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Cover by Jennifer Johnson, Sapphire Designs Book Design by Julia Lloyd, Nature Walk Design ISBN 978-1-933963-90-7 Printed in the United States of America For Jack a One "You sing?" Josh snickered. I cringed inside. Me? Not really. I flashed my friend a confident smile. "Let's not lie about why we both signed up for this class." Chorus. Easy A. Major yawn.

I adjusted my short skirt and crossed my legs, admiring my tan. First day of the third term and our choir class sat in the music room, waiting for the new teacher after Mr. Horseman suddenly got sick. Heads always turned when fresh blood dripped into the ancient arteries of Palos Verdes Prep. We sat on four-level risers, bowl-shaped, around a beaten black baby grand piano. I sat on the back riser. Anybody with a name sat in the back. I sat in the center seat of the back, surrounded by guys. Josh and I had signed up for the half-year class because we were seniors and needed an easy elective. I'd sung before... in the car. Concert Choir would be an easy A. Then he walked in. He came from the rear of the room, a kiss of scent, a whisper of corduroy and denim on a brisk, confident walk. The elbow patches on his jacket caught my eye first, then his full halo of toffee-colored hair, just skimming his collar. When he turned around, my heart stopped. He had the kind of face that caught your eye with a simple glance. He was so young. He could have been a student, impersonating a teacher. His skin wasn't the honey tan of most southern California boys I knew, but rather a pale luminescence, like a candle just starting to glow. He smiled and the room went silent. I was sure the guys around me heard my pounding

heart. "Hey.Welcome everybody." His voice filled the space like the scent of hot apple cider, spicy and inviting."I'm Mr. Christian." Mr. Christian. His name brought to mind gothic chapels and choir music. Hallowed chants.Vibrant, beautiful men hidden behind priestly robes. Things forbidden. "For those of you lost or, I don't know, otherwise out of it, this is Concert Choir." He reached up and tugged at his tie, cleared his throat. I could tell he was nervous. "Since there are forty-three of you and one of me, if I call on you during class, tell me your name, then I can kind of get my bearings about who's who. Sound good?" The gentle cadence of his voice sent my body into a hum. There was always a plethora of empty seats up front, kids leaving the perfunctory row empty just in case the teacher spit, stunk, or, heaven forbid, called on them. I stood, gathered my backpack and walked up. Mr. Christian's gaze latched on me and a rush of warmth raced under my skin. I heard whispers but I didn't care. I sat in the center front chair and looked right at him. I enjoyed when he blinked hard, as if he couldn't believe that I'd stepped over the student-teacher threshold and into an empty seat.Then he continued speaking, looking out over the class. Enveloped by his tangy cologne, I didn't even hear what he was saying. Closer now, I fixed on his face. His eyes were blue, slashed with green, like stream water over rocks. His square jaw framed a tentative smile, as if he was trying to figure out if he was standing before friends or enemies. I appreciated clothes that fit well enough to hint, and hated clothes so loose they disguised. His jeans were baggy. Mr. Christian didn't have a sense of clothing. Patches on elbows had been out for years. The look was hot. I wanted to slide my fingers up around his collar, stare him straight in the eye and loosen his tie. The hour passed and I listened to every word that came out of his mouth, watched the way his lips moved as he talked about music and what he hoped we as a group could accomplish by joining our purpose through song. "Any questions?" he finally asked. I raised my hand. His blue eyes met mine. He nodded, indicating that I could speak. "Is this your first teaching job?" The class rustled behind me. "Yes, as a matter of fact." He grinned and the tiniest dimple creased at the side of his lip."But don't hold that against me." He laughed and the sound fluttered through my body warm and inviting.The kind of laugh you could immerse in. The bell rang and noise broke out. I stood and picked up my books. "Miss," he said. I looked at him."You didn't tell me your name." I held his gaze to see how long before he'd break with a blink. He didn't."My name is Eden."

Walking down the packed outdoor halls of school, I tried to keep my mind off Mr. Christian. It was ridiculous to think of a teacher like I thought of any hot guy. For a second, shame heated my cheeks. But I dismissed it. He was gorgeous. There was nothing wrong with admiring great art.

I heard my name but was so caught up in branding images of Mr. Christian's face in my mind that when I finally glanced around, whoever had called me had vanished in the crowd.

At my locker, I spun the dial four times before I remembered I was there to exchange books. Next to me, Leesa Weitz peered over. She'd had scarlet fever three years earlier and lost all of her hair. She looked like a baby bird now. I'd never had the nerve to ask her if it would ever grow back.

"Hi, Eden." I saw adoration in her eyes whenever I was around—that excited-puppy look. Her bubbly smile made me feel guilty because I didn't have time to talk.

"Hey, Leesa. What's up?" "Not much. So, I didn't know you liked to sing." I'd forgotten she was in Concert Choir with me. "Uh,

yeah." "So you transferred in. Cool." "Yes, it is." That was the extent of our conversation. For the last

four years we'd been locker neighbors but we'd never exchanged more than perfunctory greetings with each other. I gave her my complimentary smile and snatched my English book.

I looked at my chosen ensemble for the day, wondering if Mr. Christian liked short skirts. This one was black and red plaid. I had on a tight long-sleeved tee shirt with a shrug in black. My legs were bare, even though the southern California January air was chilly. I'd slipped on a pair of red jeweled flip-flops.

"Lookin' hot." Matt came up behind me and slid his arm around my waist. Then his hand slipped. He patted my butt. It'd been forever since the move made me blush.

Matt and I had been together for six months, and at every opportunity he tried to touch me. Today, I found the move annoying.

"It's so retarded that you do that," I told him. His brown eyes widened with shock. He inched away. We walked in silence to English. The morning fog that caressed the Palos Verdes peninsula every night hung misty in the outdoor corridors of our school, threading around the buildings and green parkways. Out the corner of my eye, Matt stuck his hands in his pockets and lowered his dark head.

"What's up with you?" he asked. "Nothing. I just don't like being pawed." "You never complained before." "So that means I can't now?" I stopped just outside

Mr. Jessop's English class. "You think that because I've never said anything about it, I don't have the right?" Wide-eyed nosey students quietly passed us to go inside.

Confusion flashed across his face. "No." Satisfied that he understood not to touch me without invitation, I went into class. The rest of the morning was a wash of poets and their poetry. I couldn't think about anything but Mr. Christian. It was as if I'd drunk a sinfully rich latte and the buzz lingered in my head, limbs and heart.

What was he like? Did he live in Palos Verdes? How old was he? My friends and I took off at lunch, catching rides over to Lunada Bay plaza. Though the plaza was only three blocks from the high school, nobody walked there. Juniors and seniors, and sophomores lucky enough, hung out at the hopping galleria for lunch. The quaint Spanish-style shops circled a fragrant courtyard rich with bougainvillea trees. You could pick up a coffee, sit at a café table and munch a salad, all the while salivating over high school hotties on display. My group always sat at the centermost table outside of Fiasco's, a deli bistro. When my best friend Brielle and I got there, Matt was already lounging with Josh and Tanner. Matt watched me through wary brown eyes, wondering whether or not to give me a kiss in greeting after what I'd told him before English. "Hey," Brielle's voice chirped like a bird and everybody said, 'Hey' back. Before I could sit down, Matt shot to his feet and pulled me in for his customary lunch time display of affection. Because everyone was watching, I let him kiss me. Zing had gone out of our kisses long ago, at least for me. Today, the thick, winter fog carried his

cologne into my head with the potency of a Vicks vaporizer. I choked on it. His lips spread over mine, slippery and wet. It had been months since he'd kissed me with anything other than self-gratification. His slick mouth annoyed me. And he'd eaten something with onions. I wanted to push him away but knew better in front of our friends. All I could do was count the seconds until it was over. Finally, he eased back, searching my eyes for whether or not things were status quo between us. "Get a room," Josh joked. I eased out of Matt's tight embrace with a fake smile and sat. He sat next to me. "Want something?" he asked. I could still taste the onions he'd eaten. "Yeah, a diet Coke with lemon. Thanks." He got up and went inside Fiasco's. "First day of the last term of the rest of our lives." Tanner sat back with a sigh. His blonde waves almost covered his surf-blue eyes. "Until college," Josh piped. "Man, am I really sure I want to do all of this again? I'm, like, five months away from being done." "Yeah, with high school," Tanner said. "How could you not want to further your education?" I asked. I, for one, couldn't wait to get off the hill and out into the world. "Hey, I have no qualms living off family money for a while. My sister went abroad for six months after she graduated. What a party that would be." I rolled my eyes. "My dad would have killed me if I hadn't gotten into Long Beach State." Brielle sighed, twisting one of her auburn curls around her finger. I knew she really wanted to go into hair design, but her family considered that profession beneath them. "At least you'll be in L. A." Josh took a bite of his ham wrap and readjusted his red PV baseball cap so it was backwards. Brielle didn't say anything. I saw her eyes pinch behind her sunglasses. She couldn't care less about leaving the hill. She wanted to stay at home. Her dream was to have her own beauty shop here in the plaza. Matt came back with our drinks. He handed mine to me and sat down. "So, my parents left yesterday for Fiji." "Excellent." Josh slapped Matt's palm. Tanner did the same. "Tonight the party begins." Brielle fidgeted in the seat next to me, her bare legs crossing. "Cool. I just love your house. It's the best party house—next to yours, Eden." I shrugged. "Yeah, but we can't ever get into the museum," Matt joked. "Eden's dad's too busy hooking up with Stacey." Everyone laughed. I did too, but it hurt in that place deep inside of me that was wide and hollow. The place left empty since my mom's death ten years earlier. "Only if he can get her home from shopping," I sneered. Any picture of my Dad with Stacey, the blonde bimbo—his trophy wife—was not one I cared to have in my head so I changed the subject. "Um, Josh, so much for our easy A in Concert Choir." Josh cringed. "I hate to sing." "Why'd

you take the class, dude?" Matt asked. "Wanted an easy A, like Eden. It was either that or ceramics, and I don't do ceramics." His answer got under my skin like an angry itch. It seemed so stupid, a decision without thought. Yet I, too, had signed up for that same reason. But something about young, enthusiastic Mr. Christian and his love of his very first teaching job made me feel guilty that I wasn't in class for the right reason. I liked singing well enough, though I wouldn't consider myself a singer. At least I could enjoy looking at Mr. Christian. What would Josh do but waste an hour. "I hear he's a hottie," Brielle said. "The old guy?" Josh asked in the middle of chewing. "He is not old," I said, and shifted in my chair. "He's a teacher. That automatically makes him old." "He couldn't be much older than twenty-five," I said. "Who are we talking about?" Matt set his drink aside. "Mr. Christian, the new choral teacher." I drank from my empty cup to hide the smile forming on my lips. I pictured him in my mind then, Mr. Christian, with his elbow-patched coat.

a Two The nearly empty halls of PVPS echoed with laughter and the piped pop music leaking out of Senior Park. I had no idea where Mr. Christian would choose to eat his lunch, but after I got back from the plaza, I took a casual walk by the teacher's lounge.

The door was wide open and I peered in, scanning the bored, prunified faces of staff too old to venture away from the comfort of the stuffy lounge. Not seeing Mr. Christian there pleased me. He was way too vibrant for that stale place.

"Hello, Eden." Mr. Jones was my English teacher two years before. What few strands of hair he still had, he combed from one ear to the other. But he was the nicest man and always stopped to talk. He joined me at the door.

"Hi, Mr. Jones." "You looking for somebody?" "Just stopping by to say, hi." His smile grew huge. "Well, that's nice of you. You have

a good lunch now." Then I started off down the hall. I flipped my hair over my shoulder as I sent him another angle of my smile. "Have a good day."

He stayed in the doorway, watching me. I headed in the direction of the music room.

O Mr. Christian's door was shut and, for a moment, I was disappointed. Then I heard it. At first only the piano, light trickling notes that danced on the fringe of heaven. Then the voice. The sound stopped me. Pleasant, calm. Urgent. Male. Mr. Christian's singing voice carried the same comforting tone in song it did in speech. As if he smiled when he sung.

I opened the door without knocking. He sat at the piano, his back to me. He'd ditched his elbow-patched coat. His blue shirtsleeves were shoved carelessly up to his elbows. His body moved to the music as he played, his head dipped, lifted and turned. I eased the door closed so as to not alert him I was there. I'd never heard the song he was playing. It was classical, with light, tinkling octaves that trembled over the notes in unanimous harmonies. When his voice joined the music again, my whole body filled with the melody. Soft words floated in the air. Weeping words of love torn, an anguished heart. My heart started to thump as his fingers swept the keys, taking my pulse and blending it with the melody. I knew the song was coming to an end, and I was frozen in disappointment. The tune slowed, each key played in aching effort. His voice quieted suddenly and there was silence. Before I could stop myself, I clapped. He jerked around, shock on his face, then an appealing shade of red crept into his features. He stood. "Hey." He ran one of his hands through his tousled waves. "I thought the doors locked automatically when they shut." "They don't," I said, stepping his direction. I'd never heard anything so beautiful, and now I saw him surrounded by an ethereal light of perfection. "That was amazing." He smiled, and skimmed a hand along the old, beat up instrument in a gentle caress. "She's been neglected." I took another step, awe drawing me closer to him. "You play her perfectly." He laughed and looked at me. Then he settled back against the piano, anchoring himself. He crossed his arms over his chest. "Eden, right?" "You remembered?" "How could I forget a name like that?" "That's why Mom named me that...she said I was unforgettable." Our gazes held in silence. A trembling shiver raced down my spine. "So, how long have you sung?" I asked. His voice still echoed in my head. "Forever. My mother was a voice teacher. She says I sung before I spoke." "You're so good." I took another step. "Why aren't you singing? Or doing something else? I mean, isn't teaching lame?" "Not when you love it. You're in Concert Choir, right? Don't you like to sing?" "On a good day." He let out a full laugh. He seemed to notice that I was closer then, and uncrossed his arms, angling them

behind on the body of the baby grand piano. The smile on his face, in his eyes, slowly vanished. He cleared his throat. "So why did you sign up for choir then? Easy A?" At first I was startled that he'd asked. Then I nodded. He looked at me as if considering my honest answer, then crossed his arms over his chest again. "I'm a senior," I admitted. "I wanted something easy, something fun. You remember how it is." "Yeah, I remember." "How old are you, Mr. Christian?" He wet his lips. "Twenty-two." Every nerve leapt inside of me. I was eighteen. Four years was nothing. "Young for a teacher," I said. "I started taking college classes in high school so I could get to work on a degree." I moved to the keys of the piano and lightly touched them with my fingertips. They were cool, smooth and in my mind I heard his tune again. "I wish I'd taken piano lessons." The thought came out a whisper. "Do you have any music background?" Afraid reality would turn him off, I lied. "A little. We have a grand at home but nobody plays it." I wouldn't tell him that Stacey had bought it just because it looked good in the floor-to-ceiling bay window of our living room. "So what other instruments do you play?" I asked. "Only this beauty." He patted the piano again. The warm green in his eyes calmed me in a way I had never felt. The quiet air around us grew thick and dense. His gaze stayed locked on my face for what seemed like minutes, but I knew that was just my head playing tricks on me. The shrill tardy bell startled us both. When he didn't say anything, the awkwardness remained heavy, but not uncomfortable. I liked that I could stand in the swirling unease and not get lost because deep inside, whatever was driving me closer to him had sunk its teeth into my soul. I was ready to ask him to play again when the door was flung open and our private silence was bludgeoned with laughter and talking. Sophomores poured in with the finesse of children's wooden blocks falling on a tile floor. "I'd better go," I said. He moved away from the piano, unrolling his sleeves. I watched him button the cuffs. "See you tomorrow," he said. I was jealous of the sophomores then. They were getting their first taste of Mr. Christian. For the next hour they would hear his voice, look at his face. Hear him talk passionately about what he loved. I had to wait until class the next day.

My house sat on a cliff overlooking the Pacific ocean. I walked to and from school because the high school was only a block away. It would have been stupid for me to drive.

I was oblivious to the usual serenade of honking horns as I walked home. Friends screamed and shouted to get my attention. I waved to a chosen few, but my eyes were on the vast ocean just beyond the houses on Paseo del Mar. The view of never ending sea always comforted me when I was uncertain about things, and I was uncertain about Mr. Christian. So what if he was a teacher. I was eighteen. Graduation was only a few months away. There was nothing wrong with wanting him.

Hearing the idling of a car, I turned. Matt hung out the window of his white convertible Mustang. Josh and Tanner were in the car with him. They had their surf boards propped up on the back seat and their wet suits tossed in the back. "Party tonight?" Matt asked, grinning. Normally, I jumped at any opportunity to get out of

the house. The need inside of me was different now. "Um, not sure." I stepped onto our stone driveway and headed to the security post.

Matt followed slowly in his car, stopping at the heavy gates that isolated our house from the rest of the world. "My place," he said.

I tapped in the security code before looking at him. The gates swung open. I shrugged. "I have homework." His face twisted. "You never study." "Yes I do." It irritated me that he saw me as some party junkie. But then, that's what I was. Now, partying didn't give me a buzz. "Whatever." He backed his car out with a disagreeable screech then sped away. His reaction was so immature, I passed through the gates feeling justified refusing to hang with them. Home sprawled before me. I looked at the Italian Renaissance-style house my parents had bought some fifteen years earlier and wondered what kind of house Mr. Christian lived in. Gardeners were hard at work trimming cone and bulb-shaped hedges, pulling weeds and mowing yards and yards of grass. I never acknowledged the workers. They gave me the creeps, the way they stared at me like panting dogs. At the front door I typed in my security code again and then opened the heavy wood doors. Something with garlic and onions scented the air. Camilla, our cook, was in the kitchen, no doubt whipping up something ethnic. The familiar scents reached my bones with a hug I had come to look forward to each day when I got home from school. My feet echoed on the tile floor. I stuffed my keys in my bag and left it on the marble table in the entry hall. A quick scan

revealed that things were just as they always were when I walked through the door, showroom perfect. Picture windows lined the back of our house, making the most of what my step mother called her “vacation backyard paradise.” Our pool, inlaid out of white stone, lay on one level, and our hot tub snuggled up next to it, both in a bed of lazy palm trees. The ocean stretched out behind as far as the eye could see. I never bothered saying anything when I got home. Dad worked at his law office until seven. Stacey, my stepmom, shopped or lunched all day with her friends. William, my basset hound, was the only one who ever greeted me. He ambled slowly over from a spot where he spent his days basking on warm tile where the afternoon sun shone. “Hey.” I scrubbed his old body with both hands because he liked it. He followed me to my bedroom on the second floor. I fell onto my ivory bedspread and lay looking up at the ceiling. I could hear William panting. The house was quiet, like it was every day when I came home. Empty and quiet. Habit had me reaching for my iPod to cover the silence with my favorite music but something kept me still. I wanted to feel the emptiness I lived in. Wanted reality to sink in. Lying there, a familiar anger flushed through me. It had been this way since Dad and Stacey had gotten married ten years ago, the three of us living in this big house with its big rooms. I was pretty sure only I knew how big the emptiness was. I rolled onto my stomach and looked into William’s saggy, sad brown eyes. Mom had given me William two years before her death. Four months after she died, Dad had met and married Stacey. Loneliness left my mind thinking about the night. Dad would come home, eat with Stacey and the two of them would either sneak off to their bedroom or take off to some place—friends’ houses or shopping. As if Stacey didn’t get enough shopping in from ten until five. Camilla’s cooking was just beginning to stretch its fragrant fingers up toward my bedroom, and my stomach growled. But I couldn’t think about eating. In my head I heard the delicate notes Mr. Christian had played on the piano. I couldn’t have what I really wanted, so I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket and called Brielle.

a Three Matt lived a few blocks away near Lunada Bay plaza. The night was dark and cold, so I walked there. I was used to walking places. And being alone on the street was no different than being alone in my house. Both were cold. Sometimes I challenged the danger of aloneness. When I’d been younger, I’d purposefully exposed my skin to cold, naively thinking Dad would get all worried and tell me to put more clothes on because he cared. That never happened. The self-inflicted discomfort

toughened more than my skin. Like tonight, I didn't wear anything over my short sleeved tee and I still had on my short skirt.

Matt's house was the party place for the seven days his parents were on their trip to Fiji. The one-story house was already rocking when I crossed the grass toward the wide open front door.

"Hey, Eden." I glanced down, saw Tanner snuggling on the grass with some chick I didn't recognize, both of them wrapped in a blanket.

"Hey, guys." Music shook the house. Couples were locked together on couches and in chairs, standing in corners. Some danced. The air was thick with body sweat and booze breath.

"She's here!" I heard Brielle's sing-song voice and looked for her. She stumbled over with a grin, a silver can in her hand. "Baby," she hugged me. "Matt said you weren't coming."

She extended her can to me and I took a sip. I shrugged. "I was bored." "Here, you have mine." Brielle pushed the beer into my hand. "I'll get another one." Taking the Coors, I followed her into the kitchen where Matt played host. He sat perched on the counter, digging into a box of Pepperidge Farms goldfish crackers. "There she is." The next thing I knew he was by my side, goldfish in one hand, his other wrapping around my waist. His breath reeked. He nuzzled my neck. "Can I have a kiss or do I have to clear that with you, too?" With everyone watching us, heat flushed my face. I swatted at him. "Forget it." But I meant it and he knew it. He looked confused and angry, and tossed the goldfish box at Josh then got in my face. "What's with you?" We'd had public fights before, but tonight his voice was too loud. I shrugged again, not sure myself. But inside a whirlwind had started and I knew it was only going to gain more momentum. "No, I'm serious." He lowered his voice and grabbed my elbow. "Quit handling me." I yanked free. "Why did you come here?" "It wasn't to be with you," I snapped. I didn't care that the confusion on his face turned to hurt. Our friends stood by in nosey curiosity, and I wished they weren't so drama hungry. Disgusted with the scene—with myself for going there, I turned to leave. "Eden?"

Brielle followed me through the raucous crowd toward the front door. "Yeah, you do that!" Matt yelled at me from the kitchen. "Take your princess attitude out of my house!" The music was loud and most of the kids were so out of it I knew few had heard him. I didn't care if they had. Being there suddenly made me feel like a loser. I was sure Mr. Christian wasn't out partying. He'd be home studying music composition, or listening to an opera or something. "I'm out of here," I told Brielle. "But Matt was joking." "No, he wasn't. And neither was I." Brielle stumbled alongside me. "You... you and Matt are over?" "Yeah, we are. See ya." I continued across the grass. Bree stopped. Matt and I had really only been two people playing at liking each other because being alone was the lame alternative. We'd both be news tomorrow. I'd be barraged by leftover guys. Once again, Matt would prowl the slim pickings of PVPS for somebody else. The thought was distasteful enough that I almost turned around and went back inside. I crossed the grass, caught the scent of weed in the air and glanced around for who was stupid enough to smoke it when I was sure the cops would be showing up any minute because of the noise. Oh well. I'd learned to say that phrase because it covered every error from stupidity to purposeful indiscretions by me as well as those around me. It was my way of throwing a protective blanket over my heart and emotions. I didn't want my friends busted, but part of me knew they deserved it. I'd be happy if they all got caught

0 and had to learn a lesson. The street was empty. The further I walked from Matt's house, the duller the music pounded, lost in gray, misty fog oozing around the houses and trees. I shuddered, cold seeping into the empty recesses of my soul, and glanced into the dimly lit front windows of the houses I passed. Rooms looked cozy and inviting. There was something to being small, I decided then. But small still needed protecting.

With my mind quiet as the street, I heard the melody Mr. Christian had played earlier that day. The melancholy chords cleared the cold fog trying to settle inside of me. I wondered what kind of house Mr. Christian lived in. I felt pretty certain he lived off of the hill, as we Palos Verdes residents coined PV. A new teacher wouldn't make enough to live on the peninsula.

I turned right on Paseo del Mar and the houses gradually stretched and grew from

small and cozy to massive and museum-like.

Mr. Christian. I wanted to know where he lived. What kind of car did he drive? Did he like fries or baked potatoes? Did he have a girlfriend? Need budded inside of me, filling every empty corner with untamed curiosity.

I pulled out my cell phone and dialed four-one-one. There were, of course, thousands of Christians listed. I had no idea what his first name was, but as I typed the security code in at the front gate of home, I ran possibilities through my mind. What would people with a first name for a last name call their son? Never mind that Christian reeked with religious overtones. Would they do a double whammy like, Peter Christian? Or Gabriel? John? I hoped it wasn't Matt.

Finding out his first name would be easy. Discovering where he lived would be more difficult. I found Dad's Lexus in our driveway. I checked my cell phone for the time. Nine-thirty. Why were they home?

a Inside, their fight snuck down the stairs and into every room with the pungency of garbage. Their voices broke through the stench, Brainless Bimbo. I hate you. My money. Our money. Control yourself or there won't be any money!

With William dutifully following me, I headed to my bedroom and shut the door. That only buffered the screams, so I reached for my iPod. Soon, Muse filled my head and I couldn't hear any more arguing.

I sat at my desk, flicked on my computer and, with William watching, his long ears quirking now and then, I got on Google. I wondered if William understood English. If he understood what was going on between Dad and Stacey. He knew tone. Every creature understood tone. That's why his head jerked around every now and then toward the bedroom door. Maybe that's why his sad eyes looked even sadder.

After I logged into Palos Verdes Prep School's website, I checked out the faculty list. James Christian. James. Nice. The name fit him. "Hopefully he doesn't go by Jim or Jimmy." I scrubbed William's head. "That would just be wrong." I fell asleep with my

iPod on and old Heart tunes shouting into my head about how to get someone alone. When I woke up the next morning I had a headache. I dressed, picked out a short denim skirt, a baby blue shirt that made the blue in my eyes electric and opened my bedroom door. Not sure who had survived last night's battle, I looked down the hall toward the master bedroom. The door was shut. I went downstairs, William at my heels in a light pant. Camilla was already at work making the organic granola Stacey swore by and the dining room table was set for two so I figured Dad had waved a white flag sometime during the night. Either that or Stacey had waved a white flag of her own—in the way of satin sheets. “Good morning, Miss Eden.” “Hey, Camilla.” Ever since I'd known Camilla, she'd called me Miss Eden. I liked the way I felt when she said the words in her thick, Italian accent. Camilla was from the old school of family service: organizing everything from our pantry to our bed sheets. She even wore a gray dress and white apron. Where Mom found her, I didn't know, but she'd been with our family since we'd moved into this house. She lived off the hill in Lomita somewhere. When Mom was alive, she and I took Christmas presents to Camilla's family every year. “You eat breakfast today?” she asked. “Not yet. Did you set that place for me?” The dark skin on her face flushed. I'd embarrassed her. “I can make an extra place right away, you see—” “No, no, that's okay. I really have to hurry anyway.” I opened the fridge and snatched a Dannon Light Smoothie. She'd stopped setting a place for me at the table years ago. I guess she'd overheard too many morning arguments between me and Stacey and figured when I'd started eating in the kitchen, it was time to stop setting me a place in the dining room. Truthfully, I wanted to get to school before the teachers arrived. The faculty parking lot was vacant except for a few cars. I had no idea which teachers drove which cars, but I meant to see Mr. Christian arrive at school. I wanted to see what he drove. The library was still closed, so I had nowhere to go and not look like a stalker. I perched myself on the low cement wall outside the administration building and looked over my assignments. School work had never been hard for me and when I'd told Matt I had homework, I'd been lying times two. First, because I always made sure I had an out. Second, because I rarely had homework. I liked to finish school stuff at school so my time was my own. All of my assignments were in order and ready. A car pulled into the lot and I looked up. Mr. Edmunds. I waved at him and he waved back. Soon, Mr. Jones was pulling in, driving something decrepit in red. The man must not spend any money on anything, I thought. His clothes looked like they'd had their prime in the

seventies. He got out and waved with a little too much enthusiasm for seven o'clock in the morning. Then he came over. "Eden, what are you doing out here it's cold." "I'm fine, Mr. Jones. Really." His gaze skimmed my bare legs and v-neck tee shirt. "Well, the library will be open soon." "Yes, I know. Thanks, for telling me." He hemmed awkwardly then went down the hall toward his classroom. Morning fog slunk around the buildings like a creepy guest. I shuddered and hugged myself. More cars drove into the lot: Miss Bastian in her retro green Land Rover, one of the stable of single butch Phys Ed teachers. She hated me. I didn't bother acknowledging her. Mrs. Carmichael, the Foods teacher in an old, white Volvo. She'd flipped over my presentation on Italy my junior year. I never had the heart to tell her the secret marinara sauce recipe came from Camilla. Students started driving in and I looked at my cell phone for the time. I'd sat there for a half hour. No Mr. Christian. Maybe he was the kind that liked to sleep in late. Then a gut wrenching thought occurred to me. What if he liked to sleep in because he was married and making love to his wife? Sickened, I swallowed a hard knot. No. He was only twenty-two, too young to get married. I'd looked at his hands. I would have noticed a ring. I couldn't remember seeing one but I'd check today. Time ticked by. More students filled in the lot. Faculty packed the administrator's parking area. Friends walked by and said hello. Brielle emerged from student parking with an odd look on her face. I stood. With five minutes until the first bell, Mr. Christian must have parked somewhere else. Or be late. Or sick. I tried not to think how disappointed I'd be if he was sick. "What was up with you last night?" Brielle asked. We started toward our first period classes. "Nothing." "You totally devastated Matt. He was really mad at first, then he hibernated in his bedroom. Alone." "Oh well," I said. "You can't say that like it doesn't matter because it does." Brielle looked seriously peeved. "It doesn't matter, that's why I can say it." "We knew you'd say that." It was naive of me to think my friends didn't talk about me behind my back. That my secret expression wasn't really a secret but that everybody knew I hid behind it. "That's my prerogative, isn't it?" Stung, I left her alone, and continued on to choir. "Why are you in such a rush?" Brielle called after me. I didn't look back at her. "I can't be late."

a Four James Christian stood at the piano, his head bowed over stacks of sheet music he was studying. I let out a sigh of relief. Today he wore brown cords and a yellow, buttondown shirt. The look was old prep, but I liked it on him. The patches on

the elbows of his rustic cord jacket were too cute.

He had classical music playing in the background for us while we filed into class. I felt like I was in some BBC reality show. Josh was already sitting in the back row, and he waved me over but I headed for the front row. Butterflies filled my chest. It had been a long time since I'd jittered being near someone.

I sat down, my eyes locked on Mr. Christian. He hadn't noticed me and I was glad. I wanted to watch him. His hands were on top of the closed baby grand, as if he was supporting her. His fingers were long and beautiful, and spread over the worn black surface. No wedding band. Yes. What would it feel like to be touched by those hands? One leg was angled back and he was tapping his toe. Hearing music in his head, I guessed. I wondered if it was a melody of his own that he heard or some other. "Why are you up front?" Josh whispered in my ear. I glanced at him as he stood over my shoulder. "I like sitting here." His face crimped in disbelief. He almost laughed, but when I cocked my head at him in a glare of warning, he stopped. He leaned, crossing his elbows on the back of the empty seat next to me. "You're not serious about Matt, are you?" "I'm most definitely not serious about Matt." "You mean you seriously dumped him? That's it? It's over?" "Dumping's a harsh word." I didn't like the sound of it. It made me sound like a flaky loser. "We're just over, that's all." He snickered. "Sounds like dumping to me." Sounded careless, juvenile, so predictable. We were seniors. The only thing long term at our age was our future and the uncertainty of it. Nothing else mattered. "Call it whatever," I said, my eyes never leaving Mr. Christian. He was so far beyond trivial stuff like this I was embarrassed even talking about this subject in his room, with his classical music playing in the background. Josh hissed out a sigh and left me. Relieved, my heart pounded because I was by myself again. Finally, Mr. Christian looked up. His blue-green gaze swept the room then flashed to me and held. My breath went still. I was sure his lips curved up a little. Sure there was something in his eyes just for me. The bell rang. "Okay guys, anybody know this piece of music we're listening to?" He waited during the quiet mumbling that followed. No one raised their hands. "It's Allegro, one of Mozart's most famous pieces. Mozart's one of my favorite composers. His pieces are rich, inspiring and unforgettable. So, I expect you not to forget them. When we have a music quiz and I play three minutes of his work, I want you to know his signature

sound. “Every artist, whether he is an artist of music, word or paint, has a signature that sets him apart. How many of you have seen Harry Potter?” Hands rose. “Star Wars?” Again, hands went up. “How about Indiana Jones? Home Alone? Jaws? E.T.? Schindler’s List? Anybody take a guess at what all of those movies have in common, besides big money at the box office?” A girl in the back raised her hand. “Your name?” Mr. Christian asked. “Lila. They all have sound tracks composed by John Williams.” Mr. Christian smiled and nodded. “Right.” His body grew more electric as he continued. “And if you really listen to them, you’ll catch the common construction of his notes and chords that give the work his unique signature. “My hope is that you will become intimately familiar with some of the great founding fathers of classical music.” It was as if he’d swallowed the moon, the way his skin lit from inside. Infectious. I leaned toward him in my seat. “I know what you guys listen to because I listen to some of it myself. Think of music like you think of eating. There’s meat and potatoes, very hearty basic comfort food that sticks to your bones and nourishes you. Then there’s fluff. Chips, dessert, junk food. Stuff that won’t make you healthy but you prefer because it’s quick and there. I want you to hunger for the meat. To explore classical and other types of music that can really satisfy that deep need we all have inside to be filled.” His face was animated with passion when he spoke of this. He was right. Hip Hop, Pop, Funk, were all crap compared to the complex orchestrations we were listening to now. This music soared, leapt and parked itself inside whether you invited it to or not. “Man this stuff puts me to sleep,” Josh said from the back. I turned and glared at him. “Maybe at first.” Mr. Christian rested his hands on the black music stand. “You’re not used to it. It’s like hearing another language. Because you don’t understand it, you tune it out. It doesn’t reach you as quickly as something with a pounding beat. Again, think of junk food versus something substantial that takes time to savor.” “I’d get indigestion listening to this stuff,” Josh mumbled. The class laughed. I didn’t like that they were laughing at Mr. Christian’s excellent analogy. “Some of you may have more – immature – digestive systems.” Mr. Christian smiled a teasing grin. Josh snickered. “You can’t do anything to this stuff.” Laughs and murmurs followed. Mr. Christian looked confused. I shifted in my chair. I wanted to stand and tell the class to shut up. I didn’t like that they weren’t listening to what he had to say. He’d taken the time to relate his passion for his work so that we could understand it, and he was right. Couldn’t they appreciate that? I spoke. “Can’t what, Josh? Get drunk listening to it? Hook up listening to it?”

