

~ Chopin at 3:00 in the Morning ~

by Rae D. Magdon

Author's Note: Eight years in the making, part of this story is based on my own high school experiences. Mandy's depression, self-mutilation, panic attacks, and suicidal thoughts are mine. Gwen's struggle with her classmates and her unsupportive family are also mine. Other parts are completely fictional and have no relationship to my life at all.

Dedication/Thanks: To my handsome knight, who saved the damsel in distress from herself.

Warning: References to sexual abuse, drug addiction, and suicide in this story. I have no experience with the first two. Two women also make love several times. Mild BDSM

Disclaimer: Not related to XWP. They don't look like anybody.

Feedback: Open your e-mail inbox. Click on 'Compose New'. Put raedmagdon@yahoo.com or roxiant@hotmail.com into the address box. Tell me what you thought.

Cherry Count: +1 to the tally, giving us a grand total of 4. I have no idea what conclusions Freud or Jung would draw from this.

Other Stuff: I'm planning two sequels involving the supporting cast of this story. The sequel to **The Second Sister** and **Wolf's Eyes** will come out soon.

Chapter One: Gwen

I can barely remember a time when I wasn't in love with Mandy. There was no deafening thunderclap, no brilliant revelation. It simply *was*, like all the other truths of the world. The sky was blue, the world was round, I loved Mandy. I never questioned or denied the slow realization, but then it started becoming a distraction.

Mandy sat in her favorite window seat, the end of her pen caught between her teeth. I was on her right, ankles loosely crossed, elbows leaning on the desktop as I lost myself in her hair. Fine, strawberry blonde waves of it curled along the column of her throat, just brushing the purple dip behind her collarbone. I knew how beautiful her hair was. Bright - almost a gleaming, burnished metal, warm from sitting under the sunlight.

Long, thin fingers reached up, tucking loose strands behind her ear. I breathed sharply. A hot red mark, purple at the center, broke the tanned landscape of skin. She turned, eyebrows lifted, studying the blush that melted my cheeks. Feeling my eyes on her neck, she traced the mark with her fingers. "Do you have your makeup with you?" she asked.

"In my purse."

"Gimme." She abandoned her worksheet and grabbed the strap of my red purse, pulling it onto her lap. After removing my cell phone, three receipts, and several tubes of lip-gloss, she pulled out my cover-up and dabbed some onto her fingertip, patting it over the love bite.

"You could have asked first," I complained, even though I had gone rummaging through Mandy's purse more than once.

Mandy tilted her head to one side, exposing the curve of her neck, the vulnerable, beating place where her heartbeat thudded. My mouth went dry as I imagined tasting it. Tasting her. "Sorry. Drew's a vampire. There, is that any better?"

"Yeah." I said carefully. Just the right amount of disapproval, not enough to let my best friend know that I was jealous. "Leavenworth really gave that to you?" I could not bring myself to call her Drew, not out loud.

I risked a glance over my shoulder at the attractive teacher. My feelings for Drew were hard to sort out. Part of me was jealous. Her blonde hair and dimples made her threateningly pretty. But Drew was also smart, charming, and sincere. I couldn't blame her for wanting the same girl I did.

Drew turned around, heels clicking to the front of the room. Several sets of eyes followed her as she leaned back against her desk, resting her weight on her knuckles. My stomach twisted into a hard, tight ball of jealousy. My head swam and I felt seasick. "All right, everyone, if you're not done those papers, they're homework. It's time for lab." There were predictable groans, but Drew did not react.

"I have a surprise for you today. James Madison has purchased several new Bunsen burners for the science department and I thought that we could test them out." The class grew excited. Playing with fire was always appealing. "I've got a jar of thin glass rods on my desk. You can take one and use the Bunsen burners to bend it into any shape you want."

There was some scattered murmuring and several smiles from around the room. Drew's cheeks dimpled as she smiled back. "I figured you would like that idea. Now get to it. Remember, if you set yourself on fire, the emergency shower's in the corner of the room."

I turned in my seat to look at the large, dirt-streaked yellow pipe that stretched out over a drain in the floor. I felt Mandy's eyes on me and turned back, looking at her face instead of her neck. My gaze rested on her soft pink mouth. It was made for kissing. Had Drew enjoyed tasting those lips as much as I would have?

"So, partners?" she asked me, completely unaware.

"Yeah. You wanna go get the Bunsen Burner? I'd probably drop it." *I'm afraid my knees will give if I try to stand up. Mandy, what you do to me...*

"Sure. You go get the rods."

I stood, rolling my shoulders to stretch out the tight bands of muscle across my back. Drew was leaning against her desk, watching the back of the room to make sure no one mishandled the new Bunsen burners. I took two of the glass rods, careful not to meet her eyes, and headed back to our desk.

A few seconds later, Mandy set the Bunsen burner on our desk and sat down next to me. "Okay, do you want to go first?"

"We need-"

"Don't forget goggles, everyone," Drew called out, saving me the trouble of reminding her.

Mandy rolled her eyes. Drew saw her and shook her head, smiling again. My stomach twisted. She was smitten. Anyone could tell. It was a minor miracle that no one else on the staff at James Madison had called her on it. "Not my rules, Miss Swift. It's a state law. Go get two pairs for you and Miss Caradoc."

"Gwen has legs, she can get her own," Mandy grumbled, but she went off to get two pairs while I plugged in the Bunsen burner. Finally, Mandy thumped back down into her chair, handing me a pair of goggles and sliding the strap of the other pair over her head. The goggles messed up her silky hair, but she still looked gorgeous. Mandy would have looked good in a paper sack.

"Wow, you managed to turn it on without breaking it," she teased.

"Shut up." I pulled my own goggles on and settled the strap behind my ears. Already heartsick and disagreeable, I was not in the mood to be teased, especially by Mandy. *You've already got me on my last nerve.* I picked up my glass rod and held both ends, positioning the middle over the flame. After a few seconds the glass started to bend.

"What are you making?" Mandy asked, trying to offer the olive branch. My shoulders dropped and I sighed, shoving down the guilt.

"A G for Gwen. Maybe I'll make it a Christmas ornament."

"It's not even Thanksgiving yet! No thinking about Christmas until after Turkey Day."

"So?" Slowly, my rod was bending into a crooked 'C' shape. My eyes left the flame and returned to Mandy's face. I wanted to reach out and smooth the thin worry line creasing the middle of her forehead. Wanted to kiss her full, frowning mouth. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I'm in a bad mood."

"I can tell." I leaned forwards, seeing the worry in Mandy's eyes. Suddenly, they widened, clouding with fear. "Gwen! Your hair!"

My nose stung with the thick, biting scent of burning hair. I screamed and ran to the corner of the room. Nearly tumbling over two backpacks, I slammed my hand into the red button on the wall so hard that my wrist throbbed. Instantly, a shower of cold water pounded my shoulders, putting out the fire. I sank to my knees over the drain, cradling my head in my hands, biting my lip as I tried not to cry.

Drew was behind me, rubbing circles on my back, not caring that my shirt was wet. "Gwen, are you all right? You're not hurt?"

"Fine..." I said hoarsely.

"You know, I was kidding when I mentioned setting yourself on fire earlier. Come on, let's get you to the nurse."

"I'll take her." I looked up and saw Mandy's arm reaching towards me. I realized that she was holding onto my wrist, her knuckles white as paper.

"You can come with us, but I need to make sure she's all right," Drew compromised.

A few minutes later, I was in the nurse's office with only a smudged recollection of being led there. Drew and Mandy each held an arm and told the entire story. The nurse was sympathetic; kinder than my classmates would be the next day. She handed me a dry uniform skirt and blouse and shoved me into the bright, bleached white of the nurse's bathroom while I blinked pain out of my eyes.

I stripped and redressed mechanically, focusing anywhere except the mirror above the sink. I tugged up my new skirt, which was at least a size big and rode too low on my hips. The shirt was a slightly better fit, but my bra was so wet that I had to go without. For once, I was grateful for my smaller cup size. I left off the tie.

Finally, I forced myself to look into the mirror. My dark hair was so thick that the damage was hidden at first, but I found it after a quick search. A lock of hair on the left side was several inches shorter than it was supposed to be. I was lucky that I had been leaning forwards over the burner and my skin had not been burned.

"You could have killed yourself with this stunt," I said to the dark-haired girl in the mirror. More and more, I was becoming a stranger to myself. "What's it going to be next?"

Talking to yourself is the first sign of insanity, thought my reflection.

I shook my head. Thanks to Mandy, I was already insane.

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Cadee was going to drive me insane. Steeling myself, I sat in my usual chair, sliding my lunch tray onto the table. Cadee leaned forward, trying to spot the damage to my hair without even saying hello, her painted pink lips parted just slightly. I sighed and accepted it. Cadee had never

been the brightest crayon in the box. In fact, she was more like a half-empty box.

"I thought you burned your hair," she said. "Aren't you supposed to be, like, bald?"

I reached back to tug on my braid before I realized it was gone. My hair was still long, a few inches past my shoulders, but it didn't stop just above my hips anymore. I missed the comforting weight, but I knew I had bigger problems.

"I only burned an inch," I lied. "It wasn't my fault it got in the way. It's too long to handle."

"You set your own hair on fire and it isn't your fault? The entire school's talking about it." Startled by the voice, I jerked my head over my shoulder. Sarah was standing next to me, balancing her lunch tray with one hand. I resisted the impulse to knock it backwards into her face and down the front of her shirt. That would have to remain a tempting fantasy.

Unlike Cadee, who was actually my real friend in a strange sort of way, Sarah was one of my 'best friends'. Best friend (n) - a girl that you despise and compete with for the top rung on the social ladder (Definition courtesy of the Prep to Normal dictionary).

Sarah was pretty. Not in the California-girl-pretty way Cadee was with her bought tan and her bleached white teeth and her blonde dye job. Sarah was the real thing, with thick brown hair in a soft wave, the longest eyelashes, and a face that made you stop and look. I had caught myself staring at her more than once, but any attraction vanished as soon as I remembered who I was looking at. It went away completely after I realized about Mandy.

I thought about retaliating. Everyone knew that I was accident-prone and Sarah loved to point it out. I took the offensive. "Just like it wasn't your fault when you wore that black thong under those white capris?" The *slut* at the end of the sentence did not need to be spoken aloud. When she wore that outfit, I had done what any "best friend" would do: I took a picture with my camera phone and sent it to everyone.

"So, what were you up to last night?" Sarah changed the subject. "Any hot dates?" *Prude*. I was infamous for refusing to put out on dates. I never bothered explaining to them that I was saving myself for Mandy.

My lips pressed into a thin smile. "I was getting my hair cut," I said dryly. Sarah gave a short laugh and Cadee looked confused.

"You could have gone out after. It's not like you have a curfew," said Cadee, her waxed-thin eyebrows set high on her forehead. "Damn, you're the only person I know that has an entire mansion to themselves at least every other weekend and doesn't throw parties in it."

"I do throw parties," I said defensively.

"Not the fancy kind of party, the crazy kind of party. You're such a stick-in-the-mud sometimes."

"I found at least three used condoms in my parents' bed the last time I had a "crazy" party. There's a rug in one of the downstairs bathrooms that still smells like cheap beer."

I could sense Cadee mentally rolling up her sleeves and getting ready to argue, but a chair scraped out to my right and I turned to see Mandy sitting down. "Hey, Gwen," she said, smiling wide enough to make my heart stutter, "you look awful."

"Thanks."

Mandy's eyes did an exaggerated roll to the ceiling. "What's wrong with her, Cadee? Sarah," she added a moment later, an answer to her own question disguised as a greeting.

"Mandy."

"Hey, Mands," Cadee said, "tell Gwen she has to throw another party."

"Not like her last party was a roaring success," Sarah said tightly. She was never comfortable when Mandy was at our table. The line of her shoulders was lifted, like a cat with its hackles up.

"I'm throwing one at Christmas," I reminded them. "If you don't like my parties, you don't have to come." That shut her up. My parents' Christmas party was *the* party of the season and everyone wanted an invitation. Sarah got one every year - part of the "best friends" rules - but that hadn't stopped me from spilling punch on her new dress from behind and making it look like an accident.

"Oh, by the way, Mandy," I said, changing the subject, "you wanna come over for an early Thanksgiving dinner? I know you have to be home with your Dad, but I promise this won't take more than a few hours and you don't have to eat a lot."

Mandy's eyes widened for a moment. Then she smiled. "Sure. Your parents' can suffer my company for one dinner."

I breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks." If my crazy dreams came true, my parents needed to get used to Mandy. They had met her once or twice, but they would be hard pressed to remember if I quizzed them.

A wandering finger followed the gridded texture of my plastic lunch tray. Suddenly, my turkey sandwich didn't look so appetizing. I tossed it at Mandy, who caught it, wax paper popping as her fingers dented the wrapper. "Stomach ache," I mumbled, pushing my chair back and standing up. I didn't know where I was headed - just out of the cafeteria.

"I don't want you getting me sick," Cadee called after me.

"Feel better," Sarah lied. Mandy didn't say anything, but her jaw was set tight and crooked. She was worried about me. I left the room, struggling to ignore the feelings of emptiness threatening to well up and suffocate me.

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The drapes had been washed and the furniture dusted to make it look like we actually used the dining room, but there was still a hollow, empty feeling to the entire house. The table, still crowded with used dishes and platters, was too clean. Even the air was stiff, formal. I took one of the plates from the table, ignoring the soft scrape of porcelain against wood as I picked it up.

This year, like every year, my mother spent Thanksgiving trying to rediscover her duties as a wife and parent. Guiltily, she had decided to cram as much 'family time' as she could into a few hours to ease her conscience. My father was asleep, Mandy was back at her house for a late Thanksgiving dinner with her dad, and mommy dearest and I were left to wash up and force clean, sterile conversation.

"Do you need any help, Gwenny, darling?" My mother's voice filtered in from the kitchen. She had given the help the day off to be with their families. All of the food was prepared the evening before anyway.

"I'm fine," I called back.

"I'm almost done in here." My mother walked in through the kitchen door and shot me a smile. I blinked twice, setting another plate on top of the first one. It always surprised me how alike my mother and I looked. We had the same thick, wavy black hair, the same pale skin, and the same thin hips. My mother's smile was one thing I didn't have. It was large, gorgeous, charming, and absolutely fake most of the time. It was the reason I hated to smile. I was afraid I would develop it like some sort of hideous genetic disease.

"You sure you don't need more help cleaning up?" she asked.

I shook my head. I set the stack of plates back on the table, my face set. "I'll be fine," I said easily. "I think I can put a few plates and glasses in a dishwasher, even if I'm not used to it."

"Thanks for letting Mandy come this year, Mom." I braced myself on the table with my hands. The soft wood felt comforting against my palms. The small things can ground you, if you let them.

"Your friends are always welcome, Honeybear," my mother said distractedly, picking up the stack of plates and carrying them back to the kitchen. I had been 'Honeybear' or 'Gwenny' since I was three, despite numerous protests. "She seems like such a nice girl. She has lovely skin. Do I know her parents?"

"I don't think so." Mandy never came to my family's formal parties - she hated the heels and the company, she said - but she was very polite and knew how to fake her way onto almost any stranger's good side. "I'm going to shower and go to bed, okay, Mom? I was up late last night."

She nodded absently as I followed her into the kitchen. Her kiss grazed my cheek and I could smell the light perfume dabbed behind her ears. "Good night," she said. I did not say good night

back.

The shower should have relaxed me. Instead, the hot pounding made my shoulder blades kiss as I flinched under the spray. I thought about Mandy, but not in the way I expected to. Now that I was alone and naked in the shower, free to fantasize about learning her body, I didn't feel like it.

My mind clicked into the special groove it had and started listing things, just like it did when I solved a math problem. Math was one of the easy things in my life. But how to solve the problem that was Mandy? I tried to put it into terms I could understand, like an equation, or a piece of piano music, or the unspoken social rules I followed, but I didn't find any advice there. Mandy was too complex to plug in as a variable. Her feelings shifted, she changed. I could only towel myself off and wander back into my room.

Hazel was waiting on my bed, ready to offer sympathy and a warm snuggle. Not bothering to turn on the lights, I threw the towel in the hamper and collapsed on my side of the bed. Hazel was plump and somehow she always claimed an entire half for herself.

I grabbed for one of my pillows and buried my face in the fabric. Soon I was in the warm, dark place that helped me think. I had spent all of Thanksgiving dinner pretending that Mandy and I were lovers. We had an apartment of our own, and we were only visiting my parents for the day. When she left without me and I remembered that we weren't going back to our imagined apartment together, I was left cold.

"I'm so tired of sleeping alone," I mouthed into the pillowcase. I wanted Mandy here with me. Back in our imaginary apartment, we were laughing, kissing, making love... Hazel's thick tail feathered against my naked back and I hugged my pillow tighter.

I had to do something about this.

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I had to do something about this. Two goons from the junior class had pinned a frightened slip of a thing next to a water fountain. Probably a freshman. I recognized the violent red hair and paused, trying to remember how I knew her. *Oh, gym class.*

"You think you're real smart, don'tcha?" the first one whispered wetly, leaning forwards.

"Forget it," the other one said. "She's just some nerdy scholarship kid..."

"I almost got suspended because of the stupid little cunt!"

At James Madison, there are two types of kids - rich kids to boost funding and smart kids to boost test scores. You could always tell which were which and they usually didn't get along. Sarah and Mandy were perfect examples. Some, like me, the school's closeted math geek, tight-rope in between, but you had to learn the rules first.

They wouldn't really hurt her, not on school grounds, but if I didn't stop this now, they might go

after her later. The memory of another girl with the same expression rose in my memory, her wide eyes rounded like two mossy lakes, bursting out of her uniform in the right places and not quite realizing it. The pretty ones are picked out just as much as the losers.

"Okay, Thing 1 and Thing 2, can you stop acting like cavemen for one second please?"

The poor thing was quaking like a mouse under the cat's paw. I gripped her upper arms lightly and leaned in to kiss both cheeks. Her face colored, but I kept my grip, partially so she wouldn't fall on top of me. "What did I hear about a suspension? Did something happen?" I looked at goon number one, dragging the girl past him and into the freedom of the hallway. "Just tell your parents to call Daddy and he'll sort it all out."

The blunt face stiffened as he thought. His eyes popped, bulges of muscle falling limp as he made the connection. Her family knew my family. Knew them well enough to call in favors. They must be important.

Goon two panicked, trying to salvage the situation. "Oh, you're... we didn't..."

"Just shut up. Come on, let's go." I guided the girl by the wrist firmly enough to help her stand but loose enough to keep her relaxed. I felt her pulse steady as we escaped.

"Thanks," she sighed, half-collapsing against a wall. She was shaking horribly, so I kept my hand on her shoulder. Her skin burned hot through the thin white material of her blouse. Anyone else would have thought she had a fever.

"Ah, she speaks. Now that I know you can, want to tell me your name?"

"elizabethmoore..." It came out all one word. "Uh... I mean..."

"I heard you. Okay, lesson one. Your name is Liz. Next time someone asks you your name, all you have to say is, 'Hi, I'm Liz,' and smile."

Now that Liz wasn't about to faint, I took a proper look. Not ugly at all, just uncomfortable in her skin. Curly red hair and freckles didn't always mean geek unless you let them. Her face was pale with a round mouth and gorgeous green eyes. I smiled as Mandy's face touched the edge of my thoughts again. Maybe I was biased towards green.

