

Cheers for the
SCREWBALL SERIES

Chosen as The National Writing for
Children Center's Summer YA 2008 Pick

"Sports, romance, rivalry, mystery, and a strong first-person narrative make for a fast-paced story that readers of all ages will enjoy."

*--Suzanne Lieurance, author, founder, and director of
The National Writing for Children Center*

"SCREWBALL is a heartbreaking realistic look at first love, loss, and what it takes to finally move on. If you've ever been dumped or found yourself juggling multiple priorities, you will relate to Ashley and enjoy SCREWBALL."

--Cyn Balog, author of FAIRY TALE

"Keri Mikulski hit one out of the park with Screwball. This sporty books covers all the bases for a great young-adult read. Follow spunky Ashley Clarke and enjoy this home run novel. By the book's end, you'll be running to the nearest [softball] diamond."

--Jessica Burkhart, author of the CANTERWOOD CREST SERIES

“I loved the Jersey Shore feel of the story, having grown up summers in Barnegat Light. And there’s a real innocence to Ashley Clarke that I liked.”

--Weezie Mackey, author of THROWING LIKE A GIRL

“SCREWBALL is a very fun and cute summer read. Ashley’s character was witty and hilarious. You don’t even have to understand anything about softball to get into Ashley’s story. Definitely a very enjoyable book.”

--Book Muncher, YA Book Reviewer

“SCREWBALL will appeal to both athletes and non-sports players alike. Ashley is tough, determined, and yet appropriately girly at the same time, making her someone that high school girls especially can relate to. This is one book ideal for the reluctant reader who lives and breathes any sort of sport. You don’t need to go to the big game to experience all that fun and excitement – just grab some peanuts and this fast-paced and entertaining read!”

--The Compulsive Reader, YA Book Reviewer

“SCREWBALL was an un-put-downable read all in one day book.”

--Beth Revis, High School English Teacher

“I really enjoyed this book and I don’t even play sports. I was able to relate to Ashley and feel what she felt.”

--Word for Teens, YA Book Reviewer

Change Up

AN ASHLEY CLARKE NOVEL

SCREWBALL SERIES

BOOK TWO

BY: KERI MIKULSKI

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To:
Justin Michael

Lies.

At first, they're like a drizzle, one here and one there. But, after a while, the drizzle turns into a steady rain. The rain gets harder and harder until it becomes a downpour. Then, all the lies accumulate like a flood, break whatever dam or secret is holding them, and one day, they all come charging toward you like a wave. A wave of change.

Thursday, June 24th

Last Day of School

“Want some?” my best friend, Lizzy, holds out a squeeze bottle.

“I’m good,” I say. “Game tomorrow.”

Lizzy rolls her eyes and takes a sip.

Why am I here? I know it’s Sunray High School’s end of school ritual. Hit the beach after the last bell. But, watching Lizzy hang out with her new friends sucks.

“Excuse me, Jockette,” Mark, Lizzy’s ex-boyfriend, says. He snatches the squeeze bottle, flips it upside down, and pours the remaining red liquid into his big mouth.

He’s such a douche bag.

Mark grabs Lizzy by the waist and takes off toward the ocean, tossing her into a wave. She emerges out of the water, adjusts her barely there, black with gold accents bikini top and

giggles. I stay back, instead, opting to even out my softball farmer's tan on a towel. There's no way I'm shedding my tank and cut-off jean shorts in front of the entire school this early in the season when my skin looks like a cup of swirled vanilla and caramel ice cream.

Every year Lizzy searches Sunray for new friends to replace me. Sort of like a new summer crew to hang out with until softball is over. This year she's hanging with two of the biggest Sunray partiers ever, Jello shot Jessica and Nicotine addict Nicole. Jessica and Nicole join Mark and Lizzy in the water.

"Come on, Ash," Lizzy yells before a wave tosses her off balance, and she hops to stay upright.

I stay put.

After a few more minutes of watching the 'gang' hang out in the water and drink from squeeze bottles, I'm seriously bored and wasting time. So, I roll up my towel and toss it into my tote. It's not like Sunray High School will even notice when jock Ashley Clarke leaves the beach.

On my way home, I swear I spot my boyfriend Jake in a car. When I sneak a peek inside Mario's Pizza Shop, I swear Jake is sitting at a booth munching on pizza. Then while passing Lizzy's house, Jake speeds by on a dirt bike. I've got a serious case of Jake on the brain.

Ever since he was forced to move, Jake flips in and out of town faster than Lizzy switches relationships. Sometimes he

catches a ride from a teammate from his new school, Shady Maple High School; sometimes he rides with his aunt, and sometimes he even takes the bus. I never know when I'll spot him.

I grab my vibrating phone out of my back pocket.

"Where the hell are you?" Lizzy screeches.

"Uh. Home," I say, sitting on my porch step.

"I turned around and you were, like, gone. We're having the best time. Is JC in town or were you freaked out because Andrew is here?" Lizzy blows air.

"No, it's not Andrew," I say rolling my eyes. Please. "Andrew is an ass. I don't have feelings for that big-ego loser anymore. That was so last winter."

Lizzy giggles. "So it's JC. I knew it. I thought Mom and Dad forbid you to see him after his mom OD'd and the dirt bike spring punishment thing. What, are you sneaking around with him?"

For a second, I think back to the horrible day when Jake's brother, John, found their Mother dead in the bathroom with a needle stuck in her arm. "Whatever, Liz. I have to sneak around until Mom and Dad give him a chance."

"Uh huh. Sure," she says and puffs again.

Lizzy doesn't like Jake for some reason. I have no idea why, except Jake used to have somewhat of a player rep. I guess no one is good enough for her BFF and vice versa.

"Why don't you come back to the beach? Or when JC decides not to show up, give me a call."

“Whatever,” I say. “Oh and Liz.”

“What?”

“Stop smoking,” I say, , hating cancer sticks since Gram’s bout with lung cancer a few years ago.

“Okay Mom.”



Later, I’m four hours into an America’s Next Top Model marathon, logged onto FaceBook, and waiting to hear the tap on my window. Not waiting like a pathetic chick who needs a boyfriend or anything, but waiting because I miss him.

Long distance sucks.

I know I made a pact with myself after my first boyfriend, Andrew, broke my heart and stopmed on it, that I would never obsess over another guy again. And technically I’m not. I mean, I’m not giving up myself or sports. Ever again.

Tap. Tap. Finally.

“Jake!” I squeak, but not too loud. I’m sure Mom and Dad think that I haven’t seen Jake since April when he moved to Shady Maple, an hour and a half away, with his aunt and uncle after his mom died. I’ve failed to inform them that Jake’s aunt and uncle own a trailer home in a vacation campground ten minutes away.

They don’t get it. Perfect Andrew with the perfect parents is the a-hole. Not Jake.

I push open my bedroom window slowly, containing my excitement, even though I want to slam it open. I won’t dare risk it.

Jake smiles that gentle dimple-showing smile. That smile makes me melt, and I'd do anything for it.

Well not anything. Yet.

“How long are you here?” I ask while maneuvering the old Elmo step stool my little brother, Max, used for potty training from underneath my bed and toward the window.

“Till tomorrow night. I still have a couple days left of school.”

“Well, you would be out already if you didn't...” I stop myself before I say it. I mean, it's not his fault he had to move. It's not his fault his mom took too many drugs and left him and his brother John with nothing, so I don't dare finish that sentence.

I step on the stool and hoist myself up. Then, I wiggle on the window ledge and jump over the azalea bush. When I land, Jake immediately takes me into his arms, and I breathe in the combination of Pert Plus shampoo, Tide from his Shady Maple wrestling tee, sweat, and surf. I shiver.

We don't dare kiss in front of the house. Instead, we opt to walk a couple blocks down the street toward the beach.

“So how'd you get here this time?” I ask, but before he can answer, I notice a huge black and purple smudge underneath his right eye.

“Oh my God, Jake, what happened?”

He moves his big hand in front of his eye. “Oh, this? It's nothing.”

“Did you get in a fight or something?”

He ignores my question, pulls me down in the dunes, and starts to kiss my neck. Even though my legs are covered in goose bumps, I force myself to stop.

Jake locks my eyes and moves my hair away. I turn away.

“Jake, what happened? I can’t think of anything else right now except your black eye.”

“Come on, Ashley. We hardly see each other. It’s not a big deal.” He spins a piece of my hair around his finger.

I’m not letting him off the hook. One thing I’ve learned from the whole first boyfriend mess last year is that if something is bothering me, I’m going to bring it up and get it out there. Not let it simmer.

I scoot backwards, digging my heels in the sand. Jake begins to crawl toward me, attempting to nibble my neck again.

“Come on Jake. How did you get the black eye?” I ask.

He lets out a deep breath. “What’s the big deal, Ashley? Really, it has nothing to do with us.”

I begin to chew my nail. Are my parents right about him?

“But, it does have to do with us,” I take a deep breath.

Jake drags his index finger through the sand. He looks up at me with his chocolate eyes.

“I can’t.” He says, turning around and staring at the crashing waves. He strips off his t-shirt and sprints toward the surf.

The beach is black and Jake disappears into the inky water.

I don't even react to his extreme madness anymore. This is normal Jake. Every time we meet up at night, he always loves to surf and swim in the pitch dark.

I'm on number forty-seven of my mental list of the hundred ways Jake Cole could have received the black eye when Jake returns and retrieves his white wrestling tee. Drips of cool ocean water mist my legs.

"I'm going to wrestling camp at the end of July," he announces, drying off his face. His bicep flexes showing off his black tribal tattoo. The one I helped him pick out a few months ago.

"That's great, Jake. Look, I just don't understand why you can't tell me about your eye. I don't mean to be a pest, but I'm worried about you." I say, sounding like a mom.

Jake sits next to me with his elbows resting on his bent knees. "I know, Ash. But really, if it were serious, I would tell you." He pauses. "I walked into a door, okay. Can we stop talking about my stupid eye?"

A door? He's right about one thing, I am wasting precious make-out time talking about an eye.

Hormones, one.

Brain, zero.

"Where you going to camp?" I say, realizing that I'll be away at Nationals, if we qualify, at the end of July, too.

"York, PA. At the college I think. Coach thinks I can go even further in States this year."

“York. That’s where Nationals are.” I shout, excited that our schedules mesh. With Andrew nothing ever meshed.

Jake smiles, then stares at the surf while he fills me in on wrestling camp. I’m not listening to a word. It’s something about the way he’s passionately talking about wrestling, the fact that we’re totally meant to be, his full lips, muscles, and chiseled face. I can’t help myself anymore. So I jump him.

“Finally,” he says in between kisses.

He tastes like salt.

A faint light gleams on the dark sand. Crap.

“Jake.” I whisper.

“What?”

“My dad. I think my dad’s here.” I say, jumping up.

“What’s the big deal?”

“No, you don’t understand,” I say, taking off across the sand toward the point where the New Jersey bay side of the island, Cape Town, meets the beach side, Sunray. When I reach the sail boats, I duck in between two. Jake’s right behind me.

“Why are you hiding?”

I failed to fill Jake in on the fact that my parents don’t want me to see him ever again after my Dad’s cop buddy caught me on the back of Jake’s so-called illegal dirt bike a few days before the overdose. Then the sight of my Cape Town Cop dad seeing Jake’s mom lying on his bathroom floor with a needle stuck in her arm didn’t help. “I’m punished.” I lie.

“Again?” Jake smiles. “What did you do this time? Still riding on the back of illegal dirt bikes?”

Perfect opportunity for a get back. “I don’t want to talk about it.” I smooth a piece of hair that escaped from my ponytail behind my ear and turn my head to the side, looking up at the stars that speckle the sky.

“I see how it is,” Jake smiles and gently tackles me, twisting me up in a wrestling move. I attempt to escape, but he always counters. Now I’m a pretzel. One of the many perks of dating a wrestler. The constant wrestling matches. My stomach hurts from laughing. Jake flattens my back against the sand and pecks me on the lips.

“Do you do that to all the guys you wrestle?” I ask.

“Only you,” he says, his face suspended above mine. I hope he doesn’t see the zit on my chin. I didn’t bother to cover it, figuring the beach would be pitch black and he wouldn’t see it. But, the stupid moon must have peeked out from behind a cloud, and it’s shining like a flashlight on my red, ginormous, pulsing pimple.

“Ha, ha, very funny.”

Jake releases me. I dust the sand off my legs and peer over the side of the boat. The beach is so serene, except for the whoosh of the surf. Literally, the coast is clear. No flashlights. The beach is deserted.

“Race you back to the dunes,” I say.

“Ash, I could beat you running backwards.”

I roll my eyes and lean forward. “Go,” I shout, taking off down the beach. Jake beats me by ten feet and dives into the dunes showering me with sand. I follow and fall into his arms. If only my parents would give him a chance and see how awesome he is. Then I wouldn’t have to lie, sneak, and lead this double life.

A burning smell overtakes the fresh salt scent.

“What’s that?” I ask.

Jake jumps up, looks around, and heads toward a small glow near the dunes.

“That shit will kill you” I hear Jake shout, as he snatches fat, stubby, glowing cigarettes from a gang of freshman. He stubs them out on the beach. “Get out of here.”

I tense up watching the scene.

The group of young kids scatter down the beach.

“What are you doing?” I ask Jake as he walks back to our spot and sits down next to me.

“That’s how it all starts, Ash. Plus, I can’t stand that smell.” He waves the air with his hand.

After he’s done freaking out, I lay my head on his chest, and we stare at the sky. He’s seriously losing it, I think, as my head bobs with his breath. But, after everything he’s been through with his mom’s death and drugs, I get it. As much as someone from a normal, caring two-parent family can.

“I’m not going to sit on the beach while some kids ruin their life.”

I attempt to change the subject. “Do you ever wonder if there is another Earth?” I ask.

“Nope.” he says staring at the sky.

“What do you think of when you stare at the stars?”

“You, me, wrestling, surfing, and sometimes, I don’t know.”

His voice falters.

A shiver runs up my spine. I roll to my stomach, lean over Jake, and kiss him over and over.

When we take an air break, Jake says, “My aunt and uncle want to meet you.”

“Yeah?” I sit up smiling wide and happy.

“How about Sunday after your tournament?” he asks.

Without thinking, I say, “Sure.” If Jake said, “Will you clean sun-cooked, used toilets at that moment, I probably would have said yes to that too.

“One more thing,” Jake digs into his pocket and brings out a small black fuzzy box.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“It’s for you.” He hands it to me.

I open it and staring back at me is a gorgeous gold softball charm hanging from a slim chain.

“I knew you’d like it.” He takes the box and gingerly maneuvers the chain around my neck, latching it in the back.

The charm hangs right below the nook of my neck. It’s not too short, not too long. Perfect. Like Jake and me.

“Thanks so much.” I wrap my arms around him. Jake plays with the charm, and then looks up at me and grins.

“Like it?”

“I love it.” I’m so ecstatic, so I jump Jake’s bones. Again.

My cell phone digs into my thigh and interrupts our amazing post-necklace make out.

Looking at the clock, my stomach drops. It’s almost two, and I have a softball tournament in Maryland tomorrow morning.

“I’m sorry, Jake, but I have to go.” I love softball, and I love spending time with Jake. But, right now, softball is first.

“No worries.” He kisses me on the cheek.

After we make plans to meet up Sunday, I’m home by two, which by Jake standards is pretty early. Most nights when I’m hanging out with him, I never make it home until right before dawn. Tonight, we could pull apart because we knew we’d spend Sunday together.

Now I just have to figure out how to get this past my parents.

Friday, June 25th

“I have bad news.” The dawn sun streams into my room, and I shield my face. I wipe the sleep out of my eyes, and Mom comes into focus. It’s a new summer, which means another new haircut courtesy of *US Weekly*. This summer, it’s a sleek, dark chestnut bob. Her flip-flops make a faint clicking sound on the carpet as she scurries around my room. Mom’s a secretary at Sunray Elementary School, so she’s home all day with Max and me. Every day. All Summer.

‘Bad news?’ Oh my God, they know about Jake.

Mom’s standing in front of the window. Her foot is next to the Elmo stool. I’m screwed.

“Gram needs us this weekend, Boo. I’m sorry. So, Max, Daddy, and I are going to drive to Philly,” my mom looks at her flip-flops. “We called Kate’s dad and he is going to pick you up

this morning. It looks like you're on your own this weekend. The hotel room we booked is still in our name, next to Kate's parents' room."

I sit up. "What's wrong with Gram?" Visions of my curly blond Gram fill my brain.

"She's fine. She's getting some tests done. Don't worry. It's not anything to worry about," my mom says, picking up and folding discarded clothes from my floor. "I couldn't imagine being so far away in Maryland at the tournament while she's getting the tests. So, we're going to stay with her this weekend."

"Tests?"

"It's no big deal. It's all routine. Not anything to do with her lung cancer from a few years ago."

"Oh," I sink back on my pillow.

"By the way, Ashley, I wanted to tell you how proud Dad and I are of you lately. You've shown a major commitment to softball. And I know it was hard cutting out boys for a while, but you won't regret it. Boys are around forever. Softball is a once in a lifetime opportunity."

She rustles my hair like I'm two. Then, she straightens the framed picture of me and softball superstar Jennie Masterson on her way out the door.

Urgh. If only she knew.

This sucks. Anything Gram has to get done sucks, routine or not. Gram is awesome. When Max and I stay with her, she lets

us do whatever we want, she always takes me shopping, and lends me her juicy romance novels. She even messages me on FaceBook and has her own page.

Gram is a writer. In fact, back a zillion years ago, Gram wrote romance novels under the pen name, Daisy Spruce. About ten years ago, Gram got lung cancer from smoking, and she hasn't written one since. Reads a bunch, still attends Romance Conferences and everything, but doesn't write.

On the other hand, a softball tournament without my parents? Sweet.

I throw my comforter off and stretch. Reaching over to my nightstand, I open the drawer and take my necklace from the top of the pile of cards Jake gave me last month, latch it around my neck, and tuck it in under my t-shirt. Finally, I plop my suitcase on the bed and start packing for my parent-free weekend. I stick my iPod headphones in my ears, scroll through my songs, and press play. Not only am I going to be completely orphaned this weekend, but I'm also going to hang out with Jake on Sunday. Uninhibited and excited, I bop across my room to the beat of my fave psyche-me-up-for-softball tune. Well, minus Gram. I stop dancing, grab my cell phone, find Gram and press send.

“Gram!” I shout into the phone.

“Boo. How are you?” she asks.

“Forget about me. I'm fine. What's going on? Mom said you're getting tests done or something.” I balance the phone

between my shoulder and chin while I gather my hair into a ponytail.

“Oh, it’s all routine. It’s nothing.”

“Ash. Kate’s dad’s here,” my mom shouts.

“Gram, I gotta go.”

“Okay, Sweets. Make sure you call Pop and me after your games. And don’t forget to take a book with you.”

“Love you, Gram.”

“Love you too, Boo. No worries.”

After I throw on a tank and shorts, I grab my orange Crush duffle bag and suitcase. For some reason, I’m not totally convinced about everything being routine.



Kate’s family and I pull into the Maryland softball complex bright and early. They are so much more laid back compared to my lame-o parents. Most of the Clarke car ride consists of Max farting or snorting some sort of nasty sugar candy up his nose, trying to gross me out, while we both sit on bath towels. Dad’s a real freak about keeping his white leather interior spotless. After the game, we have to stop at the car wash so Dad can vacuum every last crumb and piece of softball dirt out of the convertible.

On the flip side, Kate’s parents are completely normal. Kate and I listened to our iPods and chatted, while Kate’s parents hung out in the front seat of their navy blue SUV, which is a normal parent car, not a cherry-red convertible like my dad’s.

Kate and I retrieve our bags from the back of the O'Donnell's SUV and walk together to the fields. The blazing hot sun reflects the newly dyed yellow highlights in Christy Mayer's nasty rat nest sprouting out of her orange Crush visor.

Christy is seriously one of the meanest, mean-girl teammates, I've ever met. For no reason at all, she despises me. I mean, yeah, I'm the other pitcher besides her on our ASA team, the Crush, and Lizzy was dating Christy's boyfriend Mark or something last year. But, Christy's hate runs deep. She hates me like I walked into her house and murdered her entire family.

We all live on an island off the southern tip of New Jersey. The island is divided into two towns, Cape Town and Sunray Beach. Christy lives in Cape Town, the bayside of the island. I live on the ocean side, Sunray Beach. Christy attends Cape Catholic High School, which is the private school. Kate, Lizzy, and I go to the public school, Sunray High School.

"Hi, Christy," I say, like I always say and always get ignored. "Hi, Stephanie. Hi, Amy," I greet the crew of girls that hang on Christy Mayer's every spoken word like she's Jesus or something. That's another story. Amy, supposedly messed around with my ex-boyfriend, Andrew Sinclair, a couple of months ago, and Christy made sure to rub it in. But whatever, I'm so over Andrew.

I fiddle with the charm hanging around my neck.

"Hey, Ash," Stephanie and Amy, who attend Cape Catholic with Christy, say in unison. Christy looks up and stays mum.

Kate grabs a yellow ball from the ball bucket, and we line up next to Christy, Amy, and Stephanie to warm up.

“Hi, Kate,” Christy says and smiles.

“Loser,” I say under my breath. I made a promise to myself. No way. She’s not getting under my skin this season. A few months ago, while surfing MySpace, I found out Christy doesn’t even know her parents or something and lives with her Grandmother. Her Grandmother has, like, zero money, so if Christy wants to go to college, she has to earn a scholarship. She even works at the local grocery store to pay for ASA. Every time I feel that yucky feeling, like I want to snatch her orange rat’s nest and punch her in the face, I try to think about her horrible life. I guess it’s not her fault she’s a bitch.

Kate tosses one over my head, and I turn around to retrieve it. As I bend down pick up the ball, I’m face to face with a skinny, tall girl with bright blond hair pulled into a short ponytail on top of her head and wearing our uniform.

“Hi. I’m assuming, since our uniforms match and everything, this must be the Crush. Where’s our dugout?” She’s beaming with a wide smile filled with perfect white straight teeth.

“Yup.”

“Hi, I’m Rachel.”

“Hey, I’m Ashley. Our dugout is over there.” I point.

“What position do you play?”

Rachel switches her bag to her other shoulder, “Pitcher.”

My luck. Barbie is not only beautiful, but she's a frigging pitcher just like me. Which means we're now carrying three pitchers on the team. Joy.

Rachel begins to trek toward our dugout. Then, I remember what it's like to be the newbie. "Wait. When you're ready, you can have a catch with Kate and me."

She stops and turns around. "Thanks. Oh, and I love your charm." She beams.

I glance down at the charm and a warm fuzzy feeling fills my stomach just thinking of Jake. I roll the softball charm in between my middle finger and thumb. "Thanks." Now I'm the one beaming.

Coach D calls us together. "Girls, I want everyone to welcome Rachel Harris to the Crush. Rachel tried out for us two days ago, and we asked her to join us this weekend. Rachel is an amazing pitcher. The assistant coaches and I were very impressed with both her movement and speed."

Christy glares at Rachel. The rest of the team smiles and welcomes her. Christy will never change.



Rachel is phenomenal. Just my luck. I should hate her, but she's unhatable. Too nice. Rachel starts the first game and pitches a flawless one hitter. I warm the bench for five straight innings, because that's all it takes for Rachel to shut down the other team and for us to earn ten runs. Am I angry? No. I mean, that's ASA,

especially when you play for an elite team like the Crush. Everyone on the team is one recruit or one guest player away from losing playing time.

“Nice game,” I say to Rachel, who is ear-to-ear smiles. I’m not Christy. I’m not going to be all mean and nasty because Rachel is way better than me. Like Christy was nasty to me last year when I walked on the team and started. Plus, that stuff comes back to bite you.

When I was eight, there was this girl on my team who was an amazing pitcher and had way more friends than me. I was seriously jealous and convinced everyone she liked this boy that still pooped his pants occasionally. It totally blew up in my face when everyone found out I made it up. My team was pissed at me, my friends were pissed at me, the pooper was pissed at me, and I still wasn’t as good as her. Lesson learned. Even though she moved away a year later, I never did anything like that again.

“Thanks,” she says and bounces to the bench. She stuffs her glove into her bat bag. At the same time, Christy shoves past both of us, bumping into Rachel.

“Sorry,” Christy mumbles while Amy and Stephanie giggle and follow her like shadows out of the dugout. Christy’s nasty initiation begins.

Rachel dramatically tumbles. “No problem, Christy,” she pretends to fall into the bench, turns toward me, and beams. “So, Ashley, are you starting the next game? I bet you are.”

Between Rachel's bright blond hair and infectious smile, she illuminates the entire team like a full moon on the beach.

"I hope so," I swing my bag over my shoulder. I look over at the stands for my parents, but then I remember they're in Philly with Gram. For a second, I miss rehashing the game with Dad. But, I have a hotel room all to myself. The second is gone.

Rachel and I grab a pretzel and Gatorade at the snack stand, while Rachel fills me in on her life.

"Where do you go to school?" I ask.

"Mainland Shore Regional. I've been pitching since I was seven and love it." She adjusts her sparkly headband. "Did Brittany Harris pitch against your high school team this year? She's my older sis."

Hello? No wonder Coach D picked up Rachel to join our team. Her sister is like one of the top five pitchers in the entire state. We played Mainland this year and they killed us. Brittany has an amazing rise ball that no one can touch. Rumor has it she might be the first South Jersey girl to be recruited to go to a major college out west. I heard UCLA or Arizona. That's, like, unheard of in Jersey.

"Yeah, she's amazing," I sit down on the grass.

"She's a nerd," Rachel sits beside me. "So, tell me your story." She holds out an invisible microphone and giggles.

"I go to Sunray Beach High School with Kate." I fill her in on Jake, Andrew, Christy, and Lizzy.

“Wow, your life is so much more exciting than mine. You know, I’ve never had, like, a real boyfriend? I can pitch a 60 mile-per-hour fastball, but I can’t snag a boyfriend.” Rachel breaks apart her pretzel and rolls her eyes.

“It’s much easier just to concentrate on one thing. This whole thing with Jake just happened. And last year, I was a wreck. I actually gave up basketball to hang out with my boyfriend, Andrew.”

“What?” Rachel pops a piece of pretzel into her mouth. “Do you have a pic of Jake?”

I dig through my bag for my cell phone.

Her eyes widen. “That’s him? He looks like someone I know.” She pauses and snatches my cell to get a closer look. “Duh. It can’t be. That guy doesn’t live around here anymore.”

She hands me back my phone, and I study the close-up of Jake and me smiling on the beach. The night before the Memorial Day tournament, when Jake surprised me at my window after he moved, we held out the cell phone at arms lengths to get a picture right before I went home. It took us like ten times to actually get both of us in the picture.

I close the phone and finish devouring the pretzel knot, the part I always save for last, and stand up.

“Want to get a hot dog?” Rachel asks.



Rachel and I mesh and are inseparable the entire day. Not

only is Rachel cool to hang out with, but, like me, she also understands pitching, loves softball, is hated by Christy Meyer, and is a closet novel lover. I usually keep the reading thing a side secret. In fact, no one knows except Gram because she lends me her books. And yeah, I bring a novel to school, but I only sneak reads after I'm done with schoolwork or after tests. Seriously, no one knows. It's not like I'm embarrassed or anything, but people assume since I'm a total jock that I don't read.

Christy gets the start for the second game, which sucks, but doesn't surprise me, since I know Coach D is saving me for tomorrow. During the Memorial Day tournament, I threw my first no-hitter. Everything came together. My screwball was breaking, my fastball was popping, and even my rise ball was rising. It was the best day ever.

But, Christy sucks today. She walks three batters in the first two innings and four girls on the Maryland Mystics hit her fastball like it's slow pitch. We're down 1-0, when Coach D turns around from her squat at the dugout opening.

"Ashley, grab Rachel and warm up," she orders.

"Told you." Rachel snatches a ball in her abnormally large hand for such a skinny body, stands up, and skips to a spot behind the dugout.

I adjust my orange shorts and matching jersey and join her.

Within five minutes, Coach D is yelling for me from the mound.

“Go get um, Champ,” Rachel pats me on the back as I run by her.

My stomach twists, and I look around for a bathroom. This is not good. I seriously did not get a long enough warm up.

And sure enough, I walk the first girl. My fastball isn't popping at all. In between batters, I try to sling the ball into my glove, warming up my arm. It's weird, I don't know if it's mental or me, but if I can't get in a good twenty minute warm-up before a game, I'm screwed.

Batter two digs in.

Kate yells from shortstop, “Watch the short game.”

Our brand new first baseman, Brittany, sneaks toward the batter's box. I wind up and release. The batter squares to bunt. She drops a perfect bunt down the third base line. Amy fields it and fires to second.

“Out,” the umpire yells.

I jog right past the dugout, signaling to Rachel to join me for more of a warm-up.

We battle back and win the game 3-2, thanks to Stephanie who drives in two runs during the bottom of the sixth inning. After a proper warm-up, I strike out five, walk one, and give up zero hits in five innings.

I swear for a second, while Coach D is reciting her post-game speech in left field, I witness Christy wiping a tear. Could it be? Karma. I love karma.

“I’m very proud of this team. We have everything it takes to win this tournament. I want everyone to meet for dinner and then hit the sack. We have the early game tomorrow, and it’s all or nothing. Single elimination. If we win three in a row tomorrow, we earn a bid to the Nationals. Our goal. We want to show the Eastern ASA just how good South Jersey softball is.”

Nationals. Sweet. We get up psyched, gather together, and shout, “Team.”

“So, are you staying with Kate?” Rachel asks.

“Actually, Kate, Emily, and I are staying by ourselves.”

“Seriously? Cause I totally don’t know where I’m staying tonight. Coach D said I could stay with her. But, I’m not sure about all that.”

“Stay with us.” I say.

Rachel is all smiles.

Just then, my cell phone vibrates in my bag.

I follow Rachel toward Kate’s SUV.

“Hi, Ashley. How’d the team do?” my dad says sounding like he’s right next to me instead of two hundred miles away.

“Okay. We won the first two games, and I pitched pretty well for six innings during the second. How’s Gram?”

“Good. Throwing the rise ball?”

I roll my eyes. “Kind of. So, what’s wrong with her?”

“She’s fine, Ash, don’t worry. We just wanted to check in.”

“Can I talk to Mom?” My dad is freakishly quiet. Usually,

he'll talk softball for hours. Crossing my fingers, I pray that he didn't find out about Jake and me. You never know with all his cop buddy spies rooming the island.

"Uh, Mom is out right now. We'll call you later. And remember, Ashley, don't let anyone in the room and be careful tonight."

Okay, normal Dad is back. "I'm fine, Dad. Kate, Emily, and this new girl Rachel are staying with me."

"Great. Are Rachel's parents there?"

"Not yet." Another lie. After all this lying, I'm having a hard time keeping everything straight. I think I need to start writing this stuff down. I mean, why did I lie about Rachel's parents?



Rachel, Kate, Emily, and I arrive at the Holiday Inn behind Amy's mom's van, which carries Christy, Amy, and Stephanie.

While we grab our stuff, I feel so lucky to be with my jock friends where I can totally be myself. Softball is my home. My escape. And to think, last year I wanted to give it all up for Andrew? Please.

Kate's mom, whose blond hair and freckles match Kate's, hands me a credit card with a black key stamped on the front.

"We'll be right next-door if you need anything. Remember girls, don't let anyone in your hotel room, and after the team dinner, I don't want you going anywhere. Understand?"

We look at each other, smile, and nod.

“See you in an hour.”

I swipe the key, and Emily pushes open the heavy hotel door. Two double beds, a small television, and a table with chairs fill the tiny room. Red and white crab curtains match the crab bedspread. A giant yellow crab hangs in between the beds and a small bathroom is off to the right past the beds decorated in crabs.

“Got crabs?” Emily asks, smiling as she plops her suitcase on the bed.

“Very funny,” I say.

“Crabs?” Rachel looks confused.

After simultaneously hitting the shower, Kate, Rachel, Emily, and I get ready for dinner. Emily is ready in two minutes, but Kate, Rachel, and I spend some time on our hair and makeup.



“How’s Jake doing?”

I apply my last dust of the bronzer Lizzy introduced me to last weekend and turn toward Kate.

“Awesome,” I say.

“Love that name.” Rachel says while brushing out her short light-blond bob upside down.

Kate giggles and turns around to face the mirror and apply pink lip-gloss. “It is a great name.”

I fill Kate in on the beach, the move, and Jake’s wrestling.

Rachel stops curling her eyelashes and looks at me like we just yelled surprise at her birthday party.

“Wait a sec. Jake wrestles? What’s Jake’s last name?”

“Uh, Cole.”

“Oh,” she turns back toward the bathroom mirror.

“Why?” How does she know him?

“No reason.” She continues curling.

Kate stops and looks at me through the mirror reflection.

“Do you know him or something?” I ask turning my softball charm in between my fingers.

“Um. I knew a boy named Jake Cole, but I don’t think it’s the same guy. Same name, but this Jake Cole lived at a campground on the mainland or something.”

My stomach drops. Jake’s aunt and uncle’s summer place is at a mainland campground. “When did you know Jake Cole?” I silently pray, hoping she’ll say, like, at church or summer camp when they were in second grade or something. But I swear, Jake probably did stuff with girls all the way back in second grade. I let out a deep breath.

“Really it’s nothing,” she says, planting another wide grin on her face. Earlier, I loved the fact that she’s all bubbly and cute, but right now, it’s seriously irritating me.

“Ready?” Kate asks attempting to break the awkwardness.

My stomach is turning as fast as my brain. Could it be? Could my new bff have hooked up with my boyfriend?

“I’ll meet you downstairs.” I step into the bathroom, shut the door with a little more force than I planned on, plop on the

side of the tub, and call Lizzy.

“Ashley, you don’t even know how this girl Rachel knows Jake. You’re totally overreacting,” Lizzy says after I finish the blow by blow. “I mean, they could know each other from like first grade or something.”

