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Same difference

by

Akilah S. Brown

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

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Neal Bowers, Major Professor
Jane Davis
Dan Douglas

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Graduate College
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This is to certify that the master’s thesis of

Akilah S. Brown

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

______________________________
Major Professor

______________________________
For the Major Program
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Chapter 1

I waited for the perfect moment. The passenger seat was tilted just enough to give the impression that it was leaning back, and my mother was slouched down in it, head nodding to the left. As soon as her chin slid down to rest on her shoulder and her mouth gaped open, I gripped the steering wheel and said, “You should have let me stay.”

She jerked her head back and blinked. Shaking her head to clear it of sleep, she pressed a hand to her forehead. Dr. Alexandra Heathrow, ladies and gentlemen. Even the most educated and professionally sought after amongst us drooled, snorted, and collected eye boogies while she slept.

I turned my head forward, pretending I had been watching the road the entire time. The land was flat, the highway endless. A tree was on the horizon—the same tree I had passed about fifty miles before, I was sure. Green grass on either side. Welcome to Indiana. It would never end.

“We’re in Indiana,” I said.

“We’ve been in Indiana since before you took over,” she said, pulling her jacket up to her chin. The air was up high—the better to keep you awake, my dear.

“I know,” I said.

It was pointless trying to keep the edge out of my voice; she knew how I felt about the move. One thousand and forty-odd miles between Lower Newport, MD and Blanche, IA. One thousand and forty-odd miles between home and this distant, foreign land we were now traveling to. Just because my mother felt some odd need to go West and manifest her destiny.

The least she could do, I figured, was go west to somewhere significant, somewhere I wouldn’t be embarrassed to say I was moving. What was wrong with Chicago? Denver? And, truth be told, I’d really have preferred going all the way west, somewhere warm and sunny, like California.

If you’re going to uproot your kid right before junior year, it’d be courteous to at least go somewhere interesting that wasn’t in the middle of a cornfield is all I’m saying.
But when you’re a hotshot researcher in the field of meat—and I really never wanted to know more about her specialty than that, what with me loving beef and chicken and pork and all, and not wanting to hear something that might turn me off for life—you have to go where the money and the colleagues and the equipment are.

You have to go to Blanche, IA.

There was always the option of Hawaii, but that wasn’t where the job gods chose to point their mighty job relocation stick.

I wasn’t sure what I had done to anger them, but I vowed to try my hardest to rectify it.

My mother sighed and leaned over to check the odometer. I dropped my shoulder and eased as far away from her as possible.

Since she was much more mature than me, she ignored my childish flinch, and said, “We’re making good time.”

“I’m ready to stop,” I said.

“You’ve only been driving for forty-five minutes.”

“Yeah, well, driving is boring.” I waved my hand around. “And this car is too small.”

The car was not too small. My mom drove a pretty decent sized Buick, our seats separated by an extra wide arm rest that held CDs and whatever else my mother crammed in there. All of our junk that didn’t go in the moving truck (a couple of bags of clothes, electronics, some “important work” of my mom’s) was piled in the backseat, and it did give the car a very claustrophobic air. There was nowhere to escape; we only had the front seats to hold our bodies, and my body, at least, was on edge from being forced to leave the only home I had known for a state I only knew for (a) having corn and (b) getting extremely cold in the winter. It was possible I’d get a little crazy and do something stupid like accidentally on purpose elbow my mother in the ribs while going for the glove compartment. Not that I would ever need anything from there, but I’d come up with an excuse.

“Your father and I discussed it,” she said, answering the comment that had woken her up, “and both decided it was best for you to stay with me.” She rested her arm along the door, staring out the window. “Which you already know.”
“And you didn’t discuss it with me,” I said, “which you already know. I could have worked out another option. Like staying with Kerry.” Kerry, my cousin and also one of my best friends, had an extra bedroom. Well, her parents did anyway.

My mom pressed her lips together into a thin line. “I am not having this discussion with you again.”

It was my turn to sigh, only I accompanied mine with flared nostrils.

Forcing cheerfulness, she said, “We should be able to stop in another seventy-five miles. I can’t wait to stretch my legs.”

“I can’t wait to shower,” I said.

“There you go. Focus on the positive.” She gave me a hopeful smile, her already wide nose flattening out and spreading even further across her face, her round cheeks curving upward, the smattering of moles seeming to pop off her face. “A little over an hour to a shower and a bed. I’m glad you’re helping me drive.”

I bit back the retort that sat on my tongue. I should’ve had my license and a car, but both my parents deemed it pointless to test until I got to Iowa, since it was only a few weeks between my birthday on July 7 and moving on August 1. No test meant no license. Moving halfway across the country meant no point in buying a used car that might or might not be able to make the journey. No license, no car, but a new house in Iowa. Seriously, what had I done to deserve this?

Not that I wasn’t proud of my mom for getting the offer of being a lead researcher on a government funded project that paid double what she made at her previous job, but would feel like triple with the low cost of living in Iowa. I could safely concede that I wasn’t that selfish. I just wish it could’ve been at home was all.

We passed the tree I had been eyeballing as a marker. The horizon spread out ahead of me, nothing but highway and heat waves. When I had envisioned myself roadtripping during the summer, Indiana was not what I had in mind.

But my mother had to manifest destiny. And I had to go with her.
Chapter 2

We got to the new house at dusk, my mother having done the bulk of the driving. Even though we had driven more miles the day before, it felt like the final leg of the trip had taken much longer, and I was anxious to be rid of the car and the fast food wrappers on the floor and my mother’s insistence on listening to lite radio fare while she was driving.

My mom maneuvered the car into the driveway, turned to me, and smiled. “Our own driveway,” she said.

I nodded, unable to say anything. My eyes were glued to the house, and I felt an unbidden wash of excitement rush over me. Our very own house. Not a townhouse, not an apartment, but a house. No one connected to us on either side. And the next house over was a good distance away; the lots didn’t sit right on top of each other, and it looked like I wouldn’t be able to peek out of my window and see right into my neighbor’s, something you could do at Kerry’s.

And there was a lawn.
And an enclosed porch.
And red shutters on the extra large upstairs windows.

We got out of the car, and I felt it. It was safe here. Safe and peaceful. I don’t know if it was the emptiness of the street or the way the air was crisp and void of humidity, but I could tell my mom wouldn’t be using the Club for her car here. And that I might have been able to get away with leaving a shopping bag in the car without worrying about the bag or the car being gone before I went back to retrieve either.

“Nice, huh?” my mom said, closing her door and breaking my reverie.

I tilted my head in her direction. She had her arms folded under her chin, leaning against the hood of the car. The piece of hair she played with while driving stuck straight out on the left side of her head, and her eyes were bright with anticipation.

“It’s okay,” I said, slamming my door. I put my back to the car, leaned against it, and stared up at the large house and the small patio area below what I guessed was the master bedroom window.

We stood there a moment more: me enthralled by our new home, her watching me.
“Great, so we got a house,” I said, turning and opening the door to the backseat.

“Can we get this stuff inside so I can get some sleep?”
Chapter 3

All of our stuff had been delivered two days after we had arrived—my mother spent lots of time on the phone vacillating between near hysteric and cold anger. I knew enough to stay out of her way, locked in my room far from the hostility emanating from the kitchen while she sorted things out.

When the movers finally got there, my mother had negotiated a discount, but still tipped the guys generously for carrying all of our crap in the house. That's just the kind of person she was.

I went to the kitchen to talk to my mother about my driving situation, that being that I still did not have (a) a license or (b) a car. I needed to know when the end to both of these would be in sight.

She stood in our war zone of a kitchen and rolled her eyes skyward when I asked about it. “Honestly, Shiann,” she said. “Don’t you think I have more important things to worry about?”

“I don’t,” I said. “School starts soon”—so very, very soon it started—“and I don’t have a ride, Ma. I have no wheels, no way to get around.”

“There is always,” she said, carefully peeling newspaper from around a stack of plates, “the bus.”

Oh no she didn’t.

“Oh no you didn’t.”

She stiffened. I took a step back. The thing about my mom was that even though she was several inches shorter than me and only came up to my shoulder, her anger could instantaneously fill a room and make me feel like a little kid staring up into the fiery black cauldron of her angry face. It was a very profound and chilling effect. And she absolutely did not tolerate sass. At all.

“Sorry,” I said. I changed my tone from challenging to placating. “Sorry. It’s just. Okay, right, so. The thing is that it’s junior year, and I’m sixteen and I should be driving to school, not taking the bus. That was always the plan, remember?” I got playful with it here, even managing a smile. “Me driving, not riding the bus. We had the Great Plan of you not having to chauffer me around anymore. Remember?”
She sighed, a heavy sigh, like the burden of having a sixteen-year-old was almost too much to bear. Perching the plates precariously close to the edge of the counter, she said, “How could I forget? But, you know, things change. For example, we weren’t supposed to be in Iowa when we made those plans either.”

As if that were a good selling point for me. No kidding we weren’t supposed to be in Iowa. Three days in the state and it was already ruining my life more than I thought possible. The fact of the matter was that not having a license to drive and riding the bus to school as a high school junior was the very definition of lame.

But my mother, of course, didn’t understand this.

I turned on my heel to leave.

“Shiann? Did you call your father yet?”

It was my turn to stiffen. I thought there was some kind of law about shooting someone in the back. I cleared my throat. “No.”

“Well, don’t you think you should?”

“Why can’t you call him?” And I whined it. Oh, God. Next thing you knew I would be stamping my feet.

“He’s not my father, for one.”

I folded my body in on itself, stamped my feet, and in the whiniest voice possible said, “If I were in Maryland, I wouldn’t have to call him.”

“You know what? Just go upstairs. I called him when we first got here. I just thought he might like to hear your voice to know you’re all right.”

Because I didn’t have a death wish, I waited until I was halfway up the steps before saying, “But I’m not all right,” under my breath.
Chapter 4

The first day of school rolled around much quicker than I would have liked. My mother got the bright idea that we should paint. She, of course, had this idea after the movers had left, which meant we had to move all of our furniture out of rooms to get the painting done. For a scientist, she could be extremely unorganized and tended to do things bass-ackwards.

I decided to paint my room orange, since it’s my favorite color. I always caught flak for that. I mean, really, who says their favorite color is orange? But that’s why I liked it. Nobody ever named orange on favorite color day, but me. Frankly, all of the purple, pink, red, blue, and black lovers out there could bite me.

The orange was actually orange cream. A really soft, pretty color that caught the sun well. The window in my room was large and had a seat, which was the second best thing about where I slept. Sitting there made me wish I was an artist because there was a great view of the backyard, which was wide and green and surrounded by trees, through which you could see a creek. Really pretty. But I contented myself with opening the window wide and acting out the balcony scene from *Romeo & Juliet*.

What I really loved about the room, though, was the built-in bookcase.

Actually, there were a couple of built-in shelf/storage areas. I was using the one under the window seat to store my DVDs and some video tapes. And the huge one in my closet was for my shoes. But right next to my closet was this arched shelf, perfect for books and pictures and, God, anything else I could think of.

I didn’t paint that orange, though. I left it white. I thought it made a striking contrast. My mother decided to go with this pale green color that was an accent in her curtains. And she painted the bathroom yellow. Which, okay. Not my first choice.

But the point is that we had to move furniture and sleep in the living room and then move the furniture back and still sleep in the living room because of the paint fumes.

The living room and den weren’t painted yet because she couldn’t decide on a color. But the office was a nice shade of blue—calming, for those days when work got to be too much, I guess.

So time really got away from me what with all of the paint fumes.
And now it was the first day of school, and I sat in the passenger seat of my mom’s car, clutching the sleek, black messenger bag my dad had bought me right before I left so I would look “smart.” His word, not mine. With my dad, it was hard to tell if he meant smart like intelligent, or smart like sharp and, possibly, fashionable. I liked to believe he meant the latter, but he probably meant the former. That’s just the kind of guy he was.

We had settled the car dispute, my mother and I, by having her drop me off. Which she thought was utterly ridiculous. In fact, her exact words were, “I don’t see how being dropped off at school by your mommy is any less lame than riding the school bus like a big girl.”

Yes, she actually said, “like a big girl.”

And since I was being bratty, I said, “A big girl who would be driving if not forced to move halfway across the country to a land-locked state. How am I supposed to go to the beach this summer?”

At that, she threw up her hands and said, “Fine. I will take you to school if you promise not to talk for the rest of the day.”

I agreed, even though it was eleven-thirty in the morning when she said that.

And so we sat at the school’s curb, and I watched as a group of three white girls got out of a red hatchback, smoothed their skirts, and went in the building. The blond girl in the back tripped—probably because of the high-heeled sandals she had on—right as the door was closing. There was a huge banner over the door that read “Welcome Back, Storms!”

The Blanche Storms. What kind of mascot was a Storm anyway? And how would one go about putting that on a jersey?

“Shiann? Please get out.”

“What if I fall like that girl?” I asked, my eyes locked on the steps leading up to the treacherous door. Steps and a door? It was an invitation to trouble.

My mother snorted. “As long as your sneakers are tied, I think you’ll be all right.”

I was dressed sensibly in my knee-length jean skirt, fitted white polo tee, and white low-top Chucks.

“Oh my God,” I said. “Maybe I should have worn my slides.”

“Oh my God. If you don’t get out of this car right now, I will kill you.”
I took a deep breath and opened the door. When I put one foot out, I turned to look at
my mother. "Did you have to bring me so early? I mean, those three girls are the only
people who are even here yet."

"Call me if you need me," she said and gunned the engine. It was a good thing the
car was still in park.

"Okay."

"And I'll meet you here right after school." Her job didn't start until September, so I
had emotionally blackmailed her into picking me up as well.

"Fine."

I got all the way out of the car and took a deep breath.

"And, Shiann?" She leaned across the arm rest and pecked up at me. "Have fun."

I pressed my lips together in what I hoped was a smile before shutting the door.
Because my mother clearly didn't love me, she pulled away as soon as both of my feet were
firmly on the sidewalk. So much for watching me to make sure I made it into the building
okay.

God, it was like the first day of kindergarten and me clutching her leg all over again.
She left that day, too, and all of the other mommies stayed until lunch. Or mid-morning or
something. But not my mom. She brought me to the door, introduced me to the teacher,
unclenched my arms from around her leg, kissed my forehead, told me to have fun, and left.

She was definitely a rip the band-aid off kind of person.

Sighing, I slung my bag over my shoulder, made my way up the steps, and went in
the building. Thankfully, without tripping.
Chapter 5

When I first told my friends I was moving to Iowa, there were two things they said. (1) "Iowa? It's cold in Iowa." (2) "Are there black people in Iowa?"

Now I knew the answer to the second question. No. No, there were not.

From parking lot to front door, from front door to office, from office down the hallway to my homeroom, I noticed two very distinctive things. (1) The building was very clean and well-lit, allowing lots of sunshine in, and (2) there was a painful lack of color amongst the student population.

Being sequestered in the house with my mom so long, I guess the reality of being in the minority never occurred to me. We had talked about it a bit before we moved, how Iowa was different from the D.C. area, that we would be going from Chocolate City to Vanilla Valley, but it didn’t hit me until I entered my homeroom and found myself looking into a sea of white faces.

There were still a few minutes before the bell, and so I sat at an empty desk by the window, third row back. Since it was the first time in the history of life that I had been in a situation where I didn’t know anyone, it was good that the window was there. It gave me the opportunity to gaze at the football field and try to ignore the chatter of friends greeting each other after a summer away.

And I learned that the Storms were represented by a tornado as evidenced on the football score placard.

I felt lame and conspicuous. And very, very alone. I hadn’t really counted on being the only black person in my class, and probably the whole building, if my hallway jaunt from earlier was any indication.

By my second class, I could raise the black people count from one to two because there was this guy, Tony, in my history class. He sat exactly opposite of me—the teacher was a fan of assigned seating and that lame all seats face the middle set-up—so I got a chance to surreptitiously watch him all during class. Tony was odd. He had an extremely large forehead, wore all black, and spent most of the class muttering to himself and writing on his arm with a skinny marker.

I decided not to attempt to befriend him.
I still had standards, after all.

The best part of my day—even if it was devoid of brown people—had to be going to drama class. I wanted to be an Actor, heavy-duty. And I had never been able to take any kind of acting or drama or theater classes at my old school.

So when I walked into the Blanche High School theater, I just knew it was going to be great. First of all, it was a real theater, and not just a multi-purpose room. You know, a lunch room or gym with a stage for assemblies and stuff.

No, there were lights and rows and rows of seats and it was dark and the stage was brightly lit and the house was in shadow and I think I whimpered when I walked in there. Just...heaven.

And the teacher seemed cool. She wore this earthy brown, floaty top that had gold swirls on it with brown leggings, and her strawberry blond hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail. You could tell she was really young, but she didn’t sound young when she said in this huge booming voice, “To the stage, young actors. To the stage,” to those of us who had settled into the seats right in front of the stage.

I could always appreciate being addressed as an actor.

So when we got onstage, she had us sit in a circle and introduce ourselves by giving our names and why we had signed up for the class. “Honesty,” Mrs. Murrow said, “is necessary in any performance. And that is what I want from each of you.” Here she paused to let her eyes rest on all twenty-three of us one by one. “If you are taking this class because you think it’s an easy A, by all means, say so.”

Of course, the first person who went said that exact thing. Which is probably why I can’t remember his or her name.

But it was a great icebreaker and everybody laughed.

I was really too worried about what I was going to say to focus much on anybody else. Except this one guy Jude Marconi. He had these super pale, watery blue eyes, black hair, and a cleft chin. I was ready to write him off as a psycho on account of the eyes—there was something creepy about them; mostly because they were so light they didn’t look real—until he opened his mouth and said, “I’m taking this class because I want to walk a mile in someone else’s shoes.”
Even Mrs. Murrow looked impressed. I thought it was deep, especially since my reason was shallow, and all about furthering my career as an actress and being able to hire a stylist to put me in dresses as beautiful as Halle Berry’s at award shows.

Jude winked at me when I said that, which made me grin.

Then, Mrs. Murrow told us that at the end of the year, we would be putting on a full-length production, using our resources from the technical drama class, the shop class, and the art class. I could’ve died and gone to heaven right then, I was so happy.

So I was floating on a bliss cloud when I got to my next class. Especially when I realized that there was a brown girl in my class who didn’t look weird and didn’t mutter to herself. She wasn’t what I would call cute or pretty but she was completely inoffensive with her two short ponytails—one at the top of her head and one at the back.

I smiled at her, a big smile, full of hope.

She widened her eyes in shock and turned her head away so quickly that I just stood there, gaping at her in the doorway until some boy behind me muttered, “Excuse me,” as he brushed past.

We had assigned seats, and since her name was Mariette-Louise Jacobson (an unfortunate name, since neither of the hyphenates were that appealing on their own), we wound up only one seat apart with Norris Henderson between us. Mr. Perry, the teacher, who had a unibrow and wore a horribly mismatched shirt and tie, tried to make my name as ugly as hers by mispronouncing it as “She-Ann” instead of “Shy-ann,” so I had to nip that in the bud quick. I don’t know why I’d never had a math teacher I got off to a good start with, especially since I actually liked math.

I tried to get Mariette-Louise’s attention after class was over, but she was out the door before I could get my messenger bag strap over my head.

Lunch was next, and going to a cafeteria with no one to sit next to was as horrible as the movies always depict it to be. I walked close to Mariette-Louise’s table to see if she’d make room for me, but she didn’t even glance up as I walked by. I had brought a book with me just in case, so I made my way to a corner table and ate my lunch and read, ignoring all of the post-summer chit-chat, just as I had that morning in homeroom.

It blew.
I’d like to say my day improved after that, but sitting on the stage listening to Jude talk about his desire to be a better person was the high point, and everything after lunch wasn’t even worth remembering.
Chapter 6

People streamed out of the high school while I stood at the curb checking my watch every twenty seconds. My mother had chosen to be late, or forgotten about me. Since she believed I didn’t need a cell phone since I didn’t have a car, I couldn’t call her to find out where she was.

When she pulled up three minutes later, my mouth was set in a hard line, and my attitude had plummeted past my feet into the depths of hell.

“Vous’re late,” I said, after I opened the door and dropped my bag on the floor. I got in and slammed the door.

She raised an eyebrow at me. “How was school?”

“Three, Mom. There are three black people. Then again, there might be five. Two I’m not so sure about. They’ve got that Wentworth Miller-Mariah Carey-Vin Diesel quality.”

My mother flung her head back and laughed. Shaking her head, she shifted gears and pulled out of the parking lot.

“It’s not funny,” I said, arms crossed over my chest, bottom lip poking out.

She cleared her throat. “You’re right. This is serious business.” Then, she covered her mouth with her left hand, and cut her eyes at me, clearly trying to keep from laughing out loud again.

“And the one black girl I thought I might be able to talk to completely ignored me in class and at lunch. You’d think, with a name like Mariette-Louise, that she’d be nicer to me.”

“Well, did you try to talk to anybody else besides her?”

I sighed. “No.”