"But... whyareyou... Ah, I mean..."

"Lesson two, before you say anything, count to three in your head so you don't spit out something stupid."

Liz closed her eyes and counted. *One. Two. Three.* "How much homework do I need to do, Gwen?" The words shook, but it was a clear, understandable sentence. I wasn't surprised that she knew my name.

"I didn't save you because I needed you to do my homework for me. I can do it myself." The hurt in her eyes made my face go soft. I gentled my voice. "I hate seeing goons like that shove people around in my school. Not unless they deserve it." Mandy had scraped through her freshman year that way, and I wasn't going to let it happen again when I could change it. "So, what was that all about, anyway?"

"He - uh, he..." *One. Two. Three.* "He was cheating off my test. I told."

"You're really hopeless, aren't you?" I said, keeping my voice bright so that she would not be insulted. "Here's lesson three. Come to class at the last minute so you can pick where you sit. You won't have to sit next to anyone you don't like. The same goes for gym. I'll hook you up with a partner. Me, if Mandy can find someone else." Mandy and I always partnered together in gym, just like in everything else. "Got it?"

"Got it." The poor thing was a little bewildered, but she was smart enough to grab a pass when it came at her. She rubbed the toes of her shoes together, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

"All right, spit it out. I know you want to ask me something."

"Did you really set your hair on fire?"

Oh, God.

Chapter Two: Mandy

The air hockey table ate up the rest of my money the summer before my junior year. I was low on cash, partly because I needed to buy clothes for fall and partly because I went all out for Gwen's birthday to take her sightseeing in New York City. Not too far away from Boston, but with lots of things to do. I was still hurting from that expense when I saw it sitting there on someone's front lawn, surrounded by stacked boxes. Who knew you could find a working air hockey table at a yard sale?

It wasn't much compared to some of the stuff other James Madison kids had. Besides the standard pool, foosball, and air hockey, some had swimming pools, bowling alleys, and mini movie theatres built in to their basements. But the air hockey table was enough for me. It was my baby, kind of like Gwen's Baby Grand that she loved to play. So I drained the last of my savings and wore some of last year's clothes on the weekends. School clothes were never a problem because of the uniform, and I did my own alterations to save money.

I put the air hockey table together in my basement. The white surface was scuffed, a little uneven on one side where the material started to buckle, but when I plugged it in and heard the pumps inside hum, I couldn't stop smiling for anything. Whenever Gwen came over to my house, we went into my tiny basement - it was more like a storage cellar than a basement, and it only had room for the air hockey table and an old couch - and played. I won, usually. She called me out on it if I let her win on purpose.

We always went to my house after school, not hers. The Estate, as I called it, wasn't the type of place I was used to. I always felt like I was going to break something or set off a security alarm, like when you cross the laser in front of a painting at a museum. There were these invisible eyes that watched you and knew you weren't supposed to be there. I didn't want to remind Gwen how different her life was than mine, just in case she decided all her stuff was worth more than being my friend.

I always felt kind of proud that Gwen would rather spend time with me and my air hockey table than her other friends and their swimming pools and movie theatres. Maybe she used me as an escape from her world of designer clothes and air-kisses, or maybe... maybe she just liked me as a person.

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I placed a kiss on the soft skin of Alicia's inner thigh and moved up to wrap her in my arms. Sharp stripes of light cut through her half-pulled blinds, making her ribs stand out over her thin hips. I bent to kiss a damp pink cheek and rested my head on her pillow, feeling her quick breath against my neck. She was just about the most sensitive thing I'd ever met, especially after we had sex, and it made her feel better when I held her. I was too much of a pushover to refuse. I knew I wasn't any good for her, and I figured giving her a little cuddle-time was the least I could do to make up for the damage.

She buried her face in my shoulder, brown curls tickling my skin. It was one of those rare times when she was relaxed, even though I could feel her heart drumming with my chest against hers. "I love you, Mandy..." she said, lifting her chin and looking up at me with wide brown eyes. She said it every time, and I had stopped fighting with her about it. Soon, she'd come to her senses and realize she was making a mistake. I wished with all my heart that she wouldn't hate me when it happened. She had every right to be disgusted with me for using her.

When I didn't respond after a few minutes, the sadness came back to her eyes and the relaxed feeling went away. I kissed Alicia's hair, pulling away from her warm body and looking for my clothes. I always wanted to high tail it as soon as I exhausted her, but I knew how emotionally fragile she was and couldn't bear to leave her alone. I loved her more than she probably guessed, but I just wasn't in love with her.

I put on my jeans and tank top while Alicia left the bed and headed for the shower. "Come with me?" she asked hopefully and I had to swallow an *already did*. I could tell she wasn't in the kind of mood for games, so I just shook my head.

"Dad doesn't know where I am," I said. She would be disappointed, but I had to walk that fine line between friends-with-benefits and couple. I didn't want to encourage her. It was bad enough that I let her talk me in to sleeping with her in the first place. I argued with her for months, but she kept pushing until I was so backwards I thought I was helping her. I was her first. After we started, I was too afraid of hurting her to back out.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" she tried again, stepping over to me and taking my hand. "You can

come over for dinner."

I gave her a weak smile and tucked a curl behind her small ear. "Maybe for a sandwich at lunch." Gwen usually came over for dinner on Fridays. Afterwards, we played air hockey and studied in the basement, or went into my room to watch TV. I never asked her out loud why she didn't watch TV on one of the enormous screens at her house instead. I liked to think it was my company.

"Okay." She kissed me, a soft kiss on the lips, the kind that made my stomach loop in uncomfortable knots. Those kisses should have been given to a lover, not a meaningless fling like me. I didn't - couldn't - love Alicia like that. I probably couldn't love anyone like that. I followed her into the bathroom and washed my hands while she started her shower and pulled the curtain. I used the spare toothbrush next to the sink, ignoring her naked silhouette. After I had cleaned up, I left after a quick and uncomfortable goodbye through the shower curtain.

After I drove home, I went upstairs to my own bathroom and tugged myself out of my clothes. My shirt ended up in the sink and my bra went around the toothbrush cup as I threw everything off and tripped into the shower I hadn't been able to share with Alicia. This was something I always did alone.

I picked up my loofah, jamming the soap into the webbing until it bubbled and I could tear away at my skin. I scraped the guilt off of my hands, leaving red, burning streaks along my palms and arms, up and down my belly. Maybe one day, all the dirt would come off and I could look people in the eye properly again.

~*~

I looked up from the college application forms I was filling out and stared across the kitchen table at my father. He was reading a book, his thick hair, more brown than gray, falling over his glasses. I would have to make him sit still long enough for a trim soon. There were lines cut in to his face now that hadn't been there a year ago. His large, square hands turned the page, and I wondered how they would look in ten more years, with skin as thin and transparent as crumpled tissue paper.

He was a college professor. Even though his salary wasn't big, he liked going to work. I knew that was what I wanted my life to be like when I finished school. I took pride in telling everyone at James Madison exactly what my father did, and the looks of shock and horror on some of their faces were freeze-framed in my memory. My father the college professor. A complete 180 from the old money and CEO parents.

I bent back down to scratch in my social security number, wondering why the quiet between us seemed so uncomfortable. Usually, staying silent suited us. I learned a lot from my Dad just by watching. That was how he taught me to cook and to drive a car. Dad probably couldn't teach me how to deal with a heartbroken friend. Alicia's hopeful face was still behind my eyes, and the knots in my stomach refused to untie.

"Dad?" I did not expect the quiet fear I heard in my own voice, and I was as surprised as my

father when he looked up and our eyes met. "We need to get a Christmas tree soon," I found myself saying. He narrowed his eyes at me and nodded, but didn't speak. We both knew I hadn't meant to say that, but didn't waste words.

I went back to my application. It would have been easier to type it up, but I liked the idea of hand writing the whole thing. It made it feel more personal, and I liked the weight of the pen in my hand. I started to list all of the clubs I participated in at school. Earth Club, Masterminds, Amnesty International... It was a good thing I enjoyed most of them, because I needed as much scholarship money as I could get.

"Dad?" I said a few minutes later, still writing. He folded the book closed on one of his fingers. "I guess I don't know what to do about Alicia. She thinks she's in love with me, and I don't want to hurt her." My Dad knew about Alicia, mostly because we talked on the phone a lot. Even though I wasn't in love with her, Alicia was my best friend aside from Gwen. Between the two of them, my cell phone bill was way more expensive than it should have been. Alicia had come over a few times, but I preferred it at her place. Time at my house was usually reserved for Gwen and me.

"Seems like she's going to be hurt no matter what," he said. My Dad could make any problem seem simple. "You'll have to think about how you can hurt her the least." But simple didn't always mean easy. I was in serious trouble.

~*~

I was in serious trouble. Groping through the dark, I tried to figure out where I had ended up this time. My palm touched wood. *Ah, the pantry.* Growing up, it was my favorite hiding place. Sleepwalking was only one of the troubles that had followed me through the years since then. Once or twice a month I woke up in places that weren't my bed. Usually they were small, dark places, like a closet or the pantry. Once I even woke up outside. Luckily, it was during the summer.

This time was different, though. I noticed skin and blood under my fingernails. I studied my hands, trying to figure out where it had come from. It took me a few minutes to find the scratches all over my stomach where I had clawed myself. I couldn't feel them.

My mind stayed safe and empty while I took off my large sleep shirt, went to the bathroom, and put peroxide on the bright gouges. They had stopped bleeding, but remained a stinging, sticky pink, protesting against the cold air. I could not remember what happened before I woke up, but my heart was pounding and I was gasping for air.

What would you say about this, Gwen? I thought. Your best friend is crazy. Fortunately, Gwen didn't know about my sleepwalking problem, even though she slept over at my house all the time. It was a little embarrassing. Secretly, I thought that sharing a bed with her helped my body to relax.

With my scratches clean and my bloody pajama shirt in the hamper, I went back to bed naked, not wanting to feel anything else against my skin. My Dad was locked in his room anyway, it

wasn't like he would see me this late at night... I looked at the red numbers of digital alarm clock, wondering exactly what time it was. 3:56 AM.

I left the covers off and slept on my back so that nothing would touch my skin. It took me at least another hour to fall asleep. I couldn't stay still.

~*~

"Hold still!" Gwen was sitting behind me on the edge of my bed, putting my hair into two French braids while we waited for my Dad to finish cooking dinner. The TV volume was turned low so we could talk, and all I could hear was a muted blend of sound coming from the set. She was pulling hard, so I could tell that she was angry with me without turning around to see her face. "Why do you keep sleeping with her, Mandy?" she asked, giving my hair another solid tug as she combed it out.

My chest tightened. "It's none of your business," I snapped back as the comb hit a knot. She didn't need to know how often I asked myself the same question. I had officially decided to end things with Alicia myself instead of waiting for her, but I wasn't sure how. I didn't need Gwen running commentary and looking over my shoulder while I figured it out.

I felt Gwen frowning at the back of my head. "It is so my business." I ignored the hurt in her voice and stayed facing away from her. She continued combing. I stared at the other end of the couch, focusing on the flowers stitched into my patterned socks, wiggling my toe out through a hole at the tip.

"You never cared who I slept with before," I said sulkily, crossing my arms under my breasts. Gwen gave my hair a sharp tug, and I winced. "Hey, stop that!"

"Sorry. Anyway, I do care. Most of the people you sleep with are insensitive jerks or bored girls looking for excitement. But Alicia's different."

"How? She's just another girl that wants some good head once in a while." The lie settled heavily on my chest as soon as I said it. Alicia was more than just another girl. I cared about her deeply, but she probably wouldn't care back after I broke her heart. Maybe it was better to start detaching now...

"That's not true," Gwen said, stroking my hair to make sure that it was smooth. My shoulders lowered and I leaned into her. Her small hands felt nice woven in my hair.

"She asks, I give. That's it. I don't see why you're bothering me about this."

"That's not it for her." Gwen started separating locks of hair near the crown of my head for the braiding. I allowed myself to close my eyes. "She's in love with you, Mands, or have you been spending too much time with your head between her legs to look at her eyes?"

"It's all I can give her." I bit down on the side of my lower lip and sighed, looking over my shoulder at Gwen. She held onto my hair and glared at me. "Look straight ahead, or you'll mess it

up!" she ordered, and I turned back. "Why can't you give her more?" Gwen was forever trying to fix me up permanently. If it wasn't Alicia, it was someone else. She might have pushed for Drew if I had shown any special interest.

"You know I don't date," I said, hoping she wouldn't ask why not.

"Why not?"

"Because." The truth was, the reasons were complicated, and I didn't want to explain. Not because Gwen wouldn't understand, but because it hurt to think about it too much. I did trust her, even if she didn't believe that. Alicia already frightened me, because what we did came too close to making love. That kind of thing was for Gwen, the closeted romantic, not for people like me.

Gwen rested her chin on my shoulder from behind, putting her free hand on my arm. "Mandy, you have to stop. Alicia needs time to get over you and find someone that can give her what she wants, and it's selfish of you to keep leading her on." Gwen pulled away and started back on my hair, working her way down the sides of my head. Her thin fingers felt relaxing against my scalp, even though they were tugging a little too hard.

My eyes went dry just thinking about what I had done to her. "I was going to stop," I said softly. Gwen patted my shoulder from behind and kept braiding.

"You know," she said, "Alicia isn't the only one that deserves a good girlfriend, Mands." I swallowed, forcing myself to hold my shoulders still.

"Not worth the pain."

"And having sex with all these people doesn't hurt you? Mandy, you're dying from the inside out." She gave my hair one final pull and pressed her hand to my cheek, pushing my head around gently so that I was looking into her eyes. My torso turned with my shoulders, stretching the healing scratches on my stomach. "This isn't who you are, and this isn't what you want."

"How do you even know?" I asked, lips trembling, "how do you know what I want? You don't understand why I do what I do."

"Because you won't tell me! I've figured out parts of you, but you won't let me in deep enough to help." Her hand burned against my face, and I turned my body around so that I was facing her. Slowly, she stroked one finger over the skin of my cheek. "Come on, Mandy, I'm not stupid. We both know I've figured half of it out already."

"I have sex to make it not matter," I told her. Her hand was still pressed against my cheek, hot and smooth at the center. "It can't matter. Does that make sense?" My shoulders jerked as the tears flooded back into my eyes, almost spilling over.

Gwen slid her hand down my neck and rested it on my shoulder, pulling me into a tight hug. "It's enough," she said next to my ear. She held me for a long time, until both of us had calmed down

and the tears I hadn't cried had dissolved. "What about me?" She broke the silence, still pressing herself tight against me. The curve of her side fit against the swell of my hip.

"What about you?" I asked, avoiding the question.

"If I asked, would you sleep with me?"

My teeth dug out the flesh inside of my cheek. I'd thought about it before. Often. Gwen was attractive with her large gray eyes and soft lips. Was I attracted to her? Yes. But could I sleep with her? I pulled away, shaking my head. "No." If I slept with her, I would have to distance myself from her, and I didn't want to do that. I had already come too close to caring with Alicia. Being with Gwen would smash the walls.

She smiled, and I saw color rise in her pale cheeks. Her black hair tumbled messily over her shoulders as she leaned back to hug me again. "Good." I realized that she was trembling as she fell against me, as if all the spirit had been sucked out of her, leaving her shaking against my shoulder. She breathed into my neck, and I was afraid because I couldn't see her eyes. I didn't want to look into them and find...

"Why did you ask me that?" I whispered, wrapping my fingers around her warm hand.

"I needed to know," she said into my skin.

She lifted her face and I looked down. I saw the want, and I knew. Oh, Gwen... She thought she was in love with me. Part of me had known, part of me must have realized, but the sight still spun my head. I had seen that look so many times on so many faces. The expression was familiar, but there was honesty in it that I didn't see often. An honest desire to help me, maybe even love me, if I let her.

If there was anyone I could trust, it was Gwen. I had given more of myself to her than Drew, or even Alicia. I heard her breath shake as I placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. I leaned in closer, and her cheeks flushed. "Don't kiss me unless you mean it."

"Unless I mean what?"

"If you kiss me," she whispered, "I'm yours until I die."

I kissed her. Her lips surrendered, so warm under mine. Colors burst at the back of my head. Something broke in my chest, and I pulled away, running for the door. I wondered later if that had been my heart.

~*~

I spent all weekend lying in bed, memorizing the ceiling. I pulled out my Dad's old rock CDs and listened to them over and over, hoping for answers. None came. My Dad was stuck in the 60's and 70's. Most of the songs were about love or drugs, sometimes both. Drugs. The songs usually made a lot more sense after a joint. I didn't regret quitting, though.

I was definitely spinning down the rabbit hole after the kiss. My thoughts kept running a racetrack around my head, ending up right back where they started: Does Gwen really love you? Probably. Do you love her? You can't. Then why did you kiss her? That didn't matter. It mattered to her, didn't it? You used her, just like you used Alicia and Drew. You have her waiting for a promise you can't make. You're disgusting, playing with people's feelings the way you do.

I wouldn't blame her if she never spoke to me again, but I had to go and tell her the truth. I had already kept her waiting for the whole weekend. I poured myself into a pair of jeans and picked up a shoe from each side of the room, trying to think of how to explain all of that to Gwen. Usually, Gwen was the one who couldn't pick up after herself. I liked to keep my clothes in the laundry basket like a normal person. For once, I was too out of it to care.

I needed to talk to Alicia, too. I couldn't keep stringing her along. I tried not to get involved with her, but she wore me down until I thought I was doing the right thing. She hadn't been with anyone but me, and I felt strangely protective of her. Aside from Gwen, she was my best friend. After she forgave me for breaking her heart, I was going to make sure her next lover was the right lover. I hadn't been good enough for her.

You're not good enough for Gwen, either, I thought. It wasn't just a social problem. It was a money problem. She was rich, gorgeous, virginal. I had already taken Alicia. Could I make the same mistake with Gwen? She probably wasn't even gay. Someday, she'd want to live in a perfect house with a perfect husband and 2.5 perfect kids and a golden retriever.

I knew I had to make her understand all those things, but I wasn't sure how. So I decided to just drive. I thumped into my car and rolled down the windows, not caring if I ruined my hair. I backed out of the driveway and drove towards the city. Gwen's house was in the opposite direction.

I pumped Clapton through the speakers, thinking that maybe I was making progress - no stoner songs, even if I was still stuck in the 60s and 70s. They only made me want a cigarette. Gwen had already stopped the pot a few months ago, and I had a feeling that my cigarettes were going next. If she was still talking to me, that is.

The houses I passed started getting bigger. Two floors, three, four. The yards started to get crowded with expensive sports equipment. Most of it looked brand new. I'd gotten turned around subconsciously. Soon, the houses - mansions - weren't even next to the street. Instead, they were surrounded by thin trees and had drives leading up to them, with tall gates in front. I stopped at one of the gates and stuck my arm out of the window, punching in the code. 0702. July 2nd, Gwen's birthday. I'm sure her parents picked that number so they wouldn't forget.

Once I was through the gate, I parked and shut the car door quietly, ignoring wind-swept hair stuck to one cheek. I headed for the back to avoid the maid, creeping like a cat with its spine lowered between its shoulders. I was out of my territory. Gwen couldn't understand why I hated her house. She told me it was fine to visit, but I knew better. This wasn't the kind of place I was supposed to be.