“Yeah, Liz, but you should have seen the look on her face. She totally hooked up with Jake at some point.”

“Okay, worst-case scenario is she hooked up with Jake. And even if she did, who the hell cares? If you worry about what Jake did before you, you will be like friendless. I mean that boy got around.”

Lizzy blows slowly into the phone.

“Are you still smoking?”

“You need to get off my back, Ms. Perfect sneaking around with JC. Now, let me tell you about the hot-ass party you missed last night.”

Recently, Liz has totally entered into this major party scene with Jessica and Nicole. Me, I don’t really do the party thing. Don’t have time. I mean, it’s hard enough to keep my sports schedule intact with a boyfriend and friends, but if I partied like those girls, I wouldn’t be able to stand up, let alone pitch.

After, Lizzy finishes telling me about the random guys she kissed, how much beer she drank, and who left with whom, Kate interrupts.

“You coming?”

“Yeah, I’ll be right there.”

“Gotta go, Liz.”

“Good luck, and remember, Ash, I told you JC was a dirt ball.”

“Stop smoking.”

“No, I mean it, good luck.”

Now what? What do I say to Rachel? I have to find an angle to ask Rachel what happened between her and Jake without sounding pathetic, insecure, mean, or annoying, which seems impossible at this point.

As I ride the elevator with Kate, I mentally prepare my plan. Did you have sex with Jake? Way too blunt. What happened between you and Jake? Way too vague. So, you knew Jake? Still too fuzzy. I need details.

The whole team is gathered in front of the entrance of the hotel. It’s so weird to see everyone without uniforms, sliders, and visors.

Christy looks especially skanky in a short ass-cheek-showing jean skirt and tight white t-shirt. Her hair is ratty and straight. I really never noticed how long it is because she always has it crazy and up in a high ponytail.

On the other hand, Rachel looks like a young Cameron Diaz with her giant infectious grin, long limbs, short blond bob, and perfect teeth.

“Ready, Freddy?” Rachel asks.

“Did you hook up with Jake or something?” Why did I just say that? Word vomit. I immediately want to suck back the words.

Her blue eyes explode. The background chatter ceases.

“Um. Seriously, Ashley, it was no big deal. Just a summer thing or something.” Rachel stares at her yellow flip-flops.

“What do you mean a summer thing?” I keep pressing even though I know I should back off. I mean, I could have waited until we got back to the room, instead of causing this whole scene. But, all I’m thinking about is Rachel and Jake playing tonsil hockey. How am I supposed to eat when the images are making me sick?

“Last summer. Look, Ashley, it was nothing. I’m sorry.” A crowd of teammates gathers around us.

I catch a glance at Christy, whose arms are crossed over her flat chest, mouth wide with a grin, as she checks out the scene. The rest of the team is staring, mouths open.

I’m treating Rachel the same way Christy treated me last year that caused me to contemplate quitting. What the hell am I doing? I’m acting like a complete jerk.

After a minute of silence between us, I say, “Look, Rachel. It’s no big deal. I was with someone else last summer too. I’m sorry I acted like this.” Now, I’m staring at my own black flip-flops not liking myself very much.

Finally, Kate interrupts the awkwardness. “You guys ready?”

No, I want to bolt. I mean, am I that insecure? Here I

am in Maryland with my team, hanging out and playing softball. Everything I love. Instead of having fun, I'm worried about Rachel and Jake, like Rachel knew me or something before she hooked up with Jake.

Emily, Kate, and Rachel load into the SUV again. I want to bolt upstairs and eat dinner alone in my room playing sick.

But then I remember a tournament last year, when I sat in my hotel room all night watching Lifetime and eating junk while Andrew went to homecoming with Megan. Sitting by myself sure isn't going to cure anything, so I step up into the van. Note to self: grow some serious self-esteem.



I'm shoveling French fries into my mouth still feeling like a chump, hardly talking, when Christy gets that familiar gleam in her eye. She's been pretty quiet so far today. I mean, it has to be killing her that she sucks lately, and Rachel and I are both getting better starts than her.

"So, Rachel, where're you from?" I stare at Christy, while Amy and Stephanie relax back in their chairs.

"I live in Mainland." Rachel smiles and sips Sprite from her straw.

"Oh, Mom and Dad can't afford the island?"

Rachel's nose scrunches up. She bends the top of her blue twisty straw. "What are you talking about?"

Christy brings her elbows up on the table and leans to-

ward Rachel. “Well, you know, it’s kind of expensive to live in Cape Town or Sunray Beach, so I figured your parents must be kind of just getting by.”

“What?” Rachel starts giggling and snorts, which is contagious and causes one teammate at a time to join her. Pretty soon, the whole table is laughing, except for Christy. Man, Rachel is a mean girl pro. I totally would have folded to Christy, especially if it was my first day on the team. It’s like she’s so positive, she deflects all negativity.

Christy’s pale blue eyes, settle on me, when everyone stops laughing.

“What’s up, Ashley? You’re looking a little down today. That was quite a show you put on earlier. Is everything kosher now?” Christy starts spinning strands of rat nest hair around her forefinger.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you know, it can’t be easy to watch Rachel walk on the team, take your spot, and find out she was with your boyfriend.”

“What are you talking about?” I break out in giggles, but they sound nervous, not at all like contagious laughter, and everyone kind of stares at me.

“Rachel, did you date Jake?”

Rachel still playing with the top of her straw, stops, takes a sip, and looks around. “So what’s everyone doing tonight?”

Kate answers, “I think we should do something memorable. I mean, we only have a couple games left together before some of us, like me, move on to 18U.”

Christy grasps her faux Coach bag and tugs Amy’s t-shirt. She stomps to the bathroom with Amy and Stephanie at her heels.

Even though Rachel probably swapped more spit with Jake than I have at this moment, she’s growing on me.



After dinner, we return to our parentless room and sit at the table. Emily pulls out an Adidas tote from her suitcase.

“Okay, girls, you ready?” she sets a pack of cards, red plastic cups, and two bottles filled with dark purple liquid on the table.

“Are you kidding me?” Kate says. “Do you realize if we get caught with that crap, we’re screwed and probably will get kicked off the team?”

“Like anyone is going to check on us with you here,” Emily rolls her eyes and unscrews the cap.

Rachel gets up and pulls on the door, checking the lock.

I eye the bottles. Not at all what I expected tonight. My stomach is filled with butterflies like I’m about to pitch a big game. A mix of excitement, yet fear. I never drank before. Unless you count the time Lizzy and I mixed red wine with coke last summer during a sleepover at her house. But, we, like, drank a glass and fell asleep watching “Juno” for the millionth time.

“Ever drink, Rachel?” Emily asks.

“No thanks,” she says while shuffling the cards.

“Em, are you crazy?” Kate adds.

“Relax, Kate. What about you, Ashley?”

I knew it was only a matter of time before the question eventually made its way around the table to me. “We do have games tomorrow. But...” I look at Kate, then Rachel as they both stare at me. “I mean, I’ve always wanted to try.” I look at the label and read, ‘Flavored Malt Cooler.’

“I knew Ashley would be game.” Emily smiles and pours the thick purple liquid into two cups.

Emily lifts the glass up to her mouth and downs it in one gulp. She’s pouring another drink, while I’m still sniffing mine.

Kate is staring at me. “Okay, what the hell?” Kate grabs a cup, and Emily pours a tiny bit for Kate. Rachel keeps shuffling.

I lift the glass up to my lips. The strong smell makes my eyes water. Is this going to taste like medicine because it sure smells like it? And what if it screws with my game? I mean, softball is my life. But, one cup?

Finally, I tip a bit into my mouth. At first, it tastes kind of sweet like juice, but then it warms my body and leaves me with a burning sensation after I swallow it.

I shake my head and place the cup on the table.

“Nasty?” Rachel asks giggling.

“How’d you know?” I ask.

She shrugs her shoulders and begins to hand out the cards.

Emily throws back five more cups of cooler before Kate and I finish our first cup. Emily offers me more, but I'm done. I just wanted a sip to try it, not get all wasted the night before a game.

"I'm good," I say.

"Me too," adds Kate.

The air conditioner makes a loud click as it turns on. We all jump in our seats, and quickly turn our heads toward the door.

I hold my hand to my heart and compose myself.

"You guys need to relax. The door is locked," Emily says, then holds up her cup. "Cheers, softball buds."

Kate holds up her cell. "Rachel and Ashley smile."

We both pose as Kate takes the pic.

"Em." Emily's eyes are shining and Kate takes her pic as she reaches for her cup, spilling the cooler all over the carpet.

Rachel and I jump up, and I grab a white towel.

The towel stains purple when I rub the carpet. "How are we going to explain this?" I hold the towel up to Rachel and Kate.

"Grape juice?" Kate laughs.

"A purple period?" Emily slurs.

"That's nasty."

I continue to scrub.

"You're tanked, Em." Kate says.

“Am not.” Emily attempts to stand up and topples over.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Kate helps Emily back to her seat.

After a few Rachel-winning rummy rounds, we’re pooped and Emily’s green, so we decide to call it a night.

“I think I’m going to puke,” Emily bolts to the bathroom.

Kate follows her and grabs her cell phone. “We’ve got to get this pic. I don’t think she’ll remember any of this tomorrow.”

Rachel breaks out in hysterics while I follow Kate into the bathroom. Emily spews purple liquid mixed with gobs of French fries into the toilet.

“I’ll never drink again,” Emily swears over the sink, while Rachel and I clean her up.

“The porcelain prayer,” Rachel says and laughs. “You’re not the first.”

“I love you guys. Did I ever tell you how much I love you guys?” Emily repeats while we finish tucking her in.

Kate, Rachel, and I sneak out the door and down the hallway. We quickly toss a plastic bag filled with the bottles, cups, and purple stained towels into the trashcan next to the ice machine. We look down the hallway and tiptoe back to the room.

Then, we squeeze onto one bed, each of us avoiding sleeping with the purple puker. Kate flicks on reruns of “Parental Control” and we talk until three in the morning.

Softball and friends. Total bliss.

Saturday, June 26th

The next morning, Emily's up before all of us, gobbling down room service breakfast at the same table where she met her wine cooler fate less than twelve hours ago. The nasty scrambled egg smell wakes me up from an amazing Brady Quinn date dream.

I pull the covers over my head to block the egg smell and realize that my parents never called me last night. That is so unlike them. I mean, I'm totally by myself, and they didn't even call to check if I was raped, murdered, or left for dead.

Rachel fessed up last night that she is a cheerleader. I mean, I knew Kate did it freshman year, but I've never met a serious fast-pitch player before who is into cheerleading. And she does, like, both, fall and winter.

At school, you either play sports, or you cheer. No one usu-

ally crosses lines. It's cool that Rachel's so sure of herself. I mean, she's not shy about reading, liking school, cheering, or staying clear of drinking. She doesn't worry about fitting a certain mold or care what people think.

"How can you eat that shit, Emily? It's so nasty." I say.

"I know, Em. It's disgusting." Kate chimes in.

"Good morning, sunshines," Emily says. Ketchup stains the corners of her mouth.

"Gross, wipe your mouth, Em." Kate says.

Emily's wet brown hair is tied up on the top of her head, and she's already dressed in her Crush uniform.

"Come on girls, Kate's parents are leaving in ten minutes. They already stopped by earlier this morning while all you bums were still sleeping." Emily says and opens the curtains.

The bright sunshine fills the room. Kate and I shield our eyes. Rachel keeps snoring.



Later, after the first game and our first win of the day, we're getting ready to switch dugouts for the semifinal game, when Christy walks up to Kate, Rachel, and me.

"Nice pictures, ladies." Christy says, grinning and grasping Kate's cell phone in her hand. "Busy last night?" She holds out the phone. "I'm sure Coach D would love to see two of her pitchers, her catcher, and shortstop, drinking and puking the night before big games."

“Give me that,” Kate says, snatching the cell phone out of Christy’s hand.

“Don’t worry Katherine, your secret’s safe with me.” Christy says, winking and swinging her tote over her shoulder.

“What the hell were you thinking giving Christy your phone?” I ask fuming and fumbling while balancing on one foot to remove my cleats.

“She asked if she could use my phone because hers was dead. She’s not going to say anything.”

“Yeah right. She totally hates my guts.” I say, wiggling my feet into my slides.

Rachel slips her ‘just threw five no-hit innings’ pitching arm into her jacket to keep it warm. She’s unbelievable.

Kate flips open her cell phone.

“You need to delete those pics, Kate.” I say.

“I will.” She shuts off her phone.

Of course, I spot Christy heading toward the snack stand. It takes a lot of food to maintain her big ass. She’s whispering with Amy and Stephanie like always. Christy’s cronies eyes dart from Christy to me to Kate to Rachel, and then over toward Emily, who’s oblivious downing a Gatorade still looking a little green after catching five innings.

“We’re dead,” I say.

“Calm down, Ash. She’s not going to say anything. Anyway, didn’t she like host ten parties or something this spring.”

“And winter.” How can I forget the winter party? When Lizzy caught Christy and Mark together, and Andrew didn’t even acknowledge my existence while I sat pathetically outside on the step.

How could I be so stupid?

“What’s Christy’s problem anyway?” Rachel asks.

“Long story. I’ll save it for the ride home.”

“If it makes you feel better her hair looks like a slurpy.”

Rachel adds, pointing to Christy’s auburn and yellow hair.

Kate finishes deleting, closes her phone, and tosses it into her orange Nike drawstring bag.

My stomach is still raw. I mean, this is a perfect opportunity for Christy to sink me. And I know for a fact she’ll take full advantage of it.

As I follow Kate and Rachel to the snack stand, my phone vibrates. I pull it out from my rolled up shorts and answer it.

“Hey, Ash. How’s the tournament?”

Jake? He never calls my cell.

I fill Jake in on the standings and our new pitcher, purposely mentioning Rachel’s first and last name a few times to see what type of reaction I get.

Nothing.

“Where are you calling from?” I ask because Jake doesn’t own a cell. He thinks that if you want to talk to someone, you should do it face to face.

“Aunt Val’s cell.”

“What did you do last night?”

“Hung out with the family.”

“Where?”

“At the campground.” Jake pauses. “Ash. You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m just wondering.” And jealous. And insecure. And anxious because Christy is going to ruin my life. And I wish I didn’t feel this way. But I do.

“You still coming over tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” I chin-hug the phone and smile.

He’s silent.

“Miss you.” Why did I say that? “Ah, I mean, I’m doing really well, and we’re hanging out with lots of guys who love softball chicks.”

“Good luck, Ash. Me too.”

After I flip my phone closed, I swear Rachel turns her head away from me like she was listening the whole time.

“What are you eating?” I ask Rachel.

“Huh?” She says with a faraway look in her eye, but I know she heard me.

“What are you eating?” I repeat.

“Hot dog, fries, and probably some nachos.”

“It’s like ten a.m.”

“We’ve been up for five hours already. It’s lunch time.” She says, walking toward the stands.

Rachel's grinning again, but for some reason it doesn't exactly seem real right now. And why didn't Jake tell me he knew Rachel? Strange.

After a quick lunch, Coach informs us that Christy earned the semifinal start. The second game of the day flies by as Christy mows down their offense, and anything the other team hit is sucked up by our vacuum defense. Behind the solid hitting of Kate, Emily, and Rachel, who DP'd, yes, Rachel is an amazing hitter too. We win by five.

Hopefully, Christy's in a better mood since the win and forgets about the pics.



"Rachel, Ashley warm up together, you're both pitching in the final. We need to use everything we have to win this game." Coach D says while scribbling on her lineup card.

Nice. Not only am I pitching in the final, but I also actually get to warm up with a normal, fun pitcher, not a crazy witch.

Rachel and I begin our wrist snaps.

"So are you hooking up with anyone right now?" I ask Rachel, digging for info.

"No, not really," she answers still smiling. "Are you nervous about today?"

"A little," I say racking my brain for good questions.

"I am," she adds. "I always have to hit the Mr. Bob before a big game. It's like some sort of reaction I have to pitching."

I change the subject back to guys. “If you could date whomever you want, who would it be?”

She stops throwing and pauses. “No one.”

“Not even a crush?”

“The only crush I’m concentrating on is the team. Get it?”

Rachel chuckles.

I give up.

After finishing our warm-up, Coach brings us together.

“Okay, girls. We’re on the verge of accomplishing something huge here. If we win this game, we’re off to Nationals. Ashley, you’re starting, but Rachel, I want you warming up between innings, ready to go in at any time. Okay, Cape Town, let’s get them.”

“Crush!” We shout and take our positions. I dig out the mound making it familiar and trying to block out the Jake and Rachel stuff that’s clouding my brain. Last year, I learned that if I don’t stop thinking about things non-softball, I’m going to suck.

I need a ritual, like Jennie Finch. She turns around and looks at a spot in center field and says some prayer or something.

I stare at Emily’s glove, nod at her sign, wind up, and fire. Crack! The ball sails out to left field. Stephanie makes the easy catch. One out. That should have never happened. The Maryland Mudcat’s first batter was scouted as a slapper and she just slammed my pitch to left field like I soft-tossed it to her. I really need to get it together.

The second batter digs in, and I receive the sign from Emily. Rise ball. After spending so much time this spring working on my rise ball, I'm starting to feel comfortable with it. The rise ball is the pitch that I need to nail, so when colleges start looking at me, I'll have all my pitches ready to show.

I wind up again and fire. The ball spins and rises right in time. The batter swings and misses.

"Strike."

Emily signals a change-up.

I wind up and fire. The batter is miles ahead of it.

"Strike."

With two strikes on the batter, I'm feeling good. Emily signals an outside fastball. I wind up and fire. Chalk poofs from Emily's glove.

"Strike three." The umpire punches the air.

Whew. Now I'm in the zone and feeling softball escape at its finest. Jake and Rachel who?

Three innings later, we're up by two runs.

"Rachel, you're going in this inning."

Rachel eases off her windbreaker and looks at me out of the corner of her eye. "Go get them," I say.

Her wide grin reemerges.

It's hard watching Rachel take the mound, after I shut down the Mudcats through three innings, but it's not about me. It's about our team goal, making it to Nationals.

“Ashley, stay warm, you might be going back in.”

Yeah right. Rachel has shut down just about every batter she’s faced this weekend.

The team takes the field, and Christy and I are left alone in the dugout. Christy slides across the bench toward me.

“Hey, Ash.”

I’m silent, waiting for her cut.

“Look, I know we don’t talk much, but the whole Mark and Lizzy thing is over. Obviously, Lizzy learned that Mark and I are meant to be.”

I roll my eyes. Is she for real?

“Anyway, we need to move on and plus, I have a favor to ask you.”

A favor? She can’t be serious.

“What, Christy?” I ask mainly out of curiosity.

“Get me a copy of Kate’s pictures, and I promise I’ll keep you out of it.”

“No way.”

“Okay, then sink with the rest of them.” She crosses her arms, smirks, and stares at me like she’s totally enjoying this.

“Why are you doing this?” Christy says nothing.

This girl is horrible. She gives me two choices. Either rat out my friends, give up evidence, and keep myself safe and out of trouble, or sit back and watch her destroy us for her own benefit.

“You’re only doing this because you’re jealous of Rachel

and know you'll never be as good as her."

"Not quite. Rachel is cutting into my pitching time. Which means, she's also cutting into yours. So, by offering you the chance to stay out of it, I'm doing you a favor."

"Whatever."

Christy slides back to the opposite end of the bench. "I might just have them already."

"You're lying," I snap back.

She keeps her eyes on Rachel with this smug expression plastered all over her Ronald McDonald face.

What a loser.

As we're celebrating our 2 – 0 win, Rachel's MVP, and her second no-hitter of the tournament at home plate, Christy makes eye contact with me while I'm hugging Rachel. She winks.

Softball is my life, my obsession, my complete escape. But, between Christy's crap and watching Rachel take the mound, dominate, and drop Jake news this weekend, the Crush is seriously suffocating me right now.



Kate's parents drop me off at nine o'clock to an empty house. With all the Christy, Rachel and Jake drama it suddenly occurs to me that I never heard from my dad or mom since yesterday. Strange.

I fumble for my keys and unlock the front door. The alarm sounds, so I enter in the code and look at the white board by the

phone for a message. Nothing. I pick up my cell and call my dad.

“Ashley, how’d you do today?” my dad asks without saying hello.

“We won, Dad. What’s going on? Why aren’t you and Mom home yet?” I say, biting my nail.

“We’re on our way, sweetheart. Are you home?” my dad asks, sounding freakishly calm.

“I just got home.”

“Okay, we’ll be home in about twenty minutes. Stay tight. Mom and I want to talk to you.”

My stomach tumbles, and I feel like I’m going to hurl the two soft taco surpresmes with extra cheese I devoured during the car ride home. They know. They know I’ve been sneaking around with Jake.

“Okay, no problem.” I say. My voice cracks.

After my dad hangs up, I toss the phone back into my bag and rush into my room. I grab Windex, paper towels, pull out the vacuum, and start cleaning like someone who’s suffering from a severe case of OCD. Maybe, if my parents arrive home to a sparkling clean house, they won’t be quick to punish me for, like, ever.

I begin spraying, wiping, and vacuuming until I hear the car pull up. Then, I sit on the couch and roll my charm, leaving the evidence of the Windex, vacuum, and paper towels out. My charm. I quickly unlatch it and shove it into the pocket of my cut-off jeans.

Dad pushes open the door. His eyes are blood shot. Mom is behind him, and she looks even worse, exhausted and pink. Max hangs his head and doesn't barrel in like a screaming lunatic.

"Hi, Boo," my mom says, wrapping her arms around me.

"Hi, Mom. Dad, what's going on?"

"Gram is going to heaven soon," Max says, turning down the hallway toward his room. Dad follows him.

"What is Max talking about?"

"Boo, sit down," my mom says.

I plop on the cushion, and my mom squats next to me.

"How's Gram?" I swallow a lump remembering her bout with lung cancer and how she beat it a few years ago. I hope it's not cancer again.

"Oh, Gram's fine." My mom looks me in the eye. I notice a few more lines around her almond eyes. I've always been jealous of mom's eye shape. She looks a lot like Demi Moore. "Gram's having a plastic surgery on Monday and we're going up to see her and help her out when she's done."

"What?"

My mom rolls her eyes. I know, a woman of her advanced age and every thing, but she's determined to get this face and breast lift.

"Why did Max say she's going to heaven soon?"

"Oh, you know Max," my mom swats the air. "He was with us when Gram met with the doctor on Friday. And the doctor was

going over all the risks.”

“Plastic surgery?”

“Yes, I know. She loves “Doctor 90210” and is convinced she’ll be happy if she gets this done. Who am I to stop her?”

I grin, so thankful, it’s not anything serious like cancer again or something. But at the same time, I wonder if my parents are lying to me like before.

When Gram had lung cancer, Mom and Dad tried to protect me and told me she had a virus. It wasn’t until a few days later after I overheard Mom on the phone that I found out Gram really had lung cancer, not a cold. Plastic surgery? Yeah, right.

“Are you sure you’re not lying to protect me again?” I ask staring at my mom.

“What?” my mom fiddles with her ring. “No, Boo. You’re in high school now. We would tell you if Gram had lung cancer.” She straightens a pillow on the couch. “How was your tournament?”

I guess I’ll have to wait to see Gram to find out. I fill my mom in on Rachel and softball, leaving out the hotel room, the purple puker, and of course, the pics.

Sunday, June 27th

“Boo, are you going to sleep all morning?” Max is manually opening my eyelids while my mom is spinning the blind handle. The bright sun illuminates my bedroom.

“Max, stop,” I swat at him and turn over, pulling my comforter up to my chin.

“Are you sick or depressed or something? Why do you need so much sleep? You were in bed by ten last night and it’s almost noon.” My mom is rearranging my softball pillows and practically making my bed before I even have a chance to get out of it.

“Mom, I’m fine,” I say, pulling the comforter over my head.

“Are you coming to the beach with us?”

Today’s Sunday. I almost forgot. Jake.

Today is the day I get to meet his aunt and uncle.

“I made plans with my friends today.”

I hate lying to my mom. But, what do I say? Uh, Mom, I’m hanging out at the campground with Jake, his aunt, and uncle? She’d freak.

Now, Max is on my bed, hanging off my neck.

“Max get the eff off,” I say.

“That’s a dollar.” My mom picks up the dirty clothes off the floor.

“Mom, come on. The word, eff doesn’t count, it’s not like I said the real word.”

“Close enough.”

I know there is no use arguing with her. My parents are freaking out about my mouth. Now, every time I curse, I have to deposit money in this stupid piggy bank my mom made. It sits on the kitchen counter, decorated and named Ashley’s Potty Mouth Piggy Bank. So lame.

“Is Dad working?”

“Yes, until seven.”

I glance at my softball digital alarm clock. Jake and I agreed to meet in front of Lizzy’s at one-thirty.

A carefully constructed plan on my part. Dad is patrolling the neighborhood and he’s on day shift today, I’ll have to be ultra careful not to get caught. But, it’s June, so Dad will be pretty busy with the tourists, plus he always takes his lunch break at one-thirty when I’m due to meet Jake at Lizzy’s. He’s super anal and predict-

able. If my calculations are correct, I'll be back on the island by 4:30, when Dad is working traffic by the bridge.

Max jumps down from the edge of my bed. My mom outstretches her bronze arm toward him. "Come on, buddy, Ashley's a bum today, let's pack a lunch and go."

Max and Mom barrel out of my room, stopping a second to snatch a crumbled up dollar bill off my desk.



After a shower, three outfit changes, makeup to cover my zit, and a dose of sunless tanning lotion to help even out my tan, I walk to Lizzy's house. When she spots me, she tosses a cigarette behind a bush. Lizzy took up the nasty-ass habit this spring after her boyfriend Mark cheated on her with Christy.

"What the hell, Liz? Yuck" I say, holding my nose. I make it a point to get on Lizzy whenever I see her smoking. I hate smoking. It's so pointless. Gram's lung cancer was a little gift from her forty years of smoking.

"Whatever, Mom. Don't get on me when you're the one sneaking around with JC." She straightens her tank. "When is lover boy picking you up, anyway? And where are you two going, in case Mr. or Mrs. Cleaver ask?"

Lizzy's like a sister. We've been best buds forever. In fact, I don't remember a time when Lizzy wasn't around. We both are so comfortable with each other, we can basically say anything.

"You're not going to the beach, are you?" I ask.

Lizzy finger-combs her sun-highlighted honey-colored hair with her French manicured nails. “Not today. I need a break from the sun. Anyway, Jessica and Nicole are going to stop by.” She hugs her deep brown legs to her chest.

Every summer things get a bit tense between Liz and me. But, like every summer, the drama blows over after Lizzy finds a new crew to hang out with, AKA Nicole and Jessica, while I’m traveling with softball. When soccer starts again in mid-August, we’re back hanging out like I was never gone.

A soft sputtering sound grows louder and louder until Jake stops in front of Lizzy’s house on his brand new moped.

“Hey,” Jake removes his helmet, smoothing his buzz cut. His black eye faded overnight to a purple, green smudge.

Lizzy turns around and retreats back into her house. “See you later, Ash,” she says, then shuts the door.

“Nice bike,” I say as I grab the extra helmet off the back of the moped. Before I slide it on my head, I check my watch. One-thirty, perfect. I fumble with the strap beneath my chin. “Where’d you get it?”

“I bought it yesterday,” Jake says, helping me with the strap.

“How’d you pay for it?”

“I’m working.”

“Where?”

“Odd jobs for people. And anyway, it’s tagged and legal.”

He runs his hand over the chrome handlebars.

Maybe once Dad finds out how nice and amazing Jake is, he'll let me on this legal moped.

"Like the necklace," he grins showing off his cute dimples.

"Thanks," I feel myself blush as I roll the charm.

Jake and I settle onto the seat and take off. Every time I'm on a bike, I love it. Something about the salt air hitting my skin while gliding down the street on the back of Jake's bike. Total Bliss. I could see myself aging into one of those biker chicks, hanging on the back of a Harley with a half-tee and muffin top.

We cross the bridge as I stare at the passing water, sea grass, and squatter houses. I wonder, how does Jake get his money? I mean, working is one thing, but he's earning enough cash for a moped and my necklace. The moped alone had to cost over a thousand dollars. Odd jobs?

Once on the mainland, Jake passes the county zoo. He makes a right down a long, winding, tree-lined road and turns into a farm that's split in two by an asphalt street. Jake slows down as we drive down a skinny road for a couple of minutes. When the road ends, it opens up into a miniature town.

A closed gate separates the mini vacation resort town from the street. Jake digs into the back pocket of his black board shorts and pulls out a card with Mainland Farm Campground stamped on the front. He swipes it like a credit card and the gate opens.

After Jake moved to Shady Maple, I was devastated. I thought I would never see him again. But, when he told me his aunt and uncle owned a trailer in a campground, this little village wasn't at all what I expected.

I've never seen anything like this tiny community before. Four little kids are playing on a wooden swing set, while two women chat as they lazily sway on two of the swings.

A man with a baseball cap and a shirt that says 'Maintenance' maneuvers a long silver pole in the giant in-ground pool next to the swing set. Six older kids hangout by what looks like a log cabin. In front of the store is a wooden bench with the words, Liars Bench written across it in white paint.

I have some major mixed feelings about meeting Jake's aunt and uncle. Could they be druggies like his mom? Are they normal? Grief-stricken?

Jake cuts the engine and walks the bike toward a mini house around the corner from the entrance. When Jake mentioned that his aunt and uncle lived in a trailer, I pictured a metal motor home or something like on the cover of the book When Zachary Beaver Came to Town that we read in seventh grade. But this house is adorable. It's pastel blue with white shutters and a beautiful white porch. White and gray rocks fill the tiny front yard and are lined with rope and pylons giving it a cute beachy look.

Jake walks his bike to the side of the house.

"Ashley Clarke!"

A woman with long black hair barrels out the front door. As soon as I'm off the bike, she wraps me up in a big bear hug.

"I've heard so much about you."

Are they on crack, too? "Uh, hi," I say.

Jake's aunt's eyes are identical to the brown color of Jake's, and she shares a spooky resemblance to Jake's mom. But, she's much more normal looking. Jake's mom was a cross between a witch and a stripper, while Jake's aunt looks like an older version of Audrina from "The Hills".

"Aunt Val, you're scaring her," Jake says grinning.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sweetie." She takes a small step backwards. "We've been so excited to meet you. All Jake talks about is Ashley, Ashley, Ashley. And you're just as cute in person as you are in the photo Jake keeps in his room."

Photo? I look over at Jake whose face is light pink. He looks down at his bike and fiddles with the helmets.

"Fred, she's here. Ashley Clarke is here."

A man a bit taller than Jake opens the front door of the house. "Hi, Ashley. It's nice to meet you."

He smiles wide and walks across the rocks. He also embraces me. It's virtually impossible to feel uncomfortable around Jake's aunt and uncle. They're like the nicest and warmest people ever.

"Nice to meet you, too," I say. Jake's uncle's hug is so strong he kind of picks me up.

“Come on in, we’ll show you around,” Jake’s aunt clutches my hand, and Jake trails behind us. We pass a giant rusty metal bowl filled with charred wood. I’ve never participated in a campfire before. Dad never, ever lets us play with any kind of fire, let alone a campfire. He says they’re trouble, and campfires are one of the leading cause of preventable fires and injuries.

I’m awestruck by how adorable the place is. I mean, it’s spotless compared to the horrible shack that Jake shared with his mom and brother. It must be an absolute shock to live with normal people in a normal house after living a crazy life with a drug-addicted mother.

I’m staring at the blue-carpeted loft with pale cabinets, a TV, and a sleeping bag spread out on the floor. I picture Jake peacefully sleeping when he meets us upstairs.

“Come on, Ash, let me show you around the campground.”

Jake takes my hand.

“We’re cooking Val burgers for dinner, so don’t stay out too late,” Uncle Fred says. “You gotta try one, Ashley.”

“Val burgers?”

“It’s a long story, I’ll tell you while we walk,” Jake pulls me outside.

“I know they’re a bit much, but they mean well.”

“Jake, they’re awesome.”

The sun is strong and it’s a bit steamier at the campground

than it is on the island in June. But, it's always hotter on the mainland. I inch up my cut-off shorts hoping to snag some tan time.

“So, what are Val burgers?”

“My aunt makes really small burgers. Uncle Fred calls them Val burgers because he's never seen burgers so small, except maybe at White Castle.”

“How do you like living with them? They seem nice.”

“It's all good,” he says stretching his arms to the sky.

“So, where are you taking me?”

“Around. I don't want Aunt Val and Uncle Fred sucking up all our time.”

He spins me around in front of him and kisses my lips. I never ever get bored of kissing Jake. I used to wonder if people who are together forever and ever get bored of each other. Now, I know it's impossible to get bored of someone like Jake. Every time I kiss him, I want to kiss him more and more and more.

“Did you wear your bathing suit?”

“I didn't know we were going swimming.” I look down at my pink ribbed tank, cutoffs, and flip-flops. Duh. I should have totally worn my bathing suit. I mean, it's summer.

“Do you mind if I jump in to cool off?” Jake opens the gate for me. He sheds his t-shirt, tosses it on a lounge chair, and dives into the pool. I sit down on the sun-cooked scorching chair.

“Hey, hottie,” I hear from across the pool. A blonde girl lounges on the second step of the shallow end. Her boobs float

like two beach balls on the surface of the water.

I so don't want to care, but I do. Am I insecure? No, but I don't get why girls do this to other girls. It's obvious I'm right here and with Jake. This happened last year with Andrew all the time, and every time, I freaked out.

Breathe, Ash. Breathe.

I look around for a hot guy to flirt with or one who will notice me. The pool is hot guy-less. All the hot guys are surfing, not at a campground pool.

Jake emerges and shakes his head, faces my way and smiles.

"Jake," the blonde girl yells again bobbing on a pink noodle. A tramp stamp graces her lower back.

Figures.