“Exactly.” Josh grinned big. The boys around him joined him in a palm slap of agreement.

Mr. Christian’s smile was gone. I could see he was getting frustrated at the direction of the conversation. “You just said this stuff put you to sleep,” he said. “It sounds like that’s where you want to be headed when you’re listening to music.”

I applauded and most everyone joined me then, as we all chided Josh. He shrugged. “I want to be in bed, but not asleep.”

Mr. Christian waited for the noise to die down. “Passion comes in many forms, Josh. Don’t limit yourself.” “I don’t intend to.” “That’s not what he means,” I shot over my shoulder. “Okay, okay.” Mr. Christian smiled and shook his head. He had hoped to enlighten us and had gotten a slap of teenaged narrow-mindedness for his efforts. I felt an ache deep inside for him. “Listen up. We’ve got a concert in a few weeks and new music to learn, so let’s get started.” He looked at me, his eyes smiling. “Eden, would you mind passing out the sheet music for me, please?” I was up and next to him before I could blink. He handed me the stack of music and my fingers brushed his. Warmth leapt up my arms, filled my chest, and tingled around my heart. I passed out the sheets as efficiently as I could, being extra quiet so his voice could be heard. It bugged me that Josh was whispering to some chick in the back row. I sent him a clam-it glare and he shut up. “I don’t believe in drowning an audience during a concert. I would much rather give them one or two perfect pieces than five bad ones. So we’ll be singing two pieces.” “That’s lame,” somebody called from the back. “Yeah, my mom’s gonna be pissed if we sing two songs and it’s over,” someone else complained. “The other choirs will be singing also,” he said. “Each will perform one, two or three numbers. Do the math. We have an hour and ten minutes of show.” “How come we only get two?” “After hearing you guys sing yesterday, two is the limit.” “Are you saying we’re crap?” He shook his head, a hint of smile on his lips. “Not saying that at all. But this is an elective class. The other choirs hold auditions. You guys are okay. You’re going to be better than okay by performance time if my name’s attached to you.” “What is this song?” someone asked. “Aria in B Minor. How many of you read music? Raise your hands.” About half the class raised their hands. He looked at me. Since I couldn’t read music, I inadvertently bit my lower lip. His gaze dropped to my

mouth. A bolt of heat jagged through my system. "You should all know how to read music." He looked back over the class. "It's as basic to understanding the composer's creation as knowing how to read words on a page and understanding any of today's literature." Some mumbles followed. I was still enjoying the lingering warm twinge because he'd looked at my mouth. Determined to steal his attention again, I sat forward, and crossed my bare legs. He kept his focus out over the class as he went on to explain the piece we were going to sing. "Alberto Montacelli is a contemporary composer who creates classical arias. He writes in minor tones mostly, something I'm partial to. His pieces are haunting and memorable, as all music should be." Mr. Christian went to the piano and began to play. He didn't even look at the music in front of him. His hands stroked the keys with the familiarity of a lover over skin. A fast hush fell over the room. With each swell of the tune, his body shifted, his head dipped. His fingers taunted the ivory keys. He closed his eyes. His face drew taut. Beneath his beautiful hands the keys danced in melancholy strains that slowly inched up the scale to higher octaves of hope, before returning to full, deep lower chords that held, echoing off the walls. When he stopped, his fingers remained poised over the keys as if he wasn't sure he was finished touching them. The sight caused a tremor deep inside of me. I wondered why he closed his eyes. What was he thinking about? The class was silent. "That is Aria in B Minor." His reverent tone whispered through the air. The class still hadn't made a sound. The piece was just as Mr. Christian had said, unforgettable. For the first time, I was excited about singing.

a I volunteered to collect the sheet music after class and took my time, hoping everybody would get out of there fast so I could have a few moments alone with him. I couldn't believe some of the girls hung around. All giggles and smiles, I recognized their signs of flirting.

"I love to sing," one said. "You're, like, going to be sooo good for this class," another kissed up. "Our last teacher was so like lame." "Uh-huh. We sang the dullest songs. That song was hot." Mr. Christian busied himself with stacking sheet music on a nearby shelf. "I'm glad you like it." He watched me bring the music over and smiled. "Thank you, Eden." I hoped to touch his fingers again when the music passed from me to him, but didn't. "You're welcome." I snuck a glance at his hands when he neatly slid the stack of music on the shelf. I shot the loitering girls a get-lost look

behind his back and they took off. I had one minute before his next class came in. "That was a cool piece of music," I said. "But what I heard you playing yesterday was even better. Was that one of your own?" He stopped fiddling with the sheet music and faced me. "Yes, it was." "Will we get to sing it?" "Unlikely." "Why? It's so good." "I'm not finished with it." "You know best," I said. He looked impressed by my comment. I wanted to continue to impress him. "What do you think about when you write music?" His mouth opened as if he was going to answer but the door flew open and a bunch of kids blustered in. "Excuse me," he said, then squatted down to the boombox. Instantaneously, the same relaxing classical music he had played for our class quieted the rowdy students. "That really works," I told him. He looked out over the students with a grin. His chin was firm, almost stubborn looking. Long, dark lashes framed his blue-green eyes. He had a masculine nose, sharp but not pointed. Again, I checked out his hands, now set casually on his hips. The graceful beauty of his fingers sent a flood of want through me. When I looked at his face, he was watching me. I swallowed a knot, embarrassed, not sure how much of my appraisal he'd witnessed. "I'd better go." The green in his eyes flickered. "Yeah."

a Five "Why don't you want to go to the plaza?" Brielle asked at lunch. "I need to talk to Mrs. Carlson." "You're not in trouble are you?" "No, of course not." "Then why see your counselor?" I walked with her toward the student parking lot, anxious to get rid of her so I could double back to Mr. Christian's classroom. I was hoping to catch him playing and singing again. "Where is everybody?" I asked. Matt, Josh and Tanner were nowhere in sight. "I told them I'd wait for you. They're already at the plaza. This isn't about Matt, is it?" "No way." "I didn't think so." I hugged her. "You have fun. I'll go tomorrow, I promise." "K." Brielle tapped across the cement in her pointy heels with one last wave at me. "Bye." I headed down the hall with my insides fluttering. A cool breeze lifted my long hair and chilled my neck. Music trickled through the halls from the speakers at Senior Park, a low pumping beat that stirred my need to see Mr. Christian. At Mr. Christian's closed door I stood with my heart pounding. I heard nothing at first, and worried that he wasn't there. Slowly I opened the door and peered in. The room was quiet and empty. I shut the door silently behind me and tried to ignore disappointment. The faint scent of his cologne hung in the air, teasing me. I closed my eyes, took in a deep breath. I'd stay whether he was here or not. Drawn to the piano, I set my bag and books on a seat and crossed to the beat up black

instrument. I lowered myself onto the bench, running my hands along the worn finish of the seat, then placed my fingers on the cool ivories and closed my eyes. In my mind I heard the song he had played. When my fingers accidentally pressed into the keys and blundered out nonsensical notes, I cringed and let out a laugh. Then I heard something from the small office that adjoined the music room. I jumped to my feet and moved away from the piano, my pulse skipping. Mr. Christian appeared in the door holding a stack of papers against his chest. He looked surprised to see me. My face flushed with heat. "I didn't know you were here," I said. He came out. He'd taken off his coat and the sleeves of his yellow oxford were rolled up. His tie was loose around his neck. "I was going through some of this old music, seeing what was in here." "Scary?" I clasped my hands behind my back and nodded at the pile in his arms. He chuckled. "Sort of, yeah. But some of it's good. I think the office needs a good clean out." "No doubt." I drew closer. "I thought maybe you'd be in here practicing." For a moment he didn't say anything, just looked at me. "Yeah. Well, I'd like to be, but when I inherited this job, I inherited the task of getting things in order. I couldn't sit here and indulge knowing the office needed an overhaul." "Can't that wait? I mean, aren't you anxious to play your own stuff?" "Sure. But this is my job. I can play anytime." "So you have a piano at home?" "I do. That's why I can't justify playing on school time." He headed back into the office and I followed him. The room was tiny, maybe six feet by eight feet, lined with shelves, packed with papers. Inside, his cologne filled my senses. "Need some help?" I asked. After setting the pile down on a stool he looked at me. "I'm sure you've got friends you'd rather spend your lunch with, Eden." My heart flipped when he said my name. "They're at the plaza." "Is that where all the kids eat? I noticed nobody stays around here for lunch." He stepped up on the stepstool and reached for another pile of music on the top of one of the shelves. "Juniors and seniors leave." He wore scruffy topsiders. My gaze wandered up his pant legs. When he reached up, the hem of his shirt lifted out of his waist band. I caught a glimpse of plaid boxers. "Are you from around here?" He thumbed through dusty piles. "Torrance." "Yeah?" I liked that we were both from the South Bay. That he knew everything I knew about the area. "So, which high school did you graduate from?" "South." "Cool." "Man, some of this stuff is really cheesy." Gathering another large bundle, he stepped down. We were so close, his knuckles brushed my arm and he looked at me. His eyes were darker in the small room, more intense. Maybe it was just that we were closer than we had ever been. I could see each

eyelash. "Want me to take those?" I reached for the pile in his arms and for a moment he considered. "Sure, just put them on the floor by the door." "So you're making a garbage pile?" I headed out the tiny room with my arms full. "They'll make a nice bonfire. Kids around here do that?" "Some...druggies mostly. They hang on the beach below the cliffs." I met him back inside the office ready to take another stack. "Jocks and preps had the bonfires at South," he said, placing another pile in my outstretched arms. His hands brushed my forearms and rivulets of warmth shot up my skin. "Which group were you in?" I asked. He climbed back up on the stepstool, scanning the upper shelves. "I was the lonely artsy type." "I can see that about you." He chuckled. "That obvious, huh?" "I don't know about the lonely," I began, my gaze steady on his, "but most definitely artsy." He looked at me long enough that my breathing stopped. But I didn't take my gaze away. I held his, in a silent game of who-can-look-longest. Finally, I said, "What's all this stuff going to be? More bonfire fuel? Or are these masterpieces keepers?" "Not keepers. Wallpaper. Toilet paper. Puppy paper. You have any suggestions?" I kneeled down next to the piles, flushing with heat because of the intense way he'd looked at me. "Oh, my..." I said with plenty of sarcasm. I held up, My Heart Will Go On from Titanic. Out the corner of my eye I saw him draw near, baggy beige pants and scruffy topsiders. He squatted next to me. "The bane of high school choral groups." Our arms almost brushed. I felt warmth from him. "You mean every choral group sings it?" "At least once. Overdone saccharine from the first note. Turns the audience into anesthetized zombies. We sang it every year when I was at South. I think Mrs. Roberts had a thing for that movie." He picked up a piece of the sheet music and looked it over. "I like the song," I said. He seemed to consider my answer and time stretched taut as a wire between us. "Tell me what you like about it." "I don't know." But I did. "Who wouldn't want to find love like that?" His head tilted a little. Because he was so close and his eyes seemed to deepen in color, I picked up one of the pieces of sheet music. It trembled in my hand. Suddenly he stood, and I was left to look at his shoes. Warily my gaze crept up his legs, his body and to his face. The corner of his jaw was in a hard knot. I set the sheet music down and stood, afraid I had somehow turned him off. Boys could be disgusted by

honesty. But then I realized he wasn't a boy. He was a man. Were men disgusted by honesty? He said nothing. The air around us hung with uncertainty. An empty

hollowness I was too familiar with opened up inside of me and I wondered if I had just lost something I'd been reaching out for.

"I'll take this saccharinely sweet stuff to the garbage bins." I started to pick up a stack but his hand wrapped around my wrist. I froze. Delicious fire shot through my body where his skin met mine.

"Don't." His voice was coarse. "We'll keep them after all." He let go of me and I looked at where he'd touched me.

He stepped back. "I need to get back to work." He inched backward toward the open door of the office. I didn't move. Then he turned and went inside.

For hours after he'd touched me, I felt his fingers around my wrist. As if I'd been infused or burned. Or branded. I kept putting my hand over the area. Though I wanted more than anything to go to his classroom after my last period, that would look ridiculous. I didn't want to come off as some obsessed groupie.

My schedule was short because I was a senior, and had worked my butt off the first three years of school so I could have a more laid back final year, but for the first time in my four years at PVPHS, I didn't want to leave school.

I headed down the outdoor hall, the nearby sea air filling my senses as I went to my locker. There, I dumped my books inside. Leesa watched me silently. As usual her face was rounded in a smile. "You look happy," she said.

The comment stopped me. "I do?" Didn't I always, was what I really wanted to say. She nodded, her fuzzed hair fluttering in the chilly breeze. "Thanks." Puzzled, I closed my locker. I walked toward the faculty parking lot, winding my way to the main covered walkway to the final strip of buildings and outdoor halls that would take me to the lot. I thought about what Leesa had said. It was requisite that my friends and I walk around with smiles. We were the best dressed, lived in the biggest houses, belonged to the right clubs, drove the nicest cars. That was more than the picture of perfection—it was the reality show of perfection. Of course, the show was a façade.

None of us ever talked about that though. Verbalizing meant admitting that we were all about the show, some intricate spectacle that might run down, like a clock inevitably unwinding. Then everything would stand still. Others could examine us. What kept me going was trying to beat that failing clock and get out on my own. No one noticed when a clock told the perfect time, precision didn't require notice. But when something stalled, the very fact that it was immobile meant something was wrong and left you vulnerable for examination. I was floored to realize that Leesa had examined me. I wandered the walkways. Knowing that Mr. Christian was still around kept me at school. I didn't care if I looked genuinely happy. I doubted anyone else could tell the difference. Few got close to me. Leesa Weitz was an exception. Matt came toward me in the main hall. He'd just gotten out of gym—his dark hair was wet at the tips. He stared at me. Expecting a fight, I kept walking. "Why are you hanging around?" he asked, falling into step with me. "Why do you care?" "Why shouldn't I?" "Excuse me?" "We spent six months together. I think I know you, Eden." I stopped, hating that he was right. "Yeah, I know." His brown eyes pierced mine. Neither of us moved. "Why did you do it?" he whispered with a look around. "I..." I couldn't hurt him, he looked alarmingly sad. "I don't know." "Were you bored? Am I not good enough?" Urgency tightened his face. If I wasn't honest, he'd come back like a boxer refusing to leave the ring, even with a broken nose. "It was fun while it lasted. I mean that." Spread out behind him was a panoramic view of Senior Park and the outdoor corridors of the school, including the hall leading to the music room. A flash of movement drew my gaze there. Mr. Christian was leading one of his classes to the open space of the park. Matt followed my intrigued gaze but then turned and faced me, intent on finishing our conversation. "But now we're not fun anymore? Come on, Eden. I thought we were nothing but fun." My eyes remained magnetically drawn to the sight of Mr. Christian now arranging his last period class in a circle. He stood in the middle. "We're hanging at my house again tonight. I think you should come and we could, you know, just be like we used to be." "Maybe," I muttered. It had been fun with Matt. But I wanted more now. Mr. Christian's analogy of meat and potatoes versus junk food came into my mind. Of being hungry and being filled. My gaze shifted back to Mr. Christian. "I've got to go." I passed Matt without any more explanation, crossing the grass to where Mr. Christian stood in the center of the large circle, but I didn't go near enough that he would see me. The singers broke out in acapella, singing something I'd never heard but that sounded like renaissance. The

tune filled the hollow of Senior Park, bringing a spiritual sweetness to the tainted halls. Mr. Christian couldn't see me, even as he made a slow circle conducting. I sat on one of the many benches scattered through the park and listened. I'd never enjoyed religious music before. The sharp pitches brought to mind dark, cavernous churches and even darker, cloistered confessionals. For a second I saw myself inside one of those confession boxes. I wondered what it would be like, to share my sins with a hidden stranger. I wondered if James Christian had anything to confess. Was he a religious man? The song ended and the group applauded and started talking to each other. "What, you like this stuff?" I started at the sound of Matt's voice behind me. I kept my focus on the group, waiting for a glimpse of Mr. Christian and to not further encourage Matt by looking at him. "It's kind of cool." "Sounds like death." "When was the last funeral you went to? I know for a fact you don't go to church." "Neither do you." "Would you go?" I looked up then, because I wanted to see the truth. His face tweaked. "Why would I go to church?" I looked at Mr. Christian and his group. "I would." Matt let out a laugh. "Yeah, for confession." I stood, filled with frustration that I had ever let Matt touch me. Out the corner of my eye I saw Mr. Christian walk back to class with the students. More than anything I wished I was a pure and sweet like that music. I started toward home. "Don't be pissed," Matt called after me. I was glad he had the brains not to follow. I went home feeling like I'd just been given a shot at the doctor's office. Matt's honest words, our past, and what I wanted for my future, stung enough that I couldn't blow it off. I could go get a Starbucks with Brielle. Go on a drive. Or shop. For a moment, I debated. But even as I texted Brielle, I knew the frivolous act wouldn't serve to cover up anything. I deleted the text, not wanting to see anyone, ashamed I was drawn to something totally self-indulgent when I was low when I should really look myself in the mirror and assess what I saw. I was sure that when Mr. Christian got stung he didn't indulge himself. I walked into the house and found it quiet. Dumping my stuff on the entry table, I walked out the back French doors, around the pool and to edge of the property so I could look at the ocean. Fleeting memories of my very worst days entered my mind. Days when I'd been so unhappy, I'd considered falling off that cliff to the rocks and violent waves below. Thankfully those days were gone. Oddly, the same vast, incomprehensible site before me that had catapulted me into hopelessness was the same vast, incomprehensible site that had also given me hope that there was more out there for me. I perched myself on one of our pool chairs and took in some sea air.

I hadn't done anything inspired to save myself, just eliminated what I hated and thrown myself into my friends. Dad and Stacey hadn't even noticed that I was never around. My absence had only given them more time to indulge themselves.

a Six I was early to class every morning thereafter and always found Mr. Christian already in his room. What set him apart from the older teachers, besides his gorgeous face and youth, was his enthusiasm for teaching. Older teachers moseyed in with five minutes to spare. Mr. Christian arrived early, arranged the chairs, picked up trash and fallen sheet music, or wiped down the piano with some sort of orange smelling oil. In the few weeks since he had started, the black baby grand was undergoing a makeover before our eyes.

I was always glad to find him alone. Only once or twice other girls were there, hanging out under the guise of 'being too early.' When Mr. Christian's back was turned I'd shot them looks. I saw right through their juvenile operation. It was stupid. They hadn't been back since.

He was gently rubbing orangey oil into the piano when I arrived one morning. I came to realize that he had three pairs of pants he wore: jeans, brown cords and a pair of khakis. Today he wore khakis with a denim shirt and dark tie. Always, he wore the jacket with the elbow patches.

Classical music played from his portable boombox. Violins mixed with a piano in a simple, pretty tune. He only paused from his tender application to glance at me when I came in. For a moment, I was jealous of the piano. "Morning, Eden." His hands moved in such care over the abused surface, I couldn't take my eyes from them, swirling in slow, loving application. "Hey." I set my planner on my chair and stood watching. "She's looking good." "Amazing what a little attention will do." He continued slow strokes over the sides. "The thing is I can't understand why Mr. Horseman didn't take better care of her. I mean, a piece will only perform well if you take care of it. It takes so little." "You sound frustrated." He stood back, appraising his work. "I am." Then he looked at me and shrugged, tossing the rag from one hand to the other. "I shouldn't let it bug me. She's my responsibility now, and as long as I'm around, she'll be taken care of." His palm caressed the side he had just finished oiling. The sight

made me tremble inside, wondering what his fingers would feel like against my skin. He took the rag to the office and disappeared for a moment. I listened to the music and looked at the piano as I heard the piano on the CD play. It was amazing that something so beautiful could come from something so decrepit. Setting my hands on the gleaming keys, I wished that by just placing my fingers where his touched, I would somehow be able to produce music. Foolish. It took years to be able to play with such expertise. "So did you start taking piano when you were, like, three?" I asked. He laughed in the back room and came out wiping his hands back and forth. "No. Almost, but, no. I was seven." "Was your mom a piano teacher as well as a voice teacher?" He nodded, coming over. "They often go hand in hand." "So what was it like? Breakfast of champions followed by piano scales and voice lessons, then she'd send you out the door to school?" He looked entertained by my deduction. "Not quite. Voices need time to warm up in the morning, as you know. That's why we go through exercises before we start singing." "So it was just the breakfast of champions then?" His smile remained, settling with something I couldn't pinpoint as his look at me shifted. What was he was thinking? I drew my lower lip between my teeth and his gaze dropped to my mouth. My body filled with heat. After a heavy blink, he took a step back, accidentally bumping into the piano. I pretended like he hadn't noticed my mouth. "So when did your mom teach you? After school?" One of his hands laid on the top of the piano, the other rested on the belt at his waist. He was trying to look casual, but he looked stiff. "That's when she taught all of her students. She treated me just like them when it was time to learn." "I don't think I'd like that." "She didn't want me to feel like she was partial." "Still, you were her child, you deserved to feel special." He studied me. "It wasn't a matter of not feeling special. I knew she loved me." For a moment we stared at each other. Then he continued, "She knew that I knew the difference." An involuntary sigh eased away from me. "Good. I was about ready to go after her." His lips turned up a little. "I wasn't treated unfairly, Eden." His intense gaze inched over my face as if searching for secrets. Then he glanced up at the clock. I did too. My heart plunged... five minutes until the bell rang. "Did your brothers and sisters also learn how to sing?" I asked. "I don't have any siblings." "Yeah? Me either." He looked at me curiously. "That fits you." "Oh, yeah? Why's that?" My face warmed. I was pleased he'd given me a moment's thought. His shoulder lifted. "Only children are often their parents' prodigies, intentional or not. When my mother started teaching me for instance, it was with the intent that I would someday

go further with my voice and talents than she had been able to. I imagine your parents have taken the same care with you. You're more assertive than most kids your age. Confident. Not afraid to step over boundaries most kids spend the next few years figuring out as if crossing a mine field." "Wow." He flushed an adorable shade of red. "It's just my opinion." "You were totally right about most of that. Amazing." His eyes grew dark and serious. I knew he wondered what part of his statement was accurate and what was not. I wasn't about to tell him neglect had made me into the person I was. He cleared his throat. "Hey," his voice was soft, "could you pass out the music for me?"

0 "Sure." I centered each piece of music on the seats, savoring the sounds of his movements behind me. Occasionally, I snuck a glance at him. He fiddled with the boombox. Wrote instructions in chalk on the board. Straightened piles of paper on the piano.

Class started at eight o'clock. Up until that week, various freshman and sophomore class members had volunteered to take roll. Pride kept me from stooping to the token act.

"Eden." Mr. Christian walked over with the clipboard. "Could you be in charge of taking roll every day?" Though I wanted to help him, I saw this as a devastating cut. He viewed me like any other student. Disappointed, I said, "I'm sure one of the freshmen would be glad to help out with that." A flash of confusion shadowed his face. I almost felt guilty. All around me girls raised their hands. One even had the nerve to grunt, like an anxious elementary-aged child waiting to be called on by an oblivious teacher. He handed the panting girl the clipboard and she gleamed. My heart felt like it was being squeezed. Our private chats had meant nothing. Though I kept my eyes on him as he took us through rehearsal, I did so only because I didn't want him, or anybody else to sense the rupture inside of me. "Altos," he addressed the group I was in and for a moment, he looked at me. Vainly, I tried to ignore how my heart quickened at his glance. "You're a little flat on that first chorus. Switch around. Everybody find a different seat. If your neighbor is flat, it can be infectious." He sent me a pointed look. I wondered what was going on. Inside I was raw. I walked up the risers to the back row. The girls made room for me as if I was royalty. I stood in the

very center and glared down at him. After he saw where I had moved, he lifted his baton, ready to continue, keeping an evasive gaze out over the class. "From the first chorus," he said. We continued until we finished the song. I hated being that far away from him. His passionate conducting didn't tickle the air around me with his scent: orange citrus and skin. His face was hidden behind the greasy heads of the two freshmen that stood in front of me. I couldn't feel the air ripple when he moved. When the bell rang, I didn't look at him. I gathered my books and walked out.

a Sick disappointment stayed with me, a gutting flu from which my whole body ached. I went through the rest of my classes like a ghost. I was relieved no one tried to talk to me. Even my teachers seemed to sense that I was a walking shell. None called on me. Only Mr. Jones either ignored or couldn't see that I was not in the mood to socialize. He waved at me from across the hall as I passed the teacher's lounge on my way to Brielle's car for lunch.

Forget it, I thought, slamming her car door. I stared at the teacher's lot, just in case Mr. Christian happened to go out today.

"What's up with you?" Brielle asked. "Nothing." "Oookaay."

We drove in steamed silence to the plaza. Seeing Matt and Josh sitting around our usual table was like looking at my own vomit. Joining them, submitting to the daily ritual, was like stepping back. I didn't want to.

Matt lit up when he saw me, and I knew then that sitting at that table would be masochistic. "I'm going inside to get something," I said, and strode into Fiasco's.

I didn't feel like eating, I was swamped with boredom that I was even there. Browsing the shelves, I hoped to distract my thoughts. But they drifted back to Mr. Christian and class. Another jag of disappointment ripped through me.

"You really do eat here." The sound of his voice caused my head to snap up. I forced my face to remain passive, though my heart pounded with thrill.

Mr. Christian. Next to me in the aisle. "Yeah, I do." I went back to browsing so he wouldn't see that my cheeks were flushed. "What's good?" I shrugged. Didn't look at him. Felt stupid. He was trying to talk to me. Maybe he hadn't noticed that I'd been pissed in class. Maybe he had, and was trying to make it up to me. Maybe I really was something special to him. I looked at him, my insides softening like butter. "Any of the wraps are good." "Yeah?" He looked over the serving counter. "Maybe that's what I'll try." "Try the wraps." I started off, pleased to be leaving him, then tossed over my shoulder, "the turkey's pretty good." Why had he come over and talked to me, I wondered, now outside in the noon sun. I hadn't seen him. He could have shopped, ordered his lunch, and gone without saying a word to me, or bringing himself to my attention. Clearly, he had sensed something had happened between us in class. I bailed on eating lunch with Bree, Matt, and everyone else and walked back to school. The four block distance would allow me the privacy I needed to think this out. And he might drive by. What had happened between us? I wanted to fantasize that he cared about me more than he cared about any other student. Did he care enough that he had taken the time to come to the plaza, knowing I ate there with my friends, and sought me out? We had both sensed the difference in class today. A steady lift of my spirits brought a smile to my face. As cars drove past, I casually glanced inside, hoping I would see him. But I didn't.

a Seven After my last class, I walked to the faculty lot and stood near a corner hoping I wouldn't be noticed. A stupid hope. You can't flick on and off a switch, enjoying the spotlight when you wanted it. It follows you, blaring indiscretion as well as diplomacy.

"Hi, Eden." Some girl I'd never met or seen before waved at me. I said 'hi' back, feeling stupid that she knew me and I had no idea who she was.

I wondered if James Christian had been popular. I scanned the parking lot, watching teachers file to their cars. Today, I would see which car was his. Since I had a few minutes until the last period of the day let out, I decided to go home and get my car. I'd do more than see what he drove. I'd follow him home. My white BMW idled just outside the parking lot alongside the low wall that surrounded the high school—the place parents sat in their Lexus', Escalades and Mercedes waiting for school to end so they could pick up their students. The spot gave me an excellent view of the

teachers' cars pulling out of the lot. In an effort to disguise myself, I'd stuffed my hair up into my pink Von Dutch hat and had my black glasses on. But everyone knew my car. The last bell rang at two forty-five. My nerves jittered. I had the radio on, unable to listen to anything but nondescript tunes spewing from my speakers. Anything more would distract me. Mr. Jones drove by, then Miss Beatty. Mrs. Carlson happened to look over and recognized me in spite of my disguise. She waved. I waved back. Fifteen minutes later, the stream of cars dwindled to a trickle. I got out and stood looking over the waist-high cement wall that surrounded the school. Most of the lot had cleared. I guessed teachers were as anxious to split as we were. Nearly ready to sigh and abandon my foolish wish, I looked out over the horizon. The golden sun sat as if deciding whether or not it wanted to disappear into the vast ocean beneath it. The site calmed me. I looked back at the parking lot just in time to catch him: brown cords, yellow button down shirt and that adorable elbow-patched coat. His tie hung loose at his neck. He didn't look around, just walked briskly through the near-empty lot with an armload of papers straight to a light gray, older model Toyota. He got inside. I jumped back in my car and revved the engine, lowering myself in the seat so that when he drove by, he wouldn't see me. After a moment I heard his car pass. I shot up, saw his gray car in my rear view mirror and pulled into the lane, keeping a nice respectable distance between us. I'd staked out guys before with Brielle, but it had been a long time. As long as I kept him in my sight and didn't let too many cars get in between us, I doubted that he would notice me. We drove along Palos Verdes Drive North at law abiding speed. My insides were so anxious I had to turn off the music. I wondered what music he listened to when he drove home—something relaxing or something that pumped? I kept my focus on his old gray Toyota. Three cars cruised in between us. He took Palos Verdes Drive off the hill and into Redondo Beach, joining the throngs of traffic that now clogged the Pacific Coast Highway. I debated driving up next to him and casually waving. But then I'd have to bag the plan and follow him another day, and I couldn't wait to see where he lived. Turning right on Calle Mayor, I followed him into the watered-down version of the peninsula. An area of houses sitting on the fringe of Palos Verdes called the Hollywood Riviera. Homes were decent, and the tree-lush community was still considered prestigious to live in, watered down or not. Less traffic forced me to drop even further him behind to protect my identity. He kept the speed limit and, from where I drove four cars behind, I was sure he couldn't see who I was. Then he took a

right and I slowed before I trailed him onto a quiet, tree-shrouded street. We were the only cars on the street, so I pulled over and watched him until he disappeared to the right somewhere. I drove at a snail's pace, searching each driveway for his gray car. The homes were small, old and quaint. Some had been restored. Others remodeled and enlarged, making the most of the coveted real estate. At last I saw it. A Tudor-style cottage. I loved it. His gray car was parked in the circular drive, but here was no sign of him and I didn't pause when I drove by. In fact, I kept my face forward, but strained my eyes to the right so that I could see as much of it as I could without actually looking over. His house. Knowing where he lived settled me in the way a child settles knowing dinner will be ready and waiting when he gets home. A sigh escaped me. I wanted to drive back by but didn't dare. There were rules to staking out, and the first and foremost was self control. No matter how much you want to steal another glimpse, risking discovery is not an option. I drove home with a smile on my face. I knew where he lived now, and the little Tudor house was stuck in my head like a fairy tale dream. Later, when it was dark and night would hide me, I'd drive back. Any light from inside the house would mean I could see in. I glanced at my car clock. Three forty-five. Three more hours and it would be dark.

a "So where are we going?" Brielle asked, checking herself out in the mirror of the passenger visor. "On a stake out." "Somebody new?" Her brown eyes were wide. I wondered if she was mature enough to accept where my heart was going. We'd shared our deepest secrets through the years, but I knew this secret would blow the lid off our tightly kept jar. "Somebody different." Brielle settled against the seat, eyes huge and hungry. "Yeah?" "I can't say right now." "What? How can you do this to me? Drag me along without spilling the juice?" "It's..." My feelings for Mr. Christian were different, so different than what I had felt for any other boy. Though I had gone through the boy rituals of finding out his first name and where he lived, I wasn't driven by some bubbly, hot fantasy that the two of us would flirt and play. What was inside of me for Mr. Christian had moved in with the permanence of a second heart beat. I turned on his street and Brielle looked around. If I didn't point out his house, she would never know. So I drove and casually took in all of the houses. "He lives down here? In the Riv?" "Yeah, so?" I was glad I hadn't told her more. Her mindset was stuck in PV. His house was dark and his car was gone. Disappointed, I drove the length of the street so that Brielle would not be able to sense any difference in my

mood or where I focused my attention. I even drove down a few other random streets, just to cover myself. Inside, I was awash with questions. Where would he be on a Thursday night? "How did you even meet somebody from down here?" "Dad's partner's son has a friend who lives here." "In the Riv? Nice try, Eden." "He's a junior partner," I shot, glad she couldn't see my heated face. I hadn't thought about logistics. "A transfer from another firm." Brielle was too busy checking out passing cars for guys to look at me and verify truth. "Let's stop by Starbucks." Because I couldn't drive by Mr. Christian's again and I had no idea where he was, I agreed. Besides, the coffee would comfort me. We pulled into the Starbucks in the Riviera. "You don't mind if we stop at this one do you?" I teased. "It's not our Starbucks after all." "Shut up." She adjusted her walk from practical to seductive, in case she was being watched. For the first time I was embarrassed for her. "So." She yanked open the door and the sweet scent of coffee filled my head. "If you're not with Matt anymore, and it's really over, do you care if he, like, is with somebody else?" "Of course not." I'd stopped thinking of Matt weeks ago. "Far be it from me to deny some other girl his charms." "He's so hot." I looked at her as we stood in line. She was studying the menu but that feigned look of indifference was bull. She was covering up. "You want Matt." She tried to look shocked. "You want him," I repeated, shocked that I hadn't seen this coming. "No. NO. No way." "Yes, you do. It's obvious. Look at you. You're pink and ...you're, like, bubbling." "I am not." "Yes you are." After the news settled in, I kept my gaze on the menu. "Go for it." But I knew Matt wouldn't reciprocate. I'd seen desire in his eyes just hours earlier... for me. Not once in our six months had he ever talked about Brielle in any way shape or form of a boy interested in a girl. "Seriously?" she asked. "You don't mind?"