When I slipped through the back door that opened into the kitchen, I found her waiting for me. Her hair fell limply beside her white cheeks, shorter than I was used to, but still well past her shoulders. She didn't look sick, I thought to myself. What she looked was drained, an empty gray, like someone had pierced a vein and sucked all the color out of her.

"I wondered how long it would take you to stop arguing with yourself, lover." She was curled up in the seat of a wooden chair, one arm resting on it's back, her legs tucked under her.

"Lover?" I asked.

She pressed her lips together, un-tucking her heels and letting her bare feet swing to the floor. "If you want," she said, her hands gripping her knees. "I won't have anyone else, Mandy. I told you, I'm yours until I die. Even after that."

"I can't," I started to say, "you deserve so much more than I can give you," but what came out instead was, "I love her." Not 'I think I love her' or 'I could love her with time' or any of the other things I thought before reminding myself why I couldn't.

"I'm hoping that 'her' means me," she said, looking at me with those gray eyes. She was trying so hard to be adult about it, but she was just a scared little girl playing at being a woman, scrunched up in the seat of that chair. What did she know about relationships? Then again, my relationships were disasters, too - if you could even call them relationships.

More arguments came. What did it matter if I loved Gwen? That didn't mean a relationship was possible for us. Even if it was possible, it definitely wasn't wise. There were too many problems to count... "Yes, it means you. But I can't..."

"I'm tired of can't. You've been saying 'can't' since we were twelve. I'm not going to let you get away with 'can't' anymore." She stood up, cupping my hip with her hand, closing against me.

She kissed me again. The world inverted again.

"So, how was that, Georgie Porgie?" she asked, and I realized that she was crying.

"That was... amazing... and, Jesus Christ, you're weird. I didn't mean to make you cry."

I could argue with myself all I wanted, but I couldn't argue with Gwen. My Gwen now. I had misjudged. Her heart was all woman, but the rest of her was so sheltered. Sweet lamb. I would never let anyone hurt her or disappoint her - if I could keep myself from hurting her first.

~*~

I knew it was going to hurt when I told Drew the Monday after my weekend in hiding. I found her at her desk, chewing on the end of her pen, obviously grading tests. She looked up as I walked in to her classroom and smiled, spreading the pile out to try and find something. "Do you want to see your test, Mandy?" she asked, pulling it out and handing it to me. I looked down at

the test and smiled. A 76/75 was circled at the top and there was a 'Good!' written next to it. I allowed myself a small moment of pride.

"Thanks," I said, handing it back to her.

Drew stood up and leaned forwards against her desk, worry lines forming on her forehead. "You don't look like you're feeling well. You okay?"

"Yeah." I hooked my finger into my hair and twirled, pulling at my bottom lip with my teeth. "Listen, Drew, I have something important to tell you..."

I saw her hands clutch the edge of the desk, shaking for a moment. The worry lines got deeper. She leaned farther forwards, supporting herself on her palms, her body settling between her shoulders. "What is it, baby?" she asked. I could see white patches of ceiling light reflected in her blue eyes.

I covered her hand with mine, brushing aside the test papers as I held her wrist. "You can't keep pretending we're in a relationship."

Drew hung her head, her blonde bangs falling over her eyes. "I'm not asking for a relationship..." she said, her voice cracking. "You said you didn't want that."

"I was wrong."

She looked up for a moment, and the hope in her face made my throat go dry. Then, she realized what I meant and pulled her hand away. "Why not me?" she asked. "You know I'd do anything..."

I walked around the desk and opened my arms, pulling her into a tight hug. Her body quaked and shuddered as her tears forced themselves out. I almost cried, too. "Drew, I do care about you... but you're not the other half of my soul."

"And she is?" she asked bitterly. Somehow, she knew I was talking about Gwen. I didn't even have to say it.

"Yes." Not 'I think so', not 'I have to find out', not 'maybe'. I said yes. I knew when I told her I loved her that there was no going back. All these doors had to close if I wanted to be with her. And now, I couldn't imagine letting her go. "Drew, I'm not just doing this because I'm in love with her. I'm doing it because I care about you. I want you to know what this feels like... I can't give you that."

"What if you're the one I'm supposed to be with?"

"I'm not. I promise, when it happens, you'll know. And I promise that I'll be there to see you smile again when it does."

Drew pulled away, collapsing back into her chair. "You're breaking my heart, Mandy..." she whispered.

"I have to. Someone else has to put it back together again." I bent down to kiss her forehead, and left the room. I felt surprised as I walked through the empty halls, and more than a little confused. I was upset, but only for hurting Drew. The thought of never being with her again didn't bother me at all.

Chapter Three: Gwen

Alicia and I would have gotten along better at the beginning if I hadn't caught her kissing Mandy. It still breaks my heart to remember the ugly thoughts I had when I saw them together as I hurried in to Mandy's house that afternoon, shoulders shrugged against the wind. I immediately assumed the worst, not even bothering to scream as I turned and walked back out through Mandy's front door, slamming it behind me and storming down her front steps, slipping over the gray ice that covered the cement.

I couldn't wipe the image of them from my mind as I threw myself into my Porsche: Alicia's lips covering the mouth that should have belonged to me, her small hands gripping Mandy's shoulders like she would tumble to the floor if she didn't hold tight. It should have been me holding her, kissing her. Alicia was in my English class, but I had never really talked to her. Mostly, I knew about her from Mandy's descriptions. Now that she had stolen my girlfriend I needed to revise my opinions.

I was angry at Mandy, too - especially when she came running out of the door, slipping on the same ice that I had barely escaped and climbed onto the snow-covered hood of my car. I kept backing out of the driveway. Her cheeks were red with cold, perhaps grief. *How can she look at me like that, with tears in her eyes, after what she did?* I questioned silently as I crossed my arms and locked the car doors.

She had been my best friend for years. We shared every part of our lives with each other. I had saved my virginity for her. I even had a notebook with marriage plans in it (Mandy didn't know about this notebook, and I wasn't going to tell her, or she would run as fast and far as she could get). And now I had caught her kissing Alicia after she promised to break it off.

"Gwen, open the goddamn door!" The muffled yell was clear enough even through the glass of the windshield. Her breath rose above her in a silver cloud.

"No," I yelled back, slamming the heel of my hand against the horn, "you get the hell off of my car before I drive away with you on it! I'm not bluffing!" I shifted into reverse and eased off the break, hoping to scare her into jumping off the Porsche's hood. She didn't budge. I continued backing up until I got to the road and turned the steering wheel, sure that she would climb off when I got to the end of the driveway. Mandy chose that precise moment to fall off of the car and into the snow.

I unlocked the door and put the car in park, getting caught in my seatbelt as I tried to climb out of the driver's side. "What the fuck do you think you're doing? You're crazier than a New York driver after five o' clock!" But I couldn't be angry with her as she sat there next to my front tires, her eyes unfocused and surprisingly dilated. Her jeans were heavy and wet, soaked at the knees where she had been kneeling on my car, and covered with snow crystals. She lifted her hand, but the motion was jerky. I put a hand on her shoulder before the big idiot tried to get to her feet by herself and fell back into the snow.

"*She* kissed *me*, Gwen," was all she managed to get out as I helped her up, brushing her arms.

"I don't care who kissed who. Get your ass in the car so I can get you to a hospital. We're getting your head checked out right now."

Mandy was sweet as a lamb then, which was almost as surprising as the kiss I had witnessed. She hated hospitals, and almost never went in for her yearly physical, which gave me another thing to nag her about. With my help, she climbed into the passenger's seat without protest.

"You have thirty seconds to explain, Mandy," I said once I had pulled out of the driveway, cranking the heat up as high as it would go. As mad as I was at Mandy, I couldn't help but take care of her. "If I don't like what I hear, I'm dropping you off at the hospital and never speaking to you again."

It was an empty threat. I couldn't stop loving her if she slept with a thousand other women. I was in that deep. And I doubted that I could leave her for just a kiss. A kiss that, if she was telling the truth, she hadn't even started. Of course, if this habit continued, I might have to leave and do missionary work in South Africa so that I could love her from afar instead of being used and humiliated. I might not be able to stop loving Mandy, but I was too proud to put up with an unfaithful lover.

Mandy looked so miserable that I wanted to stop driving and pull her in my arms, wet clothes and all. She was still crying. I had never seen my best friend so helpless before in my entire life. I realized that she wasn't just doing this relationship thing for kicks, to see what it was like at my expense. She was serious about making things work with me. Before, I had been willing to take anything she had to offer.

"I told Alicia it was over, and... she kissed me..." Mandy confessed, still sounding confused. "I was surprised. I don't know... why... she would do that. I didn't want her to kiss me." The childish honesty in her face shattered my heart and I couldn't stay mad at her.

"It's okay," I said, holding the steering wheel with one hand and offering her my other as I stopped rather abruptly at a red light. For once, Mandy didn't complain about my questionable driving skills (it was a miracle I'd gotten my license in the first place, and winter driving was the worst). She just held on to my hand and closed her eyes as we waited for the light to change.

Of course, Mandy remembered how much she disliked hospitals as soon as she was in one, and I

had to threaten several nurses to get us in and out before my girlfriend changed her mind and bolted. I was sure my right arm would pop out of its socket at one point, the way she was pulling on it (if she didn't crush all the bones in my hand first). Finally, after calling Mandy's father and threatening to pull my own father's number up on speed dial - he often made sizable donations to the hospital - the doctor checked her head and told me to stay with her that night and wake her up once every hour to check her responses.

I clutched the steering wheel with a fierce joy as I drove down the empty, heavily forested road to my house. The trees were bare now; stripped, pale brown lines cutting through the empty sky. In the summer, when the thick leaves came back, only the highest part of the sky would be visible over the treetops.

Even though my blonde idiot now had a mild concussion, I was still happier than I had been in a long time. Mandy was finally mine and I was going to make sure that she never forgot it. Watching her kiss Alicia stirred possessiveness in me that I had never experienced so strongly. The flare of possessiveness burned into arousal and I felt my skin flash hot and cold from the center of me to my fingertips and toes. I turned the heat lower.

"Gwen, are you all right?" Mandy's concerned expression transformed into shock as I pulled onto the side of the road and shoved the gearshift up to park. I jumped on her before she could speak, slamming my mouth against hers to remind her exactly whom she was supposed to be kissing.

The seatbelt left a red indent along my neck where it cut into the skin, and I fumbled at the buckle with one hand until I was free, not moving my lips from hers. We kissed hard, biting and bruising tongues and lips, pulling our bodies together, trying to get as close as possible. My glasses had slipped halfway down my nose and her fingers had a firm purchase in my hair.

My hand tugged on the hem of her shirt, searching for warm skin as her mouth found my neck and sucked hard. I gasped and let go of her shirt, undoing the clasp on my jeans and searching for one of her hands at the same time. "... need you inside me now..." I whispered, pressing Mandy's hand against me as her teeth found the skin of my shoulder. Her mouth stopped. Pushed against her warm body, I felt a sob break in her chest. Her hand squeezed once, forcing the rough denim seam of my jeans to rub over me. But then she was pulling away, leaving me pulsing with heat and unsatisfied.

"No... I can't... it's too fast..."

"Why not?" I begged, kissing the rim of her ear. I reached out to replace her hand, but she had already snapped my jeans closed and was fixing her shirt. "I'm sure you've fucked a girl in a car before."

"Exactly! I don't want to fuck you at all." The anger in her voice absorbed all of the desire I had felt. I looked at her curiously, surprised by the hurt in her eyes. "You mean so much more to me than that... I won't make the same mistake twice. We're waiting if it kills us-"

"It *will* kill me! I don't want to wait..."

"Gwen, you don't get it." I reached out to touch her, but she jerked away. I was hurt for a moment, thinking that she didn't want me, but her heavy breathing and glassy eyes told me otherwise. She was trying to cool down. "You're the one that wanted to be different from all the other girls I've been with. So I'm making you different. Can we at least wait a month? Give me a little time to romance you first."

The thought of waiting a month to be with Mandy terrified me. It gave her that much more time to slip away from me. It was illogical, but I was sure that once she had taken me, been inside of me, she wouldn't run away. "A month!" I said, choking on my words. "This might be a recent development for you, but I've already been waiting for you for years!"

"I know, angel..." She kissed me once, softly. Somehow, she knew that I needed her touch, physical proof that she wanted me. Mandy wasn't rejecting me. She was showing me that she loved me. I rested my fingers in her hair, feeling the light curls and the skin of her cheek. She smiled and we shared a silent moment of understanding. She said, "I love you." It was the second time she told me. If it was possible, that 'I love you' felt even better than the first one.

That night, frustrated, I practiced piano and tried to ignore all of the things Mandy made me feel, just for a little while. But they were exciting, wonderful, and frightening all at the same time and I couldn't concentrate. I tossed the sheet music to a Mozart Sonata away and started plucking out the melody line of L-O-V-E with one finger. It didn't matter that the song reminded me of Titanic, the worst movie in the history of the world. The only part of the movie that captured my attention was when Rose got naked. Even at thirteen, I had been such a lesbian. I could think that word, but still didn't have the guts to say it out loud.

Eventually, I caved and gave up on practicing. Music wasn't going to make me forget about making love with Mandy.

~*~

Even the busy weeks that led up to Christmas could not make me forget about making love with Mandy. We spent almost all of our time together. Shopping time, school time, movie time. We even went to the park I had played in as a little girl and rolled down the hill in the snow. Her face was so beautiful then, with her yellow curls sticking out of her knitted cap and her lips a bright, cherry red from the cold and several kisses. That night, we drank hot chocolate and watched Miracle on 34th Street.

The only thing that came close to distracting me from Mandy was my family's Christmas party. I had to pick the invitations, set up the catering, and make decisions about the decorations. My parents were away - again - but I had done this before. The Caradoc Christmas party was MY party.

All of my parents' friends and business associates had to be invited, along with their families, and all of my friends (most of whom I considered business associates anyway, since they were the children of my parents' friends). I had never really chosen my friends for myself. My parents had assigned them to me like partners for a science project. Mandy was the only friend I picked

on my own. Her and Liz, the quiet freshman girl I had saved.

Ever since I came to her rescue the poor girl glued herself to me at school. I didn't blame her. Life at James Madison could be brutal if you weren't in the right circles. I didn't mind her company either. Once she finally started talking, Liz proved to be extremely bright and an excellent conversationalist (if no one else was watching us). She fumbled over her words less, but the little redhead was still painfully shy. I decided to invite her to my Christmas Party, partially because I knew that Sarah would throw a fit. I wanted to give Liz's confidence a boost and if it made Sarah angry, all the better for me.

I delivered the invitation in person, catching her in the cafeteria between fourth and fifth period when half of the student body was leaving and the other half was filtering in. It was the perfect opportunity. Several dozen pairs of interested eyes followed me, staring at the stack of crisp white envelopes in my hand. Everyone knew what was in them. Liz gave me a small smile as I walked up to her table, assuming that I would smile back and pass her by to go and talk with someone else. The smile disappeared as I stopped in front of her and her lips fell open.

I shuffled through the stack of invitations, looking for the one with her name on it, and drew it out of the pile. I gave her my biggest smile and put the invitation in her hand. She looked down at it, back up at me, and then down at the invitation again. "Having trouble reading your name?" I teased her, keeping my voice low so that only she could hear me.

"But this is... I mean..." she stuttered, the invitation almost falling out of her loose hand.

"This means I'll have to take you shopping for a dress," I told her, closing her fingers around the envelope. I felt heat on the back of my neck and turned to see Mandy watching me with a smile almost as wide as mine. "Mandy needs one, too, so we can go together. Speaking of which..." I added when I spotted the troublemaker coming up behind me.

Liz gave Mandy a cautious glance, and Mandy redirected the smile at her. "Don't worry, she doesn't bite, and almost none of the things they say about her are true."

"I heard she slept with a teacher," she blurted out, her green eyes growing to the size of dinner plates as she realized what she'd said. "Oh, I..."

"That ended," I said dismissively, choking back my jealousy. I didn't want to be reminded of Drew, even though Mandy had ended things with her. Thinking of *my* Amanda being with anyone but me heated my blood. "She's much tamer now." I put a reassuring hand on Liz's arm. "If you're going to be my friend, Mandy comes along as part of the package."

"Like a hangover comes with too many screwdrivers," said Mandy, walking over to me and grabbing the invitations from my hand. "Hi-ya, gorgeous, do you have one of those things for me?"

"Yeah, it's in there somewhere."

She dug through the pile until she found her invitation and held it up triumphantly, shoving the others into my chest. "Ah, here we go. My personal invitation to the National Elitist Convention, just what I always wanted!" She tossed a wink at Liz and the poor girl almost tumbled out of her chair. "Don't worry, they aren't all made of plastic. It's not that bad once you get used to it. It's really the heels and the runs in your stockings that'll kill ya. So, your name is Liz, right?"

Liz gave Mandy a tentative smile. I could almost hear my voice speaking in her head: *One... Two... Three...* "Yeah, Elizabeth Moore. Hi. Gwen says we're going shopping for dresses."

Mandy gave me a sidelong glance, biting at one corner of her pink mouth. "Oh, we are? Have you ever been dress shopping with Gwen?"

I wrinkled my nose at her and stuck out my tongue.

"Is that an offer?" she teased. I felt my stomach loop over itself, and a wave of heat rushed down my spine and across my stomach. Oh God, how I wished Christmas was over so that I could show Mandy exactly what I wanted to do to her...

"Gwen - Gwen...? Hello?" Mandy snapped her fingers in front of my face and I blinked twice to clear my head. Thankfully, Liz was completely oblivious to sexual innuendo. "Gwen!" Mandy repeated, louder this time.

"What?"

"Cadee's coming over here," she said, pointing at a patch of blonde hair bobbing its way through the crowd. Soon Cadee stood beside me, staring at the invitations in my hand and looking entirely too perky for a Wednesday.

"Gimme, girlfriend," she said, grabbing for the invitations.

"Doesn't anyone say please anymore?" I complained.

Cadee ignored me, thumbing through the invitations until she found hers. She tossed the rest back at me. "Here. Hey, Sarah's coming to the party, right?"

I nodded. Liz looked at me strangely, her eyes narrowing behind her glasses. "Don't you hate Sarah?" she asked.

I laughed. "And how!"

"So why are you inviting her to your party?"

There were a lot of answers to that question, but none of them were very logical now that I thought about it. "Trust me, I wish I wasn't. It's... complicated. My parents expect me to, you know?"

I wished that I had the courage to snub her, but I knew that she would dig something up on me if I tried. I wasn't planning on telling anyone about my relationship with Mandy yet, but you should never underestimate the powers of a gossip queen. Maybe Alicia would say something? I didn't think she would do that to Mandy, since they were still trying to salvage their friendship, but...

"Oh well," Mandy said, trying to brighten the mood as usual. "Maybe you'll be able to spill punch on her designer dress again this year. Or dump eggnog in her hair." We all laughed at the pleasant mental image.

~*~

I groaned, wishing - not for the first time - that I had taken the cook up on her offer of (heavily spiked) eggnog. Maybe it would have alleviated the pounding in my head a little. I hated stress headaches.

It was the day of the Christmas party and I was dashing around like a madwoman, controlling the traffic of caterers and decorators and trying to get everything in order. My mother, who had just returned from her trip with my father the night before, was finally here to make sure everything came together smoothly. She watched me with an approving eye as I arranged for extra outlets and directed the placement of ornaments around the fireplace. I was a credit to my socialite parents.