I swear, every girl with boobs bigger than mine, which is like the entire island, mainland, and country, including some boys, want my boyfriend. I cross my arms, cover my Miracle Bra enhanced tank, and let out a deep breath.

She doggie-paddles Jake's way, keeping her blonde ponytail above water, which can't be hard with her two flotation devices. I lean closer to listen. Jake smiles and swims my way. Blondie bobs at the rope in the middle of the pool.

"What, are you ignoring me?" she asks as she holds on to the rope.

Jake acts like he doesn't hear her, but I know he does. Her big mouth is as loud as her ridiculous multicolored hag tag.

“You certainly weren’t ignoring me last summer, Jake. Who’s the new girl?” Jake swims to the side and pulls himself out of the water. I hand him his t-shirt, and his damp body glistens.

“Thanks.”

“Who’s that?” I ask, trying to act cool.

“No one.”

I can’t let up. “No, really, who is it?”

He grabs me hand and walks me toward the playground. I stop by the swings.

“Ash, what’s wrong?” My insides are exploding.

“First the black eye, then a girl on my softball team, now this girl. What do you mean, what’s wrong? I was honest about Andrew with you, and you don’t let me in, Jake. I mean, what am I supposed to think. For all I know, you could have gotten in a fight with a dude last night over your other girlfriend, that girl in the pool.”

Jake’s eyes crinkle. He’s giggling.

“What’s so funny?”

“You watch way too much television, Ashley. I did not get in a fight over dumbass over there, and she’s not my girlfriend.”

“Then who is that skank? I demand to know now.” I cross my arms again.

“Just some girl that I messed around with last summer.”

“Messed around with how?”

“Now you want details?”

“Yes.”

“Ashley, I’m with you, now. We can’t do this with every single girl I’ve ever been with and every guy you’ve been with.”

“You know who I’ve been with. I’ve told you everything, but I don’t know anything about you. Then, I meet some girl at softball that has a history with you or something,” I say, taking a deep breath. “Lizzy keeps saying you’re a dirtball, and if you don’t tell me what you’ve done, what am I supposed to think.”

“What do you want to know?”

“I want to know every girl you’ve ever kissed and if you’ve ever done more. And what happened with Rachel.”

Jake walks me over to the swings, sits down, and pats his lap. As I sit on Jake’s wet lap, he tells me about all the girls he can remember. It takes almost an hour for Jake to list all the girls he’s ever hooked up with. He’s covered more ground in his short life so far than Kate does at shortstop.

“One more quick question and I promise, this is it.”

Jake rolls his eyes and leans back. “What?”

“I want to know about Rachel? And why did you leave her out.”

Jake breaks out in a huge grin. “Rachel who?”

“You know what Rachel.” I say, jabbing him in the side of his ribs with my index finger.

He laughs and looks at me. His eyes crinkle, and I stare at his dimples.

“How the hell do you know Rachel?”

“She’s on my softball team.”

He’s laughing harder now. “Figures.”

“What do you mean?” I say, feeling myself steam, and not from the heat. I jab at his side again.

“It figures that out of all the girls in Cape Town County, you would end up playing softball with the girl I, like, kissed on the cheek last summer. I left her out because it was nothing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Relax, Ash. We’re friends.”

“Okay, one more.”

He holds the chains and attempts to stand up.

“This really isn’t going anywhere.”

“Wait.” I grab his waist. “Have you ever, like, done it?”

He grins and sits back on the swing.

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah.” I keep a straight face. I can’t believe I’m asking him this. I would have never ever asked Andrew, but Jake and I are more comfortable. We’re on the same level.

He smirks.

“Tell me,” I say, crinkling my nose because it’s disgusting thinking of him and another girl.

“I’m not going there, Ash.”

He looks up at the metal pole that holds the swing.

“How about other stuff?” I ask, still probing.

“Ash, I don’t think we should talk about every detail. I mean, I never felt what I feel with you with those other girls.”

“I want to know.” I stare at my flip-flops.

“No, you don’t. There’s no reason to talk about this anymore. I told you the girls that I was with.”

He’s right. I don’t, really. Well, kind of. Yeah, I do.

“How do you feel when you’re with me?”

“What I’ve always felt about you.” He pulls me closer

Jake kisses me gently at first. Then he grabs the back of my neck and kisses me harder. I kiss him back and we both tumble off the swing.

Jake laughs. I kind of do too, but my knee is bleeding and it hurts. I don’t want to seem like a whiney wimp, so I don’t say anything. Jake sees the blood and sheds his tee. He walks over to a hose, wets his tee and wipes my knee.

“You okay?”

I smile. Like a Mom that kisses boo boos, Jake makes me feel instantly better.

Jake helps me up, and we brush off our legs. The sand sticks to Jake’s bathing suit and my gash.

“So, are you ready for some Val burgers?” Jake smiles, showing off his dimples.

“Yup,” I smile.

A Rolling Stone’s tune plays softly in the background as Jake and I walk up to the trailer. Aunt Val hovers over the sizzling,

smoking barbeque flipping her famous burgers, which look like pieces of charcoal. Uncle Fred is lounging on a white plastic chair on the porch.

“Hey, look who’s back,” Jake’s aunt turns from the barbeque for a moment to wave with the spatula. A cigarette dangles from her lips.

With Lizzy, the cigarette thing looks ridiculous, but with Aunt Val it’s almost hippy like and not at all annoying. Even though, smoking is still gross.

Uncle Fred jumps up when he sees us and offers me his chair.

“Thanks, um...” I hesitate not sure what to call him.

“Call me Uncle Fred,” he says breaking out in a wide grin that crinkles his eyes.

“Yeah, and call me, Aunt Val,” Aunt Val says while stabbing her cigarette on a tree next to the grill.

“I wish you didn’t smoke,” Jake says as we help Uncle Fred set the picnic bench with paper plates and red plastic cups.

I perk up. I’m so glad Jake feels the same way I do about smoking. Even though, I always thought of Jake as the type that would take up the habit himself. Aunt Val doesn’t say a thing as she finishes up barbequing the burgers. They smell yummy, and my belly grumbles.

Uncle Fred turns up the classic rock tunes as Journey’s *Only the Young* blasts out of the radio. My parents play this music

all the time, but with Jake's family, it's different. It's amazing and laid back, perfectly fitting the moment. I attempt to save the song to my memory, so I can download it onto my iPod, when I get home.

As I'm squeezing ketchup onto my Val burger and debating with Uncle Fred if softball or baseball pitching is faster, I faintly hear my cell phone beep.

I stand up, flip open my phone, and Lizzy's name stares back.

"What's up?"

"Ashley, your mom was looking for you at the beach."

Lizzy panics. I duck behind a tree.

"Wait. I thought you were staying in today."

"I know, but it's such a sunny day, and Jess and Nicole came over and totally wanted to hit the beach, so I went. Kind of a last minute thing."

"So what did you say?"

"Well, at first, your mom didn't see us, and I was totally avoiding her, but then she spotted me and wanted to know where you were. So, I told her you were in the bathroom."

"Good one." I look at my watch. It's five minutes to five.

"She waited, so I told her, you went to my house because you had to poop."

"And?" I pull my nails with my teeth.

"Well, then your mom had to get home to make dinner, so

she told me to tell you to call her when you got back.”

“Whew, thanks, Lizzy. That was a close one.”

“You’re lucky I’m a good liar.”

“Yes, you definitely are. Thanks.”

I hang up and dial my mom.

“Hey, Mom. Lizzy just told me you were at the beach. Can’t believe I missed you.” I take a deep breath. “Can I hang out at Lizzy’s for dinner?”

“Boo, I’m cooking tonight and we’re leaving early to see Gram tomorrow. I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

I roll my eyes.

“Come on, Mom, can’t I please stay with Lizzy for a couple more hours?” I know the missing my friend angle will work. She did kind of feel bad for me, at least more than my dad, Mr. Psycho Softball, did last year when I had to miss the Homecoming dance and other stuff for softball. She gets it.

“Okay, but make sure you’re home before eight. We’re leaving early tomorrow morning.”

“Okay, thanks, Mom.”

“Everything okay?” Aunt Val asks as I wiggle back onto the bench and place my phone on my lap.

“Yeah, it was my mom,” I grin and take a bite out of my Val burger. Actually, more bun than burger, because this piece of meat is micro.

Jake stares at my mouth. I give him my best wide smile.

“You’ve got something in your teeth.”

I hold the napkin in front of my face and feel myself changing colors. I begin to pick at my teeth with my fingernail.

“Did I get it?” I show him my teeth.

“No,” Jake makes a disgusting face and points to my two front teeth.

I feel for the piece of lettuce and dig it out of my choppers. I’m sure I’m bright red by now.

Jake laughs.

After dinner, I’m sitting around the campfire with a long stick moving the ember around and around, while Uncle Fred drinks a beer and Aunt Val shuffles cards at the picnic table. Jake sits on the porch away from the fire.

“Ever play with fire before, Ash?” Jake asks and kicks back a Coke.

“Is it that obvious?” I pull the stick from the fire feeling kind of embarrassed of being a campfire virgin, but seriously, I’ve never been allowed to play with a fire before. It’s awesome. In fact, I’ve never even seen a real life campfire until tonight.

My dad’s so freaky about fires. One time, after I left my straightener plugged in on my carpet overnight, my dad drove me to see the charred remnants of a local fire. All the way there and all the way home he lectured me about how many families he witnessed that lost everything and were left devastated by a fire. It

worked. I never left my straightener on or plugged in again. A Clarke Campfire? Not in this lifetime.

I want to ask Jake why he's sitting on the porch away from the campfire, but I don't want to sound all needy, like he has to sit next to me every moment. His aunt and uncle don't even mention or bring up the fact that Jake is sitting seriously twenty feet away from everyone by himself on the porch when there is a perfectly good seat next to me.

I decide to go for the 'I'm nice, but still wondering about the weirdness,' approach.

"Jake, do you want me to sit with you?"

"No, Ashley. I would hate to pull you away from your first campfire." He grins, leaning back on the porch chair.

I stand up and join Jake on the porch. I often wonder, you know, with Jake's colorful past and all, when he will start making his moves. Like Andrew, we've only kissed. Not like I mind or anything.

Uncle Fred walks over to the fire with another stick in one hand and a new bottle of Yuengling in the other. He moves the ember around. "Ash, the more you move it, the more it will catch on to the other wood." I lean over to watch Uncle Fred.

"Don't worry about me, Ash. Go enjoy yourself."

"Why don't you sit near the fire?" I ask. "Are you scared of it?" I playfully dig my index finger in the side of his stomach.

“I hate the smoke, fire, and everything that goes with it,” he’s suddenly serious.

“What?” It slips out.

“Smoking, fires, the smell just pisses me off, that’s all.”

“I think it smells good.”

Jake stares straight ahead. “The smell reminds me of the times my mom got high. It brings me back to coming home as a kid thinking that we were going to do something fun for once, and she’d be either passed out on the bed or all high and acting weird. Every time I see smoke or smell something burning, it just brings me back to that time.”

I grab Jake’s hand.

“You don’t need to hear all this,” he says straightening up in the chair.

“I want to. I want you to tell me everything if it helps.”

Jake pulls his hand away keeping his eyes glued to the setting sun spilling pinks and purples behind the sea grass and brackish water that surround the campground. I pull my arms around myself because it’s starting to get chilly. I don’t take it personally when Jake pulls away from me. It’s like every time he spills a tiny secret about his family, he pulls a little bit away. Like the closer he gets to me, the more freaked out he feels.

“Do you ever want to meet your dad?” I ask, curious.

Jake clenches his fists. “Why does everyone ask me that since my mom died? What, because Mom OD’s I should go find

my dead-beat Dad? Why?”

“I’m sorry. I just thought you might want to meet him some day.” I wrap my arms around my chest.

“Not likely.” He changes positions and the subject. “Want a sweatshirt, Ash?”

“No, thanks,” I quickly answer. The last time I borrowed a boy’s sweatshirt, he broke up with me like the next time I saw him, and I had to stare at that stupid sweatshirt for months. No clothes swapping for me. Ever again.

My stomach grumbles. I have to poop. This is not good. Not now. I’m not pooping in Jake’s tiny trailer. But I can’t hold it. I can hear his aunt and uncle, “Ashley’s really nice, but she stunk up our trailer.”

I’m a shy pooper. I can only go in my own toilet. Never at school. And definitely never around a boyfriend. I shouldn’t have eaten so many strawberries. My stomach cramps, and I squirm.

Once again, my cell phone vibrates in my pocket. I grab it and check the time. Crap, it’s past eight. I hate to go, but I have to. Gram needs us tomorrow. And this time, I’m not giving up anything or losing myself, since boys break up with girls for no reason with zero warning. And this chickie is prepared this time.

“Jake, I have to go,” I say and stand up feeling yucky, stuffed, and crampy, but happy to get to my own toilet in less than ten minutes.

Aunt Val and Uncle Fred are engrossed in a card game on

the picnic bench. I lay my campfire stick by the chair.

“Ah, Ash. Going already?” Uncle Fred and Aunt Val look up from their feathered cards.

“Yeah, I have to visit my Gram tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s so nice of you Ashley.” Aunt Val smiles showing off her apple cheeks. “Where does she live?”

Jake might have had a terrible mom, but he sure lucked out in the aunt and uncle department.

“Outside Philly.”

“Shady Maple is a suburb of Philly. We’ll be back home tomorrow morning. You and your family should stop by.”

Fat chance.

“Thanks so much for dinner and everything,” I say, smiling. “It was nice to meet you.”

“No problem, maybe next time you can spend the night and get the full camping experience.”

I rack my brain wishing of ways to pull that one off. “I’d love to, thanks.”

Uncle Fred and Aunt Val stand up and go in for hugs, while Jake rolls out his moped past Uncle Fred’s and Aunt Val’s Harley and a smaller motorcycle both resting on the side of the trailer.

I stare at it and picture Uncle Fred and Aunt Val on the Harley.

“Like the bike?” asks Uncle Fred.

“Yeah, it’s nice,” I say while buckling my helmet.

“It was Aunt Val’s fortieth birthday gift,” he smiles.

Aunt Val? That’s awesome.

“I’ll be back,” Jake says before revving the engine.

“Be careful,” Aunt Val shouts and blows kisses.

“We will.”

I climb on the back and wrap my arms around Jake’s waist. He takes off with a jolt, and we’re on the back roads weaving down the tree-lined streets. I squeeze Jake’s waist, not wanting this perfect day to end. He returns the gesture by removing one hand from the handlebars and squeezes my hand that rests on his hard stomach.

The cool salt air blows on my face while a couple of fly-away honey-colored pieces of hair dance in the wind.

Jake pulls into the zoo parking lot and cuts the engine.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I know you’re late Ashley, but I’ve wanted to do this all night.”

Jake turns around to face me, unhooks my helmet and attacks my lips. His kisses are so passionate, so full of life. I love it. Jake’s hands stay wrapped in my hair and my hands stay on my lap frozen. I seriously need to ask Lizzy to show me some moves.

For a moment, I’m confused. I mean, we’ve kissed all day, so what’s this all about?

“Can I come over later?” he asks breathless.

“Yes,” I say because I want him to. Bad.

He pulls away, and we take off down the road. Jake drops me off down the street from Lizzy's in case my parents are wandering the streets looking for me. They actually do that psycho crap. Especially my dad.

As I trek home, I unlatch my charm and shove it into my pocket. Mom's car is here, but Dad's is, of course, MIA. I'm sure he's combing the streets of Sunray and Cape Town searching for his daughter while radioing his cop friends asking if they've seen me like I'm some sort of criminal.

Mom meets me at the door.

"Ashley Jean Clarke, where have you been? We've been worried sick." Her hands are on her hips and her hair looks disheveled.

"I was at Lizzy's. Sorry, we lost track of time."

Lies.

"I called Lizzy's and no one answered." She crinkles her nose. "And why do you reek like a campfire?"

"It must have been knocked off the hook or something." I stall a bit to think about the fire excuse. "And the campfire smell, some renters next door to Lizzy lit a campfire."

More lies.

She rolls her eyes and lets out a deep breath. "I don't know what it is with you Ash, but you're always pushing your limits."

Whatever.

I make an exit toward my room. I wish I could just wear

the charm. If my parents gave Jake a chance, I wouldn't have to sneak around.

Monday, June 28th

A little past one, Jake taps on my window. I let out a deep breath, turn my TV off, and drag my stool toward the window.

As I hoist myself out the window, the front light shines on a cut on Jake's chin. First the black eye on Friday and now a cut?

"Hey, how's my girl?" He asks, walking toward me.

"What happened, Jake?" It's only been, like, five hours.

His smile fades. "What are you talking about?"

"Your chin."

"Oh, that. It's nothing. Surfing injury."

"My ass. Jake. The other day you had a black eye, and now you have a frigging cut the size of Texas on your chin. What the hell is going on?" I shout.

"Ashley, are you okay?"

"No, I'm not okay."

Jake wraps his arm around my shoulders and moves his big hands on my cheeks, gently lifting my face toward his.

“What’s going on?” I turn away, and we continue to walk to the beach and sit in front of the water.

Jake lets out a deep breath. “I think you have me confused with someone else. Ash, I don’t play games.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You know exactly what I mean,” he says, leaning back on his arms.

He’s right. I’m confusing him with Andrew. I mean, he does surf a bunch, and guys get black eyes all the time from surfing. I remove my flip-flops and dig my toes in the cool sand.

“My parents are lying to me about my Gram, and Christy’s starting her crap again.”

“What’s wrong with your Gram?”

The waves crash in front of us as the full moon lights up the black sky. I sit in between Jake’s bent legs and lean into his chest.

“My mom says Gram’s getting plastic surgery, but I think she’s lying.”

“Why would your mom lie about that?”

“They did it before when Gram had lung cancer. Gram was coughing and hacking all the time, and they told me she had a freaking cold. A few days later, I overheard my mom talking about Gram’s cancer on the phone.”

“That sucks.” Jake says as he plays with my hair. “How old were you?”

“Twelve.”

“I don’t think they’re going to lie to you anymore, Ash. You’re a lot older. You can handle it better.”

“You obviously don’t know my parents.” I smirk.

“What’s Christy up to?” he asks.

“She saw some pics of us kind of drinking, and she said if I got her copies of the pics, she’d leave me out of it. But, if I don’t turn my friends in, then once she gets the pics, she’s going to sink me.”

“What?” he runs his hand through his buzz cut.

“I know. She’s psycho.”

“So, what are you going to do?” He asks tilting his head toward me.

“Call her bluff. I’m not turning my friends in.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“Enough wasting time talking about her. What do you think happens when people die?” I ask, lying next to Jake and staring at the black sky peppered with stars. I think about stuff like this lately. Especially after Jake’s mom died.

“That’s heavy shit, Ash. I think about that stuff, but I’m not sure. Mom never brought us up at church, so I don’t have the whole God thing going for me. I think when you’re time is up, it’s up. That’s it.”

“Like a bug or something?”

“I guess. What do you think?” Jake asks, locking his big brown eyes on mine.

“I think when people die, they meet up with everyone they knew that died before them, and they’ll all hang out all day and party. Then, every once in a while dead spirits swoop over living people, but we can’t see them. Like your mom, she could be floating above us right now.”

Jake smiles and hugs me.

“What?”

I break away from his hug. “That’s why I love you, Ash, and that’s why we work.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask. Wait, did he just say, ‘I love you?’

“You. I love the way you view the world.”

All of a sudden, we’re interrupted by the loudest squawking sound I’ve ever heard. “What the heck is that?” I ask, looking around.

“Look.” Jake points up in the sky, behind the dunes to one of the streetlights. Standing on the light are two birds. One is making this weird swacking/pumping sound while the other bird is silent underneath the loud one.

Jake starts laughing almost as loud as the obnoxious squawking.

“What? I think that bird is hurting the other one.”

“Oh, he’s hurting her alright.”

“Do something Jake,” I say, looking up at the light.

“You want me to break it up.”

“Yeah, they’re fighting or something.”

Jake takes a deep breath. “They’re not fighting, Ashley. They’re screwing.”

Oh my God. I look up at the squawking bird on top of the other one and feel my face get hot. I turn away to give them their privacy, but Jake’s still staring at them, so I cover his eyes with my hand.

“Looking for pointers?” I ask, laughing. But the whole mention of sex scares me. I mean, I like Jake, but I’m not doing that whole scene until I’m married or way older. I have too much to lose with college, softball, etc. I’m not spending my fun years raising a kid.

Jake looks at me, then he lunges at me and wiggles me into another wrestling hold. “Give up?” he asks, holding my legs up in the air.

“No.” He tightens it and nibbles my neck.

“Give up?”

“No.” I say, gasping for air and laughing.

Goose bumps fill my legs. “Stop.”

He looks up for a moment. “Nope.” Then, he dives back into the nook of my neck.

I try to wiggle away, but he has me locked tight.

“Okay, okay,” I say, gasping and giggling.

Jake lets go. We kiss and kiss and kiss, until I feel the cut on his chin graze mine.

I stop kissing.

“Do you have to go home?”

“No. Jake,” I pause. “What’s going on with these injuries? Why can’t you tell me?”

Jake digs his elbow in the sand and balances his head on his hand. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yeah.” I say, sitting up.

“I’m clumsy.”

“What do you mean you’re clumsy? You skateboard, surf, wrestle, and ride a dirt bike.”

“Exactly.”

He starts nibbling at my neck again and sends shivers up my spine. I give in.



After Max, Mom, Dad, and I toss our overnight bags in the trunk, we pile in the convertible. The car ride is long, so I settle in and stare out the window. It’s nice to escape Sunray for a bit, especially during the summer when it’s being shoobie invaded. Plus, I’m exhausted after hanging with Jake.

Thank God, Max is addicted to Pokemon DS. He would play his Pokemon DS game for twenty-four straight hours if Mom and Dad let him. If it keeps him still and out of my face, I think

they should let him play it until he gets a job and moves out.

We used to make the hour-and-a-half drive to Gram and Pop's every Sunday, before I became obsessed with softball. Now, with tournaments on the weekends, there just isn't time.

While cruising down Route 73, just about ten minutes from the bridge, my heart skips a beat. As we stop at a light, I look left and spot a huge pastel blue water tower with black words that spell Shady Maple. Below the tower is a skate park. I sit up straight, straining my neck to see if I spot Jake. No luck.

I want to shout, "Stop," but I can't, and I won't. Instead, I study the town: a bunch of stores, concrete buildings, car dealerships, and gas stations. Sinking back in my seat, I sigh.

So close.

As we cross over the bright blue Ben Franklin Bridge, the Delaware River, normally gray, has a bit of blue tint to it today. At home, the sun cooks. But here, in the city, it's smoking hot. The air is thick, hot, and nasty like soup.

"Dad, can you turn on the air?" I yell.

I turn toward Max, who hasn't spoken a peep. He just stares motionless at the screen with a goofy grin on his face like he's in heaven. He's obsessed.

"What?" my dad shouts.

The wind whips what's left of his hair.

Dad, turn on the air," I try to shout louder than the convertible wind tunnel.

“Why do you need the air? It’s beautiful and only seventy something today.”

Urbh.



Center City, Philadelphia is exciting and crazy at the same time, and it’s the uber opposite of the beach. Sort of a smaller version of New York City. Not that I’ve been, but it seems like the New York City I see on “Sex and the City” reruns. I mean, when do I have time to visit NYC. Most of the time, I’m stuck in country bumpkin land somewhere slinging softballs. Not that I mind. Softball is my life. I have plenty of time to check out New York after I’m playing for the NPF.

After we stop, park, and walk a bit, we make our way through a rotating door into the hospital. It smells weird, like a combination of bleach, food, and fluids.

We shove inside the elevator, in between different dimensions of adults wearing white coats of various sizes: short, long, medium, all looking worn, tired, and miserable. Tags hang around their necks with a bunch of capital letters following their names.

For a second or two, I begin thinking about what I want to do with my life. Do I want capital letters after my name? It would be nice to help people like in a hospital, but I don’t know if I could handle the whole blood and guts thing. Back to softball. Definitely something to do with sports. I can’t imagine life without sports.

The elevator is surrounded by glass, and it overlooks the

cafeteria. I stare below at the hustle and bustle. Tons of white coats, smocks, scrubs, suits, and sad families dressed in various colors buzz around like a bunch of puppies.

The elevator stops, and the doors ding open. My parents walk out first, then Max, still nose to nose with the DS. The hallways are blue and yellow and filled with more white coats, wheelchairs, bags of clear liquid hanging on long silver poles with tubes hanging from them, and women and men dressed in bright-colored scrubs pushing around carts. A group of people is gathered together behind a large desk, each furiously writing in thick binders. Look alike family members hug each other outside a door.

My parents turn into a room a few doors down from the desk. I immediately spot Pop sitting in a chair.

“Ashley!” He shouts, standing up and wrapping his arms around me. “How’s my buddy?”

“Hey, Pop.” I say, trying not to stare at Gram. Her whole face is covered in bandages, except for her eyes, nose, and mouth. Her eyes crinkle when she spots us. Does she have face cancer?

My mom begins to rearrange Gram’s tray while Max is still nose-to-nose with the DS.

“Max,” my dad says, snatching the game.

Max plops on a chair and pouts.

“Hey, Gram,” I say, gently.

“Ashley,” she says, holding out her hand. A tube dangles from her right arm.

Is that the chemo? Last time, when she had lung cancer, she was always receiving chemo through a tube.

“How was Maryland, Sweetie?” she whispers, tenderly patting my hand.

I scan her body. Okay, definitely bandages on the face and the chest. She did get plastic surgery. My parents didn’t lie to me. I mean, you can’t have face cancer and breast cancer, right?

“Great, Gram. We won the tournament,” I say, hoping to talk about softball for the rest of the day, not boobs or facelifts.

“You won a bid to the Nationals. Way to go, Ashley,” Pop shouts.

Gram’s gaze moves slowly from Pop to mine. “We’re so proud of you Boo.” She lies back on the pillow.

“How are you feeling, Mom?” my mom asks, sitting at the end of the bed.

“Okay. I can’t wait to see what I look like. Then, it will be all worth it.”

I’m still staring at Gram wondering what her face looks like under the bandages and trying hard to ignore her wrapped, bandaged, protruding chest.

I stand up.

“I’m going to grab a snack. Anyone want anything?” I ask, looking around.

“I’ll go with you,” my dad says, walking toward the door.

“Dad, I’m fine. Stay here with Mom.”

“Don’t leave with anyone and don’t talk to strangers. You’re in the city, Ash. It’s a different world than you’re used to. This isn’t Sunray Beach.”

“I promise I won’t leave and become a Philly hooker, Dad,” I say, laughing and patting his shoulder.

Once outside the room, I find my way to the elevator again. I stare at the Café until it’s even with me. Would I ever get plastic surgery? Why fight change? It’s inevitable. Wrinkles, lines, boobs sagging, it’s going to happen to everyone.

I go through the doors, sit down on a comfy chair, and pull out my phone. Then, I find Rachel and push send.

“Are you serious?” Rachel squeals after I run down my plan.

“Yes, I just need you to call my mom’s cell and pretend to be your mom.” I say.

“My mom?” she squeaks.

“Please. It’s the only way,” I plead.

She pauses. “Okey, dokey, Ash. Have fun.”

“I’ll text you when it’s time to call.”

I hang up with Rachel and call Jake’s aunt and uncle’s house.

“Hello?”

“Jake? You’re home.”

“Just got in this morning. How’s Gram?”

“Good. Guess where I am?”

“Where?”

“Philly. I went by Shady Maple on our way. I have to see you, so I think I’ve got a way to do it.” I say, trying to contain my excitement.

“How the hell are you going to do that without your parents freaking out?”

“Rachel.”

“What?”

“Rachel’s aunt and uncle are going to live in Shady Maple, and I’m going to tell my parents that Rachel asked me to stay the night. Instead of staying with my parents tonight, I’ll stay with you in Shady Maple. The whole time my parents will think I’m staying with Rachel.” I say, mentally exhausted from all this planning. “It’s perfect.”

“You sure you can pull this off?”

“Yup. I’m sure,” I say, silently praying that my parents will buy it.

Jake relays the address and quick directions to me as I scramble to find a pen. I spot one alone on a table, snatch it, and scribble the directions on my hand.



When I return to the room, my parents are still gathered around Gram. We sit, chat, and watch reruns of “Deal or No Deal” on the Game Show Network until my dad stands up.

“Who wants lunch?” he asks, stretching his arms.

“Me,” I say, hoping that this is my chance.

My mom, dad, Max, and I file back into the elevator.

“Mom, Dad, I was wondering,” I say, looking at the elevator floor. “Remember Rachel, the new girl?”

I look up. They both nod and stare at me.

“Her aunt and uncle live in Shady Maple, which is like ten minutes from here in Jersey, and she’s staying with them this week. Do you mind if I stay with her tonight? You know, team bonding and stuff?” I crack my knuckles.

My mom looks at my dad. They seem exhausted, ready to give in to anything. Perfect.

“I don’t know, Ash. We haven’t even met Rachel.” My mom says, clutching her brown hobo bag.

“Yeah, but she’s on the team and everything, and I spent, like, the entire tournament with her. She’s cool.”

“Maybe, it’s good for Ashley to hang out with her teammates,” my dad says, chiming in his softball two cents.

I knew that angle would work, even though they’re talking about me like I’m invisible.

“Can I talk to Rachel’s mom before you go?” My mom asks, taking out her cell phone. I’m there. I’m so there. I’m going to spend the night with Jake.

“Sure,” I say, flipping open my cell and reciting Rachel’s number while texting her a warning at the same time. After we step out of the elevator, my mom calls Rachel. Tons of nodding, uh

huhs, and prodding later, my mom shuts her cell.

“I don’t see why you can’t stay overnight with Rachel. You’re doing so well with softball and your concentration. So why not,” my mom says, tossing her phone back into her bag.

“And bond with a teammate,” my dad adds, chasing Max, who’s running toward the dessert table.

“Thanks,” I say, wanting to jump up and down or dance, but that would be obvious, so I stay cool. Prickly with excitement, like tons of tiny electrical shocks are hitting my skin, I grab a tray.
Sweet.



As we pull up to a small rancher on a thick tree-lined street, my fingers are crossed and shoved in between my knees. I need all the luck in the world right now.

Jake’s aunt and uncle’s Shady Maple house is cute and clean, the uber opposite of his mom’s Cape Town house, which was overgrown with weeds, screens torn, and had paint flaking off the sides like skin after a bad sunburn. The blue rancher’s grass is cut perfect and a white fence surrounds the yard. My lawn-orexic dad is probably salivating over this beautifully well-kept yard.

My dad starts to unbuckle his seatbelt.

“Dad, I’m okay. I’ll just grab my bag from the trunk,” I say, scrambling to get out of the car.

“Ash, I think we should at least take a minute to meet Rachel’s aunt and uncle face to face before we let you stay the

night,” he says, opening the door.

“Dad, please, you’re embarrassing me. I’m fifteen, not five.”

“Let her go.” Mom says, extending her hand and gently touching my dad’s thigh.

“You have your cell phone, right Ashley?”

“Yup,” I say, breathing again.

“Call us if you need anything.” She says, looking at my father, who is standing next to the car. He folds the seat forward so I can climb out of the convertible.

“Bye, Boo.” My mom says, winking.

“Bye,” my dad adds, rubbing my head.

So far, so good.

I swing my orange Crush bag over my shoulder and resist the urge to sprint up the sidewalk toward the door. As I knock, my stomach is in my throat. My dad continues to idle out front.

“Hey, look who’s here,” Aunt Val says, opening the door. “Come on in.”

I turn around and wave to my parents who wave back and drive away. *Whew.*

“How’s your Gram?”

“Okay.” The living room is big and spacious. A humongous flat screen television hangs on a large wall with a wide, brown, comfy sectional spanning the room. The house is deceptively small from the outside, but the inside is huge and open. Framed pictures

of Jake and his brother as babies, toddlers, and every single school year fill the other walls.

Aunt Val takes my bag and sets it next to the couch as she walks into the open kitchen.

“Do you want something to drink or eat, Ashley?” She asks opening the white fridge.

“No, I’m okay.” I say staring at the pics. Jake was so cute. Still is.

I’ve been so overwhelmed taking in the house and thinking about how different it is from Jake’s Cape Town house that I almost forget why I’m here.

Then, Aunt Val reads my mind and says, “Jake should be home any minute. He’s been at wrestling since we got back from the campground. Came home for lunch when you called. Then, back out,” she says, pouring a glass of lemonade. “I’m really surprised your parents didn’t call or anything before you were allowed to stay here. Did they want me to call them?”

“Ah, that’s okay.” I quickly say. “They really trust me.”

Just as Aunt Val opens her mouth to talk, the front door opens. “Hey.” Jake says, beaming. He pecks me on the cheek. His face is damp with sweat, and he’s breathing heavy. Seeing Jake makes all the crazy lying and planning worth every second.

Jake walks over to Aunt Val and plants a kiss on her cheek.

“How was wrestling?” she asks.

“All good,” Jake says, grinning. Then, he tilts his head, signaling me to follow him. I look over at Aunt Val. She’s busy reading the paper spread out before her on the kitchen table and sipping lemonade. Is he serious? Am I allowed to hang out with Jake in his room? Alone.

It’s like I’m living two opposite worlds. The single Ashley, that hangs out at Sunray with Lizzy and plays softball. And the Jake Ashley, that sneaks around playing girlfriend.

Since, Aunt Val doesn’t say anything, I follow Jake toward his room. I mean, besides my cousin and my brother Max, I’ve seriously never hung out in a guy’s room before. And my parents, they probably won’t ever let a guy alone in my room, unless I’m married or something.

Jake’s room is down the hall, across from the bathroom. It’s not what I pictured at all. In fact, it’s plain. A bed rests in the middle covered with a navy comforter. A dresser sits off to the right side with a mirror. A couple of UFC posters hang on the wall with some fight announcements, and stuck on his mirror is a tiny school picture of me. It’s the one I gave him last fall during home-room.