“So you can only talk to black people now?”

I rolled my eyes. “No.” I stared out the window at the open field we were passing.

“Okay, maybe.”

“Really?”

“Well, I don’t know any white people. What am I supposed to say to them?”

“Gee, I don’t know. How about hello?”
“And then what? What do white people talk about, Ma? What do they say to each other?”

It was her turn to sigh.

“What? There was, like, one white boy in our class back home, and I never talked to him.”

We had reached the house by then. She turned off the car and looked at me, frowning. “What would you tell him to say to your friends?”

“Hi, I guess.”

“And then what?”

“I don’t know. Something about school or TV.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She clutched her purse, not grabbing the handles or shoulder strap, which drove me nuts, and opened her door.

“Where are you going?” I asked her.

She stopped, one leg still in the car. “In the house,” she said, slowly, like I was incapable of understanding. “We’re home.”

She closed the door a little harder than I thought necessary, and when I got inside, she was banging pots and pans down on the stove and yanking cabinets open and slamming them shut. But the kitchen was completely unpacked, and you could even see the top of our small, round kitchen table.

“Is it my fault?” she asked, rinsing chicken in the sink. “Is it something I said or did?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. I set my bag in one of the chairs and leaned against the doorway that led to the dining room.

“To cause you to be so ignorant and stupid.” She turned to me, folding her arms across her chest, oblivious to the water dripping onto her shoes.

“What?” I said, disbelieving.

“You read, right? Watch TV?”

“Yeah, but—”

“And all of those books and shows have white characters, right?”
“Yeah, but—”

“So I don’t get it,” she said. “I fully do not understand.”

“Those people aren’t real, Ma.”

“Unbelievable.” She threw up her hands and turned back to the chicken.

“Unbelievable.”

I stood there for a minute, unsure of what to say. I think that was the first time my mother had ever turned her back on me, had ever dismissed me in such a way. Like she couldn’t even bother telling me to get lost.

When it became clear that she was completely focused on her task and was not—as I had hoped—going to continue our conversation in any way, I went upstairs to my orange cream room, and flopped down on my bed. I needed to bend the ear of someone I knew, so I called my cousin Kerry who wasn’t home, and my friend Larissa who also wasn’t home.

“Bah,” I said to the stuffed Mickey sitting on my bookshelf. “Guess that means I have to do my math homework, huh?”

But I had left the bag downstairs. It would just have to wait until after dinner.
Chapter 7

Because I felt it was in my best interest to do so, I apologized to my mother as soon as I sat down for dinner.

“And what,” she asked, spearing a piece of broccoli, “exactly are you sorry for?”

I studied my plate, hoping I would say the right thing. “Well, I’m not ignorant and stupid, and I’m sorry I made you feel like I am.”

“Except you made some really dumb, and dare I say, borderline racist comments earlier.”

“I think you’re just reading too much into it.”

She raised her eyebrow.

“I’m not trying to be smart,” I said. “I think you misunderstood.”

“What’s to misunderstand?” Sighing, she scooped macaroni onto her fork. “You think there’s some fundamental difference between talking to a white person and a black person. Newsflash, sweetie. People are people. And it’s not like you were friends with folks at home just because they were black.” She put the macaroni in her mouth.

“But that’s the thing,” I said. “I never even had to think about it before.”

“Then I guess it’s a good thing we moved out here,” my mom said and took a sip of her iced tea.

“Fine,” I said, reaching for my glass. “I promise to you that I will make an effort to say hello to someone who is not black tomorrow in the hopes of befriending them.”

I raised my glass for a toast. My mother studied me, probably gauging my sincerity. She must have been satisfied with what she saw because she clinked her glass to mine and said, “Good.”

Good.
Chapter 8

Trying to befriend people was a lot harder than my mother must have expected it to be. I wasn't normally a shy person, but trying to figure out who was worthy of saying hello to was a very difficult task. There was something off-putting about almost everyone. And it wasn't like there were very many opportunities to actually say hello to a random person.

I guess I could've tried on the bus that morning, but I was so irate about having to actually for real ride it, that it took all I had not to fake a seizure so I could somehow force my mother to take me to school.

And then there was the fact that no one else used my bus stop—at least not that day.

Riding the bus sucked in Iowa as much as it sucked in Maryland. And I'm sorry, but riding the bus was lamer than getting dropped off at school by my mom, no matter how she tried to spin it.

But she was trying to make a point, and I guess I did have to get used to getting around on my own. Even if I didn't like it.

So I read on the bus to avoid accidental eye contact with anyone. That was a tip I had picked up from having to ride the Metro into D.C. to my dad's job during the summer. Technically, it was my job, but he never failed to remind me that he had gotten me the job and so it always felt like I was just doing him a favor by working there and shredding documents and sending faxes. And occasionally futzing around on the internet.

All of my teachers in the morning had given lectures (something I would learn was par for the course in history) followed by what they termed "individual response" (that is, writing an essay response or doing some kind of textbook activity where you worked alone and couldn't talk to anyone to even ask for an eraser lest the teacher thought you were "collaborating on a response" as Mr. Johnston, my English teacher put it).

In drama, Mrs. Murrow announced that we'd be working on breathing exercises, which was so boring I think I passed out at one point. She said there was a deep connection between our—I wasn't the only one, apparently—inability to stay awake and our inability to relax ourselves through breathing without falling asleep. "The only time most of us truly relax," she announced at the end of class, "is when we sleep. You must be able to relax to
face a crowd. That is why so many have a fear of public speaking, why so many fear appearing on stage."

Uh huh.

So between being cranky on the bus, doing book work in history and English, and falling asleep in drama, I really didn’t have an opportunity to talk to anyone. Or so I kept telling myself.

Mr. Perry surprised me in math by assigning us to work in groups. He did it by seating, so it was me, Norris Henderson, and Mariette-Louise. It was textbook work, but we were allowed to collaborate on each answer, something I’m sure would have driven Mr. Johnston nuts.

Mariette-Louise grimaced as we moved our desks into a little troika. Norris turned his cheeks up into a smile when I accidentally scraped his arm with my desk. "Don’t worry about it," he said, before I could apologize.

Thwarted at every turn in my attempt to talk to someone else first. Unbelievable.

"So, how do you guys want to do this?" I asked. "We could work on the problems individually and collaborate"—it’s possible I would use that word whenever I could—"or we could collaborate off the break."

Mariette-Louise scrunched her forehead. "Off the break?"

"You know, from jump."

She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Fine," I said. "Right away. We could work together right away."

She nodded and pressed her lips out, so she resembled a fish.

"I think," Norris said, quietly, causing me to lean towards him, "we should work alone and then compare answers."

"Fine by me," I said, smiling at him.

He blushed, causing the whiteheads on his right cheek to stand out, and the tips of his ears to turn red. Mariette-Louise rolled her eyes.

I stared at the paper and book in front of me and chewed my eraser. All around us, I heard the rustle of papers and whispered conversations. I cupped my chin in my hand and looked at the group next to us; they were working together, scribbling and talking.
“Are you done?” Mariette-Louise’s voice cut into my thoughts.

“Excuse me?”

“Are you done?” she asked again. She leaned over to glance at my paper.
I covered it with my arm. “I’m working on it.”
She shook her head, rolling her eyes (again!) and said, “Whatever.”
Sighing, I turned my attention to my work.
SEPTEMBER

Chapter 9

Figuring out how to talk to people and what people to talk with was still problematic for me, three days later. I didn't have common ground with anyone yet—besides Mariette-Louise, who seemed determined to be as not nice to me as possible (I had asked her where she got her hair done, which was a joke as there was nothing "done" about it, and she cut her eyes at me and said, "The salon," before walking out of the classroom, like she couldn't believe I had dared asked her anything), and Tony, who was too weird to even think about. Homework in all of my classes was so basic and introductory that there wasn't even a need to pretend to ask someone about it, and absolutely nothing spectacular had happened at the school worth gossiping about. My conversational basics were screwed.

Mr. Perry kept us in the same groups for math, and the dynamic between the three of us hadn't changed. Norris blushed horribly and stuttered any time I asked him a direct question, and Mariette-Louise continued to roll her eyes or clear her throat every time I tried to make a joke or engage them in something not related to math. It was like some kind of reminder that we were in class to work, and not talk, which seemed to go against how I understood group work.

Eating lunch by myself every day was boring; I was so completely over it that the thought of doing it again made me incredibly sad. I had never, ever not fit in. I had never, ever not belonged, and finding the opposite to be true at this place—in this Blanche—was frightening and lonely. That's the only reason I did it. The only reason that—right before the bell rang to let us out of math—I said to Mariette-Louise (always Mariette-Louise; I had made the mistake of calling her "ML" once and she hit the roof because her name "is not shortened, ever, by anyone"), "Hey, is it okay if I sit with you at lunch today?"

She pretended she didn't hear me, stuffing her notebook in her bag.

"It's just that I don't really know anybody yet and since we have lunch together and everything, I thought it might be nice not to eat alone." I wanted to kick myself. I was pretty much begging someone to hang out with me. Me! I cleared my throat. "But, you know, whatever."
“It’s cool,” Mariette-Louise said, straightening up. She had decided on a different hairstyle this time, bangs and a ponytail at the back of her head. It was a bad choice because her ends were split, the bangs dry. More attention was drawn to her small mouth. The good news was that the bangs helped soften her face—when they weren’t flying away out of control. “It’s just sometimes”—she shrugged into her backpack—“we go off-campus for lunch, and I was trying to remember if today was one of those days.”

“Oh,” I said, relief flooding my body. Relief! To sit at lunch with somebody I probably would have never even talked to at my old school. Unbelievable.


“Oh,” I said again. If at all possible, in that moment, I felt less sure of myself than I had when I didn’t have a lunch prospect. And, again, this was a girl my friends and I would have avoided like the plague at school with her sloppy outfit, beat up shoes, and awful hair.

She strode out of the classroom, and I followed, struggling to keep up. When it became obvious that she was a guided missile, hell-bent on making it to the cafeteria with no plans to chat along the way, I slowed my pace, watching the back of her head as she powered down the hallway. I bit my lip, wondering why she continued to be cold to me when I made so many efforts to be nice. I mean, honestly, would it have killed her to slow down enough so we could walk together?

I stopped at my locker and then went to the bathroom before heading to the cafeteria. High school bathrooms were universally the same. The one at SCHS was cleaner than the one at my old high school, but it still had angry words and letters scratched into the brown paint of the stalls. I never understood the appeal of calling a girl a slut on the girls’ room wall. Wouldn’t that information be better applied in the boys’ bathroom? And, honestly, who cared? Did you really want to spend precious moments of your life in a bathroom stall scratching “Amy will F*** your BOYFRIEND” on the walls? And, I swear, bleeping out swear words in graffiti must have been an Iowa thing. I’d never seen it anywhere else.

After I finished using the bathroom, I stood at the sink and tried to wash the desperation off my hands. Using the mirror above the sink, spotty though it was, I looked myself in the eye. I didn’t consider myself very pretty, though I had been called striking by a lot of people—something I attributed to my high cheekbones, and large, slanted eyes. My
complexion was dark and even, a mix of good genes (my dad had excellent skin) and a Retin-A prescription (my mom’s skin was...not so great).

I kept trying to tell myself I didn’t need Mariette-Louise; she was just a means to an end. Befriend her, I thought stupidly, and the rest will follow.

Rationally, I knew better. Mariette-Louise was closed off; I never saw her talk to anyone besides her lunch table crew. She was a blender, that much was obvious. When you dressed the way she did, when your hair didn’t cooperate, the last thing you wanted to do was call extra attention to yourself. I had been that way in middle school, navigating the tricky waters of what was acceptable or not, of what would get me picked on and leave me feeling defenseless since I wasn’t very quick with comebacks, only thinking of the perfect retort later in the day when I was home licking my wounds.

But I still always had friends.

I sighed and left the bathroom, headed for the cafeteria. The lunch room smelled obnoxious—or noxious, if you prefer—so I was glad to see chicken patties available when I went through the line. The walk out of the line was just as nerve-racking as the first day of school. I kept thinking that Mariette-Louise would pretend that she didn’t see me again, that I’d walk up to the table to find all seats occupied and have to turn away, pretending like I hadn’t intended to sit there in the first place.

That’s exactly the kind of vibe she put out. I felt like any moment she’d catch me in a big Gotcha moment.

But that day wasn’t a gotcha day. I sat at the space her and her group—there were three of them—had left for me, directly across from Mariette-Louise. To my right was Elizabeth, an extremely pale girl with stringy black hair, and Sarah was to the left of me, her glasses large on her skinny face, her blond hair short and frizzy.

So not the most attractive group of people I could have sat with. And I liked to think I was progressive and nice, but, in high school, I wasn’t. I totally judged and discarded people based on their appearances.

In this case, I was right, since there was not one single ounce of charisma or personality between the two—okay, three, if you count Mariette-Louise, but at least she had that edge of bitchiness (towards me, anyway) going for her. They were very polite, asking
me questions about D.C. and the monuments, about whether I liked the school so far. When I said it was hard finding people to hang out with, they made sympathetic noises and tried to commiserate, and then they started talking about something so bland, I tuned out.

The whole time Mariette-Louise sat back and said nothing, alternating between smirking at me and eating her bag lunch. I couldn’t figure out what was so amusing about the whole thing—unless she had figured out that I listened to her friends with half an ear and was kind of regretting ever sitting with them to begin with.

But when you’re lonely and feeling like an outcast, having people you’d never talk to in another life say good-bye followed by your name will still make you feel a little closer to normal. And when said people ask you if you’re having lunch with them the next day, you may just say, “Sure. Why not?” and mean it, while the person you forced to include you says nothing and everything in her body language says she wishes you had said no, you’ll still know you’re going to sit with them the next day.

Or at least that’s how it was for me.
Chapter 10

My room faced the backyard, so it wasn’t until I heard the front door slam that I knew my mom was home. That, and she called me as soon as she got in the door.

I went downstairs into the kitchen where my mother stood, unloading Chinese food containers onto the counter.

“You know,” I said, “if I had a license and car, I could have gone to pick up dinner and cooked.”

“You know,” she said, “you could have cooked anyway.”

She had kicked off her shoes and was curling and uncurling her stockinged feet.

“Chinese, huh?” I said, pulling out the plates. “Hard day?”

“Ugh.” She rolled her eyes. “Grab the tea, would you? I got you garlic shrimp.”

“Excellent.”

We piled our plates with food. She waited until we were seated with our drinks in front of us to say, “There’s just so much to learn. And I’m not clear on the office politics yet, and it’s so exhausting trying to figure out what’s okay and what isn’t.”

“Imagine that.”

She chewed some of her seafood delight and chased it with tea. “How’s your project going?”

I scrunched up my forehead. “Oh! Well, you’ll be happy to know that I talked to two new people today.”

“Really?” She smiled, impressed.

“Yeah, I sat with Mariette-Louise and her friends.”

“Oh. Well, that’s nice.”

“She’s weird,” I said.

“Eh, sometimes people are like that.”

“I guess.”

“But what about her friends? Are they nice?”

“Eh.”

“Sounds like you have more work to do,” she said. “I’m not sure you can count Mariette-Louise’s friends.”
"Why not?"

"Because," my mother said. "You’re only talking to them because they’re friends with the only other black girl you know. Doesn’t really work for me."

I sighed. "I think they should count."

She shook her head, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

"Fine," I said. "I'll try harder."

"That’s all I ask," she said, picking up her glass. "That’s all I ask."
Chapter 11

I was dreaming, fragmented images of cars and highways, of laughing girls and sneering boys, when the phone rang, startling me awake. My eyes opened to darkness; the red numbers on my clock radio glowed, telling me it was five-thirty.

Five-thirty. I groaned, clamped my eyes shut, and pulled my blanket closer around me, making it so that only my face was uncovered.

It rang again. Sure my mother would answer, I curled up like that would make the noise go away. The third time it rang, I whimpered and then picked up. I croaked hello, my mouth cottony, my eyes still closed.

My dad’s voice was loud in the phone, cheerful even. “Hey, kid,” he said. He had always been a morning person.

“Dad.” I groaned. “It’s, like, five-thirty. Call me after school.”

“I haven’t talked to you for weeks and you want me to call you after school?” He chuckled, but there was no warmth behind it. “Sorry, kiddo. No can do. Big meetings all day.”

I rolled onto my back, sighed. “What’s up?”

“What’s up? What’s up? You’re the one halfway across the country. You tell me what’s up.”

“Well,” I said. “School is school. Same thing, different faces.”

“That’s good,” he said. “So, listen. You’re still coming for Christmas, right?”

“Yes.”

“Last time I talked to your mother, she didn’t sound so sure. You still want to come, right, kid?”

“Dad—“

“Because I miss you, you know? Leaving like that, halfway across the country. I feel like I never see you anymore.”

I was silent, hoping he’d remember that he never saw me when I lived ten minutes away.

“She’s not the only one who loves you,” he said.

“Stop,” I said. “Stop right now.”

“I wanted to stay with you,” I said, a dangerous edge creeping into my voice. “I wanted to stay, and you said I should go with Mom.”

“A girl needs her mother, Shiann. You know that.”

I felt tears start to clog my throat. “You knew I wanted to stay. We could have worked it out.”

“Shiann,” he said, distracted. I could feel him checking his watch, feel him slipping away from the conversation. “Shiann, I have to go to work.”

“Why did you call?”

“What do you mean, why did I call? You’re my daughter. I wanted to talk to you.”

“Why did you call?” I asked again. A tear slipped from my eye. “Why do you do this?”

“I’ll see you at Christmas, right? Christmas? We’ll do something big, something good.”

“Dad—“

“I sent you a package,” he said. “It should be there in a few days. Tell your mom to look out for it.” He laughed. “It’s not a bomb. Tell her that.”

I sighed. “Okay,” I said. “I’ll tell her it’s not a bomb.”

“I’ll call you soon, okay? We need to talk more about Christmas, what we’re going to do. Okay?”

“Okay, just don’t call in the morning again, all right? After school, okay?”

But he was gone, having hung up abruptly. He thought saying good-bye was unnecessary; he always ended a call after he had gotten the information he wanted or needed, after he had said what he wanted to say.

I put the phone back onto its receiver, and rolled back onto my back. I lay there, staring at the ceiling. My parents had split up when I was three, and my dad liked to prove to me at every crossing why their ever having been together had been a Very Bad Idea. His strong points were charm and charisma; my mother’s were responsibility and drive. His biggest weakness was expecting the world to hold its breath while he determined what he wanted and then swooped in when he was ready, messing up the determined order of things,
and then using that charm and charisma to soften the blow, to make it so that you were
grateful that you were even in his presence, happy to be cared about by him. My mother was
all order, which meant she was usually cleaning up the emotional messes he left behind.

My guess was he hadn’t told her that he was going to call.

Try though I might, I couldn’t get back to sleep, and I really missed the extra hour
and a half, and, as a result, after showering and brushing my teeth, when I went to the kitchen
to see my mother flitting around, I said, “What are you so upbeat about?”

To which she replied in a sing-song voice, “Good morning, sunshine!”

I dropped into the kitchen chair. She was all suited up, black blazer and skirt, red
shirt. “I thought you didn’t have to dress up in the lab,” I said.

“That,” she said, “is a myth. Particularly when you are the lead researcher, and the
only black female researcher.”

I nodded, put my head on the table.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

I told her that Dad had called that morning. She pursed her lips and turned her back
to pour herself some coffee. When she turned around, her face was neutral, but her tone was
not. “Five-thirty?” she said.

I nodded, my cheek still on the cool table. It squeaked a little. Feeling drool collect
in the corner of my mouth, I sat up.

She blew air out of her nose before taking a sip from her cup. “Okay,” she said. “I
have to get going.”

“It’s only 7:15.” We lived about five minutes away from her lab, one of the reasons
she chose the house. “You don’t have to be at work for forty-five minutes.”

She dropped a kiss on my cheek, the smell of her very light and very floral perfume
creating a little bubble around me. “This I know. I’m all about setting precedents, letting
them know I’m there at all times, watching. Do you know how much it freaks people out if
their boss is always at work before them?” She smirked. “Lets my squad know what’s up.”

I groaned. “Your squad?”

“My peeps?” She made a confused face, mock serious. “Is that what they should
be?”
“Yes,” I said, putting my face back on the table, feeling my words slur as they slipped out. “You should call a staff meeting today, just to call them that.” I closed my eyes.

She laughed, and, in a jingle of keys and a slammed door, was gone.

I stayed there like that for a couple of minutes, aware of my breathing, aware of the smooth finished wood beneath my cheek. There were birds chirping outside, calling gaily to each other. When I felt myself nodding off, I sat up, cupped my chin in my hands.

I knew I had enough time to get ready for school. Feeling the weight of the conversation with my dad earlier, feeling the anger bubbling under the surface, feeling the exhaustion from not getting enough sleep, I did something I never would have done back in Maryland. I found the school’s number, called the office pretending to be my mom, and said I wasn’t going to be able to make it. Then, I went upstairs and got back in bed.
Chapter 12

When my mother came home from work, late ("First to arrive, last to leave. Setting precedents."), she said in greeting, "Your father won’t call you before school again."