"I love the tree, Gwenny, darling," she said pleasantly, gesturing towards the enormous Fraser Fir that I had chosen, "and the decorations are gorgeous. You changed services?"

"Yes," I told her absently, not really impressed. The tree looked perfect, with tinsel and white and blue lights spaced evenly around its branches in neat spirals and several golden and silver balls hanging off of its sturdy branches. I couldn't help remembering the tree that was up at Mandy's house - the tree that I had helped decorate. Most of the ornaments were home made. Some had been passed down from her grandparents and great grandparents... Honestly, I wished my tree had some of that love in it.

"It's *shameful*," said a sharp voice behind us. My mother and I turned to see my Aunt Mary, mother's sister, clicking towards us in her pointed black heels. I preferred to call her Aunt Scary. Her face was narrow and angled and her expensive, well-applied makeup did not soften it nearly enough. She looked like a leaner version of my mother, with the same hair and skin, and a pinched mouth. Her skirt and blouse were impeccably clean and I felt dirty and underdressed in my sweatpants and baggy sweater.

"The tree?" I asked.

"No, your appearance! Gwen, *why* are you walking around like that?" she said, brushing loose strands of hair out of my face. "*Especiall*y in front of all these *people*." She gestured imperiously at the decorators, who scurried away from her flying hand. "Honestly, you have more than enough *proper* outfits in your closet, why aren't you *wearing* one?" Aunt Mary had a way of *stressing* her *words* that made my *headache* worse and even her questions managed to sound like orders.

"Because I'm working right now, Aunt Mary," I said, clenching my teeth into one of my mother's smiles. She deserved them. The only good thing about Aunt Mary coming to visit was that Callie, my cousin, got to come with her. Callie was all right. A little shy, but a sweet girl overall. She reminded me a little bit of Liz, except without the bright red curls.

"*Why* are you *working*? Isn't that what you *hired* all these *people* for?"

"Someone has to tell them where to put everything," I tried to explain.

"And *why* should they listen to you if you're *dressed* like some sort of *homeless* person!"

"Because *I'm* the one *paying* them," I said. Her glare told me that she'd noticed my subtle, not-very-kind impression of her, but I ignored the look. "I doubt they *care* what I *look* like as long as their *checks* don't bounce." Aunt Mary rolled her eyes and I decided to escape before she found something else to complain about. "I need to get dressed for tonight. I'm sure you can tie up any loose ends for me, mother..." My mother gave me a smile so forced that I knew she was furious with me. She didn't want to be left alone with Aunt Mary, either. *Oh well*, I thought, *it's every woman for herself when Aunt Mary is involved*.

"Of course, darling," she said.

I stood on tiptoe to kiss Aunt Mary's cheek, trying to keep my lips as far away from her skin as possible just in case she was poisonous. "It was *wonderful* to see you, Aunt Mary. Now, if you'll *excuse* me..." I didn't bother sticking around to find out whether I was properly excused or not. I headed for higher ground, racing up the stairs to my bedroom at a speed that would have put a cheetah to shame and leaving my mother to deal with Aunt Mary alone.

Callie was waiting upstairs for me, sprawled across my comforter and staring at the ceiling. "She's downstairs, right?" she asked as soon as I came in, lifting her head to make sure that I was alone.

"Thank God," I muttered, closing the door behind me and joining Callie on the bed. She was sixteen, a little over a year younger than me, and I saw that she was constrained in one of the torturous dresses Aunt Mary made her wear. Unlike my own mother, who was a bit of a flirt, Aunt Mary had "strict morals", as she put it, which essentially meant that she had a permanent stick up her ass. I wouldn't have traded places with my cousin for anything in the world (except, maybe, Mandy).

"So what was it this time?"

"Oh, my clothes," I said, pulling one of my pillows over my face and screaming into it. "Argh! Why doesn't someone just lock her in the basement or something until she leaves?"

Callie pulled the pillow off of my face and grinned down at me, leaning on one elbow. "Hey, I love coming to visit you. Mum's so busy telling everyone what's wrong with you, she leaves me

alone until we go back home." Callie was talkative with people she knew, but only one-on-one or in small groups. She always clammed up in large crowds, especially if Aunt Mary was around. I had never heard her say more than a sentence around her mother at one time.

The mattress groaned under me as I rolled back to my feet, tugging off my shirt and heading in to my walk-in closet. "Let's get our dresses on. Then, we can do each other's hair. Let's put on enough makeup to make the top of Aunt Scary's head blow off."

An hour later, we were zipped, spritzed, painted, and plucked to perfection. "I hate dresses," Callie complained, tugging uncomfortably at the skirt of her floor-length gown. It was decent-looking and modest enough to appease her mother, but I knew that Callie would never be satisfied in a dress. Aunt Mary thought that the raising hemlines and lowering necklines of our generation were scandalous. MTV would have given her a heart attack.

"You'll be out of it soon," I reminded her, but the frown stayed fixed on Callie's face all the way down the stairs and into the large, open dining room where we would receive our guests. We had two dining rooms in our house. One was smaller, for formal dinners with my parents or extended family. The second was more of a ballroom and all of our large parties took place there.

My entire body felt fifty pounds lighter when I saw Mandy standing near my parents, smiling directly at me. Her golden hair fell in soft curls around her cheeks, and a pink rose was pinned behind her right ear. The dress matched the color of the rose exactly and she was wearing a delicate silver crucifix around her neck, the one that she never took off.

She was stunning. Even though I knew that she was hiding her discomfort for my sake, I couldn't help but admire how poised and regal she looked. No one would ever know about her secret lack of self-confidence. "Dear God, I love you," I breathed, not even realizing that I had said the words aloud until Callie gasped, nearly tripping over her shoes. I shot her a frightened glance. After a tense moment of silence between us, I received a barely perceptible nod in return. We would talk about my accidental confession later.

"You're *finally* here," Aunt Mary said, immediately drawing all of our eyes to her face. "I was *worried* that you were going to be *late*, Gwendolyn."

My mind refused to let the picture of Mandy with the rose in her hair slip away and did not welcome Aunt Mary's interruption. "Well, I'm here now." I brushed her aside, not even pretending to be polite, and walked up to Mandy, wrapping her in my arms in what everyone else thought was a friendly greeting. "You're so beautiful," I whispered in her ear as I gave her an obligatory kiss on her cheek. I know she heard the unspoken *I love you* added on to the end of my sentence.

"How did you manage to surprise me with that dress?" I asked in a louder voice, stepping back and looking her up and down in a passable imitation of friendly interest. "Where's the red one that you bought with me and Liz a few days ago?"

"At home, in my closet," she said, her green eyes full of warmth. "I'll wear it another time. This

is my mother's dress... I wanted you to see it." *I wore it for you.*

Mandy and I stared into each other's eyes for the longest second of my life. No one near us - except, perhaps, Callie - was aware of the momentous declaration of love that had just passed between us. Mandy was always selective with information about her mother, never sharing more than she needed to, even with me. The fact that she was wearing her mother's dress for me at party she didn't even want to attend meant more to me than any words could express. I knew that she loved me as much as I loved her.

Chapter Four: Mandy

The awe that filled Gwen's eyes when she saw me in my mother's dress was worth all of the fear and self-doubt that had festered in me for the past week. Would she understand how much wearing it meant to me? Would she think I looked beautiful in it, or would she be embarrassed by its plainness? The wonder that I saw in her soft face made my heart twist and I knew that I would wear my mother's dress a thousand times to please her. I blushed, adjusting the flower pinned in my hair.

"You're finally here," said a sharp voice in front of me. My eyes left Gwen's for the briefest moment, focusing on the woman that had spoken. We had never been formally introduced - I barely knew Gwen's parents - but her attitude left no doubt in my mind that this was the infamous Aunt Mary. "I was *worried* that you were going to be *late*, Gwendolyn."

"Well, I'm here now," she said dismissively. My heart pounded as Gwen brushed past her and walked up to me, pulling me into her arms. "You're so beautiful," she said, leaning to whisper the words in my ear. For one of the first times in my life, I actually believed it. Gwen made me *feel* beautiful.

"How did you manage to surprise me with that dress?" she asked, raising her voice and stepping back to look me up and down. "Where's the red one that you bought with me and Liz a few days ago?" No one but me noticed the hidden longing in her eyes as she studied my body. I almost blushed, knowing exactly what kind of thoughts were going through Gwen's mind.

For the first time being wanted made me feel shy instead of confident. Everything I was familiar with seemed to fly out of the window when Gwen was involved. I knew that being with Gwen would be different than anything I had ever experienced before. Our month was almost up, but I had decided not to let myself take her as soon as the deadline passed. I had something special planned for Gwen. I wanted to wait and give her the magical night she deserved.

I felt several sets of eyes on me, and remembered that Gwen had asked me a question. "At home, in my closet," I told her, smiling. "I'll wear it another time. This is my mother's dress... I wanted you to see it." *I wore it for you*, I added in my thoughts. The surprised pleasure on her face was almost as wonderful to see as the need that had been there before.

Our moment was broken when several people were escorted into the dining room. The party hadn't officially started yet, but Cadee and Liz had arrived early as Gwen had requested. A look

of regret shadowed her face for the briefest moment, but she smiled when she saw them. My chest felt like it would burst when I realized that she didn't want to leave me, even for her friends.

"Cadee! Liz!" They were greeted with obligatory light hugs and air kisses, but I was focused on the low, scooping back of Gwen's satin dress. The wide straps made an 'X' across her shoulders. It didn't look particularly seasonal, but the light purple color was a wonderful contrast to her gray eyes, and she looked fabulous in it. Her long raven hair, which I knew took hours of work to tame, was sleek and glossy as it rippled over her white shoulders. I imagined curling my fingers in it, leaning in to taste the soft place where her neck met her shoulder.

My fingernails bit into my palms and I blinked to clear my head just in time. "Mandy!" Cadee squealed, clicking over to me excitedly in her very tall heels. I had no idea how she managed to balance in them. For the moment, I was distracted from my fantasy.

"Cadee," I said politely, purposely not reacting to her perky greeting. I knew from experience that it would only encourage her. Cadee had more energy than a small terrier, and was always twice as chipper as everyone around her. I had slept with Cadee on a few occasions and although the nights with her were pleasant, the mornings after were miserable. The fact that I was nursing hangovers after most of them didn't help. In the past, I needed to be plenty drunk to handle Cadee. She was vaguely bisexual, but leaned heavily towards guys, which was probably one of the reasons I satisfied her. I knew how to be aggressive.

Now, remembering my romps with Cadee made me feel... strange, regretful. If I had stopped chasing everything in a skirt for one moment, I might have noticed Gwen sooner. I cursed myself for wasting so many years on girls that didn't matter while she had been right in front of me.

"... and so, like, doesn't she look gorgeous?" I swallowed, trying to recall what Cadee had been talking about. Glancing around the large room for inspiration, my eyes settled on Liz, who had attached herself to Gwen. She looked surprisingly good in the green dress that we had helped her pick out. I smiled and gave her a wink.

"Yeah, she does. The guys will be all over her."

"I'm not sure she's interested in guys," Cadee said dryly. Liz and Gwen were too far away to hear us, so I gave Cadee a surprised look.

"What makes you think that?"

"Have you seen the way she looks at Gwen? Everything about that girl screams closeted dyke. She's got a major crush. It's so cute! They'd be adorable together if Gwen wasn't straight."

Part of me wanted to laugh at the thought of Gwen being straight and at Cadee's inaccurate gaydar, but a larger part of me was afraid. I narrowed my eyes at Liz, watching her interact with Gwen and trying to pick up any subtle signs of flirting. Liz wasn't hitting on her at all, but she was blushing like crazy and stumbling over herself more than usual. It was probably Gwen's

dress, I thought, more than a little upset by the idea.

You can't be serious, I thought, chastising myself, *you've been with lots of girls, and you even kissed Alicia in front of Gwen. If anyone has the right to be jealous, it's her*. But my inner voice was unable to make the possessive feelings go away. I considered going over to them and stealing Gwen away, but thoughts of Alicia kept me where I was. How would I feel if Gwen never left me alone with Alicia, even for a moment? We were still trying to be friends even though things between us were strained.

Before I could talk myself into going over to Gwen anyway, I noticed Cadee's eyes wandering towards the entrance to the dining room. Standing there, her gaze locked right on me, was Sarah. Her long red dress was a few shades brighter than the one I had bought, but it was much flashier; silk chiffon, with a flounce skirt and a short train at the back. The ruched bodice somehow made her chest look larger than it really was and I rolled my eyes.

"Damn, when did all these people get here?" Cadee wondered aloud, distracting me. I looked away from Sarah and did a quick scan of the room. It was about half full, but I hadn't noticed anyone new coming in. Most of them probably arrived while I was busy battling with my green monster.

"I was just thinking that..." I said. Deciding to get something in my stomach before everyone else crowded around the food, I wandered off to find a cookie and some punch.

Of course, I should have known better than to find dessert out before dinner. Ignoring the appetizers, some of which I couldn't even recognize, I decided to go with the punch, which was at the center of a long table in a clear, ornately-decorated lead crystal punch bowl with two levels to it. I knew that the Christmas punch had more than a dash of alcohol in it, but I didn't care, and I knew that none of the adults in the room would, either. In the upper classes, the legal drinking age was ignored at parties (and the kids probably ignored it all the time, with or without their parents' approval).

Still thinking about Gwen in her purple dress, I ladled myself some of the punch and sipped slowly, remembering the part of the room that I had last seen Gwen in and purposely looking in the other direction. The alcohol began to take effect, and my face started getting hot. They had gone all out spiking the punch. Usually, it took more than a few cups to get me buzzed.

There were people everywhere, some with yearly salaries that I could never match in a lifetime. CEOs and executives, investors, heirs and heiresses, politicians, and a few very successful doctors and lawyers, most of whom had lucrative private practices and family connections to help them accumulate more wealth.

The women swarmed about in their colorful dresses like birds, flocking together in groups and moving about the room to visit each other. The men, looking like a different type of bird altogether, waddled about, some of them with their overstuffed stomachs hanging out of their tuxedos. At the center of it all was Gwen's mother. She was in her element, looking like an older version of the woman who had stolen my heart as she laughed and smiled and charmed everyone

that came near her.

Somehow, I knew that Gwen would look just like her when she was in her late forties, perhaps even more enchanting. Mrs. Caradoc - my father had raised me to call everyone Mrs. and Mr. or Sir and Ma'am - had the second most beautiful smile that I had ever seen, but it couldn't be compared to Gwen's, especially not when that smile was directed at me.

I was thinking about that smile when I felt the heavy jolt, a sharp shoulder digging into my back just as I lifted my glass of punch for another sip. The red liquid spilled down my front like blood, soaking into the material of my dress and clinging wetly to my skin. I didn't need to turn around to recognize the voice that started apologizing, putting on such a show that I knew the shove had been on purpose. I just stood there in a daze, waiting for Sarah to make the effort to circle me instead of turning and facing her. Her hand rested on my shoulder, heavy and cold like lead, and I shivered, tears leaking silently from the corners of my eyes. Nothing else she could have done to me - except maybe hurting Gwen - would have made me cry like staining my mother's dress. One of the last things I had of her.

Then the hand on my shoulder changed. Sarah stepped back as the new hand replaced hers, this one smaller and warm against my bare skin. The polished fingernails proved that it was Gwen, but I had known that from the moment she had touched me. There was no clever verbal sparring, no half-veiled insults this time. Instead, as I turned my head to see Gwen's face, I saw her give Sarah a vicious stare that made me start shaking even harder. The intensity of her look surprised me so much that my tears stopped falling. She didn't need to speak to convey her threat to Sarah. Her expression said everything for itself. *Don't hurt what's mine.*

Without a word, Gwen took my hand in hers and hurried me out of the room, letting the crowd part for her like Moses at the red sea, and looking just as regal. I knew that everyone was staring at us, but my body didn't sense the eyes that followed our retreating figures from the room. I was thinking about the second to last time I had seen my mother. The last time was at the funeral. The worst part of the memory was her skin. The swollen purple bruises that covered her bare arms. The wet yellow color of her face, with skin that didn't fit right over the bones. The needle still sticking out of a violet, puckered hole in her upper wrist. The violent image made my stomach tug and I almost made my dress worse, ignoring the burn of bile at the back of my throat.

I let Gwen undress me in her room, sickened at the irony. After all the nights I had imagined undressing for her, it was happening because of a stained dress. Left in my plain underwear and garter belt with sheer stockings up to the knee, I felt more naked than I really was. I crossed my arms over my breasts, not able to look Gwen in the eye, mostly because I couldn't stop staring at the deep red stain on my dress, which Gwen was holding in her hands and examining. I clicked my shoes together nervously.

"Cold water first," she said, kissing my forehead. "Don't you move." She carried the dress out of the room and left me sitting on the bed, wondering why I let myself cry for those brief moments downstairs. I thought I had cried myself out long ago, but Gwen had a way of bringing out the tears left in me. I wrapped my arms around my naked torso, ignoring the sticky patches of skin

on my chest where the punch had soaked through my dress. Maybe, I dared to hope, Gwen would be able to do something.

I wasn't alone for long. Gwen came back without the dress, kissing my ear and the corner of my mouth as she sat down next to me on her bed. "It's being taken care of," she said, drawing me into her arms, where I was so grateful to be at that moment. My half-nakedness didn't bother me anymore.

"I'm sorry for-"

Of all the expressions I could have seen on Gwen's face, I certainly wasn't expecting grief. Perhaps left-over anger at what Sarah had done, irritation with me for getting worked up over a stupid dress, maybe even desire at seeing me in my underwear and stockings. But not grief. "No, Mandy... I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all the things that made you think so little of yourself. You shouldn't need to apologize for doing something as normal as crying and asking for a hug."

"I don't cry very often anymore."

Gwen gave me a gentle, open-mouthed kiss that was so soft I thought I imagined it. "I cry all the time."

~*~

I was all cried out by the time I got back home after Gwen's Nightmare Before Christmas party. I sat on the edge of my bed, leaning back on the familiar comforter and kicking off my shoes. Peeling off the poorly-fitted but stylish dress that Gwen had found for me to wear, I started tugging on my stockings, not caring that there was a run in them. I had stayed at the party for another hour just to show Sarah that her mind games weren't going to make me back down. It had been torturous even though we hadn't spoken again.

I threw the dress onto the floor, remembered that it was Gwen's, and picked it up again, laying it gently over my pillow and smoothing out the wrinkles. The garter belt came off next, then my underwear, left in a careless trail behind me as I headed for the bathroom. I bypassed the wide mirror completely, not wanting to see my reflection, and turned the water temperature as high as it would go, hoping to burn my skin clean.

Showers, like sex, had been an exorcism ritual of mine for years. A cigarette afterwards didn't hurt either. And did I want a cigarette right then, since sex wasn't an option. A few weeks of shy kisses from Gwen and I couldn't even stomach thinking about another woman. Gwen had made me quit smoking even though she hadn't come out and asked me to. I knew she didn't like it and so I stopped, wanting to make myself feel, in some small way, worthier of her.

I stepped into the shower, hissing and closing my eyes as the hot water pounded between my shoulder blades. I stood there for several long moments, adjusting to the temperature. Then I turned the heat up even more, grabbing for my loofah and squirting a handful of body wash onto it. The scent of lavender made my nose tingle as I scraped away at my skin, rubbing as much of it off as I could. By the time I got out of the shower, my arms, back, and stomach felt like they

had been sunburned.