Jake opens his closet door and tosses a black Tap Out t-shirt and a pair of mesh shorts on his bed. Then, he rustles through his dresser and throws black underwear on top of the clothes. I stare at the undies.

“Ever seen underwear before?” Jake’s says, smiling. He

pulls off his shirt over his head.

Oh my God, he's going to undress in front of me and I'm going to see his...

"I'm gonna to take a quick shower, okay. Then, I'll show you around." Jake says, taking his clothes pile off the bed and walking into the bathroom. I can't help but stare at the multicolored bruises on his defined chest. Is wrestling that tough?

I scan his room. Okay, I shouldn't do this, but I'm here and alone and... where should I start? The dresser, closet, or under the bed? I dive into the dresser, opening the top drawers. I rustle through his underwear drawer, moving my hand underneath his briefs. Nothing. I tackle his sock drawer next. Nothing. I pull open one of the bottom drawers. It's filled with UFC stuff, Tito Ortiz's book, pins, programs from wrestling matches, little wrestling action figures, so cute. I shut that drawer and open the final one.

Three sneaker boxes stare up at me begging to be opened. I grab the Nike box first and toss open the lid. Resting on the top of a pile of photos is a picture of toddler Jake sitting on a woman's lap. She resembles the chick that jived with John Travolta during that old nineties movie, "Pulp Fiction." Actually, she looks a lot like that chick, with a black bob, red lips, and pale skin. The woman is smiling, holding a cigarette with one hand, while hugging and leaning down cheek to cheek with toddler Jake. Mini Jake is wearing little swim trunks, and they look like they're on the beach. His mom? She looked ragged and worn when I met her.

I flip through the other pictures. They're all a combination of different scenes of Jake, his mom, his brother, some older dude with his mom, and mixed in the pile is a couple of birthday cards. A gold ring lies on the bottom of the box. I hold it in the palm of my hand and swallow a lump. What the heck does it feel like to lose your mom?

I shove the pictures and the ring back into the box and tuck it back in the drawer because I don't hear the shower anymore. I stare at the other two boxes. Quickly, I toss the top off the middle one and stare at a picture of a smiling blonde girl. *What the...?* Rachel? The bathroom door opens. I throw the top back on the box and push the drawer closed with my foot.

Jake walks in glistening, clothed, and smelling yummy. He rubs the towel over his buzz cut. At the same time, he shakes the water out of his ears. As I take in the utter hotness, I'm devising ways to get my hands back on that box.

"Jake, could you get me a glass of water?"

"Huh?"

"I'm thirsty. Can you get me a glass of water?" I say, keeping one eye on Jake and the other on the drawer.

"Sure," he walks out the bedroom door and down the hallway, tossing his towel in the bathroom. I pull on the drawer and rip open the lid. My stomach is in my throat. Yes, it's definitely Rachel and there's notes or something underneath. I hear the faucet, so I place the lid back on top. As quick as possible, I toss off the last

lid. It's filled with tons of twenty-dollar bills. *What the...?* Now, I'm busting with questions instead of answers.

"What are you doing?" Jake is standing at the doorway right as the drawer closes. I'm bent over.

I look around.

"Um, tying my shoe." I say, pretending to tie.

"You're wearing flip-flops." Jake places the glass on the dresser.

"My bad." I say, smiling and sitting on his bed. "I thought I was wearing sneaks."

Jake's eyebrow sinks and his face twists.

"What do you want to do?" Jake asks as I continue to stare at him, like his face will give off some answer to why his drawer is filled with cash and a picture of Rachel.

"I don't care," I say hoping to come across all pissy, so he'll ask me what's wrong.

"Are you hungry?"

He didn't pick up the hint. "I guess."

"Let's go uptown and eat. Leonetti's serves the best pizza in the state."

"Better than Mario's?"

"Way better." He says, grinning. "You know, I didn't even get to kiss you yet." He says, sitting next to me on the bed. His breath smells minty like toothpaste.

Maybe he simply collects pictures of chicks he's kissed.

Jake gently kisses my lips, but I can't stop wondering if he kissed Rachel like this, which is really dumb because I should be enjoying this kiss. Especially because we're alone and together, and I worked so hard to get here.

The back door slams. I pull away and jump.

“What?”

“Your aunt, Jake. We can't be hanging out here sucking face while your aunt is in the next room. What will she think?”

“She doesn't care.” He says, laughing.

“Anyway, I'm hungry.”

“Ashley.”

“Yeah?”

“Did anyone ever tell you how hot you are?” he asks, staring at me while his big brown eyes scan my bod.

I don't know what to say. Uh, Andrew, kind of said it once or twice, but I doubt he wants to here that one. So, I stay silent.



It takes less than five minutes to cover the block and a half to the pizza shop. It's weird, Shady Maple is truly shady, with trees that is. Bunches and bunches of trees. In fact, it's hard to spot the sky. Every time I look up to check for clouds, I have to look through leaves.

I'm still fuming over the pics and cash. But, how am I going to bring this up without admitting that I was snooping?

Leonetti's is cute, brick, and it smells yummy before we

even walk inside. Jake and I order at the counter and sit at a red comfy booth in the back. Easy music that I enjoy plays in the background. Actually, I'm kind of secretly into cheesy love music. It helps me relax. Sometimes, I even download Air Supply and Chicago songs onto my iPod to listen to when I'm stressed.

"A lot different from the beach," Jake says, rolling a straw wrapper between his thumb and middle finger.

"Yeah. I was thinking it should be super crowded. If this place was in Cape Town or Sunray, we wouldn't even be able to move in June." I say, waiting for my opportunity to bring up the drawer.

"Jake, I wanted to ask you something." I say, staring at the white Tap Out letters on his tee. I realize they're written in the shape of a bat.

"Shoot." Jake says, squaring up to toss his straw wrapper into the sugar holder. He misses. Total wrestler.

"I was waiting for you in your room and my foot accidentally like hooked on your drawer and..."

"Jake Cole, what the hell are you doing here?"

Jake's eyes widen and he ducks his head.

A man, who looks like he just walked out of an episode of "The Sopranos" instead of into a small town pizza shop, walks up to our table. He's huge with slicked black hair and a full black suit. He pats Jake hard on the back and his gold pinky ring catches the light.

“Hey,” Jake says squirming in his seat.

“You are unbelievable boy. Keep working hard. You’re our biggest moneymaker right now. Hell of a match the other day. I see you’re already scoring hot chicks, huh?” Greasy bear says, glancing my way.

Jake continues to squirm in his seat, sinking further and further toward the ground. *Who is this dude?*

“Excuse me.” A tall skinny waitress interrupts us and drops two paper plates of pizza and an order of fries in front of us on the table.

“Alright man, I’ll let you guys go. See you on Friday.” Grease pit smacks Jake on the back again. “Nice to meet you, sweetheart,” he says winking before grabbing his pizza box.

“What the hell was that all about?” I ask beginning to lose my appetite. Do I even know this boy sitting across from me?

“Nothing. I just know him from wrestling.” Jake says, shoving pizza into his mouth.

“Jake, he was talking about money. Is that where you got all that money?”

Jake looks up at me and drops his pizza. “What money?”

“The money in your drawer. The money that I was about to ask you about before greasy spoon interrupted us. I accidentally came across a box of money.”

Jake leans back and crosses his arms. “What do you mean you accidentally came across a box of money?”

Crap. This isn't going well. "My foot got stuck on your drawer handle, then when I pulled it, your drawer opened and a couple of boxes fell out."

Jake grins. "Do you actually think I'm going to believe you? Ashley, your parents might be naive enough to think that you're here on some sleepover with Rachel, but do you honestly think that I'm going to believe that your foot got caught on my dresser drawer?"

He reaches up and scratches his shoulder, exposing his tribal tattoo.

"It did," I lie looking down at my pizza slice.

"Ashley, you're one suck-ass liar."

He's starting to piss me off. "The point isn't how I found the money, the point is how the hell do you have that kind of money at fifteen?"

"Sixteen. Remember, I failed second grade."

"Whatever."

"It's not 'whatever'. I can work, Ashley. Some of us have to work"

"Doing what?"

"What do you mean, doing what? I do whatever. You know, stuff."

"With that guy? Jake, are you selling drugs?"

Jake's eyes turn into slits and his hands clench. He bangs the table and pushes his plate. The paper plate slams into my soda

causing some of it to spill.

“I’m done.” He says, storming out of Leonetti’s.

I did it again. Word vomit. Bringing up drugs is completely off limits, and I did it. I mean, why would I say that when Jake’s mom died of a drug overdose? He despises drug dealers and he even blames them for his mom’s death.

It’s like the time in middle school when everyone was going around joking and saying, “your momma is a whatever.” So, Lizzy and I were kidding around one day at her house, and I said, “Your momma is a slut.” Uh, well, Lizzy’s mom kind of is a slut, so Lizzy broke into tears and yelled at me to go home. We didn’t talk for, like, a week. Once again, like today. Word vomit.

The aroma of the pizza slice is tickling my nose. Basically, I have two choices. I can A) leave, go catch up with Jake, apologize for accusing him of working as a drug dealer, and starve. Or B) I can finish the pizza in this nice comfy cool booth by myself and hope Jake isn’t too pissed off. I feel terrible about what I said, but I’m kind of starving, and since Jake already paid for the pizza, someone has to eat it. Hopefully, Jake will come back to talk.

I take a couple of bites of pizza, a few sips of soda, and a handful of fries for the road. Then, I slide out of the booth.

After exiting Leonetti’s, I spot Jake sitting on a bench in front of Main Street.

“Hey,” I say, standing next to him.

Jake turns around and looks at me. Instead, of his usual

easy smile, he squints, stands up, and stays silent.

“Look, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to accuse you of being a drug dealer. It’s just that, you know, you have all this money and stuff and I just wonder where you got it. Then, you have like bruises all over your body. I mean, what am I supposed to think?”

Jake walks besides me and looks both ways. Then, he dashes across Main Street. I follow. He’s still silent.

“Jake, aren’t you going to say anything. I said, I’m sorry.” I say, grabbing his arm.

He looks down at me. “Let’s just forget you said it, okay?”

I pull on Jake’s arm. “I don’t want to forget about it. Jake, I want to talk about all this stuff. I want to know what’s going on with you.

He jumps up and snatches a gigantic maple leaf off one of the million trees that line every street. “Shady, huh? You think I’m shady?”

“What would you call it?” I say, staring at his ear, which looks different from the last time I saw it. In fact, it’s a bit swollen.

“What’s that?” I ask pointing to his ear.

“Coach says it’s the beginning of cauliflower ear or something from not wearing my head gear enough.” He says, moving his hand over his ear.

“Does it hurt?” I ask imagining his ear turning white and cheesy looking like a vegetable. I can’t lick a white, powdery, yucky

ear. *Gross*. And I hate cauliflower.

“Nope.” He says, stopping at a tree and using it as a punching bag.

I keep walking. After sparring with the tree, Jake catches up with me. We cross train tracks, walk down a few more streets, and arrive at a row of ballfields behind some houses.

Jake grabs my hand and guides me to a secluded enclosed dugout that overlooks a baseball diamond surrounded by woods. We sit together on the bench. The sun is slowly setting, but it’s still sizzling.

“Jake, we have to talk.”

“What?” He asks, eyes wide. He rests his elbows on his knees, leans forward, and bows his head.

“This is it, Jake. You have to tell me what is going on. I mean, what am I supposed to think. You have all this money, some mob guy approaches you at Leonetti’s, and you have bruises and stuff all over your body. I don’t care what the heck you are doing, I just want to know.” I say, raising my voice with the last sentence for effect.

Jake stares at the diamond. “First off, he’s not a mob guy. And second, I don’t want to get you involved, okay. It’s nothing. I told you, I have a job that’s it. It’s nothing that I’ll get in trouble for, but my brother needs some money, okay?”

“Is whatever you’re doing illegal?”

“Not really.” He says not making eye contact with me.

“What do you mean, not really?”

“Look, Ashley, I’m wrestling. It’s not really legal, and it’s not really illegal. I’m fine. The bruises are not a big deal. They go away. Now, can we just hang out instead of talking about all this shit?”

Jake turns to look at me. Wrestling? Is he fighting for money? Like the UFC guys do? I can’t imagine what this boy is going through, losing his mom, having to live with relatives, and supporting his brother.

“Stop being such a spaz.”

I jab Jake again. “I’m not a spaz.”

I move over to jab Jake once again and he clutches my hand without even looking, pulls me up to my feet, places my hand on his cheek, and grabs my face. He dives in for the most passionate and most incredible kiss of my life. My legs turn to jelly.

After kissing for a while, I sit on Jake’s lap. We start kissing again, but this time Jake starts moving his hand up the back of my shirt. I’m not saying anything, secretly kind of hoping he steals second. For some reason, when I’m with Jake, it’s like I’m a passenger in a car that Jake’s driving. And I don’t care where he goes as long as he keeps driving, but not too fast. Yet.

“I want to thank you for risking so much to see me,” Jake says after we take a kiss break.

I look down at my hands. “It’s no big deal.”

“Yes, it is.” He lifts my chin up with his forefinger. “I know

it's hard for you to lie to your parents and everything. And you're doing this all for me." He smirks.

Damn, he's so hot. We smooch some more.

Jake's pressed up against me, when I feel something vibrate. He finishes the kiss and slowly slides his hand into his front pocket. A brand new black razor cell phone emerges from his shorts.

"We gotta go," Jake says, taking my hand and pulling me up to a standing position. "I have an eleven o'clock curfew.

A curfew?

"When did you get the phone, Shady?" I ask, stopping him from getting up.

"Oh this." Jake looks down at his phone. "I just bought it yesterday." He says, handing me the shiny new phone that is still covered in plastic. "Look, I'm not going get into the whole texting scene, but I figured we need it to talk, so I picked one up."

I shove my hand in my pocket to feel for my phone and realize that I left my cell at Jake's. Knowing my crazy mom and dad, they definitely called since they dropped me off this afternoon. What if my parents called? What if Jake's aunt and uncle picked up my cell and told them that I was with Jake? "Crap."

"What, Ash?"

"My phone. I left my freaking phone at your house." I say, speed-walking toward the houses.

"Where are you going?" Jake asks, still standing in the dugout.

“Your house.”

“My house is this way, you goof ball.”

I turn around and follow Jake. After running a few blocks, we arrive at the rancher in less than five minutes. A sweep of relief fills my body, when I confirm that my dad’s convertible isn’t parked in Jake’s driveway. My parents would seriously ground me until graduation if they caught me staying the night at Jake’s house.

“Why are you freaking out?” Jake says, stepping in front of me and opening up the gate just as I’m about to reach for the handle.

“My cell. I left it at your house. What if my parents called and your aunt and uncle answered it or something?” I’m breathing heavy. Jake is talking normal and of course, totally in shape.

“They’re not going to answer your cell phone, Ash,” he says, pushing open the door.

Jake and I walk into the living room. Aunt Val and Uncle Fred lounge on the sofa staring at a “Law and Order” episode.

“Hey, guys.” Aunt Val says, stretching.

“How was Leonetti’s?” Uncle Fred asks pushing the leg rest back down into the couch.

I look at Jake.

“Good,” Jake answers.

I follow Jake into his room and dig into my bag. Sure enough, four missed calls from my mom, two texts from Lizzy and six from Rachel.

“Where have you been?” my mom says before I can even say, hi. “I have been calling the house and no one is answering the phone there either. And, why do Rachel’s aunt and uncle have voicemail with Rachel’s chatter and music? Your father and I were fifteen minutes away from driving to Shady Maple and picking your butt up.”

“What number do you have?” I say, trying to stay calm.

My mom regurgitates Rachel’s number.

“Oh, Mom, I must have given you Rachel’s number by mistake before we left.” I say, crossing my fingers.

“It’s the same number we called before you left.”

Crap.

“I know, you called Rachel’s parents, remember?” I say, hoping this works.

“You know, Ashley, this seems a little strange. I want you to put Rachel’s aunt on the phone right now.”

“I can’t, Mom.”

“That’s what I thought. Your father and I are getting in the car and picking you up, and you’re staying with us tonight.”

“No, I mean, they’re sleeping. I can’t wake them up. And, anyway, Mom, Rachel is standing right here and you’re embarrassing me. Really, you have no reason not to trust me. Rachel and I went out for pizza, and I forgot my phone. I promise I won’t forget it again, okay.” My fingers are turning white from crossing them so hard.

“Ashley, you’re on thin ice. We will find out what’s going on if you are trying to pull one over on us. I promise you that.” She hangs up.

This trip, the sleepover, hanging out with Jake was, like, supposed to be the best night of the summer. Now, I feel like a jerk, and my stomach is filled with all sorts of yuck.

Jake rubs my back while I read Rachel’s texts, which consist of freaking out about my parents calling her cell phone a bunch of times. I text her back to tell her that I took care of it.

I shove my phone back in my bag.

“Ashley, you can have the spare bedroom. I cleaned it up and left fresh sheets on the bed. We picked up some soft pretzels earlier if you guys want some, they’re in a bag on the counter. Good night,” Aunt Val says before turning in.

When I hear Aunt Val and Uncle Fred’s bedroom door shut, I bury my head in my hands.

“Ashley, what’s wrong?” Jake asks, still rubbing my back.

“It’s just that I feel bad. I feel bad for lying to my parents. I feel bad that I said that horrible thing to you earlier. I feel bad that I can’t tell my parents about us, you.”

“Why can’t you tell your parents about us?”

“The whole dirt bike thing.” I say, looking up at Jake’s coffee eyes. “They think you’re a bad influence on me or something.”

He stops rubbing and pulls his hand away from my back.

“Is that so? Because of my mom, right, my family, is that what all this is about? Is that why they won’t let us be together? I’m a bad influence because of the druggie mother?” he asks, clenching his fists.

“No, it’s not that, Jake. It’s the dirt bike, that’s it.”

“You’re lying,” He says taking a deep breath. “You’re the worst liar ever, Ash.”

I blush. “I’m not that bad.”

“Oh, you’re bad. Real bad. Sleeping, come on, couldn’t you think of something better than that? And you’re embarrassing me? Lame, Ash.” He grins.

“Whatever.” I say, tossing a pillow at Jake. He grabs my waist and pulls me to the bed. At the same time, he maneuvers his leg in between mine, twists it around and holds my arms above my head.

“Easy pin.” He says, moving his face inches from mine. Jake kisses me, gently at first, then harder. His kisses send shivers up my spine, and I’m in this faraway land, until I realize he’s lying on top of me. Driving too fast. I stop and wiggle to a sit.

“You okay?” Jake asks.

“Yeah, I’m a little freaked out, that’s it.”

“Your parents?”

“Yeah.” Another lie. How can I tell Jake Cole that I’ve done more things with him in three hours than I’ve ever done.

“I’m tired.”

“Let’s go watch TV,” Jake says, grabbing my hand.

Tuesday, June 29th

The next morning I'm lying on the couch. For a second, I can't remember where I am, but then I spot the family pictures and the big screen television hanging on the wall. I smile, blush, and pull the blanket up over my mouth.

Jake and I slept together. We fell asleep watching UFC fighting on SPIKE, and I never made it to the spare bedroom. I glance over at Jake on the opposite end of the wrap-around couch. He's in the fetal position, facing the cushions. For a second, I wonder what he dreams about. Wrestling? His mom? Me? Or some random chick he hooked up with before me?

I sit up, stretch, and wipe my eyes. I'm still in my plaid shorts and tank from yesterday.

"Hey, sleepy head," Uncle Fred says, walking out of the kitchen, dressed in khakis, a pale green collared shirt, and clutch-

ing a black case. “If you want breakfast, bagels are on the counter. Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” I say thinking that all I want to do right now is jump in the shower and change clothes.

Before Uncle Fred leaves, he nudges Jake. Jake stretches and rubs his eyes. “Hey, bud, it’s almost eight.”

“See you later, guys.” Uncle Fred walks through the front door.

After Jake finishes waking up, he looks at me and grins. Easiness fills my stomach. For a moment, I realize as I stare at Jake with all his bruises, his slashed chin, and wrinkled Tap Out tee that he’s actually pretty normal. When we first got together with all the dirt bike riding and crazy mom, I thought he was a loon, but when I see him here, with his aunt and uncle, waking up on the couch, he looks like a little boy, not a bad ass.

Jake reaches over and grabs his sneakers.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“Running. Want to come?”

“Running?”

“I’m training, Ash.”

“In the summer?”

Jake rolls his eyes. “I’m always training.” He says, tying his sneaks. He stands up, opens the front door, and takes off down the street. I let out a deep breath and grab my bag.

After a long shower, I snatch a cinnamon raisin bagel off

the counter, open the fridge, pour myself some orange juice, sit down, and open up the newspaper.

“Hi,” Aunt Val greets me dressed in green scrubs and black crocs.

“Good morning,” I say staring at Aunt Val’s get up. “Are you a nurse?”

“No, hon. I’m a radiologist.” She says, snatching a bagel off the counter. “Are your parents going to pick you up this morning?”

My stomach sinks thinking about my parents.

“Yeah.”

“Well, we’ll see you hopefully in a couple days. We’re heading down the shore on Friday for the fourth. Have fun with Jake,” she says grabbing her nametag and dashing through the door.

I picture myself and Jake lounging on the sand at the beach watching the the fireworks sparkle above the water.

The door closes behind Aunt Val, and I’m alone. Should I check out Jake’s room again before he gets home from his run, or should I act normal, stay at the table, and finish my breakfast?

I dash into Jake’s room, open his bottom drawer again, and locate the middle box with the pictures. As I lift the lid off the top, I hear the front door open and my heart skips a beat. I reapply the lid and slam the drawer closed.

“Good morning,” I say walking into the living room. It’s amazing how much time Uncle Fred and Aunt Val let us spend alone

together. They're totally trusting and cool, unlike the Clarke's.

Jake's chest heaves in and out.

"Hey," he says, breathless. He walks by me, smacks me on the butt, which I kind of like, and grabs a towel out of the closet. I watch him walk into his room. A minute later, he closes the bathroom door.

Sweet. Another shower. As soon as I hear the water splash, I run into his room again, open the drawer, pull out the box, and dump the contents all over his bed.

There are random pictures of girls and guys. Tons of pictures of Jake wrestling. Pictures from the campground. One of Rachel sitting on a lawn chair, another with a group of girls. I resist the urge to take them. I mean, why does he keep this stuff? One picture of Jake with an emo looking chick with her arm around him. Jake and his brother on motorcycles. Jake on his dirt bike. Jake and his brother with their surfboards. Basically the box is a Jake's life photo album. I let out a deep breath.

I place the lid on the box and set it in between the others right were I found it.

The shower shuts off with perfect timing and I return to my bagel, bummed and feeling like a pathetic loser for going through his stuff.

For a minute, my thoughts jump to my computer. I mean, I don't have that many pictures of other guys. Okay, yeah, I do. Pictures on my computer and definitely plenty of pictures on my

cell phone. And yes, pictures of Andrew. So, who am I to judge? It's in the past.

Jake walks into the living room with a bag.

"I hate saying this Ashley," he says, placing the royal blue Shady Maple Wrestling bag on the couch. "But, I have to go. Coach runs open mats in the mornings."

He walks over to me and wraps his arms around my waist.

"I had the best day with you," he whispers in my ear, which sends bunches and bunches of shivers up my spine. Goosebumps cover my legs.

"Me too." I croak. "Hey, your aunt and uncle said that you'll be down to watch the fireworks, so I'll see you in a couple days."

"Yeah," He says straightening up and smiling.

Jake plays with my charm and maneuvers the clamp until it's behind my neck. He returns his hands to my cheeks and kisses my lips, gently, nice.

He throws his duffle bag over his shoulder and leaves.

I'm alone again waiting for my parents to pick me up. Truly, an opportune time to search Jake's room, which I do like a CSI agent at a crime scene. I tear apart his room, his drawers, his closets, and even under his bed. And besides the couple pics of Rachel and random girls, and an exorbitant amount of UFC stuff, I find zero evidence that points to Jake lying.

As I wait for my parents on Jake's front step, I feel pretty

crappy. Crappy that I searched Jake's room. Crappy that I don't trust Jake because of something that happened to me that has nothing to do with him. AKA Andrew. Crappy that I lied to my parents to hang out at Jake's, when I should have just asked or at least tried to talk to them. This isn't me. The whole sleepover has left me feeling like the summer after Max was born when I really wanted a hermit crab and my parents said I couldn't have one.

One July morning, Lizzy's mom slept in late after a particularly long night, so Lizzy and I snuck up to the boardwalk. We both stole hermit crabs, which isn't extremely hard when the guys at the store are so busy with tons of tourists. They didn't even notice two eight-year-old girls sneaking out the back with two hermit crabs, cages, and extra shells. I snagged a softball shell, and Lizzy snatched a flowered one.

It was cool at first. I hid my hermit crab underneath my bed and nobody knew it was there, but me. My secret. I tried to play with it, but you can't really do anything fun with a hermit crab, like you can play with a puppy or kitten. After a couple of hours, it kind of lost its flavor, and I felt awful about lying and stealing.

A few days later, I couldn't stand the feeling anymore, and I confessed. My parents made me trek up to the boardwalk, apologize to the store, and give back my hot pink cage and softball decorated hermit crab. I was punished for a couple of weeks and placed on diaper duty. Instead of feeling awful, I felt relieved, and I actually didn't mind the diaper duty, which is strange because Max

had a poop problem and would excrete these awful green lumpy smelly diapers.

Today as I wait for my parents, I feel that same feeling. Like I want to confess. Like Jake and me spending the night together is like the hermit crab, awesome at first, but now I feel all yucky and bad about it. I mean, I want to shout how I feel about Jake, not hide it from everyone like the crab. Like I am. I draw my legs up to my chest and watch ants scurry around the sidewalk.

The red convertible pulls up just as I'm mesmerized by an ant colony building orange anthills.

"Hi, Ashley," my dad says as he grabs my bag and places it into the trunk. He eyes me mysteriously like a cop interrogating, searching for clues.

"Hey, Dad," I say acting as peppy as I can muster after a measly four hours of sleep last night.

"Did you have fun?" He says, still looking at me out of the corner of his eyes as I fall into the backseat next to Max, who's stuck in another Pokemon stupor.

"Yup," I say flipping open my phone.

"Where's Rachel?" My mom asks turning around to also get a good look at me.

"She's still sleeping," I say, mesmerized by my screen and reading through Rachel's texts again.

"This late?" my dad asks, looking at me through the rear-view mirror.

“Mmm hmm,” I say still staring at the screen. “We’re teenagers Mom, not ten. We sleep.” I push the keypad as fast as I can.

My mom finally turns around in her seat after she realizes that I’m texting and not paying attention to their craziness.

A half an hour later I ask, “How’s Gram?”

“Good. She’s coming home tomorrow. She’s excited to see her new face,” my mom says, her short dark hair blows in her face.

“Good,” I say still texting. “Dad, can you put the top up?”

Silence.



After fighting shoobie shore traffic on the Cape Town Bridge for what seemed like forever, we pull up to the house.

Max looks up from the game. I swear his eyes are blood-shot and dilated. The boy needs rehab.

“Are we home already?” he asks squinting.

I snatch the game out of his hands. “Seriously, Max, you need to stop.” I climb out of the car and hold it up to the sky. Max jumps up and down, swinging his arms.

“Give it to me,” he screams. Finally, he stands still and stomps on my foot, which hurts because I’m only wearing my Adidas slides.

“You little...”

Max takes off and hides between my parents, who are in the process of unlocking the front door.

I pretend to toss the game into the street like a Frisbee.

“Wait!” Max screams sprinting toward me. He lunges at me, wrapping his arms around my neck. I’m cracking up, balancing my cell in one hand and his DS in the other.

“Will you two knock it off?” my mom yells from the porch.

I spin around with Max flailing from my neck until he lets go and tumbles to the ground.

“Ashley Jean Clarke, will you please give your brother back his obsession,” my dad says, rolling the lawn mower out of the garage.

Max’s face is red hot. I lower the game to eye level and hand it to him. He snatches it and runs into the house.

“Don’t forget you have practice today at four,” my mom says, holding the door open. “You haven’t forgot about softball again, have you?” She eyes me suspiciously.

“Mom, do you honestly think I’d make that mistake again?” I say, rolling my eyes.

After only snagging a couple hours of shut eye last night, I’m in serious need of nap.



“So what the heck happened to you last night? Did your parents think you were with Jake?” Rachel asks me later. We’re sprawled out on the gym floor getting ready for an indoor batting practice.

I pull my brand new Miken Icon silver bat out of my bag. I'm in love with this bat. After begging and completing endless chores for four full weeks, I earned enough money to buy this amazing piece of softball equipment. It just arrived in the mail today. I can't wait to use it in a game. Carefully, I tear the plastic off my shiny bat.

"I dodged a major bullet."

"I know. I almost answered my phone when I saw the number, but then I remembered that it might be your parents and oh my God, I'm so glad I didn't. What would your parents do if they knew you spent the night with Jake?"

Just then, Christy places her slimy hand on my bat. "Nice bat, slut. Too bad all that money won't buy you hits."

"Whatever," I say, rolling my eyes and snatching my bat back.

"Staying over at Jake's, huh? So, Jake's adding you to his long list already, Ash? I thought you would at least wait like a few months. What do you think, Rachel?"

I let out a deep breath. Seriously, it's to the point of ridiculousness. Christy is immature and pathetic. I ignore her like an annoying bee and hope she'll leave and go sting someone else.

A few minutes later, I look over at Christy and her crew. Amy and Stephanie swarm around Christy with their hands over their open mouths. They stare at Christy's cell phone. My stomach drops. The Maryland hotel pictures.

“Let me see that,” I say, standing up and snatching the cell out of Christy’s hand.

Rachel maneuvers next to me, and we simultaneously let out a deep breath. Staring back at us is the picture of Rachel, Emily, and I sitting together with two bottles in front of us. Even though none of us are actively drinking, there are four cups filled with purple liquid on the table.

I hit the arrow button and sure enough, there are at least ten pictures of us playing cards, Emily puking, and us throwing back drinks, whether it’s water or wine cooler, you can’t tell in the pics. We’re screwed.

“How the hell did you get the pictures?” I ask waving her cell phone in the air.

“I snagged Kate’s phone at the tournament and sent them to myself, dumb asses.” Christy snatches the phone back. “You might as well take that bat back, Ashley. Because when I show Coach D these pics, you won’t be using it,” she says tossing her phone in her bag.

“Let’s go, girls. Grab your bats and hit the cages,” Coach D shouts from behind the pitching machine.

Rachel and I exchange worried looks. How the hell are we going to get rid of those pics? And do Kate and Emily know?

I stare at Christy’s bag, trying to figure out a way to get her cell and erase the pictures. I wish I could be all badass and just snatch the phone, but the hermit crab is about as badass as I get.

“Ashley, you’re up,” Coach D says. I place my new bat back into my bag, not wanting to mess it up in the cages and grab my old DeMarini bat from last year.

Rachel holds the net for me as I enter the cage. With every swing, I’m picturing Christy’s Ronald McDonald face on each ball.



After practice, Christy sprints out the gym door clutching her stupid cell phone. Rachel and I attempted to snag it twice during practice, but each time we were close, Coach called us over to do something else.

“Hey, did you tell Kate and Emily?” I ask Rachel as we’re piling our stuff in my Dad’s trunk while my dad talks softball with Mr. O’Donnell.

“Yeah, for a sec. Kate said she’d take care of it.”

“I think we’re too late for that,” I say, opening the car door for Rachel.

My dad finally joins us.

“Do you mind if we take Rachel home?” I ask as my dad maneuvers on his white leather driver’s seat.

“The famous Rachel. It’s nice to finally meet you,” my dad turns around and smiles at Rachel, then looks at me.

During the ride home, I think of the many ways Christy can bring the photos to Coach D’s attention without actually showing her. Drop them in front of her? Leave them somewhere? In other

To: Jake

Can't w8



“Going to the fireworks Friday, Ashley?” Rachel asks sliding across the seat to the door. Her house is literally minutes from Jake’s aunt and uncle’s campground on the mainland and is seriously huge. Sunray and Cape Town houses are usually tiny and smushed right next to one another, like mine. But, Rachel’s house is gigantic and her yard is even bigger. She could seriously have, like, ten horses, four cows, and a chicken coup in her back yard, and still have room to fit our house and our backyard on her property with plenty of space to spare. I wonder what her parents do.

“Yeah, are you going?” I ask, gawking at the house and climbing out of the convertible to open the door for Rachel.

“Yuppers. Text me. We’ll meet up.” Rachel says.

“What do your parents do?” I ask still staring at the humongous house.

Rachel halts for second. “Uh, they own their own business.” She clears her throat and smiles again.

“Thanks, Mr. Clarke,” Rachel says shutting the door.

She waves still sporting her signature wide-mouth grin. I rest my head back on the convertible’s headrest and muse.

words, Christy will expose us without making her self look like a rat. Teams despise rats.

“Did you two have fun last night at your aunt and uncle’s house?” my dad asks Rachel studying her reflection through the rearview mirror. My parents refuse to drop the Shady Maple sleepover. I cannot believe that my detective dad is interrogating Rachel right now.

“We had a blast. Aunty and Uncle Bill loved her. Did Ashley tell you we ate at Leonetti’s? They have the best pizza.” Rachel says, smirking

She’s a pro. Much better liar than me.

Dad looks at me and smiles. An easiness returns to his face.

“No, Ashley forgot to mention that.”

My cell phone vibrates in my bag.

Fr: Jake

Fireworks Fri?

I’ve been in softball escape mode, and I almost forgot Jake will be here in three days. Sunray always has a huge fireworks display the Friday before the fourth. I’m always at some tournament and never get to see them. Not this year. I can’t wait. The fireworks. The beach. Barbeques. All with Jake. Total bliss.

I text Jake back right next to my dad.

Wednesday, June 30th

At exactly two minutes past midnight, the familiar tap wakes me up. Last night, I was beat after spending another day with Gram, Mom, and Max. I didn't even make it through one chapter of Gram's latest romance pick, Dangerous Stud.