Unfortunately, I did wake up at five-thirty again the next morning, the air charged with anticipation. I couldn’t figure out what had woken me, lying there in the dark with those angry red numbers glowing at me, and eventually fell back to sleep. It wasn’t until I was in the shower that it hit me: one wake-up call could scar you for life. It’s just good he hadn’t called with bad news; I might have never gotten a complete night’s sleep again.

School had become rote: go to class, go to lunch, go to class, come home. I sat with Mariette-Louise and her friends off and on, depending on my mood or how engrossed I was in my book of the moment. I had gotten a pretty good one—a "hood" novel as Kerry liked to call it—dealing with sex and drugs in, yes, an inner-city area. So, fine, it was a ghetto hood novel. I didn’t care; I loved them. The truth of it was, I preferred disappearing into a world of drugs and misogyny than sitting there listening to the bland twins bland on about nothing while their reigning goddess Mariette-Louise sat back and watched, smirking over the conversation like she was too good to join in.

It was tiring, pretending to care. And it was hard, trying to engage Mariette-Louise with her awful hair and ugly shoes. I just couldn’t take it anymore.

I still hadn’t figured out a way to engage anyone else in conversation outside of class. I didn’t know where to start, I didn’t know if I cared enough to. When my mother asked how things were going, I told her about conversations I overheard between other people, randomly making up names to go with them. It was a new level of pathetic.

But in the last week of September, things changed.

It was in drama class, where Mrs. Murrow announced that we were going to be doing more movement exercises. I had learned to bring a change of clothes for drama; we constantly did breathing exercises on the floor and stretching and all kinds of other things. I was wearing a ratty t-shirt and some cotton biker shorts and had a bandana wrapped around my head, gangsta-style. Those white girls may not have minded sweeping their ponytails along the floor, but the thought of that dust settling in my hair, making it look like I didn’t bathe, just didn’t sit right with me. A couple of the other girls had started bringing extra
clothes with them as well, I’d noticed. I would just slip into the dressing-room backstage (complete with vanity lights; I seriously loved that theater) and do a quick switcheroo.

So I was sitting there at the back of the stage, close to the wings (I later learned where I sat was considered both upstage and stage right) when she made the announcement. And because it was getting a little ridiculous, I said under my breath just how gosh darned excited I was about that.

The boy in front of me—the pale-eyed, pseudo-philosopher boy from the first day—turned around and said, “At some point I figure she’s going to break and let us act.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “At the rate we’re going, that big play she teased us with will be the first time any of us get a chance.”

“Fantastic,” Mrs. Murrow said loudly, walking towards us. “Thank you, Jude and Shiann, for offering to be our first two volunteers. On your feet, thespians!”

We scrambled to our feet, Jude shrugging when I sent him a questioning look.

Mrs. Murrow’s ponytail swished from side to side as she circled us. “Acting is not just about standing in front of a crowd and reciting lines. It’s about reading situations, about playing off of someone else. Knowing how to recognize cues, how to give your body completely to somebody else”—at this, she got some snickers—“in order to fully immerse yourself in the character, in the moment.” She stopped behind us. “In the act.”

Taking our arms, she turned us so that we were facing each other. Jude was tall, a little skinny for my tastes, but not noodle-y at all. His arms were wiry and muscled in his sleeveless tee. Mrs. Murrow had us bend our elbows, so that our palms faced outwards towards one another. We stood toe-to-toe, palms pressed lightly together.

“Everyone,” she said, “should be standing like these two right here.”

The stage was hollow, and I could hear everyone shuffling to stand behind me. Jude rolled his eyes, and I tried not to laugh.

I tried peeking over my shoulder, but Mrs. Murrow was right behind me. “The most important part of this exercise,” she said loudly enough for the entire class to hear her, “is not to break eye contact.”

I turned back around and faced Jude.
“For this, you will follow each other’s movements. I want you to be aware of your body, of the body of your partner. Who is leading? When does the other take over? Where do you go? How far are you willing to take it?”

She nodded for us to begin, so I led, moving my right arm up and into a circle. Being forced to stare into someone’s eyes was very unnerving. I had to press my lips together to keep from giggling. It didn’t help that Jude kept widening his eyes and waggling his eyebrows.

“You should be touching at all times,” Mrs. Murrow said. She moved between couples, her voice floating to us from various parts of the stage. “But do not limit yourself to just the connection of your hands. Try it with arms or legs. Or faces.”

“I think she wants us to make out,” Jude whispered.

The couple next to us—two girls—had taken Mrs. Murrow seriously and were touching noses.

“I’m not with that whole face touching thing,” I said, jerking my head towards them. “It looks creepy.”

“I wonder what she would do if we made out,” Jude whispered back. “Technically, our faces would be touching.”

“Yeah, but we’d be breaking eye contact. Unless you’re one of those boys who kiss with your eyes open.”

He laughed, shook his head. “I don’t think so.” It was his turn to jerk his head towards the two girls. “Maybe I should get them to make out, see what she says.”

“Get them to make out?”

“Hey, Ellis,” he whisper-shouted.

Ellis said, “What, Jude?” in this voice that let me know he bothered her during classes all the time. Ellis was behind me, so I couldn’t see her, but her partner rolled her eyes.

“Shiann here thinks you two should make out, see if the teacher finds it against the rules.”

“I did not say that,” I said to the partner, dropping my hands.

“Sure you did,” Jude said, lacing his fingers through mine, and pulling my hands back up in front of me. He straightened his fingers out, and I uncurled mine so that our palms
were flat against each other. He tilted his head and smirked, inviting me to go along with it.

“You said it would be hot.”

“Shut up, Jude,” Ellis said. “Ignore him, Shiann.”

“No talking,” Mrs. Murrow said.

I turned towards her voice, and she said, “Maintain eye contact!” so I snapped my head back around. She gave a heavy sigh. “Maintain eye and body contact, Shiann. There are only two rules to this exercise.”

Jude mouthed body contact at me and leaned forward. I pulled my head back and he lifted the corner of his mouth.

“Not that kind of contact, Mr. Marconi,” Mrs. Murrow said. She stood behind us, our hands still forming an extremely tight London bridge. “But I did think you two would have moved beyond this by now.”

She circled us and then went back to the other side of the stage. Jude shrugged. We began again.
Chapter 13

Talking and joking with Jude in Drama had given me a craving for human contact so I decided to forego sitting alone and reading and planned instead to sit with Mariette-Louise, Elizabeth, and Sarah. Maybe they would be slightly amusing and entertaining that day. I mean, we had just done something besides roll around on the floor and breathe in drama class; anything could happen.

So I carried my tray with its chicken nuggets and tater tots out of the lunch line and made my way towards them. Mariette-Louise actually looked amused by something her friends were saying, a small smile on her face. It was a change from the surly expression she usually wore when she knew I was planning to join them. Things were already looking good.

Things looked a lot better when, as I started drifting left towards their table, I heard someone on my right call my name. I stopped and looked over my shoulder, confused.

"Shiann!" An Asian girl with thick purple highlights in her black bobbed hair waved me over to where she sat with Jude and a chunky girl with brown hair.

"I think she heard you, Ellis," Jude said, his voice floating above the cafeteria din and settling right into my ear drum like he was standing right beside me. He smiled in my direction.

I'd like to pretend I acted cool, that I didn't practically skip over to their table, glee filling my heart. But, well, that'd be a lie. I may or may not have stepped on a backpack or two maneuvering through the tables to get to them.

I plopped my tray on the table and dropped into the seat next to Jude, breathless.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," Ellis said, chuckling. She wore thick black eyeliner. "Jude said you were going to sit with Mariette-Louise and her cronies and demanded we rescue you."

"Yeah," he said. He reached across the table and plucked Ellis's pudding cup off her tray. She handed him a spoon. "No need being bored to death when you could sit with us."

"That's not very nice," I said without much conviction.

"But true," the other girl said. "Why else would you go read instead of sit with them?"

"Now, now, Corey," Jude said to her. "Maybe it was a very, very good book."
I pressed my lips together. The last thing I wanted to do was badmouth Mariette-Louise to them. I glanced over at her table; she had her arms crossed and was glaring at me. I gave her a sheepish grin. “Well,” I said to them, “let’s just hope I don’t feel like reading instead of sitting here tomorrow.”

“Oh, nice,” Ellis said. She swirled mayo and ketchup together on her tray and dipped a nugget in the mixture. “Maybe we’ll be the ones reading tomorrow, and then you’ll know to keep walking.”

I laughed, and it felt good. It felt good to be teased, it felt good to laugh.

“How do you know them anyway?” Corey asked, scrunching her nose.

“Oh, I have class with Mariette-Louise,” I said. “Trig, actually.”

“So that means you’re good in math, right?” Jude asked.

“I guess,” I said, shrugging. “Why? Are you going to ask me to tutor you so we can start a torrid affair?”

Ellis laughed, but her eyes never left Jude’s face as she said, “Yes, Jude, tell her about your last torrid affair with your tutor.”

He blushed. “Ellis, quit. We didn’t have a torrid—or tepid—for that matter—affair.”

“It’s his thing,” Ellis said. Her voice flattened out. “He always asks pretty girls to tutor him. He’s seen one too many cheesy teen movie if you ask me.” She leaned towards me and stage whispered, “He asked me to tutor him in history last year. I told him to get bent.” She smiled with her mouth, her eyes flat.

“What would you stop?” he said. “Ignore her. I never asked her to tutor me—“

“Well, you should have,” she said too cheerfully. “You might have gotten some.”

—and I don’t ask every pretty girl to tutor me.” At this, Corey snorted. “Who even says tutor anymore anyways?”

“Ignore them,” Corey said to me. “They have this total love-hate thing going on. I think they should just do it and get it out of their systems.”

“All Corey thinks about is sex,” Ellis said. “She’s convinced that everybody is hot for everyone else and must—what’s that you say, Cor?”

Corey stopped twirling her ponytail and opened her mouth to speak.
“Oh, that’s it,” Ellis said. “Corey thinks every boy and girl who snipe at each other have unresolved sexual tension.”

“It’s true,” Corey said. “Think about any TV show you’ve ever seen.”
“Except sometimes people just hate each other.”
“Do you hate Jude?”
Ellis glared at her. “Or like to argue because it’s how they communicate.”
“Or they’re hot for each others’ bods.”
“I haven’t hooked up with either one of them,” Jude said to me.
“Not for lack of trying.” Corey said.
“That’s not true,” he said to me, rolling his eyes.
“Totally true.”
“He’ll try at least twice a month,” Ellis said, nodding seriously.
“They confuse the fact that I’m being nice to them with me wanting in their pants.”
“We only let him sit with us because we don’t care that he’s a horndog. All of the other girls see him coming and hide.”

“Yeah, and none of the boys trust him around their girlfriends,” Corey said. She pushed her half-eaten salad away. “It’s sad, really.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard about him by now,” Ellis said. “He’s pretty infamous what with having banged half the girls in school.”

“Because he acts all shy and tutor needy.”

And on it went with Ellis and Corey bagging on Jude and him telling me to ignore them and not believe them until the bell rang. It was a blast.

When we went to dump our trays, Corey fell into step beside me. “Don’t worry,” she said. “Jude’s okay. We just like messing with him.”

He and Ellis were a few steps ahead and looked like they were fussing. “But Ellis does like him, right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Corey said. She shook her head. “But she’s used to him falling for other girls.”

“Oh,” I said, unsure of how to take that. “Okay.” I stacked my tray on top of the others.
We walked out of the cafeteria. "Yeah," she said. "It's okay. See you tomorrow, Shiann."

"Yeah, tomorrow," I said. She disappeared around the corner, and I went the opposite way to my class.
Chapter 14

It was good having people to sit with at lunch. I could feel my confidence coming back in waves. Mariette-Louise and her friends had helped for sure—it was nice having them say hi to me in the hall—but I felt like, with Jude and Ellis and Corey, I had found people I wanted to hang out with that wanted to hang out with me whereas I didn’t really have a choice before. If I wanted someone to talk to, I was stuck with Mariette-Louise and Sarah and Elizabeth.

So things had settled down, and I was feeling pretty good about myself. Norris, Mariette-Louise, and I were stuck being partners until November, and then Mr. Perry was going to switch us up again. The three of us had exchanged numbers and emails for the “just in case” call. So far there hadn’t been a reason to use them; they hadn’t called me and I hadn’t called them. This wasn’t surprising with Norris: I had figured out fast that he was notoriously shy; I still had to flat out ask him specifically for his opinion. Otherwise, he scribbled on his paper while Mariette-Louise and I attempted to suss things out on our own.

Mariette-Louise had made it pretty clear that she wasn’t planning on calling either of us. When we passed her notebook with our numbers scribbled in it back to her, she curled her lip and said, “I don’t usually need help in math and I never miss school, so…”

Norris blushed and said, “Me neither.”

“So I guess we’re all clear this is a formality, right?” She stared at me, waiting for an answer.

“That’s cool,” I said. “I’m not a big fan of homework buddy calls either.”

But I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bug me a little. I mean, geez, would it have killed her to be nicer to Norris? The poor guy looked terrified. And as for me, well, I could take a hint.

In truth, Mariette-Louise had become more distant since I started sitting with Jude. She was never outright mean, which made it worse. It was like I didn’t know where I stood with her. Did she hate me? Did she like me?
I had also realized people in Iowa—or Blanche at least—were really freaking nice. Most people smiled at me or nodded in greeting as I passed by, and I had taken to saying hi when I made eye contact with someone. That would have never happened at home.

So I was making headway and feeling pretty on top of things. My mom and I were getting along better, but that may have been because I rarely saw her. Work was keeping her busy, what with having to arrive early and leave late. She often came home and went straight to her room to read or watch The Discovery Channel before dozing off, usually with the light and TV still on.

I had just turned off her light and TV and lay down with a book that Larissa had sent me when the phone rang. I picked it up, quick, so it wouldn’t wake my mom. I whispered hello.

Kerry whispered hello back, and then asked, “Why are we whispering?”

“Oh,” I said and laughed. I explained—at a normal volume—about my mom being sleep and put my book down beside me, bookmark still in place. We did our usual back and forth of pleasantries, me explaining how Mariette-Louise was still being difficult followed by her complaining about her little brother. Then she asked if I had talked to Larissa lately.

When I told her that I had emailed Larissa the day before, she cleared her throat and said, “Oh.”

“Oh what?”

“I shouldn’t say.”

I hated, hated, hated when Kerry did that. She and Larissa had grown up on the same block and played together and stuff when they were younger. When I would visit Kerry—which was often, as my dad and his brother were the best of friends—Larissa and I became really close, and then she and Kerry became much better friends. But I liked to think I was the glue that held them together. So I hated when they kept secrets from me.

I also knew that divulging secrets one swore not to tell was a big no-no. However...

“You shouldn’t say because she told you not to tell me or you shouldn’t say because she’s going to tell me herself?” I asked, sighing.

“A little of both?”
I was silent, something I knew Kerry hated because silences made her extremely uncomfortable and she always, always, always felt the need to fill them.

“Okay, fine,” she said after a moment. I smiled. “But you have to swear to pretend you didn’t know when she tells you.”

“Whatever,” I said. Kerry was also prone to over-dramatize. I was pretty sure what she had to say wouldn’t be life or death.

“Swear,” she said.

“Fine. I solemnly swear on my What’s Love Got to Do with It? Soundtrack that I will not, under any circumstances, acknowledge that I know what you are about to tell me, should said topic of conversation arise.”

“Thank you,” she said. Then, “Larissa lost her virginity to Kyle Page.”

“What?” I screeched, sitting up. I lowered my voice. “What? When did this happen?”

“I don’t know, like two weeks ago.”

“Two weeks ago? Two weeks ago?”

“I thought she would have told you by now.”

“Kyle Page? The boy with the stutter and the lazy eye?”

“Stop.”

“Kyle Page from around the corner? That Kyle Page?”

Kerry sighed. “Yes.”

“Ew.”

“Stop it.”

“But...Kyle?”

“She thinks he’s very nice.”

“Huh.” I thumped my back against the wall as I leaned back. Kyle was very nice but also a little...odd. And I wasn’t joking about the stutter and the lazy eye. I mean, there’s lowering your standards and then there was Kyle Page. “Are you sure they really did it?”

“She says they did.”

“Call her.”

“What?”
We went back and forth for a bit, me insisting she call, Kerry reminding me that I swore not to say anything. In the end, though, she relented and I waited for the click and “Hello?” that let me know the three-way call had been connected.

We listened to Larissa’s phone ring twice when Kerry said, “This is a bad idea.” Larissa picked up then. “Kerry, I’m going to call you back later,” she said. “Kyle’s here.”

“Who’s Kyle?” I said at the same time that Kerry said, “Shiann’s on three-way.”

“Oh, hey, Shiann,” she said.

“Your lack of enthusiasm is noted,” I said.

“It’s just that I have company,” she said.

“So I heard. Who’s Kyle?”

Larissa sighed, sounding more than a little put upon. She then said she would call me tomorrow and hung up.

“Well,” I said to Kerry.

“Well,” she said. “When you get home, maybe you can talk some sense into her.”

We chatted a little more, about rather insignificant things, and then hung up. I lay back down, hugging the book to my chest. The distance between home and Iowa felt further than I had previously thought.
Chapter 15

The next day was the first morning it got cold. I realized quickly that Iowa cold and Maryland cold were two different brands of cold. For one thing, the temperature was in the 20s, and the chill settled on my legs and crawled up my spine. Every time I passed a doorway or stood near a window, I felt it.

By the time lunch rolled around, it had warmed up significantly. Or at least as far as I could judge by looking at the people leaving the building for lunch or work. I knew you couldn’t trust white people and weather—the white boys at my school would always wear shorts in the winter time. Some of them anyway.

I sat with Ellis and Corey at their usual table. Jude had decided to sit with his baseball friends. Ellis explained to me that he liked to split his time with the two groups. “Usually,” she said, “depending on how much help he needs with his homework.” There was more than a touch of disdain in her voice as she said this, and I noticed that she still set her pudding aside for him.

And I may or may not have said, “But he still gets a taste of your pudding, huh?”

Which made Corey laugh, but Ellis not so much. She set her lips in a line. “We have an understanding,” she said. “It’s not like he gets it for free.”

And Corey laughed harder, her face turning red.

“Shut up, Corey,” Ellis snapped. She narrowed her eyes, but I saw the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

I laughed then. Feeling the sound fill my belly and my ears, I enjoyed the shake and tightness in my sides. I apologized several times for my giggle fit—not feeling at all sorry. They moved on to a different topic, and I couldn’t follow the whole conversation because it was filled with inside jokes and half-finished sentences.

Normally, it didn’t bother me. I enjoyed watching their back and forth, laughing as they made fun of each other, smiling when they smiled. But after the previous night, it just made me feel further away from them, further away from my friends, further away from everybody.
Chapter 16

When I got home that afternoon, I saw that my mother had left a note on the fridge, saying she would be working late and for me to cook dinner. I sighed and opened the refrigerator. A roast and some cut up veggies were in a roasting bag wrapped in plastic with a sticky note that said to heat it on 375 and make sure I used the thermometer to gauge its doneness. Normal people get to cut the steak, but we had magnets plastered to the freezer that said, “You can’t tell by looking!” And believe you me, my mother followed those by the letter. It really didn’t matter; she was just going to heat her food to high heaven when she got home anyway.

I wouldn’t have to put the food in until five, so I went in the den and started my homework. Nothing made any sense. The numbers and letters in math started criss-crossing in front of my eyes and everything I had to read and respond to in every other class just stopped making sense, full stop.

I turned off the music and turned on the TV for a while, but all of the reruns were reruns I had seen before, and I wasn’t in the mood for Dr. Phil or Oprah’s brand of advice, so I shut it off and sat there for a while, looking at the Mommy & Me picture from when I was three that hung on the wall. In it, my mom was thinner, her cheeks still round and nose still wide, but you could tell from her neck and chin and shoulders that she was a lot smaller. I was rocking the pigtails and the goofy grin. We matched—her in a solid red, scoop-necked top and me in a little red and white print number with a ruffled collar.

I sat there until dusk settled in, staring at the picture. When it became too dark in the living room to see—the room faced east—I went up into my room where there was still some light.

I felt it weighing down on me, heavy and unbearable. I was lonely. I had been ignoring it for the past month and a half, convincing myself I had been making friends. But none of them were friends. I didn’t have anybody to call on the weekend to hang out. There were no inside jokes for me to share, no way to feel comfortable finishing anybody’s sentence.

I stared at my What’s Love Got to Do with It? poster, the silhouette of Angela Bassett giving me no ounce of comfort. The house was big—something I liked at first, sure—big
and empty and quiet. My mom wasn’t there, there was no one to invite over, no one to help fill in the empty spaces.

I felt like I was drowning in an orange creamsicle.