After toweling off and crossing back into my bedroom, refusing to look into the mirror as I passed it, I laid down on the bed, shivering as the cold sheets made contact with my scraped, bright red skin. I didn't bother to put pajamas on - I wasn't sure if my skin could handle being rubbed against anyway. Sarah was conspicuously absent from my thoughts. Instead, I was thinking about Alicia. Well, Gwen and Alicia, but Gwen was never out of my thoughts, no matter what else I was thinking about.

I remembered the way that Liz had watched Gwen during the party, fumbling, unsure of herself, but thrilled to be there. Gwen was doing a good thing by being Liz's friend, even if it made a small part of me jealous. Eventually, Liz would outgrow Gwen, find someone that meant the world to her, and move on. She wasn't in deep enough to be really hurt by her crush. Not like Alicia and I had been. Thinking of Alicia made me feel guilty. I had been trying to give her space, not wanting to ruin what was left of our relationship, but I couldn't help missing her. Besides Gwen, she really was my best friend.

Not giving myself a chance to change my mind, I flipped over on the bed, reaching down to the pile of discarded clothes I had left on the floor. My purse was next to them and I pulled out my cell, hitting the third button on speed dial and waiting. The phone rang four times. It was easy to picture Alicia staring at the screen, studying the number, debating whether to answer or not. I was relieved when I heard a click, followed by a tentative, "Hello?"

"It's me," I said, cringing as soon as the words were out of my mouth. What a brilliant thing to say. It wasn't like she didn't have caller ID.

"I've missed you," Alicia gushed, followed by a long pause, as if the words had surprised her. She didn't take them back, though.

"I've missed you, too," I admitted, wondering if calling Alicia had been such a good idea. I didn't want to give up on our friendship. It was too special to just toss aside, but I didn't want her following me around like a lovesick puppy either, hoping for a second chance. It would only remind me of how I'd taken a beautiful, innocent girl and broken her heart. "I - I want to do dinner or something," I blurted out before my courage deserted me. "Listen, this... this isn't going to change things, but... I care about you a lot, and..."

There was silence on the other end of the line. "You've never told me you cared about me before," she said after the pause had become almost unbearable. Her soft voice made her sound so lost that I wanted to reach through the phone and hug her. *Oh God, what had I done to this poor girl?*

A powerful wave of self-hatred almost prevented me from responding to her, but eventually I found my words again. "I do. I promise."

"I watched you, the day that... when she came in and saw us, and then walked back out the door... I've never seen someone look more lost in their life than you did at that moment." Briefly,

I wondered if Alicia's expression had been similar after I had followed Gwen out into the snow. I hadn't noticed. Getting Gwen to listen to me had been the only thing on my mind. "I don't know much about this kind of stuff. I mean, you were my first... But I know when I'm beat."

That reminder made my stomach toss like the spin cycle on a dryer and I was shocked to find that my eyes were wet, even though I wasn't crying. Taking Alicia's virginity was the second thing I regretted doing the most in my life. The first thing I regretted doing... I didn't let myself think about it.

"You never let me comfort you when I tried. Promise me you'll let Gwen do it instead. God, I wish I was the one that got to hold you when you were upset, and kiss you when you needed me, but..."

There was another silence, but this one was less uncomfortable as we both thought through what Alicia had just said. "I will," I said at last. "But... maybe someday, you can... be there for me, I mean. If I need it. That's what friends do."

"You know, Mandy, I think I'd like that."

We said our goodbyes, still cautious with each other, but feeling better. Suddenly feeling thirsty, I stood up, dropping my phone back into my purse and grabbing my bathrobe off of its hook. The fabric rubbed uncomfortably against my sore skin, but I ignored the pain and tied the sash tight around my waist. Then, I went downstairs for a glass of water.

My Dad was sitting at the kitchen table, still working, even though Christmas Break had started (at least for the lucky college students). For a professor, Christmas Break wasn't exactly a break. The first semester of college had just finished and he had final exams to grade as well as a curriculum to prepare for the second semester. The decorated tree loomed over both of us from all the way in the living room, looking larger than it was underneath the low roof of our house, its lights casting my father's face in a strange white glow.

"It's two thirty," I told him from across the kitchen, opening a cupboard to grab a glass. "You should think about bed."

"How was the party?" he asked, looking up from his papers. "You look tired."

"I feel tired," I said. And I was tired. Gwen's party and my phone call with Alicia had worn me out, but my mind was running double speed, and I knew I wouldn't be able to fall asleep. I considered telling Dad about ruining my mother's dress, but decided to wait and see whether Gwen's magic cleaning treatment worked first. If the stain came out, I wouldn't have to upset him.

"Maybe you should head up to bed," Dad said, searching the tabletop for his pencil as he pulled a sheet of paper closer. I reached across the table and pulled the pencil out from behind his ear, handing it to him. "Thanks, sweetheart."

"I can't. My brain is still trying to figure out if Gwen's Mom is made of plastic or not." He laughed and I smiled. I wondered how Dad would react if I told him about Gwen... me and Gwen... dating. I had never seriously dated anyone in my life. Putting a label on what Gwen and I had made my throat close up. I took a sip of my water to loosen the tightness in my chest. Dating. What did I know about dating? What if I messed it up? The closest I'd come to an actual date with anyone was stopping at Tim Hortons with Alicia on the way to her house before we had sex. And we usually used the drive-through anyway...

But then I thought about Gwen. We had been on dates before... sort of. I had taken her to New York City for her birthday, hadn't I? Boston wasn't that far away, but it wasn't a cheap day trip, either. That had been like an extended, sleep-over type of date without the taking-her-to-bed part. We went out to dinner and saw movies all the time. Did those count as dates? What about the park? What about the Christmas party I had just suffered through? No, that definitely hadn't been a date, even if Gwen had gotten me half naked because of Sarah.

I decided to take Gwen on a proper date. She had only given me a month to romance her before we... I couldn't even think about what she wanted us to do. I had fantasized about being with Gwen more than once, but that was before she had dropped the 'I love you, Amanda' bomb on me. It almost felt insulting to think of her that way no matter how attracted to her I was. Maybe I was still feeling guilty about Alicia.

But somehow, I knew that Gwen was different. In all of my previous experiences, I had never made love to someone before. I knew that making love was what Gwen would be expecting. Not fucking, or even the affectionate sex I was used to with Alicia and Drew. Something completely different. I was terrified.

~*~

I was terrified. My sleepwalking problems were getting worse. At first, I thought that it was the added stress in my life, because of Gwen and all. But then I remembered that Gwen usually helped me through the stressful times in my life; she didn't cause them. I woke up in the pantry again, and once behind my bathroom door. Strange injuries were turning up all over my body that I couldn't remember. Bruises on my arms, more scratch marks, a lump on my forehead where I had rammed it against something. They usually appeared after I woke up in a strange place.

I was going crazy. The words repeated themselves in my head, like an echo in a canyon. *You're crazy. You're crazy.* After I heard the words, I usually thought about Gwen. She couldn't know what was happening to me. It wasn't that I didn't trust her. She would attach herself to me like a barnacle to try and 'fix' me if I told her. If I left her alone, maybe she'd get bored and leave me, or maybe she wouldn't notice what was happening... At least, those were the excuses I gave myself. Really, I didn't tell her because I didn't know how. I had zero experience with sharing my feelings.

Even with all the crazy stuff happening to me at night, nothing prepared me for the first time I had a panic attack during the day. I was lucky, because I had slipped into the bathroom between periods. The one on the fourth floor that hardly anyone uses because it's so out of the way. I

walked in the door and up to the sink. The next thing I knew I was falling to my knees on the cold tile floor and just shaking all over. I didn't cry or scream like people do in the movies. I just shivered and wrapped my arms around myself, staring at the wall until my eyes hurt, but not really seeing anything.

I was ten minutes late to my next class. I told the teacher that I had thrown up and she sent me to the nurse. The nurse took one look at me and sent me home. I guess my episode in the bathroom scared me enough to make me look sick. I stayed in bed the rest of the day eating twinkies and watching reruns of That 70s Show, trying to feel normal.

~*~

Trying to be normal - to play a role, fit into a mold - takes a toll. Somehow, I knew that Gwen would do something incredibly stupid to prove her love for me eventually. It was only a matter of time.

A powerful force like Gwen wouldn't be satisfied with just coming out of the closet, I reasoned. She was going to explode out like some kind of hurricane. But part of me kept hoping that maybe, just maybe, Gwen would keep her cool and delay - in the best case scenario, *permanently* delay - what was going to be a very nasty coming-out party.

Sports are a big part of life anywhere near Boston, and since we didn't live far away from the city, most of us were obsessed with the Patriots, the Sox, and the Bruins. Beantown loves its sports, and anyone that challenges our natural athletic superiority deserves what they get, in our opinion. One poor kid that transferred from a school in New York last year wore Yankees gear to school once. He was covered in bruises and mud stains by the end of the day. He never wore them again.

That's probably why the James Madison Hornets were such a big deal to us. Unlike the underfunded sports program at some of the inner city high schools, the wealthy parents who sent their kids to James Madison made sure the school had plenty of money to fund the athletic department, especially the hockey and football teams. This year, hockey had the spotlight. Several key players on the football team had graduated the previous year. Our record was a winning one, but it wasn't our best. Our hockey team, however, was undefeated so far in the season, and the entire school was out for blood.

Everyone at James Madison got into it. The Hornets were a source of pride, especially for the scholarship kids. Some of the best players, like our right wing forward, James Ribaldi, were on scholarships, too. Not for academics, but for sports. As long as he kept scoring goals and held a C average, he had a free ride. He wasn't rich, but he was popular anyway and he was a nice guy if you got to know him. If you were a Horner, even the legacies wouldn't make fun of your background.

So when Gwen asked me to go to a Hornets game with her, I didn't think anything of it. It was seven days before Christmas, and the Hornets' last game until after break, so Ackerman Rink was packed. It was named after Sarah's uncle (she never let us forget it), and it was just as good as The Garden. The seats were comfortable, the food was good, and there was even a working

jumbo-tron over the rink.

Gwen and I made sure to get there early, so we both had really good seats. The thing I remember most about that game, though - besides what happened after the second period - was how happy Gwen looked. Her nose and cheeks were flushed as red as her lips and she was smiling so hard that her dimples were showing. She had a bucket of popcorn on her lap with extra butter and our hands kept accidentally bumping whenever I reached over to grab a handful. Of course, I let her have a bite of my hotdog to make up for the popcorn I stole.

By the time the second period rolled around, things were looking up. We were winning 2-0 and Ribaldi was the star of the game. All of us were hoping for a hat trick and the crowd was furious when the ref called a questionable hooking on him. "What was that?" Gwen shouted, nearly spilling what was left of her popcorn. I put a hand on her shoulder to keep her in her seat.

"Hey, just be glad the ref didn't call offsides on us earlier," I said. Gwen always got more worked up over hockey than I did, even though I enjoyed going to the games with her. Of course, I spent more time watching her than the players on the ice anyway.

The Beavers had an unsuccessful power play - they were a mediocre team with an even worse name that was the butt of way too many jokes - and the Hornets fans smelled blood. By the time the second period ended, everyone was high on adrenaline. While a third of the stadium wandered over to the concession stands, Gwen and I sat next to each other, our pinkies barely touching, staring up at the jumbo-tron above the rink.

Suddenly, a juicy pink lip print appeared on the screen, blowing the crowd a loud, wet kiss. The words 'KISS CAM' scrolled underneath the picture in flashing white letters. Several girls giggled and the noise around us swelled as the letters blinked at the crowd. The two camera guys, kids in our tech class who normally sat in swivel chairs right next to the rink and shot feed for the jumbo-tron, had left their stations and were walking through the crowd, looking for victims.

The first couple on-screen was a shy freshman boy who was sitting next to a pretty, well-endowed junior girl. When she noticed that they were on the screen, she mauled the kid and planted a passionate kiss on him. His face turned redder than a tomato, and everyone laughed. The camera cut to another couple and all of us laughed again when we recognized Ryan Walters and his sister, Catherine. Ryan rolled his eyes and waved half-heartedly as his sister leaned over to kiss his cheek and mess up his hair. The crowd 'aww'ed.

Then, suddenly, like I was in some kind of daydream, Gwen rested her hand on my shoulder. I turned away from the screen to look at her, letting her fingers sink into my hair as she gripped the back of my neck and pulled me close. The world spun as warm lips covered mine. When I felt Gwen's soft tongue trace the line of my bottom lip, I kissed her back. Until I heard the voices.

The first thing I saw when I opened my eyes was black rubber. It took me a few seconds to realize that it was part of a video camera. A video camera? I looked past the camera and saw myself up on the jumbo-tron, lips swollen, eyes large and afraid. Gwen had kissed me in front of

at least two thirds of our school. I had no idea...

Grabbing Gwen's hand, I bolted out of my seat and trampled over the people sitting next to us. There was no way we were staying here. As angry as I knew I would be with Gwen in a few minutes when my brain processed what had just happened, I couldn't leave her behind for the wolves.

Chapter Five:

I came in to school at exactly seven thirty the next morning. I took extra time with my makeup and hair, not because I cared about how I looked, but because my nerves got me out of bed an hour and a half earlier than usual. My weight dropped enough over the past two weeks to prevent the elastic of my uniform skirt from digging into my waist. Stress had cost me fifteen pounds that I didn't need to lose in the first place. The material draped itself over my hipbones, much looser than I was used to.

Mandy had been furious with me. Remembering coldness in her voice made my eyes burn. What had I been thinking? What had I been trying to do? Why hadn't I discussed my feelings with her instead of putting on a show to prove... what? That I loved her? She already knew that. That I wasn't ashamed of myself? I already knew that, too. That I wasn't afraid of anyone? I wasn't afraid - I was terrified.

The main hallway was jammed when I got there. People were shoving stray backpacks away from their faces and dodging shoulders, trying to get through the crowd to see what was going on. A small freshman boy fell backwards into my chest and I almost toppled over. At five foot three, I wasn't tall by anyone's standards, but this kid was a few inches shorter than me. He stared up at me with a thin, frightened face. I grabbed his shoulders and pushed him back onto his feet. He smiled at me genuinely for a moment, and then his eyes dropped down, half embarrassed and half awestruck. "Hey, you okay?" I asked him.

He looked back up at my face, obviously thinking: 'is she actually talking to me?' I gave him a few seconds to recover.

"I, uh... yeah - I mean..."

"Tom, what are you doing?" a nasally voice interrupted. I looked over at another freshman kid with chubby cheeks and curly hair.

Before the kid could answer his friend, the mob drew back as a unit and the halls went completely silent. I closed my eyes, shaking my head and exhaling slowly through my nose. I heard a pair of heels clicking towards me and I opened my eyes in time to see Mandy dip her chin and kiss me softly on the lips. "Hey, princess," she whispered. Only I saw the fear clouding her eyes as she swung her backpack off of one shoulder shifted her weight to her hip.

"I can't believe you just did that," I whispered, my lips barely moving.

She gave me a tired smile. "Your reputation is already sunk. You might as well take advantage of this mess and kiss me now that everyone knows."

"Mandy... are we - are you... all right?" Mandy had taken me straight home - her home, not my parent's house - after yesterday's kiss. We talked late into the night. Well, Mandy talked and I listened. The anger passed after a few minutes, stripped back to reveal a deep hurt and betrayal. She was angry that I hadn't told her how out of control my life felt, how frustrated I was at hiding our relationship, how much our secret was choking me. I felt walls closing in around my heart, pressing tighter and tighter until the pressure made me want to scream. Or kiss Mandy in front of a few hundred students.

"Yeah, angel. Yeah. We're all right. You be a good girl today, okay? Don't send Sarah to the ER or something."

"No promises," I muttered, not wanting to think about Sarah any more than I had to. Only Mandy seemed to notice as the five-minute bell rang. The rest of us watched her, still as statues. She smiled again, the set of her mouth a little more relaxed, and turned away from me, brushing her hand against mine as she left for her first period class. As soon as she turned the corner the murmuring started. Everyone started talking at once and every pair of eyes was staring at me. I didn't say a word, hurrying to French in total silence.

I spent the first half of the day on autopilot with looks and whispers following me through the school, ricocheting off of lockers. Small snatches of conversation zinged into my ears: *'is that her? Did you hear?'* I forced myself to breathe. My entire body felt heavy, like someone had poured cement down my throat. A thick, choking fear congealed in my chest, cutting off my breath.

Did they honestly think I couldn't hear what they were saying? Everyone was talking about how the popular prude had finally gotten laid by the school slut. Part of me found it hilarious in a sick sort of way. I was more than willing to give Mandy that precious gift, but she kept turning me down. None of the gossipers would have believed it.

I finally lost it during fifth period, my scheduled lunch. The tears came rolling down my cheeks thick and fast as I ran for the library, clutching my glasses in one hand while I tried to dry my eyes with my sleeve. As soon as I saw Mandy I collapsed next to the beanbag chair that she was sitting in, holding her tight and wishing that I never had to let go. She let me cry into her crisp white blazer and I hid my face in her shoulder as she stroked my hair.

"Christ, Gwen," she whispered.

"I got tired of my entire life being fake," I hiccupped, the words scraping along my tight throat.

"You were really brave," she said, rocking me back and forth and rubbing my back while I finished crying. "Stupid, but brave. You didn't have to kiss me in front of the entire school."

"I should have talked to you instead..." I sniffed and pulled away from her, smoothing the hair on top of my head and shoving my glasses back up on my nose. "I'm sorry... I know I look like a complete mess."

"I don't care," she said, reaching for my hand. She squeezed it gently, rubbing her thumb over the back. I looked up at Mandy. She was so beautiful. Beautiful, with her soft blonde curls and her warm arms and her perfect smile. She reached down to fix my collar and then she straightened my tie.

"It's too late to take back kissing you anyway."

"So, what are we going to do now?" Mandy heaved herself out of the beanbag chair and laced her fingers with mine.

"I don't know," I said. "Let's just go somewhere else."

"Let's clean you up first," she whispered, tugging gently on my arm and leading me out of the library. Luckily, no one said anything when we left together although I felt them watching. The two of us hurried into a nearby bathroom down the hall. I could actually feel Mandy's body relax once we were out of the public view. I suddenly realized that Mandy had been putting up with unwanted attention all day, too... and I hadn't even asked how she was handling it.

"Mandy, are you all right? Have they... said anything really terrible?"

She leaned over and kissed my cheek, rubbing my tears away with my thumb. "Mostly just people asking questions. Did we or didn't we? I didn't answer any of them. I got a few pats on the back for finally popping your cherry," she added sarcastically.

I hung my head and let her lead me to the sink. She kissed my hair and wiped my face with a wet paper towel. I looked at myself in the mirror. My cheeks were blotchy and my eyes were red and swollen. I undid the rubber band at the bottom of my braid, letting it unweave and spread over my shoulders.

"You look better now," she told me. "Do you want to go get something to eat?"

"I don't want to go to the cafeteria." The cafeteria was Cadee's kingdom and I wasn't ready to face her yet. All of her friends, including me, sat at the sunny table next to the window. It was the kind of table that always seemed to glow with its own inner light, where the beautiful people reflected so much sun glare that they were almost impossible to look upon like mythical Greek gods descending from Olympus. At least, that's how Liz had described it to me from the other side of the room.