Before I grab the Elmo stool, I smooth down my hair, and run my fingers under my eyes to erase any smudged mascara.

Every time Jake shows up, whether I'm expecting him or not, it always makes my stomach leap. I maneuver the stool and push open the window, but instead of Jake, Lizzy is staring at me with bloodshot eyes.

"Liz, what's going on?" I ask, pushing open the window.

"Hey, Ash. Whaz up?" she shouts, losing her balance.

"Shush. My parents will hear you. I thought you were Jake."

“Jake, Jake, easy bake,” she says, bursting into giggles and holding herself up by the ledge.

“Where were you?”

“Jessica’s,” she slurs. “Do you mind if I stay over. My mom’s gonna be pissed if I come home like this. She’s got this new boy toy that’s only like nineteen and kind of creepy.” Lizzy loses her step and stumbles into the bush next to my window.

“Are you okay?” I ask, extending my arm through the window to help her up.

Lizzy tries to pick brush out of her hair, but misses.

“Meet me at the front door.” I say, pushing the window closed.

“Sorry, man,” she says, staggering into my living room a few seconds later. “I just can’t go home. And if Mom knows I’m here, she won’t ask any questions. She totally trusts and loves you.”

Lizzy leans onto my shoulder.

“Yeah, I know.” I say, letting Lizzy blab on and on about her mom while I guide her toward my room, trying not to gag from the intense cigarette and beer aroma oozing from her clothes.

Lizzy squints and falls into my bed.

“Perfect,” she murmurs.

“Liz?”

The room is quiet except for the rhythm of Lizzy’s breathing. I slide off her flip-flops and pull the covers out from under

her. She doesn't even stir as I tuck her in.

Her phone buzzes across the floor. I pick it up, read a text from her mom, and answer it.

To: Mom

Sleeping at Ash's 2night

Seconds later, Lizzy's mom returns the text.

Fr: Mom

Tell Ash I said hi. C u tom. Call be4 u come home.

Yuck. That's disgusting that Lizzy has to call her own mother when she's on her way home, like in case her cougar mom is in the middle of something with her boyfriend. Poor Liz.

I turn Lizzy's phone off and toss it on my nightstand. Then, I snatch a pillow off my bed and a sleeping bag from my closet and spread it out across my floor underneath my window.



Across the hallway, the toilet flushes and I feel for my phone, which is still lying next to my head. The glaring sun beats through my window. Seven fifteen. *Urgh.*

A Lizzy lump is curled up on my bed. The floor feels hard. A faint beer mixed with cigarette smoke stench hovers above my

room. I stand up and open my windows. Lizzy needs to wake up and take a shower. Like now.

I stare at Lizzy's honey hair peeking out of the top of the comforter feeling guilty. Lately, I know I've been MIA. Between conniving to see Jake and softball, I've barely spent any time with Liz.

My mom opens the door at a snail's pace, glances at the bed, and then at me on the floor. "I didn't know Lizzy was sleeping over, honey."

"Yeah, she stopped by last night."

Mom knows the drill. Since Lizzy and I first met in nursery school, she's been crashing at my house. Lizzy's mom figured out that she could do whatever she wants at night and not have to worry about Lizzy if she stays with me. Lizzy loves sleeping here. A break from the rotating bar guys.

When we were in second grade, Lizzy confided in me that she wanted my parents to adopt her. She was serious. I begged my mom, but of course, the super anal Clarke's wouldn't cooperate.

"How about chocolate chip pancakes?" my mom asks in a whisper.

"Did I hear pancakes?" Lizzy asks, sitting up. Her hair is wiry and poofy.

"Chocolate chip and whipped cream, Liz?"

"Yes," Lizzy shouts, stretching her arms out like she's cheering.

I can't believe Lizzy's ready to down chocolate chip pancakes and whipped cream after she was so wasted last night. She should hang with Emily.

My mom shuts the door, and I lie back on the floor.

"What's wrong with you, lover girl?" Lizzy asks, falling back on my pillows.

"I'm beat."

"So when's JC buzzing into town?"

"Today." I say, looking down.

I look at Lizzy and I don't want to admit it, but we're drifting apart. I mean, every summer Lizzy and I go through this. I'm at softball a lot, she hangs out with other friends for a while. But this summer is different. She's hanging with Nicotine addict Nicole and Jello shot Jessica. The class elite. The class drunks. The class by itself that happens to hang with Andrew and Mark.

"How is good ole Jake?" Lizzy asks wrapping her hair around her index finger.

"Great. We had the best time yesterday and the day before."

Lizzy stares at me with her piercing blue eyes. She always sees right through me. Especially because when it comes to guys, we usually share every dirty detail.

"So, your relationship is that perfect, huh?" She asks, raising her eyebrow.

"Yeah, pretty much." I say, fiddling with the zipper on my

softball-covered sleeping bag.

“Isn’t he dealing with some serious stress and stuff after his mom died?”

How do I tell Lizzy that yeah, he’s dealing with major stress, even making all sorts of money doing something probably illegal? So I lie.

“He’s actually handling it really well. His aunt and uncle are amazing and they’ve been helping out. It’s really unbelievable how he’s been able to bounce back.” I say looking up at Lizzy with the broadest smile I can muster.

She half smiles, still staring at me.

“So, who was the lucky guy last night?” I say, attempting to change the subject.

“What makes you think every time I’m hanging out, I’m hooking up?” Lizzy asks, throwing off my comforter.

“Just asking. Why are you so uptight?”

“I’m not.” She says, hugging her legs to her chest.

This sucks. Everything I say is wrong and I feel all twisty and tight and secretive. I wish things between Lizzy and me would go back to normal and be calm, like it used to be, not all crappy and uncomfortable.

“Look Lizzy, what’s going on?” I ask, hoping to clear things up.

She hugs her legs tighter. “Ashley, I didn’t want to tell you this, but it’s kind of been weird between us since you and Jake got

together. I mean, last year was cool when you were dating Andrew. But, now with Jake, you're closed or something. It's like all that matters to you is when you're going to catch some alone time with Jake. And when Jake's not around you're at softball. What are you going to do in September when Jake's back at school, and you're back at Sunray? I just don't think it's healthy that you're spending so much time with a guy that your parents don't want you seeing, lives a hundred miles away, and is pretty messed up."

I stand up and start folding my sleeping bag. My legs are shaking. Where does Lizzy get off telling me what I should and shouldn't be doing?

"At least, I'm not smoking and drinking and God knows what with my time," I mumble, shoving the sleeping bag in my closet.

"What did you say?"

"You heard me," I say, staring at Lizzy. I mean, how could she possibly know what it's like to be in a serious relationship with a guy whose mom just died. She has no clue.

"Is that what you think of me now. I'm like my mom? Are you saying that I'm acting like my mom?" Lizzy asks, bending over and grabbing her cigarettes from the pocket of her Sunray soccer hoody that's lying next to the bed.

"Well I figured since you're passing so much judgment, I'd pass some of my own."

"You're changing, Ashley Clarke. I'm just trying to warn

you. You're my best friend, and I think that you're spending way too much time with Jake."

"I'm changing? What about you?" I say, resting my hands on my hips.

"What about me? I'm a normal teenager going out and having a good time, not acting all married at fifteen." She says, smacking the cigarette pack on her palm.

"Pancakes are ready." Max yells, barreling into my room and jumping on the bed with Lizzy.

"Hey, buddy," Lizzy says, tossing her cigarettes on the nightstand, grabbing Max, and reciprocating his giant hug.

"Dizzy Lizzy is here," he shouts melting into her arms.

I stare at Lizzy and Max. Am I changing? Am I neglecting my friends? Or am I just hanging out with different friends? Like Rachel.

While Lizzy and Max play tickle torture, my phone vibrates across the floor, bumping into my foot.

Fr: Rachel

Go on Facebook now. Not good.

Instinctively, I feel for my softball charm and remember it's in my nightstand drawer.

"Come on, girls. The pancakes are getting cold," my mom shouts from the kitchen.

“Go ahead, Liz. I’ll be right there,” I say, turning on my computer.

Two minutes later, I’m staring at my worst nightmare. Christy uploaded the pics on her Facebook page under the title, “Maryland Tournament”. Coach D is constantly on Facebook. She even talks about how she loves chatting with old friends on Facebook at practice. She’s sure to check out these pics between now and tomorrow. And Christy made sure of it by tagging the whole team. I’m screwed.

“And you’re getting on my ass for partying.”

I jump.

“You scared the shit out of me,” I say holding my chest.

“Your mom wanted me to come get you. Don’t tell me that Christy Meyers is messing with you again.” Lizzy says, clutching the mouse and clicking through the pictures. “Nice Ashley. I didn’t know you are a cheap-ass wine kind of girl. How come you didn’t tell me about this?”

“I wasn’t drinking, and it just happened last weekend.”

“Is she still with Mark?” Lizzy starts scrolling through Christy’s friends, then her profile and wall.

“Girls, the pancakes are getting cold.” I turn off the computer before my mom gets a look at the pics. It’s bad enough if Coach D sees them, but if my parents do, I’m dead.

“What’s going on?” my mom asks, walking into the room toward us.

I kick the computer plug out of the electrical socket. “I was just showing Ashley my new boyfriend on MySpace.” Lizzy says smiling.

“You know girls, you should be careful on MySpace. Child molesters hang out on that site.”

Lizzy and I roll our eyes. Ever since this television special, parents are freaky about MySpace. In fact, my mom checks it, like, every week or something, and she forced me to do that block thing so that only people who know my name or email address can friend me. So lame. Like I would friend some old nasty dude who likes to molest children.

“We know, we know,” Lizzy and I say. Thank God, there are no specials about freaks on Facebook, yet. I don’t even think my mom knows Facebook exists.

As Lizzy and I follow my mom toward the kitchen, Lizzy whispers, “Don’t worry, I’ve got something big on Christy.”

I smile and wonder what the heck Lizzy’s got lined up. I hope it’s something that will take that girl down for good. We might not agree on boyfriends right now, but one thing we do agree on is Christy has to be stopped. And soon.

After breakfast, Lizzy and I make plans to meet up at her house. Lizzy leaves and I change into my brand new powdery blue and white Juicy bathing suit. When, you’re boobs are the size of mosquito bites, it’s tough find a good bathing suit. I did some research and read in *Teen Vogue* that girls with an athletic build, should

wear a solid colored bottom and busy or horizontal striped top. So when I saw this bathing suit on sale at Marshall's last week, I had to have it.

When you live at the beach, it's normal to run into everyone half naked, like your teacher, principal, mail carrier, neighbors, friends, friends' parents, and everyone else. So, a good bathing suit is ultra important.

Before I take off for the beach, I check my cell phone one more time.

Fr: Jake

Meet?

He's getting into the texting thing.

To: Jake

10th st?

Tenth street beach is the locals' hang out for the summer. It's a surfer beach in front of a nun vacation resort. If my parents catch me hanging there with Jake, it's a no brainer. Jake surfs and technically, he's still a local. Total coincidence.

Fr: Jake

C u soon

Butterflies flutter in my stomach like I'm about to pitch a huge game. I take a look at myself in the mirror and pull up my hair into a high ponytail, throw on some cut off shorts and a blue Nike tank, slip on sandals, and snatch my necklace out of my nightstand drawer. I grab my bag and I'm off.

On the way to Lizzy's, I call Gram.

"Ashley, how are you?" Pop answers.

"Hey, Pop, is Gram there?"

"She's sleeping, Boo? But, I'll tell her you called."

"How's she feeling?" I ask nibbling on my nail.

"Great, sweetheart, great." He pauses. "How's the shore?"

"Nice, Pop. Wish you were here."

"Me too, Boo, me too."

"When are you coming?" I ask.

Pop pauses. "Not sure yet. But, once Gram feels better, we'll be down. I'm sure she'll want to show off her new face and assets if you know what I mean."

I giggle. "Yeah, I bet she does."



It takes me like two minutes to reach Lizzy's. "Hi, Ashley. How are you hon?" Lizzy's mom says breathless, meeting me at the door dressed in a white frilly top and black skirt before I even raise my fist to knock. She's holding a pack of cigarettes in one hand and a waitress apron in the other. She takes off past me like she's

being chased. Seconds later, she peels out of her parking spot in front of their house.

“Ashley, is that you?” Lizzy calls from the basement. “I’m downstairs.”

I take the steps two at a time and spot Lizzy in front of her computer. A camera is attached by a long wire to the side of the keyboard.

“Here it is. The picture that’s going to destroy Christy.” Lizzy clicks her mouse, and a photo of Mark kissing some blond girl fills the screen.

“This is it?” I ask hoping it was something devastating like a picture of Christy doing something down and dirty with, like, the biggest loser in the school, or Christy flashing a body part.

“What do you mean, is this it? I took this picture to remind myself how much of an asshole Mark is. It’s perfect” Lizzy says straightening up in her chair. “Anyway, when you told me about Christy, I know this will kill her, considering, word is, she’s still back and forth with Mark.”

“So, what do you plan on doing?” I ask

“First, I loaded the pictures of the party to my Facebook page and MySpace page. Then, I sent messages, a bulletin, and posted a reminder to check out my pics. It’ll get around and she’ll see it. Guaranteed. Cape Town and Sunray are way too freaking small for Christy to miss seeing her boyfriend sucking face with someone else at a party.”

“Who’s the girl?”

Lizzy smacks a pack of Newports on her palm and fishes a cigarette out of the pack. She flicks a pink lighter and holds the tiny fire up to end of the cigarette resting between her lips. Then, she inhales the nasty carcinogens. “Don’t know.”

“Gross,” I say dramatically waving the smoke out of my face.

“Get over it.” She grins.

I spot a pic of Lizzy with a group of guys I don’t recognize stuck to the side of her computer.

Lizzy shares the same thought process as the boys do around here. She never exclusively dates during the summer, just in case. Around May, Sunray and Cape Town guys mysteriously break up with their local girlfriend. Then once fall rolls around, everyone is back together. Most girls chalk it up as part of living in a touristy area. Lizzy on the other hand, thinks that girls should have just as much opportunity to meet guys from out of town as the guys do with girls.

I take the mouse back from Lizzy and click through the pics myself.

“When was this?” I ask looking at pictures of girls and guys dancing, drinking, and posing. Shots of Lizzy, Jessica, and Nicole with their arms draped around each other like they’re best buds. Shots of Andrew and Mark smiling and hanging on more random girls. Yuck. I’m checking out the pic of Mark and the blond, when

suddenly I notice that in the background Andrew is nose to nose with a girl who looks a lot like... Kate?

“What the hell is this?” I ask pointing to the small background shot of Andrew and Kate. “I didn’t know Kate partied. And I didn’t know Kate and Andrew are friends.”

“Uh, she doesn’t.” Lizzy stubs her cigarette in a Horseshoe Diner ashtray.

“Then what are they doing?”

Lizzy clicks out of the photo album and onto Perez Hilton’s site. “Hey, did you hear about Miley Cyrus? Can you believe what she did?”

“Are you trying to change the subject or something? You know, I’m totally over Andrew, so if you’re trying to keep something from me, it’s stupid.” I lie.

“Are you?” Lizzy turns away from the computer and faces me.

“Yes, I am. Really, Lizzy, I’m so over Andrew and completely in love with Jake. I can handle anything.”

“Kate and Andrew are friends. They hang out. But, maybe you need to think about why you care so much. JC lover.”

I play with my softball charm. “I don’t care who Andrew dates.” I say, plastering a faux smile across my face. “Andrew and I have been done, over for like six months or something. I don’t even think of him anymore.”

I roll my eyes.

“I gotta go,” I say standing up and grabbing my drawstring bag. “I’m supposed to meet Jake at the beach.”

I barrel up the stairs. Once outside, I breathe again. Some random girl from the tri-state area is one thing. But, I sure hope Andrew never dates one of my friends. Ever.

As soon as I finish walking the path through the dune grass to the beach, I spot Jake, dark, tan, and yummy, bobbing on his surfboard.

I plop my bag on the sand, drop my shorts and tank, and smooth out my blanket. Then, I sit down, adjust my bathing suit top, and lean back on my arms. I decided not to bring my beach chair today, since I figured Jake and I would wind up on his moped.

When I’m posed and ready to greet Jake, I spot him, paddling with his knees on his board in black board shorts. He rides the wave in, hops off the board, and scans the beach. I watch his face relax when he spots me. He places the board underneath his pit and walks my way.

Jake’s so dark. I on the other hand, am still sporting the ridiculous partial knee, thigh, and arm farmer’s tan from my softball uniform. I’m trying out this tan in the can stuff that Lizzy recommended. Part of my body is now golden tan, while the other pale parts are orangey instead of beige. And my fingers look like I soaked them in pumpkin guts. I seriously need to read the directions. I’m doing something wrong.

“Hey,” Jake says, standing over me and dripping freezing water on my stomach from his soaked frame.

I jump up, bumping into his nose, and adjust my top.

“Sorry.”

As Jake rubs his nose, he plants the surfboard behind my blanket.

“Did you bring your moped?” I ask, picturing Jake and me riding the moped with a giant surfboard horizontal on the back.

“Yeah. John was here earlier. He’ll take care of the board.”

Jake kisses me. I would love to roll up and down the Jersey beach with him for all of Sunray Beach to witness, but I have to be incognito since my parents are probably roaming the beach at this very moment.

I grab his hand and lead him to the water.

The waves slap against our legs, and we wade further and further out holding hands.

“Going to the fireworks tonight?” Jake asks.

Every year, Sunray has amazing fireworks right over the water. Since my tenth birthday, I’ve always been away at a softball tournament and missed them. Not this year. Fireworks are the night before I leave for a major Fourth of July tournament in Virginia. Perfect weekend.

“Can’t wait.” I smile.

Two little boys on boogie boards bump into Jake. The one boy tumbles into the water, but Jake catches him before he goes

under. “You okay,” he asks.

“Yup.” The little boy barrels toward his buddy.

Jake reaches for my hand. I dive into the oncoming wave.

“Mom and Dad on the beach today?” he asks once I reemerge.

“Just hyper,” I smile ducking underneath another wave.

This time when I come up for air, Jake is gone.

I scan the water, but I can’t find him. My heart is literally in my throat. Where is he?

“Gotcha,” Jake grabs my waist underwater. I sink into his grasp, but avoid kissing him. I would rather resist now for more later, than give in and get punished until 2020.

“Hey, look who it is,” I hear a faint voice in the distance. “Ashley Clarke.”

Mark is retrieving a football from the water and wearing an obnoxious red, white, and blue, fireworks-covered, spandex shorts. As suspected, about football throwing distance away is Andrew.

“Hi, Mark,” I roll my eyes. At the same time, Jake turns around from his spot in the surf.

“Hey, Jake,” Mark sludges through the water toward Jake. When was Mark ever friends with Jake?

Mark extends his hairy arm toward Jake, who hesitates at first, then takes his hand and does that weird guy handshake thing that consists of hand and arm slaps, feels, and gropes. How does every guy know how to do that exact handshake? Is it something

that's, like, passed down father to son?

“How's it going? Man, I saw you fight the other night. Unbelievable.”

I look at Jake, then Mark. Fight?

“Thanks,” Jake says.

“How'd you get involved with that shit? I'm thinking about trying it, you know, since I'm pretty big and everything.” Mark says, puffing out his chicken chest.

“What fight?” I say squinting at Mark behind my oversized sunglasses.

Mark looks at Jake, then at me. “Uh.”

“Hey, Ash, Jake, what's up?” Andrew walks up and looks at me with his pups. My stomach drops. I hate it that I still have a stupid physical reaction to his presence. I grab my chain and start playing with the softball, avoiding Andrew eye contact.

Jake is mum. All four of us stand there in awkward silence, until a blond girl I don't recognize interrupts us.

“Hey, guys, let's go. I thought we were playing football.” As I look up, I notice another blond girl filling out a tiny red bikini.

“See you guys later,” Mark says wrapping his arms around the first blond by her waist as she tosses the ball to blond girl number two before tumbling to the ground under Mark.

Andrew lingers for a minute. Then he turns around. I stare at his chiseled back before he joins the girls.

“That was awkward,” I say.

“Why?” Jake asks.

“I don’t know. That’s the first time I saw Andrew with you, you know?”

“I didn’t think that’s a big deal anymore. We see people from town all the time.” Jake says, charging ahead of me toward the blanket.

“Hey, you’re not getting away that easy,” I say, gripping his arm. “What’s the deal with the fight?”

Jake stops. “It’s nothing, Ashley.”

“I’m tired of hearing the same damn thing all the time. Do you think I’m stupid, or is it that you don’t trust me?”

“No,” he says sitting on the blanket, propping his elbows on his bent knees, and rubbing his head.

“Hello?” I wave my hand in front of his face. “What? Do you think I can’t handle that you’re fighting people for some reason? Is it your mom? Are people coming up to you and saying things about your mom or something? Cause I don’t blame you if you’re kicking ass because of that.”

Jake sinks his head between his arms and smiles.

“What?”

“You should write books or something. You have a crazy-ass imagination.”

“Stop changing the subject.”

“Okay, do you really want to know everything? Trust me, Ashley, sometimes it’s better not to know some things in life.”

“No, I want to know.” And I do. I want to feel like a part of this life that he’s living.

Jake stares at the water and takes a deep breath. “I told you already, I’m fighting sometimes for money. I’ve been training with this guy in Mixed Martial Arts. I fight around the area. You can’t tell anyone because it’s underground stuff, and I’m underage. Plus, I don’t want to ruin my chances for a wrestling scholarship with a major college or university.”

“What? Is it illegal?”

“Not really. I stay out of the business part. The guy you met at the pizza place the other day runs most of the fights. He hangs out at a gym, tells me where to go, and I show up to fight.”

Jake doesn’t look at me while he describes MMA. “Can you get seriously hurt?”

“As long as I keep training hard and fighting like I am, it’s unlikely. Bruises and stuff, yeah, but nothing major. They’ll stop the fight before anyone gets hurt bad.” He says, holding his hands in front of his eyes to block the glaring sun.

“Why can’t you get a normal summer job, Jake?”

“What and make six dollars an hour at McDonald’s? I make over two hundred dollars a fight, and five hundred if I win. Nobody makes that kind of money at sixteen. Plus, it’s helping me get ready for wrestling season.”

This all sounds ass backwards to me, but I guess if I had the opportunity to pitch or something for that kind of money, I

wouldn't be flipping burgers, either.

"But, it seems so shady."

"It's not, Ashley." Jake says, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and kissing the top of my head. I swear between Jake and the hot July Jersey sun, I'm melting.

"Can I go to a fight?"

"It's not like it's at an arena or anything like on TV. Most of the time it's on a mat at a gym. It's really nothing." He says, squeezing me tighter. I rest my head on his hard chest. "Don't worry about me. I'm only doing it through the summer. Then, I'm done."

For a second, I forget where I am. A lifeguard whistle brings me back to reality, and I jump.

"Let's go to the boardwalk," I say. Jake pulls a black tee with the words, Punishment, over his head.

After shoving my bag on the back of Jake's bike, we walk the three blocks to the boardwalk. Sunray's boardwalk is cool. I mean it's not as great as Wildwood's boardwalk with its amazing roller coaster and water slides, but after some renovations last winter, we now have a new pier with a gigantic Ferris wheel, a couple of kid rides, some games, and a dinky roller coaster.

Today the boardwalk is dressed to impress, splashed with red, white, and blue flags, balloons, and streamers. Patriotic music pumps from the loud speakers. Families on huge six-seat bikes zoom past us, and Jake grabs my hand.

“Watch the tram car, please,” a yellow tram car that looks like a kiddy train filled with adults screams. We maneuver out of the way at the same time, trying to avoid the zillions of bikes thumping across the boards.

“I don’t miss tram cars,” Jake grins squeezing my hand tight.

I spot an old photo booth in one of the arcades. “Did you ever get your pic taken in one of these?” I ask Jake pulling him toward the arcade.

“Nope,” he keeps walking straight.

“Come on. It’ll be fun.”

Jake rolls his eyes and resists, but then I smile at him, and he follows me to the photo booth. I dig into my pocket for the twenty I grabbed before I left the house.

“Here,” Jake says maneuvering in front of me and feeds two dollar bills into the machine.

“I forgot that you’re the next Tito Ortiz,” I tease pinching his bicep.

“Does that mean I’ll end up with Jenna Jameson?” He says, grinning.

I attempt to punch him in the gut. Jake catches my fist and pulls me into the booth.

We both squeeze onto a tiny seat. A flash blinds us before we can even smile.

Jake places his arms around me. We smile. Then, he starts

laughing and we make goofy faces. Finally, Jake kisses me on the cheek. It sends chills up my back.

I turn toward him, and we kiss. Little pecks again and again until one of the pecks turns into a longer passionate one, and Jake presses me up against the side of the booth. This bad boy is so freaking hot. Hotter than Fourth of July weekend at Sunray hot.

The sound of the machine spitting out the pictures stops us mid-kiss. Jake pulls the curtain open, and I follow him out of the booth.

I snatch the pics before Jake can get a look at them. He walks around me and hugs me from behind, resting his head on my shoulder, and we both stare.

“You’re so hot, Ash,” Jake whispers in my ear.

My knees buckle.

After three rounds of Skee Ball and four games of basketball, we walk out of the arcade. Adorable little white, brown, tan, and black teddy bears fill a stand in front of the amusement pier.

Jake walks up and places a dollar on number two. The guy working the stand hits a button and the wheel ticks around and around and around and finally stops on number three.

“Sorry, man,” the guy at the booth says dragging the coins across the board and into the hole. Jake places another dollar on two, and once again the wheel spins.

But, this time it stops at two.

“A winner,” the worker shouts.

“Can I have that one?” Jake says, pointing to an adorable tan teddy bear. He hands it to me, and I snuggle it.

“Thanks.”

Jake grabs my hand, and we avoid tripping over toddlers running toward rides. He stops in front of the giant Ferris wheel. Jake pays, and we sit together in a pink car. The attendant locks us in.

“Scared?”

“No,” I say, but honestly, I’ve never been on this Ferris wheel before. It’s so huge. It hovers over every house in Sunray, and you can see it miles away.

The wheel shakes, and it starts moving slowly. We sail up and up until it stops at the top. When I look down, people on the beach look like miniature dolls, and the ocean stretches for miles. It’s breezier this high, and the car begins to rock back and forth.

Jake moves his body, rocking it faster. I grip his knee.

“Stop.” I shout.

“I knew you were scared.” Jake says, halting the rocking.

I smile and look up.

Jake cups the back of my head under my ponytail. “You know, Ash, I wouldn’t mess this up. You gotta stop worrying so much.” Jake kisses me, and the Ferris wheel does its thing.

“Miss Ashley Clarke.” I spot him as soon as we step off the wheel. “How are you?”

“Fine,” I say looking down and walking fast ahead of Jake

down the boardwalk. Mr. Willis, a cop that works with my dad stands in front of the lemonade stand.

“Tell Dad I’ll see him tonight, okay?” he says.

“Okay.” I call back over my shoulder.

Jake catches up with me. “Still haven’t told Dad about us, huh?”

“Kind of,” I say staring down at the weathered brown wooden boards.

“Why are you so caught up with what people think?”

I stop walking and face Jake. “I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You care what your parents think. You care what your friends think. You even care what your Dad’s friends think. Why can’t you just tell people about us?” Jake asks folding his cut arms in front of his body.

“I don’t want to talk about this,” I say turning around and walking toward the end of the boardwalk.

He doesn’t get it. He doesn’t have parents to worry about, and his aunt and uncle are super cool. It’s easier if I just sneak around and do this. If I tell my parents, then they’ll be on my ass, and I’ll never see Jake again.

“That’s what I thought.”

I stop, spin, and wrap my arms around Jake squeezing his butt, smacking a kiss right on his lips. “There, does that make you feel better?” I ask. “Let’s get out of here,” I say.

“My aunt and uncle are at the beach, Ash.”

“Exactly.”

Jake grins. And we race to his bike.



It takes us ten minutes to get to the campground and exactly two seconds to get inside the trailer and start making out on Jake’s bed.

Jake’s on top of me.

He pauses and leans his head on his bent elbow staring into my eyes. “You okay with this?”

“Yeah,” I say. I mean, did Jake ever ask any of the other bazillions of girls he’s probably laid on top of if they were okay? Why me? Do I give off some sort of vibe or something?

Jake dives into my neck. Shivers shoot and I wiggle, his breath is driving me insane. I feel his warm hand underneath my tank on my stomach.

I move my hands underneath his tee to feel his massive muscles like I saw Blair do to Nate during a “Gossip Girl” episode. Instead I’m all-thumbs and this doesn’t feel smooth like the show. But I do know his chest is hot.

“Wait, Jake.”

“I’m sorry, Ash,” Jake pulls out his hand out from underneath my tank, forcing my hands to get wrapped up and stuck in his shirt.

Another car door slams.

“Is that your aunt and uncle?”

Jake gets loose and crawls on his hands and knees toward the window.

“Shit.” Jake says, fixing his shirt.

I sit up and smooth down my hair.

We almost tumble down the steps just as the front door opens. Jake pulls me next to him on the couch.

“Ashley, how are you?” Aunt Val shouts placing plastic grocery bags on the kitchen table.

“Hey, look who’s here,” Uncle Fred follows, balancing a case of beer.

“Need help?” Jake asks.

“No, we’re good,” Uncle Fred says while he places the case in the fridge.

“Are you guys staying for dinner?” Aunt Val asks.

Jake looks at me. I shrug my shoulders.

“Yeah, sounds good,” he says. “Want to go to the pool, Ash?”

First the beach, then the boardwalk, his bed, now the pool, it’s like we’re fitting in an entire summer in five hours.

“We’re going to the pool,” Jake yells.

“Be back in an hour for dinner,” Aunt Val shouts back.

And once again I follow Jake’s lead.

We never made it to the pool.

After another quick make-out session in the woods, but this time, he actually touches the outside of my bathing suit top

for a second, which I think was an accident, we're back at the trailer while Aunt Val barbeques another round of her famous Val burgers.

I grab the stick and start playing with the fire Uncle Fred started while we were gone. Jake sits away from it on the porch once again.

My stomach is all twisty and excited. I sneak peeks at Jake as he sits on a wooden rocking chair on the porch with a goofy grin on his face. I seriously could've stayed in the woods forever. He's so freaking hot. I love the way he moves my hair out of my face and grins, showing off his dimples. And when he kisses me, I melt like the cheese Aunt Val is placing on the Val burgers.

My phone vibrates me back to reality. I stand up and walk a bit down the dirt road.

"Hey, Mom," I say trying to sound as cheerful and normal as possible.

"Hi, Ash. Are you still with Lizzy?"

I think about the answer for a sec. Is Mom trapping me? Does she know that I wasn't really with Lizzy today?

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Are you coming home for dinner tonight?"

"Uh, no, I'm going to eat with Lizzy."

"Okay. Well, your dad is working and I was thinking of going up to the fireworks with Max. Are you going with Lizzy?"

I think about this question too. Man, lying sucks, and I

hate thinking this much.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, well I’ll see you up there.”

“Yeah.” I hope not. I flip the phone closed.

Jake is sitting at the picnic bench munching on chips when I walk up.

“Everything all right?” he asks.

“Just Lizzy,” I lie again.



After dinner, I’m back on the bike inhaling Jake’s sweet scent and hugging my bear.

We take off with a jolt. A few minutes later, Jake pulls up to the Sunray’s point, where the bay meets the ocean and beachy Sunray meets bayside Cape Town. Kind of like Jake and me. His old life in Cape Town meets mine in Sunray. The same point that Jake and I almost shared our first kiss, until I pushed out because I was scared he would hurt me like Andrew.

After we take off our helmets, I wrap my hair in a loose ponytail again and adjust my shorts. The moped leaves me with a major wedgie. I clutch his hand and lead him to the exact spot that he made his move last winter when I resisted.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Making up for the past,” I say.

“Ashley, you’re so amazing. you how lucky I am?”

I gently pull Jake’s hand. He follows me and sits down.

I straddle his lap and start kissing him. We tumble into the dune grass. I swear I've never kissed anyone in my lifetime as much as I've kissed Jake Cole today, and all I want to do is keep doing it over and over again.

Fireworks pop and sizzle overhead. We stop and lean on a black rock. The fireworks light the sky in blues, purples, reds, and silvers. My favorites, the ones that sparkle, then fizz like tiny stars, ignite overhead. This is by far my best Fourth, even though technically Monday is the real holiday. I rest my head on Jake's shoulder, and I feel the rise and fall of his chest. Heaven.

After the amazing fireworks finale ends, Jake and I walk hand in hand back to the bike. We spot a huge crowd circling a group of guys in the middle of the parking lot.

"Is that... ?" But before I can get the words out, Jake sprints to crowd, pushing his way to the middle. I fall behind and watch from a distance.

"You're an asshole," Jake's older brother, John, shouts, stumbling and pointing to a guy in a black tee.

"You're mom's a whore, and since she's dead, now you owe us." The black tee guy says and pushes Jake's brother. John stumbles backward, then retrieves his step and leaps at the dude.

As fast as a blink, Jake, his brother, and five other guys are beating the piss out of each other. Random guys jump in trying to pull the guys away from each other, but no one can move Jake and John. In fact, Jake has the black tee guy in some painful looking

scrunched up wrestling move, and he's punching him in the face over and over and over. Blood drizzles out of the guys nose. His hands are up, trying to defend himself, but it's useless. I've never seen a fight, let alone one with blood. It's gross.

I want to turn away. The sounds of fist hitting flesh are nauseating. But, I can't. Jake is a different guy. A monster. The guy that gently kisses me and cares for me is gone, replaced by a freaky animal. It's frightening.

Flashing blue, red, and white lights pull up at the scene and that's my cue to get the heck out of there. I catch a glimpse of my dad in the squad car window and duck further into the dune grass. If I take off for home now, he'll see me. So, I stay put.

Three cops spring out of their cars. And all three descend on the fight. My dad grabs the back of Jake's tee.