I stayed there on my bed, letting the darkness creep in on me. There was no light in the room when I heard my mom’s car in the drive, the jingle of her keys, the open and shut of the kitchen door. She called me, and instead of answering, I turned on my side and let the tears that had been building all day slide out of my eyes.

“Shiann?” she called, tapping on my door. It creaked as she pushed it open. “Why isn’t the roast...?” Her voice moved closer to me. “What’s wrong?”

The weight of the bed shifted, and my hips moved back towards her as she sat down. Her cool hand brushed my forehead; the smell of her cocoa butter hand lotion didn’t mask the scent of the heavy duty anti-bacterial soap she used at work.

I shook my head and tried to put my face in my pillow, but it kind of interfered with my ability to breathe, so I pulled my hips back in line with my body, tried to make my body as small as possible.

“Is it cramps?” she asked.

I shook my head, trying unsuccessfully to keep a sob from escaping.

She sighed. “What is it then?”

“I...I want to go home,” I whispered.

This time, her sigh was heavy, and I felt her stiffen. “Christmas isn’t that far away.”

“I don’t think I can wait that long.” I gripped my pillow tighter.

She laid her hand on my arm. “Okay,” she said. She stood. I heard the door close softly as she left.
Chapter 17

The next morning, when I went down to breakfast, my mother was sitting at the table, sipping a cup of coffee and reading the paper. And she was in her pajamas and bathrobe. I tried not to look surprised, but she grinned when she saw me, so I knew it was in vain.

“You are aware that normally you would be in your office by now?” I asked in greeting.

“Well, good morning to you, too!” she said.

“My god,” I said, pulling open the refrigerator. “How much coffee did you have?”

“Glad to see you’re in better spirits this morning,” she said, cheerful. I rolled my eyes and set the juice on the counter. “Was that an eyeroll? Why, you’re feeling even better than I assumed.”

I froze with my hand on the cabinet, my back to her. “Ma.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll leave you alone.” She was quiet, presumably sipping her coffee. “I’m guessing it’s too soon for jokes then. Are you feeling better?”

“Yes,” I lied.

“Good. Because I talked to your father about you going home for Thanksgiving.”

“Really?” I said, trying—unsuccessfully, I might add—to keep the excitement out of my voice. I turned to face her.

“No, not really.” It was her turn to roll her eyes. “He said that if you really want to come, he’s okay with it.” She took another sip of coffee. “And that, of course, he’d be happy to see you before your scheduled visit.”

At that, my face fell. I knew what that meant. He didn’t want to see me; I was interrupting whatever other plans he had. I turned back to my juice, started pouring it in the Barbie cup I’d had since I was a kid. I cleared my throat in an attempt to keep my voice from catching when I said, “That’s okay. We only get out four days, and I’d be spending two in the airport.”

“I think it’d be a good idea for you to go,” she said. “I know this hasn’t been easy for you, leaving all of your friends behind. This could be just what you need.”

I shook my head, felt the sting of tears. I exhaled, trying to keep them at bay. “It’d just be a tease,” I said. “I’d rather just wait until I can spend the whole time there.”
"I don’t know," she said. "More like an appetizer?"

"Yeah, well, you know I don’t even bother with appetizers, Ma. Anyway," I said, before she could say anything else, "my bus’ll be here in about twenty minutes, and I have to finish getting everything ready."

"Oh. Well, okay then."

"Thanks," I said once I was at the bottom of the steps. "I mean it. Thanks, Ma. You’re the best." And she was, wasn’t she? I mean, it wasn’t her fault that my dad was the way he was.

"I am, aren’t I?" she said.

I shook my head, a slight smile on my face, and went up the stairs.
The rest of October passed uneventfully. School was school, home was home, Iowa was Iowa. All that really changed was the weather, getting progressively colder and making me feel less enthused about the prospect of being there for any part of December, January, February, or...well, at all, really. The weather did nothing to improve my mood; the funk that had started that day at lunch had settled into my bones, and it felt like every time I smiled I was stretching my skin, stretching my face, stretching my sanity to pretend to be even a little happy for just that one moment.

My mother tried to cheer me up, always reminding me that it wouldn’t be long until I could go home to visit. I wish I could say it made me feel better, but it just made me feel like she wanted to get rid of me, that the Christmas break wasn’t coming fast enough for her.

I was never very logical when depressed.

I knew I was sliding into a serious funk when I couldn’t muster up enough energy to dance along to the “Proud Mary” scene in What’s Love Got to Do with It? At most, I would lie on the bed and watch Angela Bassett shake her tail feather. On the worst days, I just clicked off the TV, irritated at all of the energy she and the other actresses/dancers were expending.

As Thanksgiving got closer and closer, I regretted my decision not to go home, even if my father had made it clear that he didn’t want me there.

I especially regretted it when my mother announced that she wasn’t cooking. “Won’t it be nice,” she asked as I sat there staring at her as though she had grown three heads, “to just laze around the house all day eating take-out and not doing anything?”

“No,” I said, sticking out my lower lip.

She scoffed. “It not like that’s what you wouldn’t be doing anyway.”

I was still upset about it, but by the week of the break, the idea became more and more appealing to me. It would be nice not to have to go anywhere or do anything or wash dishes. Those were things I could admit to myself, even if I didn’t say anything to her. She smiled when she saw me looking over the take-out menu, trying to figure out which dish seemed most Thanksgiving appropriate.
That Wednesday, Jude gave me an invite to his house, saying I should stop by if I got bored. "My folks always make way too much food," he said. He scribbled his number down on the inside flap of my notebook at lunch while Ellis pretended not to look. Corey, on the other hand, grinned at me and waggled her eyebrows.

I told him I'd think about it even though I knew I wasn't going.

So when I got home that night, I dumped my bookbag in the room, changed into some yoga pants and slipper socks, and went to the living room to wrap myself in this huge afghan my mom's great-aunt had knit for her eons ago and veg out in front of the TV. I was enjoying a rerun of *The Cosby Show* in the darkening room when my mom came home—early for once.

When she made her way to the den, she had changed into sweatpants and popped some popcorn. "Thought I'd give everybody a chance to spend some time with their families," she said when I noted how early it was.

"Or everybody called in today."

"Well. It's always a boost of morale when you get a half day." She passed me the popcorn bowl.

"Why didn't you take a half then?" I stuffed a handful into my mouth.

She sighed. "I wish I could have. I'm really looking forward to this weekend."

I nodded.

"Which reminds me." She sat up straight, leaned towards me. I stiffened, knowing I wasn't going to like what was coming. "One of my colleagues invited us over for dinner."

I shook my head.

"I think we should go."

I stared at the ceiling. "What happened to staying home and eating take-out?"

"It's business."

"This person is just kissing up to you. You know being the boss gives you the right of refusal."

"Shiann."

"I don't want to go."

She was silent for a long while—long enough that I looked over at her to see her glaring at me, her mouth set in a line.

"Unbelievable," I said.
Chapter 19

I wish I could say that the dinner turned out to be a good time and that I was glad I decided ago. But the fact of the matter was, I knew how phony the whole thing was. Leo Baker—Mom’s employee, though she kept referring to him as her colleague—had a shiny bald head and a constantly red face. He was overly excited to see me (“So this is your famed daughter!” he said when Mom introduced me), his family kept up what I could only call false and forced cheer (his wife kept a smile plastered on her face the whole evening), and I spent the whole day thoroughly and completely miserable.

My mom did her gracious visitor thing, smiling and laughing, and generally looking like she was having a roaring good time. Except when she looked at me.

And then there was the food.

No sweet potatoes, no macaroni and cheese, no greens, no stuffing, no dumplings, no ham, no three different kinds of pie nor three different kinds of cake. There was turkey and pasta salad and asparagus. Oh, and a pound cake.

Not exactly the kind of Thanksgiving dinner I’d invite anybody else too.

And who has Thanksgiving without a mass of carbs to insure absolute lethargy once dinner is over?

When I tried to cop before the dinner that Jude had invited me already, my mother refused to buy it. We had to present a united front, we were a family, we were going whether I liked it or not. And there was nothing wrong with any of that, and I would have gladly suffered it without being a pouty, whiny mess. If I had somewhere to escape to later. Somewhere I could hang with my peeps, somewhere I could laugh and talk, somewhere I could make fun of the absolute travesty of a dinner I found myself at.

As it was, it took all I had not to cry on the Bakers’ couch. The loneliness was crushing me, the weight heavy on me. My mother sat next to me on the couch, talking to Leo about the best time to return the turkey to the fridge. She patted my arm, and I attempted to push a smile through the tears collecting in my eyes, but I had no idea if she was even looking at me. I couldn’t even see her clearly anymore; it felt as though she was miles and miles away.
DECEMBER

Chapter 20

I would be lying if I said that my moods didn’t swing up and down, up and down from the end of Thanksgiving until the beginning of Christmas break. One minute I was feeling down, the next I would be excited about home. Christmas break was the Emerald City at the end of my yellow brick road, and December was my field of poppies after the snowfall.

Doing math problems, rolling around on the floor during theater, listening to my history teacher drone on and on, I chanted one thing to myself: home, home, home, home. At lunch, I laughed a little louder, talked a little more. In math, I was able to ignore Mariette-Louise’s snide remarks and turned up mouth.

Home, home, home, home.

The weather got colder—which, honestly, I didn’t even think was possible—and I comforted myself by checking the weather back in Maryland. Let’s just say that I never thought I’d be euphoric to see temperatures in the forties.

My father called once to reconfirm my flight information and tell me he was looking forward to seeing me. I told him I was happy to be coming home.

Home, home, home, home.

My mother brought me to Des Moines International Airport, which was smaller than any airport I’d ever been in before. And quieter. It was not teeming with activity nor was there a bustle of people rushing from place to place.

“Boy,” I said at the baggage check, “it sure is a good thing we got here over an hour early, huh?”

My mom yawned. “Yes.”

It took about fifteen minutes to check me in, and then we were standing at the bottom of the escalator that led to the gates. I opened my mouth to say bye, but before I could get the words out, I was engulfed in a hug, my mother’s soft body wrapped around me. “I’m going to miss you so much,” she said.

I rolled my eyes over her head. “I’m only going to be gone for two weeks, Ma.”

“I know.” She pulled away and smiled at me. “Have fun.”
"I will."

"And call me as soon as you get there."

"I will."

"And call me anytime you need to."

"Ma," I said, exasperated, "I will."

"I know." She pushed her mouth up into a smile and hugged me again, quick this time. "Are you sure you don’t want me to go to the gate with you?"

"I’m a big girl. I think I can handle it."

I said good-bye to her again, and went up the escalator and through security. I found my gate, sat down, opened a book and waited.
Chapter 21.

The flight was fine. The worst part was switching in the middle—just after I had gotten comfortable on the teeny tiny airplane that took me to Detroit. Switching was awful because the Detroit airport was huge, and there were fifty minutes between the time my first flight landed and my second was scheduled to take off, which sounded like more than enough time, but wasn’t because the two terminals were on opposite sides of the big, big airport and I had to rush like a madwoman to make it in time. I got there just as they were boarding the flight to BWI.

The second plane was a lot bigger, and that made me instantaneously comfortable and amped up my excitement levels. I was getting closer and closer with every passing minute.

It had been obvious in Detroit, but back in the Baltimore airport, I fully let myself appreciate the people. People of every color, shape, and size were all around me. There was noise. Lots and lots of noise. I let myself be swept along with the crowd to the baggage claim.

After I got my bags, I went to the pick-up area right outside. The air was brisk, but not really cold, so I stuck my hands in my jacket pockets and looked around for my dad. Not seeing him, I cursed my lack of cell phone again and decided to give him a chance to show up before I officially freaked out.

After fifteen minutes, he still wasn’t there. I couldn’t decide what to do. I just knew that he would show up the minute I went inside to find a phone booth, and I knew the longer I stood out there not finding out where he was, the edgier I would feel.

I gave it ten more minutes, and just as I threw up my hands and turned to go inside, I heard a woman call my name very clearly. I looked around, but didn’t see anyone I knew. So I shrugged it off.

“Shiann!” This time the voice was closer, and I saw a tall, thin, light-skinned woman with a ponytail coming towards me, waving. Her nose was a little red, and she was wearing a thigh-length wool coat and leather gloves. “Sorry I’m late,” she said, stopping in front of me. “Are these your bags?”

I stared at her, speechless.
“Do you have anything else?” She looked around me as though I were hiding additional bags behind me.

“Do I know you?” I finally managed.

She put a hand to her forehead. “Oh, sorry. Forgive me for being so rude. I’m Denise.”

I blinked at her.

“Denise Radtree. Your father’s new secretary. He asked me to pick you up. Didn’t he tell you?” I shook my head. “Oh, of course, he didn’t. I knew I should have called you myself, but he insisted he could confirm your travel plans on his own.” She pulled up the handle on one of my bags. “Anyway, let’s get going.”

“I don’t know you,” I said, grabbing the bag’s strap.

“Your father sent me,” she said again.

“What’s the safe word?” I asked her. I do not even know where that came from, but it seemed all of my time spent watching cartoons after school had been useful after all. Those cheesy commercials about not getting into cars with strangers had permeated my subconscious.

Without hesitating, she said, “Portugal.”

That caught me off guard. “Really?”

She sighed, pulled a cell phone out of her pocket, pushed a button and then handed it to me. My father’s voice came through loud and clear. It was softer than I was used to, kind almost. “Yes, Denise? Did you get Shiann okay?”

“Daddy, it’s me.”

The sharpness returned. “Yes, Shiann?”

“I don’t know this woman.”

He sighed. “It’s okay. I know her.”

“How do I even know you’re my father?” It was a valid question. I hadn’t even seen what buttons or numbers she’d pushed.

“Honestly, Shiann,” he said, sounding put upon. “I’ll see you at home later. Get in the car with Denise. I promise she won’t do anything to you.”

He hung up, so I handed the phone back to Denise.
“Are we okay?” she asked.

I shrugged.

She smiled—I think it was supposed to be reassuring—and started towards the parking lot with the larger of my two suitcases. I followed because, really, there was no other option for me to take.
Chapter 22

In the Cadillac—a company car, she explained—Denise attempted to make conversation with me, asking me about school and my friends. When that didn’t work, she switched tacks, telling me how excited my dad was to see me, how he hadn’t talked about anything else all week. I stared out the window, trying to figure out what at the office was so important—on a Saturday, no less—that my father couldn’t even bother to take two hours out of his day to pick me up and welcome me home. And he sent his secretary? God, who did that?

And when did he get his own secretary anyway?

When we pulled up to my dad’s townhouse, I found that I was actually hoping his non-company car would be in the drive. It wasn’t, of course, but I was surprised at how disappointed I was.

I opened my door, and Denise put her hand on my arm. I pulled away, a little harder than necessary, but I did turn in her direction. She held out a key ring with two keys on it.

“I brought my keys,” I said.

“He had the locks changed.”

I rolled my eyes before reaching out for them. She explained about the note he’d left me on the kitchen counter and told me he’d be home around six. She offered to help me with my bags, but I told her not to bother. I wheeled them to the front door and set about unlocking the door. Once I got it open, I turned back to wave at her. She waved back and took off.

I went inside, leaving my bags by the door. My father’d flip if there were wheel marks on his floors when he came home, so I knew it was best to just wait for him to deal with them. The outside of his place was deceptively small, and I was always surprised by the amount of space there. That day was no different. I moved from the foyer to his kitchen where the note waited. It said he should be home around six, and there was money clipped to it just in case he didn’t make it in time for dinner.

I pocketed the money. My dad wasn’t a just in case kind of guy. He knew his plans ahead of time and didn’t believe in contingencies unless he planned to need them. I went into the living room and flipped on the TV. The best thing about my dad was that he was an
electronics freak. Thus, he had a flat-paneled widescreen TV and all of the goodies that went with it including a ton of DVDs and fantastic stereo system.

I sat on the black leather couch and looked around the room at the African prints and statues. There was nothing for me to do. My dad and I were supposed to be hanging out or whatever so I wasn’t set to hook up with my friends until the next day, which worked out perfectly since they both had plans. Or so I’d thought until I realized my father wasn’t actually going to be around.

The silence was loud in the house, making me feel even more alone than I thought possible. I put an action movie into the DVD player and turned on the surround sound. The explosions and music filled the room, and I lay back on the black leather couch and went to sleep.
Chapter 23

My dad and I kept missing each other—correction, I kept missing him. When I woke up, my bags were upstairs in my room, but he was nowhere to be found, and the next morning, another note was on the counter with more money clipped to it. By the time I was ready to go to Kerry’s for our sleepover, he still hadn’t shown, so I had to shoulder my duffel bag and walk the block and a half there. It wasn’t a big deal to walk or anything; I had just expected to see him at least once before I went.

It was dark when I left, and there were few cars driving by in our neighborhood. I had forgotten just how dark it could be; the streetlights were spread out to prevent young kids (read: boys) from congregating in front of the houses when it was warmer outside.

Kerry’s dad opened the door when I got there. The warmth and noise spilled out onto the door step, washing over me like some kind of homing beacon. “Hey, Uncle Russ,” I said. “Hey, little miss. Give me a hug!” He gave me a hard squeeze, rocking me from side to side.

“Ow,” I said when he let me go. He stuck his head out of the door. “Where’s Martin?”

“Oh, you know him. Out doing his player thing, I guess.” I stepped into the foyer. He backed out of the way and frowned. “You should have called. Me or Sharon would have picked you up.” He dropped his voice to a whisper. “I’m surprised Kerry didn’t offer. She’s dying for any excuse to use that license of hers. We won’t let her drive after dark, though, for fear of her hurting somebody.”

“I heard that, Daddy,” Kerry said from behind him. To me, she said, “Hey.” And then we squealed and hugged each other. Uncle Russ rolled his eyes good-naturedly and left the room. I sniffed the air. “Do I smell cookies?” I sniffed again. “Chocolate chip cookies?”

“You do.” Kerry hooked her arm through mine. We were the same height, but Kerry was at least three shades lighter than me. “My mom has been so excited for your visit, she’s been making desserts for the past three days.”

Their place was one of those one floor deals, so we walked away to the opposite end of the house where Kerry’s room was. She flipped the light on in her room, and I shook my
head. It hadn’t changed a bit: stuffed animals on the bed, hanging from the mirror, on the floor, and on the mini-shelves her folks had installed a couple of years before. Her room was also pink, which completely matched her personality.

She plopped down on the bed and crossed her legs. “Toss your stuff wherever,” she said. “We have to start catching up.”

“Yeah,” I said, dropping my bag behind the door. “We must explore why you didn’t tell me you cut your hair.”

“Oh this?” She ran a hand along the nape of her neck. “I was just tired of carrying all of that hair around. Dumb boys think long hair is some kind of invitation to be touched.” She rolled her eyes. “Plus it’s a lot easier to deal with after I wash it.”

“I can imagine,” I said. It had been mid-back, but now it was short—shorter than mine even—stopping above the ear. “Your eyes stand out more, though.”

She had these ridiculous doe eyes, big and pretty, with long eyelashes. She hated them. “God, I know.” She covered her face with her hands. “I can’t win for losing.”

“Shut up,” I said, sitting down on the bed. “When’s Larissa getting here?”

Kerry made a face and rolled her eyes. “Who knows? She promised to be here before nine, so we’ll see.” She stood. “My mom’ll kill us if you don’t go say hi.”

I agreed, so we went off to the kitchen. Aunt Sharon and Uncle Russ were going back and forth about getting the back door fixed or oiled or something, but they stopped when we came in. Aunt Sharon ran to hug me. She, unlike my mother, was thin and tall and almost all angles. But she always made me feel at home, and this was no different. She made me sit down, and put the plate of cookies in front of me and commanded me to eat.

“Nobody could eat those until you got here,” Kerry said. “You can imagine how happy that made my brother.”

“Where is he anyway?” I asked.

“One of his basketball buddies, I think. Who knows? He goes out way more than I do so it’s a little hard to keep up.”

“Oh, hush, Kerry,” Aunt Sharon said, “and get the cake off the top of the fridge.”

It was sugar heaven.
After we finished grubbing down on junk food and chatting with her folks, Kerry and I retired to her room with a big bowl of popcorn and a couple of sodas. “Sooo,” Kerry said, once we were settled with a movie in the DVD player, “tell me more about Iowa. What’s up with you and this Jude guy? Go out after Thanksgiving?”

“Quit it,” I said. “You know we’re just friends.”

“What about that girl Mary Jean or whatever. Did she stop acting stupid?”

I sighed. “Mariette-Louise. And, no. I told you she hates me more now that I don’t bother sitting with her at lunch.”

“I wonder what her deal is.”

“She’s ugly?”

“Stop it, Shiann. You know better.”

“You’re right. That was mean. But her attitude sucks, so it follows, that if beauty is only skin deep, then she is a horrifically ugly person.”

“You know, I’m not so convinced you’ve been nice to this girl.”

“Bite me.”

We watched the movie for a bit. I checked my watch a couple of times. When it was quarter to eight, I said, “Call Larissa.”

Kerry sighed. “Why?”