0 "Nope. Take him. He's yours." She jumped up and down, giddy. "Easy, easy girl." I turned away for a moment, her reaction so ridiculous.

We ordered and sat by the window, our favorite place to sit because you could be seen. Guys driving by could stop, come in, and you could hook up for the night because of the window.

Somehow, I doubted Mr. Christian went to such obvious lengths to hook up. I had no idea what a man like him would do to meet women. As I sat sipping my drink, I

glanced at my reflection in the window, wondering if he had a girlfriend.

a Eight I didn't mean to be late to class, but Mrs. Carlson, my counselor, nabbed me in the hall and handed me some papers for graduation my parents needed to fill out. Mrs. Carlson always liked to ask how I was doing. I enjoyed telling her. By the time we stopped chatting, I was late. I stuffed the papers into my purse and headed to Concert Choir.

I could hear the warm-up scales already in progress and stopped myself from going in. Since I was tardy, should I bail on class and see where it got me? Would Mr. Christian care? For a flash, I had the fantasy of him taking me aside in the small office. A hot tingle raced through my blood thinking about him being mad at me for not being on time.

I didn't look at him when I entered the room, stuffy and stale smelling with a load of morning breath. I walked up the risers to the back row. The girls obligatorily parted, the center space opening for me.

I set my books down, straightened my clothes, and flipped my hair over my shoulder before at last looking over the heads in front of me at Mr. Christian. Though he was facing the class in general, his gaze locked on mine. Our eyes held for a moment before he looked out over the rest of the students.

When warm-ups were over, he adjusted the music stand. "Please get out Alberto Monticelli's piece." The sheet music had been passed out by someone else since I'd been late. It sat on the seat of my metal chair. I picked up it up. "We'll start at the beginning and work our way through. Altos, be mindful of being on key. We may have to do more body shuffling." He sat at the piano and played the beginning notes, then stood with his arms up, his baton ready to engage us. We sung the song without stopping. I watched him, trying to gauge his assessment of our run through. From where I stood, things sounded pretty good. He kept his expression neutral until the last note was sung. Gripping the music stand, he lowered his head momentarily. The room fell into whispers. When he looked up, silence jolted the room as if a lightening bolt had just struck. "How many of you want to be here?" Mr. Christian asked. It took

a few moments, but finally, most everyone raised their hands. His scan of the class stopped on me. "That's surprising because you sound like you could care less." "It's morning," somebody complained. "Yeah, our voices aren't warmed up." Mr. Christian's smile was forced. "Yeah, right." He adjusted the music stand again, keeping a tight grip on it. "I'd take that into consideration if your morning voices left you after a half hour. Or even an hour. But this is what you sound like." He turned and plucked a mini recorder from on top of the piano. Since I'd not seen it, I figured he'd set it out when class began. Flicking a switch, he played back what sounded like a bunch of kids singing underwater. Mumbles and laughs followed. "You see what I'm dealing with here?" he said, clicking off the recorder. "We'll go through the piece again. Remember to breathe from your abdomen. Did Mr. Horseman teach your how to breathe right?" A jumble of replies followed. Mr. Christian took off his coat. Some of the girls whistled. The lusty expressions grated on me like fangs on bare skin. He blushed a cute shade of red then held his flat palm against his abdomen. "Most of us when we sing, talk, or just go about our day, breathe from our chest like this. To get the most from our voices, we need to breathe like babies breathe, from the lower abdomen. See how my abdomen moves my hand when I speak?" Underneath his palm, his stomach lifted. "I think we could see it better without the shirt on," a girl quipped. "Very funny," he grinned. "Place your hand against your abdominal wall and as we sing, make sure you're singing with your diaphragm and not your upper chest. You'll project farther and your sound will be richer." We started the song again, all of us standing with our palms against our stomachs. It was probably just me, but I thought we sounded better. When the song was over, his twinkling smile confirmed what I had heard. "Much better." He applauded. "Now let's try it from the beginning again." Mr. Christian was so pleased, his glowing grin spread up the front row all the way to the top riser. After class, I collected the sheet music as usual. Some of the younger girls loitered near him at the music stand. I took my time stacking the music on the shelves in the office. "We sounded better, didn't we?" one girl asked him. "The breathing instruction helped." I heard him say. "Are you single?" another asked. I froze, one hand still up on the stack of music I had just filed away. "Yes, I am." "How old are you, anyway? You look totally young for a teacher." "Old enough to be a teacher," he replied. I had to peek. He was surrounded by a pack. His hands skipped from his hips to his hair to scrubbing his jaw. When I came out of the office he looked over. A brief expression of relief flashed on his face. Seeing that his attention was

diverted, the girls looked at me. "Anything else, Mr. Christian?" I asked with a smile. "Uh, no. Thank you, Eden." One of the freshmen cocked a brow at me. Another crossed her arms. "Is she your TA?" the third asked with a sneer. I walked to my chair with my shoulders erect and a smile on my face. "I just help with the sheet music." I picked up my bag and tilted my head at them. "And anything else he needs help with." One of the girls' eyes widened. The bell rang. Quickly, they snatched their backpacks and went out the door. Mr. Christian's gaze was tight on me. "Eden, I think you and I should talk." "The music." I gestured to the boombox with a nod for him to turn it on. He didn't acknowledge the reminder. "That was a misleading comment you made." He took a few steps toward me, then glanced around at the students noisily pouring in. "I told her that I help with the music." He leaned closer. "And anything else I need help with?" I shrugged. "Yeah, so?" "That sounded suggestive." A hot shudder shot through my middle. "If they think that then well, they're—" "I can't talk about this now." The green in his eyes turned stormy. He glanced around. "You have to be careful what you say." I swallowed, nodded. "Oh, sure. Of course." I turned then, and clutched my books to my tingling breasts. I'd made him upset. That wasn't cool. What did he think of me? A voracious gnaw ate at my conscience. I left the room.

a Nine I signed my dad and Stacey's signatures on the papers Mrs. Carlson had given me earlier and headed back to the counseling office after school was out. None of the counselors were in. I left the papers in Mrs. Carlson's mailbox; a slot with the other teachers slots, built into one of the walls.

I didn't want to go home. I wouldn't see Brielle, bent as she was on luring Matt. Walking the hall alone, I thought about how uptight Mr. Christian had looked when I'd made those comments about helping him. I wanted to be his TA, absolutely.

But I wanted more than that. I could admit that I'd intended innuendo. But I'd meant to shut those girls up, not anger Mr. Christian. Panic caused me to break out in a sweat. What had I done? He'd said he wanted to talk. Now would be just as good a time as any, so I headed to his classroom. The door was ajar and I went in. The room was empty, but I heard noise coming from the closet. Setting my bag on a chair, I straightened my clothes and approached. "Hello?" I called out. He came through the open door. We stared at each other. The room seemed to shrink. "I came by to talk to

you,” I said. “About what happened earlier?” He glanced at his watch. “I have a faculty meeting in five minutes.” “Oh. It’s no biggie.” I headed to my bag, keeping my back to him so he couldn’t see I was disappointed we weren’t going to talk about what had happened and settle things. “It is a biggie.” He came up behind me. I smelled him, felt him. My eyes closed involuntarily. “Eden.” When he said my name, his music echoed through my head. I saw the inside of a dark, cavernous cathedral. Brilliant stained glass pictures. Ivory marble statues. “What?” I didn’t turn around. He cleared his throat. “I’ve got this meeting so now’s not a good time. But—” “It really isn’t a big deal.” “Maybe it isn’t.” He didn’t sound convinced. He moved around so I would have to look at him. The tentative look in his eyes made me feel bad. “I really didn’t mean to say something that might sound... you know...” Though I had intentionally said those things to sound nicely ambiguous, the genuineness I saw in his face made me sorry I had taken that liberty. “I appreciate that.” When he lowered his head, I had the sudden urge to run my hand along the top of it, like a mother would to a troubled child. I picked up my bag instead. His eyes met mine again. “I’m your teacher, Eden. I can be your friend, but I’m your teacher first.” I nodded, my stomach jumbling. What was he telling me? To back off? Had he read my thoughts? I was mortified that my actions had given my private fantasies life. I backed slowly toward the door. For a moment, he just watched me. Then he grabbed his coat and slung it over his arm and came toward me. He opened the door and held it while I passed by him. I stole another deep breath and filled myself with his scent before the cold, afternoon air hanging in the halls outside chilled me. He locked the classroom and we started down the corridor in silence. I was a muddle of hurt, confusion and frustration. He was unlike anyone I’d ever known. When he spoke to us about music, I felt the love and passion he had as if he held me in his arms and passed that love and passion to me through an embrace. His voice lifted my spirit. His face... I glanced at him as we walked side by side. He looked like one of those beautiful, marble statues you might find in a museum or somewhere in a dark corner of a church. “Are you religious?” I asked. His eyes were clear as a stream, and rippled into a smile. “That’s an introspective question. What makes you ask it?” “Something about you... you kind of look it.” His hearty laugh swirled through the empty hall before filling me. “How does one look religious?” “I don’t know. You just remind me of a marble statue I might see at church.” “Marble? That hardly invokes feelings of warmth and invitation.” “I mean, you look like one of those statues.” “Do you go to church Eden?” I shook my head,

watching to see if he found my honesty a turn off. "You?" He nodded. "That's where I started singing. My mother was our choir director." "Cool." I could see him in a white robe with a big, round red collar, his angelic voice clearly above everyone else's. "You had the best voice, I bet." "Mom always thought so." His grin deepened. "Music has its roots in religion. I got a steady diet of both growing up." "So, where do you go to church?" I was already planning to go there. He stopped at the joint in the hall that led to the faculty offices. For a moment he looked at me as if considering my question. "All Saints Church down in the Riv." "Non-denominational?" "Yeah. I've got that meeting." "Oh. Sure." I started toward the parking lot. "Bye." "See you tomorrow." I strained to hear his footsteps even with my back turned but they vanished after seven steps.

a It rained that night. The pattering sound drowned out Stacey's useless chattering on her cell phone as she walked through the house on her nightly bragging session to her friends about her latest purchases.

I took off in my car and headed down to the Riv. The hollowness I carried yearned. I thought about Mr. Christian when he first told us about classical music being more satisfying and scanned the radio for a classical station because I didn't own anything but pop.

0 I'd listened to enough in class that the repulsive reaction I'd had initially was nearly gone now. As I drove down PV Drive, I tried to listen to the melody, like he'd taught us to. The violins were strong, like a wind blowing through trees. Cellos snaked a deeper harmony along the base of those trees. In my mind, I saw a dark forest. When I heard tinkling bells, I imagined the leaves on the trees shimmering with the sound.

The song took me right to Mr. Christian's house and I slowed as I drove by, peering through the rain at the darkened cottage. His car was nowhere in sight. But then he could very well have parked it in the garage.

Still, the place looked empty. I wondered where he could be. Some churches held meetings on weeknights. I knew that much from kids who weren't my friends but whom I'd heard talking about it. I drove to the address of All Saints I had looked up in

the white pages. The building was on the corner of Pacific Coast Highway and Redondo Beach Boulevard. A handful of cars were in the parking lot—though I didn't see his—and a few people were going inside so I parked. He could have parked somewhere else, like on the street. He could be inside. My nerves skittered. I had no idea if Mr. Christian had church meetings on Thursday nights, but the creamy-colored church with its spirals pointing to heaven, its stained glass shooting colors of hope into the rainy night, drew me. It was warm inside and smelled of oiled wood and paper. I hadn't worn a coat. Like every teenager, I saw the practical umbrella as taboo. My skirt and top were drenched with rainwater. Standing in the dark-wood foyer, I shivered. Low lights from black sconces mellowed the room. A wooden stand held a stack of programs so I took one. It had the church itinerary for the week. Organ music seeped heavily through the open doors and into the foyer where I stood. I walked into the chapel to find a smattering of people sitting in random pews, listening to the music. An older man played. One look around and I knew James Christian was not there. Still, I wasn't disappointed. The music was doing just as he'd said it would, filling the hollowness inside of me. For a moment, I stood in the back and listened. This melody was heavy, and moved like a herd of horses at a full run. The organ added drama with its warbling notes. I decided to stay, even if Mr. Christian wasn't there. This was his church after all, and he walked here. Sliding into the last row, I sat, shivering. The inside of the building looked relatively plain and simple as far as churches went. The only church I'd ever been to was the Catholic church where Dad had Mom's funeral. He'd taken me there for three months after, said we needed it. No one spoke now. Everyone listened to the old man play, his body moving like a wave at the organ. It was freeing being there, not knowing anyone. Not caring if anyone saw me or what they thought because I was there. I could see why people went to church. Leaning back against the bench, I closed my eyes. Song after song played. Most of them had the sound of classical music but the shortened verses were that of their cousins, hymns. What were the words? Had Mr. Christian written any hymns? My clothes slowly began to pull away from my skin as they dried. Still damp, they kept my flesh too chilled to fall into deep relaxation. I wanted to sleep. The music echoing off the tall walls and stained glass windows lulled and warmed me from the inside out. "Eden?" My eyes shot open. My heart pounded. James Christian stood in the aisle next to the pew in which I sat. I sat up. "Hey." "What are you doing here?" Confusion mixed with something else I couldn't read on

his face. I hadn't thought through what I would say if I were to see him. My mind tumbled with stupid replies. Because I was in a church, I tried honesty. "I wanted to see your church." He blinked, surprise on his face then. "Wow." He glanced around, so I did too. Some parishioners were watching us. I wasn't sure if it was because we were talking, interrupting the music, or because they knew him. I slid over, making room for him. For a minute he looked as if debating the idea of sitting. Then he sat next to me. The heat of his body electrified me. His cologne mixed with the smell of rain. Unlike me, he'd used an umbrella. He held it clutched in his left hand and now it dripped onto the carpet strip beneath our feet, wetting the red plush to blood. "I hope that's okay," I said, not wanting to offend him. "Of course it's okay," his voice dropped to a whisper. I shuddered when he leaned close so our voices would remain intimate. "Church is for everyone, any time." "I just wanted to see it." I stretched out as I had been when he'd found me. My arm brushed his. "The last time I was in church was for my mother's funeral." I felt his gaze on me even though I kept mine on the organist. "I'm sorry." His soft tone almost opened an old well I had purposefully sealed shut. Tears started but I blinked them back. Sorrow was on his face. "It was a long time ago," I said. "Not that long for a girl in need of a mother." He was so insightful. "You're right." "This is a good place to come think of her," he said. "I hadn't been thinking of her at all." A line formed between his brows. "I'm sorry if the suggestion brings you pain." "It doesn't." His face was so serious. I sat back up. "It was a long time ago. Yes, I have moments when I think of her and when I do, it hurts. But I don't dwell on it. I can't." That was real hell. I faced forward. "You're soaked." "I didn't have an umbrella." "I can see that." His gaze traveled the length of my body and I shivered again. Instantly, he took off his coat. "Here, take this." My mouth fell open. Eyeing the elbow-patched coat, everything inside of me leapt with the eagerness of putting it on. I slipped my arm into the warm sleeve as if I was putting on the Pope's robes. Enveloped in his warmth, I wanted to close my eyes and revel in his scent warming my nose, filling my head. "Thank you." "You can't get sick being wet and cold," he leaned forward, his elbows resting on the back of the bench in front of us, "but you can be miserable." There was no misery in me anywhere with his coat wrapped around me. "Why are you here?" I asked. "Oh. I work with a group of wayward youth once a week. I teach them to sing, no surprise there." "Don't you ever do anything for fun?" His eyes flickered in the soft light. "It is fun." "Aren't the kids kind of hopeless?" "Not at all. In fact, a lot of them have more hope after learning to sing

and appreciate music.” I shrugged, hugged his coat around me, his body warmth now dissolving into mine. “You smell good.” His face broke into a smile. He reached up and loosened his tie with a glance around before he looked at me again. “You say it like it is.” “Shouldn’t I?” “Maybe. But I’m your teacher.” “So what? We’re in a church. As far as I know, that’s neutral ground. Here, we’re two people—an eighteen year old and a twenty-two year old. That’s all.” He pinched his lips and didn’t say anything for a long moment. “That’s not all, Eden and you know it.” For a thick while we stared at each other. Then he leaned a little closer. “I could get in trouble spending time with you.” “You’re not spending time. You happened to run into me here. It was a coincidence.” “Was it?” A knob formed in my throat. I reminded myself where I was. God would hate me lying to this beautiful, churchgoing man. “Okay. I came here because...” I couldn’t believe I was going to admit the truth. But the light in his face made me unable to lie. “I wanted to see your church. And if you happened to be in it, that would be cool too.” The long emptiness between us was punctuated by the silence now hollowing the chapel because the organist had finished. Mr. Christian stared at me. Heart pounding, I met his stare equally. I did care about him. I liked who he was, what he did for me and for other people. I didn’t know where he had been, but I wanted to. I had no idea where he was going, but I wanted to know and more than that, I wanted to go there. “Eden...” I braced for a brush off. As fantasies went, this one was beyond anything I had ever dreamed up, and inside, I fought the impossibility of it continuing. “I know what it sounds like.” I hoped to stop him from saying the words that would hurt me. “And it’s true. Crap, see what being in a church does to me? It’s like some truth serum.” He bowed his head and more silence stretched between us. I wanted to touch him. “I’m sorry if I put you in an uncomfortable position,” I said. “That’s the last thing I’d want. I can’t lie, though.” Feeling tears start, I blinked fast and sat up, tugging off his jacket. I held it in my arms, running my hand over the elbow patches. “I like this coat,” I said because he still hadn’t said anything and that hollow inside of me was opening again. “It was the first thing I noticed about you.” When he lifted his head, distress colored his eyes. I bit my lower lip, feeling guilty that I had somehow brought that to him. His gaze fell to my mouth and the veil of anguish vanished. His eyes sharpened, his jaw drew tight. I took a deep breath and held the jacket out. “I really am sorry.” He took the jacket from my hands, our eyes locked in something silent I didn’t understand. I stood and after a moment, he did as well. Then he lifted his umbrella. “Take this. It’s still raining.” I

touched his warm fingers when I took the umbrella but he didn't release it to me. Our hands remained joined as securely as our eyes. I had thought I'd shared hot moments with Matt. Nothing had ever felt like this, searing my bones, melting me from the inside out. "Thank you."

At home, I stood out in the rain, looking up into the rounded coves of the black umbrella. The smile on my face would not leave me. Water dripped from every sharp point and onto the stones of our driveway, sounding as if millions of fingertips pattered against the taut, black fabric to get my attention.

I had used the umbrella like he'd told me and stayed protected from the rain during my dash to my car from the church. I was dry now, with the exception of my legs, splattered with water.

Euphoria forced me to kick at the puddles forming around my feet. I was dry because of his umbrella. In my head, I saw his face and I closed my eyes, reaching for the intense look he'd had when desire had dissolved the distress on his face. He wanted me. I knew desire, I'd seen it plenty of times in the eyes of boys that wanted me.

James Christian wanted me. I stopped kicking puddles, stunned from the revelation. Away from the reverent confines of the church, my

mind easily wandered to the forbidden fantasy of the two of us. And at that moment, I didn't care that I had shared a portion of my feelings with him. Someone had to start things. Though I doubted he would ever reciprocate, it was freeing knowing that he knew how I felt.

The front door swung open, sending a ray of golden light right where I stood. Stacey looked at me. "What are you doing?" "Staying dry." "Getting wet is more like it. You going to come in sometime tonight?" "Maybe." I was under James' protection as long as I stayed underneath the umbrella. I didn't want to go inside. She let out one of her, you're-a-strange-girl-and-I-don't-care-if-I-don't-understand-you sighs and shut the door. The beam of light drowned in the rain.

a Ten I debated keeping the umbrella. It sat in my bedroom in the corner like a prized idol. I stared at the black contraption as I dressed for school the next day.

One of his possessions. In my house. Catching my reflection in the mirror, I almost laughed. You sound ridiculous. It's just an umbrella. He probably has dozens of them. Stacey did. Dad did. I had none. I took it to school with me, holding it against my body like an infant as I walked the hall toward Concert Choir. He would hate it if anyone saw me hand it to him, so I kept it tucked under my arm. Chopin played from the CD player and a few students were already in their seats. Immediately, I searched for him. He was at the piano, minus his elbow-patched jacket, wearing a soft green shirt and a dark tie with his khakis. He was talking to some kids. My heart started to skip. I took in a deep breath. I quickly crossed to the office where I would collect the day's music. I stashed the umbrella by his coat, which he'd hung over a chair that was kept in the small space for utility use. My fingers lingered over the corduroy, traveling to the plaid patches. I smiled. Grabbing the music, I headed into the classroom and started passing out the sheets. I meant to make things as comfortable for him as I could. Even though I had admitted that I'd gone to his church to see him that was all I had admitted. I saw no shame in that. I expected a 'hey' at least. But I passed out the fortythree sheets of music without being stopped by him for anything. I didn't look over, now afraid of what I might see if I did. I took my seat in the back row when the bell rang and finally looked at him because everyone else did, too. The room fell silent except for Chopin. Mr. Christian had both hands on the black music stand as if he was holding onto it for life. Or he wanted to huck it across the room. There was no jolly pleasure in his face at greeting his first morning class. Two knobs of bone protruded from the sides of his taut jaw. His eyes flitted over the body of the class. When his gaze lit on me, I wanted to hide. The look pierced me. He gazed back over the class. "Sit up straight please." Everyone straightened without a word of complaint. "We'll go through Monticelli's piece first. You should all know the words now. His hardened look pointed right at me. "Collect the music, Eden. Please." I made my way around the risers again and took back each piece of paper while he continued. "No music anymore, people. If you don't know it by now, well, then, you'll be mouthing it I suppose. Our performance is this Saturday. Even though it's Saturday, wear your dresses and suits Friday for advertising, please. Show time is at seven-thirty but I would like you to come at six-thirty for warm up. Any questions?"

0 “Do we have to wear the dresses?” “What other alternative do you suggest, Emily? We are a family-friendly choir here.” A group laugh broke out, easing the tension that had strung the class together in apprehension. But when my smile met his, his vanished instantly. That stung. I looked away, trying to understand what was going on. We practiced our two songs we were set to perform, James as intense as a lion tamer cracking a whip at a cage of lions. I’d never seen him angry and where I wouldn’t classify this display as ferocious, I sensed his raw impatience. I couldn’t wait for the bell to ring so I could get out of there. I almost made a dash for the door but thought better of it. Surely, his frustration wasn’t about me. Us. There was no us. It had to be about one of his classes. Casually, I gathered my things and walked right to him, my insides filled with frightened butterflies. When the last student had left, I stood in his line of vision. He stopped stacking sheet music and looked at me. “I left your umbrella in the office.” He didn’t react, didn’t even move. “I hope that everything is okay.” Setting his fingers on his hips, he jerked out a nod. “Yeah.” The door swung open. I was glad. Tears were rushing through my head and I knew they’d give my wounded heart away if he wasn’t distracted. He didn’t look at whoever entered the room, and as I blinked to try to hold the tears back, he watched. His eyes narrowed briefly, the tendons in his arms shifted when he crossed his arms over his chest. I started for the door, humiliated that he’d seen my eyes wet. I hadn’t cried in front of anyone since my mother had died. The bathroom was too far down the hall, but a deserted area of the parking lot was just around the corner, so I went there knowing no one would see me. Tears streamed down my cheeks. Infuriated that I would react this way because of something so stupid, I wept even more. Every time the music room door opened and closed, I heard laughter. Chopin. His voice. The sounds wafted through the short hall right to my heart, as if to torment me even more. I ditched the rest of that day. The deep red choral dress hung on the outside of my closet and I stared at it now. Dad opened my bedroom door dressed in his suit and tie. “You okay, princess?” “Fine.” I lay on my bed in my pajamas, staring at the dress. He followed my gaze. “New dress?” I stared at him. “Uh, yeah.” “I’m off. Hope you feel better.” Then he shut the door. Rolling onto my back, I stared at the ceiling. My phone vibrated and I looked to see who was texting me. Brielle. It was her fiftieth text since yesterday. where r u? r u alright? where have u been? we need 2 talk. i have 2 tell u something. I had no desire to hear about Matt, so I ignored her. Matt had also

texted me, wondering why I wasn't at the plaza. At school. Was I in the concert Josh was talking about? I'll come see u sing, he texted. The day dragged by and I found myself out by the cliffs, looking at the endless ocean. I didn't wear my robe. I wanted the freezing air to singe my skin in the flimsy cami and shorts I wore to bed. I deserved the discomfort. Mr. Christian's cold behavior left me feeling like I had lost something. Like I was empty, without more to take, and yet I knew that more would be gouged away still. I had felt this way when my mother died, and had stayed out on the cliff's edge until Dad had found me and carried me back inside. I couldn't think about anything but how complete I'd felt sitting in that church next to Mr. Christian. About how I'd never felt so drawn to someone before, at first because of what I saw when I looked at him. But there was so much more to him than how he looked. What was inside of him, what I couldn't touch, was what I wanted. I don't know how long I sat out there, but my chattering teeth finally woke me from my daze. I looked at my arms, they were blue. My nail beds looked like smoky moons on an ashen sky. Rising, I only spent one second feeling angry that Dad wasn't there to carry me back inside. Besides, I shouldn't need anyone to carry me anywhere. Stacey's prattling made me furious. If I was going to stay home and wallow in grief, I didn't want her around. Wallowing was private, at least for me. It had been since my mother's death. Since I'd learned that the people around me that missed her could care less about my loss, they were too lost in their own. I was relieved when Stacey finally took off at noon. Around two-thirty, somebody banged on our front door. I hadn't heard Camilla for hours and figured she'd gone grocery shopping or something, so I went to see who had gotten in through the gate Camilla had no doubt left open. She didn't see security in the same light we did. I opened the door to Matt. He stood with his hands in his pockets, his red baseball cap askew the way he knew I liked it. "You okay?" His brown eyes swept me from head to toe. "I'm fine." "Everybody's wondering." "I know. I've gotten a million texts." "So, why didn't you answer them?" "I'm not feeling very good." Matt leaned in the doorway when he saw that he wasn't going to be invited in. "So, what's up? You barfing? What?" "I just don't feel good." "Oh. Sorry. You singing in the concert tomorrow night?" I saw Mr. Christian in my mind then, in his coat. The memory of slipping that coat around me and the comforting warmth I had felt caused me to shudder. Matt came away from the door jamb. "You cold?" He glanced at my chest. "Matt!" I folded my arms. I doubted Mr. Christian would do anything so tacky. He grinned and shrugged. "How about I come in and warm you

up? You look good.” Was he really saying this? I put my hand on the door, my signal that I was not about to invite him inside. “I really just need to crash.” His grin dissolved. “Wait. You’re really... you and me... you really aren’t... don’t, Eden...” My name sounded like tin scraping pavement coming from Matt, nothing like the reverent melody with which it floated from Mr. Christian’s lips. Still, I could see he was devastated by the realization, and he wasn’t afraid to show me, now that we were alone. “Why?” Too much pleading was in his tone. “It’s just... time, I think.” “But we still have a half of a year of school left.” We were obviously using different calendars for measuring time. “You’re a great friend. Let’s not let this get in the way, ‘kay?” The vulnerability on his face snapped shut like a book. “Fine.” He started backing down the walkway, glaring at me. Then he shot back toward me with such fury on his face, I held the door with both hands, ready to slam it if necessary. “You’re doing this on purpose,” he hissed in my face. “I am not. I don’t like you that way anymore, that’s all it is.” “You wanted to be the first one to dump me. I should have never told you that.” He was so wrong, I couldn’t believe where his mind was, tangled up in insignificancies I had long forgotten. “As if I would do something that retarded.” “Why else would you cut me out? I told you I’d never been dumped and you had to be the first.” He stepped closer. “You hook up with somebody else?” “No. I wouldn’t do that.” He took an uneasy step back, eyes hurt. “So you really are just bored with me?” I didn’t say anything. “I thought you loved me.” My eyes widened. I had never felt anything close to love for Matt. “I just told you, you’re a great friend. I hope that will never change.” “I love you, Eden.” The selfish whine in his tone spoke volumes over his words. Like a kid not getting what he wanted for his birthday. But I wasn’t in the mood, nor did I have the strength to argue with him. “I’m sorry if this hurts you.” “No you’re not. You don’t care one bit. You think I can’t see it in your face?” That scared me. Ours had been a surface-skimming relationship, mostly for show. To think he had had moments where he’d really studied me made me feel like a disgraced lover stripped naked before the man who had just sold her out. “Whatever you see, it’s not what’s real.” My voice was tattered. I went to him and put my arms around him. “I mean it.” His body went stiff. For a minute I thought he would let me hold him until he softened, understood and accepted. But he pulled my wrists down and pushed me back, his face harder. “You think that’s going to help?” Then he turned and started down the walk. Numb, I watched with the cold air chilling my skin to blue again. His car screeched as he backed it out the drive, then it roared as he took off down Paseo

del Mar.

a Eleven Feelings of uselessness washed over me with the strength of a tidal wave. I hadn't felt this abandoned for years. My friends, parties and Matt's company were always a place to escape to. Disbelief hung like a leaden shrug over my shoulders the rest of the night. I really hadn't lost my friends and I could always find a party, but those were temporary shelters that disappeared with the ease of night vanishing into day.

Brielle had finally given up and stopped texting me. I had no idea what she was doing but I guessed Matt figured into it somehow, and he just might go for her, feeling rejected as I knew he was. I'd never been a rebounder, but at that moment, the idea had its merits.

Matt and I had been together for six months. For me, that was a record. Like him, I'd always been the one to end the relationship first. I'd never been dumped. He'd never been dumped. We thought things would be perfect.

I didn't mourn the demise of our relationship. I felt bad that I had hurt him. That was a first for me. Maybe it was the time invested. I had the brief cheesy thought that I was really growing up, having this partial epiphany.

Had Mr. Christian ever hurt anyone? Dumped anyone? Been dumped? The thought that any girl could knowingly hurt him sent a hot flush of anger through me.

Rationally, I knew he'd had his share of the same experiences we all have. But I cared enough that I didn't want him to be hurt by anyone. And I knew I was the only one who could make sure that would never happen.

I walked through our empty house wishing I could undo the way I felt about Mr. Christian because it would only torture me. But his face, his voice, the light inside of him, the gentle way his hands flickered over the piano keys was locked inside of me.

I ached in that hollow place. What if he never spoke to me again? The day I had not

seen him at school felt like a week. I'd never missed a guy like this. No one had ever occupied my thoughts so completely. Like his music, his image drifted endlessly in my mind, a melody I couldn't stop hearing, even in sleep. Thinking of him, I went to my computer. After I hooked up my iPod, I downloaded some of the music he played for us in class. What I really wanted was to hear him sing, to listen to his creations. I closed my eyes, laid on my bed and saw him at the piano, fervently playing the keys. In my vision he wore his coat, blue shirt and a dark tie with his dark brown cord pants. He was so clueless about fashion, the flaw made everything else about him more appealing. I saw myself lying on the grass somewhere with him sitting over me, as if I was the piano. I yearned for him to explore me with that same intensity with which he touched the instrument. Sweet heat filled me. I easily imagined him kissing me. Leaning over, his body pressing mine deep into the grass as the sun warmed us both. Chopin's delicate melody played in my ears. If James thought I was like any other teenaged girl, he was wrong. He wasn't like any other man. I wanted him in my life. I refused to accept anything I had done was wrong. The rising swells of the music urged determination. I counted the hours until the concert

a The blood-red dress hung on some of the girls, and fit like a twisted glove on those more plump. On me, the gown clung nicely. But then, I'd had Stacey's tailor do some tucking and nipping.