The guy that Jake was plummeling isn't moving. I watch in horror as my dad reaches toward his belt and grabs his cuffs. My dad slams Jake on the squad car and pulls Jake's arms behind his back. He wraps the cuffs around Jake's wrists. Jake never says a word or resists as he is maneuvered into the back my dad's squad car.

My dad's mouth is moving the entire time. He's reading him his rights. Jake is arrested.

The other two police officers seize and cuff John and two other guys, and throw them in the back of the squad car.

Black tee guy is lying on the ground in a fetal position.

Blood pools from his face when the ambulance workers arrive at the scene.

Eventually, black tee guy maneuvers to his feet and gingerly, with the help of the workers, makes his way into the back of the ambulance. He looks gruesome.

When the crowd disperses and the squad cars and ambulances take off, I pull out my cell phone and text Lizzy.

To: Lizzy

Help

I wait, and almost immediately, Lizzy texts me back.

Fr: Lizzy

??

To: Lizzy

Stuck @ point not leavn evr

Fr: Lizzyy

WTF? JC?

To: Lizzy

Dad arrestd him.

It's so weird to even text those words. I mean, of all the places in the world for Jake to be arrested, it's in my town by my own father.

Fr: Lizzy

OMG Im @ 10th

I look around again just to make sure none of my dad's buddies are on hand to witness me climbing out of the dune grass. Jake's moped still rests on its kickstand all by itself in the parking lot. Should I try to ride it or call his aunt and uncle and tell them to pick it up?

For a moment, I stop and fiddle with my charm. I don't even know how to ride a moped, and it's not like I'm paying attention to how to drive it, when I'm on the back. I decide to leave it alone.

Thank God, my parents don't know that I'm still with Jake. I would probably get grounded longer than him. In fact, I'm sure Jake's aunt and uncle probably won't even ground Jake considering that dude pushed John first and is a slime ball drug dealer or something looking to get paid.

The black tee guy that was shuffled into the back of the ambulance could walk and everything, but his face was seriously messed up from Jake pounding on it.

When I arrive at the 10th street beach, there is a group of

guys and girls from Sunray huddling around a small fire. Lizzy is standing with Jessica and Nicole when she spots me. She bursts out of the group and sprints toward me.

“What happened?” she asks, blue eyes bulging. “I thought you were with Jake and everything was cool. Did your dad catch you with Jake? What could he possibly arrest him for? I mean, it’s not like he’s over eighteen.”

“No, not exactly.” I proceed to fill Lizzy in on the fight.

“Oh my God. Jake’s screwed.”

Shouts echo from the group as Mark sprints down the beach, diving into a wave. If Mark’s here, that means... I scan the crowd looking for Andrew. Off sitting on top of a lifeguard stand, I recognize Andrew’s dangling hairy legs and the hoody he lent me last year, with his arm around a girl with blond hair.

“Hello?” Lizzy snaps her fingers in front of my face.

I turn back to face Lizzy.

“Yeah, I know. I’m so not looking forward to going home.”

“Well you might as well hang out here and buy time.” Lizzy grabs my hand, but I don’t want to go and hang out with Mark and Andrew. I wonder if this is Andrew and random girl’s first kiss. Does Andrew kiss every girl for the first time on a lifeguard stand? Like me last summer? Is that, like, his signature move?

“It might be best if I go home now before my dad gets home from work.” I lie.

“Okay. Text me later and let me know what happens,”

Lizzy hugs me.

“Thanks.”

Before I turn around to walk home, I sneak another peek at Andrew, who’s involved in a major lip lock. *Yuck.*

On my way home, I text Jake over ten times, but nothing. Sick with worry, I avoid the sidewalk cracks, thinking about the million things that could happen. I mean, what if Jake is seriously arrested? Will it hurt his shot of snagging a wrestling scholarship? Will he still even be able to wrestle? Will he go to jail?

“Ashley, you’re home.” My mom scares the piss out of me, and I jump.

She’s rocking on a chair on the porch, cupping a mug.

“Why don’t you have a seat?”

Her tone sounds bad. Is it Jake? Oh no, Dad saw me.

“Where’s dad?” I ask.

“He’s not home yet, and it’s probably a good thing.”

“What are you talking about?” My stomach is jumpy like I’m on a trampoline, and I can’t get off.

“Ashley, your coach called.”

Oh my God, the picture. After everything with Jake today, I completely forgot. I swallow a lump and sit on the porch step.

“Please tell me you weren’t drinking at a tournament.”

“I wasn’t drinking.”

“You’re lying, Ashley. I saw the picture.”

First she asks me to tell her I wasn't drinking and then she accuses me of lying. This is so not good. And Coach D knows. We're frigging screwed, and I hate Christy for letting this happen. What started out at the best day ever is turning into my worst nightmare.

"What the hell has gotten into you?" Mom maneuvers to the edge of the chair. "Then, your father calls a little while ago and I find out that you never stayed at Rachel's aunt and uncle's. You spent the night at Jake Cole's."

I'm going to hurl Val burgers all over the porch.

"What are you talking about?" I do my best to play dumb.

"Don't pull that crap with me, Ashley. You know exactly what we're talking about. Dad broke up a fight with your friend, Jake, and he had to report his address. He tried to give five fake addresses before they spoke to his brother, who gave up the real address. Are you sleeping with him, Ashley? Your dad and I didn't even know you two were still together." My mom asks placing her mug on the ground and running her fingers through her shoulder length hair.

"No." I say, fiddling with my charm. Who cares if they see it? Screw it.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Ashley Jean Clarke? And what the hell has gotten into you? You have so much to lose, and the rate you're going, you're going to be knocked up, miserable, and living in a shack like..."

She seriously didn't just say that. "Like who, Mom? Like Jake's mom. What is wrong with you? If it wasn't for you and dad, I wouldn't have to sneak around. You need to let me grow up and make my own decisions."

"Is that so?" My mom stands up, walks toward the door, and faces me. "You're done, Ashley. No friends, no phone, no computer, no softball. You have to learn what it's like to have nothing for a while, until you earn our trust back. I never coined you to be like this, Ashley. Sneaking around, lying, drinking, sleeping over your boyfriend's house, probably having sex."

"It wasn't like that, and I'm not having sex." I yell. A family of four is walking by the house on their way to the boardwalk stares at us, but I don't care.

My mom slams the door.

At the same time, I lie back on the porch and look up at the star-filled sky. No softball, no friends, no Jake. I stand up, pick up my mom's mug, and pitch it into the side of the porch. It smashes into a million pieces.

Thursday, July 22nd

I'm bored. Like really bored. Like Geography class bored. It's been almost three weeks, and Dad still isn't talking to me. After a couple of trips to see Gram, a million reruns of "Gossip Girl", too many hours of VH1 and MTV, four million pitches against my mattress, oodles and oodles of hours of "Guitar Hero", and four smutty books courtesy of Gram later, I'm ready to hang myself. Punishment sucks.

All I can think about is Jake. Everything I watch, reminds me of him. I still don't even know what happened that night, except that my dad found out his address. Yet, I don't dare ask. My stomach is all twisty and yucky every time I think of the fight, Jake, and this dumb-ass punishment.

And since I'm not allowed to play softball, there is absolutely no way to escape this mess. Without softball, my life

completely sucks. I mean, at least last spring when I was punished, I was still allowed to hang out with my teammates and pitch. But, this time, I'm stuck at home doing absolutely nothing. I let my parents down. I let my teammates down. I let my coach down.

My dad needs rehab. Our lawn is perfect, but he's outside for like hours every night watering, seeding, edging, and cutting. My mom, on the other hand is taking another approach. She handed me this old ratty book, "Ten Stupid Things Women Do to Mess Up their Lives" and even highlighted some of the passages. She also threatened me with counseling if I don't change. They need to change. Not me. They need to change and treat me like a fifteen year old, instead of a five year old.

Mom says Jake has bad character. How does anyone around here know about Jake's character? They don't even know him. They found out his mom died of a drug overdose and forbid me to see him. My mom never even met Jake, and my dad met him on two occasions that happened to be really sucky times for Jake, like when his mom died and the fight.

It's weird. Jake hasn't stopped by at all through all this. In fact, I'm not even sure if he's knows I'm punished. My parents have been watching me like a hawk. I even tried to sneak into my parent's room while they were sleeping to try to snag my cell phone resting on my parents' nightstand, but once I put my hand on it, my detective dad woke up and stared at me. I turned around and returned to my room.

At least, today is the beginning of some normalcy. I'm allowed to go back to softball practice, which I miss bunches. On the other hand, this presents a whole list of other problems. Like, I've missed the last tournament, and I still haven't seen coach since the picture mess. In fact, I don't even know what happened to Emily, Kate, and Rachel. I'm, like, walking into this totally blind.

Mom drops me off at the field early, and I immediately spot Rachel a couple of steps ahead of me. I pick up my pace to catch up with her.

"Hey," I say out of breath because for the last two weeks I spent my time lounging in front of television instead of working out. When dad refuses to pitch, I know he's pissed.

"What the heck happened to you?" Rachel asks and stops.

"You have no idea." I say, filling Rachel in on the fireworks, fight, and punishment.

"That sucks."

"What happened with the picture?" I ask hoping that I won't have to face even more punishment.

"Kate, Emily, and I met with coach before the last tournament and told her what happened. We had to sit out the first game, which we lost by the way because Christy sucks, apologize to the team, and that's it."

"Whew. Are you serious? I don't know what I would do if softball was taken away from me. It's like the only thing I can do right."

“I know what you mean,” Rachel stares at the sky for a second. “Man, that sucks that your parents lost it like they did. Have you talked to Jake?”

“No,” I hang my head and stare at my cleats.

Rachel wraps her arm around me. “Hey, why don’t you borrow my cell to call him or something?”

“You have his number?”

“No, but I think you can find it.” Rachel says, digging into her bat bag.

She hands me her pink phone. “His number is programmed in my phone and his cell is so new, so I don’t have it memorized yet.” I say, handing back the phone.

“Summer bummer. Can you call the phone company or something? Hey, can’t you look it up on the internet?” Rachel asks adjusting her sparkly red headband, which holds back her blond bob.

“I’m banned from that, too.”

“I’ll look it up.” She pushes some buttons on her phone. “Is there anyone else who would have it?”

“Jake’s brother.”

“Well, I can definitely get his number,” she says, dialing 411.

“Cole in Cape Town, New Jersey, please.” She pulls the phone from her ear and presses one.

“Here.” My heart is racing and my palms start to sweat.

John says hello.

“John,” I shout.

“Who’s this?”

“It’s Ashley, Ashley Clarke, Jake’s...” I pause, but I guess I am. “girlfriend.”

“Hey, Ash.”

“Do you have Jake’s cell phone number?” I say, squatting down on the grass trying to contain the bursting excitement rushing through my body.

“Yeah, hold on.” When John gets back on the phone and relays the number to me. I press the numbers into Rachel’s cell and save it under Jake.

I press send and take a deep breath.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” Rachel says walking toward the field.

Jake’s voicemail picks up.

“Jake, it’s me. I’m punished, and I don’t have my cell. My parents found out that I stayed at your house. Anyway, I miss you, and I want to see you, and I’m worried about you. So, call me or something on this cell. I love you.” I say flipping the phone closed. My heart is beating so hard that I can hear it. Did I say, ‘I love you?’

I shove the phone in a little pocket on the inside of my short’s waistband and grab my bag. Now, I just have to figure out how to miss practice if Jake calls me back. My stomach flutters. I

scan the field and locate a Mr. Bob. Perfect.

When Coach D arrives carrying the ball buckets, I can't make eye contact with her. Instead, I concentrate on my throwing form as I toss the ball back and forth to Rachel.

Coach D walks toward Rachel and I. "Ashley, glad you're here. I want to talk to you after practice."

"Okay," I squeak swallowing a lump in my throat.

Rachel transfers the ball from her glove to her hand and when Coach D is back in the dugout planning practice, she grins.

"Don't sweat it, Ash. I told you all the girls got together already with Coach D. We're in the clear. Seriously."

I want to believe Rachel, but with the streak of bad luck I've been faced with lately, it's hard to believe anything will go that smoothly. The phone is still silent as Christy sashays her way onto the field like a diva.

"Ashley you're back. Joy." She announces, rolling her eyes and grabbing a ball out of the bucket.

"How's Mark?" I ask curious to her reaction to Lizzy's pics.

Christy pretends she doesn't hear me and walks as far away as possible from Rachel and me in left field to begin her catch with Amy. *Loser.*

By the middle of practice, the phone still hasn't moved. I'm starting to get nervous, and I'm having a hard time concentrating and locating my pitches. Plus, the time away from the diamond,

even two weeks, doesn't help. I attempted to get some throwing time in, begging my dad to go to the field, but my parents wouldn't budge. I couldn't leave the frigging house.

Coach D calls the pitchers and catchers together to throw. Rachel and I pitch to each other. At the same time, Christy throws next to us with Emily. We're silent. No way am I going to talk about anything with Christy standing next to me. What will she spread next? It's all her fault.

"How's Jake, Ash?" Christy asks, before going into her windup.

Here she goes. I'm not biting. I have enough to deal with.

"Not talking to me, huh?" she says, retrieving the ball from Emily and setting up again. "Well, I thought you should know that he's been in Cape Town quite a bit. I hope he doesn't fall into his old habits since you're punished, you know. That would suck. But, who could blame him. He's a guy. And he's Jake Cole."

Christy winds up and fires. I picture myself grabbing Christy by her Ronald McDonald hair and punching her in the face.

"Pretty bad summer for you, huh, Ash?"

I try to zone out Christy, instead focusing on Rachel and my pitching, but I can't. What if Jake does cheat on me? I mean, she's right. He's a guy, and technically we never talked about if we're officially girlfriend or boyfriend or anything. We hung out, made out, and I slept over at his house.

Rachel starts giggling.

“You’re so jealous, Christy. Jake’s no Mark.”

Christy stops mid motion. “You should know, Rachel, you should know.” She winds up again and fires a fastball.

Rachel continues to giggle. “Whatever.”

After a sweaty, sweltering practice, Coach D calls us together for our end of practice mile run, and we take off. Christy is ahead of everyone, as usual, with her crew surrounding her like bodyguards. Rachel and I stay in the middle of the pack.

“Did he call yet?” Rachel asks.

“No,” I say, trying to sound as upbeat as possible.

“He will,” she says, taking in a deep breath. “Do you want to keep my cell for a while, so you can talk to Jake? It’s not like I have a boyfriend or anything to talk to, so you’ll get more use out of it than I will in this lifetime.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone has ever offered to do for me. But, Rachel, I can’t take your cell,” I say. “I’ll be done with this punishment soon. Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, but then what are you going to do? Will your parents let you see Jake?”

“Unlikely.” I say, seriously out of breath. I’ve never been able to run and talk at the same time. Which sucks and makes running even more boring and horrific than it already is.

After we finish the run, Coach D calls us together to go over our National warm-up scrimmage. Finally, a game in Cape Town.

“Ashley,” Coach D waves me over after the talk.

I walk over staring at the grass when Rachel's cell phone starts to vibrate.

"I wanted to talk to you about the picture."

It's Jake. But I can't bail out of this ultra important conversation about the pics.

"I already spoke to the other girls involved, and I just wanted to say that I'm very disappointed in you."

The cell vibrates again. I sneak a glance at Mr. Bob.

"The four of you have very bright futures, and I hope that you will make a better decision the next time something like alcohol or another temptation is introduced."

My stomach is jumpy. I have to talk to him. "I will. I'm sorry."

"The rest of the girls were forced to sit, but since your parents took it upon themselves to discipline you, I really don't think it's necessary for me to sit you when you've missed two weeks because of the picture."

Please be done. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot my mom's car. Crap. And Rachel is waiting for me by the dugout. I need to talk to Jake.

"Don't thank me. Just make better choices in the future, Ashley. I know sometimes peer pressure is hard to resist, but you could play softball in college and engaging in certain activities, especially illegal ones, is not the way to make it to the top of your game."

I nod and help Coach D gather the balls for the ball buckets. Then, I sprint, Mr. Bob bound, signaling to my mom to wait.

Mr. Bob is nasty and the toilet resembles a giant bowl of brown soup. I pull out the cell phone and flip it open.

“Hey,” Jake answers sounding chipper.

“Hi, Jake. I’m really sorry, but I got punished and stuff. It’s been horrible. How are you? What have you been doing? Are you okay? Did you get arrested? Are you hurt? What are you doing?” I repeat, holding my hand to my chest to halt my pounding heart.

“Wooh. Slow down,” he says. “It’s okay. I heard from Rachel that you were punished. No worries.”

Heard from Rachel? She didn’t tell me she talked to Jake. Mr. Bob is cooking and the stench is making me gag.

“What happened? Did you go to jail?” I ask, deciding not to waste time Rachel nagging. It’s okay if they’re friends. I gulp, trying not to breathe through my nose.

Jake laughs. “The scumbag was going to press assault charges, but he pulled out at the last minute. Your dad told me the guy had drug charges or something.”

“That’s a break.” Seriously? My dad helped out Jake? Maybe he doesn’t totally hate him.

“So, when can I see you?” Jake asks.

“I don’t know. I’m in for the summer.” My legs feel heavy. I want to sit down, but hell no. Gross.

“The whole summer? Isn’t that a little harsh?”

“Yup. That’s my parents. They think I’m having sex with you or something.”

Jake laughs.

“What?” I ask.

“No, it’s just ridiculous. Do your parents always freak out like this?”

“Uh. Yeah. I was trying to explain all this on the boardwalk. You don’t get it, you don’t have to...” I stop myself before I word vomit. “We’ll figure something out,” I add, hoping he missed the part about his parents.

“I tried to stop by a couple nights, but you didn’t answer.”

“What nights?”

“Last week and the week before, for a couple days.

“I’ve been hanging out with Gram.”

“How is she?”

“She looks great. And she’s so happy and can’t wait to show off her new face.” I say, smiling thinking of Gram. “Where are you now?”

“I’m in the Shade. But, we’re heading down again next week.”

My stomach drops. “Why not this weekend?”

“I have a wrestling tournament this weekend in Philly.”

“Legal?”

“Very funny. Yes, legal. I have to give up fighting for money for a while. I’m starting to train for the wrestling season, and I

can't risk getting hurt. In fact, Coach talked me into running cross-country to keep in shape. I can't get the crap kicked out of me once a week and run cross-country. So, I agreed to fight one more time in late August, then I'm done."

For a minute, I try to picture Jake all Zen and running.

"Cross country?"

"Maybe you can help me train when you're let loose."

"Yeah. I'm in jail longer than you were, and I didn't even freaking fight."

"Ashley, you in there? Are you feeling okay?" My mom yells, pounding on the door.

"I have to go."

"Love you," he says and hangs up without waiting for me to respond.

I stare at the phone like Jake will magically appear in this smelly Mr. Bob with me. I would give anything to see him right now.

"Ashley," my mom yells.

"I'll be right out, Mom." I shove the phone back into my shorts and push open the door.

"What the heck are you doing?"

"I had to go," I say walking toward the dugout. "What am I in jail? I can't even shit without you or Dad following me? Do you need to check all my crevices, or do you still want to change my diaper?"

“That’s a dollar.”

“Whatever.” I pick up my bat bag and violently throw it over my shoulder. Rachel walks next to me. How am I going to hand the phone off to Rachel with my mom watching my every move?

Rachel winks at me. “See you Saturday, Ashley.”

“You too, Rach.”

The phone digs into my hipbone. Sweet.

Saturday, July 24th

A couple of days later, while I'm pulling my orange Crush jersey over my head, I hear Rachel's phone vibrating in my closet. Instinctively, I walk over to my door to lock it, but then I remember Dad removed the lock after I was busted. So, I charge into my closet, shut the door behind me, relax on a pile of clothes, and grab the lit phone.

"Hey, Ash." Jake's sweet voice sends shivers down my spine. "Just wanted to wish you luck with your scrimmage. I'm on my way to my tournament."

It would be so much safer if Jake and I text instead of talking on the phone, but I love hearing his voice. It's like he's actually here in the closet with me instead of, like, a hundred miles away.

"You too," I say wiping the sleep out of my eyes. After last night's two-hour talk, Rachel's battery is super low. I'll have to hit

her up for the charger today. She's the bestest friend ever, even if she does have some weird friendship or something with Jake that she doesn't talk about.

"Love you," he says.

"Love you too," I say, whispering back. I never thought in a million years I would echo those words to anyone ever, especially Jake Cole. But, I'm feeling them, bad. And it's becoming our good-bye.

The phone goes dead. Instantly, I switch gears. I have a tournament to win. I smile, stand up, open the door, and let the light spill into the closet from my room.

"Ashley, are you ready?" my dad opens my bedroom door.

"Dad," I scream covering my chest and hoping he'll think I'm getting dressed, instead of snagging me holding Rachel's hot pink cell phone.

"Sorry," he shuts the door. "Mom and I will be outside."

Whew, that was a close one. I toss the cell in my bat bag and finish getting dressed.



As usual, we arrive at the field super early, ahead of everyone else, so I can get into my so-called zone. The only person in the dugout is Kate, pale blond hair piled high on her head in a ponytail, listening to her iPod.

Honestly, I don't even feel like playing today. It's not that I want to give up softball or love it any less, but after the picture

incident and everything that went on between Jake and Rachel, playing for the Crush is exhausting.

“Aren’t you going to get out and sit with Kate?” my mom asks, anxious to get me out of the car. Lately, after the Jake sleepover and picture incident, my parents and I are all weird. You would think after spending hours and hours together stuck in the house, we would be close, but I just don’t get them. It’s like they’re judging people before they really get to know them, and it sucks.

When I was five, I was hanging out with this girl, Taylor, who lived down the street. She seemed nice enough to me. I mean, I didn’t care that every time I went to her house, her parents would fight and beat the piss out of each other. As long as the girl liked to play with a ball or Bratz dolls, I was game.

During dinner one night, my parents got into an argument about my dad’s work schedule, and I asked my dad why he doesn’t smack my mom around if he doesn’t like what she says, like Taylor’s dad does.

The next day, Taylor and I were playing on my swing set in the backyard. My mom walked outside and called me over and told me we were going to the store and Taylor had to go home. I told Taylor I had to go and that was it. Later, my mom told me I wasn’t allowed to hang out with Taylor anymore. Day after day, Taylor would knock on the door and my mom would tell her I was busy.

It’s the same thing with Jake. It’s like they have to control who I’m friends with. When I met Lizzy, I learned to keep my

mouth shut. I waited until my parents got to know and love Lizzy. Then, when Dad found out Lizzy's mom was arrested and accused of assaulting a police officer after a minor traffic violation, they already loved Lizzy. Instead of prejudging and fearing my friendship with Lizzy, they welcomed her with open arms.

Kate spots our obnoxious red convertible, because no one can miss an old guy driving an open cherry-red convertible, especially when it's the only one in the parking lot, and waves. I climb out of the convertible.

"Hi, Ash. You ready for today?" Kate asks me smiling.

"Yeah," I say unzipping my bat bag.

"What's new? Are you still punished?"

"Uh huh." I pick up my glove, cleats, and sliding pads.

"That sucks. Thank God Coach D only sat us for one game, you know? I can't believe Christy posted that pic. The whole team was pissed at her after that. You should have been here."

I stay silent, remove my slides, and pull my slider on.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going to go and grab some Gatorade. Want some?"

Why can't I be all upbeat and peppy like Kate?

"I'm okay."

I spot Rache l getting out of a gray SUV. She's leaning to the side, balancing her enormous bat bag on her shoulder. At the same time, she's talking to a couple of red-uniformed girls that are

beginning to fill in the opposite dugout. Today, we're scrimmaging Rachel's old ASA team, the Shore Sharks.

"Hey, Ashley. How'd it go?" Rachel asks.

"What?" For a minute, I can't think of what she's talking about.

"The phone. How'd it go with Jake?"

"Amazing. Thanks again for the cell."

"It was a no brainer, Ash. Oh and here's the charger. I should have given you this earlier."

"Thanks." I say, seizing the charger.

"You know, something weird happened the other day." I say. "I was at my friend's Lizzy's house and I got all weirded out because I saw a picture of Andrew and Kate together at a party. I'm so into Jake, but then I saw Andrew hooking up the same day with some girl, and it creeped me out. What do you think? You don't think I still secretly like him or anything?"

Rachel stops sorting through her bag and looks up.

"Andrew who?"

"Remember the guy I told you about, Andrew Sinclair?"

"Oh, yeah. Your first boyfriend." She says, adjusting her headband.

"I mean, do you think it's weird that I care what he's doing?"

Rachel looks down at her bag.

"What?"

"Oh, Lordy, you're probably not going to like this too

much. But, how long ago did you guys date?” She looks up at me.

“I don’t know, we, like, broke up around Christmas.”

“Christmas?”

“Yeah. Okay, saying it does make it seem ridiculous.”

Rachel rummages through her bag. “I don’t think it’s weird. It’s normal. But seriously, I mean, you’re totally with Jake now.”

She doesn’t get it. “I know.” Feeling dumb for even bringing it up.

“Plus, guys move on, Ashley. Sometimes, we like them more than they ever liked us, and when they date and hook up, you just have to deal.”

“He was my first.”

Rachel’s eyes bulge. “What?”

“No, not like that. Like, he was the first guy I really liked.”

I say, playing with my glove.

“It burns, Ash. But, it’ll go away. Trust me,” Rachel says, picking up a ball. “Want to warm-up?”



The scrimmage is pretty laid back. Rachel pitches the first two innings and of course, no one, even from her old team, the Shore Sharks, touches her riseball, fastball, or screwball. And to think these girls hit her everyday at practice for two years, and they still can’t make contact with her pitches. Rachel winds up and explodes off the mound with each pitch.

Next up, Christy pitches the middle innings. She pretty

much shuts everyone down also, but in a different way. Christy isn't as smooth as Rachel, and I'm not just saying that because I hate her. She's all power with a knee-buckling change up that the Shore Sharks couldn't judge. And Christy is ballsy. She'll throw the change up first or last. She doesn't care.

I take the mound at the bottom of the fifth inning. Finally, back on the mound. Back to pitching. Back to my thing. I wind up and fire.

Two singles and a walk later, the Sharks are teeing off my pitches like I'm throwing bunches of meatballs right down the middle. Emily calls time out.

"You okay," she asks taking off her mask.

"Yeah," I say. Actually, I'm not sure what is going on with me. My shoulders are tight and heavy and my pitches just don't have the pop they usually do. Can two weeks make that much difference? Or am I suffering some sort of bad karma from all the lying and sneaking around I've been doing lately.

"Relax and throw your game. It'll come back."

The next batter digs in. I wind up and fire. Smack. Chalk puffs from Emily's glove. "Strike," the umpire yells.

I take a deep breath. I receive the ball and look at an advertisement for Sunray Tans hanging on the center field fence. As I stare at it, I promise to never lie or sneak around again.

Three batters later we're out of the inning.

I'm the first one up. I enter the box with my brand new bat

and drive a single past the third baseman. After running through first base, I return to the bag and adjust my slider. The Shark's first baseman stands in front of me.

"Hey, Ashley."

I don't recognize the girl, but I probably ran into her or played with or against her at some point after almost ten years of softball. This happens a lot.

"Hi," I say.

"I heard you and Rachel are hanging out a lot. How's the team treating her?"

"Good."

"Isn't it weird?"

"What?" I say, arranging my feet on the bag.

"You know, Rachel was with Jake, and now you're with Jake. Does it ever get weird between you two?"

The air sucks out of my lungs.

"No," I say, squinting and trying desperately to concentrate on Coach D's signs. But, Coach D is all blurry. I wipe my eyes and adjust my helmet, trying to force thoughts of Jake, Rachel, Andrew, and my punishment out of my head. Softball. Think softball.

Rachel rips a line drive to left field, and I take off.

The Sharks cannot handle our pitching and we easily win the scrimmage by eight. By the end of the game, we're scorching. It's freaking August hot, the air is warm and thick, and the sky is an endless blue. No sea breeze today. Just static hotness.

While Coach D reviews the Nationals agenda, my gaze drifts to Rachel. What did she mean earlier by her comment that sometimes we like guys more than they like us. Did she mean Jake? I want to ask her to tell me every single solitary detail of her friendship with Jake. But, then I sound like a jealous lunatic.

I pick at my nails, then at the grass. How can I be so damn confident on the mound, but then turn into a giant insecure nerd off the field? If Rachel was really into Jake, she would never have loaned me her cell phone. Right?

I almost giggle thinking about how much of a geek I'm being. I must have way too much time on my hands or something, dreaming up all these ridiculous conspiracy theories.

After Coach D hands out our Nationals itinerary, I join my parents on the sideline. Max still has his nose in the DS, and my parents are stone faced. No, "Nice game, Ashley." Nothing.

We walk in silence to the convertible. I toss my bag in the trunk. My dad spreads out the towel on the leather seat, and I make myself comfortable. It's going to be a long week before Nationals.

When we arrive home, my mom tosses a yellow manila envelope on my bed, along with my SEVENTEEN magazine. I look for a return address. USA softball?

"Did you order something?" my mom shouts over the lawnmower sounds whizzing by my window. "Did you ask dad? I don't remember you asking me for our credit card?"

“Yeah,” is all I say because I’m not really sure what is in this envelope. I don’t remember ordering anything.

My mom drifts out in the hallway, reading and opening mail.

I shut the door behind her and rip open the envelope. A black tee falls on my bed along with a card. I hold up the t-shirt. In white letters is the word ‘Punishment’.

I smile and pick up the homemade card from my bed. The front is decorated with a Ferris wheel. Inside, it says,

I can picture your smile right now. I miss it. I miss you.

Love, Jake.

I hug the card, place it in my nightstand drawer next to the charm and Rachel’s cell phone, grab the tee, a pair of shorts, and head toward the shower.

Friday, July 30th
Nationals

Rachel, Kate, Emily and I smush into Kate's SUV on our way to York, Pennsylvania for the Eastern Nationals. This is it. The big time. We did it. We made it. We're facing some major competition. And tons of college scouts always pepper the National stands. Besides non-stop softball, Jake and I devised a well-constructed plan to meet up.

That's right. Jake's at York College for wrestling camp, and I'm a measly five minutes down the road at a hotel for Nationals. It's perfect, and we couldn't let the opportunity slip through our fingers.

Rachel's singing *Umbrella*, accentuating the ay, ay, ay, ay to the point where it's sticking in my brain like cheap bubble gum on the bottom of a shoe.

"Shut up," Kate hip checks Rachel, and she belly giggles.

Rachel and I sit on the far back two seats, and Emily and Kate take a seat in front of us. It feels amazing and refreshing to be out of my parent's house finally, even though they're behind Kate's car. My parents agreed that I am officially off punishment after Nationals, as long as I promise not to lie or sneak around with Jake.

Things are looking up.

"Are you still punished?" Kate asks.

"Yup, until next week" I say, looking down at my Adidas slides.

"Your parents are harsh," Emily adds.

"Yup."

"Umbrella. Ay, ay, ay, ay," Rachel sings.

"Shut uuupp," Kate yells.

"You girls ready to rumble," Kate's dad says, clad in an orange Cape Town Crush hat.

"Dad." Kate rolls her eyes and grabs her pink vibrating cell phone from the cup holder. She leans into her seat and her fingers fly across the keyboard.

Emily reads my mind. "Who's that, Kate?"

She looks up for a moment and answers, "No one."

"You sure have a lot to say to no one," Emily says, pulling out a bag of Doritos.

"Doritos at seven in the morning? Ew." I say.

"Umbrella..." Rachel sings with her iPod headphones

stuck in her ears. Kate tosses a pillow at Rachel. Rachel just catches it and places it behind her head.



It takes us about three hours of highways, tons of trees, and acres of open farm land to arrive at the softball complex. This is it. Nationals. I never made it to Nationals before on my fourteen-and-under team. All the teams here are good. Good enough to win a tournament to qualify. Good enough to be national champions.

At the hotel, Kate's mom leaves the SUV to retrieve room keys, while Kate's dad hunts for a parking spot.

Throughout the week, tucked away in the back of my closet, Jake and I devised a plan to meet tonight at seven at this coffee shop called Colonial in between York College and my hotel. My plan is to beg my parents to let me go out with Rachel for an hour. Then, Rachel and I are going to walk the five minutes to the shop, and I'll have one hour to spend with Jake. Finally, time with Jake. It's been one long-ass month.

"Let's go girls," Kate's mom says.

Today is a total travel day. Games don't start until tomorrow morning, so we have the entire day to do whatever.

We shuffle out of the car and grab our stuff. This time, Rachel is rooming with me, and Kate and Emily are staying with Kate's parents. Softballs will talk before Rachel, Kate, Emily, and I will be allowed to stay in a hotel room alone again.

“Want to go swimming?” Rachel asks after we’ve unpacked. This particular hotel room isn’t too bad. It’s much bigger than the one in Maryland. It’s a suite with two rooms, a tiny kitchen, a miniature living room with a pull out couch, and a bedroom with two double beds. Everything is brown with red swirlies and paisleys – the curtains, the bedspread, and even the chairs.

Rachel and I will sleep on the pull-out couch in the living room. Mom, Dad, and Max will sleep in the bedroom. Thank God Rachel and I don’t have to listen to my dad snore all night.

“Yeah. Let’s go.” I say, grabbing my bathing suit.

“I want to go. I want to go,” Max shouts jumping on one of the double beds.

“Max, get down.” My mom yells. “You’re not going anywhere until you behave yourself.”

“Don’t swim too long, girls. If you expend too much energy, you won’t have anything for tomorrow,” my dad warns us. I wonder what he’s going to do without any grass to cut for four whole days. He’ll probably suffer lawn mowing withdrawal symptoms and beg the hotel management to let him upkeep their lawn.

After I change into my bikini, I throw on a pair of shorts and slip on my flip-flops. Rachel follows me out the door in a white sundress over a polka-dot yellow bikini.