“She’s not here yet. I want to know what’s up.”

Kerry rolled her eyes. “You know what’s up,” she said. “I’m not calling her. If she’s coming, she’ll be here.”

“Come on, K.”

“No, I’m not doing it. She knows you’re here, she knows we’re supposed to be hanging out. If she can’t take one night out of her busy, Kyle-centered schedule, then I’m not pressing her out about it. I’m sick of chasing after her.”

“Kerry—“

She threw her cell phone to me and told me I could call Larissa if I wanted to talk to her so badly. Sighing, I dialed the number. I wanted to ask if something else was going on, but Kerry had crossed her arms and flared her nostrils. I knew not to press it.

Larissa didn’t answer, so I left her a message telling her that we were waiting for her.
“Totally pointless,” Kerry said after I tossed the phone on the bed.

“Okay!” I said, overenthusiastic. “It’s your turn to dish. What’s the word? New boy?”

“Boys are stupid.”

“Old boy then.”

“Ha!”

“Ah, a not yet boy. That explains so much about you right now.”

Kerry fake-laughed and then let it blossom into full-blown laughter. I joined in, and we talked well into the night.
Chapter 24

All three days of my vacation so far had been spent waiting on other people. At least one of them (Kerry) had shown up. On time.

So, I was dressed and waiting for my dad to show up so we could go to our night before Christmas Eve dinner. I had been craving seafood, so he was taking me to his favorite of all favorite restaurants.

If he ever showed up.

I had been ready on time, right at five-thirty.

While I waited, Kerry called to invite me to go with her to a New Year's Eve party. I said sure and faked a lot of enthusiasm. But I had one eye on the clock, and couldn't concentrate on the conversation.

I hung up and watched some TV.

At seven, I turned the TV off and sat in the dark room. And waited.

It didn't take long for me to start crying—maybe a half hour or so. I felt like something was lodged in my chest right between my breasts. And it hurt so bad.

I sat there in the dark, sniffling and crying, the pain expanding and spreading across the upper half of my body. I gasped for breath.

In the darkness—in the quiet—it was easy to hear my dad's car pull up. I jumped up and wiped at my eyes. The remote fell to the floor, the noise muffled by the rug, but I ignored it, grateful for the simple and uncluttered room as I ran for the steps. I tripped going up them, I banged my knee on the railing, but by the time his key's jangled in the lock, I was in my room with the door closed.

I slipped under the covers on the twin-sized bed—the one with my mom was a full-size—with my shoes on and pulled the covers over the top of my head. Even though it was stupid, I held my breath when he called my name. I exhaled slowly, trying to steady my breathing when I heard his footsteps on the steps. He tapped on the door twice, not very hard, and pushed it open.

I heard the click as the door closed, heard his footsteps going down the steps, heard the front door open and shut, heard him rev his car's engine.
Tears sliding down my face, I sat up and pushed the covers off. I took my shoes off and threw them at the wall behind the door one by one, hoping against hope that they left scuff marks and dents in the paneling. I undressed, sat on my bed and shivered for a while. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness, so I could see the outlines of the furniture. I moved to the bean bag where I had thrown my pajamas when I unpacked from Kerry's that morning and put them on.

Then, I got in the bed and cried until I fell asleep.
Chapter 25

When I woke up the next morning, I felt like crap. My eyes were swollen, and my head felt thick like it was full of cotton and I was trying to see the world through gauze. Showering helped a bit. I mean, at least I could see.

I smelled the bacon and heard the sizzle of the skillet before I finished descending the stairs. My dad stood at the stove in a blue and gray sweatsuit. Name brand and expensive, of course.

“Morning,” I said without enthusiasm. One sure way to piss off my dad was to walk in a room and not greet him.

“Afternoon, you mean,” he said, turning, spatula in hand. He smiled, flashing brilliant white teeth. I had come, over time, to accept that my dad was a nice looking guy. I could see why he always had different girlfriends, why women were always staring at him as he walked by. He was tall, he always dressed nicely, and he carried himself well—confident but without much of a swagger. There was a hint of one, of course, but he didn’t walk like George Jefferson or anything.

The time on the microwave read eleven fifty-nine. I didn’t correct him.

“I’m making brunch,” he said, already turned back to the stove. “Omelettes, bacon, fresh squeezed OJ.”

“I don’t eat eggs,” I said flatly. I went to the fridge, pulled out the milk. Went to the pantry, got out the Cheerios.

“Come on,” he said. “My omelettes are famous.”

“I still don’t eat eggs.” Pulled a bowl and spoon out of the cabinet.

“Watch your mouth.” His voice was sharp. My mom wasn’t the only one who didn’t tolerate sass, though it usually took him a lot longer to say something.

I shook cereal into the bowl. Angry little o’s jumped out of the bowl in protest at the unnecessary force I was using. I let some milk splash onto the black island countertop. Scraping one of the stools on the floor as I pulled it under me, I sat.

He flinched.

It was small, but I saw it.
I dipped my finger in the splash of milk on the counter and made lazy circles in it while I ate my Cheerios.

"Big day today," he said, sitting across from me. He was careful to pick up his stool and set it down. Then he outlined his plans for us: chilling out in the living room watching a movie, going to see the lights as soon dusk settled—this meant riding around the neighborhood and going to Watkins Park for the annual lights show, going to see a movie at the movies. And somewhere in there we were going to have the seafood dinner I should have had the night before.

I’d like to be able to say that the day was a smashing success, that my dad and I made up, and everything went great, and it was the best Christmas Eve ever. I’d like to say that I didn’t spend the whole day near angry, frustrated, nor sad tears. That I didn’t sit as far away from him as possible in the car.

Here’s what I can say: at least he didn’t go hit on a woman at the restaurant bar while I picked over my food like he did the last time we went out.

And that reminded me why, even though I was lonely and depressed in Iowa, living with my dad was never a true option, no matter how much I liked to pretend it was.

At six forty-five the next morning, he banged on my door, startling me out of sleep. My heart pounded in my chest as he boomed, "Merry Christmas! Time to open the presents!"

Christmas was his favorite holiday; and he still got worked up over it. Not because he was excited about what he might get, but because he loved seeing my reaction when I opened my gifts. I stumbled down the steps, sleep still in my eyes, teeth unbrushed. Three presents were stacked on the coffee table in the entertainment room—he didn’t bother with trees. I plopped down onto the couch.

"Go from the bottom to the top," he said, sitting next to me. I scooched over to put some space between us.

I ripped open the bottom—biggest—gift, letting the paper fall to the ground. Taking off the box top and peeling back the tissue paper revealed black leather. I pulled a three-quarters length leather jacket from the box. It belted around the middle and had that rich smell only new leather has. I wanted to bury my face in it. Instead, I said, "Oh, nice."
"Yeah?" He grinned.

"Yeah, it's nice," I said, careful to keep my voice light.

It was harder to act disinterested with the next gift, an mp3 player. Or the five hundred dollars in the accompanying envelope. But I managed it, saying, "Wow, this is great, thanks," with so little enthusiasm in my voice that I almost believed that both were no big deal.

I gave him a peck on his shaved cheek and collected my gifts. All I wanted was to go back to bed until a decent hour. I stood.

"Don't you want to see what you got me?" he asked. I sat back down. I put my elbow up on the couch's arm rest, resting my head on my arm. Boots and two games for his Playstation and a game for his X-Box.

He pretended to be surprised and excited, saying stupid stuff like, "I always wanted this." It was so lame since he had bought the gifts and wrapped them himself.

"Boy, I have great taste," I said sarcastically. "How can you stand having me for a daughter?" and then, "Can I go back to bed now?"

He sighed. "Sure. We're going to Russ's for dinner." If I didn't know better, I would've thought he wanted me to stay down there and play video games with him or something.

"How could I forget?" Gathering my gifts, I left the room. I felt a little bad being so mean to him, but since I was still angry at him, it wasn't by much.
Chapter 26

Dinner at Uncle Russ’s was nice, like it always was. Loud and fun. Kerry and I squealed over each others’ gifts. She loved my jacket, I loved her new art supplies. She coveted my mp3 player, I needed her new boots.

That’s when she told me she was going to get her hair braided the next day, and did I want to go?

“It sounds boring,” I said, watching her artfully arrange her stuffed animals on the bed.

“Why do you think I want you to go?” she asked.

So the next day, Aunt Sharon picked me up and dropped us off in D.C. at the braiding salon. Kerry got micros—those itty bitty braids that weren’t braided down to the end. “It’s almost like having my old hair back,” she said. “Only I don’t have to do it.”

The night before I decided to get mine done, too, instead of just sitting there and talking to her while her head was transformed. I opted to get Senegalese-twists, the thin ropes stopping at my shoulders.

I loved the finished product, the way my face seemed more in focus, my features sharper. “Regal,” Kerry called it. “Really brings out your cheekbones.”

She looked cute. Her braids made her face look softer, and, well, little girl cute. Kerry had been fighting that look her whole life, so I just said she looked adorable and left it at that. But she pouted while we waited for her mom to come back for us, and when her mom said that she looked “so sweet,” she refused to talk the whole way home.

When we got to my dad’s, the Cadillac that Denise had picked me up in on that first day was parked in the drive alongside his truck. I said good-bye to them, promising to call Kerry later.

The smell of food hit me as soon as I opened the door. Baked potatoes definitely. And steak. I followed my nose to the kitchen where my dad and Denise sat with plates of food and glasses of red wine in front of them. She was still pretty, and my dad’s hand rested on her wrist. They were laughing.

“Hey,” I said.
“Oh, hi, Shiann!” Denise said, withdrawing her arm from my father’s hand and picking up her glass. “How’s your vacation going?”

“Fine. How’s your secretary-ing going?” I let my eyes drift to the glass, the plate, and then back to her face.

My father chose that moment to speak. I guess he was trying to help lessen the tension or distract me from what was so obviously going on—I mean, his secretary? Could he be a bigger cliché?—because he said, “What is that, the Medusa look?” in regards to my hair. “Is that popular now?” He chuckled.

Denise’s smile faltered. “I think it looks nice, Shiann.”

“Yeah, if you want snakes crawling out of your head.”

The words hung there while he took a sip of wine. Then, Denise shook her head and chuckled lightly. It sounded force and false. “Oh, Martin, quit it.” She smiled at me. “She looks lovely. You look lovely. Don’t you think she looks lovely?”

Before he could answer, I said, “Thanks, but it’s no big deal, Denise. I really just wanted to know what was going on with New Year’s since Kerry invited me over. But it’s pretty clear that you guys have plans, right?”

“Sure, go ahead with Kerry,” he said. “Maybe you’ll find a boy to kiss at midnight that won’t mind getting turned to stone.”

Denise looked horrified. Her mouth slacked open and she covered her mouth. I guess Denise didn’t realize that was just the way he joked around.

“Wow,” I said. I pursed my lips together. “All right. See you two crazy kids later.” I turned on my heel and left the room.
Chapter 27

It was easy avoiding my dad after that, especially since he was never home. We were, as they say, like two ships passing in the night. He left me a note telling me to have fun with some money on it for New Year’s Eve. It also said he would call me at midnight, which was stupid, since I didn’t have a phone, but then I went upstairs and there was one sitting right in the center of my bed. A cell phone. My mother was going to kill him.

But I charged it anyway.

I put on some jeans and a long-sleeved, red v-neck top. Kerry picked me up in her mom’s Corolla. She had just gotten her license two months before, and, technically, shouldn’t have been driving because of the provisional restriction placed on it. She maintained exactly the speed limit the entire way there and kept the music so low that a song would be halfway over before I could figure out what it was.

The house we pulled in front of was gigantic and well-lit. Walking into the foyer, I tried not to gape. Kerry seemed pretty at ease there; she explained that she and the girl—Merrick—had worked on a project there together.

There were tons of people I didn’t know there, all of them down in the basement. Kerry greeted people left and right, and I felt like there had been some kind of cosmic shift in the school or in the universe where I didn’t even recognize people I was pretty sure I knew, and I got greeted by people I didn’t recognize. It didn’t help that the room was dark and the music was loud.

I followed Kerry to the table filled with chips and sodas. Grabbing a handful to keep myself busy, I hung back while she went to talk to some other people. I felt lame following her around like a puppy dog.

I reached for a soda, and that’s when someone hugged me. I pushed the person away, only to see Larissa smiling at me. “Shiann,” she said, draping her arms around me again, “you’re here!”

“Larissa,” I said, “you’re drunk.”

She giggled. It was weird that she looked exactly the same: same dull brown skin, same thick dark hair, same chipmunk cheeks. I don’t know what I was expecting after she
had blown me off the past week—maybe some grand diva. But she was just Larissa. Drunk, but Larissa.

“I missed you so much,” she said. “I would’ve called, but Kerry has been such a bitch lately, I swear.”

“Is that so?” It was hard to miss the hostility in her voice.

Larissa dropped her voice to a loud whisper. “She’s just jealous.”

“Where is Kyle anyway?”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Around here somewhere. I think he went to get some weed.” She hooked her arm through mine. “We’re going to leave as soon as he gets hooked up. Maybe go up to the park or something. I don’t know.” She giggled.

I disengaged her arm from mine. “Oh.”

“I really missed you, Shiann. I know you wouldn’t be as pissy to me as her.”

“Yeah, well, if you’re—”

Kyle came up then, snaked his arm around her neck. “Ready to go?”

She nodded. “I’ll call you, okay?” she said to me.

“Right,” I said, narrowing my eyes.

They walked away with Larissa leaning on him, and him righting her when she stumbled.

Not seeing where Kerry disappeared to, I went and sat on the couch by the door.

And there I sat, loneliness gnawing at me, until someone turned up the lights and announced that the ball was dropping. I stood, pretending to engage in the countdown, but I couldn’t see Kerry anywhere, and I didn’t have anyone to talk to, and I just couldn’t work up the enthusiasm necessary to care.

My father, true to his word for the first time since I’d been home, called me a little after midnight. I asked him to pick me up and escaped from the party—unmissed I was sure.
Kerry called to apologize. I let her, grudgingly. She wanted to come over and help me pack, but I told her not to bother—I’d see her next time I was in town.

It was better that way, I supposed. Getting re-used to the idea of being alone. Once my plane landed that night, I’d be back in Iowa where I didn’t have any friends, where it would be more of the party the night before, only every day and continuous.

My dad drove me to the airport the next day. When we said our good-byes, they were stiff. He hugged me, but it was exactly the kind of hug I could find no comfort or warmth in. I spent the whole two seconds wishing it was over so we could stop pretending to like each other.

“I love you,” he said, planting a kiss on my forehead.

“Okay,” I said, hitching my carry-on across my shoulders. And that was that.

It was weird to be happy to be back in Iowa. But when I saw my mom waiting for me at the bottom of the escalator in the airport, I felt relief flood my body.

“Oh my God,” she said in greeting, “your hair! It’s so cute!” Then she hugged me, and I knew I was home.

I had spoken to her every day over the break, but so much of what I’d said was censored so she wouldn’t worry. On the car ride home, I gave her a more complete recap, leaving out the part about drunken Larissa and my dad’s comments about my hair.

I felt relaxed for the first time in ages. I was so happy to get back to my room and to my DVD collection and my trashy books and all of the color my mother insisted on having around the house.

I was home.

But after my first day back at school, I would have gladly traded “home” for “back in Maryland.”
Chapter 29

The easiest way to preface this would be to say that I did not hate Mariette-Louise. At times, I found her unpleasant and difficult to be around. I thought her friends were boring and their interests trivial. But I did not hate her.

I also went out of my way to be pleasant to her.

She was the first person I saw that Wednesday, and for the first time ever, it was she who had approached me. I was at my locker, trying to remember my schedule when she appeared at my elbow.

“Oh my God,” she said, her voice flat. “Your hair.”

“Yeah,” I said, running my finger up and down one of the braids. “I should’ve gotten it done sooner. You wouldn’t believe how much faster and easier it is getting ready in the morning.”

“Right,” she said. She picked at a loose thread on her bulky green sweater—a really unflattering sweater, that made her look heavier than she was.

I sighed and put my hands on my hips, considering what books I might need.

“So, you know how sometimes you sit with us at lunch?”

“Mmhmm,” I said absently. I didn’t point out that I had stopped sitting with her months ago.

“Don’t sit at my table at lunch today?”

My eyes widened; I looked at her. “What?”

“Yeah, it’s just”—she gave a ghost of a smile, waved a hand at my hair—“I don’t really like that, and I don’t want you at my table.”

Before I could formulate a response, she had walked away, leaving me gaping at her.
Chapter 30

Mariette-Louise was the only person with a negative reaction to my hair. Corey said she liked it a lot and Ellis loved it. She did tell me that I should’ve gotten some color in it. “Some red or something,” she said. “I’ve seen it in the stores.”

But I couldn’t shake what Mariette-Louise had said. All during math and lunch, I just stared at her (when she wasn’t looking, of course), trying to figure out why she would say such a thing. I mean, it was okay that she didn’t like my hair—I didn’t much like hers on any given day—but to tell me to stay away from her because she didn’t like it made no sense to me.

I said as much to my mother at dinner that night.

She gave the standard speech about some people needing to put down others to feel good about themselves. Then, she shocked me and asked for Mariette-Louise’s number. When I asked her why, she said, “Because her mother needs to know about this.”

“Come on, Ma, I can handle this by myself,” I said.

“Yeah, I don’t think you can. Go get the number. It’s not a request.”

I had scribbled the number in my math notes, so it took me a while to dig it out of my backpack and find it. My mother watched me in silence. When I handed the number to her, she left the room. I followed.

“I’ll tell you how it goes,” she said. I heard the click of her door as she closed it.
Chapter 31

This time, Mariette-Louise was at my locker when I got there. Her mouth was set in a hard line.

"Sorry, I said that about your hair." Her eyes were to the left of me, her tone mechanical.

I shrugged.

"And you can sit wherever you want at lunch."

I narrowed my eyes. "Gee, thanks." I folded my arms across my chest and tilted my head. "I still don't get why you don't like me," I said.

"Why should I?" she asked, finally meeting my eyes. Then she turned and walked away.

That question echoed through my head all day. During history, during the partner exercises in theater, during lunch. Why should she like me? By the end of the day, I had settled on an answer, and I knew why I expected her to: because there weren't enough of us. We were the only two black girls I had seen—and, counting Tony, we were the only three black kids in our entire class.

But then wasn't I a contradiction? I didn't go out of my way to talk to Tony. I had never been mean to him, but I had dismissed him that first day, counted him as too weird and not worthy of my time. And it was obvious that without me practically forcing myself on Mariette-Louise, she had done the same with me.

It still hurt, though.

At home, I told my mother what happened. We sat on opposite ends of the couch, my mom with her legs stretched across two cushions, me facing the TV. "She apologized," I said, "but I don't think she meant it."

"I can imagine," my mom said.

I asked what she said to her mom.

"Exactly what you told me," she said. Sighing, she turned the volume on the TV down. "It's too bad Mariette-Louise's apology wasn't heartfelt. I'm uncomfortable with that kind of self-hatred."

"Self-hatred?" I made a face.
“Maybe that’s too harsh.” She dug her toes between the sofa cushions. “But it seems as though Mariette-Louise does not want to share the limelight. She’s been the only black girl in her class for a long time. Having you there must be making her feel threatened.”

“That’s craziness. How can I be a threat to her?”

“I didn’t say it makes sense. Or...” She put a finger to her lip.

“Or what, Ma?”

“It’s also possible that you call attention to the fact that she’s black.”

“How can I be calling attention to her being black? She is black. It’s like you’re speaking a language I don’t understand.”

“Don’t be dismissive just because you don’t understand. Think of it this way: say you’re the only left-handed person in your class, right?”

I nodded.

“So all of a sudden, one day another left-handed person shows up. Someone sees him writing with his left hand, and they say, ‘Hey, Shiann’s left-handed too!’ when all that time they had sort of forgotten about it or hadn’t thought about it.”

“That’s just stupid, Ma. How could anybody forget she’s black? I mean, she’s black in a freaking cornfield full of white people. It just doesn’t make sense.”

“Of course it doesn’t. But it just might some day.”

“I doubt that,” I said under my breath.

“I can still hear you, genius.” She threw one of the pillows at me. I caught it and stuck it behind my head.

“I’m saying,” I said, motioning to the remote, “you gonna turn the TV back up or what?”
Chapter 32

Insight or no into what made Mariette-Louise tick, I kept my distance from her for the
rest of the week. It wasn’t that hard to do considering we didn’t spend a whole bunch of time
outside of math together anyway. I was polite, but, really, only talked to her when we were
in math class and it was necessary for group work.

I was still kind of sad about it, though.

When Saturday rolled around, I woke up and decided I was done feeling stuck in the
house. It was cold, but not that cold—by Iowa standards anyway—and the sun was shining.
I showered, dressed, and ate. My mom had stuck a bus schedule on the bulletin board she
kept by the kitchen door when we first moved there, so I pulled it down and looked at the
map. There was a university on the other side of town that housed the bus company; I guess
so people wouldn’t miss classes even if they didn’t have a car. The Blanche Bus, as it was
called, and my school bus stop were one in the same, so that part was easy. As it turned out,
the bus that stopped there was on the same route as the mall, which was fine with me. I
didn’t want to have to figure out any kind of transferring between routes since—as someone
who didn’t get out much—I didn’t know the town that well.