I wore my hair up, with some loose curls draping down the back. I even stuck some sparkly pins in it. I didn't want to look like I was going to prom, like some of my choir mates looked. I preferred looking as though I was ready for a date.

Walking through the outdoor halls of school at night felt like I was in a dream of dark mists. I smelled the ocean on those mists. Rather than streaming sun, the lowlit corridors were surrounded by now-dark and empty common areas. Other choir members threaded through the halls along with me, but none were in my circle of friends, so we didn't talk. Laughter, conversation and music seeped into the night nearly as thick as the fog beginning to reach into the area.

I heard the usual whispers trail me after I passed some of the younger girls. I ignored them. My insides strummed, anticipating seeing Mr. Christian.

When Mr. Horseman had conducted, he'd dressed for concerts in a tuxedo. Images of Mr. Christian's glowing smile and toffee-colored curls against a black and white tux whet a need in me that had been starved for a day.

I entered the dark auditorium and looked for him. He was standing at the front of the room, his profile facing me. His lean frame was covered in black: sleek pants and a tight black turtleneck sweater, pushed up at the sleeves.

The spotlight skimmed his head, lighting his brownsugar waves and curls to an angel's halo. My heart leapt. He was directed Renaissance choir through a rehearsal of one of their numbers and most of the other choral groups stood along the sides of the auditorium or sat in the seats, listening. I made my way to the front, drawn to sit as near him as possible, then stopped myself and slid into a row in the middle. I had a clear view of the muscles of his back, the way they shifted underneath the taut black fabric of his turtleneck. The long, strong curve of his spine moved like a slim aspen in the wind as he conducted. The acapella harmonies of Renaissance choir rung like church bells through the room. I'd never heard anything more unified and perfect. When they finished, everyone cheered and applauded. He whispered something to them and they all laughed. I wondered if they were his favorite group, because they sounded the best. When he called Concert Choir up for our run through, I tried to stay hidden. I wasn't anxious for him to see me. I just wanted to watch him. I stood on the back row with the altos, just like I did in class. The moment our line filed in and stopped, I felt him looking at me. His gaze captured mine for a long, sweaty moment while the other choir members filled in the lower risers. I wondered if he was waiting for me to smile or in some

0 way acknowledge him. I didn't do anything but meet his gaze levelly. He finally looked over the rest of the choir and lifted his arms, ready to begin. For the first time, I noticed the pianist, an older petite woman with dark hair, gray streams woven into it. She had Mr. Christian's firm chin and straight nose. A small pair of glasses sat propped on the tip of her nose. Her rounded cheekbones perched high on her lightly painted face in a glamorous smile.

His mother. We began our aria with gusto. We'd been instructed to keep our eyes on our conductor so I did, watching James' face light and change like a child's on Christmas morning. I felt myself smiling as I sung, something I thought looked ridiculous, but now, with the excitement of an audience and the thrill of performing, couldn't stop if I had to. Our peers applauded our first song. I felt good about it, hearing the harmonic voices fill in around me. James stood at the music stand with both hands braced. The muscles in his shoulders bunched. "Pretty good, guys," he said. "Remember, this is a classical piece. We aren't working on the railroad all the live-long day, singing because we have to." Everyone laughed. "And smile. I look up and I see these morbid faces. We're having fun tonight, okay? Tonight, everything is going to change." "Why?" somebody asked. A crackle of comments followed. Mr. Christian waited until they died down. "Because it's my first concert, that's why. And you're all going to do great." He sent his smile to everyone as if he was celebrating with a toss of confetti. His wandering gaze finally rested on me and held. My heart fluttered. "For those of you that weren't here at six like you were supposed to be," he sent his gaze generally, "my mother is our accompanist for the night." He gestured to her with an extended hand and she briefly stood, smiling. "Hi, Mom!" somebody shouted. She nodded back. "That's Mrs. Christian to you, buddy," Mr. Christian shot with a grin. For a moment, I envied him, having a mother who would do something like this for him. Obviously, she had taken the time to not only learn, but master each choir's songs to be able to just walk in and sit down and play perfectly. We sang our last song and he told us we sounded much better, then we all filed off stage and another group filed on. During the performance, I sat with Josh and his friends in the music room, across the hall from the auditorium. The doors were left open so we could easily hear the concert in progress. Different choir groups came and went. I knew I wouldn't see Mr. Christian through the night; he had to be on stage. But we watched the show via a black and white monitor. "Matt's so mad." Josh sat next to me with a cup of Swiss Miss steaming in his palms. "You want?" I shook my head. "I said I was sorry." "You don't blast a guy and say you're sorry." "I wouldn't walk away, Josh, without saying something. We're friends." "Not anymore," he sipped. I stared at him. A couple of giggling freshman bumped into him to get his attention. "Hey!" He steadied his hot chocolate and glared at them. "Easy, they're fans." He tried not to hide a pleased look behind another sip. "Seriously. You've really pissed him off." "I didn't mean to, I just thought it was the best thing for us both." "You left him hanging,

you know, for the rest of the year.” Matt’s real reason for his bruised ego was so superficial. I sighed. “We’re not each other’s accessories. I’m sorry if he won’t have a date for prom, but, cry me a river, he could get any girl to go with him.” “Who will you go with?” “I probably won’t go.” Nothing about prom sounded even remotely alluring to me now. Unless, of course, I was there with Mr. Christian. We could chaperone. I started laughing and Josh sat back, confusion on his face. “What?” he asked. “Nothing.” “I’m sure Matt wouldn’t think it’s funny.” Mr. Christian and I at prom together? I doubted Matt would get a laugh out of that. “It wasn’t about him. Josh, none of this is about Matt. You guys are so self-absorbed it’s nauseating.” I stood, frustrated. We were on next and I wanted to cool off before I stood up under the hot lights. I left him sipping his hot chocolate and walked the cold, nearly-empty hall just outside the auditorium alone. “Concert Choir!” somebody called for us and soon, red dresses and black suits congregated near the doors as Girls Choir in their blue dresses poured out of the auditorium like a stream of water. My nerves jittered, even though I had no one there to watch me sing. I wanted us to do great for Mr. Christian. This was his night. A lot of the parents held his future as music director in the palms of their hands. “Smile, guys,” I whispered to everyone around me. Most looked at me with awe that I had addressed them. “Mr. Christian’s depending on us.” “Yeah,” another, less-popular girl stole the opportunity to give her two cents worth. “Or the ax will fall.” I didn’t like that image one bit and raised my brow at her. “There is no ax. He’s a great conductor and nothing’s going to screw that up. Just sing your best and smile.” “And look at him,” another girl piped. That would be the easy part.

The concert ended with the Renaissance choir. I snuck into the back of the auditorium, like most of the other students, and was smashed against the back wall for the final song and standing ovation Mr. Christian received.

When Leesa Weitz brought out a dozen red roses and laid them in Mr. Christian’s arms, I flushed with jealousy. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of giving him something. He smiled and gave her a hug.

I clapped along with the audience. How stupid. I should have been the one he hugged and appreciated for the thoughtful gesture. But then I hadn’t been thoughtful, I’d been just as self-absorbed as I’d accused Josh and Matt of being.

I nearly fell into another slimy bout of self centeredness by gathering my purse and leaving without giving Mr. Christian my congratulations but, I stopped. He'd be alone at some point tonight. At some point, every last student and parent would be gone.

I straightened the music room. The place had become a shamble of discarded Styrofoam cups and napkins and paper airplanes during the concert.

"Want me to help?" I heard Leesa's voice and turned. She stood in the door, the ruby dress fitting her body like a legwarmer on an oak tree.

"That's okay, I've got it." I wondered if she felt like I did about Mr. Christian and that was why she was hanging around. "That was cool, the roses."

"It's custom." "Yeah. A nice one." She went to a chair, retrieved a ratty gray coat and put

it over her arm. "Sure you don't want me to help?" "That's okay. I'm almost done." After a pause, she left. I was alone in the music room

and sat at the piano, my fingers dusting the keys without making a sound. Another half hour dragged by. Finally, I heard the melodic timbre of Mr. Christian's voice and the soft pitch of a woman's. I'd completely forgotten his mother. He'd probably driven with her. Embarrassed, I quickly gathered my bag to make a dash out but the two of them came through the door. Mr. Christian stopped when he saw me. The roses in his right hand lowered an inch. His mother only stopped when she saw us both standing like statues, staring at each other.

"Eden." "Hey." "Mom, this is Eden. She's one of my students." Mrs. Christian smiled and came toward me, her delicate hand covered with jewels outstretched. "Yes, I recognize the dress. Concert choir?"

I met her in the middle of the room. "Yes. It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Christian." "Thank you." "You stayed after." James started toward us. "I just cleaned up a little." I took a

deep breath, admiring him up close for the first time in thirty-two hours. Just looking into his eyes filled that ache I had inside with warmth. "And I wanted to congratulate you. The concert went really well, don't you think?" He nodded. "Yeah, it did. Everybody was great." I noticed his mother inching backwards toward the door. She laid a hand on his arm. "I'll wait in the car, James. Eden, a pleasure my dear." "You too," I said. I couldn't believe she was being nice enough to leave us alone. I wanted to jump up and down. I clasped my bag tight instead. "She's so talented, coming in and playing like that. Wow." He nodded. His face looked relaxed for the first time that night. He let out a sigh and pushed a hand through his hair. "So, you really think it went well?" "It went great. I heard all the numbers on the monitor, and I stood in the back for Renaissance. Everybody was great. Seriously." "Maybe I can stop sweating now." He laughed. I wanted to roll around in the sound of it. The image brought a smile to my lips. He looked at my mouth and his laugh slowly filtered away. He glanced around. "So, where are your parents?" "Oh, they didn't come." His brows shot up. "Why not? They out of town?" "They don't come to stuff like this." "They don't like the arts?" I shifted feet and looked down at my bag. "They don't know I'm in the group." "Why not?" I liked that he took a step and it brought him closer to me. "You sang tonight, and very well. Why wouldn't you want to share that?" I shrugged. I didn't want to ruin the night or the moment talking about Stacey and Dad. "Sorry, I didn't think to get you something. I can't believe I didn't think about it. Leesa is into the drama thing and knows the etiquette—" "Forget it." He looked at the roses in his hand. Then he looked around the room. "Thanks for cleaning up. That's an even more appreciated gesture, believe me." "Good. I did something then." "You did great tonight," his voice was soft. "And that dress." His gaze traveled down my body and back to my face. "You probably drove the guys crazy tonight." "Really?" He tilted his head at me. "Don't you have a boyfriend?" I shook my head, fingering my bag. "That surprises me," he said. "Because I seem like a girl that would have a guy around?" I fished. "No." He started toward the light switch and I followed. "In my experience, the beautiful girls are always taken." Beautiful? The word startled, surprised and pleased me. He flicked off one of the overhead lights, leaving us in near darkness that stretched shadows across half of his face. "High school guys don't know anything." Then he turned off the last light and the only light was what shined in from the hall out the open door. He stood holding the door open, waiting for me to exit and I did. I watched him juggle the roses while he locked up the room. Then he gestured to the

parking lot. "I'll walk you to your car," he said. "That would be nice, but I don't have a car here. I walked." His brows shot up. "This time of night?" "It was five-forty-five when I walked over." I laughed. Inside I was pleased to see concern for me on his face. "I just live down on Paseo del Mar." He nodded. "One of those houses?" "One of those." Our feet echoed in the empty hall. We didn't speak, but I wasn't uncomfortable, like I had been in the past with Matt or anybody else when there wasn't any talk. I felt safe being with him, in thought and without words. I saw a lone white Jaguar parked in the lot. His mother sat inside. We headed that direction. "Let me give you a ride home, Eden." "It's not far, and I like to walk." "I'd feel better if I drove you. It's ten-thirty." He stopped near the white Jaguar. I glanced over. Through the window of the car, his mother smiled up at me. "You really don't have to." "I insist." "Okay." Mr. Christian opened the back door of the car for me and, after I was seated, he closed it, taking a moment to look at me through the glass. Inside, the leather seats smelled of heavy perfume. I figured the Jaguar belonged to his mother and the scent nearly confirmed it. Classical music played from the CD player. "You don't have a car, dear?" Mrs. Christian asked over her shoulder. "I just live around the corner. I usually walk." She nodded, just as Mr. Christian got in the car. "It's good exercise." "I think so," I said. He started the car and glanced at me through the rearview mirror. "Eden lives a few streets away. I offered to give her a ride home." "Yes, she told me." We drove out of the empty parking lot and onto the street. "You play so beautifully, Mrs. Christian. I still can't believe you played a concert without practicing with us." "Oh, I practiced, believe me dear." "Will you be playing for all of the concerts?" "Shhh." James's eyes smiled at mine in the rearview mirror. "I haven't asked her that yet." His mother's soft and fluid laugh filled the car, just as warm and inviting as Mr. Christian's. The kind way she looked at him, her face lit with a glow that made me envious. I knew then and there that she would play for him. He pulled onto Paseo del Mar. "Turn left," I told him and leaned forward. He glanced at me. "It's there." I pointed. For the first time, I was embarrassed about my house, palatial as it was. So overboard. I wondered what they were thinking. He drove onto the stone driveway. "Will the gate open?" he asked. "I'll get out here, it's okay." I opened the door. Before I knew it, Mr. Christian was out of his door and holding mine open. The sea breeze tickled the curls around his face. "Thanks," I said. Then I leaned around him to say goodbye to his mother. When I did, I reached to steady myself. His body was in the way. I had intended to reach for the door, but my hand rested instead on his bicep. Our eyes met. I swallowed a nervous

lump, but I left my hand there. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Christian." "And you." I stood erect. My hand fell to my side. Intensity was back on his face, no smile, nothing but sharp heat. I could have withered into the stone driveway. He shut the door. The only sound was the soft idling of the car. His gaze left mine to skim a look at the house. "Want me to walk you to the door?" I shook my head, even though I wanted that very much. But at the same time, I wanted to get inside, away from this picture of prosperity with me standing in front of the house like the cover of *Lifestyles of the Rich*. I turned and pressed the buttons of the security code and the gates slowly opened. "I have a remote," I said. "But I forget to use it." He nodded and took another sweeping look of the property. Then he shoved his hands in his pockets. "Goodnight, Eden." "Goodnight." I started through the gates, now on their swing back to a close. My heels tapped a lonely tune as I crossed the cobblestones.

00 a Twelve The house was expectedly empty when I went inside but I was too warm in my heart to care. I stopped and looked at my reflection in the Italian mirror Stacey had imported after one of their trips to Italy. My skin gleamed. My eyes twinkled.

Smiling, I took the stairs up. William panted at my heels and I reached down and scrubbed his body the way he liked.

Then my mind flashed images of Mr. Christian's face after the concert. The way he'd looked conducting us: muscles tense, light beads of perspiration along his jaw. How happy he'd looked when Leesa had placed the roses in his arms.

He'd hugged her. I undressed, wondering how Leesa felt about him. She was a nice girl, but her illness had left her with little more than a baby chick's head of hair. Less than attractive. I watched myself as I slowly peeled off the dress. The joy I had felt moments ago stripped away. I looked at my deep red bra and panties. I looked healthy, Leesa did not. I was attractive, Leesa was not. How lame was it for me to think this way about her. She couldn't help what had happened. I hung up the dress and stood looking at my reflection. Mr. Christian had called me beautiful. Turning, I surveyed every angle. No ripples. No excess bulges. Still, a body was just a body. I'd learned that the day I had gone to my dead mother as she lay in her coffin and pressed a kiss onto her icy lips. That day, my father had vanished in his loss,

abandoning me along the way. He stopped hugging me. He never asked me how my day was. Our daddy-daughter dates became extinct. And he never again tucked me into bed. Mine had been a slow death after that, leaving me behind in the form of a shell. Looking at myself now, that empty place inside of me threatened to rip open, exposing what I really was. So what if I was beautiful? I'd done nothing with what was inside of me. I'd let myself die, and lost myself in the transparent existence my friends lived in. More than once I'd seen beauty in Leesa's eyes, beams of light in her smile. Real caring in her countenance. Like Mr. Christian. I washed my face and changed into my pajamas. I got out my iPod and put on some classical music. Slowly, the lofty tunes lifted my spirits. I thought of Mr. Christian and how he spent time with wayward kids, teaching them to sing. I thought of Leesa's smiling eyes, the way she eagerly waited to talk to me—and anyone else. In the mirror, I saw a girl who looked pretty even in simple pajamas. Even without all the paint and goop. I was healthy. Strong. And I had thick, handfuls of blonde hair. I ran my fingers through it. A flash of tears filled my eyes. I had enough, and thought at that moment if I could, I would share with Leesa. Monday, before Dad was up for his shower, I was dressed in nice jeans, a bright pink tee-shirt and a cropped jacket. I left my hair down. I was out the door, anxious to see Mr. Christian. I walked the empty halls of the high school relishing the quiet and the unknown. Nerves bundled in my stomach. Not sure whether or not he was there, I walked to the parking lot behind the music room where he had parked his mother's car Saturday night. His gray Toyota was there. I smiled. I didn't care what he thought of me showing up early. Since Saturday, I felt alive inside in a way I never had before, my whole body magnetically drawn to the music room. The door was closed, but I could hear him playing that song I'd heard him play months ago. Its melancholy tune quickly seeped into my heart as I opened the door. The whoosh of pressure in the room alerted him. He stopped and turned. Our eyes locked. I let the door silently close at my back. He stared at me, and a taut quiet stretched between us. "I like hearing you play," I said. I moved toward him. He turned, in sync with my slow approach. He looked up at me but didn't say anything. I rested my clammy hands on the cold, slick piano body. "May I?" The muscles in his throat shifted, then he swallowed. "Eden." My knees weakened, like a soft tickling kiss had just been blown against the backs of them. "Is it okay?" I asked. His gaze held mine tight, like two hands joined. He understood what I was really asking. That's why he didn't answer. "Let me stay," I said, his silence peeling away my courage,

leaving me desperate. "Please." "You're going to get me in trouble." "No, I won't." Another deep pause. Nothing but the sound of our low breathing. Then he turned, and placed his hands just above the keys. The gesture fired heat through me and I held my breath. He started to play. I couldn't move, so overjoyed listening to him, so overwhelmed being close to him. I remained fixed at the side of the piano, enjoying that I could openly stare at him while he brought the room life with his music. The melody reached in. Touched me. Filled me. As if an invisible siphon leached off the notes and chords with the urgency of needed breath. He slowed the piece, his long fingers curling and flattening on the ivory keys, his eyes closing, lashes pressed against his cheeks. The tune echoed off the empty walls with one final deep chord. When he opened his eyes, they locked on mine. His hands slid from the keys and into his lap. "There can't be anything between us." "I'd like us to be friends." Caution and amusement fought on his face. "Friends?" I had to smile. "Okay, well, maybe more. I think you're interesting. You're so passionate about your work it's contagious." He let out a low laugh. "I don't know how contagious it is. Nobody else seems to care." "Then they're retarded." He shook his head, settling another piercing look at me. "My position is precarious, Eden. You're smart enough to know that." "But I'm eighteen. I'm totally legal. If I weren't in school and we met at a club, it wouldn't matter. Would it?" "Probably not." "If we had met at a club, would you have talked to me?" He looked at the keys for a moment, tapping a finger silently against one solitary note without it making a sound. Then he looked into my eyes. "Eden, that's not something I can tell you." My insides buzzed with thrill. "Why not? Are you afraid?" Though I had the sudden squeeze of disappointment around my heart that perhaps he wasn't attracted to me, the way his eyes sharpened told me otherwise. "Or are you afraid I'll tell someone." "I'm just starting my career." "I have no one that cares enough about me that I would tell something like this to." His brows knit across his face. For another long moment, he looked at me with deep worry that opened my heart. "You said your parents don't come to concerts, but, they're your parents. And you're a teenaged girl. They want to know what's going on in your life." "Hard to believe but, no. My dad remarried after my mother died, and they can't keep their hands off each other. They don't know I'm even around and could care less that I'm not." He looked at me as if deciphering whether or not I could be serious. "What about your friends?" I shook my head. "Come on, it hasn't been that long since you were in high school. It's all about where we're eating lunch today and who's having tonight's

party.” “And who’s hooking up with whom,” he added. “One mention that you and I were talking to each other before school or that you listened to me play – alone – in my classroom, and I could get fired.” My fingers skimmed the worn body of the piano. “You could be talking to any student before or after class – alone – and that wouldn’t get you into any trouble.” “You’re not just any student.” His admission pleased me. Neither of us said anything then, the air filled with the implication. I smiled, hoping he would too, but intensity tightened his face. “I’m serious.” “I can see that. Can’t you just forget that I’m in your class?” “No. I see your face every morning. I watch the way you smile when you sing, like...” He lowered his head a moment. “Like... you’ve never been happier.” “Because I never have been.” “That can’t be true. You’re popular. You have friends everywhere, I’ve seen it. I can tell you’re a girl who has everything.” The rush I had felt building around us popped. “Because I live in a big house I have everything?” “It’s not just the big house.” “How do you know all of this without knowing me?” My face heated as anger spread. “You don’t know anything about me.” “And you don’t know anything about me. Whatever you think you like about me, Eden, it’s only the part I let the world see. That’s the mask we all wear.” “Is this some lame excuse for rejection? If you aren’t attracted to me, just say so, but don’t play around with it. I can take it, whatever it is.” A deep line creased between his brows. “It isn’t rejection, it’s facts. You don’t know me beyond the walls of this classroom.” “You drove me home.” I tilted my head and tried a grin. “And I saw you at your church.” A slow smile spread on his lips. “Okay, okay, point taken.” He stood then, and looked down into my eyes. Desperation rushed back into every scared hollow I had inside. “So.” I had the feeling the conversation was almost over and didn’t want it to be. I smiled when he did. “I just, kind of thought we could, hang some time.” “And do what?” “Not homework,” I joked, but his eyes stormed with uncertainty. “We couldn’t even be seen in public together, Eden.” “You make it sound like it’s against the law, two people hanging out. I’m an adult. I can be with whoever I want.” He shifted, shook his head and rested a hand on the piano. “It’s more complicated than that. If anyone found out that I was seeing one of my students, there would be political accusations. Is she getting an A because he’s seeing her? Is she seeing him because she only wants an A?” “That’s just wrong,” I shot. “I wouldn’t do that.” Though I had been guilty of kissing up to teachers before, especially male teachers, Mr. Christian’s honest vulnerability made me appalled, not abusive of such deception. He lowered his head a moment, stroking the piano with such gentleness I followed

the gesture with my insides quivering. "Do you have a girlfriend?" I asked. He let out a light laugh. "No." What idiots women were, I thought. "Then let's hang out some time." His serious expression once again left me feeling empty handed. "How about we 'run into each other' at Starbucks? That way, no one can say anything. You like coffee?" He hesitated, but finally said, "Yes." The coerced look on his face pinched my exposed heart. "Look, forget it. I'm sorry I even came in here." I took another look at his hand, at the way it lay protectively on the piano and couldn't look him in the eye anymore. "It was stupid of me. I'm sorry." I turned, grabbed my bag lying on the chair. I shouldn't have to talk him into anything. If he cared or was interested in getting to know me, he would have to come after me. He was a guy, after all. More than that even, he was a man. I started toward the door. "Eden." Without turning to look at him I stopped, my hand on the knob, my heart thudding. "There's a Starbucks in the Rivera. Do you know where it is?" I nodded. The first fluttering of joy started in my stomach. "Tonight. Seven o'clock." Breathing froze. My whole body flushed with delicious anticipation. I gripped the knob, my knuckles turning to rock. I didn't turn and look at him. I opened the door and walked out.

A few minutes later, I waited outside the music room until the bell rang and most of the other choir members had filed in. I meant to show him that in no way would I give away what had happened between us by being some giddy girl. I heard the classical music he played for us on his CD player start.

Leesa stood next to me and I smiled at her. "Hey, Leesa." "Hi, Eden." Her smile twinkled. "Have a good weekend?" "Pretty good. What did you do?" I asked. She looked shocked that I'd asked, then pleased. "I hung out with some friends, thanks for asking." We started through the door of the classroom. "Sounds better than my weekend," I said. "Really? I thought you would have been with Matt." "We're not seeing each other anymore." I glanced over her shoulder at Mr. Christian who stood talking to a few students. Leesa was so enamored with our conversation, she didn't notice. "You're not? Wow. I'm sorry." "There's nothing to be sorry about. But, thanks anyway." We separated and went to our chairs. Hers was closer to the front than mine. I noticed that she set her books under her seat then instantly focused on James Christian and what he was doing. "Let's get started." James looked out over the class. I waited for him to look at me, but he avoided it. "Thanks to everyone for a

great concert.” “We sounded awesome,” a boy called from the back. A bunch of kids voiced their agreement. “You guys did great.” James nodded and moved his music stand so that it was in front of him. “So, we’re like, on a break now?” Josh asked. Everyone laughed. “No, we’re not on a break.” James grinned. “But we are starting on some new music.” A roll of good-natured groans rumbled through the room. “You work us too hard, Mr. C,” somebody said. “That’s my job, to work you guys.” “Can’t we just have a party today?” He shook his head. “You should have celebrated Saturday. Sorry if you missed out. Now, it’s Monday.” Another round of groans. “Besides, we have the spring concert to prepare for.” “What will we be singing? Not more classical. Save us!” James set his hand over his heart with a feigned frown. “You don’t like my choice of music?” “I say you let us pick the songs,” a boy suggested. The room roared with shouts of song titles. James laughed and finally held up his hands until the room quieted. “Okay, okay... or the fun of it, let’s hear what some of you suggest?” Hands shot up and he pointed randomly to each one. “Something from Eminem.” “Yeah, The Real Slim Shady.”

“No way, we need to sing, Holiday.” Another suggestion. James laughed with a shake of his head. “Right.” “Phantom of the Opera has some good songs.” “Now that’s not a bad suggestion,” James said. Leesa

raised her hand. “Yes, Leesa?” “I know it’s old, but I kind of like My Heart Will Go On, from Titanic.” James’ face flushed red. He shifted, and moved the music stand an inch. Then his eyes met mine. For a moment he looked at me, before turning his attention back to Leesa. “That’s an old standby. Yeah, we can sing that. Anybody else have suggestions?”

The day dragged as if I carried leaden weights on my ankles. I couldn’t think during any of my other classes, anticipating my meeting with James later that night. Lunch came and I forced myself to continue my regular pattern of joining my friends at the plaza for a nonsense lunch.

Matt sat at the table with Josh and Tanner. Brielle and I scored a parking space right in front of Fiasco’s and walked over.

“I wonder if Matt will be a retard now,” I said. Brielle didn’t say anything. I looked at her. Her gaze was pinned on Matt.

We walked to the table. From behind the protection of my dark glasses I glanced around, wondering if James would happen to show up for lunch.

“Hey,” Brielle chirped. The guys all responded except Matt, who stared at me through narrow eyes. Then he reached out and snagged Brielle and pulled her onto his lap. She giggled.

I rolled my eyes but the black lenses of my glasses concealed it. Josh and Tanner looked awkwardly at me. I felt like I was crashing a party.

I sat down and stretched out as if the PDA didn’t bother me. I was too wrapped up in counting the hours until seven to spend one second thinking about Matt and his rebounding efforts with Brielle. But I also didn’t want Brielle to get hurt.

Matt turned her face in his hands and gave her a deep kiss. My stomach lurched. Had we looked that revolting? Tanner and Josh looked away. When Matt’s hands started to travel all over Brielle, she broke the kiss with another giggle.

Our eyes met. “It’s okay,” I told her with a nod. “Go for it.” Something in Matt’s expression was angry. Fortunately,

Brielle didn’t see it. She was too elated having my approval. She was content to stay perched on his lap, but he nodded at an empty seat and she reluctantly moved.

“Missed you at the concert, Matt,” I said, just to be salty. He leaned back in his chair. “Bet you did.” No one said a word, now that I’d instigated what everyone was sure would turn into an argument. But I’d just had one of the toughest talks of my life. With James. Talking to Matt was a piece of cake. “Josh and I both missed you, didn’t we, Joshie?” Josh pretended to watch the cars driving by. “Speak for yourself.” “We did great,” I went on as if nothing was weird between us. “It was a great concert.” Brielle dug into her purse and slipped on her sunglasses. “Want something?” Matt

leaned toward her. "Uh, sure, a diet Dr. Pepper. Thanks." He shot me a scowl and got up. Then he walked into Fiasco's. For a minute no one said anything. The silence, the situation, was so ridiculous I almost broke out in a laugh, but that would have come off as really lame. I tapped the table with my nails. "Brielle, look, this isn't complicated. You and Matt are more than welcome to each other. Seriously. Just... be careful." She nodded but still wouldn't look at me. "I am careful. We don't need your permission." That was Matt talking, because Brielle was weak as a baby. She followed me wherever I went. But rather than argue with her, I thought of the night. Of James. Of Starbucks. I leaned forward on my elbows. "You guys will be a good match. I'm happy for you." Josh shook his head. "What's wrong with you?" "What?" I asked. "You're, like, giving them the key to a hotel room." "So? What am I supposed to do?" "Don't you even care?" Tanner asked. Out the corner of my eye, Brielle watched me intently with her thumb fingernail stuck between her teeth. "Just because Matt and I aren't together anymore doesn't mean he can't be happy with my best friend." Josh threw back the last of his Mountain Dew and shook his head again. "Still." "Still what?" I pressed. This was all too immature for my taste. Games were for people who couldn't stop playing them. I stood. "I think I'll walk back to school." I gathered my purse. Brielle nodded. Now she and Matt could ride back to campus together. They wouldn't be offering me a ride if they passed by, but I didn't care. I looked at my cell phone for the time. Six hours and forty minutes to go.

At six-thirty, I changed into a gray skirt, dove sweater and a cropped pink denim jacket. I freshened up my makeup, sprayed on some perfume and changed my Louis V for my Marc Jacobs bag. Then I headed for the front door.

"Where are you going?" I couldn't believe Stacey was home. The surprise almost stopped me in the hall, but I kept going, walking right by her. "Out."

"Where?" Why was she suddenly asking me this? Of all the times to start playing mom, this was not going to be it. "For coffee." Then I slammed the back door and strode quickly to my car. I snuck a peek at the door as I slipped inside, started the engine. My heart thrummed. What if she came after me? Tweezed me for more questions? I could tell her I was meeting Brielle.

I screeched out the driveway, tapping my fingernails on the steering wheel as I waited for the slow gates to open. Music blasted from the speakers. Checking my rearview mirror, I had the fleeting fear that Stacey would come running out. Why, I couldn't fathom. Her interest in me was about as important to her as a trip to the library.

Her appearance and question bugged me as I drove along the Drive and off the hill. She was never home during the day, and if she was, we never said a word to each other. If she thought she was going to get anything out of me now, she was in dreamland. I'd lived without a mother for the last twelve years. I was four months short of graduating from high school and moving out on my own. She was the last thing I needed.

I let out a sigh and slipped the compilation CD of classical music I had downloaded from iTunes. The music took my mind from troubling thoughts of Stacey to James' peaceful face.

Warm comfort filled every part of me. This 'chance' meeting was all that mattered. James and I were opening a locked door, stepping over boundaries and into rooms I'd never been before. I didn't see this get-together as forbidden. I hoped his acquiescence meant that he didn't either.

Embarking on a very real adult move, I tried to ease my skittering nerves. My feelings seemed more vibrant, more alive than I had ever felt anticipating seeing Matt or any other boy I had liked up to this point. Swirling in my system was an urgent energy I didn't know how to release.

I parked. The night fog had begun to roll in, and thick fingers caressed Starbucks. Coffee scented the air. I looked through the huge windows into the burnished-lit building and found him sitting on a stool at one of the tall café tables.

I pretended not to notice him as I walked by outside. Out the corner of my eye, I saw him sit up when I passed. The heavy warmth in the store breathed through my senses once I was inside. I looked around, pretending to look for him and in my peripheral vision, saw him rise and come toward me. "Eden." I turned and faced him.

He wore chocolate-cream slacks and a snug brown sweater that fit as cuddly as the black turtleneck he'd worn for the concert. I took in a deep breath. He smiled at me. "Hey," I said. He angled his head in the direction of the table where he'd been sitting. "Would you like to sit down?" "Sure." I followed him, admiring his back muscles, the fine curve of his erect shoulders when he walked. He pulled out the stool for me and I sat. "Do you come here a lot?" I asked, setting my handbag on the floor. I could hardly believe I was sitting with Mr. Christian. Alone. He leaned an elbow on the small table. A slight smile lifted his lips, as if he was pondering my we-just-ran-into-each-other question. "No. I'm not much of a coffee drinker, actually." "What do you drink?" His eyes flicked off the faces in the room as if searching for someone he knew. I glanced around, too. I didn't recognize anyone. "Hot chocolate," he said. "Can I get you something?" he asked after he finished looking around. "Yeah, I'll take a caramel cappuccino." He nodded and left then. My reflection in the glass made my smile grow. I was sitting with James. The two of us. Alone. I was content to watch him as he stood in line, his hands in his front pockets. As he ordered, I heard his melodic voice rise above the music playing overhead like another song. When he came back with our drinks, my heart stammered. "So, hot chocolate?" I nodded at his steaming cup. "Yes." He sipped, his green-blue gaze fixing on mine over the rim of his cup. "Here we are, Eden." He held his cup in the palms of his hands. "Here we are." I sipped, because I felt awkward. "Ouch." "Burn?" I nodded. "Hell." I looked at him, gauging whether my profaning had offended him. I had no idea if he swore or not. It reminded me that he was right, I really had no idea of who he was. "Tell me about you," I said, holding my cup between my hands like he did. The corners of his mouth lifted. "Tell me about you." "We have a problem, because I want to hear about you." His smile deepened. "I grew up here in the Riv." My mind flashed a picture of the Tudor house I had seen him drive to. I felt ridiculous that I had done that now, on the precipice of finding out where he lived by his own admission. "And you went to South," I said. He nodded. "Where did you go to college?" I asked. "Cal State Dominguez." He watched me for a reaction, figuring I'd find the college lowly. I ignored my conditioned response of aversion. "Do they have a good music program there?" "One of the best, that's why I chose it. Where do you want to go to school?" "I've been accepted at UC Santa Barbara." "Wow. That's great." "I wanted to be far enough away, you know? USC, UCLA weren't far enough." He sipped his hot chocolate, the steam clouding his eyes. "You sound anxious to get out of PV." "I am."