Rachel and I ride the elevator up to the top of the hotel. As soon as Kate’s mom told us about the swimming pool on the roof, I couldn’t wait to check it out.

Once we arrive rooftop, we step out, and I let out a gasp. The pool is amazing. It's in ground, huge, deep with a diving board and a slide. The crystal blue water is surrounded by tons of white and blue striped fold-out lounge chairs.

Right away, I spot Christy, Amy, and Stephanie tanning on three chairs. Christy is sitting up, reading *InTouch* magazine.

Rachel and I take two chairs and drag them as far away as possible from Christy and her cronies clad in the skimpiest, obnoxious bikinis ever. When Christy spots me, she lowers her sunglasses for a moment to check me out.

Rachel lounges on one of the chairs and applies her sunscreen. "So, are you meeting Jake?"

"Yeah."

Wait a second. I don't remember telling her about our plan.

"How do you know?"

"You told me, Dummy," she laughs. "How are you going to do it?"

Did I? I repeat my plan to Rachel.

"And I'll cover for you. Your parents will completely believe that we're going to the coffee shop, she smiles. "I'm so excited you're going to get to see Jake again. You must be all jumpy inside."

"Yeah, I am. I don't know what I'm going to do when I see him. I mean, it's been over a month."

I lie back down to tan.

A few seconds later, a huge shadow blocks the sun. When I look up, I'm face to face with Ronald McDonald.

"What?" I scrunch my nose and eyes to make out Christy, who is seriously starting to resemble a clown with all the dye jobs and heavy make up.

"Can I talk to you alone for a sec?"

What now? I look at Rachel who's blocking the sun with her eyes to observe the scene. She grins.

I swing my legs over the side of the lounge chair.

"What?" I ask.

We walk over by the elevator.

"Look, I don't want to be the one to tell you this, but Jake's been hanging out with Rachel ever since you've been punished."

"What?"

"You heard me. I know we've had our problems, but I hate to see her acting like she's your best friend, when she's hanging out with your boyfriend behind your back."

"And why should I believe you?"

"Believe what you want. I just don't want you to feel stupid when you find out."

Ronald McDonald turns around and walks away. My first instinct is to call Jake and ask him. My second is to torture Rachel with questions until she tells me every single detail of her relationship with Jake. I mean, they do have some sort of a past, and I did find a picture of Rachel in Jake's drawer.

But why should I believe Christy? She hates me and has consistently tried to ruin my life with lies. Last year. Andrew and Mark. The torture. The lies.

I look over at Christy who is staring at me, along with Stephanie and Amy. She's not going to ruin my new best friend and boyfriend like she almost ruined my future with the Crush. I force her words out of my head, pretend we never spoke, and re-join Rachel.

"What did slurpy want?" Rachel asks while flipping through *US Weekly*.

"Nothing." I say and lie belly down my towel.



"Rachel and I are going to get something to eat," I shout to my parents.

I twist the knob.

"Wait, what?" My dad sprints out of the bedroom. "Where are you going?"

"It's like five minutes up the road. A coffee shop called Colonial."

My dad looks at me, then at Rachel.

"I love donuts, and I always have one the night before a game. It's good luck," Rachel smiles at my dad.

Good one, Rachel. The softball angle always works. He'll definitely fall for it.

He lets out a deep breath.

“Okay, but one hour, that’s it. And if you see any college boys, don’t talk to them. Remember, college boys are over eighteen, and that’s a crime.”

“Can I go?” Max stammers out of the bedroom in his Transformers pajamas.

I slip out of the door before my dad can answer.

Once outside, my stomach is all twisty, and I’m so excited I could sprint. I straighten my plaid shorts and matching tee. The outfit took me an hour to pick out, along with another hour spent straightening my hair and doing my makeup, which is so unlike me. Excitement is an understatement.

“You look good. Jake is going to be so happy to see you,” Rachel smiles. She’s wearing a bright orange Crush t-shirt with black cotton shorts and flip flops. I mean, if Rachel is interested in Jake, she wouldn’t be wearing something I usually wear to bed right now.

I text Jake on our way to Colonial’s to let him know I left.

We walk into the comfy coffee shop, and it’s buzzing with tons of softball girls, their families and some summer college students. I scan the area. No Jake. Rachel and I find a table in the middle of the shop and sit, eyes glued to the door.

“I’m so excited for you,” Rachel says.

“Me too.”

I check my watch again, even though the last time I looked at it was less than a minute ago. It’s been forty-five minutes and still

no sign of Jake. Rachel threw back three doughnuts and a coffee during the wait. I call Jake again. No answer. My stomach sinks.

“He’s probably just running late,” Rachel reassures me again like she’s been doing since five after seven.

“He’s not coming.” I say. “Jake’s always on time.”

“But, it’s probably not his fault.”

I take in Rachel’s bright blond bob, pale blue eyes, and perfect skin. She is gorgeous. Is it true? Did Jake fall for Rachel?

“He probably moved on. You know, since I’ve been punished for so long.”

Rachel frowns, but even her frown is mixed with a tiny smile. “No way, Ash. He’s so into you.”

“How would you know?” I snap.

She looks down. “Everything you say. Plus, you know, I’ve known Jake a long time, and I swear he never spent more than like a week with one girl, even as a kid.”

“How do you know him so well?”

Rachel fiddles with her coffee lid.

“I told you. We’ve known each other since we were small.”

“Uh huh.” I stand up and head toward the door. Tears are stinging my eyes.

“Wait, Ash.”

I’m pissed. It’s happening again. Jake is done with me. Another guy is bored with me. I let it happen again. I let Jake in. I’m done. I’m done with guys.

“Are you okay?” Rachel asks when she catches up with me.

I hand Rachel back her cell phone. “Here.”

She looks at her pink razor phone, then at me.

“And if he calls, I don’t want to know.” I swallow a lump.



After a silent walk, we arrive back at the hotel.

“Ashley, you have to believe me, Jake is so into you.”

“You would know.”

“Wait. What is that supposed to mean?” Rachel grabs my hand before I knock on the hotel door.

“You are hanging out with Jake. Christy told me.”

Rachel’s face drains of color. “It’s not what you think.”

“Whatever, Rach. You’re a liar and Jake is a pig. So, you can freaking have him.”

I storm toward the elevator. I push down and the elevator door opens, then closes just as Rachel reaches the door. Screw her.

“Ash, what are you doing?” Kate asks me before pushing the open door button.

“Don’t let her in.” I swat her hand away from the button.

“What?”

“I just need a break, Kate, from all this.”

“Okay,” Kate looks at me funny.

“Want to hang out with Emily and me? We’re going to a coffee shop called Colonial.”

I let out a deep breath. “No.”

“Uh, okay,” she says eyeing me suspiciously. The elevator doors open and she steps out.

Now what?



“Where the hell have you been for the last hour?” my dad greets me at the hotel door. I peek around him and spot Rachel lounging on the pullout couch watching television. “You know, Mom and I were going to let you off punishment when we got back home. Forget it now.”

“I was downstairs,” I say, nudging my head as a signal that I needed to talk outside. Dad shuts the door.

“Rachel is pissing me off, Dad. I needed a break.”

“Couldn’t you just tell us?” My dad rubs his scruff with his hands.

“Rachel was supposed to.” I say rolling my eyes for effect.

He lets out a deep breath. “We’ll talk about your punishment when we get home. Now, get some rest, you have a huge day tomorrow.” Dad holds the door open for me, and I slip by into the bathroom.

It sucks having to share a room with someone you want to strangle, so I take my sleeping bag, pillow, and one of Gram’s romance novels and set up shop on the floor.

“Still not talking to me?” Rachel asks, sprawled out, remote in hand, and flipping channels.

I stay mum, turn my back to Rachel, and pray the carpet is bug free.

“It’s a complete misunderstanding, Ash. If you’d talk to me and let me know what you heard, I can clear things up.”

“Whatever.” I get up, drag my sleeping bag, pillow, and book into the bedroom and shut the door.

Tuesday, August 3rd

National's Suck! We lost three in a row yesterday after winning only one and losing two the day before. As a whole, our pitching isn't bad, in fact, Rachel and I both threw no hitters yesterday and still lost by one run. Our defense is terrible, and our bats are freezing cold. I don't know if it's nerves or what, but we suck.

Emily tosses me the ball. Her shoulders are hunched and she shimmies back to her squat. The batter digs in.

“Get behind your pitcher,” Coach D yells from the dugout.

As I wipe my forehead with my uniform shirt, a few measly cheers arise from behind me.

I wind up and fire. A slow dribbler rolls beside me. Kate and I move toward the ball. I let up, thinking Kate will grab it. She does the same. The ball stops dead on the dirt.

“Time out,” Coach D screams and stomps toward the mound. Rachel grabs her glove and follows Coach.

“What the heck is going on? You girls play for the Crush. The best ASA team in South Jersey. In fact, you were hand-picked and expected to be the best of the best. We earn a spot at Nationals and everyone is just throwing it away.” She shakes her head and holds out her hand.

I place the yellow ball in her palm. Coach D hands the ball to Rachel. I jog to the dugout and hang my head.

It’s happening again. Like last year, I’m letting guy stuff seep into softball. I mean, Rachel and I are doing amazing on the mound. But, off the mound, at bat, and on the field, we’re all kind of out of it.

Softball is my life. My love. My reason to go to school everyday. The only thing I’m really good at. The thing that never decides it’s done with me or changes. I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have softball. It’s the one thing I can turn to when everything else is crap. Like now.

After Rachel strikes out during the bottom of the seventh to end the game and our bid to Nationals, we slap hands and begin to gather our gear.

As Kate packs her bat bag, she wipes tears from her eyes.

“You okay?” I ask.

“This sucks. I mean, this was my last game with the Crush. And I hate to end like this.”

She looks up at me. Her pale blue eyes are almost white.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders.

“Sorry, but we had some really great tournaments, too. You have to think of those instead of this crappy one.” I hate the thought of playing without Kate next year, but I don’t want to make her even more upset than she already is. I stay mum.

“I know, but it’s Nationals and I’m one the oldest, the leader of this team.” She lets out a deep breath and plops on the bench.

“Don’t sweat it. You’re an amazing leader. We just sucked this weekend.” I hug her.

Man, I hate change. I’m tired of everything changing. Like my life is like a chance at the plate. And I’m facing a pitcher who throws a bunch of fastballs all the time. Then, right when I’m ready to slam a fastball over the fence, she decides to throw a change up and throws me off balance, and I miss. That’s me and my life.

We break apart and Kate lets out a deep breath. She gets up and finishes packing her bat bag.

Last year, I was so happy to make the Crush and move up from my fourteen and under team. It was amazing and competitive and perfect. Then, I met Christy. She’s like a cancer. She starts her crap and it spreads throughout the team. In fact, I blame this horrible tournament on her. And Jake. And Rachel.

I throw my bag over my shoulder and walk toward the convertible.

Emily's face is bright red and sweat saturates her uniform as she saunters behind me.

"It's frigging hot," she says.

She's right. It is hot already, and it's only nine thirty. We worked so hard to get to Nationals, and it's miserable hot, everyone's cranky, and the girls we played against were ridiculously good and huge.

"Rachel and Ashley, can I see you for a moment?" Coach D yells from the dugout. I look at Rachel, which I've been trying to avoid doing all weekend. It might appear difficult when you're sharing a room, but it's definitely doable. A lot of romance novels plus pretend sleeping, and a mom who loves Rachel, I've hardly had to talk to the sneaky skank. We turn around and walk toward Coach.

"Girls, this is Coach Matthews."

A guy with black hair and a black mustache wearing a blue Team New Jersey collared shirt extends his hand.

"He was so impressed with your pitching performances today, he would like to talk to you for a minute."

At least something positive might come out of the weekend," Coach D lets out a deep breath.

"Hi, girls. I wanted to tell you how blown away I was by your pitching. And I would like to invite you both to try out for Team New Jersey."

My stomach flips. Team New Jersey? Is he serious? That's

like the best of the best. Even better than the Crush. New Jersey's best. Rachel and I are stunned silent.

"Here is my number and our website," he says, handing Rachel and me his card. "If your parents have any questions, have them call me. The tryouts are in September. We only have room for one pitcher so far, but we would love to take a look at both of you."

My hands are seriously shaking right now. This card is my ticket off the Crush and away from Christy and Rachel for good. That is, unless Rachel tries out because she is like way better than me. And her pitches are faster than mine.

"Thanks," we both say in unison.

Rachel looks at me. "This is amazing." She jumps up and down holding the card.

I want to celebrate with her, but I stop myself because she's a slut. Instead, I turn around and walk away, holding my excitement for the car ride home alone with my family.

Wednesday, August 11th

It's been exactly forty-one days since I've seen Jake. No visits. No explanation. No more mail.

I want to believe the reason I haven't heard from him is my lack of cell phone, but a nagging voice inside my head wonders if he's just moved on. And moved on with Rachel.

I admit it. Sometimes I miss Rachel and wonder if I did the right thing by ignoring her throughout Nationals. I never really gave her a chance to explain herself, but I couldn't stand the thought of hearing the words, Jake and I are together and you're going to have to deal, come out of her mouth.

Instead of dwelling on Rachel and Jake, I've been throwing myself back into pitching against the wall or my mattress because Dad still isn't talking to me. And I've been spending bunches of time with Gram, who's staying with us until the end of summer.

“Rummy,” Gram says placing her cards down on the table. At the same time, she leans her back against the kitchen chair.

She always wins.

The bandages are off, and I have to say Gram looks forty instead of seventy.

“What’s got you so glum, Ash?” Gram asks sipping a McDonald’s milkshake.

“Rachel, Jake, my parents.” I fill Gram in on the details, including the fact that my parents extended my punishment until the end of the summer after I was late coming home from the coffee house.

“Ah, Ash. This could be a complete misunderstanding. Life’s too short, Sweets. If you want Jake’s booty, you need to go get him, and if Rachel is as nice as you say she is, then I’m sure it’s just gibberish.”

I think about this. Gram makes it all sound so simple.

“Have you given Rachel a chance to explain why they were together? And have you even talked to Jake?” She sips her shake.

“No,” I look down.

“Before you get your panties in a bunch, let them explain themselves.”

I chuckle.

“And as far as your mother is concerned. Let me share a secret with you.” Gram leans forward, looks around, and whispers. “Your mom fell head over heels for this dirtball greaser scum

bucket in high school. Slimy Steven came from a terrible family, and Pop and I forbid her to see him. Well, your mother wouldn't listen and snuck around with this guy for a few months. Then, he broke her heart in a trillion pieces when he was caught with his pants down in a closet at school with your mother's cousin. It was all around town and your mother was devastated. She's just looking out for you."

My Gram places her cool hand against my cheek. I grab it and hold it.

"Now, let's cut the crap and talk about books. Did you read Final Seduction yet? I love that one."

I smile. Gram and I talk books, and I squeeze her wrinkled, cool hand.

Monday, August 16th

Soccer preseason starts today. Soccer season is a blast. I get to play with all my high school friends again. Absolutely no pressure. Finally. Another stressless soccer season.

Rachel and I haven't spoken since Nationals. I thought about what Gram said, but I'm still not ready to talk about it. First, I need to get over Jake. Then I'll talk to her so she can fill me in on their amazing relationship. Puke.

The Team New Jersey card is gathering dust on my nightstand. I've picked it up and put it back down about fifty times since Nationals. Of course, Dad wants me to tryout, but I'm not sure. It is a chance of a lifetime, but I'm crossed. I'm not sure if I want to compete against Rachel. Isn't winning Jake enough? Why should I give her the chance to humiliate me by taking my boyfriend and my spot on the team?

However, Kate does age off the Crush this year, and the Crush is stressing me out. So, a new team with new girls and no Christy Mayer would be nice.

Sometimes I wonder if Jake ever called Rachel asking for me. Man, I made it easy for the two of them to hook up. Programming Jake's number into Rachel's cell, confiding in Rachel about everything Jake, and letting her in. Letting them both in.

But, it's all good. I've been here before. The broken heart thing. The burn gets easier with time.

Not only is today the first day of soccer, but it's also Kate's seventeenth birthday. Lizzy called my house last night to tell me she's throwing a huge bash for Kate tonight. Lizzy's mom took off for Myrtle Beach yesterday with her latest boy toy and left Lizzy the house to herself.

"Ashley, you're going to be late for practice," my mom calls from the kitchen. I'm still trying to pull my new short bob up into a ponytail, but I'm failing miserably.

That's right. Last week, I visited the hairdresser, with a copy of *US Weekly*, and chopped my hair. Tossed my long braided ponytail in the mail and sent it to Locks of Love. A good deed to make up for all the lying and sneaking around I did for a guy that turned out to be another dirtball without having to tell my parents they were right.

New Life. New Ashley. New hair.

I pull a tank out of my drawer, layer it over my sports bra,

and pair it with Nike black shorts. I grab my spikes, socks, wallet and toss everything into my yellow Sunray soccer drawstring bag.

My softball necklace falls out and onto the carpet. *Urgh.* I pick it up and shove it in my nightstand drawer next to the bear, underneath the cards, and shut the drawer.

“Here.” My mom says, handing me a bagel and my thermos. I peck my mom on the cheek.

Lizzy and I meet at the corner and walk the five blocks to the field. Practice starts at eight sharp with a three-mile run. Every year, I think the same thing as I walk to practice. I really should start training before the first practice. But, every year, I make the same mistake. While I should be spending time getting in shape, I don’t, and the first three-mile run is filled with cramps, coughing, and heavy legs.

Kate is ear-to-ear smiles this morning.

“Happy birthday,” I say and hug Kate.

“Thanks,” she says taking a sip of water out of her water bottle.

“Happy birthday, Kate,” Lizzy adds. “You’re coming tonight, right?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Kate beams, twirling around her car keys.

“Is today the day?” I ask Kate.

“Yup.”

“Good luck.”

“You going?” Lizzy asks me before slumping on the grass trying to sneak in some relaxation time before Coach Kent tortures us with the three-mile run. The entire team has to run it in under twenty-eight minutes. If we fail, we have to keep running three miles before every practice until we all make it under twenty-eight. It’s torture.

“Still punished,” I say and look down.

“Parents a little harsh, aren’t they? I mean, how long has it been?”

“Forty eight days.” Forty-eight days since I last saw Jake. Not that I care.

“Holy shit,” Lizzy adds. “That sucks, Ash. I didn’t realize it was that long.”

I squat. Lean forward, and pull blades of grass. Life sucks.

“Line up, girls.” Coach Kent whistles and points to the cement.

And it’s about to get worse.



After a particularly torturous practice, Lizzy and I practically crawl home.

“You have to come. Kate’s like one of your best friends.”

“I know. Maybe they’ll let me off punishment today since soccer started.” *I pray.* I mean, how many more days can I spend sitting in my room? I picture myself playing another hundred hand-held games of solitaire.

“Why don’t you sneak out?” Lizzy asks rolling her t-shirt sleeves and hooking them under her sports bra. “You do it for Jake all the time.”

Speaking of Jake, I’ve yet to tell Lizzy that Jake and I are done. I’m not in the mood for a big fat I told you so Lizzy lecture.

“I’ll be there.”

Lizzy smiles.

Right after five o’clock dinner, I charge toward my room.

“Ashley, I want you to help with dishes.”

Damn. So close. I was hoping to get ready while mom and dad were cleaning up. Then, find the old Elmo stool and take my chances.

“And we want to talk to you.” My mom says standing next to the sink with the dishtowel resting on her shoulder.

“Dad and I decided that you can go out tonight under two conditions.”

My stomach jumps.

“If you promise to stay away from Jake Cole, and you promise not to lie to us anymore.”

“Sure. Look, I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

My dad hands me my cell phone from his pocket.

“Your computer will be back tomorrow,” he adds.

I take off and skip down the hallway.

“Wait, Ashley, the dishes.”

“Oopps, sorry.” I turn around, skip back, grab the towel and begin drying as fast as I can.



By the time, I straighten my short new do, apply my make-up, pick out an outfit that shouts, ‘I’m single,’ and walk the three blocks to Lizzy’s, the party is already out of control.

People are peppered on the front step, in Lizzy’s tiny backyard, and spilling out onto the street. There’s no way this party will last.

I squeeze past a guy and girl totally hooking up on the front step and walk into Lizzy’s house.

“Where’s Lizzy?” I ask Kate who is sitting next to Andrew, while Andrew watches an Eagles preseason game on Lizzy’s brand new flat screen.

“Downstairs.” She says, smiling, but looking a bit bored.

“You drinking?” Kate asks me.

“Not sure.” I look at Kate’s empty hands.

“I’m not. I practically died today at practice and we have to run three miles again tomorrow. Plus, I drove.”

“I know. Wait, you drove? Congratulations.” I hug Kate accidentally brushing my arm on Andrew’s thigh.

“Hey, Ashley.” Andrew wakes up from his football fog.

“Hi, Andrew,” I say looking down to avoid eye contact.

A chorus of drink, drink, drink, drink is coming from the basement. I take the steps two at a time and spot Lizzy upside

down being held by two players on the football team, with a plastic tube in her mouth.

The guys flip Lizzy back to her feet and she stumbles my way.

“Ashley’s here!” she shouts. She’s wasted, and Mark is behind her squeezing her butt. “My best friend in the whole wide world. I love you.” She falls into me, stumbles, and I catch a whiff of her beer breath.

I grab the wall.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine.” Mark walks next to Lizzy, and she wraps her arm around his neck.

“I’m going to take her upstairs and tuck her in.” Mark winks.

“Fat chance,” I tell him, gripping Lizzy’s arm. At the same time, I snatch the red plastic cup out of her hand, toss it in the trash can, and hoist her up the stairs.

After another half hour of Lizzy telling me how much she loves me, Lizzy’s asleep alone in her bed. I shut and lock the door, grabbing the key that she uses when her mom brings guys home before I leave.

When I walk down the steps I spot Amy chatting with Kate and Andrew. Amy is holding another one of those red cups.

I walk past Kate and Amy. Should I? I mean, last time alcohol and I spent some time together, it was not good. But, that was

real alcohol. This is only beer. It can't be that bad. I mean, my dad drinks it all the time. One cup of beer isn't a big deal.

"Ashley?" Amy shouts. "Where you going?" Amy fiddles with her cut-off shorts with her free hand.

"The big metal thing that spits out beer."

"The keg," Amy smirks. "That's where I'm going, too." Amy follows me.

A cute guy that I'm pretty sure goes to Cape Catholic is filling his cup at the keg.

"Want some?" We lock eyes and he smiles. He's cute in a surfer boy kind of way with sun-kissed brown hair that hangs right to his eyebrows and green eyes with brown speckles.

"No, thanks." I'll have to find another way to forget about Jake. I can't drink. I've worked too hard.

Amy is behind me, and surfer boy fills her cup while keeping his eyes on me.

"Did you see him look at you?" Amy asks me, then sips her beer. "He's staring at you."

"No he's not." My cheeks feel hot.

"He totally is." Amy turns around to check him out. "Hey, did Christy tell you about Rachel and Jake?"

Just hearing Jake's name with Rachel causes my stomach to turn inside out. "Why?"

Amy twirls her blond hair with her index finger.

"Well, Christy, didn't want to be the one to tell you. In fact,

none of us wanted to tell you, but we saw Rachel and Jake together eating at Mario's pizza."

"Are you sure it was them?"

"Totally. We were right there."

Now my face is flaming.

"Ashley Clarke, right?" Surfer guy turns around from his group of Cape Catholic soccer friends when he spots me.

"Yup." I smile. Surfer guy holds out his hand, "Ryan."

I like the name, Ryan. He'll do. If Jake can move on, so can I. Jake probably thinks I'm home still punished and pining after him. *Hello?*

I stare at Ryan's lips. I can do this. I can kiss another boy. I have to. I'll show Jake.

"Do you play soccer?" I ask, trying to continue the conversation. The room is getting a bit blurry.

"Yeah." We look eye to eye. Ryan's not as tall as Jake, but who cares?

"What position?"

"Striker." He smiles.

"Do you score a lot?" I ask, attempting to flirt.

"Yeah." He breaks out in a huge smile and leans in closer.

Just kiss him. Get this over with. I step closer to Ryan until I'm so close, I can smell his beer breath.

Ryan's lips hit mine and he forces his tongue in between my lips. It's sloppy and warm and yucky, and nothing like it is with

Jake, Andrew, or even my first kiss with a guy friend. *Gross.*

I pull away and smile, so poor Ryan doesn't realize he has a sucky pucker.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back."

I push through the back door. Amy follows me.

"Did you just totally hook up with Ryan Carr?" I pull out my cell phone and scroll down scanning for Jake. When I spot his name, I push send.

But then, I flip the phone closed.

"What are you doing?"

"I have no idea." I sit down on Lizzy's deck and pull my legs into my chest. The outside is spinning and I'm confused. Why did I just do? Kissed some random dude to prove that Jake isn't the only one that can hook up with other people? I run my fingers through my hair.

"Do you have any gum?" I ask Amy who's still staring at me open-mouthed while sipping from her cup.

Amy hands me a piece of Big Red.

I have to find Jake. I have to find out if he is with Rachel, and I have to find out why he lost interest.

"Where's Kate?" I ask Amy barreling through Lizzy's back door.



In an ironic twist of fate, I'm ducking in the backseat of Kate's brand-new blue VW convertible staring at the back of Andrew's head. Technically, in New Jersey new drivers aren't allowed to have more than one passenger in their car before their eighteenth birthday. But, after I begged Kate and Andrew, explaining that I had to talk to Jake, Kate agreed to take me as long as I sprawled across the back seat. And Andrew came with us in case she got lost.

"Where is it?" Kate asks as we cross the bridge, leaving Cape Town and Sunray behind us.

"Past the zoo. Then, through a farm and down a winding road into the campground."

Kate scrunches her nose, smiles, and sneaks a peek at Andrew.

Kate passes the zoo. The sky is still twirling. I know this might not be the smartest thing in the world to do. To surprise Jake like this. But, I have to know. Now.

"Right here," I yell.

She turns into the farm.

"Are you sure?" Kate asks.

"I swear. It's like this little community a little bit down this road. Not at all what I expected."

Kate pulls up to the gate. The card. I totally forgot.

"You can just drop me off here," I say nudging at the seat.

Andrew climbs out of the car and folds the front seat.

When I stand up, we're face to face with barely an inch between us.

"Thanks," I say quickly looking down. At the same time, I bump my forehead on Andrew's chin. It hurts, but I swallow and pretend it doesn't.

After rubbing his chin for a bit, Andrew sits down. Kate backs up and turns the car around.

"Call me if you need a ride," she shouts taking off down the road.

This is it. I jog down the stone-covered dirt street. What if Jake's aunt and uncle aren't even here this weekend? What if Jake isn't here?

I slow down my pace when I reach Jake's street and peek around the corner. Aunt Val's Harley is in the driveway, and Jake's moped is resting on the side of the house. The living room is lit, but the rest of the house is dark. All of a sudden, I feel something on my leg. I slap at a mosquito on my calf.

My stomach twists, and I tiptoe toward the house. What am I doing? Losing it?

I check my watch. It's almost nine thirty. I tucked Lizzy in, hung out, and hooked up with Ryan or Brian or whatever his name is, and it isn't even close to my ridiculously early ten-thirty curfew.

Jake hops down the steps two at a time and walks toward

his moped. This is my chance. Where is he going? I sprint toward the driveway.

As Jake walks the moped, we almost slam into each other in the stone-covered street.

He stops and squints.

“Ashley.” He says, smiling, showing his gorgeous dimples, and kicking out his kickstand. He lifts me up in a bear hug. I swallow a lump and look around for a sign of Rachel. He runs his hand over my hair. “Your hair.”

“I cut it,” I say, pulling away and running my fingers through it.

“I like it. It’s different. In a surfer chick sort of way.”

“We need to talk,” I say. *Ugh*. The same words Andrew said to me just eight short months ago.

Jake grabs my hand and we walk toward the playground. I stumble.

“So what’s the deal? Why are you hugging me? I mean, why don’t you just get it over with. You used me, and when I was punished, you dumped me. I know you couldn’t talk to me or anything, but you should have at least sent me a letter or something telling me you were through with me.”

“What?” Jake looks like he ate something gross.

“You haven’t returned my phone calls, texts, you moved on with Rachel, and you didn’t meet me at Nationals. That adds up to a dump. My parents were right about you. Just like Slimy Steve.”

I place my hands on my hips, well what I thought was my hips, but I miss. Then, I find my hips.

“What? Why don’t you sit down, Ash.”

“I’m fine. There you go. Always changing the subject, like all this is my fault. Please.”

“Are you going to let me explain?” Jake sits on a piece of wood that surrounds the playground.

“Go ahead.” Why does he have to be so damn cute?

“I couldn’t get out of camp to meet you. We weren’t allowed to leave. They had guys watching the dorms. Then, I lost my phone at camp.” He locks my eyes.

“Likely excuse.” I say, rolling my eyes. I lie back on the gritty playground sand, and stare at the stars, hoping to wake up from this nightmare.

“And what’s this about Rachel?”

“Everyone is telling me they saw you and Rachel together eating pizza or something.”

Jake moves the playground sand around with his sneaker.

“Did she tell you anything?”

Just what I thought. He wants to check her story first to see if it will match with his.

“What should she have told me?” I ask sitting up because I want to see him squirm through this one.

Jake lets out a deep breath and looks up at the sky.

“It’s not what you think, Ash.”

I can't take it anymore. "Just freaking tell me, then. Tell me, why you didn't call me or stop over. Tell me, why you ignored me during my whole punishment. And tell me, why you're hanging out with one of my friends. You don't tell me anything." A tear erupts in the corner of my eye. I wipe it away before Jake can see it. No more tears over a guy. I get up and start walking toward the road.

"Where are you going?"

"Home." I stumble. Jake grabs my arm and spins me around.

"Rachel's parents were in a drunk driving accident a few years ago. Her mom was killed, but her dad lived. Her dad was driving, and he was drunk. They hit a tree. The reason everyone saw us together is because we both go to this support group in Cape Town for kids who have a parent that died."

The wind sucks out of my chest. "Rachel never told me that."

"Who wants to tell someone their dad killed their mom? Rachel is a good friend of mine. We've known each other since we were little. That's it. We went through something similar, and we usually grab lunch or something to talk after the group. It's nothing."

I think back to the tournaments. I never remember meeting Rachel's parents or her even mentioning them.

"There is nothing going on between me and Rachel, or me and anyone."

The kiss. I feel like I'm going to puke. I swallow weird, begin hacking, and can't stop.

Jake rubs my back. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I finally catch my breath. "I need to go home."

Jake pulls me into a hug. He feels so big and nice. How am I going to tell him about Ryan? Why did I react before I talked to him?

And Rachel. I completely concocted a story in my noggin that wasn't even true. Constantly, I complain that my parents treat me like a little girl, and that's exactly how I acted. Like a little girl who reacts before she thinks.

"So that's why Rachel gave me her cell phone and everything."

"She knew how much I was into you because I would talk about you non-stop." Jake stops and moves a hair stuck to the side of my mouth. I must look like dog crap. Part of me wants to kiss him, right here, right now, but I can't.

We walk to the trailer, and I climb on the back of the moped. Jake helps me as I fumble with the helmet.

I lean on Jake's strong back and rest the side of my head between his shoulder blades. Should I tell him about Ryan? Or hope that he won't find out?

"Wait," I pop my head up before Jake turns the key.

He looks over his shoulder.

"Did you hook up with anyone this summer besides me?"

He places his hand on my hand. “Of course not, Ash. I was waiting for you.”

He turns around and starts the bike.

What did I do?

Tuesday, August 17th

The next day at practice is total hell. I'm sluggish and nauseated through the whole thing. Lizzy doesn't look much better. In fact, worse. I can't believe I messed up everything in two hours.

Our soccer team didn't make the three-mile time again, so tomorrow's practice is going to be even worse. I feel horrible about Rachel, but I don't know what to say, except I'm sorry for being the worst friend ever.

Lizzy and I take tiny steps during our walk home. No more parties. No more hanging out where there's alcohol. The first time I was punished for like two months, and the second time I kissed some dude for a second and probably ruined everything with Jake forever.

"Did you hook up with Ryan Carr?" Lizzy asks.

“Shut up. Who told you?” My stomach rumbles.

“Everyone knows, Ash. So, are you and JC over?”

“Not exactly.” I say, adjusting the twisted pre-wrap at the crown of my head that’s used as a headband.

“Did you tell him?”

“Not exactly.”

“What are you going to do?” Lizzy chomps on her gum.

“I don’t know. If I tell him, I risk losing him. But, if I wait and he finds out, I might lose him anyway.”

During practice, all I could think about was this mess. So much so, that I cost the team a lap when I didn’t execute a play correctly because I wasn’t listening.

“I wouldn’t tell him.” Lizzy says, stopping at the corner of her street. “At least if you don’t tell him, you might get away with it.”

She has a point. But, sneaking and lying again? Obviously, I suck at it.

“It’s your only option.” Lizzy turns the corner and walks toward her trashed house. Beer cans and cigarette butts scatter the front lawn. Chairs on her porch are overturned. “See ya.” She waves.

“You need help cleaning up?” I ask.

“I’m good. Mom doesn’t come home until Saturday. You up for another party tonight?”

“Uh. No.” I screwed up my life enough.

After a refreshing shower, I log onto Facebook and do the unthinkable.

I search names for Christy Mayer. Of course, her icky auburn head in some boob-revealing bikini top flicks right on the screen. I click on her name. Then, I add her as friend. Finally, I send her a message.

Hey, Christy. Thanx for telling me about Jake and Rachel.

Ashley

Somewhere lurking in her hate-filled body, I do believe she told me as a favor, not for her own gain. Even though, I'm sure she secretly enjoyed every minute. I press send.

While I'm logged on to my completely neglected Facebook page, I play around for a while. I send Rachel a hug. Then, I water my garden, pet my puppy, and take a few quizzes. Right before I'm about to log off, Christy writes on my Wall. "You're welcome, slut. Just looking out for ya." I smile and log off. Christy and I might not ever be best friends, but she's accepted me finally, and I'm learning to accept her, Ronald McDonald hair and all. The Crush decision just got tougher.