I put on my leather jacket and was wearing a sweater underneath it. Halfway to the
bus stop, I realized that I should have worn my coat and left the jacket behind. But it was too
late to go back and change, since I was rushing and the next bus wasn’t scheduled to come
for another hour. I was glad I had remembered my earmuffs, though.

When I got to the bus stop, a blond girl was there, wearing a purple Columbia jacket
and one of those headbands to cover her ears. Her shoulders were hunched into the jacket,
and her high ponytail swung from side to side as she moved from one foot to the other.

Back in Maryland, I would have nodded or something just to let her know that I knew
she was there, but being in Iowa had turned me into a nice person, so I said hi.

“Hey,” she said back.

“A mite chilly, huh?” I asked. And, okay, that was the point I wanted to kick myself.
Continuing a conversation and making it about the weather was the lamest thing ever.

“A mite,” she said. “You’re Shiann, right?”
“Uh...yes.” Of all the things I expected her to say, that was certainly not one of them. I felt like I had some kind of bad reputation. Had someone written that I was a slut on a bathroom stall somewhere?

“Yeah, Ellis mentioned you before. We have art together.” She laughed. “You looked like you thought I was going to slap your mother or something.”

I grinned. “It’s not every day that I get people recognizing me on the street.”

“Right. My name is Megan, by the way.” She stamped her feet and grunted. “Man, I wish the bus would hurry up and get here.”

“Cold?”

“Just a little.” She turned away from me to look down the street.

“I didn’t think you people got cold.” As soon as I said it, I regretted.

“You people?” She faced me, eyebrow raised.

“You know,” I said, “Iowans.”

She studied me for a minute, then burst out laughing. “You know, you’re all right, Shiann. Where you headed?”

I told her I was going to the mall. It turned out that’s where she was headed too—to get some new running shoes. When I said I was just going there to hang out, she asked me if I had ever been there before. I shook my head, and she said, “Oh, you’ll love this mall then.”

The bus came, and we sat next to each other, talking the whole way. Mostly we talked about school. I told her a little about my friends and Maryland; she told me she had an older brother and younger sister.

When we got to the mall, I followed her off the bus and inside. We walked past the little bakery and sandwich shop-towards the fountain. I was shocked to find that we could see clear from one end to the other.

“No, not so much.” I sighed, deep and disappointed.

“Don’t worry about it. You can hang with me. After I pick up the shoes, we can go in whatever store you want. I mean, there are tons of them to choose from, so I’m sure it’ll take all afternoon, right?”
"You know, this sarcasm thing of yours is working for me. Reminds me of somebody I know."

And so it went that Megan and I hung out that day. There were about three stores that I could really browse in, but I wasn't particularly committed to it, so we wound up leaving after an hour and a half. As we got off the bus, I started to say good-bye when Megan interrupted.

"Hey, let me put my stuff down and we can figure out something else to do," she said. "I don't really feel like sticking around the house talking to my little sister all day."

"Oh," I said. "Okay."

She lived a street over from me, on the opposite side of the main road.

"So how come I've never seen you on the bus?" I asked as we went up her walk. The house was chocolate brown.

"I usually drive. My dad took my car in to get serviced this weekend. But I'm glad I had to take the bus today." She smiled. "I probably would have never met you otherwise."

"Probably," I said.

We went inside. A huge cross hung on the wall where you opened the door, and under it was a small mirror. A pile of shoes were by the door. "Do you want me to...?" I indicated the pile.

Megan shook her head. "Nah, that's just for when the ground's wet." She pointed upstairs. "I'll be right back. My room's kind of a mess right now, and I don't think it's fair to subject anyone to that." One foot on the bottom step, she turned back to me. "Two seconds, I swear."

I stood, hands stuffed in my pockets, waiting. I felt weird, like at any moment one of her parents was going to come in and demand to know what I was doing there. The little hallway was narrow, and there were pictures of Megan and her brother and sister lining the wall—two of them together and then two sets of individual photos.

She was back before I could work out a reasonable way to explain myself to her parents. We went towards the kitchen where the house opened up into a well-lit, spacious area. "My dad cooks, so he wanted a 'real' kitchen," she said, using airquotes. "You know,
someplace we could all hang out and talk to him while he creates his next masterpiece.” She rolled her eyes. “It was remodeled two years ago.”

There was plenty of floor space, and the paneling was dark wood. I would have felt perfectly fine sitting on the floor or at one of the small tables that lined the wall.

Megan handed me a glass of juice and motioned for me to follow her to the basement. Down there was a huge entertainment center with an entire wall lined with DVDs and VHS movies.

“Wow, this is obscene,” I said.

“I know, isn’t it great? What do you want to watch? I figure a movie’ll buy us some time to decide on something real to do.”

“I don’t know. There might be too much to choose from.”

She laughed. Grabbing my elbow, she guided me to the middle of the wall. “These are mine. We all get our own section. You’ll note that most of the movies belong to my little sister or my dad. There’s a bit of a hand me down mentality there.”

I studied the wall. Megan’s section was a block of three short rows. A piece of paper was posted above each row of her movies with her name drawn in block letters and decorated with glitter, butterflies, and ladybugs. And she had a lot of Johnny Depp movies.

I picked up Mean Girls.

“Good choice,” she said. “We should probably have popcorn, huh?”

We went back upstairs. She put the bag in the microwave, and we listened to the kernels pop. That’s when her mom and brother came home. There was a rustling of bags and the slamming of a door, and then a tall blond guy with broad shoulders and a much shorter blond woman with warm brown eyes carrying bulging plastic bags came into the kitchen.

“Oh, hello,” her mother said at the same time her brother said, “What’s up?”

Megan introduced me. Her brother’s name was Gary, her mother’s Cindy—Mrs. Lowry, she quickly corrected. Mrs. Lowry asked me how I liked Iowa, how was school, and how my parents were. The ding of the microwave went off before I could answer, and Megan practically dragged me from the room.
“She was just being polite,” she said as we settled on the soft, soft and wide basement couch. “I bet if you’d answered, she’d ask you the exact same thing next time you came over.”

I still felt weird, like I had been intentionally rude.

We couldn’t think of anything to do after the movie, so I headed home. Megan walked me halfway, chattering on about the movie. We exchanged “see ya’s, and Megan suggested we try to hook up for lunch during the week.

It was all kind of surreal, I thought as I walked the rest of the way home.

“Hey,” my mom said when I went in the house. She was standing over the stove, and the house smelled like stir-fry. “What’ve you been up to all day? Did you have fun at the mall?”


“Really?” She smiled, sprinkled something into the pan. “Go wash up, and we can talk about it over dinner.”

“Okay,” I said.

Okay.
Because I had never seen Megan at school—or at least, never registered her before—I really wasn’t planning on seeing her again. Every time I thought about hanging out with her over the weekend, it felt weird and dream-like. I spent most of Sunday thinking that someone that cool and easy to get along with just did not exist outside of the friends I already had. And those friends were in Maryland.

But I couldn’t help from looking for her at the bus stop on Monday.

She wasn’t there, of course, but she had told me that she wouldn’t be.

When she appeared in the school lobby wearing a white hoodie and loose jeans, it almost seemed like magic. “Hey!” she said enthusiastically. She lifted both her hands skyward in surprise. “That’s so random how I never see you at school and then all of a sudden, it’s like, bam, first thing in the morning.”

I laughed. “I was just thinking the same thing.”

We fell into step with each other. “So, listen, I’m glad I ran into you. You want to get lunch today? I’ve got my car, and if at all possible, I’m out of here every day to grab some real food.”

“Real food?”

“You know, McDonald’s, Wendy’s. But if that’s not cool, we can hit up one of the places closer to the college, grab some of that cuisine they serve over there. Greek or Mexican or something. What do you say?”

I stopped at my locker. “Sure.” I twirled the lock. “But where—“

“Oh, we’ll just meet right there where we just saw each other.”

The first bell rang.

“Okay, I better head to the office,” she said. “I’m in charge of directing the announcements, and they act like the world stops if I’m not there to press that little button.” She rolled her eyes. “But lunch is a definite, right?”

I nodded.

“Cool,” she said, and then she was off.
I shook my head and stuffed a couple of books in my bag. Megan was so high energy, that little exchange had exhausted me. But I felt good for the first time since starting school, like I had something to look forward to.
Chapter 34

Wearing the braids made the bandana in theater even more necessary. I had forgotten it one day, thinking that the easy ponytail made everything else simple—except Mariette-Louise’s attitude—but when I got home, I discovered there was dust in both the actual ponytail and the braids right at my neck. I was tying the gray and black scarf on—to match my gray yoga pants—when Mrs. Murrow breezed onto the stage, her black top and pants floating around her.

“Center stage, please, thespians,” she said, clapping her hands twice for effect.

I sent Jude a questioning look. He shrugged.

“Quickly, ladies and gentlemen. I want to begin as soon as—“

The bell rang then.

“—the bell rings. Well, then. I guess that’s my cue.”

She began moving between us, her voice loud and clear.

“As you all know, it is January, the dawn of a new year, of new beginnings. It is also the time I always announce that preparations for the spring play must be begin.”

I clapped my hands together, and a ripple of whispering came from the rest of the students.

“I know,” Mrs. Murrow continued, still walking between us, “that this is an exciting time. I hope you will realize that our activities and exercises over the past few months have not been in vain. Because now is the time we will begin putting these small things into a much larger scope to prepare you for your debut before the school.

“For those of you who do not know, this will be a student run production with a student director. I will have a largely background role, supervising things, answering questions as they come up. But this will be, for all intents and purposes, your show.

“So now that we have some direction for these upcoming months, let us begin.” She clapped her hands again. “Arise, young thespians, so that we may get to work.”

She paired us up and gave each couple a section of the stage “to call our own.” Then, we received a small section of a play and had to come up with information about the two characters’ home lives and personalities based on their dialogue. She had blacked out the
characters’ names, so that we had to come up with their gender and everything. It was weird, but fun, and the first time I had to write for that class.

At the end of class, on my way to the dressing room, Jude said in passing that he had something to tell me at lunch. I asked him what, and he just said, “Lunchtime, Shiann,” and made a face at me.

Shrugging, I went to get dressed and promptly forgot all about it.
Chapter 35

Megan was where she said she’d be, and I grinned when I saw her. Me! Going away from school for lunch! It was unreal.

I played it cool, though, somehow managing not to skip towards Megan.

She drove a red Volvo, which of all the cars in all the world, I would have never, ever pictured her driving. Which I told her. She shrugged, saying, “Hand me downs are it for my family. It used to be my mom’s car until she upgraded about two years ago. Of course, that means when she gets bored with the Camry, my little sister gets that instead of this box of a car. Unless I can convince my mom this one is better.”

After we clicked on our seatbelts, she switched on the radio. Hip-hop poured from the speakers, and she put the car in gear and we peeled out. Well, as much as one could peel in a Volvo.

She asked if McDonald’s was okay, and I shrugged. The food didn’t really matter to me that much anyway. It was more about the getting away from the school that had me relaxed for the first time in ages. We were sitting in the drive-thru when she turned to me and asked, “So what’s up with you and Jude?”


“Really? That’s not what Ellis says.”

“Jude and I are friends. He’s just a nice guy.”

“Mmm.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, that mmm?”

“Well, Ellis has a pretty good read on Jude. She knows who he likes at any given moment.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s just because she likes him so much.”

“The point is, she thinks he likes you, which means he probably does. Are you gonna go for it?”

“Not likely.”

“Really? Why not?”

I shrugged. “He’s not really my type.”

“It’s because he’s gay, isn’t it?”
"WHAT?" I shook my head in disbelief this time. "Jude is not...I mean, I don't..."

She laughed, easing her foot off the brake so that the car rolled forward. "It's okay, Ellis doesn't believe it either. But I told her not to be surprised when he comes home from college with a boyfriend."

The voice on the intercom crackled, asking for our orders. We told him what we wanted, paid, got our food, and left. The ride back to the school was mostly chewing and drinking.

"I thought they didn't have gay people in Iowa," I said. "Then again, I didn't think there were any people in Iowa. In fact, I'm still not sure it exists and I live here now."

"Yeah, I feel that way about Wyoming." She shook her head. "Except I've never lived there."

We were back at the school, the lunch break ending all too soon. I gathered my trash, stuffed it all in the bag. We got out of the car, Megan bumping her door closed with her hip. As we walked to the school, she asked if I wanted a ride home from school. I did. And that's how we started riding to school together every day.
February

Chapter 36

February rolled around, cold and gray. It had snowed a week and a half before, so there were still patches of snow dotting the landscape, the weather never quite getting warm enough to melt it all away.

When Megan and I walked into the school, it looked like Saint Valentine had vomited all over the hallway. Pink, white, and red posters were everywhere advertising the student government’s Candygram fundraiser. Depending on how much you liked someone, you picked a color-coded card to let them know accompanied by some candy. All for the low, low price of one dollar.

“Oh, God,” Megan said, stopping in front of one. “I forgot all about this.”

“Oh, right. This,” I said. “They would do this at my old school.”

Megan put her hands on her stomach. “Oh, God. Oh, God. I forgot about this.” She closed her eyes. “I think I’m going to be sick. Oh, God.”

“What? What is it?”

She leaned her forehead against the wall and took several deep breaths. “Okay, I never told you this because it’s embarrassing and stupid and basically it was all my fault, but I broke up with this guy Ryan right before Christmas, and, okay, last year we made a big deal about the candygram thing, and...” Here, she stood up straight. “Be honest. Would you think I’m pathetic if I sent him one this year?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “What does he look like?”

“Short, no-neck, football player.” She smiled. “Okay, that was funny. But seriously. How pathetic would that make me?”

I shrugged. “I guess it depends on why you broke up.”

“Right, you’re right. There’s no way I can send him anything.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Yeah, something like that.” She sighed. “I’ll see you later. I better get to the office, try to clear my head.”

She walked away, throwing a wave over her shoulder.
Chapter 37

I was concerned about Meg. All day long, I kept an eye and an ear out for this Ryan guy, so I could get a glimpse of him and see if I could figure out why they broke up. That, and I was nosy.

Finally, I broke and asked Ellis about him in theater. She said he was a meathead, and didn’t offer anything else.

I got paired with Jude who glared at me once we were settled in our corner of the stage. We were working on the character sketches again—something Mrs. Murrow said was absolutely necessary for the creative process.

“Where have you been?” Jude hissed at me when she was on the other side of the stage.

“What do you mean?” I stage-whispered back.

“I don’t know, it’s like you dropped off the face of the earth or something. You haven’t been at lunch or anything.”

“Oh,” I said, dropping my head to read the passage in front of us, “I’ve been hanging out with Megan.”

“Right,” he said, “Megan. It’s okay if she eats with us.”

“Fine. I’ll be at lunch today.”

And I was. Megan and I went and sat with Ellis, Corey, and Jude. There was a lot of back and forth between them that I couldn’t follow. All I know is that there was some talk of baseball, and how Megan never came to the games anymore because she wasn’t on the softball team, and at the end Megan said she didn’t mind sitting there every once in a while, but she definitely didn’t want to make it an everyday thing.

“They exhaust me,” she said on the way home. “Ellis hates when I’m around because she’s always scared I’ll spill about her crush on gay Jude. It’s all very whatever.”

“I’m surprised he doesn’t already know.”

“Oh, he totally does. He just doesn’t want her, so he acts like he’s oblivious.”

When I went home, I went online to investigate someone for my Black History Month presentation in history. I wanted to not glom onto well-known names and find someone I had never heard of before.
Megan called when I had just discovered the Dance Theatre of Harlem’s website.

“So do you and Jude have plans for Valentine’s Day?” she said, after I said hello.

“Oh, stop it.”

“There’s a V-Day party. You wanna go?”

I thought back on the disaster that was New Year’s. “Yeah, parties aren’t really my thing.”

“There is no doubt that it will probably be stupid. But it should be at least a little fun. Maybe.”

I was silent.

“I think Ryan is going to be there. I want to see for myself, and I need some moral support.”

I sighed. “Fine. What’s the worst that could happen?”
Chapter 38

Valentine’s Day came fast. Megan and I sent each other friendship candygrams to, as she said, “stave off the bitter of not having boys in our lives.” That, and we both wanted a delivery in class so people could see that someone out there liked us. And candy.

The day was a nauseating display of teddy bears and heart-shaped boxes and notes in lockers. A couple of girls were crying, off in little clusters of disappointment. At the end of theater class, Jude gave me, Corey, and Ellis all Kisses and those little cards that we used to exchange in elementary school. Apparently, his little sister had extras. All of ours had Care Bears on them, and mine said, “You are beary special” with Jude’s name scrawled on the bottom. Ellis blushed when she got hers and refused to let me or Corey see what was written on it.

That night, I went over to Megan’s to get ready. We—more like she—had decided that I would spend the night at her house. This way I could avoid my curfew and my mom’s questions about a party at someone’s house I didn’t know.

Megan had cleaned her room, so I was allowed to see it for the first time ever. What amazed me was that it still wasn’t clean—at least not by my mother’s (and therefore my) standards. Not that it was dirty or anything, but I could tell she generally lived in a world of chaos. The biggest contributing factor to that was the sewing table she had right under her window. It was covered with all kinds of clothing and swatches of cloth. A variety of threads, different sizes of scissors, and little packets of patterns were under the table, shoved back out against the wall. And, of course, a gleaming sewing machine was on top in an awesome mint green color that matched her walls.

I believed her when she said that she usually had stuff spread out all over everywhere when she wasn’t expecting company. She told me that her little sister always had things she wanted fixed or altered; in fact, Lillian’s clothes accounted for most of the huge pile on Megan’s table.

There were also some softball trophies and pictures of a younger Megan with her teammates, but not much else. She rolled her eyes when she saw me studying it. “My dad insists on having that dumb shelf there. He calls it my own little trophy case. I just want to pack all of that crap up and never look at it again.”
She refused to elaborate when I asked why she quit playing, only saying that “it was just time.”

In a decidedly anti-Valentine protest, Megan wore a black tee with “Love Sucks” in a deformed heart that she had made by gluing sparkly little rhinestones on it. My tee, also black, said “Kill Cupid” in those little stick-on bubble letters.

“You know,” she said as we stood at the mirror hanging on her closet door straightening our jeans and fixing our belts, “I actually hate these dumb sparkles.” She studied our reflections. “And I probably should have made your shirt red. It’s a much better color on you, and the black is kind of cliché, don’t you think?”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Slimming and all that.”

“You should put some blush on to highlight those cheeks of yours.”

I shook my head. “Make-up and I don’t really get along, what with all the needing to reapply and stuff.”

“No, no, this’ll be great. It’s really just this glittery stuff. I won’t put a lot, and it’ll draw attention to your face and away from that stupid black t-shirt that I should’ve done in red. Or pink.”

“I like the t-shirt. And I hate glitter. And pink.”

She was at her dresser, pushing things aside and opening her top drawer over and over again. When she finally found what she was looking for, she turned to me, blush brush ready. I tried to move away, but all of that softball must have made her reflexes sharp because she got to me before I could take a step.

“There,” she said, satisfied, after two quick strokes with the brush.

I looked at myself in the mirror. It was just the lightest smattering of glitter, and it did make me look a little less serious.

“See, not so bad, right?” She went to her sewing table, pushed some clothes around, and then waved a digital camera over her shoulder. One of her parents, she explained, would take our picture before we left. Not only to display the shirts in her portfolio, but to verify that the night did happen.

When we went downstairs, however, neither of her parents were around, having gone to get pizza. Gary was there, though, playing video games in the basement. Megan sighed
heavily and grudgingly asked him to take our picture. He consented without any grumbling, and when we got in the car, she told me it was because he thought I was cute and wanted me to come back. I told her she was full of it.

She laughed at me, gunning the car’s engine, and said, “Trust me. He told me the first day he met you, but we have a strictly no cross-dating rule, so you are completely off limits to him.”

I didn’t tell her how bizarre I thought it was that she had pegged two boys interested in me when—at home—I’d be hard-pressed to find one.

We made our way to the party, which was in one of the big houses closer to the college. In fact, it reminded me a lot of the house Kerry’s friend from New Year’s lived in.

I followed Megan inside where we were instructed by a short pixie-looking girl to drop our coats in a room right beside the bathroom. The actual party was in the basement, a strobe light and disco ball added a frenetic effect to the room, highlighting the jumping bodies. A boy Meg greeted handed her a cup as soon as we hit the bottom of the stairs. She took a sip and then grimaced. “Christ, this is strong,” she said. “Want some?”

I shook my head, wondering whether or not I should warn Meg about the dangers associated with accepting open drinks at parties. Or if I should remind her that she was driving us home. But she set the cup down on the first empty surface we came across.