Or was, I thought. Up until I had met him, I couldn't wait to get out. Now, a place deep inside tore in two with doubt. "Tell me why?" He set his cup down, and crossed his forearms. I liked the way his fingers looked resting against his brown sweater, gentle but strong. "I'm not close to my parents," I started. "When I said they don't come to concerts, that was only part of it. They don't come to anything." His brows knit over concerned eyes that reached out to me, opening me, taking away any fear I had of sharing what I held closed in my heart. His voice was soft. "I'm sorry." "I told you, my father remarried after my mother died. Things were never the same." "How did she pass away?" "Cancer." He nodded. "I'm sorry." A rush of emotion choked my throat. It was more than my father had ever said to me. I had to reach for my cup. "Anyway." I set the cup back down after I'd taken a sip. "My dad's into Stacey and work. He's a lawyer. It keeps him pretty busy. When he comes home, they go out. So we never see each other." I wanted to change the subject. "Your mom seems sweet." A small smile crept on his lips. "She is. My father left when I was in elementary school." "Oh, no. I'm sorry." "Like you, I've learned to live with it." "So you and your mom are close?" He nodded. "She's done a good job being both mother and father. I respect her. It couldn't have been easy." "I'll bet you never gave her any trouble." He laughed. "I wouldn't say that." "What kind of trouble did Mr. Christian get into? Tell me?" "My name is James." I bit my lower lip and his gaze dropped to my mouth. "James." My voice sounded as raspy as my breathing. He reached for his drink and lifted it to his lips, staring at mine. "I like James," I said. "Thank you." "It's formal, but cool." He set down his cup, now focusing on my eyes again. "What kind of trouble did I get in? The usual guy stuff." "Girls?" He let out a snicker. "What makes you assume that?" Was he kidding? "Most hot guys do." His face flushed like he'd just drunk his steaming chocolate down in one gulp. "I hate to burst your image of me but, no." "Seriously? I'd have thought they were lined up around your piano." He laughed. "That would have been nice." "You could have played for them and they would have done whatever you wanted. Like a genie with his magic lamp, only yours being a magic piano." He shook his head, as if my suggestion was outrageous. "Why? You like girls, don't you?" His chuckle faded and sat back for a moment. "Yes, I like girls. I'm here with you, aren't I?" "Phew. For a minute I thought you were going to tell me you came from a single parent house with an overdomineering mother and that now you're gay." "You know an awful lot for—" "—Don't say 'a teenager.' There's a lot to know if you want to know people. You'd be surprised how many boys come from homes like

that.” “And they talk about this?” “Of course. They want to talk. We share our dysfunctional experiences.” I took the last drink of my coffee. He looked at my cup. “Would you like another?” “I better not, I won’t sleep for days.” “Does the caffeine bother you?” he asked. I nodded. “Then why do you drink it?” “I like the taste.” “So do I, but I don’t drink it for the same reason.” “But it tastes so good. How can you resist?” Something in his eyes flickered, stirring me deep inside. He brought his cup to his lips, his gaze shifting to my mouth. “Some things are harder to resist than others.”

0 a Fourteen After we finished our drinks he escorted me out into the gray night. Wispy fog chilled me and I shuddered as much from the temperature as the unknown. What would happen next?

“Cold?” he asked, noticing I had shivered. It was such a juvenile thing for a girl to feign being cold so that a guy would put his arm around her. I was embarrassed that nature had forced me into the reaction.

“I’m okay.” He set the pace and we began a slow, meted walk toward my car. “See?” I said, hoping to keep the end of the evening light. “This was no biggie. We ran into each other, had a drink and both survived.” He didn’t reply but looked as if he was considering what I had just said. “It was a biggie for me, Eden.” My throat caught. “I didn’t mean to make it sound as if I didn’t enjoy it. I did. And I didn’t mean to make light of tonight either. I know you went out on a limb here.” My car was just a few feet away and dread poked a hole in my heart. The evening was coming to an end. “Yeah, well, we both went out on a limb.” He stopped at my car door, his gaze lingering with mine. “I enjoyed this tonight. You’re a complex girl. I tend to be drawn to things complex.” Heart pounding, I tried to remain calm at the very idea that he was drawn to me. “I can tell that about you. Your music is... complex. So,” I stuck out my hand, “friends?” He slipped his hand around mine with the gentleness of an embrace. Then his other hand covered our joined hands. “Yes.” He opened my car door, held it for me while I got in. When our eyes met again, his locked with soberness on mine. “Our friendship needs to remain private.” I nodded. My thrumming heart almost stole my voice. “Of course.” “Goodnight, then.” “Goodnight.” He eased the door closed and stood back while I started the car. I couldn’t stop smiling. I sent him a small wave before I drove off. I kept my eye on my rearview

mirror. He stood in the middle of the parking lot watching me. I was so euphoric, I wanted to talk to someone, but that was impossible. Usually, I would call Brielle. We'd spend hours going over every detail of all things male. But whatever was happening between James and me, I held like a treasured secret box I alone had the key to. I was relieved that Dad's car was gone when I pulled into the driveway. Stacey and Dad always drove his Lexus when they went out. They were out, and that meant I wouldn't have to talk to anybody about anything. Camilla had left me a note on the butcher block saying that my dinner was in the refrigerator. I was too excited to eat, my stomach a jumble of giddy butterflies. I wanted to call him, to talk on the phone with him. That was irrational. I'd moved into a league that required patience and timing. Nothing would turn him off faster than an overanxious girlie. Where allowing those feelings in my heart would only torment me, not acting on them would ensure things between James and I blossomed at a natural pace. I fell onto my bed so ready to fly I wondered how I would ever come down from the euphoria. I wanted to see him again, my appetite whet by our tryst at Starbucks, but not satiated. I reached over to my bedside table for my iPod. I filled my head with his music, closed my eyes and pictured the way he had looked across the table, his smooth skin glowing under the soft burnished light, his eyes sparkling one minute, darkening with something that sent a soft ribbon of heat through me the next. Thoughts of tomorrow danced in my mind, playing out an outrageous fantasy, one with me hugging him as the whole choir looked on. Of him kissing me, throwing silence into the air with the act. Though our relationship had to be kept under wraps, that didn't stop me from enjoying the fantasy of everyone knowing. But exposing us would never happen. He loved his job, it was his life. That was okay. I just wanted to be a part of his life too. I stared at my phone, so anxious to call and talk to him, I felt like I was filled with a million bees all buzzing for a way out. But then, I didn't know his phone number. Matt and I had spent hours on the phone talking about nothing. I couldn't imagine wasting even a moment with James. There was so much about him I wanted to know. Since I couldn't satisfy my urge to talk to him, I ran our conversation at Starbucks over and over in an endless hot pink loop. He'd asked me questions. It seemed impossible, but I'd seen interest in his eyes. He'd looked at my mouth. I closed my eyes and imagined kissing him. I let out a groan. That would never happen. He seemed too wary of just a friendship. I hated that I couldn't have something – someone I wanted right now. I told myself that I couldn't look at him like any other guy. I couldn't think

about him like one either or I'd be stalking him before I took my next breath. This was not going to be some fast and easy hook up. I couldn't just call him because I wanted someone to be with, like I had with Matt. Am I ready to wait? I'd had Matt at my fingertips for so long, snapping my fingers and not having access to a guy would be like sitting at Starbucks, smelling the coffee and not being able to drink anything. James' face came to my mind then, and the calm assurance I felt whenever I was in his presence. I was ready for someone that could show me something more than another requisite party—a quick buzz, a tasty drink. Someone I could be content just to smell the coffee with.

I heard raised voices the next morning and looked at my clock. Six-thirty. Dad should have been gone already. Stacey's voice shrilled through the air like an angry opera singer. I threw back my covers and got ready for school. Snippets of conversation pierced the walls, jabbed under my closed door. "That's it. I'm serious, Stacey!" "So am I!" A door slammed. Dad's heavy footsteps came down the hall. I froze on the off-chance fear that he might storm into my room and yell at me for no reason except that the two of them had had an argument. His footsteps eventually vanished. My heart slowed. I finished getting dressed in a pair of snug jeans and a bruised purple sweater that everyone told me made my eyes super blue. After dusting on some blush and brushing my hair, I was ready to go, more anxious than ever to get out of there. Their arguments usually didn't bother me, and the words never stayed in my head. But today, as I walked to school, the fierce anger I'd heard in both of their voices echoed in my mind. I couldn't help but think about my feelings for James. I could never yell at him like that. I could never see him raising his voice at anyone. It seemed sick that arguing became a natural progression for most relationships that had years behind them. My friends and I rarely discussed our parents but I knew most of them had overheard fights. Half of their parents were divorced or single. Some were into their second marriages like Dad. Part of my heart ached for Dad. The part I held in reserve, a corner that waited for his return. I pushed the ache away as I walked onto campus rationalizing that he'd made his bed, slept in it and if the sheets and blankets weren't doing the job anymore that was his problem. It would be easy to forget Dad and his entanglements in Concert Choir. I walked down the hall with last night's secret meeting tucked like a candle deep in my heart. The flickering warmth gave me a smile that wouldn't leave my face. Handel's Watermusic was playing when

I walked into the music room. Leesa was there, talking to him. The two of them stood at the piano. James leaned against it, while she jittered in front of him like a pup waiting for a treat. I paused in the door. "I can do it," she said, smiling that sunny-Leesa smile. "Oh... well... thank you." Leesa then looked at the stack of sheet music next to his hand on the piano. She picked it up with a coy dip of her head and started setting the sheets on the empty seats. A flash of jealousy shot through me. I took a step inside the door and the movement caught James' eye. A smile broke on his face, but was quickly replaced a more guarded expression. "Hey, Eden." "Hey." I went to my seat and put down my books and bag. "Hi, Eden," Leesa piped. "I offered to pass these out for you." I bet you did. I smiled. "Oh. Cool. That's nice of you, Leesa." James scratched his jaw with a nervous smile. Suddenly the classroom felt too warm. I couldn't believe how peeved I was at Leesa. At James for letting her take my job. I sat, crossed my legs and got out some homework I'd finished two days ago. Out the corner of my eye, James watched me for a moment before turning and doing something at the piano. What did he expect? For me to bat my lashes at him? Blush? I was annoyed at what had happened with Leesa, but I meant to show him that I'd never give us away. Never. The class filled with chattering students. The bell rang. I kept my face down, my eyes on my assignment, even though I wasn't actually reading any of it. When the music clicked off, everyone quieted. "Okay, hey, everybody." The tuneful sound of his voice urged my gaze to his and I softened like butter under the sun. Looking at him now, the light glow of his countenance, his smile, I couldn't believe I had been upset by something so stupid. Yet when I glanced at Leesa, the unmistakable gleam in her face told me that she, too, had it for James. As he spoke about the piece of music he had chosen for us to sing, I casually checked out the other girls in class, trying to gauge their interest. All of them stared at him with lively curiosity. Most of the guys on the other hand listened as if half bored. "So, does that sound like a compromise?" he was asking when I finally tuned back in. There was general agreement. I wondered what we were all agreeing to. "I think those songs suck," Josh mumbled. "You think all songs suck," Leesa tossed over her shoulder. I'd never heard her talk back to anyone above her social station before. I didn't know she had it in her. Her comment flashed red across Josh's face. He sat up, stared at the back of her nearly-bald head and made a face. My frustration at Leesa dissolved when Josh mocked Leesa. A pang of pity rang through my heart. James continued, "We'll be singing two songs for the spring concert. I've passed out

Summer Moon first. We'll work on My Heart Will Go On tomorrow." My Heart Will Go On? He seemed to have been waiting for my reaction. His gaze held mine for a millisecond that felt like a hot hour, then he reached for his music stand and placed it aside before he crossed to the piano. He played Summer Moon all the way through for us, explaining our various parts and then we started to sing. He conducted from the piano, pounding out the alto, bass, tenor and soprano parts with his usual enthusiasm. Hearing him play something contemporary was exciting. All I'd ever heard him play was classical. His body moved as if he was holding himself in check—like at any moment he could break out in the most perfect dance moves ever. I grinned, imagining him dancing—with me. He looked hot. The class enjoyed the change of tempo that was obvious. Everyone jittered, swayed, moved and clapped. When the hour was over, the pop of disappointment deflated everyone as if a helium balloon had just burst. No one wanted to leave. Singing had been fun. Begrudgingly, everybody vacated the room. I noticed Leesa immediately started to pick up all of the music. That left me with no reason to stay. James followed my stare at Leesa as I walked down the risers to the floor. "You think they liked the song?" he asked me. He was looking right at me, but Leesa piped from the back row of chairs anyway, "They liked it a ton, couldn't you tell?" "It was a lot of fun to sing," I said and headed for the door. Competing for James' attention felt like I was back in junior high school again. My first reaction was that I refused to do it. I don't know what I expected. I had the brief, fantastic vision flash through my head of him walking over and stopping my exit. Of him kissing me there in the door before I left, telling me that Leesa didn't matter, that I was all that mattered. Boys never did stuff like that. Did men? I walked out of the room cowering behind foolishness and let out a sigh. Rustling behind me caused me to glance over my shoulder. My hope that even part of my fantasy would come to life was dashed the minute I saw Leesa's smiling face and wispy head. She fell into step with me. "Hey, Eden." "Hi." "I like our new songs, don't you?" "Yeah." "Isn't he the coolest?" "Yeah, he is." She squeezed her books to her chest. "And so hot. I can't take my eyes off him." "Have a crush do we?" I asked. "He's gorgeous." "He probably has a girlfriend, Leesa." She shrugged. "I can dream, can't I?" I didn't even want her dreaming. Common sense told me James wouldn't be interested in Leesa as anything more than a student. Still, I had just extended my feelings to him—in a small, protected way—so I was insecure about us. There is no us, you retard. You're getting way ahead of yourself. I lifted my chin and navigated my way

through the bodies coming toward us down the hall. Not surprisingly, Leesa trailed at my elbow. "You going to your locker?" she asked. Just because she'd said more than two words to me about James did not mean that I was open to a full discussion. I shook my head. "No. Gotta run. See you later, Leesa." Without looking at her again, I went on my way. "See ya," she called.

The rest of the day hovered like the thick, wet fog that had crept in that morning. I couldn't stop feeling jealous. I scanned the halls between classes, as if I might see him. But I'd never seen him walking down the halls. I wasn't sure he even left his room until school was over.

When lunch came, I waited for Brielle at her car, but she never showed. Something clawed in my stomach. I hadn't heard from her for a few days, and my disassociation from Matt left me out of the loop.

I walked to the plaza to check things out. Josh, Tanner, Matt and Brielle sat at our table, laughing and talking, the hole that my absence made apparently not significant enough for anyone to notice or care about. A few other students occupied the half-dozen other tables, and the scent of bread and coffee hung in the foggy air. I almost didn't go over, but that would have seemed like I cared more than I should, so I did. A smile plastered on my face. "Hey." They looked up at me with surprise, their laughter dying. I sat in the empty chair as if nothing was wrong, ignoring the prickly silence. "Bree, what's up?" "Uh... nothing." "Didn't look like that when I walked over. Come on, we're not going to be all weird because you and Matt have hooked up, are we? You have hooked up, haven't you?" Matt's brown eyes narrowed. "Why do you care?" "She's my friend. I don't want you hurting her because

0 you're on the rebound from me." "News flash, Eden, you weren't worth a rebound." I stared at him. Cold fog drifted behind Matt, nearly

veiling the plaza. A chill raced through me. "Just weeks ago you were at my door, begging." I shook my head, held his gaze tight unable to keep from jabbing back. "You weren't worth a rebound either." I looked at Bree then. "Don't say you weren't warned."

Matt shot up from his chair and stormed to me. He stood over me with fire in his eyes. "Shut up!" I lifted a shoulder. "You were being honest. That means I can't be? It's a double standard with Matt, Bree. Be careful." Matt pulled me to my feet. The raw strength in his grip terrified me. My mouth fell open. I knew he had a temper, he'd grabbed me once before, but never in front of people. "Let go of me!" Before I knew it, he was dragging me away from the table. My whole body shook with fear. I'd never been handled before. I tried to stop, batting at him, but he wrapped his arms around me. "People are watching us," I hissed. "Good for them." He stopped a good forty feet away from any ears, though plenty of eyes were still watching. His arms fell away from me. "Look, I don't want you screwing things up because you're getting back at me." "I could care less that you like Bree. Haven't I made that clear about a hundred times now?" "Then what are you doing here?" "Having lunch with my friends." "We're not your friends anymore. Forget it, Eden. Nobody wants you around so screw off." He stormed back to the table. Stunned, I couldn't move, wondering if I had just had some freakish nightmare. I'd hung with these kids for four years, and now they were telling me it was over? I walked back to school feeling skinned and hollowed. I couldn't believe that Brielle hadn't even tried to come after me. I couldn't believe she'd chosen Matt over me. The water through which I now saw my reflection was painfully shallow. I didn't want to think about the past four years and the ease with which I had leapt from stone to stone, boy to boy, kicking aside the last without care. Though I felt empty, I didn't cry. The impossibility of what had just happened kept me in a daze. I spun my locker dial, staring at the flesh-colored paint covering the metal closet. A hideous color. I wondered who'd been so color blind to have chosen it. Graffiti and scratches looked like scars etched into skin. "You okay?" To my left, Leesa glanced at me from her open locker. I hadn't even heard or seen her. "Yeah." "You look sad." With her I was happy or sad. So basic. There was something to living your life that simply. "It's nothing." I shut my locker. "Oh. Okay." Leesa waited, her worried gaze on me. I felt a gush of need to talk to her, unload. Purge. She'd listen. She'd never judge. She wasn't like my friends. I smiled at her, easing the concern in her eyes, then turned and left. I walked toward my last period class dead inside. Not even the image of James' face lifted my spirits. Wretched abandonment resurfaced inside of me like water ready to drown me. My knees buckled. Tears pounded for release behind my eyes. I decided to ditch last period.

a Fifteen I found a moving truck in our driveway, its fat rear end butting up to our front door. Stacey was in her fawn-colored Juicy velour sweats barking out orders to two bulbous movers making trips in and out of our house with chairs and paintings.

Stacey's brown eyes widened when she saw me. "What are you doing home?" "What are you doing?" I demanded. One of the movers had just hoisted an old painting from the living room. Dad and I had had the painting long before Stacey had come into the picture. "That's Dad's!" "It's mine now. Just take it," she ordered the mover when he stopped. He looked at me. "It's not yours." My voice raised an octave. "Shut up, Eden." She swung her ample hips around and stayed on the heels of the movers. Irate, I went out the front door and marched up the ramp and into the moving van to see what she had taken. I gasped, pulling out my cell phone. I dialed Dad. The phone rang and rang. Then I got his voice mail. He never picked up when I called. Traipsing back into the house, I dodged a mover with a set of lamps. "You can't take whatever you want," I told her. "Oh, yes I can." She cocked one of her hips. "Your father and I came to an agreement. Now go plug into your iPod and shut up." Dad may not have wanted that old painting or even the fancy lamps, but my mother had wanted them at one point and seeing them carried out ripped open old scabs deep inside. "I don't want you taking anything!" "Tough!" "You take what you bought and leave what was my mom's!" She angled her head as she slowly came toward me. Her eyes lit with spite. "I'm taking my crap and your mother's crap, Eden. How do you like that?" I slapped her. The movers froze. Rage turned her brown eyes black. She slapped me. The sting sunk through my cheek to my jaw, rattling my teeth. Tears sprung from my eyes. A sob choked my throat. I was ready to beg. I had so little of my mother, to see any of her possessions being taken from me pierced deep in that hollow, abandoned place inside of me. "I'm calling Dad," I managed to say. "You do that." I turned, my fingers frantically pressing his number. Again, he didn't answer. I pressed speed dial over and over again and continued to get his voice mail. Stacey went back to ordering the men. I crumpled on the bottom step of the stairway, tears streaming out of control down my face. Each time something of my mother's passed me, more tender scabs were ripped away. I endured an hour of the infliction before I went to my bedroom. I slammed the door to show my displeasure and so I wouldn't hear her flirting with the movers. I fell onto my bed as if a flood was ready to burst me open, my insides ready to explode. Through tears I looked at my

watch. School let out ten minutes ago. I quickly raced down the stairs, pretending not to notice the holes Stacey's greed had left in our home. She didn't say anything. I doubt she even saw me leave. I got in my car, screeched down the drive, and headed to school.

I parked in the red, as near to the music room as I could. I ran to the closed door and yanked. It was locked. Frantically I pounded on the cold steel surface, the dam of emotions inside of me pressing against my will, threatening to burst.

When the door opened, tears streamed from my eyes. "Eden?" I almost dove into him, so anxious to bury myself

somewhere. He moved aside so I could enter. When I passed him, I took in a deep breath, searching for his scent because it would calm me. "What happened?" Then his hands were on my shoulders and he turned me to face him. "Eden?" "I'm sorry. I didn't... I had to talk to someone." "Okay. You want to sit down?" I wanted him touching me. I didn't want to move. I shook my head, staring up into his face as if it was a rope and I was lost at sea. He tentatively skimmed his fingers from my shoulders to my elbows, sending rockets of heat up my arms and through my now trembling body. Immobile, I stood with my teary gaze locked with his. "Just a minute." He went over and locked the door, then came back, standing so close, the spicy orange scent of him soothed me. "What happened?" I took a deep breath. "Today... was a very bad day for me." Though tears balanced on my lashes, I fought letting them fall. "Things just... they got out of control. My dad and my stepmom were arguing this morning. They've been arguing a lot lately, so, you know, it's no big deal. When I got home, she was moving her stuff out. But not just that, she was taking some of my mom's stuff. My mom. It's so wrong." My chest buckled, and I knew another sob was coming. His eyes were so caring, I couldn't stop crying. I wept openly, hunching over in an effort to cover how deeply this tore at me. "I'm sorry." His voice was a soft whisper, and I continued to weep uncontrollably. Finally, I looked at him. His face was twisted in discomfort. I wasn't sure if it was for me or for him. More than anything, I wanted him to do something. What, I wasn't sure. I knew he couldn't go to my house and straighten out Stacey. I felt like I had the day they'd lowered my mom's casket into that deep hole. Part of me had wanted to fall down in there with

her. Another part of me had held onto my dad's hand like a life line. But he'd let me go. With tender hesitation, James wrapped his arms around me. Heat wound around my grief. I was drawn to the flame as helplessly as a moth, and my arms slid around him. His gentle hand soothed my head in soft strokes. The comforting sensations were so strong, my weeping began to subside. The first moment of silence between us steamed hot as an August day. I went still. My head pressed against the firm contours of his chest. I heard his heart thudding. Felt him swallow. Felt his comforting caress slow and finally stop. He held me for what seemed like minutes of thick, heavy quiet. Then his hands slipped up to my shoulders and he eased me back. His gaze was like tightrope strung between us and we each held an end. "I'm sorry I unloaded on you." I was mortified. I'd gone into his arms like a baby. I had the horrible realization that he now saw me as a child. "Sorry." "It's okay." "I'm sure my problems are the last thing you wanted to know." "I'm glad you told me." "Just what you needed, right?" "It's scary when things happen at home." I nodded, another rush of pressure building in my chest. "And my friends bailed on me. All of them." "All?" "The ones I hang with—my core group. At the beginning of the semester I decided I didn't want to be attached, you know? So Matt and I broke things off. He's been a total retard about it since. Now, my best friend Brielle, has moved in on him. That doesn't bother me. The thing is I know he's just using her." He continued to listen. "So today he told me to screw off." I searched his open face for any signs of emotion but he remained neutral. "Anyway, that's not that much of an issue. Not compared to what Stacey did." "Your stepmom?" I nodded. "I... I'm afraid to go home and see what's left." "Does your dad know?" "He knows. I can't believe he's letting her walk out with everything. Those things were a part of my mom, you know? It's so unfair." He nodded and lightly touched my shoulder, guiding me to the chairs. We both sat. My eyes followed the graceful caress of his fingers. "You have beautiful hands," I said. He let out a light laugh. "I do?" He eyed them. "Is that a female thing?" "Most girls like great hands." "Oh." He hid his hands then, tucking them into the pockets of his pants. "When your dad left, how old were you?" I asked. "Ten." "And you haven't seen him since?" "Nope." "Do you even know where he is?" "I have a vague idea. When I was a teenager, I had this insatiable curiosity to find him. Mom hated it, but she didn't stop me. I think the teenaged years are the defining years. Junior high and high school are brutal. They can cut you to shreds or carve you into the person you're going to be." "Wow, that's... you're right." I couldn't believe how insightful he was. I would

have never had a conversation like this with Matt. “So, did you find him?” “I came close. I knew he still lived in Los Angeles. So I called him one day, told him who I was and that I wanted him to come see me.” He lowered his head for a moment, his hands coming out of his pockets, fingers pressing together as he leaned forward on his knees. “He told me that part of his life was over. He was sorry if I wanted to see him but that was never going to happen.” “I’m sorry.” He shrugged. “It was another carve of the knife, you know? Sure, I was disappointed, but I had my mom. She’s been great.” “I won’t miss Stacey at all. She wanted two things: my dad’s money and my dad—in that order. It was disgusting.” “People get into relationships for all kinds of reasons, Eden.” His eyes flickered with something I didn’t understand but chilled me with the unknown. “My reasons have changed,” I stated. He tilted his head and sat back. “How so?” “I can admit I’ve hooked up with a guy for the wrong reasons—how hot he was or whatever. But that’s changed. I mean, one thing I’ve learned is just because somebody’s hot doesn’t mean that they have anything worthwhile going on inside. In fact, nothing’s more disappointing.” A faint smile curved the edges of his lips. “I agree.” “I guess that’s something we all figure out, my dad later than most.” “You’ve got a strong head on your shoulders,” he looked impressed. “I imagine you acquired it through a lot of experience and study, and I don’t mean purely academic study.” Pleased that he would notice, my cheeks heated. “Yeah, I like watching people—studying them. It hasn’t kept me from making plenty of my own mistakes, but I avoided a few.” “I wish I could say that.” He stood, slipped his hands in his pockets. I wondered if he wanted to leave. Being here—with him—gave me the security of being tucked into bed.

0 “Do you have to go?” He studied me a moment, emotions I tried to read shifting on his face – curiosity and guilt, the last thing I wanted him to feel.

“Eden, if you look at me that way, I... I won’t be able to.” Power surged through me. I didn’t move, hoping he wouldn’t either. “I like being here.” “Yeah.” Another silence pulled between us. He held my gaze for a while. My heart fluttered. The flickering of concern was still in his eyes and it plucked guilt inside of me. I shouldn’t keep him, he had a life of his own, things he had to do. I lowered my head and looked at my hands clasped in my lap. “Thank you for... listening.” I stood. Though I wanted to stay, our brief talk had lifted my spirits. I could face going home now. “I didn’t know

where else to go.” He took a few steps to the piano and wrote on a yellow Post It. Then he turned and came toward me with his hand out. “Here’s my phone number.” My eyes widened and I worked to remain casual. I took the yellow paper and looked at the number—his number. “That’s my cell. Call me anytime.” I wanted to wrap around him again, I was so elated. I nodded and smiled. “Sure. Okay.” The yellow Post It pad caught my eye on the piano behind him. I crossed to it, picked up the pen he’d used and felt his warmth still there. After I’d written on the paper, I peeled off the piece and went to him. “The offer goes both ways.” I extended my cell phone number. He looked at the paper in my hand as if considering whether or not he should touch it, let alone take it. I waited, my breath held. Finally, his fingertips brushed mine and he took the note. “This has to remain between us, Eden,” he said, gently tucking the paper into the breast pocket of his shirt. His expression was solemn. “I told you, there is no one in my life. You just heard for yourself.” He took in a deep breath. “That’s not true anymore, is it?” Our eyes held again. He opened the door for me and I left.

a When I got home, the moving van was gone. So was Stacey’s car. My dad’s Lexus was in the open garage. I looked at my cell phone for the time. Five o’clock. Dad never walked through the door before six-thirty. Nervous, I walked in like I always did, not sure what to expect. Another glimpse of the empty places where furniture had once been, where paintings had hung, and I felt as though I’d been slugged in the stomach. Even the smell of Camilla’s garlic and spices didn’t do much to help me feel comforted. My feet echoed on the tile floor. I stopped in the entry room, listening for where my dad might be but heard nothing. Taking my purse upstairs with me, I went to my bedroom. Farther down the hall, the master bedroom door was slightly ajar. I heard Dad weeping. For a minute I stood unable to move. I hadn’t heard him cry since Mom had passed. A flash of anger stole any sympathy I had for him. How could he even compare his love for Mom with what he’d had with Stacey? Curiosity moved me to his door. I peered in. The bed was torn apart; vases of silk flowers had been thrown across the room and had shattered into pieces. The scent of Stacey’s perfume hung heavy in the air. The entire top of her dressing table had been swiped clean. Perfume bottles, framed photos of Stacey, of Dad with Stacey, now lay broken on the floor. Dad sat on the bed, his suit jacket discarded in the rumpled sheets, his white shirt and tie loose around his neck. He held his head in his hands, bent over in

the soft sounds of weary mourning. "Dad?" His head jerked up. Red rimmed his swollen eyes. "Eden. I didn't think you were here." "I just got here." He took in a deep breath. "So, you know that Stacey's gone." I nodded and took a step into the room the scent of her perfume, mixed with his cologne like marital battle odor. "I came home earlier. She was taking a butt-load of stuff. Dad, how could you let her?" He looked at me a minute. "You're a selfish girl, Eden." "Excuse me?" Bitterness and old anger soured my tone. "I'm not the one who spent years in a relationship with a gold digger. You couldn't even give Mom two years respect. What? Was Stacey that great that you could forget Mom and me?" He rose as if he carried a mountain on his shoulders. His face hardened. "Like I said, you're selfish. I don't need to explain what I do to you." "Then who do you explain anything to?" I steamed. "Your law partners? What an asinine answer that is." Tears threatened to spring out of my eyes. I fought them. He started picking up the mess and didn't say anything. I wanted to scream at him that he was a hypocrite. I was selfish? I wasn't the one who had spent the last ten years in an older man-younger woman relationship. I wasn't the one who had completely ignored his daughter for a decade. I let out a trembling sigh and left him to clean up his own carnage. William was at my bedroom door and I bent down and scrubbed him. "Hey, Will." He followed me into my bedroom and I shut the door, still simmering, still teetering on the verge of tears after Dad's comment. Flopping on the bed, I patted the mattress so William would join me. He labored up on his hind legs panting, but needed me to pull him onto the mattress. I wrapped my arms around him, blinking back the last of the tears threatening to fall. My phone rang and I checked the screen. Brielle. I almost ignored her, figuring she deserved it. Still, I had so much swirling inside of me, to talk to her would make me feel better. "Hey." "Hey." Awkward, with what had happened at lunch. "What's up?" "Matt's just really angry at you. He doesn't know I'm calling, but I couldn't leave it like that, you know?" "Don't let him tell you what to do, Brielle." "I know, I know. But I'm not you, Eden. I've liked him for a long time and he finally likes me. I can't blow that." "Being yourself is not blowing anything," I told her. "Guys walk all over girls that don't stand up for themselves." Even as I reminded her of this, I knew it fell on deaf ears. We'd had this talk a hundred times because Brielle ended up being the doormat in her relationships. "You're right. But..." I had my answer. She was laying herself down at Matt's feet. "Fine, whatever." I didn't want to feel the pinch of concern inside. Too many other hurts were already rampant, fighting. "Other than lunch's debacle, how is

everything? It seems like forever since we talked.” “I know.” Her voice lightened with relief that I wouldn’t be harping on her anymore. “It’s been okay. I’m getting ready for midterms, aren’t you?” I hadn’t even thought about them. “Yeah, I am.” “And, you know, hanging with Matt.” We were back around her tiny circle already. “Hey, I don’t care if we talk about you guys, I really don’t. I’d rather hear you go on and on about Matt than not talk, ‘kay?” “Kay. So, anything up with you?” she asked. James’ face came into my mind. I closed my eyes when a shudder rumbled my body just thinking about how it felt when he held me. I smiled. “Not much. Except Stacey up and left today.” “What!?” “Yeah. Got herself a moving van and packed up half of our stuff.” “No way. And your dad let her?” “Are you kidding? Dad probably rented her the moving van.” A fresh burn of anger singed me again. “He wanted her to go?” “No, not that. He’s...” I thought of his swollen face and couldn’t talk about his pain. “He just pays for everything, you know that.” “I can’t believe Stacey left. I didn’t see that coming.” “You didn’t hear the fights.” “Still, did you think she’d ever leave?” “She probably got bored. People do that.” I’d just done that. Still, I thought adults outgrew relationship boredom. “It wasn’t what Dad wanted, that’s for sure.” “Yeah.” “Hey, there’s something we need to talk about.” The long silence warned me what Brielle had to say next might be bad. “What?” I wondered if she’d heard something about me and James. My heart started to skip. “You know prom’s coming.” I let out a sigh. “Don’t worry about it.” “But you and Matt—” “—We’re not together anymore. Go for it. I’m sure he wants that.” The slight pause made me ask, “Doesn’t he?” “That’s the thing. I asked him about it and he didn’t say. He just said he wasn’t sure what he was doing.” “Well he’s not going with me, so...” I couldn’t believe Matt was stringing her along with such a deceptive leash. “Who will you go with?” “I don’t know and right now, I don’t care if I go or not.” Spending the night partying, then going to some ratty hotel sounded millions of lifetimes away from me now. “Well, I guess I’ll see what he decides.” Brielle sighed into the phone. “You decide. If you want to go with Matt, fine. But tell him how it’s going to be.” “Not all of us get what we want like you, Eden,” she said.

a Sixteen The next morning, I was at school a half hour early so I could beat Leesa. Not that our attendance was a contest, but she was honing in on what I felt was mine.