"Are you scared?" she asked, leaning against the bathroom door and watching me.

"Yes."

Mandy raised her eyebrows. "It isn't like you to admit that you're afraid of something, princess. You usually lie about it. I can tell by the way you suck one side of your mouth in and clench your hands tight." I studied Mandy for a moment, surprised and a little pleased that she could read me so well.

Overwhelmed with a sudden desire to kiss her, I pressed my lips to the corner of her mouth once, softly, when someone jiggled the doorknob to the bathroom and both of us jumped. My head banged into the wall with a loud clunk and I winced. "Fuck," I hissed, reaching behind my head to rub the spot. I groaned, trying to ignore the pounding blood rushing to the fresh new lump.

Mandy stayed pressed against the door, her eyes darting around the bathroom, looking for a place to hide. "Get in the stall..." she whispered loudly, trying to shove me towards the nearest toilet.

"Everyone already knows anyway," I said hopelessly. "I honestly don't care if we're seen together. Besides, didn't you kiss me earlier?"

"Yes, but that was a kiss! They might think we were - I mean..."

"Fucking? Who cares? They already think we are anyway. Not that you seem interested..."

Mandy gave me a hurt look and opened her mouth, but was interrupted by more pounding on the door. "What the fuck?" came a muffled voice from outside. "Open the door!"

I side stepped away from the door and stood next to the sinks, hunching my shoulders over so that my hair hung in front of my face. Mandy opened the door. Cadee and a three-girl entourage walked in, and Mandy's lips melted into a practiced smile. "Sorry," she said, "I was leaning against the door talking to Gwen."

At the mention of my name, all four of them turned to look at me. I tilted my chin up proudly. The curtain of hair protecting me fell back, brushing my cheeks as it parted. I leaned casually against the sink, one arm resting against my side. I tried to mold my face into an expression of bored disinterest, but I had a feeling that my swollen lips and red eyes gave me away.

"It's not as bad as it seems," Cadee said, getting straight to the point. "Bisexual is a new fad, right? We might be able to play this as trendy. I mean, lots of us have experimented..." I knew Cadee had been with a girl or two of her own, including Mandy. I couldn't listen to her lecture me on experimenting. Screw a girl once, you can call it an experiment. Make a habit of it, and you're just fooling yourself.

I was speechless for several seconds as I stared at Cadee. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Um, duh. If guys start finding out you're bisexual, they'll line up to date you."

"I'm already dating someone," I said, clicking across the bathroom tile and squeezing the blood out of Mandy's hand. This was what I wanted, right? To prove to everyone that I controlled my

own destiny, even if I didn't control my heart.

"What, no way," one of the girls behind Cadee blurted out. Susanna. I was grateful that Sarah wasn't with them, at least. "Mandy would never date anyone. Is she even capable of having one-on-one sex?"

"Um, I'm right here," Mandy interrupted. "If you're finished talking about how much of a whore I am, the infamous dyke slut has somewhere to be."

"Gwen, seriously," Cadee pleaded, leaning forwards, "we've got all of Christmas Break for things to cool down. We can fix this."

"There's nothing to fix." I said. I turned and stalked out of the door, dragging Mandy with me.

"Well, that didn't go too badly," Mandy said as I pulled her down the mostly empty hallway. "When are you going to tell her that you're not bisexual?"

"When I can actually say the word." I said. "Want to ditch school? The holidays are almost here anyway. It won't matter."

Mandy pressed her lips together, surprised. "You? Goody-goody Gwen is going to skip school?"

"Why not? What can they do to us? Three truancies is a detention. One can't kill me." Part of me wondered if leaving meant I was letting them win, but I figured I had put up with enough for one day. I could have stayed home sick and not shown up at all.

"Come over to my house later," Mandy agreed. "I have some people I want to talk to."

I felt the corners of my mouth turn up for a split second. Even on such a rotten day, Mandy could still make me smile. "Okay. Hurry, though."

I leaned in for a quick goodbye peck. Kissing Mandy in school, I decided, was something that I could get used to doing all the time. I headed towards the nearest exit while Mandy turned and walked back down the hall. *Oh God, what a long month*, I thought, shaking my head and staring at my feet.

~*~

My month of waiting had come and gone. Now, it was the night before Christmas Eve and I was starting to worry that she didn't want me. Silver frost spiderwebbed the windows of my bedroom and the trees outside were draped in long white sheets of snow and ice. The sky was dead black. Thick winter clouds covered the stars and hid the moon.

I was huddled in front of the fireplace, cocooned in a crochet afghan, when Mandy came back into the bedroom. She was wearing one of my red silk nightgowns, but it looked completely different on her curvier, taller frame. The hem rode up too far and the soft material bunched and wrinkled across her hips.

"Well, don't you look like you just stepped out of a centerfold?" I said, raising my eyebrows. I caught the sudden blink of her eyes, the way her mouth tightened for a fraction of a second before falling back into its usual seductive smile.

"What were you expecting, latex?" she asked, automatically slipping in to flirt-mode. Her bottom lip was rounded, the sheen of lipgloss still bright along its curve. "I can change if you want."

I had memorized her habits. If I called her a slut, she'd act like a slut, playing along to take the sting out of the words. "I'm sorry, Mands." Standing up, I held the afghan at my throat, letting it drape over my shoulders like a woven cape. "I didn't mean that."

Mandy's sexy attitude bled out of her in seconds. Her smile shook and then fell. She just stood there, awkwardly clasping her wrist with one hand. "I don't know what to say..." Her voice tripped.

I stepped forward, letting go of the afghan-cape. It slid off of my shoulders and down my back, settling in folds around my ankles. "Say you love me. Say you'll forgive me." I locked my fingers behind her neck, leaning into her as the logs snapped beside us. "Say you'll kiss me?" I asked, our noses touching.

"I'll kiss you," she said, still not smiling.

"You knew what I meant. I want you to kiss me, not just say it." She lowered her lips onto mine, and a sharp heat hooked in my chest. I imagined I could feel myself swelling inside, expanding like a balloon, pushing out of my skin and floating into the air. We pulled apart, breathing each other since we had to breathe at all, and kissed again.

She outlined my lips with small, pointed kisses. Her eyes were open, but frosted over and unseeing as I studied her. I tried to memorize everything; her golden curls, the clean lines of blue silk cutting over tanned skin, and the firelight painted over her face, accenting her cheekbones.

"Mandy, would you...?"

"No, Gwen. I want to hear you say it." Her eyes were clear now and filled with wanting. My face and neck flared with heat and embarrassment.

"Please... make love to me..." I breathed anyway.

Mandy stepped back and every inch of my skin screamed with loss, but I opened my arms and let her go. The fire cast trembling shadows in her hair as she dropped to her knees, finding the corners of the afghan and spreading it. She looked up at me with wet green eyes and I saw that her hands were shaking. "Come here, princess," she whispered. I realized that she was nervous, too.

I knelt in front of her, settling between her legs and leaning back against her chest as I watched

the flames. I closed my eyes, breathing the sweet warmth of burning wood and Mandy. Soft hair brushed across my shoulder, and a hot mouth pressed against my collarbone. "You're sure that you want this?" I felt the question vibrate along my throat as her arms closed around my middle.

"Yes." Heavens, yes. More than anything.

"Angel, could you... tell me you love me? Please?"

She sounded so far away from me then, like a frightened little girl. I turned, cupping her face in my hands, trying to bring her back from wherever she had gone. Our eyes fastened and I said, "Amanda... I love you. I've never loved anyone else. It's always been you." I kissed the tear on her cheek before it fell, my lips tasting the lonely flavor of salt and skin. Neither of us needed to be alone ever again. "I know you love me, too. Please, show me how much..."

I turned back and relaxed my head into the place where her neck met her shoulder. Fingers trailed up and down the sides of my arms and I felt her mouth move back to my neck. "What do you want, princess?" she asked in between kisses.

"To feel you inside of me."

Mandy smiled against the column of my throat and I shivered. "I can give you that, but not yet." Warm hands circled my waist and tightened possessively as they touched bare skin, sliding beneath my sweater and pulling up. Suddenly, I stiffened in her arms. She couldn't know how inadequate I thought my body was, especially my breasts. I closed my eyes, angry and embarrassed.

I'm sure that Mandy felt me wince as she dropped the sweater next to us. I stared at the fire, throat tight with tears. "Don't," she said, kissing my cheek from behind. Her hands moved up my bare stomach and traced the sides of my breasts. "I know what you're thinking. Stop it. You're beautiful."

"But..."

"Perfect." The pads of her fingers outlined the tiny blue veins that ran beneath pale skin. She palmed me easily, smiling as softness pebbled against the curved ridge of her hand where her fingers started. "All of you is so perfect, especially here," she said thickly. I believed her. I felt the choked knot in my throat release and buried my face in the safety of her shoulder, sobbing quietly. The tears were a light spring storm, gone in a moment, and left me feeling clean.

Sensing that I had recovered, Mandy adored every inch of skin she could reach, learning white breasts and hips softly, but exploring my arms and sides with firmer fingers, tracing the shadowed grooves between each rib, never staying long where I wanted her. Her thumb dipped through the sunken eye in my stomach, painted the rounded bone of a hip...

"Oh..." My voice trailed off as her palm cupped between my legs, cradling me. Her lips kissed my hair, ghosting my temple as she squeezed, claiming me even through soft cotton. She hooked

her fingers through the waistband of my underwear and pulled them down while I lifted my hips for her.

"You're all right?" She was anxious, frightened for me. I tried to smile and almost broke down in tears again. I nodded, digging my teeth into my lower lip and closing my eyes. Pleasure signals were shooting up my spine and ricocheting around in my brain and she wasn't even touching me. The next second, though, I felt her fingertips on my inner thighs. I trembled in her arms.

"Stop teasing me," I said tightly, pressing myself back against her and gripping the afghan with my hands.

"Only if you ask nicely."

"Please..."

She brought her fingers against me and traced bottom to top, barely pressing in. I hissed, overwhelmed at being touched so intimately for the first time, my eyes fluttering shut. I felt so vulnerable, swollen open against her hand, and more than a little nervous, but I trusted her. The power I let her have - the control and the trust - was headier than her light touches. My gift to her.

Her soft pulling and stroking had no steady rhythm or pattern. The spontaneity was driving me to distraction. Her touch drifted from the swollen point just under my curls to the soft wetness below. "Higher," I pleaded, putting my hand on top of hers and lacing our fingers, trying to move her back up.

"Impatient, aren't we?" she asked, letting me position her fingers. She found the spot I wanted, the edge of her manicured nail catching against tender skin. Her free arm wrapped around my hips, holding me steady and pulling me tight against her.

But she left me wanting, moving her hand back down and pressing harder until I parted for her. All the stories I'd heard as a child came back. 'Your first time always hurts... there's blood everywhere...'

"Do you trust me?" she asked, kissing my damp forehead.

"Do it quick." My mouth tightened to a thin dash and I bit down on the corner of my lip, looking at her face. Her eyes were smoky glass as her fingers pressed against soft, trembling folds. My breath shook. "Take what belongs to you, lover. I'm yours."

She couldn't fight. She sank into me slowly, whimpering, her eyes rolling back into her head. "Oh, angel," she whispered, her eyes still closed, "so warm and soft..."

Her fingers stopped, caught. Mandy forced her eyes open and I could see the tears. "Shhh..." I kissed her hair, stroking her cheek with my hand. "I waited for you. Don't make me wait any longer..." A sharp sting, a deep, steady pulse of ache, and I was hers.

"Gwen, I-"

"Don't say anything, Mandy... Don't say a word. Just love me." We kissed sweetly. Our eyes were wet. I could tell that she was overwhelmed, filled with what I had given her. So was I. I clung to her shoulders, staring up into her lovely face. Naked, vulnerable, a little frightened. She was my shield from the rest of the world and she knew it.

I twitched around her fingers as she drew them out, not wanting to let her go. I needed her back inside and I lowered my hips, following her hand. More. I wanted more of her. I gasped as she dropped kisses on my neck. I dipped my chin, staring at soft, petaled folds flared open around her fingers. I couldn't believe this was me, us, real. "Oh God... look what you do to me, lover..." I could feel her smile as she curled her fingers again, repositioning her thumb. Slowly, she moved inside me and I gave a full-body jerk.

She started going faster, building up an easy rhythm. My skin burned hot to the touch like a piece of metal left out in the sun. "I can't," a voice scraped. Surely not mine. That voice belonged to a woman on the edge of insanity.

She grasped my chin in her hand, turning my head to the side and leaning over my shoulder to kiss my forehead. I gasped and tried to turn away, but she held me in place. "No. I want to see your eyes when you come for me, princess." Then I knew that this *was* me: me weeping brokenly into her skin, me collapsing helplessly against her side like a snap-stringed puppet.

I belonged to her. Any protective walls of pride or shame I might have kept were battered down. My heart was open. She could do with it - with me - as she pleased. There is nothing sweeter than surrendering, giving your deepest self.

Something inside me snapped like a rubber band. A fine tremor lit along my soft inner muscles. I threw my head back onto her shoulder, bucking my hips to take as much of her into me as I could, impaling myself on her long fingers. Her thumb gave one final upwards flick, rolling over the swollen bundle of nerves, and I was lost.

I only half-managed to stop the scream building in my throat. What came from between my lips was more like a strangled sob. "Stop... please..." I begged, even though stopping was the last thing I wanted her to do.

"Shh... let go, angel..." said her voice in my ear. "I love you."

I squeezed my eyes shut and the room shook. A fierce, terrible pleasure. Such joy.

After an eternity, my body stilled and a blissful numbness built around Mandy's fingers. She stopped moving them, but we remained joined for several minutes, neither of us having the strength to break the bond. At last I said, "Mandy... thank you... I'm so glad our first time was together."

Mandy frowned at me, confused. "Our first time?"

I smiled lazily. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but was that or was that not the first time you ever made love?"

She thought about it. "Of course, but I still..."

"So, in a way, it was your first time, even though you weren't a virgin." Mandy didn't disagree. Actually, she looked happy after hearing my explanation.

"You know," she said, almost shyly, "it doesn't have to be over yet."

"No," I agreed, sounding equally shy, "it doesn't."

We spent all of Christmas Eve day together, kissing, talking, playing cards, and making love sporadically. That night, I reminded myself to say a thank-you prayer for the best Christmas gift I would ever receive. Nothing had ever reaffirmed my faith in God, love, and human goodness like making love with Mandy. I was complete.

Chapter Six: Mandy

Gwen, who had been digging for something in the refrigerator, pulled her head out and smiled at me. "Hey, you're up late this morning. What time did I finally let you go to sleep last night?"

"A little after five," I said, swallowing a yawn.

"Getting up before you for once was a new experience for me." Something started beeping and she darted over to a waffle maker on the kitchen counter. "It did give me a chance to make waffles, though."

"Are they the ones with the little blueberries in them?" I asked hopefully. She nodded. "How do you put them in? Why doesn't the waffle maker burn them or squish them?" I was a decent cook, and could put together several simple meals, but Gwen was a fabulous cook when she wanted to be, even though her family hired a chef.

Gwen shook her head, tossing her messy braid off of her shoulder. Almost half to it had escaped the rubber bands, but she'd keep pulling it tighter without redoing it until it completely fell apart. Gwen was lazy with her hair, especially in the morning. "You're hopeless, love," she said as I came over, standing on tiptoe to kiss my cheek. "I really shouldn't allow you in here at all. You distract me."

I couldn't resist commenting. "Uh-oh! You might light something on fire like you did with your hair in science class. Besides, this is my kitchen." Gwen raised an eyebrow. "Pull your bathrobe tighter. I don't want my waffles to get cold."

"Maybe I want to tempt you." Gwen smirked. I laughed and crept up behind her as she reached

for some plates, pulling on her braid teasingly before wrapping my arms around her middle. She whirled around, trying to look angry.

"No one's pulled my hair since fourth grade," she accused. I reluctantly let her go, taking one of the plates using a nearby fork to drag two waffles onto it. "You'll start teasing me about my glasses next. I was too lazy to put in my contacts this morning."

"I think that glasses look sexy on you."

"You think that everything looks sexy on me."

"True," I admitted. "I'm going to stand my ground on this one, though."

"Shut up, look cute, and eat your waffles," Gwen ordered as I sat down. I spread some butter on them, reached for the maple syrup, and obeyed. I have absolutely no idea where Gwen learned to cook, but whoever taught her should be very, very proud. The waffles tasted wonderful.

"Damn. They're amazing, princess. Almost orgasmic." I took another bite.

"Only almost?" Gwen asked innocently. "I'll have to fix that after breakfast, won't I?"

"You're a woman of many talents."

"And I spoil you rotten." Gwen rolled her eyes and started eating her own breakfast, neatly stabbing a piece of waffle with her fork and popping it into her mouth. She chewed, swallowed, and slowly drew the fork out of her mouth, licking off every drop of maple syrup. I knew she was thinking about using that tongue on something else.

The sight made my heart stop. To my surprise, my chest felt heavy with fear. I hadn't let Gwen touch me much since she gave herself to me. I easily distracted her whenever she tried. I wanted all of the attention to be on her, but over the past three days she had become an octopus.

I knew she was dying to touch me, but something felt wrong inside and I wasn't sure why. I had let other lovers touch me, although that was never very enjoyable except with Alicia and Drew. It didn't make any sense. I knew that I was in love with Gwen and that I was very attracted to her... so why did I keep putting this off?

"What are you thinking about?" asked Gwen, chewing another bite of waffle before running her tongue over her lips.

"Stop it. I can't eat my breakfast." She laughed, her bathrobe slipping down on her shoulder as she moved. I knew the best way to keep her from going after me was to go after her first and make her melt. I shoved another bite of waffle into my mouth and swallowed awkwardly. "Okay, done. Now, it's payback time."

"Not until I'm done," Gwen said coolly, taking an extremely small bite of her breakfast and

chewing for twice as long as she needed to. She was trying to make me squirm. She was succeeding, but not for the reasons she thought. Part of me knew that I should be going crazy, but...

"I'm thirsty," she declared, standing up and shifting her hips as she walked towards the fridge. I caught her as she stepped over to the cabinet to get a glass, a carton of milk on the counter beside her. "Hey, let m-" I cut her off, pressing my lips to her neck. I knew her weak spots. She closed her eyes, leaning backwards and resting against my shoulder. I moved down to her collarbone and I felt her muscles tense.

If I pressed the right buttons, I'd have her sobbing into my shoulder before she could think. The sounds she made when I touched her were gorgeous. Thinking about making love to Gwen helped me relax. I loved the taste of her skin. I loved the feel of her around my fingers; all tight, heated silk.

"Are you done eating?" She nodded weakly, and I slipped my hand into her robe. "Good. I'm going to make sure you come right here for me, angel," I murmured, kissing her forehead. Softness, a red burn against my hand. I felt her tremble, a whimper catching in her chest. 'I've got you,' I thought to her. 'Give yourself to me.' She slumped against me, complete submission. I tightened my arms around her, allowing myself a small smile. This was something I loved doing, something that made my heart burst every time.

~*~

I woke suddenly, panting and listening to my heart try to smash its way out of my ribcage. It took me several seconds to realize where I was: safe in bed. That calmed me down a little, but the nightmare settled into my skin, unwilling to relinquish its hold.