Another boy that seemed to appear from nowhere who was her height, slipped a skinny arm around her neck and whispered in her ear. She laughed and shook her head. They shouted words I couldn’t make out to each other, then Meg said over her shoulder to me that she’d be right back, and the two of them slipped through the throng of dancing bodies and disappeared.

I stood there in shock, not wanting to believe that Megan had actually abandoned me at a party where I knew exactly no one and, worst, stood out like a sore thumb with my brown skin and my black t-shirt with its anti-Valentine’s Day message on it.

I retreated back to the wall, following it until I found a couch on the other side of the room where a couple sat, the girl on the boy’s lap, and I plopped down in the narrow space offered there. At least at Kerry’s friend’s party, I had known the music and could pretend I just wanted to sit there being anti-social and not dancing. Here, I just felt like a loser, invited
to a world I didn’t belong in where the people didn’t speak the language and the music was completely uninviting. It sounded like a hybrid of electronica and rock and was—to me at least—completely impossible to dance to. I guess the people at the party disagreed with me since all of the people in the middle of the floor were jumping up and down and flailing their arms about. Music without a beat just didn’t move me, but it seemed to be just their thing.

After about five or ten minutes (two and a half songs, all of which seemed interminable), Megan reappeared, squeezing herself between me and the boy who had just sat beside me. “Was I gone long?” she asked, putting her blond head close to mind.

I shrugged, trying to keep my anger from showing.

She cut her eyes at me. “God, I am so rude. Howie wanted to show me this thing he had painted and he gets all anal about people seeing his work.” When I didn’t say anything, she said, “This is his party by the way.”

“I figured,” I said. “It’s not that many people who bring art to a party.”

She smiled, a small one. “I’m sorry.” Then: “Oh, God, are you ready to go?”

I shrugged again.

“I think we should go. This party is...oh, god, that is him. Oh, God, we have to get out of here.”

“What?” I said, looking around. “That’s who?”

“Ryan just came in. Oh, shit. We have to leave.”

“Where is he?” I asked. “Are you sure it’s him?”

She covered her face with her hand. “I’m sure, yeah. Just...shit, is he coming over here?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Is he that redhead with all the freckles?”

“What?” She looked at me from under her hand. “Oh, right, you don’t know him. No, he doesn’t have freckles. He’s the guy with the black hair and no neck. And really big arms.”

“Oh!” I said, spotting him at that moment. He was cute, if you liked no-neck guys with big arms and square heads. He had also been standing behind the redhead, which is how I missed him the first time. “He’s, um, he’s kind of coming this way, but he might be going to...oh, no he’s coming over here. Hi.”
He nodded to me, then turned his attention to Meg. I could tell he was short, but standing over us, he looked a lot taller and very intimidating. “Hey, Meggie,” he said. She forced a smile and dropped her hand. “You know I hate that,” she said. “That’s okay.” He shrugged. “I hate a lot of stuff you do.” I cringed. “But I guess that’s why we’re not together,” he continued. “Come on, Ryan. Do you really want to do this now?” “Nice shirt,” he said, putting his hands in his pockets. His eyes blazed. “I thought you might like it.”

At that moment, the music switched to a slow song, the first that had been played since our arrival.


Megan looked at me. I shrugged. She sighed. “Fine, for old times’ sake.”

The two of them stood arm’s length apart from each other and did more talking than dancing. They made an interesting duo: one light, one dark, one thin, one thick. They were the same height, though, which meant they had equal ground in the discussion, which looked to be growing more heated by the second. Ryan whispered something in her ear, momentarily closing the wide gap between them, and Megan pulled back suddenly and stiffened. She walked back over to me, grabbed my wrist, pulled me off the couch and said, “Let’s go. I can’t stay or I’ll punch him in the nose.”

She didn’t say anything until we were in the car and had driven around for quite a bit. After about fifteen minutes of driving aimlessly through the neighborhood and up and down the road leading to our homes, she took the car to the McDonald’s near the school, pulled into the parking lot, and put her head on the steering wheel and cried.

I wasn’t sure what to do. I had never been a big hugger, and I wanted to make a joke to lighten the mood, but nothing seemed appropriate.

Megan sat up and wiped her eyes. “God, I just hate him sometimes, you know?” She shook her head. “I should’ve known he just wanted in my pants. ‘For old time’s sake,’” she
said, mimicking his voice perfectly. “Everything is sex with him, and he thinks he’s entitled and...God!” She banged her fist down on the dashboard. “I just—“ She grabbed the steering wheel and shook herself. “—I just want to strangle him is all.”

She puffed her cheeks out, exhaling. She turned to me. “Hungry?”

“I could go for some fries.”

“My dad has a gun, you know,” she said as we sat in the drive-thru line. “I should get him to invite Ryan hunting and then accidentally shoot him in the ass.”

I must have looked alarmed because she laughed. “Don’t worry, my dad has this dumb pellet gun that wouldn’t hurt a fly. He just likes shooting at cans when he gets pissed.”

She flicked the headlights on and off. “Besides, he’s not worth the charges.”

“Right.”

We laughed then, and the heaviness of her freak out melted away.
When we got closer to Megan’s house, I suggested that maybe I should go home. It was close to but not past my curfew, and truth be told, I was a little wary of actually spending the night at her house since I had never slept over at a white person’s before.

Not that I told any of that to her.

She said for me to stop being ridiculous. “Besides,” she said, “We’re definitely not sleeping in my room. I’d hate for anything in there to jump off that sewing table and attack you. We’re going to camp out in the basement and watch movies.” She pulled into the driveway. “And if my brother is down there, we’ll force him to let us play video games with him until he gets so frustrated with our lack of 007 shooting skills that he leaves. It’ll be great.”

Luckily, we didn’t have to put that plan into motion because her brother had decided to go out, leaving the basement free. Her parents, she said, were early bedders, never staying up past ten-thirty.

She pulled out the sofa couch and lined up three movies for us to watch. She fell asleep at the beginning of the second one. Once it was over, I got up and turned the TV off. I lay there for a long time after my eyes had adjusted to the dark, trying to figure out what shapes the shadows of the DVDs made and what would happen to me if someone broke into the house via the sliding glass door on the opposite wall.

I don’t know how long it took me to fall asleep, only that it wasn’t until well after I heard Megan’s brother come in, go to the kitchen and then upstairs to his room. All I remembered was waking up to brilliant sunlight and loud talking from the kitchen. My head felt full, and I knew I would be cranky all day, but I used the downstairs bathroom to put water on my face and rinse out my mouth in case I ran into any of Megan’s family members on the way up to her room and my toothpaste and washcloth.

I had slept in my bra, too, which made it easier to accept that I might be seen. Good thing, too, because Megan called out to me before I could slide past the narrow piece of wall separating the downstairs from the upstairs.

In the kitchen, her family was all crowded around the island.
“Come on and eat!” her father said. He looked like a male Megan with blond hair and a narrow face. A mini Meg’s mom stood at his elbow. She had a round face and a halo of golden hair. They looked like an Aryan postcard.

“I was, uh, going to shower and stuff first.”

“You can shower later,” Megan said. “And don’t worry about brushing your teeth. My dad’s blueberry pancakes make it so that you can feel your teeth rotting while you eat them.”

“Now, Meggie,” he said, and I noted that Megan did not flinch or attempt to correct him, choosing to smile at him instead, “that’s an awful way to try to sell my product.” He winked at me. “But they are awfully sweet. You’re not on one of those awful no-carb diets, are you?”

I shook my head.

“Good!” He slid a plate towards me. On it were three huge pancakes with gigantic spots of blue that ran into each other, in some spots causing what looked like a mini explosion. Powdered sugar and whipped cream were on top. I could feel my teeth rotting, and I hadn’t even taken a bite.

I went home after about two hours. Megan’s dad insisted on details from the party. He wanted to know just how much fun we’d had. Megan lied, telling him we got in late, and it was a blast. I nodded and smiled, trying not to outright lie to him.

As soon as she dropped me off at home—“It’s a long walk when you’re tired,” she’d said—I said hi to my mom and went straight upstairs to crash.
Theater class was getting more and more interesting. We had moved on from character sketches to character sketches plus monologues, which meant that we got a chance to perform for our fellow classmates. Sometimes, it was just in our little assigned groups and other times, it was in front of the class. After a performance, Mrs. Murrow would talk to us about the shading she thought was missing from our performances. For example, my monologue was about a girl who lost her dog, and I had played it sad, but not distraught, so Mrs. Murrow pointed out that she thought maybe I had underestimated or overestimated how important the dog was to the girl, that I needed to think of how soon after the dog had been lost my character was speaking, and that I needed to consider a way to play it that maybe wasn't so predictable. Like, what if she was just pretending to be upset about the dog being gone?

It kind of blew my mind.

So, the first week of March she gathered all of us thespians to center stage again for another announcement.

"This year’s play," she said, "in a stunning turn of events, will be completely student devised." She paused, making eye contact with each of us. "In this class, I want you to explore all of your creativity. I want to push you to your limits so that you know you are capable of everything." She pushed a strand of her strawberry-blond hair out of her eyes.

I looked over at Jude and rolled my eyes playfully. He raised an eyebrow and gave Mrs. Murrow his undivided attention. Stung, I followed his example.

"A student came to me and asked if he"—she put a finger to her lip—"or she, if you will, to keep up the mystery, could submit a play for my consideration." She paused for effect, a technique she had taught us the week before.

"And I loved it. I absolutely adored it. So this year’s play will be an original work by none other than this class’s own Jude Marconi."

All heads swiveled in Jude’s direction. He had the decency to look sheepish, hanging his head in modesty, a faint blush on his cheeks. My mouth hung open in a quite unattractive way, I’m sure. Ellis beamed from her seat beside him, like she had done all the work.
"A round of applause, if you will," Mrs. Murrow said. We all clapped dutifully, the applause becoming more enthusiastic after the shock had worn off. Jude looked pleased, the corner of his mouth curving into a smile. And then he winked at me.

I couldn’t get close to him after class; everyone crowded around him, saying congratulations and asking who he had cast and to tell them about the play. When I realized trying to talk to him then was fruitless, I went and got dressed, figuring I’d attack him at lunch.

And attack I did. “Why,” I asked, slamming my tray down on the table, “didn’t you tell me about this?”

“You,” he said, dragging a tater tot through a pile of ketchup, “have not been around.”

“Oh,” I said and sat. It was true. I had been pretty exclusively hanging with Megan. The only reason I had brushed her off for lunch that day was to dig details out of Jude, a mission she had no interest in, so she said she’d see me after school and headed out to lunch on her own. “So, tell me about the play then.”

Corey and Ellis groaned.

“What?”

“If you get him started,” Corey said, “he’ll never stop.”

“Ever,” Ellis added.

“Oh, shut up,” he said to both of them. “It’s a—“

“Concurrent love story,” Ellis supplied.

“About two sets of couples,” Corey added.

“Who never quite get it together.”

“Because fate is not on their sides.”

“And they keep missing each other.”

“Until, finally, their near misses...” Corey paused here and nodded towards Ellis.

“...lead them to each other,” they finished in unison.

They both dissolved into giggles. Jude crossed his arm and narrowed his blue eyes into slits. “I hate you both,” he said. To me: “There’s more going on than that, like this whole star-crossed Romeo and Juliet thing, and a school rivalry.”
“It’s really good,” Ellis said, smiling. “We just know how much it bugs him when he can’t tell it.”

“Yeah,” Corey said. “You’ll like it.”

“Well, when can I read it?” I asked him.

“Mrs. Murrow’s going to pass it out soon.” He shrugged.

I sat back. “That’s cold. You’re not going to give me a sneak peek.”

“I would have last month when I tried telling you about it. Giving it to you now would be like insider trading or something.”

“But you let Ellis read it!” I pouted.

“She’s my best friend.” A slow smile spread across Ellis’s face at that. “Besides, it won’t be that long.”

“Fine,” I said. I frowned.

“Bet you’ll come around more now, won’t you?” he asked, smirking.

I threw a ketchup packet at him. “Shut up.”

He laughed. Ellis gave me a half smile, and Corey rolled her eyes. “It’s just that he missed you is all,” Corey whispered to me when he and Ellis got into a heated debate about food fights. “I’m sure he’ll let you read it. If you ever call him like he’s been trying to get you to do since school started.” She sat back. “I’m just saying.” She cocked an eyebrow at me.

“A love story?” I whispered back.

“Jude is a sensitive soul.”

I knew exactly what Megan would say to that, so I pursed my lips together to keep from giggling.

“What?” Corey asked.

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head. “I just can’t wait to read it.”
Chapter 41

That night, I was making dinner since my mom was working late again. Her schedule had balanced out so that she wasn’t always at work, but still, about three nights a week, she stayed over, doing some kind of magic with lab results. The one meal I knew how to make exceptionally well was spaghetti, so the noodles were boiling on the stove, and I was getting ready to cook the hamburger when someone knocked on the door.

I opened it to find Megan, eyes red from crying. “Oh, Shiann,” she said as she walked in.

I stood back and let her pass, wondering what had upset her so quickly. She had been fine on the ride home, laughing and joking about her day, sing-singing “gaaay” when I told her about Jude being sensitive. And here she was in tears.

“God, I’m so pathetic,” she said, plopping down at the kitchen table. She put her head down. “I know I’m pathetic, so you’d think that’d make me less pathetic, but it doesn’t.” She lifted her head, eyes liquid with unshed tears. “Which is more pathetic: someone who knows they’re pathetic or someone who doesn’t?”

I stood, spatula in hand, and said, smartly, “Uh...”

“The answer is me.” She cupped her face in her hands.

“What happened?” I asked, sliding into the seat opposite her.

“Ryan.” She rolled her eyes. “Always Ryan. It’s just that everything is screwed up, and I miss him. I shouldn’t miss him, you know? I didn’t miss him when I had him and now he’s all I can think about.”

“Oh. Well, did something happen?”

“No. It’s just that his stupid birthday is next weekend. Last year we had a lot of fun on his birthday, you know? And this year he hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” I said. “At least it didn’t look that way at that party.”

“Oh, he hates me.” She stood. “So this is your house, huh? Your kitchen’s really...yellow.”

“Yeah, I know.” I gave her the unofficial tour. She loved the picture of me and my mom, loved the bookshelf and hidden nooks and crannies in my room, and absolutely adored the backyard. She thought we should have an end of year cookout at my place; I thought it
was a bad idea. Giving parties made my head hurt. All of the cleaning for people to come and then the cleaning when people left was exhausting.

I had to get back to dinner and invited her to stay, but she had already eaten. I walked her to the door, and when I pulled it open, she stopped with her hand on the screen.

"Thanks," she said.

"For what?"

"Just being around you makes me feel better. So, thanks."

"You're welcome," I said. I wasn't sure if that's what I was supposed to say, but she smiled at me and left, so I guess it was sufficient.
Mrs. Murrow handed out the scripts the next day. Auditions would be open to the whole school and not just the drama classes. We had a week to decide which part we wanted to play.

“This play,” Mrs. Murrow said, “will require commitment. Be prepared to stay after school. Be prepared to come in on weekends. Do not, however, think that this is all fun and games. We take this production very seriously.”

Jude nodded throughout this speech, solemn.

“You are the only ones privy to the script,” she continued. “It does give you a slight advantage over other contenders. However, I felt it best that we not make Jude’s play available to the entire student body before the production. You will all work on the play in some capacity, so it’s important for you to be familiar with it.”

She stopped behind Jude. “Jude will serve as the director. Anyone interested in other roles such as stage manager or costume manager, please let me know. Otherwise, thespians, you are dismissed for lunch.”

I turned the script over and over in my hands. I couldn’t wait to read it; I couldn’t wait to figure out who to play.

On the car ride home, I told Megan that I was nervous about it. “What if I don’t get picked for anything but standing in the background?”

“Are you kidding? You know, Jude has some kind of gay-boy crush on you. You’ll totally get an important part.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m sure Mrs. Murrow has some kind of method that prevents people from just putting who they like in the play.”

“Shiann, you worry too much. If you’re that anxious about it; just ask Jude if you can sit on his casting couch.”

I shook my head. “You are unbelievable.”

“What? I bet it’d work. He’d have to give you a major part then.”

But I wasn’t so sure I wanted one. I read the play, which was good, but some of it was so cheesy. I mean, one girl died halfway through and came back as a ghost to direct the
boy she thought was her true love to his real true love, the girl he never paid any attention to and who he kept crossing paths with unaware every day.

The auditions were closed, meaning we couldn’t sit in and watch other people try out. Mrs. Murrow absolutely detested bullying and making people feel unworthy, and she felt people would be nervous enough as is without having to worry about being teased about small flubs by their classmates the next day. She had us fill out a questionnaire with our name, age, whether or not we’d take just the part we auditioned for or any part, our special skills, after school activities, if we would work production blah blah blah. I wasn’t sure what special skills I had besides a mean Angela Bassett playing Tina Turner impersonation and a decent if not fantastic singing voice. But I put both of those down, along with “ability to adapt to any circumstance.” Which was true and kind of a dig at the fact that I was an actor.

The bottom of the sheet also had a bunch of criteria for the judges to evaluate us on, such as diction and expression. I tried not to look too hard at that because it made me nervous.

Standing in front of the casting panel was so, so different from class. We had done tons of stuff on stage, but mostly playing to the front two rows. Mrs. Murrow, Jude, and Mr. Lance, the music teacher, all sat further back, in the furthest half of the seats from the stage. Instead of all of the house lights being on, only the stage was lit, and the three of them were mostly in shadow. It made the theater look bigger. A lot bigger.

I stood center stage and said, “My name is Shiann, and I’m reading for the part of Emily.” Emily was a smaller role—not one of the main four or the dead girl. She had a lot of great one-liners and little jokes. Plus, she was only in three out of the twelve scenes, which meant I could start a little smaller since this was my first time actually performing on stage. I hated her name, though. Emily. I didn’t know any black people named Emily.

After I read—Mrs. Murrow read a few of the lines Emily played off of—the judges said, “Thank you,” and that was it. I didn’t think I had done too badly. I only missed one of the cues, and I had ampied up my personality by two to give a little more and project into the audience. I hoped it had been enough.

When I got home, my mom asked how the auditions went. She was excited for me and hoped that I’d get a bigger part than the one I auditioned for, but I told her I didn’t think
it worked that way. "The most nerve-wracking thing," I told her, "is that we have to wait until after Spring Break to find out what we get." Two whole weeks of torture before I had an answer.

Kerry called for the first time that evening, on the cell phone I always forgot I had because it didn’t ring much. My mother hadn’t flipped about it, saying instead, "As long as your father is footing the bill, I don’t care one way or the other." But I thought she felt better knowing I could be reached at any moment, even if she only always called me at home, since I still had no car of which to speak.

Anyway, Kerry had called to share gossip. Nothing big, it seemed, had been going on with her, just everybody else. Larissa was the same, still all wrapped up in Kyle and her grades were plummeting, and her mom called Kerry about twice a week looking for her. Kerry refused to rat her out, even though she wanted to throttle her half the time. She told me about this boy Peanut who had gotten locked up and two girls we knew who were pregnant, and the whole thing seemed far away from me, and I felt like I could see the edges of that world I used to inhabit, but the real picture was fuzzy to me now.

We talked for about half an hour before we ran out of things to say. She was happy for me and my play, and that was about it. It was weird.
Chapter 43

The most exciting thing that happened to me over the break was taking those braids out of my hair. It took three days and several movies. My head was too tender for a touch-up, so my mom cornrowed it for me, and I would have to wait until the week after we got back to school to get my ends clipped and my roots straightened out. Hopefully, I could find a hairdresser by then. If not, my mom would do it, but it would have been nice to sit in a chair that didn’t have a hard wooden back or get my hair rinsed in the kitchen sink.

Megan had gone to Minnesota to visit her grandparents, so the first time she saw me sans fake hair was on the ride to school. She liked it and asked if I could do hers the same way. I shook my head, laughing. I explained to her that I didn’t even know how to do it.

Mariette-Louise, who I hadn’t spoken to directly since that day she made that stupid comment about my hair, felt that she could speak to me again in math class. And what did she say, “Nice hair.”

And I had been doing well ignoring her, but I just did not know what her problem was. We were in our group again: me, her, and Norris. Poor Norris looked ready to hide when I said, with equal bite in my voice, “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, suddenly you can talk to me now?” she said.

“Oh, suddenly you can talk to me now?”

“Whatever,” she said and went back to writing on her paper.

That’s when I lost it. “I don’t know what the hell your problem is.”

She looked up, eyes wide and innocent. “My problem?”

“I have been nothing but nice to you, and all you have is some snotty comment or some b.s. about how my hair looks. Do I talk about how ugly and ridiculous your hair looks every day and how you can’t seem to pull a comb through that mess? No. So I’d appreciate it if you back up off me and let me mind my business like I been trying to do.”

Norris’s ears turned red, and he pushed his seat back a little. In case he needed to duck for cover, I guess.