I wore a light pink tee, a short cream-colored skirt and pink sea-shell flip-flops. Matt used to love me in pink. Most guys stared at me in pink, so I was curious to see how the color would go over with James.

I came around the corner of the music room building and heard classical music. And Leesa's laughter. I stopped. What was she doing? Wow. I hadn't seen this coming.

I walked in and found Leesa trailing James around the room like a puppy. He headed into the office and because both of their backs were toward me, neither saw me enter. I went to my seat and set my stuff down, then sat and pretended to look through my books. With finals coming, I could use the time for study.

"That's so cool." Leesa gushed from inside the office. Just the thought of James smashed in the tiny space with her made me bristle. She was trying to be close to him, the move so obvious I cringed.

"I don't know how cool it is." His melodic voice didn't soothe me, the sound lit my wick. He'd used that tone with me.

I thought he spoke differently to me than to any other girl. "Graduating top in your class from college? That's way cool. But it's even cooler that you're humble about it." "That's nice of you to say, Leesa." The back of my neck burned. When the two of them came out of the room, he saw me. "Oh. Hey, Eden." I glanced up. "Hey." Then I looked back at my book. "Leesa, can you pass out those copies of My Heart Will Go On for me, please?" "Sure. Hi, Eden." Leesa glowed like she'd swallowed a searchlight. My stomach crimped. James set his hands in his pockets and casually walked over. I sat six rows up on the risers. He stayed on the floor in front of the first row of chairs. The casual greeting didn't extend to his eyes—sharp, hot—they swept me from head to toe. "So, how's it going?" he asked. I shrugged. "Fine." I was vulnerable. Didn't like being vulnerable. I went back to studying. It was stupid of me to feel jealous, but I couldn't help it. I'd never met anyone like him, and I realized then I wanted him more than he wanted me. I hated uneven relationships. I'd always been the one in control. Truth was I didn't feel in control of whatever was happening between James and me. I kept my eyes downcast, pretending to read, and listened,

frustrated the extra half hour would be wasted now. "Do you listen to pop music, Mr. Christian?" Leesa asked as she passed out the sheets near where we were. James crossed back to the piano and my heart sunk. "Sometimes. Usually in the car because I forget my CDs." "Who's your favorite?" "I like mostly nineties stuff with a lot of harmonies. Old Backstreet Boys, 'N Sync, stuff like that." "I like that too." I rolled my eyes. "Do you dance?" Leesa asked. "Uh..." His light laugh spun my insides. I looked at him. He caught me. For a minute our eyes held. "I like to dance, but I've been told I'm not very good." I returned my attention to my book. "I'll bet you're great," Leesa gushed. "You're just hiding behind more humility." "No, I'm really a bad dancer." "Slow dancing is all that matters anyway. I'll bet you can do that." I coughed. I couldn't believe she was saying this. I tapped my chest with my fist, and sent James a look of disbelief. His face remained annoyingly neutral. I stood. "I need a drink," I snapped. Then I headed out the door to the drinking fountain. After I took a drink, I took some deep breaths, and waited to go back inside until after the class had filled and the bell had rung. Making an entrance always boosted my ego: everybody watched me. A faint whistle came from somewhere in the back and I smiled, acknowledging the flattery with a quick tilt of my head. To my left, I saw James watching me, too. It was satisfying when another boy mumbled, "She's freakin' hot." Out the corner of my eye I saw James reach for his music

stand and plunk it into place. A smile bloomed on my lips. I sat. "Why are we singing this piece-of-hud song?" Josh held

up the sheet music. We were ready to start practicing My Heart Will Go On, the sopranos carrying the melody, the altos and tenors coming in with some pleasant harmonies. All in all, I thought we sounded pretty good.

James said, "Mr. Meyers and I decided the theme of the spring concert would be Romance in Bloom. I know, I know, it's cheesy."

"Majorly cheesy," somebody wailed. "He must have come up with that because you're way too cool for something so lame," a boy said. "He's been here a lot longer than I have," James's tone was respectful. "So..." "So you caved," a girl teased. James defended himself, "Come on, it's not that bad." "Yes," Josh groaned. "It is. I think we

should sing something else. Like Snoop.” “With your parents’ approval, right?” James joked. “Who needs approval?” Josh leaned back in his chair. “Most of us are eighteen now. Those of us who aren’t, well, tough for them. Hey, Mr. C, let’s party at your house this weekend.” The class broke into roaring agreement. I watched James, anxious to see what he would say. With a big grin, he held up his hands, shook his head. “No partying at my house.” Complaints hurled through the air at him. His face turned the soft shade of my tee shirt. He looked adorable embarrassed and I forgot that I was mad at him—for the moment. The class broke out in a chant of, “Par-ty! Par-ty! Par-ty!” James’ face got redder. “Guys, guys, hold it down.” “Where do you live, anyway?” Leesa asked. A sharp bristle scraped my spine. “Somewhere.” “Oooh, mysterious,” Leesa giggled, wiggling in her front row seat. “I’ll find out, yes I will.” I almost choked on another cough. I couldn’t believe her nerve. James took the moment and the comments in stride, but his grin screamed uncomfortable. He couldn’t stop fiddling with the music stand. “Let’s move on to our song, ‘kay guys?” He lifted his baton as a signal that he was ready to start. Mumbblings followed. He pressed the first note of My Heart Will Go On and we started singing.

“Eden, will you collect the sheet music, please?” James asked over the noise. We’d stopped singing and the bell was set to ring in one minute.

I glanced at Leesa, whose face wore disappointment. “Leesa, you want to do it?” She brightened. “Yeah, sure!” Feeling delicious, I gathered my books. James’ expression was confused but I just tilted my head at him. I added a nice sway to my hips as I left the room. Once out the door, my delicious euphoria withered. I’d just been a complete idiot. He’d probably never speak to me again. I wanted to run back and apologize. I wanted to rewind time. I kept walking, knees wobbly, regret surging through my system. I was cold with the afternoon breeze off the nearby cliffs. The rest of my day stunk. The only bright spot was that Brielle waited for me at her car and we drove to the plaza together for lunch. “You okay?” she asked. As much as I tried to hide the morning foul up with my fake designer smile, I guess I couldn’t. Part of me was glad she’d seen through it. Maybe our friendship could survive her fling with Matt and the secret I kept inside after all. “I had a lame morning, that’s all.” “Yeah? What happened?” “Just stuff. I don’t mean to be evasive, I seriously don’t. But,” I thought of Dad and our fight, “Dad and I had a fight is all.” She nodded, satisfied. “That sucks.

Is he still mourning over Stacey?" "Mourning and in another world. He thinks I'm the selfish one. That just shows how screwed up he is." "Yeah." We parked at the plaza and got out, walking close but not arm-in-arm like we usually did when we were together. Matt, Josh and Tanner sat around our usual table. I ignored Matt's glare and, in spite of the distance the last few weeks had created between Brielle and me, hooked my arm in hers. "What are you doing here?" Matt sat forward, resting his elbows on the wrought-iron table. "Get over it." I sat down. Brielle sat in the free chair next to Matt and shifted her feet after Matt's disapproving frown. "I'm gonna go get a drink," her voice warbled. "You want anything?" she asked Matt. I couldn't resist. "Yeah, thanks. I'll take a diet Coke," I chirped, smiled. Her quick laugh was an effort to fill the awkward silence in the air. "I don't want anything," Matt scowled. Brielle tapped off in her platforms. I sat back and extended two, shapely legs I knew Matt loved. His eyes flicked over them. "Be nice," I told him. "You want me to be nice?" His body tensed like coiled snake. "You're the one walking around like a..." "A what, Matt? You can't take it, that's what's bugging you." Matt's jaw turned to stone. Nobody said anything. "Just leave it." Josh's efforts at keeping peace. "Exactly," I said. "Let's get on with it. Josh, you were railing pretty hard on Mr. Christian today." "Just hassling him." "About partying," I added. "He's a cool guy. I could see hanging with him." "Yeah, he'd be cool about it." "Course he'd be cool. He loves a good party, just like the next guy." How little you know about him. I watched Brielle come back with two icy drinks and a fake smile. "I guess you could try to find out." I took my diet Coke from Brielle who sat in the chair between Matt and me. "And you said he was old." "Me?" Josh looked embarrassed. "No way." I sipped, smiled. "Anyway, he's sure got Leesa Weitz by the bra." Josh and Tanner laughed. Josh rubbed his eyes. "And that'd be a sports bra, right? Cause she's like, a triple A." "You guys are terrible." I shouldn't rag on Leesa, her misfortune with scarlet fever had earned my eternal sympathy. But all was fair in love and war. "She can't help that." "That, and she's ugly," Josh shuddered with drama. "Leesa?" Brielle crossed her legs after a glance at mine. "You mean Baldy?" The boys laughed again. This time I saw myself in the mirror of my bedroom the night I had thought I could share my hair with Leesa. I didn't laugh. "She likes him. So what?" "That's desperate." Josh ripped open a bag of Doritos. "He's way too cool for her." My cell phone rang and I tugged it out of my bag. James. Heat flushed my cheeks. I shot to my feet, then casually walked away from the table. "Hello?" "Eden?" "Yeah." "It's James." "Hey." "Can we talk later today?"

Maybe meet at Starbucks?" A hard knob of concern formed in my throat. "Sure. Everything all right?" A long pause. My heart started to pound. He said, "I think it'd be better if we talk in person." I tried to swallow the knob in my throat but it wouldn't go down. I didn't want to wait. If he was going to dump me, I wanted to know now. "I can respect that." I noticed nobody at the table had resumed talking. They seemed to strain my direction. "But I'm the kind of person that likes to know what's up." "I'll see you at seven, Eden." His voice was unbearably controlled. "Will that fit into your night?" "Yes." "Bye." My cell phone clicked. Dead. Gone. Over. I stared at the blank screen. My chest drew tight. Panic closed my throat. Why had I been so juvenile? I'd lost everything before it had even begun. Matt and Brielle watched me keenly. I lifted my chin and slipped on my dark glasses so no one would see my glistening eyes. Then I sat back down at the table and stuck my phone in my bag. "Who was that?" Brielle asked. I reached for my diet Coke and sipped. The soda was flat. "Don't worry about it."

a Seventeen He was there when I pulled into the parking lot. I saw him through the window, sitting at the same table-for-two we'd sat at during our first meeting. He'd changed into jeans, a deep blue tee shirt and wore a red hoodie. I still wore my pink shirt and cream skirt, though I'd pulled on a white cropped hoodie because it was cold.

I tried to feel like nothing was wrong. He wasn't going to tell me I'd been a retard and to go jump off the Redondo Beach pier. My stomach muscles bunched. I flipped my hair over my shoulder with a clammy hand and pulled open the door to Starbucks.

Usually comforted by the strong scent of brewing coffee, tonight the smell made me nauseous. I gripped the handle of my bag and walked toward him with a smile.

His usual grin wasn't there. Instead, he looked at me as if he was trying to decide whether or not he was going to invite me to join him.

"Hey." I didn't sit. He got up and pulled the chair out for me. "Hey." I sat, my nerves scrambling. "So, what's up?" "Would you like something?" I swallowed. "No thanks." The blue in his eyes was stormy. "Eden, I'd like to talk

to you about something.” “Okay.” “Are you and Leesa friends?” “Uh, sort of. I’ve known her for years, but I wouldn’t

say we’re buddies. We don’t hang or anything. Why?” He lifted a shoulder. “I just wondered. You... you kind of get harsh with her. I don’t know if she senses it, but I have a couple of times.”

“This is about this morning, I know. I have a really hard time with people that are so... embarrassing. I feel bad for them.”

He looked confused. “What was she doing that was embarrassing?” “You’re serious?” “She was just passing out sheet music.” “It was more than that.” “What do you mean?” He looked honestly clueless. “She was totally flirting with you.” His eyes widened. He didn’t say anything but looked like I’d just slugged him. I couldn’t believe that he hadn’t seen it. “She was being helpful...” His voice trailed off. Amused, I laughed. “Yeah, that too.” He dipped his head, stared at his drink. “You really couldn’t tell?” He looked up, his eyes bigger, bluer. “I’m not very good at picking up signals, I guess.” He buried his face in his hands for a minute. “I feel like an idiot.” I tried not to laugh at his discomfort as I sat there stunned. Impressed. And more attracted to him than ever. This hottie had no clue how incredibly hot he really was. “Well, open your eyes. She’s after you.” His skin turned pinker than my shirt. “No. No, she’s not.” “Yes. Yes she is.” “She’s... but...” He let out an adorable groan. “I don’t know what to say... I’m a music geek.” I didn’t care if he was Napoleon Dynamite. His naiveté was endearing. “That explains your jacket,” I said. “Jacket?” “The one with the elbow patches.” “You don’t like it?” I snickered, bringing another blush to his cheeks. “Your jacket is the least of your problems. What are you going to do about Leesa?” “Nothing. I mean, she can’t be serious. She’s my student.” “So am I.” The right corner of his lip lifted, held, and his eyes twinkled at me. “Leesa is... a sweet girl. But... wow, this is such a mind-blower.” I pinched my lips to keep from breaking into a grin. His expression shifted from embarrassed to shock to disbelief, trying to understand what seemed impossible. “Just because I’m friendly with her doesn’t mean anything. I’m her teacher, I’m supposed to be friendly.” “Yeah, well, girls see it totally different.” “Obviously.” He let out a sigh, scrubbed his hair then rested his

elbows on the small table, his gaze fixing on mine long and deep. Penetrating. "So you were mad at her for flirting with me?" "You're catching on. Bravo." I reached for the ceramic holder of pink sweeteners and fiddled with it, unable to endure his gaze any longer. "It was stupid, I know." "I'm the one feeling stupid." He sat back but his eyes didn't leave me. "Oh, well, I'm glad. Now we both feel stupid." He sat forward, as if he didn't want anyone to overhear what he was going to say. "So... we understand this. Nothing's changed." I bit my lower lip, wondering if the relief coursing my veins was real. His gaze dropped to my mouth. My heart skipped. He cleared his throat, shifted and sat back again. My body hummed. It took him a few minutes for him to tear his gaze away from my mouth. I couldn't help but smile. Then he did too. "I'm going to get something to drink," his voice rasped. He rose. "You sure you don't want anything?" I nodded. What I wanted was not one of Starbucks' specialty drinks. I made sure James knew that by holding tight to his gaze. He took tentative steps backward toward the bar, unable to look away. I watched him while he ordered, the pleasant surprise of his secreted hotness lingering in my blood like a nice buzz. I'd had my share of boyfriends. Some had been no more than accessories. Others, like Matt, had done more than just hang from my arm. They'd become part of me. But not like James could become a part of me... an unforgettable destination. Matt had been a trip to Barstow. I wasn't proud of that now, not looking at a kind, sincere, innocent guy like James who had inexplicably gone for who knows how long unnoticed by the opposite sex. Could he seriously have been a music geek? Maybe he'd been ugly in high school. Five years wouldn't change a person's appearance that much, would it? I didn't care. He was beautiful inside and out. How he'd gotten that way only made him more fascinating. When he came back to the table, he smiled an

0 endearing, cute grin that said he was still flustered about what had happened with Leesa. "I took the liberty of getting you one. I hope that's okay." He set my caramel cappuccino down in front of me.

"You remembered." "I guess I'm not a complete idiot," he laughed. I sipped. The hot drink burned my mouth. With a hiss I

set the drink down. "Get burned?" I nodded. His gaze focused on my mouth. The way

his jaw contracted sent a shiver through me. He dug into the pocket of his hoodie and pulled out a yellow and red Carmex. His long fingers twisted off the red cap and he handed the tube to me.

I took the Carmex and parted my lips. Inside of me, every inch tingled because he was watching. I was putting something on my lips that he'd put on his. Gently I pressed the yellow tube to my mouth, spreading the moistening gel over every curve. Menthol-therapy spread from my lips to my toes like warm jelly. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Keep it." "You sure?" He lifted his hot chocolate for a sip keeping an eye on

me over the rim of the cup. "I'm sure." "Were you a straight-A student?" I started, dying to dig deeper into him. To solve the mystery of how this gorgeous guy had remained untouched. He colored a little. "I did well enough." "It's just that you said you started taking GE classes in high school. Not many people do that." "I didn't spend much time socializing, Eden. Guess you could say I was more academically motivated." "I'm getting that," I said, intrigued. "So, you were like, in band and stuff?" He shook his head. "I sang." "Of course," I said. "Did you ever, like, have a girlfriend?" My questions kept a pink flush on his skin and a half grin on his lips. "In high school, no." He studied me a moment. "You look surprised." "I guess I am." You're so gorgeous. "Had a girlfriend... ever?" "Yeah..." He reached for his drink and kept his gaze steady on mine. "You saw me today. Half the time I can't tell a flirt from a friend." "Unbelievable." I covered my shock by reaching for my own drink. I sipped. He scrubbed his face with his hands, then looked at me. "Disappointed?" "Why would I be?" He fiddled with his cup, his expression wary. "Come on, Eden. I've seen you with your friends. You're so at ease. That's one of the things I thought was great about you. I'd have given anything to be like that in high school." "I don't know if I'm at ease. But I'm not afraid." I sipped again. "Are you afraid?" "Not afraid, just deficient." He set aside his cup and clasped his hands, his face serious. "I guess my academic mindset is finally catching up with me, biting me in the back." "So you were focused. That's cool. You knew what you wanted and look where you are—teaching—and you're only twenty-two. You're glad to be where you are, right?" He nodded. "Yeah. It's just that my solo life didn't plant a lot of relationships along the way." "But you're so amazing." I

leaned on my elbow, awed. He flushed again. "You're... well... I'm flattered." "If it's any conciliation, I would never have guessed that you were shy or whatever. Your clothes are the only give away." "My clothes?!" He reddened, grinning. "You keep bringing up my clothes." "Because they're so... how can I put this nicely." I liked that he took my chiding good-naturedly. "Just give it to me straight," he said. "Okay. Well, they're retro for sure. Prep is probably the most accurate, but also a stretch because they're, like, prep with a twist." He glanced down at himself. "Wow. Really? Twist?" "Not what you're wearing right now. This outfit is totally cool. It's your school stuff that needs an overhaul. I feel really bad saying that, because it's.... You're nice. I'm not hurting your feelings, am I?" "No. I want to know." He leaned toward me on both elbows. "You can help me." I laughed. "You want me to be your fashion coordinator?" "Let's not label it," he joked. "So." A pit opened in my stomach. "Is this why you invited me to Starbucks?" The green in his eyes flickered. "No. Eden, no." He seemed to stammer over what to say next. I felt bad putting him on the spot, but at the same time his discomfiture gave me a shot of power. "Among many things, I saw in you something I admire. Something I lack." He held my gaze with all of the seriousness of a confession. "Is that all right with you?" It was more than all right. It was the most complimentary thing anyone had ever told me. I nodded. "That's so poetic. Do you write lyrics to your music?" "Sometimes." "I want to hear them." "Do you always get what you want?" He raised an eyebrow. The tone of his voice deepened, sending a warm thrill through me. "Always. But I'm not spoiled." "Oh, I'm sure you're not." He laughed but it wasn't mean. "Seriously. What do you think about when you write music? What's your muse?" "That depends." "Remember that first day I came into your room and you were playing? That was the prettiest song. Who inspired it?" "I'm not sure what song you're talking about. But people don't necessarily inspire me." "That's lame." He laughed. "I told you, I haven't been socially motivated. I can be moved by a lot of things: A place. A scene. An event." I wanted to be an event. "I want you to come over." "To your house?" "Where else?" "No way." "Why not? Meeting at a public place is one thing." He paused, his features taut. "It's acceptable... for the most part. Meeting at some place private... That takes our friendship to another place." The nerves in my stomach drew tight. "You mean we're never going to meet anywhere but Starbucks?" "I'm getting used to being seen in public with you. It's a risk for me, Eden." "Yeah, and your chances of being seen by anyone at my house are a lot less than at Starbucks. My dad's never there." For a long moment, his gaze held mine. I

wondered if I was going to have to hold his hand through this. Part of me found the idea lame. I had to remind myself that he was a super, hot and rare commodity. Not dwell on the slick moves the boys I'd dated had left in my head, tainting me into thinking that was what was real. "After school tomorrow." "In broad daylight?" I laughed. "Yes, in broad daylight." His hesitation both annoyed and intrigued me. "I'll leave the gates open. You can pull your car right up to the house, that way no one leaving the school will see your car and know that you're there." "I seriously doubt anybody knows my car." "Everybody knows everybody's car." "Seriously?" I didn't dare tell him I'd stalked him just to see what he drove. That I'd then followed him home. He'd freak. I felt ridiculous. The natural course of our relationship would lead me to his house, that I had no doubt of now. "Or we could meet at your house." "I don't think that's a good idea." "Why?" "Let's just say that my mom is conservative." "Do you think she'd like me?" "She'd be too afraid for my future to like you as anything but one of my students." "That's lame." I couldn't keep disappointment from my voice. "So we're really going to be in hiding?" "Hiding's not the right word—careful. I think that's the best for now." He'd thought enough about this to have a plan. That was cool. But it stunk we couldn't go public. Again, I counted the months until graduation. "I better get going," he said, rising. I didn't like being told it was time to end a conversation or anything else. Matt had talked to me as long as I wanted, stayed with me until I'd had enough. My feelings prickled. "Oh. Sure."

He walked me to my car. I didn't want the evening to end, but he'd said he had to go. "Give me your keys, Eden." "My keys?" Surprise tingled through me. I dug through my bag and handed him the keys. Deliberately, his fingers brushed mine and held my hand for a moment, his blue eyes sparkling. He unlocked the car door and held it open. The gentlemanly gesture made me feel special and helped soothe my prickled defenses. "Thanks for the coffee." "You're welcome." On the far out fantasy that he might kiss me, I waited a moment. His gaze dropped to my mouth and he touched my lower lip with his finger, gently lingering. "Still hurt?" "N-no," my voice rasped. He smiled. "Keep that Carmex on it." "I will." My heart thudded at his touch. As if he knew my knees were melting, he kept his finger on my lip, drawing it slowly down to my chin before he put his hand back in the pocket of his hoodie. "Tomorrow. Redondo Beach. Five o' clock." Excitement stole my voice. I nodded. I got into the car and looked up at him. "Have a good night, Eden." "You too." I drove

home with my heart pulsing joy through my body. James was the coolest, nicest guy I had ever met, the best of two worlds; a hottie that didn't know he was a hottie. There was no way I was going to let anyone else know this. And no way was I going to let any other girl near him. I'd never been jealous. I'd never felt possessive. In my relationships, I'd been the hot one. The most sought after. I'd been a shopper at a boutique, picking and choosing what I wanted, when I wanted it. When I'd had enough, I moved on. At home, I walked in the house and found silence. It was nine o'clock, so I went to the garage door and peered out into the garage. Dad's car was there. Uncertainty knotted my stomach. I went to his office and peered through the glass French doors. Empty. I checked out the family room next, and found him sitting on one of the big, leather couches, staring at the television. He was watching his and Stacey's wedding videos. From the big screen Stacey's face beamed like a celebrity on the red carpet. I hated these videos. They could have been titled the Stacey Show for all that Dad and I or anyone else was in them. I swear she'd paid the cameraman to film only her. "Dad?" He turned for a second to look at me but didn't say anything. I walked up behind the couch to sneak a closer look at his face. Faint red rimmed his eyes, the only sign of what was going on inside of him. "Why do you watch this if you know it will hurt?" I asked. He didn't reply. "She doesn't deserve this, Dad. You're so much better than her. And you can do so much better than her." He didn't say anything. "You're not still mad at me, cause that would be totally lame." Like a zombie, he didn't move. Only his eyes blinked. I let out a sigh. I couldn't believe he was pining away after the gold digger. I was glad she was gone, and hoped he would see her for what she really was sooner than later. Save himself hours of self-inflicted torture. I turned and headed upstairs, digging my phone out along the way. I dialed Brielle. "Hello?" "Hey, it's me." "Hey, what's up?" Upstairs, I dropped the whisper I'd spoken in. "Dad's being so lame right now." "Because of Stacey?" "He's sitting in a vegetative state in front of the TV watching his wedding video." "Oh. Sorry." "Don't be. I can't believe he's sorry about this." "Well, they were married, right?" I shut my bedroom door. "So?" Not once had Stacey been satisfied with simply being in the gorgeous house Dad provided. She asked him for new this, more of that. At Christmas, she gave Dad a watch or a new suit while she expected a twenty-thousand dollar bracelet and a trip to Dubai. I plopped onto my bed. "I can't believe I'm hearing this from you, Brielle." "I guess I just think, well, it's nice when people can work things out." "I don't know, to me it's so clear. I can see it for exactly what it was. I

just can't understand why he can't." Brielle didn't say anything more. I didn't like her silence. I wasn't happy that she'd sided with Dad. But then maybe she had rug burns after being Matt's doormat. "So, how are things with Matt?" I knew how bad regret would be for her when Matt dumped her. And I knew he'd dump her eventually. "Good. Fine. Good." Her fake enthusiasm told me the circulation was already draining from their relationship. When she didn't elaborate, I said, "Oh. Good. I'm glad. You guys hook up yet?" She paused and I continued, "It's okay, you don't have to tell me. But if you want to talk about it, you can." "That would just be too weird." "You're probably right." We talked a few more minutes about other stuff then said goodbye. I'd just clicked off my phone when Dad opened my bedroom door and peered in. He hadn't entered my bedroom for years, no doubt as uncomfortable being there as I was having him there. "Dinner, Eden." He shut the door to avoid my reply. Stunned, I couldn't move. Dinner? He hadn't asked me to come down and eat with him since I was fifteen. Numbly, I took the stairs down wondering what in the world we would talk about.

Camilla had prepared lasagna. The deep baking dish sat in the center of the dining room table as if awaiting a large party. Two thrown-together place settings dressed one corner of the twelve-foot table.

Dad was already sitting, hands clasped over his empty plate. He watched me enter and sit down. We both picked up our cloth napkins at the same time. I would have smiled at the coincidence, but the air was so thick with weirdness, I was having a hard time breathing. He gestured to the lasagna, which meant I was supposed to dish up first. I did. I reached for the salad bowl and scooped myself a small mound, then handed it to him. He handed me a soft garlic roll, then took one. There was no sound but the crunch of chewing. I started to sweat. I snuck glances at him, staring down at his plate, his jaw going round and round. He sat with his forearms poised on the table. His wedding band was still on his finger. I wasn't surprised. His lawyer mentality wouldn't give up easily. "How's school?" His voice cut through the awkward silence like truth through a lie. "Fine." "Graduation's coming. You ready for finals?"

0 "Dad, that's three months away yet. Yes, I'll be ready for finals." "I can hardly believe you'll be leaving for Santa Barbara soon." He just got rid of Stacey, was he anxious to

be alone? “I’m not going to USSB.” He froze a moment, then locked his courtroom glare on mine. “Why not?” “I’m still enrolled, don’t get jumpy. I’m just thinking about staying in town. Maybe USC.” “You hate SC.” Yeah, but it’s closer to home. And James. I shrugged. “Things change. So why are we suddenly eating dinner together?” His eyes steeled. “Things change.” We ate the rest of our meal in silence. Stacey’s presence had made us roommates and left us strangers. After I’d finished, I rose, ready to take my plate to the kitchen. Dad lifted his to me. At first I stared at it. When I could see he was serious about me taking his plate along with mine, I glared at him. His steady gaze was straight from the courtroom – all business, no b.s. I took the plate.

a Eighteen The next afternoon I raced home when school was over. As expected, no one was there. Camilla had come, started dinner, and left, her note on the granite counter with our menu.

I let out a sigh of relief, still spooked after last night’s dinner with Dad. The impromptu family eating experience had stuck with me like indigestion.

I changed from my jeans, tee shirt and hoodie into a gauzy skirt in milky white with a matching long-sleeved tee with Sweatpea across my chest. I pulled on my calf-high cream boots and sprayed on some perfume.

I’d counted the hours all day, my concentration zapped by the excitement I carried inside. During Concert Choir, I’d passed out sheet music, sung, and collected the music when class was over like I normally did. I’d caught James glancing at me throughout class and refused to acknowledge our secret meeting with any hint of furtive eye contact.