I stare at the Team New Jersey card resting next to my computer. Should I call? Should I tryout? Or should I stay on the Crush for another year? I pick it up and flip it in between my fingers. Decisions. Change. Yuck.



Mom and Max are off to the beach, so I have the house to myself. It's like I'm so used to being punished, I don't know what to do with myself. I take a break from the computer and scower the kitchen looking for some lunch. After this morning's killer practice, I'm famished.

I find some lunchmeat, bread, and chips and make a sandwich. During our torturous run today, I decided that I'm going to invite Jake over before school starts and introduce him to my parents. I'm sure they'll change their minds about him once they get to know him. Plus, I can't go on lying about everything anymore. I suck at lying, and I suck at sneaking around.

Tap, tap, tap.

I peek out the window between two navy Venetian blinds. Jake's at my door wearing a baseball hat, a UFC tee, jeans, and holding his helmet.

My stomach flips with excitement. Perfect. Plenty of time for a make-up make out session and then, later, he can meet my parents.

I throw open the door.

"Hey, Jake." I say and wrap my arms around him.

He pushes me away. His eyes squint and his hands are clenched. "Who's Ryan?"

No!

"Who's Ryan, Ashley?" he says again.

“Uh. Uh...”

“That’s what I thought.” Jake turns around and jumps down my steps.

I can’t let him go.

“Wait. Wait,” I say as I run after him over the stones in my bare feet.

He revs his moped engine.

“Jake, I can explain. Wait!”

Jake takes off with a jolt. I watch him get smaller and smaller down the road, the buzzing of his engine gets softer until he turns the corner and disappears.

I walk into the house and stare at my half-eaten sandwich. Tears fill the corner of my eyes. I messed this up, big time. It’s all my fault. I should have told him about last night. I should have never hooked up with Ryan or Brian or whatever the heck his name is. I have to make this right.

After I toss my sandwich in the garbage can, I write out a note to my mom.

No more lies.

Mom,

Don’t be mad. I need to talk to Jake. I’ll be home later.

Love,

Ashley

I slip on my flip-flops. At first, I pull out my cell phone to attempt to call Jake, but then I remember, he lost his cell.

Instead, I dial Rachel.

“Hey, Ash, what’s up?” She sounds cheery and normal even though we haven’t spoken in over two weeks.

“Rachel, I need your help.” I regurgitate the entire story about last night and Jake, leaving out that I know about her parents and the support group.

“That sucks, Ash.”

“Where would Jake go?”

“Why are you asking me?”

This time, I’m honest. “Jake told me about your dad, Rachel, and the group. I’m sorry for not trusting you and not letting you explain.”

“Oh.” The line is quiet for a minute. Then, old Rachel is back. “When he’s upsets, he usually goes to his mom’s grave.”

“Where’s his mom’s grave?” I ask, embarrassed that I don’t know or even thought to ask him. I tend to spend too much time obsessively jealous and worried that some boob girl will catch his attention, or he’s with one of my friends, that I totally neglect things that matter. Like his mom’s grave.

“It’s behind the church on Eighteenth Street. She’s buried all the way in the back.”

“Thanks, Rachel.”

“No prob. Look, Ash. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my family. It’s just embarrassing and stuff, and I don’t like people to know about it.”

Now, I pause wracking my brain for the right thing to say. I mean what do you say to someone who's dad got drunk and rammed a car into a tree killing your mom? "No worries, Rachel." I can't say I understand, cause I don't. I don't understand what it's like to deal with all this heavy stuff. I can't say, it's no big deal because it is. It's a big deal what happened to her family. "I'm sorry too."

"Good luck." She pauses. "And no worries, Ashley. It's all good."

"Thanks." I flip the phone closed and take off toward eighteenth.

Rachel was right. The moped is parked at the gate, and Jake is sitting all the way in the back of the cemetery near the trees.

I've never been to an actual cemetery before. Actually, so far, I've never known anyone who has died.

Tons of gray and dark blue tombstones scatter the grass-filled cemetery. Some are big, some are small, and some have flowers. I'm careful not to step on places where I think the dead bodies are buried, but I can't figure it out, so I give up and walk the dirt path instead. Jake doesn't see me. He's squatting picking at the grass. Once in a while, he stops and wipes his eyes.

When I near Jake, I notice that the patch of grass he's picking at is bare. No marker or tombstone. I'm literally inches away, and he still doesn't see me.

"Jake." He won't look at me. "Look, I'm sorry. I thought

you were doing your thing, and I wanted to show you that I could get guys too.”

He looks up at me. His eyes are red. “You hooked up with Ryan to show me that you can get guys? What the hell is wrong with you? You ruined this, Ash.”

I’m taken aback by how angry he is. A chill runs up my back, and I swallow a lump.

“Why would you do that without talking to me? Then, you come over, and you have every frigging opportunity to tell me what you did and you don’t. Instead, I have to hear it on the beach from Mark. Were you ever going to tell me?”

I hate Mark. “I couldn’t.”

I look down at the grave and wonder for a minute if his Mom can hear us. Sorry Mrs. Cole for having this argument in front of you.

Jake stands up. “Just like you couldn’t tell your parents about us. Because you want to pretend you’re still an Andrew type girl. Just like hooking up with pretty boy, Ryan. You could bring him home to Mom and Dad. Face it Ashley, you hide this. Us. You’re embarrassed to be with me.”

“That’s not true.” I wipe my eye. “You’re what I want.”

“You know, I wish you didn’t care so much about what people think. I always thought you would ask me what was going on before using Ryan to show me that you’re in control. I thought you were into this. Us.”

“I am.” Adrenaline flows through my body. “I didn’t even know where your mom’s gravesite is. You wouldn’t tell me about your black eye, or your pictures in your drawer, or your injuries, or the support group. You kept things from me. So when you didn’t call, I thought you moved on, and you were keeping it from me.”

Muffled thunder rattles off in the distance and soft droplets of rain begin to fall. Jake doesn’t move. His fists are clenched.

I want to hug him and forget about Ryan and my parents and the summer. The rain is falling harder now. Pouring.

Jake and I take off toward the church. He pulls on the handle and thankfully it opens. We duck into one of the rows.

I fall into the pew and stare at the front of the church. It’s old and musty. The windows are covered with stained glass and a wooden cross hangs at the altar. Two statues, one of Jesus and one of Mary, stand on each end of the altar. The rain pelts the roof and echoes through the church.

Jake bends his head and places his hands in prayer.

“You pray?” I ask.

“See this is what I’m talking about, Ashley,” he stops praying and whispers. “You think you know me, but you don’t. Yes, I pray. A lot. You would to if you were given the life I’ve been handed.”

I stare at Jake. Can I sometimes be as judgmental as my parents? I go to church just about every Sunday. I don’t remember seeing Jake. But, there are a ton of churches in Cape Town and

Sunray. Why would I think he doesn't go to church? Because of his parents? His life?

I follow Jake and bow my head. Believe me, I could pray for hours asking forgiveness for everything I've done wrong this summer.

Jake and I are silent for what feels like hours. I sneak peeks at him out of the corner of my eye, but his eyes are shut, and he's still bowed. Finally, Jake lifts his head.

"Now what?" I say.

Jake stares at the front of the church and leans back on the hard wooden pew. "I don't know. But, I do want to tell you that I had every intention of taking you to my mom's gravesite. I was waiting for the tombstone to be delivered. I saved enough fighting money to finally get my mom a nice tombstone and ordered one last week."

"I'd love to see it," I reach across Jake's lap and grab his hand. He pulls away.

"Look, Jake, I was going to ask you something even before you found out about Ryan."

"Don't say his name." Jake keeps his gaze at the front of the church and his body tenses.

"Anyway, I want you to come over to my house for real. I want you to walk in my front door and meet my parents and hang out."

Jake and I lock eyes. "What about your dad?"

“What about my dad?” I squeeze his hand again.

“He arrested me, Ash. I’m sure he doesn’t want his little girl dating someone he arrested.”

“I don’t care. I like you. You like me.” I say, sounding like one of Max’s old Barney tunes. “And my parents will like you after they give you a chance.”

Jack sits up, removes his hat, and runs his hand over his buzz cut. “What about all this other crap?”

“I guess we can just figure it out from there.”

Jake wipes his eyes and puts his hat back on. “I don’t know if I can.”

Please. No. My stomach turns inside out and I swallow the lump that hasn’t gone away since Jake stopped over. The rain continues to pelt the roof. Jake and I sit in silence.

Until my phone vibrates.

“Hello.” I whisper.

“Where are you?” My mom shouts.

“I’m with Jake.” I say, looking at Jake whose head is tilted back, staring at the ceiling.

“Where? It’s storming. I want you to come home.”

“I’m fine Mom. We’re in a church. Jake took me to see his mom’s grave.” Jake turns and looks at me.

At first, my mom doesn’t say anything. Then, in a calmer voice she says, “When the storm passes, I want you to come home.”

I flip the phone closed and look at Jake. I want to kiss him. Bad. Make this right. But I can't, not here. And anyway, I don't think he wants to.

A door slams and both Jake and I shoot up and look behind us.

An old woman walks up the aisle and glances our way. As soon as the woman takes her seat, Jake looks at me out of the corner of his eye and nods to the back. We stand up and make our way to the back of the church and out the door.

The air is still wet from the storm. I wrap my arms around Jake and hug him. He stands with his arms at his side looking up at the cloud-filled sky. Then, he pulls away from me and grabs his helmet from the back of his moped.

“What are you doing?” I stand in front of his bike.

“I can't do this, Ashley. You cheated.”

“Wait, Jake? What are you doing? Please wait. I'll make this up to you. Please,” I beg. If he drives away, I don't know when I'll ever see him again. He can't go.

He maneuvers the bike around me.

“What about my parents?”

“It's too late, Ash.” He takes off and I watch the bike grow smaller and smaller down Ocean Drive.

After I stand at the church and stare at the street for a few minutes, I wipe my eyes and start walking.

My cell phone vibrates. He changed his mind.

“Where are you now? I want you to come home right now.”

my mom’s voice fills my ear.

“Mom, we broke up, okay?”

“Oh. Honey. I’m sorry.”

I wipe my eyes because when I say it, it’s real.

“I’ll be home in an hour,” I say and close the phone.



“Oh my God, Ashley, are you okay?” Lizzy asks tossing a cigarette in her front yard and wrapping her arms around me. “Did Jake find out?”

I nod and flip over one of the chairs on Lizzy’s porch.

“That bastard.”

“Liz, I’m the one that freaking messed up. I’m the one that hooked up with Ryan to prove that I could do it, too, or something. I don’t even know why I did that. I’m so effing stupid.”

“Everyone makes mistakes, Ashley.” She holds out her pack of Newports in front of me. “Want one?”

“Are you crazy? Jake broke up with me. I didn’t lose my mind.”

She shrugs her shoulders. “A cigarette always works for me when I’m upset.”

“What should I do? Should I go to the campground or call him and try to work this out?”

“Let him cool off for a while, Ash. If he loves you as much as he says he does, he’ll be back.”

I want to believe Lizzy. But, for some reason, I don't. Jake is all about loyalty. I was the first girl he fell for, and I screwed up. Knowing Jake, it won't take long for him to fall back into his old habits, and I'll be history.

Tuesday, August 24th

“Twenty-seven fifty-one,” Coach Kent shouts and pushes the stopwatch as the last girl crosses the finish line a week later.

We all let out a sigh. Finally, no more three-mile run before practice.

“Take a two minute water break. Sprints next.” Coach Kent smiles.

“Urgh.” I grab my water bottle. Kate plops down next to me and stretches.

“Hey, Ash, did you hear about the Mixed Martial Arts tournament this weekend? It’s all over town. Are you going?”

My stomach drops. “Uh. I don’t know.” I say, looking down at the grass. Lizzy was wrong. Jake never called. We haven’t spoken since the church.

“Well, Andrew, Mark and I are going. Mark says it’s all

underground or something. Whatever that means.” She rolls her eyes.

Lizzy pipes up. “When and where is it?”

“Next Saturday at the Muscle Beach Gym on 15th street.”

Kate pours water over her head.

“Perfect. We’re going.” Lizzy says, nudging me.

Coach Kent blows his whistle, and we line up at the goal line.



After practice, I push open my front door, Gram is sitting on our couch.

“Hey, Gram” I drop my bag and hug her. She’s showing off her new boobs in a low-cut red top. Her pale blond hair is pulled tight on top of her head.

“Like em? They look good don’t they?” she asks pointing to her chest and giving it a jiggle.

She’s crazy. “Uh, yeah, Grams.”

“How was practice?” She places her open novel, Stud for Breakfast, on the table.

“Hot.”

“When am I going to meet Jake, Boo?”

I stare at my grass-clipping-covered Adidas slides.

“What happened,” she asks wrapping her skinny arms around my shoulders.

“He broke up with me.”

“What? I thought he was the one messing around.”

I fill Gram in on the party.

“Oh. I told you to finish Deceptive Love. Total newbie relationship mistake.”

I can’t help, but smirk. Gram thinks all life lessons can be solved through a romance novel.

“You need to find that boy and win him back if you love him.” She grabs her water from the table.

I shrug my shoulders.

“Life’s too short, Sweets. Get back on the horse and find your cowboy.” She grins, pinches my cheek, and then smacks my butt.

Later, while I’m checking out Team New Jersey on the web, my phone vibrates across the table.

Fr: Rachel

I made Team NJ. Yay!

I close out the screen. Too late. My decision has been made for me.

To: Rachel

Congrats

Before I flip my phone closed it buzzes again.

Fr: Rachel

Tm NJ nds 1 mre pitcher I g8v ur #

What? Now what? Do I take a chance and tryout? What if I make it? Do I leave the Crush? It seems like I just left my 14U team. Finally, I'm used to the Crush, and Christy and I are cool. Plus, Team New Jersey is tough. It's ASA Gold. The best girls in the state play for that team. And I hate change. Urgh.

I pick up the card and stare at it. An opportunity of a lifetime. Team New Jersey will raise my game to the highest level. Colleges recruit from Gold teams. Everything I've worked for over the past eight years. But, am I good enough? And playing for Team New Jersey means major sacrifices.

My phone vibrates again. This time I don't recognize the number. Is it the coach?

I fight with myself and finally answer.

"Is this Miss Ashley Clarke?" a woman's voice asks.

"Yes," I squeak.

"Hi, Ashley. This is Coach DeMarco from Team New Jersey. Do you have a minute?"

"Yes," The answer sticks in my throat.

"Today, your teammate Rachel tried out for Team New Jersey and made the team. She told us that you are still interested in trying out, but misplaced our card."

I shake my head and grin. Rachel's slick.

“We wanted to tell you that another pitching spot has opened up unexpectedly. Lets just say, one of our girls is going out on medical leave for about nine months.” She lets out a deep breath. “Anyway, Coach Matthews was very impressed with your performance at Nationals. Would you like to try out?”

This is it. The moment. I could play for Team New Jersey and soar. Or I could stay on the Crush and stick to what I’m used to.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Great. How about the Saturday after Labor Day?”

“Sure.” My hands are trembling.

“Okay. Can I talk to your mom or dad, so I can give them directions to the tryout? We’re thrilled your interested in trying out, and I can’t wait to meet you.”

“Thanks,” I say and walk out into the hallway.

My dad is sitting at the kitchen table in full police garb. I hand him the phone without saying a word. Then I practically skip to my bedroom picturing myself in a Team New Jersey uniform. I pick up my glove and ball and flip my mattress. Then, I wrist snap into the bed, throwing harder and harder.

While I throw, I’m thinking about playing for Team New Jersey. And Jake. I’m thinking about how I usually never go for what I really want. I want to play for the best of the best. I’m going to try out and make Team New Jersey. But, before I do, I’m going to tell Jake how I feel on Saturday.

Saturday, August 28th

He's here. As soon as I spot him, my stomach is in my throat. Jake is bouncing on both feet on one side of the mat. Another guy in blue shorts, totally ripped like Jake, is bouncing on the other side.

The Muscle Beach gym at Sunray is packed with fans crowded around a mat. Equipment, weights, treadmills, and exercise paraphernalia is pushed against the wall. I spot the Sopranos guy from Leonetti's sitting at a table in front of the mat.

A ref dressed in black and white stands in the middle of the circle. He motions to each fighter and yells, "Let's fight." Both guys touch gloves, and the match begins. My stomach is filled with butterflies for Jake.

The guy in blue shorts jabs at Jake. Then, he spins around and kicks Jake hard in the side of his chest. Jake falls back and

stumbles a bit, and his eyes glaze over. The blue shorts guy lunges at Jake. Jake ducks, grabs the guy's leg, and takes him down. The guy squirms, and Jake maneuvers on top of him. Blue shorts guy rolls to his stomach, and Jake wraps his arms around the guy's head and neck. At the same time, Jake squeezes the other guy with his legs.

Blue shorts guy gasps and squirms, but he can't move. He taps out. Jake wins in fifty-three seconds. Damn, he's good.

My stomach flips.

Jake gingerly makes his way to the middle of the mat, holding his side. The ref raises his hand and Jake's face tightens.

After the match, he finishes collecting his stuff, and Lizzy clutches my hand, pulling me toward Jake.

"What's with the change of heart?" I ask Lizzy. We maneuver through the crowd toward the locker room.

"You love this dirtball, and I'm not going to spend sophomore year watching you mope around and be miserable," Lizzy says. "By the way, that guy in the blue shorts was hot."

I see Jake's back before he disappears through the doors. Nibbling my nail, I go over my speech that I've been working on since Tuesday when Kate told us about the match.

"Do you think JC can hook me up with him?" Lizzy points at blue shorts boy. "I promise I'll be nice." Her eyes follow the boy into the locker room. "This is so much better than high school wrestling." She fans herself with her hand.

A few seconds later, blue shorts walks out of the locker room all muscles and shirtless, holding a gym bag and a balled up tee. Lizzy stares at him, and he smiles.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” Lizzy answers. I watch the exchange like a tennis match.

Blue shorts nudges his head, signaling Lizzy to join him. She follows, and they engage in a discussion with their faces only centimeters apart.

“Wait one minute.” Lizzy says.

“Ash. I’m going to show Brett around Sunray. Okay?”

“Sure, Liz.” She’s unbelievable. I wish I could fall in and out of lust like she does.

A few minutes later, which feels like hours, Jake pushes through the locker room door hunched over and stops when he sees me. His eyes bulge, and my stomach twists.

“Great match, Jake.”

“Thanks.” He says, nodding and adjusting the plastic bag of ice bandaged to the side of his chest underneath his Tap Out tee. He barrels ahead of me. This isn’t going well so far, but I can’t let him go.

“Guess what?” I ask, catching up with him, and hiding my trembling hands in the pockets of my shorts.

“What?” he asks finally stopping and turning around. His face twists.

“Rachel called and she wants me to try out for Team New Jersey.” My voice quivers at the end.

“Yeah?” He squints.

“I think I’m going for it,” I say, looking up at Jake.

“No regrets,” he answers, letting out a deep breath.

“What does that mean?”

“That’s how I live, Ash. No regrets. The worst thing in the world is to look back at your life and wonder, what if?” His teeth clench.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. My rib. I think I cracked a rib or something. I’m having trouble breathing.”

“Shouldn’t you, like, go to the hospital?”

“I’ll be fine. Docs don’t do anything about cracked ribs, Ash.” He leans against the wall.

“So, you said ‘no regrets’. Then, what about us. Do you ever wonder, what if?”

He stares at me. His eyes are moist. My stomach is swirling.

Two girls pass us in the hallway. “Hi, Jake.” They say in unison. Neither of us says a thing. We continue to lock eyes. I’m not going to let anyone get in the way. The girls are like pesky flies. They annoy me at the moment, but once they’re gone, I’m not going to think of them again. I’m going to concentrate on what I have instead of what might happen.

“Want to go to my house?” I ask.

“Ashley.”

“I’m sorry, Jake. You don’t have to come over. I know I messed up. It’s just that I don’t know what to do. I miss you a lot. I think about you all the time, and I came here to tell you.”

Jake grabs his shoulder and slides down the wall.

“Jake?”

He doesn’t move, and his eyes are closed.

“Jake?” I shake him. He still doesn’t move. “Help.”

The two girls who passed us earlier turn around.

“Get help!” I shout. “He’s passed out.” They take off toward the tournament.

Tears roll down my cheeks. “Jake!”

His eyes open. “Sit tight, Jake. We’re getting help.”

“Stay with me,” he says, and closes his eyes again. I rub his cheek and hold his hand.



“I feel like someone is sitting on my chest,” Jake whispers during the ride to the hospital. I squeeze his hand. Even when the paramedics lifted him onto the gurney and carried him into the back of the ambulance, I never let go of Jake’s hand. And I’m not. Ever.

“You’ll be okay. I’ll be here,” I say, caressing his blue-tinted cheek. “I’m not going anywhere. Ever again.”

“Jake, can you tell us your home number, so we can call

your parents?” the paramedic asks gripping a clipboard.

Jake looks at me. His eyes water.

“Here,” I say, grabbing my cell phone out of my pocket. Scrolling through the numbers, I recite Aunt Val’s cell phone number to the paramedic.

The paramedics talk medical mumbo jumbo back and forth, but I can’t follow it. Something about a pneumothorax. *What the...?* I’m so scared. Scared Jake is seriously hurt. Scared Jake is going to die. Like his mom.

When we arrive at Shore Hospital, the paramedics jump out first and tell me I have to wait in the waiting room.

“But, I can’t leave him,” I say, kissing Jake on the forehead.

“We’ll let you know as soon as we know something,” a man in a white coat places his hand on my back.

A woman in pastel blue scrubs takes over and leads me to a packed waiting room. Televisions hang in every corner. A kid holding a bucket stares at me. Next to the boy, an old man in a wheelchair is coughing into his hand.

I fish out my cell phone, scroll to Mom, and press send.



Ten minutes later, my mom and Gram are with me in the waiting room. Gram is rubbing my back, while my mom talks to the receptionist.

“They’re still working on Jake, Boo.” Mom sits down next

to me and plays with her ring.

“That poor, poor boy,” Gram says.

“How did he get so hurt? Was he in an accident?” my mom asks.

No more lies. “He was wrestling, Mom.”

“That’s such a brutal sport.” She shakes her head. “I don’t understand it.”

“Did you ever see Forrest Griffin?” Gram perks up. “What a hottie. He has the best ass. I completely understand the appeal.”

“Behave yourself, Mom,” my mom looks around. A couple with a small baby stare at Gram.

“I’m not condoning your relationship, Boo. But, it’s obvious you really like this boy. Regardless of Jake’s injury, I still don’t think you two should be together.”

“Save it,” Gram butts in. “I told her about Scumbag Steven.”

“Mom, you shouldn’t have told...”

Gram holds up her index finger. “Just give Jake a chance, Dear.”

“Ashley!”

I look up. Aunt Val and Uncle Fred practically run toward me.

I hug Aunt Val, then Uncle Fred. “What’s going on? Is Jake okay?” Aunt Val asks while Uncle Fred walks up to the receptionist.

I regurgitate the story to Aunt Val.

“Oh, honey.” She hugs me again.

Then, I remember my mom and Gram. “Mom, Gram, this is Aunt Val.”

“Nice to meet you,” my mom says, shaking Aunt Val’s hand.

“Me too. You have a wonderful daughter. We absolutely adore her, and so does Jake,” Aunt Val says wrapping her arm around my shoulder. “Please excuse me, while I demand to see my nephew.” She grabs my hand.

“Sure,” my mom smiles.

Aunt Val pulls me through the doors.

“What are you doing?” I whisper.

“Our boy can’t be back there all by himself. He must be petrified.”

We walk through a small hallway, which opens up to a huge open emergency room with white walls and blue curtains separating each bed. White coats and scrubs scurry around.

“There he is,” Aunt Val says pointing.

I follow Aunt Val. She opens the curtain to reveal Jake, reclined in a hospital bed with his eyes closed. He’s wearing a light- blue striped gown. A bag of clear fluid hangs from a silver pole. Tubes extend from the bag and are attached to the top of his hand.

“Jake,” Aunt Val whispers.

Jake opens his eyes and grins.

“We’re here. You’re going to be okay.”

Just then, Uncle Fred walks behind me. “How is he?” he asks.

“I’m good,” Jake gasps. He looks at me.

“The doctor says you have a broken rib and collapsed lung, Jakey. They’re going to keep you here for a few days.” Uncle Fred says, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Jake nods, looking at Uncle Fred.

“Can I speak to Mr. and Mrs. Cole?” a man with a white jacket asks, peeking around the curtain.

“We’re his guardians,” Aunt Val says walking toward the doctor. Uncle Fred follows.

I walk toward Jake and grab the hand Aunt Val was holding.

“You okay?” I ask, trying to muster a grin. But, seeing Jake all pale and sickly looking is seriously freaking me out.

“Yeah,” he squishes his face when he breathes. Then, he tries to sit up. I gently touch his shoulder. “It’s okay,” I say, sitting on the side of his bed. “Just relax. Look, Jake. I’m not going anywhere. I know you’re pissed at me and stuff, but, I’m not leaving your side,” I say, squeezing his hand. “I love you.”

His eyes water.

I want to hug him, but I know I can’t. We stare at each other until Aunt Val and Uncle Fred walk in with the doctor.

“The doctor has to insert a chest tube, Jake.”

Jake’s eyes bulge.

“It’ll be okay,” she says.

I give his hand one more squeeze. Then, I let go.

“Why don’t you go home for a bit, Ash? We’ll call you as soon as he’s done getting the chest tube.”

I nod.

A woman wearing green scrubs walks behind the bed and unlocks it. She pushes Jake down the hallway and through doors. Uncle Fred and Aunt Val follow holding hands. When they’re out of sight, I take off toward the waiting room.



During the car ride home, my mom is silent.

“I’m disappointed I didn’t get to meet Jake,” Gram breaks the silence. “And the busted rib thing makes him even hotter I bet in a warrior kind of way. Huh, Ash?”

My mom looks at Gram, then back at the road.

“Yeah. He can’t wait to meet you, Gram.”

“So, does this mean you and Jake are back together?” my mom looks at me in the rearview mirror.

“Yeah.” I say, staring back. “Does this mean, you and Dad are going to be okay with it?”

“His aunt and uncle seem nice,” she says, taking a deep breath.

“And?”

“I don’t see why you can’t see him with restrictions. You know, until Dad and I get to know him.”

“What kind of restrictions?” I ask.

“Let’s take it one day at a time. But for now, until we get to know Jake, how about you and Jake hang out at our house.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes. I am. It’s obvious you care very deeply about Jake. And I trust your judgment, Ashley. You’re a good kid.” My mom’s eyes crinkle in the rearview mirror.

“Wahoo!” Gram yells breaking into a dance in the front seat. She turns around and winks at me.

“What about Dad?” I ask.

“I’ll talk to Dad,” she says.



When we pull up to the house, Dad is walking the perimeter of our front lawn in the pitch dark pushing the mower, still dressed in his police uniform.

I dash into the house with Gram. My mom stays behind, and I watch from the living room window as they chat. A few minutes later, my dad shakes his head and drags the lawn mower toward the garage.

“Is he cool with me and Jake?” I almost tackle my mom when she walks through the front door.

“He’s getting used to the idea,” she says.

Gram slaps me five.

Sunday, August 29

The next day after church, I walk up to my dad while he's tying his sneakers and take a deep breath.

"Can you take me to see Jake?" I ask, halting in front of him.

Next to Dad on the couch, Gram places Stud for Breakfast on her lap and adjusts her position.

He looks up at me.

"I guess," he says, shrugging his shoulder.

The only noise during the ride to Shore Hospital is "Stairway to Heaven" and my dad's finger-drumming against the steering wheel. He stops the convertible in front of the entrance.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" my dad asks.

"No, I'm a big girl, Dad."

"Yeah. I know, Ashley." He looks at me. Then, he fidgets

with the seat. “Ashley, you’re so much like your mother.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“She makes up her mind and there’s no stopping her. One of the reasons I fell in love with your mom.” He adjusts his rear-view mirror. “Look Ashley, if you like this Jake Cole character, then I guess I’m willing to give him a chance. You must see something there.”

“Seriously?” I ask. My cheeks ache from grinning.

“Seriously,” he smiles.

“Sweet.” I hug my dad.

“I’ll be back in an hour. Don’t be late.” His face turns stern.

I nod, open the convertible door, and barrel up the steps toward the entrance.



When I walk into Jake’s hospital room, his brother, John, is lounging next to Jake by the window. They’re both staring at television. A clear tube attached to a giant bag half filled with pink tinged liquid peeks out the side of the blanket below Jake’s side.

“Hey, Ashley.” John says standing up and offering his chair. He bends the brim of his baseball hat.

“Hi, John,” I say, walking over to Jake’s bed.

He smirks, looking me up and down.

“Hey,” Jake says, tenderly sitting up.

“I guess I’ll leave you two alone. I’m hungry anyway,” he

walks toward the door.

I gradually lower myself on Jake's white blanket like the bed is hot bath water.

Jake looks at me.

"Hey," he says.

"Did the tube thingy hurt?" I ask, squeezing his hand. He places it on my thigh and nods his head.

"That sucks." I stare at the clear tape covering the IV needle. "Guess what?"

Jake widens his eyes.

"I'm allowed to see you." I regurgitate the rules.

He smiles.

"Are we all good?" I ask hoping that he let the Ryan thing go.

"This is a start," he says, squeezing my hand tight. "Time, Ash. Time."

"Look, Jake. I'm sorry. The Ryan hook up was dumb. It only lasted like a second. I knew it was wrong, but you have to believe me. I thought you moved on with Rachel."

Jake lifts his hand. "Let's just not talk about it anymore. I don't want to know anything about that night."

I look at the television hoping to change the subject.

"Do you like Ryan Seacrest?"

Jake rolls his eyes.

Urgh. Word vomit again. Why did I pick a Ryan?

“Sorry. I’ll try again. When do you start school?”

“I don’t think I’m going to school anytime soon.”

I spin my charm between my thumb and finger.

He reaches out and grasps my necklace, moving the clasp to the back of my neck with one hand.

“Ashley, I couldn’t stay away from you if I tried,” he says, releasing the charm. It falls back on my chest.

I lower myself toward his face and gingerly kiss his lips. He grabs the back of my head with his good side and pulls me toward his face for the best kiss of my life. Gone are the yucky, tight, and all coiled up feelings. Everything is replaced with a feeling of ease. An easiness, but at the same time, it’s twisted with excitement. Just being around Jake is like fireworks, but good fireworks, fun fireworks. Not fireworks that end in fights. But, fireworks that I never want to end.

“Even a chest tube, collapsed lung, and two fractured ribs can’t keep a Cole boy down,” John says, walking into the room holding three Tastycakes.

Jake and I pull apart and smile.

Behind John, Aunt Val and Uncle Fred walk in holding Burger King bags.

“Ashley!” Aunt Val shouts, placing the bags on the table. “I knew you’d be here. Did Jake tell you, he’ll be back home later tomorrow? They’re taking the chest tube out tomorrow morning.” She grins.

Uncle Fred digs into the bag and tosses a burger at John. “They’re not Val burgers, but they’ll have to do.” He smiles.

We eat, laugh, and chat until my hour is up.

Then, John, Aunt Val, and Uncle Fred gather the trash and walk down the hallway.

“I guess this is goodbye for now,” I say, squeezing Jake’s hand.

“Yup.”

“When will I see you again?” I ask.

“Don’t know,” Jake answers, locking my eyes.

“I’m trying out for Team New Jersey next weekend.” I rack my brain trying to think of something amazing to say.

“Good luck.” Jake smirks.

“Feel better, okay,” I swallow a lump.

“I will.”

“I love you.”

“Me too,” he shows his dimples. “And Ash.”

I turn around before I reach the door.

“Stop being so dramatic. Save that stuff for your future books or something. I’m sure we’ll be back next weekend. The summer doesn’t end this. You know, us.”

I let out a deep breath. “Okay. So, you’ll call me?”

“Of course, Ashley.”

I break out in a huge smile, walk over to the bed, lean over Jake, and we kiss. Then, we both smile and stare into each other’s

eyes, until I have to go.

On my way out, I pass Uncle Fred, Aunt Val, and John at the doorway.

“Leaving, Ash?” Uncle Fred asks.

“Yeah. My dad’s downstairs.” I look down.

“Hey, Ash. I’m heading to Shady Maple tomorrow to stay with Jake for a few days. Do you want me to pick you up?” John asks, locking my eyes with the same hot gaze.

For a minute, my brain spins trying to figure out ways to pull that off. But, then I stop. “Thanks. But, I’ll have to ask my dad.”

“See you soon, Ash.” Aunt Val wraps her arms around my shoulders.

I look down at my flip-flops, and a lump reforms in my throat. I hope so. I hope my parents take me to see Jake. I mean, what is the winter going to be like after the campground closes for the season. Will this work? Will Jake and I still be together?

“Don’t look so glum,” Uncle Fred adds. “We love the campground during autumn.”

I muster a smile knowing that if I play for my dream team, Team New Jersey, the weekends Jake will visit will probably be filled with softball.

For a second, I think about my promise to myself. I will make this work. I can love softball and Jake at the same time.

“Bye,” I wave and step into the elevator.

I watch Uncle Fred, Aunt Val, and John step into Jake's room.

Then, the doors close, and summer ends.

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Keri Mikulski is the author of *Screwball*, the National Writing for Children's 2008 Young Adult Pick. Keri earned a bachelor's degree in nursing from Thomas Jefferson University, a master's degree in teaching from The College of New Jersey, and is a graduate of The Institute of Children's Literature. A three sport athlete back when softballs were white, Keri enjoys helping out with her local Jersey shore high school softball team, teaching freshman college writing classes, golfing, Coach bags, and Derek Jeter. *Change Up* is her second novel and her favorite pitch to teach. Visit Keri at:

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