Mariette-Louise narrowed her eyes at me. “What did you just say to me?”
“You. Are. UGLY!” I screamed the last word, rising up out of my seat. “Ugly, ugly, ugly, ugly. Your soul is as black as your skin, and you know what else?” By this time I was standing. “You can kiss my naturally black ass and take it with you to hell.”

The class was quiet, all eyes on our group. I stood there, my chest heaving up and down, hands balled into fists. Mr. Perry scribbled something at his desk. I looked around at all of my classmates staring at me and felt shame creep into my chest.

“Shiann,” Mr. Perry said, coming up to our cluster. He handed me a green slip. “I think you need to go to the office.”

I took the paper, crumpling it in my palm. He stood there, I guess to keep me from attacking that dumb girl, as I shoved my books into my messenger bag and slammed my chair into my desk.

The hall was quiet as I stomped down it, down the steps to our grade-level office. I handed the pass to the secretary and put my head in my hands. My mother was going to kill me. It really didn’t matter how much trouble I got into because my mother was going to kill me dead and send me to school the next day.

When the vice-principal called me into her office, my palms were all sweaty and I felt slightly sick. I had never been in trouble before, had never done anything like that in class before, and had never had to sit staring at the accoutrements of an administrator’s office while she called my mother.

There were two of those inspirational photos on her walls; one about success, the other about, funnily enough, inspiration. There were plants on each filing cabinet, and she had pictures on her desk.

She was a small woman, Mrs. Matthews, with her pastel suit and her brown bob. I found myself praying that my mom was away from her desk, but of course, I would have no such luck. Mrs. Matthews told her that I had been put out of class, that I had caused a commotion, and my mother must have asked for me because Mrs. Matthews handed me the phone.

“Shiann, what is going on?” Her tone was clipped. I could feel her anger pouring through the line.

“Mariette-Louise—“
"Mariette-Louise? Oh, Shiann, I thought we had gotten past all of this."
"I tried to, but she provoked me."
"Is she in the office?"
"No."
"Did she get put out of class?"
"No."

She sighed. "Okay, fine, we’ll discuss this when I get home. Needless to say, I am not pleased by this at all."

And even though it was one of her scheduled late days, my mother was waiting for me when I got home. Mrs. Matthews had given me a detention, which she told me was lucky because I was really slated for a one-day suspension, but since I had no priors, she was willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. My mother didn’t care about my lessened sentence, however.

"Oh, Shiann," she said, disappointment cloaking her, "you know better. You know better. And if something like this happens again, there will be hell to pay. Hell. To. Pay."

When I explained what happened, she told me she didn’t care because I was responsible for my own behavior. "You’re making an excuse, Shiann. And you know that excuses are—"

"—foundations of nothingness," I finished. It was one of her favorite quotes.

"Exactly. Not only that, but you disrupted class, and you belittled one of your classmates in front of everyone. I want you to go upstairs and write a formal apology to Mr. Perry."

I stuck out my bottom lip and crossed my arms.

"It could be worse; you could be grounded." She narrowed her eyes. "You should be grounded."

I uncrossed my arms.

"And I want you to apologize to Mariette-Louise."

"Oh, Ma, come on."

"You made a private dispute public, you called her horrible names, and you embarrassed her in front of people she has to see every day."
“Unbelievable,” I said under my breath.

“And,” she said, “I want you to be sincere.”

Making me apologize and making me be sincere about it? My mother was not a nice woman. I went upstairs to write my letter. Practicing sincerity was going to be a lot harder.
APRIL

Chapter 44

My life had become a complete reversal. Now, instead of my mom asking me every day if I had made a friend yet, she asked if I had apologized to Mariette-Louise. Every day. I told her that I’d apologize when I knew I meant it and not a moment before. I remembered how I felt when Mariette-Louise had “apologized” for her hateful comment about my hair, and if my mother wanted sincerity, it was going to take a while. Anything I said to her before then would just make matters worse, and then I might have engaged in a violent act, and that was completely out of the question.

It was harder working up an apology than I expected. I spent so much time ignoring her in school and class that I often forgot I was supposed to say anything to her at all.

On top of dealing with Mariette-Louise and her drama, my dad had called “to see what I was doing.” What that meant was that he wanted to know if I was still planning on coming home for the entire summer and whether or not he would need to get me a job. Again.

When I told him things were going well, and that I had made a new friend, he said, “Good, good. Glad to hear things are going well.” Then he told me he had a meeting and hung up.

A bright spot did follow that: the play cast list was announced. Mrs. Murrow told us she would post a call sheet after lunch, but that she wanted her drama classes to know what was what right away.

I didn’t get the part of Emily. But I got an equally satisfying part, that of Lorraine, who served the same role as Emily (sidekick/best friend), but for the dead girl. So it was smaller, but essentially the same, and I had two scenes instead of three.

Jude gave me the thumbs up; Ellis, too, smiled.

When I left the theater, Megan was standing outside, leaning against the wall.

“Well?” she said.

“How did you even know to be here?” I asked.

“Eh, Jude told me earlier. That boy cannot keep a secret to save his life. I hope you never tell him anything important.”
“Did he tell you what part I got, too?”

“No.” She pushed off the wall. “That would have been unethical.”

“Really?”

“That’s what he said.”

We walked towards the lunchroom. Mariette-Louise and her two cronies cut in front of us to go inside. I stiffened. “That girl,” I said.

“Would you quit?” Megan said. “Ignore her. She is so not worth it.”

“You’re right. You’re so right.” We stopped inside the door, leaned against the wall beside it. “It could be worse,” I said. “I could have to see her outside of math.”
Chapter 45

You know, one day I would learn to keep my big fat mouth shut. The next day in theater, Mrs. Murrow announced that we would be working with the technical education and art classes since they would be constructing and designing the sets. She wanted us to meet each other, in case there were ever any questions.

So, of course, Mariette-Louise walked in with the art class. Just because I said that I wouldn’t have to see her outside of math. Of course. When would I learn?

The good news was that we were on stage, and they were in the house, and so that day we did not at all have to talk or anything.

So that was a plus. I hoped all days would be like that.

The next day, flyers were circulating backstage. Everyone had one but me. They were a fluorescent green, so it was hard to miss them. Ellis and Jude stood side by side, heads bent over them.

"Hey, guys," I said, walking over to them. "What’s up?"

Ellis held her flyer up. "Are you going to this?"

"To what?"

"This party," Jude said. "That girl, Mariette-Louise, is giving it."

"Oh," I said.

"Yeah, these were in our lockers this morning," Ellis said. "How does she even know which lockers are ours?"

"It’s not that hard to figure out," Jude said.

"So," I said, trying to keep my voice steady, "did she just invite the cast or everybody?"

"Everybody, I think," Ellis said. "Look." She motioned with her head to the seats where the art students and tech ed students were all comparing flyers.

"Oh," I said. "What kind of party is it?"

Ellis consulted her flyer. "A pre-party. The drama club usually throws their own after party here."

"Are you gonna go?" Jude asked me.

I shook my head. "I doubt it. You may have heard that we don’t get along so well."
“Yeah,” said Jude, “but it’s about everybody, not just you two.”

I blinked at Ellis who was staring at Jude in disbelief. She shook her head. “He’s a boy,” she said. “They don’t always get it.”

“What?” Jude asked.

“Nothing,” Ellis and I said in unison.

“You should think about it,” he said. “It might be fun.”

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll think about it.”
Chapter 46

"I can't believe she didn't invite me," I said to Megan on the ride home. "She invited everybody but me. Unbelievable!"

"She's a bitch," Megan said. "Don't take it personally."

"How can I not take it personally? She invited every single person in the cast, every single person in the art class, and every single person in the tech ed class except me."

"Okay, so she didn't invite you. Would you invite her to a party at your house?"

"Are you kidding? If I invited everybody else, yes I'd invite her. Even if I didn't talk to her. I wouldn't exclude her based on her toxic personality."

"You're more mature than me." Megan switched lanes. "You want to crash? Because I'm okay with crashing."

"No, I don't want to crash," I said. "I just want to forget about this. If she didn't invite me, fine. I'm not going to make a big deal about it." I tapped my chin with my forefinger. "In fact, I bet she wants me to say something so she can be all smug and stupid and get me riled up. No, I'm going to act like it doesn't bother me at all. I'll just pretend like it doesn't exist."

"Sounds like a plan to me," said Megan. "I still think we should crash."

"No," I said. "Then she'll think I want to be there when I don't. In fact, I refuse to talk about it anymore."

And, again, the next day that's all anybody could talk about. Jude asked me several times the next day if I was planning on going. I told him several times that, no, I most definitely was not.

At lunch, he asked again. "Me and Ellis are going to a movie and then to that party," he said. "You should join us."

Ellis shot daggers at him with her eyes. I smiled at him, while giving my head a small shake at his cluelessness. "Seriously," I said. "You guys go and have fun. Megan and I had already made plans anyway."

"You should stop by."
“Oh my God,” Ellis said. “Would you give it a rest already? She said she didn’t want to go. What, are you going to nag her into meeting you there?” She turned to Corey. “It’s like he turned into my mother all of a sudden or something.” Corey and I laughed. Jude looked bewildered. “I was just trying to be nice,” he said. Ellis patted his hand and said in a patronizing tone, “She knows, sweetie. It’s okay.” “Yes, sweetie,” I said, mimicking her tone, “it’s okay.”
Chapter 47

"This is so not okay," I said to Megan. She had come over on Saturday night so we could have our anti-party party, which included but was not limited to watching such fine cinematic classics about horrendously bitchy girls such as Mean Girls and Heathers. We had also bought a score of junk food to eliminate the bitter taste in our—okay, my—mouths from being brutally rebuffed. The first movie was loaded into the DVD player and we were ready to watch it.

"What’s so not okay?" my mom asked. She had promised to stay upstairs or in the kitchen, but she kept drifting into the room, taking handfuls of popcorn, candy, and chips.

"Nothing," I said at the same time Megan said, "That Mariette-Louise invited everybody but Shiann to her party."

"What?" my mom said, looking at us in confusion.

"Oh, yeah, Mrs. Heathrow. Shiann has been completely ostracized."

"Did you apologize to her?" my mother asked.

"Does it matter?"

Megan put the bowl of popcorn in her lap. "Everybody else working on the play is going, so it’s all very deliberate."

"Oh." My mom reached over Megan’s shoulder and grabbed some popcorn. "That’s unfortunate."

"Gee, thanks," I said.

"Well it is," she said defensively.

"I don’t know, Ma," I said. "You should practice your outrage more."

"I think we should crash, Mrs. H," Megan said around a mouth full of popcorn.

"What do you think?"

My mom shrugged. "It’s up to you. I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction, though."

"Thank you," I said.

"We should just drive by," Megan said, "see what’s what. The party started over an hour ago. We can just see who’s there."

"No," I said.

"Come on," Meg said.
“No.” I pointed the DVD remote at the TV.

“It’ll be fun,” she said.

“Absolutely not.” I started the movie.

“Fine,” she said. She crossed her legs and passed me the popcorn bowl.

A half-hour later we were cruising down Mariette-Louise’s street.

“This is so crazy,” I said. “And stupid.”

“It is not,” Megan said. “It’s an adventure. Like spying.”

“Spies die.”

“I don’t see any cars,” Megan said. She flipped on the interior light and handed me one of the flyers. “Check the house number again.”

“Where did you even get this?” I asked.

“Jude. Now, check the number.”

“It’s seven oh three.” I peered at the house we just passed. “That was seven twenty”—we rolled by another house—“and that was seven twenty-two. We’re going the wrong way.”

Megan did a three-corner turn. I kept an eye on the numbers until we pulled up in front of a small white house with an old Taurus in the drive. “That’s it,” I said.

“I still don’t see any cars,” Megan said. “I’m going to go knock on the door.”

“Megan! Don’t do that!” But she was out of the car before I could finish.

She walked up to the door, slowly. Then, she put her hand up to the window closest and peered inside. She turned on her heel and ran back to the car.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I didn’t have to knock,” she said, breathless. “I could see just fine from there.”

“Well?”

“Nobody’s there. Just Mariette-Louise and those two boring girls she hangs out with. There’s still a ton of food on the table, and they’re watching a movie.”

“Seriously?” I said.

“Seriously.”
I leaned my head against the headrest. I rolled my head over to look at Megan. She was beaming at me.

"Now, aren't you glad we came?" she asked.

I nodded. I held out my fist to her; she tapped it with her fist. "Fantastic," I said.

And then we went back to my house to finish movie night.
Chapter 48

During math that Monday, it took all I had not to laugh in Mariette-Louise’s face or ask how her party went. But I was a bigger person than that. What I did do after class, however, was apologize. For some reason, the spirit of sincerity was upon me.

I stopped her at the door and asked if I could talk to her. She got all huffy, shifting her weight from side to side like I was going to ask her to do something for me. Looking her straight in the eyes, I said, “You know, I’m sorry about that day in class. That wasn’t right.”

“Yes, well,” she said.

“It’s too bad things had to turn out the way they did.”

She rolled her eyes and walked away. I held in my laughter until she disappeared into the stairwell.

The day kept getting better. I ran into Elizabeth and Sarah in the lunch line and asked them how their weekend was. They both shrugged and said it was okay. “Really?” I asked.

“How was Mariette-Louise’s party?”

Sarah rolled her eyes behind her glasses. “What party?”

Elizabeth elbowed her in the side and bugged her eyes.

“Oh,” Sarah said. “I mean, it was fine.”

“Yeah, it was great,” Elizabeth said. “Lots of fun.”

“Oh, really? Who was there?” I asked.

“Just people,” Elizabeth said, and she grabbed Sarah’s elbow and steered her away.

It was like karmic payback for the whole year of Mariette-Louise treating me like dirt. I loved it.

The rest of April passed in a blur of play rehearsals, school, and hanging out with Megan. Learning and perfecting my part was a lot harder than I thought. Jude and I had completely different ideas about how she should be played. I thought she was glib and sarcastic; Jude imagined her to be a lot more reserved, the one-liners delivered in earnest. I had to play it his way, but I didn’t much like it.
When I told my mom I had finally apologized to Mariette-Louise, she stopped asking me about her, content to let that hatchet stay buried.
MAY

Chapter 49

Opening day for the play was getting nearer and nearer. At home, my mom was trying to finalize her schedule to make sure she'd be there. "Nothing big is scheduled to happen," she said, "and I'm going to make sure it stays that way. All of our grants and everything have been applied for, so I can devote all of my attention to helping you get ready."

So she would run lines with me and force me to project, which was weird to do standing in my living room.

My dad sent a package the week before dress rehearsals started. I let it sit on the table for three days before my mom demanded I open it. "Do you really want him to call here asking why you didn't call thanking him for the gift?" she asked me. "Really?"

So I opened it. Inside the brown box was a brand new DVD camcorder with a set of DVDs and a note asking us to burn him a copy of the play. My mother rolled her eyes. "It figures," she said, "that he'd send us a gift that we have to work to use." She picked up the box. "I guess I better get comfy with the manual. I would like to have a copy of your debut."

The camcorder was one of those almost thoughtful gifts my dad liked to buy. What it really did was show off how much money he had to spend, and then left my mom stressed out because she had this fear of technology. It took her over a month to work the DVD player, and I had the feeling that the recording of the play wouldn't happen because my mom would forget to plug up something important on the day.

When I told Megan that, she volunteered to run the camera. My mother hugged her because she was so happy. That's the day my mom would have adopted Megan if she were able.

Dress rehearsals were an unmitigated disaster. On the first night, I kept missing my mark, one of the tops they put me in was too big and swallowed my frame, and one of the skirts was too short and kept showing the bottom of my underwear when I walked. On the second night, I had to be prompted for my lines about thirty times, and I was always standing outside of my lighting. Little fights kept breaking out in the wings because someone was on
the wrong side or in the wrong wing or they kept harassing the curtain guy. At the end of the night, I felt exhausted and near tears.

Mrs. Murrow gathered us all on stage and gave us a pep talk. "Thespians," she said, "there is a saying in showbiz: bad dress rehearsal, fantastic show. And given what I've seen here tonight, your show will be magnificent." We laughed nervously. "Don't worry. This is why we do the run throughs. Once the audience is here, you will forget all about these mistrials and give yourself fully to the magic of performing in front of a crowd. Now go home and get some rest, so we can be fresh for our opening night."

We left the stage, some of us (me) feeling defeated. I saw Mariette-Louise backstage and walked over to her. A lot of the set designs looked amazing, so I told her so and asked her which one was hers. "I don't know," she said, turning away so that her shoulder was facing me. "We all worked on all of them."

"Well, they're really nice," I said. "You guys did a great job."

"Okay." She turned her back to me and started talking to another one of the girls from the art class.

I was a few steps away when she said, loud and clear, "She just always wants to be the center of attention. I bet she didn't even look at the sets."

I paused for a moment, considering whether I should respond, but in the end, I walked away. She had made up her mind about me, and even when I was being genuinely nice, she felt like I was some sort of threat to her. I just couldn't deal with her drama anymore.

The next day was opening night, and I spent way too much time doing my hair, only to have it wind up looking the way it always did: brushed back off of my face and curling right below my chin. I tried adding some extra curl and flat ironing it, but it looked the same.

My cell phone rang when I was trying the mouth exercises Mrs. Murrow had taught us earlier in the year. I had a hard time keeping a straight face when I did them, so it was a mostly fruitless exercise. It was my dad on the phone, calling to tell me to break a leg. "I bet you thought I was going to forget, didn't you?" he asked, by way of greeting.

"I didn't know."

"Yeah, well, I pay attention," he said. "I know this is important to you."

"Yeah?"
“Yeah. So make sure you send me a copy, okay? I put the extra discs in there and everything.”

“I know, Dad. I saw them.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s a nice gift.”

“I’m glad you like it. I love you.”


Megan came by shortly after I talked to him. She and my mom were going to ride to the show together and sit together so I could have a cheering section.

My mom came downstairs in a well-tailored purple suit. She looked fantastic. Megan and I both told her so. “Well,” she said, “it’s not the Oscars, but it is a big night. I figured I’d better look halfway decent so you wouldn’t be ashamed to tell people I’m your mother.”

I gave her a big old hug. Megan grabbed the camera bag, and the three of us went out the door.
Chapter 50

I wish I could give justice to the performance. All I knew was that everything went well. There were a few flubs here and there, but nothing the audience noticed. Mrs. Murrow was right: once I saw the audience, I got this rush and fire burned in me, and that was it. I went out there and did everything I was supposed to do. The audience laughed when they were supposed to, got shocked into silence when they were supposed to and everything was just right.

When it was all over, I was tingling from head to toe. It was weird, too, knowing the audience was out there but not being able to see all of them. The house lights went up, and I was shocked to see the theater was full. Wall to wall people. Jude had warned me, telling me that the spring play was a big deal, but I couldn’t believe it until I saw it.

He got a standing ovation when Mrs. Murrow introduced him as our playwright.

The curtain fell after we did our final bows, and I rushed over to him and jumped on him, giving him a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. I was so incredibly proud of him, and flying high from my audience rush. “So I guess this means I owe you dinner now, huh?” he said when I pulled away.

I laughed. “I guess you can buy me dinner if it’s what you really want.” I shook my head. “You know there’s no way I’m going to turn down a free meal, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said. I started to walk away.

“Shiann.”

“Aren’t you going to give me your number?”

“Okay,” I said. I started to walk away.

“Aren’t you going to give me your number?”

“Okay,” I said. I started to walk away.

My mom and Megan were waiting in the wings with a bouquet of carnations. “You guys!” I said. “You didn’t have to do this!”

“We know,” Megan said. “But you were great.” She gave me a hug. “What was that all about?” she whispered in my ear.

“I’ll tell you later,” I whispered back.
“Oh, baby,” my mom said, crushing me in her own hug. “You were so fantastic. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Ma.”

“Really wonderful.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

“All grown up—“

“Okay,” I said. “That’s enough.” I linked arms with the two of them and took my mom to meet Mrs. Murrow.
Chapter 51

Megan had asked me the night before what my plans for the summer were going to be. I had told her countless times that I was going home, that I had a job lined up there. But that morning when I woke up, it weighed heavy on my mind.

I went and knocked on my mom’s bedroom door. When she told me to come in, I sat on the bed next to her. She was watching Lifetime, and the girl in the movie was crying. I waited until the commercial and turned to her.

“I’ve been thinking,” I said.

“Uh oh.”

I smiled. “What if I stayed here this summer?”

She raised an eyebrow.

“You know, I could go home for two weeks or so, and then spend the rest of the summer here. Daddy won’t miss me.”

“I don’t know, Shiann.”

“Well, I graduate next year, and I know I’m going somewhere way out of this state. But, for now, Iowa ain’t so bad.”

“Really?”

“You’re here. Megan’s here. We only have one summer left before I leave home.”

“True.”

“And you know staying with Daddy longer than three weeks may actually make me insane.”

She nodded.

“We can make this work,” I said. “You and me out here in the cornfields of Iowa.”

I rested my head against hers.

“It’s not so bad,” I said again.

She put her arm around my waist and gave me a light squeeze. “No. No, it’s not.”

FIN