Now, I was in my car, speeding down the winding cliffs on Palos Verdes Drive North as if I was a race car driver. On the Esplanade, I inched along in traffic toward the Redondo Beach entrance, searching for James’ gray Toyota. My palms were wet, my heart was pounding. Spotted. I parked, got out and jogged across the street to the long declining cement ramp that led to the beach. At that hour of the afternoon, the beach was nearly empty. Rollerbladers skated the biking/walking path. A few dogs

led their owners by the leash. Salty air tickled my nose and a light, cool breeze lifted my hair from my neck. Beyond the reach of the darkening Pacific, the sun hovered in golden red splendor. I scanned the stretch of beach for James. He stood near the edge of the ocean, barefoot, in a pair of jeans and the same red hoodie he'd worn yesterday. I forced myself to walk down the ramp, rather than run. At the bottom, I slipped off my boots and carried them, my toes digging into the cool, grainy sand as I crossed to him. "Hey." He had his hands in the front pockets of his jeans. "Hey.Wow." His gaze swept me from head to toe. "Another great outfit." "Thanks." We didn't say anything for a moment. A chill of awkwardness chased down my spine. At last we were alone.What would we do with it? I couldn't talk nonsense to him like I could with any teenaged guy, nonsense just to fill the air with noise. "Here we are," I said. He smiled, looked at me and then back out at the sun. "Yeah." "Do you want to be here?" "I wouldn't have come if I didn't." I nodded, enjoying the wind blowing through my hair. I looked great with the wind in my hair. I sat down and extended my legs. His gaze locked on them, then shifted to my eyes. I grinned. He sat. Our arms brushed. His stretched out pose mirrored mine. He had great feet—finely sculpted foot bones and nicely shaped toes. "Nice feet," I said. He laughed."You notice everything." "If we were at my house, I'd offer you a drink. Since we're not, I'll have to offer you the view." I gestured to the choppy sea. "I don't drink, so I'll take the view. I used to come down here after school and de-stress." "You surfed?" He laughed again."No.Watched." "I do that, too." "The waves, the seagulls, runners on the beach, that kind of thing.The sound of the waves always calms me." "I know what you mean. Off the back of our house is a seventy-five foot drop to the ocean. I like to stand there and listen." His eyes met mine."What's your dad do?" "He's a lawyer." "Aah.That explains the house." "Does the house scare you?" I brought my legs to my chest and wrapped my arms around my knees.The breeze had changed course and now my hair fluttered around my face."Because it's just a house," I said. The green in his eyes flickered. He didn't respond, but studied me without a smile. He looked back out to sea. "This feels strange." "Don't worry about it." "I'm not worrying, I'm feeling it." A fluttering of panic let loose inside of me. I was enjoying this moment, and wanted more of the same. "What do you do for fun?" He smiled at my obvious change of subject, and picked up some sand that drained from his fingers."I told you, I've been out of things. School took all my time. Still takes all my time, now that I teach." "You have to change that, James. Look at you.You're far too..." His eyes locked with mine. My heart pounded

faster. "You're way too hot to stay isolated." He barely smiled, like he wasn't sure if he should believe my words. "You throw that word around pretty easily, Eden." "Everybody does." "Hasn't it lost its meaning?" "Maybe." I looked out over the ocean, feeling the air around us thickening with something I hoped was heat. "I guess it depends more on who's saying it and who they're calling hot." His sharp gaze still had me pinned. "And that's what it all comes down to, doesn't it? How close can we get to the edge?" "The very," I said, rising to my feet. I crossed toward the water racing at us from the ocean. He joined me, staying at my side. Moving closer to the rushing pull of tide didn't ease the tension between us, it drew it to a head. I couldn't help but feel like something was going to happen. James walked right into the licks. "There's power in that beast." "Yeah." "Not the place to find yourself sleepwalking," he said, and laughed. "No." I laughed. "Do you? Sleepwalk?" He nodded. "Weird, huh?" "Like, how do you know?" "Mom found me one night walking down our street." "No way! Alone?" "As far as I know sleepwalking's a solo activity." We shared a laugh. "Wild," I said. It was just one more fascinating thing about him that intensified my draw to him. "I was seven." He looked out over the ocean, the breeze ruffling his hair. "I'd been cast as Peter Pan in our neighborhood play. Mom came home late one night and found me 'flying' down the middle of the street." "That could have been dangerous. I hope you live on a quiet street." Knowing that he did, I hid a grin. "Yeah, I do, thankfully." "How crazy. Do you still do it?" "Sometimes, usually when I'm under stress. I'll wake up somewhere other than my bed." I licked my lips, and it drew his gaze to my mouth. A warm tremor ran through me. His hands shifted in the depths of his pant pockets. I wanted to kiss him, right there on shore both of us holding onto each other for life and anything else we could hold onto before the tide swept us to sea. I took a step toward him, bringing my body flush with his. He didn't move, but his nostrils flared a little, and his breath quickened. I held onto his flickering gaze, my feet sinking into wet sand, my breaths deep. He moved closer. In the distance, waves crashed violently, then hissed to our feet, soaking us with cold, foamy water. Thrill raced through me, paralyzing, freezing me with both fire and ice. His hands grasped the sides of my shirt, then slipped tight around my waist when he pulled me against him. His mouth pressed eagerly against mine. I wound my arms around his neck and our bodies pressed together. The breeze slipped around us, chilling my legs and I shivered. The response brought his arms around me completely, as if he'd felt me tremble and he wanted to warm me, or stop me from

shaking, or both. I'd been kissed by a lot of guys but nothing so electric had ever bolted through my system. The hot, sweet, gentleness of his mouth moved over mine with surprising skill, lightly at first, then fast and hard. One of his beautiful hands slid up my side and touched my face. The move melted my knees. The urgency to hold onto him kept my arms locked around his neck, my lips chasing his. When both of his warm hands held my face, my heart and breath caught. He eased back, and I felt the cold, sea air singe my wet mouth. I looked up into his face. I didn't know what to say. Words seemed not only insignificant, but silly and useless. I felt beautiful. Special. I wanted to say thank you. I wanted to tell him everything in my heart. I wanted to wrap around him again and not let go. At the same time I felt fragile. How had he learned to kiss like that if he hadn't been around? Had he lied to me? "What?" He must have sensed I was distracted. A faint line appeared between his brows. Afraid he'd take his hands from my face, I placed mine over his. "Where did you learn to kiss like that?" The line between his brows deepened. "Learn?" His hands slowly slid away, he took mine with them, and held them between our chests. "It's not something I set out to learn." He studied me a moment. "I just did what I felt, Eden." I felt dirty. Embarrassed. I'd never kissed with anything but technique in mind, with the need to maintain my reputation. Or manipulate someone. I couldn't ever remember kissing from my heart. I looked out toward the ocean, wishing I could bury myself in the water and come out clean. All of my backseat, couch, and corner kisses reeked with sleaze. His touch no longer warmed and comforted me, but reminded me of where my life had taken me and who I was. I stepped back, the cool air surrounding me. As I gazed at the blue sea, I saw him move a little closer, still watching me. "Everything all right?" Everything sucked. I wasn't worthy of him. His pure kiss had poured over me like holy water. Awakening, yet not cleansing me. I let out a sigh. I felt his hand touch my arm and looked at his long, gentle fingers. Fingers that had just touched my face in a gesture more intimate than sex had ever been. Fingers that made beautiful music no matter what they touched. Tangled in thought, I turned, picked up my boots and headed across the sand toward the ramp. I wished he wasn't there. I wished I'd never laid eyes on him, never known how unique he was because that had changed me forever. Nothing would ever be the same. I couldn't look at guys anymore. How would I look at men? I felt him come up behind me, then next to me. "Did I say something?" "No." There was such earnest innocence in his voice, if I looked at him, I'd start to cry. "Eden, what?" He took my elbow and the

move jolted me to a stop. His face was fraught with concern. "I've just... this is different for me." "In what way? Can we talk about it?" The angles of his eyes squinted in piercing intensity, like he wasn't going to move one inch unless I told him. "I think... I should go home now." Shock shifted on his face. Hurt passed through his eyes. Confusion, plain and raw distorted his features. "I'm sorry if I—" "Don't." I cut him off. Suddenly I saw him in his church, on his knees, confessing. Or praying. I couldn't be the reason he sinned. Lost his job, left his church—whatever. That was a weight I could never bear. I started for the cement walkway. Again, he grabbed hold of my arm. The muscles in his throat constricted, as if he was struggling to keep himself from saying more. I felt guilty for making this hard for him. He deserved something easy. Something better. He slowly came toward me, his face taut with anguish and confusion. "I don't know what I've done, but..." I closed my eyes. "Please don't apologize. It's not you." A tear escaped, and rolled down my cheek. My chest surged with quarantined remorse. I felt his finger steal the tear and I opened my eyes. A shade of relief brightened his face, still tight with concern. "If you want to talk about whatever is bothering you, I'm here," he said. Waves fought in the distance, a crashing battle that rolled onto shore in watery submission. Maybe he was right, maybe this was wrong. But then we were both here. He'd kissed me. Still, when I looked into his face, illuminated with a joy I was sure I wasn't imagining, the purity behind his motives shamed me. It didn't matter what he said. I wasn't worthy of him.

On a Nineteen After I'd purged myself of every last tear, I lay on my bed wasted. William lay snuggled against me, having witnessed hours of sobbing. His head rested on his crossed front paws, his droopy eyes looked ready to weep.

I petted his body and he groaned, bringing the first smile to my lips in hours. My fantasy had dropped right at my back door: James and I kissing on the beach and I'd blown it. Head clearer after the crying jag, I realized I hadn't blown anything, just seen things for what they really were. James was unreal—a statue carved of marble—something beautiful but untouchable. I'd broken some theological and ethical rule kissing him. Forget that he was a teacher. The spirit inside of James was far more off-limits than Mr. Christian the teacher was. He would never look at me the same again. Whatever he'd seen in me would be veiled now by some confessional curtain once he realized what he'd done by kissing me.

He'd given himself to me in that kiss, opened his heart, his feelings. I'd never done that when I'd been with a guy. Had he sensed that?

I saw him in my mind again, and again the picture was in some dark confessional on his knees, crossing himself, shaking his head. Knowing that I would cause him to unload regret in this way leadened my heart with more guilt.

A knock at my door startled me. When the door opened, my dad came into the room. The way he blinked, I knew he was taken aback by my puffy, red face.

"Eden." I petted William in the vain attempt that Dad wouldn't look at me. He came close to the bed, something he hadn't done in years.

"What's wrong?" "Nothing. I'm okay." For a minute he stood in silence. He was used to

staring at people, getting them to open up, say what he wanted, do what he wanted. So I kept petting William and didn't look at him.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I did. So badly I wanted someone to unload to, but this was a solitary road I had chosen to walk. "I just miss Mom." I always missed her, so I wasn't lying. I was sure, in fact, that she would listen to me if she had been there. And I could trust her, if I told her.

"I'm sorry." He moved closer and stood twitchy as a racehorse at the gate, not sure if he should touch me or not. He kept his hands in his pockets. For years we hadn't exchanged anything more than obligatory hugs. I wanted him to hold me. Not ask questions, not say anything.

But comforts like that had died long ago and I'd learned to bury that need. When the need resurfaced, I lost it in hanging with my friends or in being with boys.

My skankiness made me shudder with guilt. Again, I saw James' face, felt the

softness of his lips, the beat of his heart.

Disgusted with myself, I closed my eyes to prevent more tears from falling. I heard Dad move and my eyes flashed, shocked that he'd actually brought himself closer.

"You sure you're okay?" Worry tightened his face. It had been so long since he'd looked at me that way. Stacey had been his focus. The years of neglect had created a constant storm I wasn't sure either one of us knew how to navigate our way through.

"I'm sure." If I didn't shut up, he'd keep questioning. "You want dinner tonight? I thought maybe we could go out." My eyes widened with surprise. "I'm not really up for it. But you can go." "Who am I going to go with, Eden?" There was sarcasm in his voice. I shrugged, continuing to pet William. "So you and Stacey aren't going to try to work it out?" Though I'd wondered, with the furniture gone, I pretty much figured she was gone for good. "I don't know." I hated hearing hope in his voice. "Well." Awkwardness returned. "I'll eat here then. Camilla made chicken pepperoni." "Yeah?" That was one of his favorites. He nodded, relieved that a subject as simple as dinner was all that was between us now. He started for the door. "Come down when you feel better." Eating was the last thing I felt like doing. Eating a meal with him was another, but I nodded anyway. He closed the door and I wept again.

I wanted to skip Concert Choir the next day, but that was cowardly. I'd never hidden from bad situations with guys before, and this wasn't like a dump-job. I just wasn't sure what James was thinking. I knew where my head was—lowered—with enough shame that I didn't look at him when I went to my seat. But his classical music dove straight to my heart, working it like putty.

In my peripheral vision I saw him watch me. His interest strummed my insides, remembering how he'd kissed me, touched me, said my name. How whole I'd felt in his arms.

Noise filtered around me. Soft music, a theme song I recognized but he'd never played for us before. I tried to distract myself by searching my brain for what it was, but the movie never came to me.

At last I glanced at him. He'd watched me since I'd come in and his beautiful face was mixed with concern and curiosity, pleasure and wariness. He made no gesture of greeting, just reached for his music stand and adjusted it.

"Okay, let's get started." He scanned the group. "Anyone know this music?" I rolled my eyes when Leesa raised her hand. "Leesa?"

"It's from The Notebook." He gave her a nod. Leesa wiggled with glee. I was glad he didn't tell her how great she was for knowing. "We do both of our songs without the sheet music today because you guys should know this stuff by now, right?" Mumbling followed. The routine of class comforted me, filling in the empty spots inside of me that I didn't know what to do with. Able to watch James now that class had started, I realized the feelings I'd had for him had not disappeared after yesterday, but were more intense. As he spoke and sung along with us, I was captivated by his mouth, the way it moved. I stumbled over lyrics, unable to find room in my head for anything but the memory of his kiss, of how safe I had felt against him. Every time our eyes met, something pure and innocent sparkled in his. Guilt forced me to look away. When class ended, I hoped to sneak out without notice, filled with a jumble of emotions I had to sort out without being near him. "Eden." When he said my name, I stopped in my tracks. If I looked at him, I might explode or dissolve, both were frightening. "Can I talk to you, please?" The class had nearly emptied, all but Leesa who loitered nosily. "Leesa, if you don't mind, shut the door on your way out," he told her. His bold request shocked Leesa as well as me. She glanced at me, then at him, before sulking out. "There's not a lot of time." He started toward me when the door shut with a thud. "I..." He looked me over, as if hoping to discover why I'd been weird yesterday. I nervously fingered the strap of my backpack. "I wondered if we could meet tonight." "Sure," I said too soon. "Starbucks?" I nodded, my eyes finally meeting his. "Yeah. Sure." Confusion and urgency flashed on his face. I felt bad that I'd put it there. Unanswered questions hung in his eyes. The door flew open and a rush of kids entered. Where our covert talks and after class visits had never bothered me before, I looked at the faces of those who had just come in, sure they sensed that something more than a teacher-student talk was between this teacher and student. No one seemed to notice. He backed away, bumping into his music stand.

When I walked out the door, I found Leesa waiting for me. She stayed at my elbow like a dog begging for a scrap he knows is hidden somewhere in your pocket. I started toward my locker, wondering if she could see the emotions of happy and sad on my face.

“What did he want?” she asked. I shot her a raised brow. If I didn’t answer, she’d be suspicious. Still, I wanted her to know I didn’t find her question appropriate. “He wanted to ask me something.”

For the first time, I saw jealousy flicker in Leesa’s usually happy eyes. “He did? What?” “I imagine if he wanted you to know, he wouldn’t have asked you to leave.” I turned the corner to our locker hall. She stayed with me. “He likes you, doesn’t he?” she asked. My heart pounded. I worked to keep my face even, my walk steady. “Likes me? He’s my teacher, Leesa. I hope he likes me. I try to be nice to all the teachers.” I stopped at my locker and she did too, her face so close, I could see the individual hairs on her head blow in the breeze. I stared at her, afraid she could somehow see the truth. “You’ve always been a kiss-up,” she said, her voice trembling. She looked like I’d just slapped her. I glanced around, shifting my feet. “You flirt with whoever and don’t care about the rest of us! It so unfair!” Stunned, my fingers froze on my locker dial. I stared at her. “He’s the nicest guy too.” Her voice rose. “Why would you do that to him?” “Leesa,” I kept my voice low in hopes she would do the same, “I haven’t done anything to him.” “Then why does he watch you all the time? Why did he ask you to pass out the sheet music? How come he wanted to talk to you alone?” Visions of her storming into the principal’s office and rattling on us terrified me. I swallowed. But then, she sounded like a love-sick groupie with a bad crush on her teacher; surely Mr. Edwards would see that? “Leesa.” I reached out and laid my hand on her arm, using the gesture to calm her. She looked down at my hand as if an angel had just touched her. Her face softened. “I’m sorry if you think I’m flirting with Mr. Christian. I’m not.” “I know, I know.” She looked embarrassed now, and couldn’t meet my gaze. Her nearly-bald head flushed red. “I’m probably just seeing things.” “You like him, don’t you?” I kept my hand on her arm. She blushed and nodded. “Can you tell?” “Um, like a baby screaming in a chapel.” She laughed. I let my hand fall away. “It’s cute that you like him, Leesa. I’m sure he’d be very flattered.” We both opened our lockers. My racing heart started to slow. “Do you think he knows?” she

asked. "Uh, not sure on that one." "But you won't tell him will you?" "Cross my heart." I made the crossing motion, and James' face came into my mind. I smiled at Leesa and she smiled back. "Hey," she said as I started off to second period. I turned and walked backward so I could see her. "Maybe you and I could go somewhere, do something?" "Um, yeah. Maybe." I gave her a wave. She stood at her locker, her face happy.

a Twenty James was waiting for me at seven o'clock. I sat in my car staring at him through Starbucks' big windows. In jeans and a dark brown turtleneck, he looked like he'd just morphed from an old Beatles movie. The outfit was adorably wrong.

I could tell he was watching for me, the way he squinted into the glass trying to look beyond the reflection. Though I wanted to be there, I wondered how it would all play out. I prepared myself for being dumped. I figured he'd had enough time to think about my odd behavior and had decided I was just too young and stupid after all.

The idea sickened me. I got out and crossed the parking lot, making sure he saw me, but without looking at him. If he was tired of me, the pre-coffee sighting would confirm in his mind that he was glad to soon be rid of me. I honestly couldn't believe that I was there for anything more than an "I think this is over" talk. I lowered my head. Rather than extend the inevitable, I looked right at him when I entered. He stood, a small smile on his lips. At the table, he pulled out the chair. "Eden, have a seat." "Thanks," my voice cracked. I held onto my bag as if it was a life preserver and I was floating in the middle of the ocean and forced myself to meet his gaze. "So," I started. He set his elbows on the table, clasping his fingers at his lips. I looked at his mouth, remembering how sweet his kiss was. He caught my stare. A guy ready to dump a girl would have had a look of disgust on his face, wouldn't he? James' intense stare held me pinned. I blushed and set down my bag, then clasped my own hands on the table. "Want something?" he asked. I let out a laugh. His unintentional innuendo didn't slip by me. "You mean to drink, right?" He bit his lower lip, thought a minute, then turned a light shade of pink. "You kind of set yourself up for that one," I told him, feeling a little more relaxed now that we'd shared a laugh. He buried his head in his hands for a minute. "I'll take a drink, sure." He rose and dug into his front pocket for his wallet, his eyes on me. I couldn't read his expression, and a knot

formed in my heart. Was he offering me a drink to be nice, figuring I'd know better and say no? Was he offering so we could get this nasty deed over with? Maybe he was pissed that I'd made something of the innuendo. I looked out the window while he ordered, the knot in my heart pulling tight. Part of me wanted to get this over with. Another part of me was reaching out for any last bit of him I could get. His scent, which was all but drowned in the smell of brewed coffee, his face, the sweet kindness in his eyes. He came back with a caramel cappuccino for me and a hot chocolate for him. The light whiff of his cologne infused me with courage when he sat. As he lifted his drink to his lips and I watched, I realized I couldn't give him up.

0 "I need to tell you something," I said. His expression was patient. "Yesterday... I realized some things. Not to sound stupid or anything, but, all this time I thought... well... I wanted us, you know, to be more than friends. I liked that you weren't like the guys I know. That was a really big plus for me. I thought we'd click, and we did. But when you kissed me I knew how different we really are. How wrong it was."

His eyes darkened. I thought disappointment passed over his face. He looked away for a moment, holding his cup between both palms. "I disagree."

"You... you do?" "Yes. What was wrong about it?" I blinked. "You mean besides the teacher-student

thing?" "That's not what this is about anymore, Eden. Come on." He leaned forward, the same electric passion flickering in his eyes I'd seen countless times when he conducted us. "What's really bothering you?" "I'm serious." "Everything was fine before I kissed you," he almost hissed. "What changed?" I leaned toward him. "I don't know... everything." "That's bull and you know it." Anger flashed in his eyes. It dawned on me then that he wasn't there to dump me. The fire in his eyes was for me. It stirred me deep down and I wanted to kiss him again, right there at that table—in public—for the world to see. I sighed and sat back, relieved that we could work this out. But I couldn't dislodge the guilt I felt. This revelation didn't change anything. He was still James, pure and sweet. And I was Eden. "Look," he said, "if you don't want to see me anymore, just say so. But don't take me back to high school with all its games and crap, okay?" "You said you didn't date in high school," I quipped. He

smiled, looking relieved for the first time that night. “I still knew what was going on. And I’ve had girls dump me before. Do you think I’m some monk?” “After that kiss? Hardly.” “I see.” His grin was playful. Mine was as well. “So, is this about the kiss?” “Maybe... a little.” “Was there something wrong with it?” “No. No. Don’t ask, please don’t ask.” “You’re blushing.” He looked totally pleased that I was on the spot. “Okay, I won’t ask.” “Thank you.” I took a big gulp of my drink and cringed when it burned all the way down. He reached across the table. “You okay?” “You make me mess up.” “Me?” I couldn’t stop smiling. “Yeah, you.” We both sipped in silence for a while. I listened to the jazz music overhead. He glanced at his watch, then looked at me with eyes bright. “Hey, I want to take you somewhere.” He stood. “Where?” “It’s a surprise.” He reached for my hand. I looked at his long, beautiful fingers and my heart fluttered. He pulled his car into the parking lot of All Saints Church. I must have looked surprised. He smiled, pleased that he’d caught me off guard. He came around the car, opened my door, and again extended his hand. “Church?” I asked. I thought about the irony of my guilt and his efforts to keep us together and us winding up at church. “But there’s no one here.” “Exactly.” His eyes glittered. Everything inside of me hummed. He led me to a side door, pulled keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door. He kept hold of my hand once we were inside. The door shut behind me and pitched us into black. “I know this place blindfolded. Hold on.” I followed, clutching his hand tight. We took a few steps and then the lights blinked on. He grinned at me. “Are you sure we won’t get in trouble?” “It’s a church, how can we get in trouble?” “I don’t know. Why do you have a key?” “Because I teach here.” I looked around at the dark halls, shivering because it was weird being in a church without people. I expected to feel warm, welcomed, like I had when I’d wandered in that night it had been raining. Now, the cavernous building merely felt old and empty. “Do any priests live here?” “No.” He kept hold of my hand as we wound along a narrow hall lit by ancient overhead lights. Dismal, beaten looking, it was clear this part of the church was not for anyone’s use but the clergy. I’d never seen the veins of a church before. Cold. Dead. The sight kind of disappointed me. I guess I figured if a church belonged to God, you’d feel the heartbeat in every room—not just in the chapel. He continued leading me along, passing old black and white photos of past ministers, their names engraved on plaques underneath their pictures. James pushed through an ornate, carved wooden door and we were in the chapel, near the pulpit. A large light switch was on the wall and he flicked on a few lights, just enough to light the spot where the

piano sat. "Is this where you teach the kids? Here in the chapel?" He nodded. With a gentle tug he led me to the piano. It was a full grand in pearly white. After he'd pulled a lone chair up next to the piano, he took my shoulders in his hands and lowered me into the chair, his eyes locked with mine. Without saying anything, he sat down at the keys. I watched him extend his long fingers over the ivories. The moment his hands pressed down, he closed his eyes and that sweet, melancholy tune I had heard him play when I'd first seen him alone in the classroom floated into the empty air around us, filling the chapel. In my head I envisioned dark, stormy clouds battling in the sky, the rich melody tumbling over lower octaves. Then his fingers tickled the upper keys as if a ray of sun or some other light finally broke through the storm. The tinkling tune skittered down the keys, while the lower keys played out the ferocious battle, both tunes in minor tones headed for a collision. His face twisted in pain, as if the song was taking him along, shredding his spirit, the torturous drama unfolding underneath his hands. I sat transfixed. My heart pounded. I wanted to reach out to him but at the same time was in awe of the music pouring out of his heart. I couldn't move. When the two melodies met, my breath stopped. He held the tune with a dramatic plunge of his hands against the keys, sending the last notes ringing off the arched ceiling of the chapel in a final, frightening chord that held no promise, no hope, only an unforgettable echo as if the walls wept at the pending silence. He looked at me. The final chords whispered off the walls. Neither of us spoke. My palms were sweating, my heart thrummed. I couldn't understand what I saw on his face. Uncertainty swirled in the air. Talking would be irreverent somehow. Disrespectful. I wasn't sure if he was waiting for me to say something. "That was amazing," I said. "When you first heard it, I was struggling with how to finish it," his voice was coarse. "I couldn't... an ending eluded me. Then I met you." A low ache started inside me. The dramatic tune had wound around my heart and was now lodged in my soul. I'd just witnessed what the powerful song had done to him—the way it had taken hold and twisted him inside out, exposing everything inside of him. What would happen now? He stood. His eyes were stormy, fastened on mine. I was frozen to the chair, not sure what to do, what to expect. He reached out and gently framed my face with his hands, his eyes intense. My heart drummed with fear and excitement. "Eden," he whispered my name like a reverent prayer and I stood. Our bodies brushed. He pressed against me, lowering his mouth to mine, his warm lips fluttering like his fingers had fluttered over the keys. "Put your arms around me," he whispered against my lips. I obeyed. Then he turned

me, and I felt the cold body of the baby grand at my back. He continued kissing me, his hands slowly sliding from my cheeks to my neck. One arm slid behind me, the other caressed the side of my face. The urgent drive of his lips against mine forced me into an arch. The cool body of the instrument at my back and the muscled heat of him along my stomach and chest bounced an electrical volt rushing for release. He tore his mouth from mine and his warm lips grazed my chin, down my neck. The rush of fire blazing under my skin was unbearable. I squeezed him against me. A soft groan escaped his throat and suddenly his eyes met mine. I was half lying back on the piano, a dull ache in my lower back from the awkward position. I hadn't noticed it, caught up in the feel of him. He stood erect and brought me upright, keeping a hold of me, his arms wrapped tight around my body. For a moment, neither of us said anything. A voracious whirl hummed inside of me, but now that he'd stopped, I was reminded of where we were. "I want to play you..." He pressed his forehead to mine, closing his eyes. "I want to play your body like an instrument." A shudder slid through me. I urged his lips to mine and his eyes opened. I pressed my mouth against his so hard I had no other thought but to dissolve into him. I tasted hunger, need, but seconds later his hands wrapped around my arms and he gently tugged my arms down to my sides. I felt like I had just gotten on a rollercoaster ride that had jolted to premature stop. His dazed look met mine. "As much as I want you," his low voice stirred me more, "I can't. Not here." I was frustrated, angry. He was so beautiful and standing right in front of me, tempting me. Denying me. A surge of something wicked pushed through me. I wrapped around him again. At that moment, I couldn't care less that we were in a church. He'd used his poetic words to open my heart. His haunting music was a fantasy of us. This was real. He wanted me. I kissed him again. His lips were unresponsive. I used every seductive technique I knew in a driven effort to break him. He snagged my arms and pulled them down. "Eden, stop." "I don't want to stop." "I told you, we can't. Not here." I stepped back as if he'd just slapped me. "Then where? You won't take me to your house because of your mother. You won't come to my house because of my dad. We can't live our lives over a cup of coffee!" His face drew tight. "We're in a Church—my church." "Yes, I know that. It was you who brought me here." He bowed his head, his voice soft when he finally spoke. "I know. That was my fault. I'm sorry." His sincere apology sliced like a razor through my pride. "Don't." I couldn't stand the thought that he regretted any part of what had just happened. He'd created a song for me, written the rousing notes with me in his

mind. Finished a masterpiece because of me. And he'd kissed me as if his life depended on us sharing breath. He'd whispered something unspeakable to me—something I would never forget. He'd made me want that, made me willing to abandon myself to him. I started for the door, sure there was nothing left to say, do, or hear there in the chapel. My heart hurt. My body rang like a bell that wouldn't stop vibrating except under his gentle reassuring hands. I felt his presence behind me, stirring the vibrating ring inside of me into another ravenous rhythm. I whirled around and slid my arms up around his neck one last time. He had my wrists in his hands and down at my sides before I could press a kiss on his lips. He pulled back, leaving me leaning toward him, my lips parted. I couldn't look at him, embarrassed that I wanted him, was willing to do anything for him, and he was not willing to do the same for me. He reached around me to open the door then stopped. Instead, he grabbed my arms again. In a flash my back was flat against the door. He had my hands in his and he held them down to my sides, his body jammed against mine. Anger fought with desire on his face. "Is this what you want?" My heart stammered. "I—" "You want me to disrespect everything in my heart, including you, and take you right here? Right now? Eden, is this really what you want?" Shocked tears filled my eyes. At the same time, my body sang under the delicious pressure of his. How could I want him—but not want to do anything that would hurt him—at the same time? "No. No. You're right." He studied me, and remained pressed against me long enough to allow me to be sure. Finally, he eased back, his eyes narrowing in a way that was unsettling. "I want to make this right..." His tone was firm. "It has to be, or I won't be able to live with myself." I nodded. The determination on his face was so raw I could only agree. "I know." But what was right? He turned off the lights, took my hand, and led me through darkness to the door.

a Twenty-one The soundtrack to the Notebook played on the short drive back to Starbucks. Neither of us spoke. Neither of us turned it off. The lonely, foreboding tune kept me on the verge of tears. I stared out the window, too ashamed to look at him, though out the corner of my eye I saw him glance over. Away from the church now, my mind went over what had happened in frustrating clarity.

He stopped me. No guy had ever stopped me before. He pulled his car next to mine and killed the engine.

Reaching over, he touched my shoulder. When I didn't look at him, his gentle fingers turned my chin around so I had to face him.

"Eden." I wanted him to wrap around me and surround me with forgiveness for my stupidity. But I was afraid if I asked for that, he would see the request as another stab at manipulation.

"I don't know what you've done in your past with other guys, but that kind of deliberate move you laid on me at the church could be dangerous for us both."

I'd never been chastised for my moves before, let alone stopped. They'd gotten me whatever I wanted. I felt like a child getting a hand slap from a parent. "Oh, and telling me

00 that you want to play my body like an instrument isn't just as slick?" His brows knit over stunned, hurt eyes. Instantly I regretted the words. The fragile line that had separated us, the line that both of us were trying to ignore, was as obvious as a naked priest now.

"I'm sorry," I blurted. "I didn't mean that." He didn't move. Barely blinked. Deep down I knew I'd blown it. Panic seized me. I wanted to twist back time, go back to the chapel, to the piano when he'd looked at me as if he couldn't create another note without me being there.

"I'm sorry," I plead again. He sighed, sadness and resolve creeping into his eyes. "I am too." We sat in the parking lot of Starbucks, the sound of traffic rushing by us. Laughter filtered through the air every time the door to the place opened. I refused to move, to make any motion that this moment was final, trying my best to hold onto it.

He got out of his car, walked around and opened my door. If I got out, everything would be lost. We wouldn't talk about this. I couldn't save the moment and convince him I wasn't too young, I could do this. He stood back, eyes locked with mine in a goodbye that neither one of us wanted to validate with words.

I got out on shaky knees. Open your mouth, say something! My mind raced for words. None came. Silence wouldn't change the truth. "Can't we talk about this?" I asked. "Another time would be better for us both, I think." Another time? That was the last thing I wanted to hear. I was not the kind of person who waited for anything. Ever. I could see that he was set on waiting. But how long? He went around to the driver's side and got in his car. My heart broke and shredded, the pieces falling somewhere inside me. He backed the car out. I was unable to move. To breathe. He pulled out of the parking lot, the image of his old gray car blurring through my tears.

I drove home in a daze, trying to block out the memory of the stupid things I'd said. Trying to remember the way he'd looked at me in the church. The way he'd kissed me. Touched my face. "I want to play your body like an instrument." His words whispered on an endless, tormenting stream through my consciousness.

I could change his mind back. This wasn't over. He said we'd talk another time and we would. I'd make sure of it. But the ache of loss pounded inside of me with each heart beat. I opened the door of my house and took in a deep breath, finding the familiar scents unique to 26000 Paseo del Mar comforting, with everything falling apart around me. Dad's car was in the garage. The sight made me feel a little better, but I walked through the house without saying anything. Darkness beyond the glass doors of the back of the house called out to me and I soon found myself walking around the perimeter of our darkened pool, towards the cliffs. My mind flashed to James and me on the beach. A violent wave of regret crashed through me. It was over. I stood surrounded by black night. Stretched out before me an inky sea crashed in brutal rhythm against the rocks below. Clouds blanketed the sky, making the seam where the ocean met the horizon a blur of onyx. Cold fog fingered my bare legs and I shuddered. Despair gouged its way into my heart. How could I have screwed things up so badly? I'd gone after what I wanted, something I was accustomed to doing with success. Failure wasn't my pattern. James hadn't come right out and dumped me with words, but his acquiescence had delivered a blow far more final. It wasn't as though I hadn't seen that look before: how could you say that? It's just that nobody, not even Dad, ever had the nerve to make me face my own words. I thought about Matt, about the many times I'd just said what I felt like saying, knowing he'd take it. Even after I told him it was over and he tried to come back, he still let me say what I

wanted. It left me with a false sense of power. Brielle, Stacey, even Dad took what I tossed out. I guess I was used to it. I figured because I could get away with it, I could always get away with it. James' face came in my mind. I closed my eyes, trying to stop the tears but they coursed down my cheeks. "Eden?" I whirled around, shocked to see Dad behind me. "What—" When he saw my tears glistening, he quickly came over. "What's wrong?" He set his hands on my shoulders and I closed my eyes. "Nothing." "Something's wrong. What is it?" He brought me against him. The contact burst the old well buried deep inside of me, the family well I'd sealed shut when my mother died. I wept against his chest. I expected him to be tense but his body was simply there for me. He ran his hand over my head like he had years before, right after Mom had died and I'd cried to him. "You want to talk about it?" he asked. I shook my head. "No. But it's not because I don't want to talk, it's just... I was really stupid and did something I regret." "We all do that." "I know, but most people can fix things they break." "And you can't fix this?" "I don't think so." "There are some things that can't be repaired." I met his gaze. Sadness crept in his eyes. "Those things we have to live with. Those things teach us. But you're young. There can't be anything out there that you can't change." He dipped his head and gave me a smile. "Is there? Come on, I know you." I wanted to smile back but my heart was shrouded with the heaviness of reality. "I really can't fix this, Dad." He put his arm around me and led me back toward the house. "I'm positive that you'll find a way. You always get what you want." I sighed, leaning against him. It was cool that he'd come out after me — something I would never have expected. His words offered me hope. Hope was the best thing I had at that moment. Maybe he was right. Maybe I could fix things.

My cell phone was ringing when we got back inside. Dad let me go and for the first time, I didn't leave him feeling like it would be the last time I was ever going to see him. Not because something might happen to either one of us, but because when my mother died, I really never saw my dad again. Things between us changed. He nodded with a smile, watching me click on my phone, then he disappeared into the kitchen.

I hoped it was James. That I would be able to apologize for my stupid comment and talk it out, but the caller ID said Brielle.