But had it been a nightmare, or a memory? Sometimes I forgot the difference. I had dreams - memories - that I knew were true, but some of them were probably vivid constructs of my imagination. This one seemed so real that I wasn't sure if it had actually happened or not. It's hard to remember everything that happened when you were seven, even if the memories were painful enough to leave an impression.

I squinted over at Gwen to see if I had disturbed her. There were silver-white highlights on her bare skin and her dark hair, still damp from the shower, was spread across most of the pillow. I'd never tell her, but I was afraid of losing her. I didn't deserve her. It would only be a matter of time before everything fell apart.

As careful as I had been to keep still after waking up, Gwen's eyes fluttered open. She smiled dreamily at me for a moment until she noticed the light film of sweat glistening at my collarbone and my colorless cheeks. She knew my nightmare look almost as well as I did. I had stared at it in the mirror for years. "Are you all right?"

"Fine." I turned to face the wall. "Go back to sleep. I didn't mean to wake you up."

"You don't look fine." She ran her fingertips over my slick back, pressing at a swollen knot under

my shoulder blade. "You're soaked, and I didn't do anything to get you that way. Maybe you should see-"

"No. Nothing's wrong," I said into a pillow. "I'm not seeing anyone."

"But the night sweats..."

"It's hot. Heavy sheets. Go back to sleep."

"You had another nightmare, didn't you?" The silence after that said more than her words. She was asking without asking. Why wouldn't I tell her? She would understand what had happened, she had already figured out most of it anyway, but she couldn't know what was going on in my head.

Gwen pulled close against my back, draping an arm over my hip and tucking her chin over my shoulder. "It's okay to let me in, Mands... I won't judge you. We both know that I can guess what happened. I love you..."

I didn't bother arguing. Gwen thought she was telling the truth, but she didn't know what she was promising. I knew she wouldn't judge me for what he had done to me. That wasn't the part I was worried about, although I didn't want to air that dirty laundry either. It was the other part. The part about my mother.

The nightmares were getting worse. The panic attacks and the blackouts, too. I remembered snapping back into focus over three months ago in the pantry and discovering the scratch marks along my stomach, the blood under my fingernails. But that had been before Gwen and I made love... If anything like that happened again, hiding it would be impossible now.

I didn't realize I was crying until I felt Gwen's lips against my cheek. "I love you," I said, the sides of my throat lighting up with pain.

"I love you, too. Go to sleep."

But I didn't go to sleep. A flash of lightning illuminated the room through the half-drawn blinds. Rain began drumming against the window glass. A thunderstorm was starting outside.

~*~

The next morning found me sitting on the couch, listening to the echoing rolls of thunder outside. I counted the seconds between the lightning flashes, watching as they flooded the bruised, purple-blue sky with pale light.

'One Mississippi, two Mississippi,' I mouthed to myself. The storm was two miles away. It was raining hard and the wind was rattling through the stiff, bare branches of the young spring trees.

My heart thudded heavily in my chest as I looked up at the sky, pressing my dry lips together and swallowing. The night before had been horrible. Maybe it was being back in Dad's house after

Gwen had awakened so many old demons, or maybe it was the coming thunderstorm.

Gwen had slept like an angel after we talked, but her small smile and even breathing were not enough. Not this time. I shuddered as another crash of thunder shook through the room. I loved spring thunderstorms - the smell, the excitement, the electricity of them. I used to creep downstairs at night or in the early morning to watch when I was little. Sometimes, I still do.

Raindrops spattered against the side of the house, and a V of lonely Canadian geese flew through the patchwork sky, trying to outfly the storm. A flash of lightning illuminated a small figure standing in the kitchen. It was Gwen, wearing her purple bathrobe and looking worried.

"Mands?" she said, her voice cracking with early morning sleepiness, "why are you up?"

"Couldn't sleep."

She padded over to me on quiet feet, curling up beside me on the couch and reaching out to touch my cheek. I turned away from her, trying to hold back tears. "Mandy, don't do this," she pleaded softly, brushing my arm. I felt a great anger swell up inside me. I was angry with her, with everything, but mostly with myself.

Suddenly, I needed her. I grabbed her wrists and whirled around, forcing my lips down on the surprised 'o' of her soft mouth. The kiss was surreal, almost like I wasn't the one doing it. She responded fiercely, sinking her teeth into my lower lip and then soothing the bite-marks with her warm tongue. A tingling rush of excitement shot down the back of my neck and branched out to my arms and chest.

I bruised her lips with mine, digging my nails into the tender, lightly-freckled skin of her shoulders and shoving her backwards. Her wavy black hair tumbled across the couch, locks of it draping over its arm and side, dangling above the floor. My hands slid to the neck of her bathrobe, trying to pull it off of her shoulders, but she managed to latch her hands around my neck and pull me against her, drawing me in for another kiss.

"Don't be upset," she whispered into my mouth, keeping her eyes closed. I tried to kiss her again, but she tilted her head back and my lips caught her chin. "Tell me what's wrong. I try to help, but you just kiss me until I forget. You make me come until I pass out, but you hardly let me touch you..." I tried to tug open the neck of her robe, but she held it closed with one hand, looking down at me, her glasses half falling off of her nose. "Talk to me."

"It's complicated," I said.

Gwen sat up against the arm of the couch. "Once, you told me that you had lots of sex so that it wouldn't matter. Is that what you're doing with me?"

I didn't answer her. My lips parted, but no words came out. An expression of pain flickered across Gwen's face. She pulled away from me and got up from the couch. I grabbed her forearm before she could walk away. "Please..."

She let me pull her back onto the couch and settled on top of me, resting her head just above the neckline of my robe. We stayed like that for a while, listening to the rain drumming against the windows. Another flash of lightning highlighted Gwen's hollow cheeks. Her eyes were closed, but I could see the strain in her face.

"There are lots of reasons I don't talk about it," I said out of nowhere, surprising myself. "One is that I don't want a pity-party. I never wanted adults to talk about my personal life and feel sorry for me." Gwen didn't move her mouth, but she opened her eyes and looked up at me, waiting.

"You know my Mom isn't around. I'm sure you've probably wondered why I don't talk about it. The truth is, she was a drug addict. She was clean when my Dad met her. It wasn't bad all the time... She would go on and off. She didn't use when she was pregnant with me. That managed to keep her clean. But a year after I was born, she started again. Sometimes she'd let Dad talk her in to a rehab clinic. Then she'd come out and be good for a couple months, maybe even a year... but it never lasted. She would be gone for days at a time, even weeks, and we wouldn't hear from her at all. Or Dad would get phone calls in the middle of the night..."

I watched Gwen's face carefully as I told her all of this. I saw the corners of her mouth turn down. The lines that cut through the smooth skin of her pretty face upset me. But she had asked me to tell her. She couldn't have been expecting a happy childhood tale. "She had a relapse and Oded when I was seven. I was the one who found her." I had to close my eyes then. I couldn't look at her. The words wouldn't come if I saw her face. I thought about crying, but couldn't. The tears I had for my mother had dried up years ago, I reminded myself.

"My dad was miserable, he kind of lost himself. I mean, he still loved her, even when she started using again. He did everything he could to help her, but it wasn't enough..."

Outside, a thin branch banged against the window, and both of us jumped. "Are you okay?" Gwen asked, scooting up so that her face was against my neck.

"I've always hated that question. It's like, people always ask you if you're okay, and you always say 'yes' even when you're not. Sorry," I added, seeing the hurt return to Gwen's face.

"I really meant it. I know you don't want to talk about it..."

I dared to open my eyes. "I'll keep going. God knows when I'll feel up to it again. Anyway, my Dad was kind of crazy for a while, so this uncle I had helped take care of me. He was my Mom's brother. I'd only seen him once or twice before, but he stuck around after her funeral. He liked taking care of me a little too much. He sort of had sex with me until my Dad found out and he went to jail."

Gwen pulled her face away from my neck and stared up at me. "You mean he raped you?"

I winced. "I hate that word. It's a label. I can't be Mandy if I'm a 'victim' instead," I tried to explain. Gwen was looking at me, trying to understand. "Everyone would say: 'Oh, that poor girl,

no one could ever understand what she's gone through'. I don't want to be understood. I don't want to be treated like damaged goods, or have people trying to psychoanalyze me. I would hate to be some case study. It reminds me of biology lab, dissecting a frog or something, except it's my brain... I don't want to be a 'survivor' either. 'Look at me, I suffered as a child, and now I'm so strong'. What happened changed me, but that's only a part of who I am. I'm a person. My whole life and my personality aren't centered around one event. Besides, what he did doesn't bother me nearly as much as seeing my mother there... dead... God, that's what really gets me.

"Anyway, a few years later, when I was eleven, I had this older 'boyfriend', right? And I was at his house, and he asked me to jack him off." Gwen wrinkled her nose with distaste, and a small part of me wanted to laugh. She was definitely a lesbian.

"So I figured, what the hell? And I did it... And it felt great. It was like I had control... I suddenly had this power... The best part was that it didn't matter anymore. I learned how to detach. If I did it with everyone, nothing in the past seemed important. Of course, smoking a few joints didn't hurt either when I wanted to forget." I paused for a second, swallowing. The lightning flashes were softer now, and there weren't as many. The thunder was muffled and far away, and the rain had died down a little. "Want to know something?"

"What?" Gwen asked, a worry line creasing her forehead.

"You know how you complained that I never let you touch me? Well, I kind of held back with everyone. For the guys it was a dream come true. I never complained or asked them to do anything they didn't want to do. Eventually, I lost interest in guys for the most part. I was too interested in other girls. I was less guarded with some of them, but still... I mean, I let them touch me a bit more, but I did most of the work."

"I wondered," said Gwen, her voice soft.

"Alicia was a little hurt, I think, and so was Drew, but they were never as upset as you... Most of them just shrugged it off."

"I don't want you to be like that with me, Mandy... I don't want you to treat me like them."

"You know you mean more to me than that. I'm just a little... Scared, I guess."

"Of opening up to me?" I nodded. "Well, I think we just made some progress there." Gwen shook her dark hair off of her forehead and buried her face in my neck, pressing her lips to the place where my heartbeat was. "Mands," she whispered, sending warm breath against my throat, "can I...?"

"Can you what?" I asked.

She grabbed one of my hands, lacing her fingers with mine as she moved down to suck on my collarbone. "I want... to taste you... please?" she pleaded, her mouth still occupied with my neck and shoulders.

"Gwen, don't..." She pulled away.

"Did you let Alicia do this for you?" My throat closed, but her eyes broke me.

"Yes."

"Often?"

"No."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes." There was no hesitation.

"Then you'll let me. I'm not giving you a choice."

There was a long silence. "I never told Alicia what I just told you... Only my Dad knows, and that's because he was there. We don't talk about it. After hearing what I said, and... if I let you do this... will you believe that I trust you?" Gwen nodded her head, and almost smiled.

Uncomfortably, I gave in, stroking her arm with my free hand as she kissed just above my breasts, pausing instead of moving lower. Oh, princess, I thought, leaning my head back against a cushion, what am I going to do with you? After this, I was going to have to remind my innocent lamb just who was supposed to be in charge. "How do you want me, princess?" I asked, "standing up against the wall? Kneeling over you? Lying down? On my hands and knees?" Gwen squirmed and made soft mewling sounds with each suggestion.

"Sitting," she forced out, kissing her way down my stomach and flicking her tongue over my navel. I gasped and shifted up on the couch, spreading my legs, and Gwen slipped to the floor and knelt between them. Her arms locked around my waist as she continued to plant soft butterfly kisses along my stomach.

Part of me wanted to suggest a sixty-nine just so I could make the playing field level again, but I stopped myself. If Gwen wanted to do this for me so much, I'd let her, even if it made me uncomfortable to receive all the attention. It wasn't about pleasure; it was about trusting Gwen with my body.

Planting a shy, gentle kiss on the soft skin of my inner thigh, she nuzzled into me, whimpering and purring like a kitten. My fingers twitched, automatically reaching for her hair, but I shoved them behind one of the cushions, afraid of pushing. My insides quivered as her tongue pressed softly between my lips, scraping upwards in a long, tentative stroke.

"Gwen, baby..." I gasped as she took another broad, experimental lick upwards, harder this time. "You don't have t-"

"Mmm," she sighed, and I could feel the vibrations ripple along my skin. She looked up at me with glistening eyes and I freed one of my hands, stroking her cheek. She leaned in to my caress and then dove in with obvious enthusiasm, using her tongue like a small dart to tease apart my outer lips so that she could suck the inner ones into her mouth. Her eyelids lowered and I felt her moan again in the back of her throat.

She kept going and I felt a large knot underneath my stomach loosen and unravel as I savored the feeling of her hot mouth on me. Obviously, Gwen had picked up a few things from her romance novels, because she experimented in ways I wouldn't have expected even though it was clear that she'd never attempted them before. I didn't care - I was too busy savoring the sensation of, not only having someone go down on me for the first time in about a year, but also having the girl I was in love with doing it.

Eventually, she settled into a rhythm, licking me from bottom to top with long, broad strokes, her hands tracing gentle patterns on my inner thighs. I felt my stomach twitch with a wonderful, sharp pain as I watched her pleasure me, her hair draped over her shoulders, her cheeks flushed, her lips swollen from kisses.

"Oh, angel," I sighed, giving in to temptation and shoving my fingers into her thick black locks, not pushing or guiding, simply stroking her hair. Both of us stayed like that for who-knows-how-long, suspended in limbo as she gently pushed me closer and closer. Each stroke of her tongue sent ragged throbs of pleasure shuddering through me, but she stayed away from where I wanted her most, purposely stopping just too low. I was tempted to grab her hair and force her mouth up, but I stopped myself.

"Princess, I can't..." I pleaded instead. I expected her to keep teasing me, or to look up at me with a self-satisfied smirk, but she didn't. She lifted her head and blew a cold stream of air. I felt my entire body shudder. Then, she moved her lips up and slid inside of me at the same time.

My head fell back and I pushed my hips forward against her mouth despite myself, my chest heaving. Gwen started to lash with her tongue and I could only scream as I started to spasm around her fingers. "I love you," I gasped, squeezing my eyes shut until tears leaked out and trying to milk the feeling for all it was worth, savoring as much of each hot pulse as I could. I had no idea it could be so... perfect. Right.

Just as my climax was fading into aftershocks, Gwen surprised me, pulling away for a brief moment before forcing her entire tongue inside of me. That started another round of spasms and I felt pressure building in my lower belly, like a balloon about to burst. I sat up straight again and stared down at Gwen, opening my mouth to warn her, but I was too late...

The first jet caught her by surprise, but she figured out what was going on and pulled back, opening her mouth to catch the rest. She stared up at me, her eyes shining with triumph and excitement. "You can squirt? Oh God, that's so awesome!" she gushed, trying to catch her breath.

I breathed a sigh of relief and held out my hand, pulling her back up onto the couch and into my arms. I kissed her lightly on the lips, tasting myself on them.

"I'm glad you think so," I told her. "It really freaks some people out... I was worried..."

"Mandy, I..."

Both of us stopped talking and just stared at each other, caught in a powerful, unspoken declaration of love. I bent my head and started to lick Gwen's face clean, starting with her lips and moving outwards to her cheeks and chin. There's something wonderfully intimate about cleaning your lover's face after she's been pleasuring you; I felt another burst of emotion, letting a few more tears roll down my cheeks.

"My God, Gwen, I'm never letting you go." It was time to start letting her in.

~*~

Later that week, as part of my promise to let Gwen deeper inside, I took her to The House. At first it seemed smaller than I remembered, but then I realized that I had grown several feet since we moved out. I was nineteen now. It was hard to believe that there was still a part of the scared seven-year-old girl somewhere inside me.

Gwen's entire body was tense and she gripped my hand like a stress ball. I knew she hated going downtown. Rich and isolated all her life, the inner city made Gwen jumpy. The sight of dirty, unshaven faces, most of them black, and baggy t-shirts that stretched down below the knees had her on edge. Gwen was not necessarily racist, but she understood nothing about the culture of the inner city. Naively, she believed most of the media's stereotypes. No, not racist, but she could not help being a little classist.

I felt a significant absence of fear as I stared at the red spray paint across the front of The House: 'DO NOT ENTER- ALL FLOORS UNSAFE'. Maybe it was true, but I had to go inside and see the place. We would be fine as long as we didn't try to go upstairs. Besides, what I really wanted to see was on the first floor.

I knew that Gwen wanted to ask me if I was sure, if we really had to go in, but she didn't say anything. She knew that I needed this for my own peace of mind and she loved me enough to go inside a collapsing old building with me if she had to. "Let's go," I said, not giving her a chance to change her mind even though I knew she wouldn't. Her mouth tightened and she gave my hand another firm squeeze as I shoved open the door.

The place had been broken into a few times and there wasn't much furniture left. There were a few empty beer bottles on the living room floor. I stared at them numbly, wondering why I was so surprised. Had I really expected The House to be perfectly preserved like a specimen in amber? The image in my mind, I realized, had been more like a dollhouse than a real house, too plastic. This was the real thing.

"This is where I found her," I told myself. "She was right there, on the couch." I pointed at the slightly scratched wall where the couch had been. "She still had the needle in her arm." I could tell that Gwen was trying to picture it, imagining what it would be like for a seven-year-old girl

to walk into the living room and find her mother dead, but it was beyond her comprehension. "I haven't forgiven her," I said, trying to explain, "but I can't hate her, either."

Gwen, intuitive as she was with me, stayed silent, but she said I love you with her face as she tilted her chin up to look at me. Her gray eyes were wet and I wondered if maybe she did understand, at least as much as someone who hadn't seen it could bear to. I gripped her hand and led her into the kitchen.

The tiles on the floor were cracked and scuffed, yellow with age. For a moment, I pictured them as they once were, a speckled tan color. It wasn't strange that I remembered the tiles. I spent a lot of time staring at them, trying to forget. And then I looked up and saw the pantry. The door was hanging open on one broken hinge, but I had expected that. I had been there when he ripped it off.

"This is it," I said, wondering why I wasn't crying. I should have been, I thought. But then I realized that this house wasn't really where my ghosts were hiding. They were inside a different house, the one in my memories, and I couldn't chase them away by coming back here.

I had a wild, crazy thought. What would it be like to make love to Gwen here? It was a stupid idea, but for some reason it stuck. Maybe then the ghosts would come out and I could banish them forever. Another part of me wanted to have her here just to prove to myself that I could, to remind myself that I was in control.

Gwen was surprised when I kissed her and even more surprised when she realized it wasn't a kiss that asked for comfort. It was a hungry, wet, needy kiss that told her just how much I wanted her. For an instant I heard Gwen choke back a soft cry in her throat, but a second later she pulled away and looked at me in horror, realizing what I was trying to do.

"Mandy, I won't let you do that to yourself. It won't help."

"How do you know?" I countered.

"Because I just *know*. I don't usually call you out on this kind of thing, but this is crazy-stupid, and I'm not going to let you do it. If you want me, you have to take me home first."

Home. I had called this place home once, too. Now it was just The House. It was useless to me. "Fine, we'll go back home, but... could we just watch a movie, maybe?"

Gwen smiled a ghost of a smile. "That sounds perfect."

Chapter Seven: Gwen

Little shocks touched each fingertip as they pressed down on the piano keys, feeling the cold. The thermostat was low in the middle of the night, leaving the naked skin of my arms and legs tight against the open air. When I played in the dark I didn't use music. I kept all the lights off,

shelled in by the blackness where no one else could get in while I sent the music out. A little like an exorcism.