“Hey.” I heard faint sniffing on the other end and found a private corner of the living room. “What’s wrong?” “It’s over.” I wanted to pound Matt. “What happened?” “I saw him... with another girl... she goes to Cal State Long Beach! How did he even meet her, you know? He was supposed to be mine!” “I’m sorry, Bree.” I opened my mouth to tell her, ‘I could have told you,’ but that would have been taking a giant step back into the kind of mire that had messed things up between James and me. I opened my mouth to start railing on Matt and realized that wouldn’t do her any good either. The last thing I wanted was for someone to tell me how wrong all of this James-and-me thing had been in the first place. “How do you know she’s from Cal State?” “Josh told me.” “He told you? What a jerk.” “I pulled it out of him. He didn’t want to tell me, Eden.” “So, you saw Matt with her?” I asked. “Yeah. Okay, I’ll admit, I was stalking him. But he’d been acting weird and I wanted to know why.” I could tell her why, and as my mind ranted all the reasons, I tried to think of what I could say that would make her feel better, not worse. “Maybe it’s nothing. It could have been nothing, Brielle. Are you sure he—” “They were kissing out in front of his house!” She started crying again. I felt sick for her. “Did he see you?” “No, of course not.” “Have you asked him about it?” “He won’t answer any of my texts or calls.” My head was ready to explode with expletives about Matt and what a jerk he was. Her sorrowful weeping brought a sigh from my chest. “You should have called me.” “I tried, but I only got your voice mail.” “Oh.” I’d been creating my own crisis, I realized. “I was deep in something. I’m sorry.” “It’s okay. I want to go by his house. Do you think I should?” “The last thing you should do is beg.” “But I love him. I’d do anything for him.” “Brielle, he doesn’t feel the same. He was kissing some other girl, an older girl even.” “Why? Wasn’t I good enough?” “You’re great enough for any guy. He’s dumb, that’s all—a retard. He isn’t good enough for you.” Her silence made me think I’d convinced her. “Maybe you’re right,” she sighed. “I’m totally right.” I could have unloaded right there about James but that would never happen, not while I still held hope I could repair the damage. I wondered if I should go by his house... call him. “I’m going to go make myself barf,” Brielle joked. “Purging always cleans the soul,” I said. She was too anxious to get off the phone. I knew where she was headed—to Matt’s—but then, who was I to tell her not to go? “Hope it makes you feel better,” I said. “It will.” She hung up. I looked at the phone. Talking this out with James would make me feel better, that was a given. I dialed him and got his voice mail. His heavenly voice only opened the fresh cut in my heart wider. Knowing he would see my name on his cell

phone, I couldn't very well disconnect without leaving a message, I'd look ridiculous. "Hey, it's me. I wanted to talk to you about tonight. Call me... please, James." I held the phone against my breast, closed my eyes and prayed he'd call. "Everything all right?" Dad's voice forced my eyes open. He stood just in the doorway of the living room. "Uh, yeah. Brielle." He stood awkwardly for a moment, then tilted his head. "She okay?" "Yeah. Or she will be once she realizes she's better off." "Must be about boys." Brielle—boy. Me? Dad would flip if he knew I'd been seeing a man. "Yup, it's about boys all right." "Well, that's your department," he winked. "I'm going to be in my office." "Okay." He disappeared again. The phone buzzed against my chest. My heart skipped when I read the caller ID: James. I clicked it on. "Hey." "Hello, Eden." His voice was soft, but void of his usual cheer. My heart plummeted. "James, I wondered if we could talk." "I think we both need some time." "I really want to talk. Please. I can't wait until tomorrow." I paced the corner of the living room. "Tonight's not good for me. Tomorrow at school—" "School? I can't wait until then, James. Please. I really need to talk to you." "That doesn't mean it will happen, Eden." I stopped. Awful silence stretched between us. He wasn't going to let me see him tonight and I lowered myself into a nearby chair. I was going to have to live with this wretched blackness eating away at me for who knows how long. Nausea rolled in my stomach and up my throat. "Okay," I managed. I realized then that he'd been nice to even answer my call. He could have ignored me. I didn't say anything more. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said. The phone clicked in my ear. He was gone.

a Twenty-two I was tempted to wear one of my real hot outfits to school but James would see right through that, so I didn't. I settled on jeans and a red Palos Verdes Viking hoodie. How I looked was irrelevant. James didn't see me in the same light boys my age did, anyway. That realization both thrilled me and haunted me as I walked to school the next morning, because how James saw me was the deciding factor in whether or not I could save what I'd blown.

I hadn't slept. I'd laid in bed all night with warped, wild thoughts of James, of Matt. Of Mom. I got to school an hour early. I wanted to see him the second he got out of his car. His classroom door was locked, so I sat down on the cold cement hall floor and waited, thinking about what I would say. I had to convince him that I would never say something so juvenile again. Closing my eyes, I took myself back to when he'd

played that song for me. Taken me to the church, a place he considered special—reverent—shown me what my influence had done to one of his creations. He'd been inspired by me, enabling him to complete something unfinished. I tingled. That was significant. And then he'd kissed me, another kiss that had come from some important place deep inside of him. A place I wanted more than anything to explore. "I want to play your body like an instrument." No words had ever moved me more. He'd opened his heart, given me complete access. Why then, had I used that against him? I buried my head in my hands and fought a sob. I had no idea what I was going to do to take my stupid actions back, but I was willing to do anything. "Eden?" I was so caught up in thoughts of him I hadn't heard anything. I looked up. He stood over me, his face sober. Dark shadows were under his eyes. He wore his brown cords, a denim shirt, tie, loose at the neck and the elbowpatched jacket. A file was tucked underneath his arm. I scrambled to my feet. Neither of us said anything. After a minute, he dug out his keys and unlocked the door. I had hope when he held the door open for me. I took in a deep breath, tortured by his scent when I passed by him. He closed the door and locked it. Then he looked at me, his expression wary with unreadable shades of blue sadness. "James, I'm so sorry about last night. What I said, it was so stupid. I've thought about it all night. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I couldn't even sleep." I stepped toward him. "It was so wrong. I'm really, really sorry." He still held the file and he took a few steps and set it down on the piano. He kept his hands on the glossy surface, looking at the instrument that now shined and glowed like new. "I accept your apology, Eden." I took another step toward him, hoping. Then he looked at me. "But this doesn't mean we can continue where we left off." "Why not?" "Because." "But why?" "Is that what you're used to?" "Well... yeah, actually." He shook his head. "I guess that's what makes us different." I didn't know what to say or where he was going with this but I was jumbled up inside. "I've stayed out of relationships because they can hurt. It's not a good thing, I know. I threw myself into school so I wouldn't have this kind of thing happen to me because it's painful. That worked for a long time. "Then I started thinking maybe it would be different now. I got myself out there and... I don't know... I seem to be drawn to complications." He bowed his head a moment. "That's not your fault, that's part of me. I came here to the high school thinking I'd put all that behind me and dive into work. But it didn't matter." His gaze lifted to mine again. "Here I am again, in the same place." "So, I'm like everybody else?" He'd once told me he saw something different in me. It hurt to

think he didn't see that anymore. "No, no." His voice gentled. I stepped closer. "If you don't want to see me anymore, tell me why at least." I thought of his words, of him not wanting me to drag him back to high school, which is exactly what I'd done. "I said I was sorry and I meant it. But I'll say it again, if you want. I'll keep saying it, James." He stood erect, his hands leaving the piano and falling to his sides. "Last night, I realized that the years between us really are a barrier. Like you, I thought they wouldn't matter. That maybe we could, you know, get around them. I wanted to think that we could..." "And we can, I know we can. We were doing fine until..." I lowered my eyes. "What I said was wrong but it shouldn't be everything. Why should a few words be everything? I just say what I feel. It's something I do without thinking." "And it hurts people." The pain I saw in his eyes was as if I'd just said the same, thoughtless words again. Now that I knew he'd been hurt in the past, I felt guiltier. "I know, I know. I'm sorry." Tears sprung behind my eyes. "James, please give me another chance." "Eden." He came close, as if deciding to overstep the boundary so precarious between us one last time. I didn't give him the opportunity to think about it, I wrapped around him. The warmth of his body opened my heart, the scent of him filled my head and I felt ready to collapse, emotions sweeping over me with the strength of a violent wave. Gently he caressed my hair with one hand, while the other rubbed comfortingly on my back. "I'm so sorry." I sobbed. "You were only being honest. It was wrong of me to use that the way I did. I'm not used to the honesty. I'm sorry." "Shhh. It's okay." I didn't dare think he meant it was really okay. I was afraid to look into his face, to validate his words. I stayed locked onto him. When his hands went to my shoulders and he tried to ease me back, I forced myself to let go, knowing how it would look if I held on. He kept his hands on my shoulders. I still couldn't look up at him. "I'm sorry too," he said. I let out a sigh then dared to lift my eyes to his. For the first time since I'd hurt him, I saw a break in the tight, soberness on his face. I wondered what that meant. "Can you forgive me?" I asked. He paused, holding my gaze for a painfully long time. His hands fell away from my shoulders. "Of course I can forgive. I'm just not sure I can pick up where we left off." My heart hollowed. "You... you really don't think so?" "Maybe after school. Eden, I think this... our relationship... complicates things for us both." After school? I wanted to think he was joking, or that he meant at three o'clock when the school day was done. But I knew what he meant. "I'm not sure what good it would do either of us to keep seeing each other, the whole secretive thing..." "It would do me a lot of good." I tried a laugh to lighten the air. "And

you look relieved too, I can see it.” His lips curved up a little. He dragged a hand through his hair. “I was sleepwalking last night.” “You were?” “I told you, I sleepwalk when I’m stressed.” “I feel terrible. I’m sorry. I really am.” He moved to the piano and aimlessly stacked an already neat stack of sheet music. “It’s no biggie.” “When did you wake up? Where were you? I hope you weren’t in any danger.” “No. I was in the garage.” “The garage?” He let out a laugh. “I guess I thought I was going somewhere.” I wanted to think his subconscious mind had been driven to see me, but I didn’t dare say that. We heard rustling on the other side of the door. Then the door moved, as if someone was trying to open it. His eyes flashed to the large clock on the wall. I wiped under my eyes. “Do I look okay?” I asked, afraid mascara might have tracked down my cheeks. When he stole an extra moment to look at me, and I saw glints of admiration light his eyes, like I’d seen before. I felt better than I had in hours. He nodded. “You look beautiful.” I bit my lower lip and smiled. “Thanks.” “Can you pass out the sheet music for me? Please.” He nodded toward the office as he headed to unlock the door. “Sure.”

Brielle and I sat alone at our table in front of Fiasco’s. Behind the safety of her black glasses, Brielle kept an eye out for Matt, even though we both knew he wouldn’t show up.

I sipped my Diet Coke. I wore sunglasses, too, but I wasn’t looking for anyone. I had to step back, give James the time and space he needed. Amazingly enough, the distance didn’t hurt as much as I thought it would. Maybe because I knew it was only temporary. The longer I thought on something I wanted and the further away it seemed, the more I wanted it. I hoped that James felt the same way.

“I saw him, did I tell you?” Brielle said. About four times, but I smiled. “Did you?” She nodded. “He passed right by me in the hall without

even looking at me. And he knew I was there, I know it.” “Maybe you should make yourself scarce for a while.” “I can’t help that we walk by each other between

classes. And we have Econ together.” “You could walk another way.” “But he sits in front of me in class, one row over.” “See if you can sit in front of him. Let him look at

you

for a while.” “You think?” The hope in her voice made me sigh. I doubted anything would bring Matt back; he’d never been hers to begin with. She just didn’t know that. “Two months,” I said, thinking of James, of June and graduation, “and we’re out of here.” “I’m kind of sad.” I kept my straw between my teeth. “Think of everything out there waiting for us.” Her glasses couldn’t disguise the longing in her scan. She wouldn’t want to do anything, go anywhere, as long as she kept looking for Matt. “You coming to the final concert?” I asked. “Yeah, planning on it. I was hoping to ask Matt if he wanted to come along, but...” “Dad’s coming, did I tell you?” She looked at me. “Really? Eden, that’s great.” “Yeah.” Brielle sat back and shook her head with a grin. “What?” I asked. “You always get what you want.” “Yeah. I do.

a Twenty-three James said we could wear any dress we wanted for the concert, as long as it was in spring colors. He instructed the boys to wear pastel shirts. Most of the guys moaned, but the night of the show, they all came looking like Easter eggs.

James warmed us up in the music room, smashing the choral groups together in a sweaty, but nevertheless fun variety of scales. He wore his soft yellow button down shirt, khaki slacks and a pastel plaid tie. I didn’t know they made ties in plaid. I couldn’t believe he had a new jacket. The soft fawn shade flattered the glow of his skin, accentuating the halo of his toffee curls.

I wanted him more than ever. “Everybody,” he quieted us after the warm ups. “This is our last concert for the year. Let’s sing it with all we’ve got.” He let out a sigh and lowered his head for a moment. The quiet emotion silenced everyone. “It’s been great semester.” He looked into our faces. “You guys are a good group of kids, and I want you to know this has been a dream for me, teaching you.” “You going somewhere?” somebody asked. “No, but a lot of my seniors are. I want everybody to know how much I appreciate your support. It’s not easy adjusting to someone new. Thanks.” Some of the boys started to clap and soon the room rocked with applause. I glanced at Leesa. She was, as always, in the front row—beaming. James’ full-room scan finally fell on me and his eyes held mine for a second before he continued smiling at everyone else. The moment seemed to string us together over the raucous noise and

busy bodies all herding out the door, readying for the concert. Mrs. Christian was back as our pianist. She looked like an elegant Madame in her long peach dress and single strand of pearls, her dark hair back in a conservative knot. When I walked by her, she smiled. "Hello, Eden." "Mrs. Christian. I didn't think you'd remember me." "How could I forget such a lovely young woman?" She patted my arm. Concert Choir was supposed to sing first and after I'd taken my place on stage, I strained to see Dad in the audience. With lights blinding me, I couldn't, but knowing he was there lit me from the inside. James held his baton up and gave us that special smile he kept in reserve for performance. Then Mrs. Christian started playing the sweet, romantic melody of My Heart Will Go On. The words tugged my heart. I thought it ironic, the song, the movie, the way that Rose and Jack had fallen for each other even with the obvious differences that seemed insurmountable. Their story reminded me of James and me. As I continued to sing, occasionally James' gaze would light on me and hold. My heart fluttered. For that moment, no matter how brief, I was sure that his eyes were clear and free of the pain I'd brought us both. I hoped that when he saw me, he remembered his first feelings for me and not what had come between us. After we sung, the audience gave us a standing ovation. I saw Dad then, the spotlight skimmed his tall frame about six rows back. He beamed. Concert Choir filed off the risers and waited in the music room with the other groups waiting to be called on stage. With a few weeks left of school, most kids felt free to drop the social boundaries that usually separated us. That included me. I joined a group of kids playing cards, coming face-to-face with some I hadn't said more than 'hey' to. Leesa hovered. There was something she wasn't telling me. I knew she wanted me to ask her about it. I figured it had something to do with James and flowers, and I'd already taken care of that so I didn't care what she'd done. When she couldn't hold it in any longer, she followed me into the bathroom. I stood at the mirror, patting powder on my chin. "You look excited," I finally said. "I am," she gushed. "I got Mr. Christian a Michael Bublé CD to go with yellow roses." "That will be nice." "His mother told me yellow was his favorite color." "Yeah? You talked to his mother?" Her head bobbed like a dashboard toy. "I called her." "Wow. That was... brave." "I know. I called one hundred and twenty six different Christians in the book before I got the right one. And guess what?" She leaned close, her voice dropped to a whisper, "I know where he lives." "Seriously?" She bubbled. "In the Rivera. He lives with his mom, isn't that cute?" "Uh... why is that cute?" "Men that like their mothers are the kind you want to marry,

at least that's what my mom always says." Knowing first hand the kindness between James and his mother, I couldn't disagree. I smiled. "Getting a little ahead of yourself, aren't you?" She shrugged, eyes gleaming. "Might as well dream big." I'd always dreamed big. And my dreams usually came true. I snapped my compact shut and stuck it back in my purse. "Show's almost over. Better go get your roses."

Each choir gave James something different. By the end of the show, his arms were laden with bouquets and brightly wrapped gifts. The way he grinned, the soft glow illuminating from his skin, I could see that he was pleased.

I stood out in the reception area with the rest of the choirs, mingling with parents and friends. Brielle made her way through the laughing, talking crowd. She handed me a pink rose and hugged me.

"You guys were great!" "Thanks." I eased back and sniffed the rose. "How sweet of you. Seriously. You didn't have to do that." Brielle shrugged. "You deserve it." She wrapped around me again, with a longer hug this time. "Thanks for being there for me." "Aw." I patted her back, touched by her display of friendship. "Anytime, baby." "I gotta run. See you tomorrow?" She backed into the crowd. "Yeah, okay. See ya." I sniffed the rose again. I looked for Dad. We found each other in the outdoor common area next to the auditorium. He smiled. I hadn't seen him look so happy in a long time. "You did great, honey." He hugged me. "Did you like it?" "It was great, really was. And that's one of my favorite songs, that Titanic song. What's it called?" "One of your favorite songs and you don't know the name of it? Dad." "Stacey kept track of those things." Did he have to bring her up? I ignored the comment and forgave him, knowing how hard it was to get somebody out of your head. I almost told him it was time to start keeping track on his own, but stopped myself. Then I saw James. He stood surrounded. Graciously, he greeted myriads of parents. I watched as casually as I could, awed that he took the compliments, the incessant gabbing from both students and parents with the sure confidence of a man. Not a boy. But then he was a man. Dad must have followed my nonchalant stare, because he said, "Your singing teacher seems like a talented guy." "He is," I said. "Um, will you excuse me a minute? I have to congratulate him." "Sure, sure. Do you want me to wait so I can drive you home?" "No thanks. I'll catch a ride." He'd hate for me to walk, so I didn't tell him.

Dad brought me in for a side hug. “You know your mom loved to sing. Do you remember?” I didn’t, and was pleased to know. “Yeah?”

0 “Yeah. See you at home, honey.” He kissed the top of my head then he went on his way. I dug into my purse for the large jewelry box and held it behind my back. Then I waited outside the boisterous circle that surrounded him. Finally, there was a break and he was left alone. He looked at me. “Eden.” “Hey. It went so great tonight. Everyone sounded good—even us.” His eyes sparkled. “You guys sounded the best ever tonight.” “You told us to sing our best and we did.” He nodded. I saw his mother come up behind him. Where she had been in the interim I wasn’t sure, but she smiled, nodded at me and touched James’ elbow. “I’ll be in the car, James.” Then she was gone. Some students were still in the music room and their laughter filtered out into the hall. “I have something for you.” I held out the box. His eyes widened. He tried to balance the various bouquets, Leesa’s CD, and other gifts in his hands so that he could take it. We both laughed. “You didn’t have to give me something, Eden.” He opened it. His brows knit tight across his face in confusion. I could tell he was trying not to laugh. So was I. He lifted the two large black cat collars, crusted with silver bells, from the box. “What in the—?” “For when you sleep.” I grinned. “Just slip those on your ankles at night. You make a move to get out of bed, and—dingalingaling—they’ll wake you up.” He let out a hearty laugh, the infectious sound filled the empty hall and echoed through my heart. “That’s... that is so funny.” He leaned over and kissed my cheek without realizing it. After, he glanced around. I did too. Empty hall. Both of us broke into another smile. “Eden, that’s really...” His smile settled and the green in his eyes flickered. “That’s sweet.” “I don’t know how practical it is, but you can’t be out walking around when you’re unconscious. It’s dangerous.” He studied the collars with a smirk. “I will definitely give these things a try.” “You got quite a haul there.” I nodded at the bounty in his arms. “Yeah.” We started toward the music room together. He seemed to be walking as slow as me. “Leesa was so excited about the CD.” “I could tell. Mom told me she called.” “Watch out,” I laughed. “She’s on your trail.” He cringed, but he wore a smile. We stopped at the door of the music room. Some of the kids from Renaissance were still partying. I didn’t go in. “Well, congratulations again.” I backed in the direction of the parking lot. He stood outside the door of the music room, watching me. “Bye, Eden.”

a Twenty-four The weeks I went back to being just another student in James' class were the hardest of my life. Nothing could take away what had happened between us. His whispered words floated in the air every time I looked at him—every time he looked at me. Fragments drifted in my mind of the feel of his body next to me, of how comforted I felt wrapped in his elbow-patched coat. The way he'd opened himself when he'd kissed me.

It took a while for that memory not to bury me. I knew I'd only be able to forgive myself for such a blunder by proving to him and to myself that I could handle this relationship. I was handling it by doing what he'd asked. Waiting.

I often wondered if he ever thought of me. Sometimes I caught him looking at me with something more than how he looked at Leesa or anyone else. I forced myself to ignore it. I wanted to give him enough time to breathe. Think. Wonder. Miss.

My past had taught me that if I pulled back, whatever I wanted came right to my hand. At first, I doubted this would happen with James. He'd taught me that the years between us were thick with significance, layered with nuances that made a difference.

More than anything I wanted to leap forward and catch up with him. I was certain I could, without having to actually live the years. I was certain he thought I could not.

So I stepped back. I was friendly but distant, helpful without being threatening. It was easy, because I set my mind to doing whatever it took to gain his faith again.

Finals stole my mind from James, from wanting him for a few weeks. I poured myself into studying. Dad and I even took a quick trip up to USC to check out living options in L.A. Things between he and I started to loosen up, like a jar that had had its lid screwed on too tight and could breathe again. I listened to my iPod on the drive while Dad talked to the office. By the time the weekend was over and we'd looked at dozens of apartments and dorms, we were able to chat a little on the drive home.

June meant graduation. Saying goodbye. I hoped James was coming to the

ceremony but I was afraid to ask – more of that not being threatening. I sent out hundreds of announcements at Dad's request. One, I tucked into my locker just for James. I slipped one of my senior portraits in it but I couldn't bring myself to give it to him. To him, it might just be another reminder of where I came from, rather than what I was leaving.

Still, the passage of graduation would mean I was free. He was free. I'd been counting on that almost as much as I'd been counting on my diploma as a symbol of my independence.

The last day of school for seniors was spent signing yearbooks. In Concert Choir, kids sat in their chairs, exchanging books. James had his usual classical CD playing. Mozart. His favorite. The melodies made me ache deep down, thinking about how much I would miss him. Miss the class and his music. As I stood in the doorway with my yearbook against my breasts, I knew I couldn't wait much longer.

James stood at the piano, surrounded by kids waiting for him to sign. He wore a light pink button-down shirt, dark tie and khakis. I loved the way his hair curled at the back of his collar.

Engrossed in what he was doing, he didn't see me. I went to the risers and sat. I hadn't been sitting two minutes before a group of whispering girls tentatively approached me.

I smiled. "Hey." One held out her yearbook. "Hey. Would you sign my book, Eden?" I didn't even know her name. Embarrassing. "Sure." I took her book and opened it. Thankfully, her name had already been inscribed by dozens of her friends—Kaylyn. Kaylyn, Keep singing. Listen to classical music. Eden I happened to glance below where I'd signed and saw James' name. Since Kaylyn was chatting with the girls she'd come over with, I quickly read the inscription. Keep singing. Mr. Christian I smiled. Handing back her book, I glanced at James again, still surrounded, still scribbling away. "There you go, Kaylyn." She blushed. "Thanks." "Could you sign mine, too?" Her timid friend asked. "Sure." I signed all five of their books. Memorized all their names and swore in my heart to say hi to them whenever I saw them again.

Leesa stood behind them, like she was at an author book signing. "Leesa, hey." "Hey." She sat next to me. "Will you sign my book?" "Of course." "Want me to sign yours?" "After all the years we've known each other? Absolutely." I read some of the comments Leesa's friends had written, they blared up at me like neon in brightly colored pen. Leesa, Your smile's the best ever. And you're the best ever friend. Darla

Leesa-bird, Let's hang out this summer. Even if you can't go to the beach, let's do something. Whatever you want. Don't forget to call me. 310-2294. And here's my email: prtygirl55@yahoo. com Love you tons, Margo

Leesa, You're the sweetest, nicest friend. Let's not forget each other, k? I hope you're feeling better soon and that things don't

get worse. Keep in touch. I love you, Steph. A pit opened in my stomach. Was Leesa okay? I hadn't heard anything, but then we didn't hang with the same crowd. I signed her book and waited for her to finish mine. It looked like she was writing a novel. I felt bad I hadn't written more.

Then she looked at me with her sunny smile and we exchanged books. "Thanks." She looked like I'd just handed her a million dollars. "Hey, are you okay?" My question startled her. I felt bad that she would find it surprising that I would ask. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks, Eden." I watched her walk to an empty corner, open the book and read. I took a deep breath, stood and crossed to her. She tore her gaze from the words I'd written and her blue eyes met mine. "Are you sure everything is all right?" I pressed. She looked pleased I was asking, and her lips curved up. "I had a blood test that was kind of bad. But I think everything will work out. Thanks, though, for asking." What kind of blood test? What did it mean? Why couldn't I ask Leesa the questions in my head? She was dealing with life and death, and here I was worried about insignificancies like relationships. I realized then that her life experiences had taught her things I wouldn't begin to comprehend for years. "Well, I hope it's all good. Let me see that for a second." I reached for her yearbook and she gladly passed it to me. I scribbled in it. Her blue eyes shot wide. "You want me to call you?" I nodded. "Yeah, that'd be fun." "Okay. Thanks, Eden." Her eyes dove for the rest of what I'd written to her. I crossed back to my seat, feeling happy, but the unknown

stuck with me. What was Leesa's fate? Then Josh wandered over and sat next to me. He had his book on his lap but didn't make any move to offer it. He was watching James. "Bet you never thought you'd like singing," I said. "Who says I like it?" "I've seen the way you smile when you sing. You like it." I elbowed him. The long, taut rope that had nearly strangled us since Matt and I had broken up seemed to loosen a bit. Josh grinned. "He's cool, Mr. C." "Yeah." "You still going to UCSB?" he asked. "Nope. USC. What about you? Going abroad or to school?" He laughed. "Talked my parents into summer in Italy. Not quite six months like my sisters got, but, hey." "They want to keep you out of trouble," I said. "Too late for that." We both laughed. I noticed he looked at Mr. Christian again, so I did too. A few minutes passed. "Last day," I said. "Yeah." There was a tint of longing in his voice he was trying to disguise, but that was impossible. He didn't know how. He was still a boy. Josh slid his book halfway to my lap as an offering.

a I signed Josh's book and by the time I was done reminiscing, the bell rang. Startled, I looked at the clock. I couldn't believe class was over.

James was still at the piano, still signing, still surrounded. I stood and debated what I should do. When the class finally started to empty, I inched closer to him, watching him finish the last book.

He looked up, saw me. "Eden." I still trembled inside whenever he said my name. "Hey." I pressed my yearbook to my breasts in a tight grip.

He glanced at it. "You were busy," I said. "Yeah." He set one hand on the piano, the other hung by his side. Would the very act of having him sign be another reminder of things I was anxious for him to forget? He looked at me expectantly. In my heart, I wanted something tangible of his. I wanted to know what he would write to me. Yet, having him sign seemed like a step back, so I didn't give in. I backed toward the door, my yearbook clutched against my chest. His hand slid from the piano. What could I say? Class was great? Thanks? Words seemed insanely stupid. Nothing was the only appropriate thing I could think of. Eyes locked on his, I backed through the door, holding him in my vision as long as I could.

Dad took graduation day off to be with me. He took me out for breakfast to the plaza and bought me a dozen red roses—one to celebrate every year of school. A tiny jewelry box from Tiffany's held a dainty platinum necklace with a diamond inside of a heart. Always my heart, he wrote in the accompanying note. Knowing he'd picked the pendant out with me in his mind thrilled me. I wrapped my arms around him.

The ceremony was at six, in the outdoor park in the center of school. It was a warm evening, and the sun was low enough that the buildings blocked any glare, leaving behind streams of burnt gold that shone like golden carpets across the grass.

I left Dad and sat with my class, the boys in black caps and gowns, the girls in scarlet. Before finding my seat, I found Brielle. She looked ecstatic, and ran over to me with her arms out.

"Eden!" We hugged each other. "This is it, it's really it." "I know, I know." Her hug was brief because she pulled back and

scanned the crowd—for Matt. I saw him behind her, his tall form easy to spot as he headed our direction. He had yet to put on his hat. He was looking at me.

"So, you get anything?" Brielle asked. She flashed a diamond that hung around her wrist on a delicate gold bracelet. "You like?"

I gasped. "It's gorgeous." Out the corner of my eye, Matt was getting closer. My heart pinched. He was coming over for me, though Brielle would hope it was for her.

I showed her my necklace. "Eden! That's stunning!" "I know, huh." Matt was right behind Brielle now, and I smiled at him. His brown eyes were tentative. "Hey." "Hey." At the sound of his voice, Brielle whirled around, then froze. Matt glanced uncomfortably at her. "Brielle." "Hey, Matt." "I wanted to congratulate you." Matt nodded at me, so we both understood that he was talking to me. I couldn't believe he wasn't including Brielle in the congratulatory comment. She withered.

0 "Thanks." I could have snapped at him for his rudeness, but what could I expect?

He'd never felt anything more for her than friendship. He had a lot to learn about being fair and smart. About being a man.

I hugged him. "Congratulations to you, too," I said. He squeezed me. When I eased back, I turned to Brielle who looked like she'd just witnessed us hooking up rather than hugging. Then Matt reached out and hugged Brielle. I heard her whimper. Then her breath caught, like she was on the verge of tears. Matt's eyes met mine. He looked both embarrassed and afraid of Brielle's reaction, and started patting her back like a parent pats the back of a baby. Brielle started to sob softly against him and his eyes widened. I patted his arm and left the two of them to talk. I searched for my seat, waving at friends, some of which I had come up the ranks with since elementary school. So many faces. I hoped to see James, but my sweeps of the crowd never found him. Because we were seated alphabetically, just like our lockers had been assigned alphabetically, Leesa sat on my left. "Hey," she said. She glowed. She had on mascara and blush. Her hair, still fine and wispy, peeked out from under the awkward cap in cottony fluff. She looked beautiful. "Hey, Leesa." "Can you believe this is it?" "I know. I almost can't. It's perfect." "My whole family is here. Grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins. We're having a huge party after down at Fisherman's Wharf. It's going to be so much fun." "Wow." I nodded. I wished I had a big family like hers. "Sounds great." My grandparents lived too far to come. But they'd both sent me five hundred dollars. No cousins nearby. Aunts and Uncles had sent congratulatory cards with money or gifts. Only Dad sat somewhere in the audience. But that was enough. I soaked up the two hour program, every word like water sucked into a dry sponge. This really was it. The end. It seemed strange that with the flick of my tassel, I was done with a chapter that had taken four years of my life to complete. When the band played Pomp and Circumstance and we filed past our parents, I searched for Dad. Without any idea of where he had gotten a seat, I felt a twinge of disappointment. Then I saw James. He stood at an aisle seat, applauding with the other teachers that were in attendance. I locked my gaze on him and as I got closer, he saw me. My heart pounded. Every nerve fluttered. My eyes never left his face. He radiated, his face an ivory candle surrounded by dark suits and formal dresses. I wanted everything to shift into slow motion so I could say something to him. Stop and hug him. Kiss him. Thank him for opening my eyes and changing my heart. For helping me be a better person because of who he was. But the procession

moved on, and I with it, passing him with the slightest tilt of my head. He clapped loud when I went by, the melodic timbre of his voice piercing my heart. “Congratulations, Eden.”

a Twenty-five I got in my car and headed down the Drive. I’d thought about all of the ways I could prove to James that I’d grown up. I knew he’d forgiven me, I’d seen that in his eyes weeks ago at graduation. But that wasn’t enough.

On the way, I listened to a classical mix. The music kept a smile on my face and hope in my heart, even though I had no idea how he would receive me—if he would receive me. All I knew was that I’d waited long enough.

The white church sat lit up against the purple night sky of August. I could think of no better place to start over. The parking lot had a handful of cars and I searched for his gray Toyota. When I spotted it, I smiled, and pulled my car next to it. Already my mind flashed images of him walking me to my car, maybe even kissing me good night.

I got out and once again, checked to make sure that my short, flowered skirt was hanging the right way, that my soft blouse wasn’t twisted around. I dug into my purse and got out my compact. With a final blot to my chin, I was ready.

Then I glanced at my yearbook on the backseat. I’d brought it just in case. But I didn’t need an excuse to be there, and I really didn’t care if he signed it.

That book was over and done. I walked toward the building with my heart pounding. Visions of the last night we had spent here almost made me turn around, old feelings of guilt suddenly overpowering. But just as powerful was the memory floating in my head of the way he’d once kissed me. Of how he’d called my name at graduation.

I opened the doors to the chapel and heard voices of the youth struggling to sing—something religious. I smiled. Then I heard his soothing voice. “Come on, guys. You can do better than that. Let’s start over. Try it again from the beginning.”

I stood in the back. The faint smell of dust and oiled wood filled my senses. James’

back was toward me. He'd ditched his elbow patched jacket, it hung over the first bench like an old friend. Waiting. The denim shirt he wore was one of my favorites—the color made his eyes so blue. And he had the sleeves rolled up. I wondered if he'd loosened his tie yet. My entrance drew the attention of the group of kids, and their eyes shifted from James to me. I took a deep breath.

James turned around and his gaze locked with mine. Would he smile? Was he glad I was there? Ask me to stay? Questions tripped through my mind along with flashes of him reaching out to me. Embracing me. I was getting way ahead of myself. But I could dream, couldn't I?

a About the author: JM Warwick enjoys writing YA fiction from the mountain-view office of her Utah home. She has six children, five cats and a Doberman/Dane dog named Scout.

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