Chopin was easy enough to start with. I had memorized countless Mazurkas and Preludes, even if I didn't always remember their names. Sometimes, I would start playing and recognize one I hadn't thought of in months. Chopin is always best for the middle of the night. Rachmaninoff was too high-energy.

I kept playing when I heard the footsteps, faint at first, then a little louder. She didn't bother softening them, not wanting to startle me. She placed a kiss on my bare shoulder, then just under my ear, neither of us breathing. I held the dominant, forgetting what I was playing. I took my hands from the piano as she whispered to me. "Chopin at three in the morning?"

I turned my head, trying to find her lips, but she caught my forehead with her mouth and cupped the back of my neck, her fingers playing with strands of hair. Her hand rested against my throat. "I can feel your heartbeat. Fast, like a small bird's." She held her arms open, and I stood. "Come here, princess. Let me..."

Our bodies spoke without words as we came together. Nothing else mattered but Mandy. Not my parents, who had been staring at me curiously for days. Not Cadee, who had left dozens of messages on my cell phone that I refused to answer. Not Sara, who hadn't called me once since the last day of school and was probably planning some form of humiliation for me.

I swung my legs over the side of the piano bench, letting Mandy's soft palm curve around my left thigh. She pressed her face into my hair and breathed deeply, wrapping one arm under my knees and looping the other around my shoulders. I was lifted from the piano bench, and my cheek rested against her chest. Mandy was a lot stronger than she looked, but the weight I had lost before Christmas (which hadn't needed to come off in the first place) probably helped.

Her breathing stayed steady as she carried me out of the music room and up the stairs, but mine quickened, because I knew where she was taking me. I took advantage of my position, sucking Mandy's shoulder until I left a proud purple mark where my mouth had been. Mandy kept her face buried in my hair, her heartbeat faster than her slow, patient steps. She brimmed with quiet confidence.

Mandy stopped at the door to my bedroom. "Someday," she said, almost shyly, "I want to do this for real," and she carried me inside. I didn't realize what she meant at first. When it finally clicked, I was higher than the moon.

"Did you just ask me to marry you?"

"Maybe," she said, blushing. Her eyes were smiling as she lowered me onto the mattress. "What do you think, Lady Guinevere?"

"I think that you're more charming than any Sir Lancelot. And you're prettier, too."

Mandy laughed. "A saucy wench! I think I like that." With Mandy's body stretched over mine, it felt like I was wrapped up in a very warm, moving blanket. I kissed her nose, and moved to kiss her lips, but she pressed a thigh between my legs, making me cry out instead. "Mmm... I like it when you forget your underwear, too." The confident exploration of her hand prevented me from answering. She smiled as she felt the proof of my desire for her. "Is this all for me?" I could barely nod as her words and fingers coaxed another flood of wetness from deep inside of me.

Somehow, she got my shirt pulled up around my wrists and caught one of my nipples in between her teeth, flicking the tip with her tongue. I tugged my arms, but my hands were caught in the shirt with Mandy's free hand holding them there. One finger of her other hand was drawing tight circles over the hard bundle that made tears squeeze from my eyes.

Mandy's mouth released me with a soft pop, leaving the red tip of my breast exposed to the cold, stinging air. I whimpered and arched my upper back, seeking her mouth again, as she kissed her way to the other side of my chest. Too many sensations - the warmth of Mandy's breath and lips against my skin, the burning place where our naked bellies touched, the circling and flicking of Mandy's thumb.

I wanted to feel Mandy's skin under my hands. My need to touch her gave me the strength to pull one hand from my tangled shirt and slide it between our bodies. *Yes, that's what I want*, I thought, smiling. The wonderful feeling I got when I pressed inside of Mandy always took me by surprise. I would never get used to it and I never wanted to... the tight pulling around my fingers, the warmth, the smooth velvet muscles. I loved all of it. I loved it twice as much when Mandy was inside of me at the same time.

As if she could read my mind - half of me wondered if she could - she gave me what I wanted and filled me with a possessive roll of her hand. It almost hurt... almost. Stabs of pleasure radiated out from my abdomen; every inch of me trembled. I must have screamed I love you, because I heard Mandy telling me that she loved me too as we moved together.

And then she was moving away, pulling out of me, the warmth of her body drawing mine with it. I wanted to be back inside of her, with her inside of me. I sobbed, freeing my other hand and tossing the shirt away, reaching for her. "Shh, angel, no," she soothed, taking my hands and kissing them. "I want to taste you."

Mandy was gentle, patient with me. She had done this before, but only when I was so close that a few soft kisses sent me crashing over the edge. This would be different - she wanted to take her time. Her mouth explored the soft line that would blossom open and reveal all of me. "Please," I begged, my voice breaking. The sight of her head between my legs, golden curls brushing my thighs and hips, made me squeeze my eyes shut.

Mandy's fingers probed forward carefully and I felt her warm breath as she whispered intimately against me, just loud enough for me to hear. "Aah, Gwen... so soft. So tight. I fill you up with just two fingers. You drive me crazy... Am I hurting you? Tell me if I hurt you, little girl."

I couldn't speak to tell her no as she suckled me with round lips, but her knowing touch drew

little mewling cries from somewhere deep in my throat. My head tossed over the loose covers. I saw her hollowed cheeks, her beautiful shining hair, her wide green eyes. I felt the burning stroke of her mouth. I was swollen open against her tongue, clutching tightly at the fingers moving inside of me. *Wonderful.*

"Come for me, princess." I didn't want to. Didn't want her to stop. I would die if she stopped. But I was powerless, and came in a trembling burst of wetness and tears, screaming inside of my head. Later, as she held me in her arms and kissed my hair, Mandy told me that I hadn't made a sound.

She carried me down slowly, taking the time to kiss my inner thighs and run her fingers through the glistening curls above her head. I was about to reach for her, to caress her face and thank her for something so beautiful, when she took me, still swollen, back into her mouth. "Oh, no more..." I groaned, but there was no stopping her. "Amanda..." Hearing her full name, she looked up at me with cloudy eyes, blinked slowly, and then bent her head back down. I lost count of how many times I shattered with release against her mouth.

Floating. I was floating somewhere between dreams.

Then I fell one last time, rubbing the skin of my shoulders raw against the covers as my hair fell over my face.

For a few moments, I felt a strange numbness. Then, a crippling spasm of pain. I cried out, clutching Mandy's hair too tightly with my thin fingers. "Please, stop... it hurts... I can't..." My lover knew my body so well. This time, she realized that I couldn't. She understood my limits better than I did. She gave me one last kiss and pulled herself up along my body, pressing her skin against mine. *Yes.*

"Yes," I said some time later when I found my voice.

"Yes what?" Mandy asked sleepily. She was obviously exhausted. I felt sore and tender and very well-loved myself, so I didn't blame her.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

Mandy opened her eyes. "You're serious," she said, looking directly into my face.

"As a heart attack."

I hadn't been expecting tears, so when Mandy started crying I felt a little nervous until I saw how big her smile was. I was usually the one that cried when we made love and it was refreshing to see her let go for once. "You're serious," she said again.

"You aren't very articulate, are you?" I grinned at her. "Sir Lancelot would have said, 'I wish to bind myself with thee in holy'..."

"Shut up... Jeez, you're in a mood tonight. Sir Lancelot my ass."

"I like your ass." I couldn't resist one more dig.

"I shouldn't have called you Lady Guinevere. You're definitely Morgan le Fay. Now go to sleep. Or if you won't, at least let me go to sleep. And move your feet. They're cold."

I smiled and buried my face in Mandy's neck, enjoying her smell and her warm skin. "I really will marry you, Amanda."

The last thing Mandy said before we both fell asleep was a contented, "I know."

~*~

It was naive of me to think my parents didn't know. There is only so much you can get away with until you get caught. It could have been a lot worse, I suppose. They could have walked in on us while we were making love instead of while we were sleeping. Neither of us even woke up. I didn't know anything was wrong until I went downstairs to make Mandy some toast and eggs. That's what trying to be romantic gets you.

My mother and father were sitting at the kitchen table with ominously blank expressions. Usually they smiled at me and fussed when I came down to breakfast, trying to make up for the times when they weren't home to share meals. There were no 'Honeybears' or 'Gwen's darlings' this time. I could guess why.

I decided that I really didn't want to play the question-answer game, so I opened the breadbox and pulled out two slices for Mandy's toast. I popped them into the toaster oven, and then I went to the fridge to get the butter and two white eggs.

"How long has this been going on?" my father asked. I almost looked over my shoulder at him, but decided that I didn't want to see either of their faces a second time.

"Long enough." The eggs felt cold and heavy in my palm. I dropped to my knees and started looking for the frying pan and a small mixing bowl. The kitchen was silent except for a sharp crack and I broke the eggs on the rim of the bowl. I sighed as I realized that I had forgotten a fork to break the yolks. With a silver butter knife in one hand and a fork in the other, I returned to the kitchen counter without another glance at my parents.

My father cleared his throat. "I heard something, but I thought it was just talk. I didn't expect..."

"Why would you notice something like this? It took you months and I wasn't even trying to keep it a secret." I stabbed at the yolks until they were a yellow, runny mess.

"Gwen," my father started, "we didn't raise you to be like this."

"No, you didn't." I lopped off a hunk of yellow butter with the butter knife and dropped it into the frying pan, turning on the burner. It hissed up at me as I went back to stirring the eggs, the

prongs of the fork scraping the inside of the bowl. "What you did was hand me a box of condoms when I was sixteen and ask me if I needed birth control. I was still a virgin. Of course, if I had been like most of my friends, it already would have been too late for that talk..."

I poured the eggs into the melted butter and left them, pulling the brown toast out of the toaster oven. "And having Aunt Scary preach to me about how I'd be damned to hell if I ever enjoyed sex didn't help. You didn't bother to ask me how I felt about sex or boys or any of it! You just assumed. You don't know a thing about me."

"Obviously, we don't. And I'm sorry for that." With a piece of toast in one hand and the butter knife in the other, I did a full-body turn to face my mother. She was looking at me with defeated eyes, and she seemed more sincere, more real, in that one moment than all of the memories I had of her combined.

"Morgan..." my father was frowning. My mother lowered her eyes to the floor. I turned around, set the toast and the butter knife gently down on the counter, and took two steps towards them.

"Any time, you could have asked me. Asked me where I was going, who I was going to be with. I would have told you the truth. Did you know that Mandy is the only person I've ever made love with?" I saw my parents flinch, but I was glad. Some things just needed to be said. "Did you know that she beats me at air hockey most days after school? Did you know that I've hated Sarah Ackerman since fourth grade when she put glue in my seat and ruined my new skirt? Did you know that I have a new friend named Liz, who has bright red hair and plays the clarinet? You don't know a damn thing about my life, and it's not because I keep secrets. You just never cared enough to ask me."

The smell of the eggs brought me back to the counter. I whipped at them with the fork to scramble them, tossed them onto a plate, and reached into the spice cabinet for the cinnamon sugar and the pepper. I was so flustered that I almost dumped pepper onto the toast. I finally got the yellow eggs peppered the way Mandy liked, the toast buttered and sprinkled with cinnamon sugar, and put the knife and fork, which I had wiped with a paper towel, next to the food. "I'm going upstairs to take my *lover* breakfast, and if you two decide that you want to get to know your own daughter for a change, I'll be back down afterwards."

I felt a lot older than eighteen when I brought Mandy her toast. Somehow, she knew something was wrong before I said, "well, it was going to happen eventually." Mandy yawned and reached for her plate, fluffing two of my frilly pillows up to lean against.

"Thank you, angel," she said, giving me a soft kiss on the mouth as my reward. That made me feel a little better. "So, what's the damage?"

"Oh, about what I expected..." I stalled, not really wanting to talk about it. I stole Mandy's fork while she was busy with her toast and speared a bite of her eggs. Chewing bought me another few seconds to organize my thoughts. "I actually did most of the talking. Daddy did say that he didn't raise me to be 'like that,' though."

Mandy rolled her eyes as she reclaimed her fork. Since she had taken back control of the eggs, I picked up a piece of her toast. "Stop eating my breakfast!" Mandy ordered playfully. "There will be none left for me."

"But I made it," I whined, pushing my lower lip out in a puppy dog pout. Mandy wiped a bit of cinnamon sugar from my cheek with one finger.

"Oh, fine, have some," she grumbled, still chewing on a mouthful of her scrambled eggs. Somehow, she managed to keep her mouth mostly closed, so none of it showed.

"My mother just looked sad." I looked up at Mandy and realized that she was a million miles away. Sometimes, the word 'mother' did that to her. "I'm sorry," I said quietly, even though Mandy probably didn't want an apology.

"Coming from anyone else, I'd hate an 'I'm sorry'. You wouldn't believe how many times I've heard it... someone finds out my mom is dead, the first thing they say is, 'oh, I'm sorry...' But I know that you actually mean it. Even though you didn't know her or anything."

I rested my head on Mandy's shoulder, wrapping an arm around her waist as she finished cleaning the plate. "I know you."

"Yeah, you do." I felt Mandy tense up against the line of my side, and I looked up at her chin without moving my head from her shoulder.

"What's up? I do know you, right?"

Mandy tried to smile. "In the biblical sense." But the joke felt cold to both of us. "Sorry. I guess... Gwen, I have something to tell you." Honestly, I thought it was going to be another 'I love you,' so I wasn't prepared when she said, "I think I'm hurting myself."

I pulled my head up, frowning. "What do you mean, hurting yourself?" Mandy lowered the sheet that was tucked under her arms, revealing her breasts. For a few moments, I was too distracted by her nipples reacting to the cold air to notice the scratches on her belly. Had those been there last night? It had been dark, and Mandy stayed below me most of the time, tasting me...

I reached out to touch them and Mandy allowed my small hands to wander over her stomach and sides. Eventually, the curious fingers found themselves covering her breasts, but I did not forget about the gouged pink lines on her belly. "Did you do that, lover?" I asked in a low whisper.

"I had a nightmare again. You weren't in bed with me and I guess I was acting it out or something." I could tell that Mandy really didn't want to talk about this and I was impressed that she had come forward with the story herself. But then I remembered that the scratches were very noticeable in the daylight and I probably would have asked. She was heading me off.

"I didn't want to dump this on you just after your parents found out about us, but I knew..."

"It's okay," I interrupted in a soft voice. "I'm glad you told me." Now, I just had to figure out how to get my lover's head in a better place. What a Christmas break. Sometimes, I just wanted to tuck my head under a pillow, close my eyes, and wish away the winter.

~*~

But before winter could end, I had to go back to school. Starting the first day, I skipped lunch and went to study in the library. I didn't want to deal with Sarah. Cadee, who was still pissed at me for ignoring her numerous texts and phone calls over Christmas Break, visited me during the last ten minutes to catch up. She tried, bluntly, to introduce the topic of my "bisexual phase" into the conversation several times, but I cut her off until she (finally) got the message. Sort of.

When everyone realized that Cadee wasn't ditching me as a friend or treating me any differently (except for several loud questions about whether I found certain girls attractive), the "Great Divide" happened. Several people came up to me at random over the next few days to tell me that they didn't care. It was embarrassing to be singled out, but a few of them were really sincere. I was touched.

Of course, some people thought that declaring their allegiance gave them permission to ask me exactly what I did with Mandy. "I totally don't care if you dig chicks, Gwen. It's cool. So, did you really sleep with Mandy? Did she (insert sexual act here)?" I had a hard time getting rid of these perverts (mostly guys), but they weren't nearly as bad as the members of the student body that suddenly treated me like a leper.

People that I had known since preschool stopped talking to me. It surprised me how much being rejected hurt. I always thought that I was above needing the approval of my classmates, but that was back when I was loved and adored by everyone. Now, I was swinging between wildly popular and loser faster than I could blink.

Solid, reliable Mandy was my rock through it all. Whenever I was overwhelmed by all the attention, whenever Cadee's casual attitude towards the whole thing got to me, whenever some idiot guy asked me to have a threesome, whenever I cried because Susanna or someone that I hadn't even cared about before hated me, she was there.

Mandy's reputation remained mostly unchanged, although several of the guys thought she was a stud for finally popping my cherry. Their comments embarrassed me, but secretly, a little piece of me was proud. I was not ashamed that I had waited for the love of my life and there was no doubt Mandy fit that description. I liked making a statement, even if it was only to myself.

I walked in to my English classroom at the last minute, willing the clock to move double-time so that the day would finish faster. There was only one seat left, and it happened to be right in front of Sarah Ackerman. I winced as she waved me over, looking smug. My pick-your-own-seat strategy had backfired.

"Great," I muttered. Just what I wanted, a whole class period with insults being whispered in my ear. *You're a big girl, you can take this*, I thought, giving myself a private pep talk. But I still felt sick to my stomach when I settled into the chair in front of Sarah. At least it was next to a

window.

Then, I noticed that it was two minutes past the bell and our teacher, Mr. Gregory, still hadn't shown up. He was never late. The class started whispering. "Where is Gregs? Is class cancelled?" I was just grateful that the whispering wasn't about me for a change.

The door opened and we all watched Drew Leavenworth walk in. She was wearing a nice black skirt and looked obnoxiously pretty. I gave myself a mental slap for being jealous of Drew now that Mandy was mine. That thought made me smile a little. I was Mandy's girl now. I just knew that Drew was upset about it. Then I felt guilty for enjoying my competition's (very public) defeat too much.

"Professor Gregory is in a conference," she explained before we could question her. "I had a free slot, so I'm watching his class. Your teacher wants you to write an in-class essay on page 53 of *The Nielson Collection of World Poetry*."

We pulled out the book in unison like a group of trained monkeys. I had to reach for mine since my backpack was on the floor. When I settled back in my seat, I felt something sticky at the tops of my stockings and along the edge of my skirt. I lifted myself back out of my chair and looked down. The blue and white plaid pattern of my skirt was stained with bright red right between my legs. It looked like my period had caught me a day early. Or...

I blushed as red as the stain. Sarah was sicker than I thought. I looked down into my chair and saw a handful of red gushers - broken, of course. Leave it to that bitch to turn her sugary afternoon snack into a ruined skirt and public sexual humiliation.

I thought there would be laughter. Instead, the rest of the class was silent except for a few whispered "oh my God's" and "what's happening's."

I went crazy. Not frustrated-crazy like when I kissed Mandy at the hockey game. Mad-crazy, like I wanted to grab Sarah's hair and tear it out by the roots. I didn't care about anything except putting her in her place and showing her just who the alpha bitch was. I snatched at Sarah's sleeve and jerked her out of her chair. She was too shocked to pull away. She just stared at me with huge, cloudy eyes filled with so many emotions that I could not begin to read them. I saw red.

I let go of her sleeve and grabbed her tie, yanking her face down closer to mine. "All right, slut," I hissed, not even trying to cover the back of my skirt, "you can ruin my clothes, you can make fun of my klutziness, you can tease me for being a dyke, you can spread nasty rumors about me, but you will *not* turn the most beautiful experience of my life into a sick joke. Do you understand?"

Sarah didn't say anything. Her lips trembled. I looked over my shoulder. Drew was staring at me in shock, not believing what she was seeing. Well, since she hadn't rushed in to stop me...

With the entire class watching, I shoved Sarah away from me so hard that she fell back over her

desk and cracked her head against the window. She slumped to the floor, dazed. My stomach was tossing, and I felt like I was submerged in hot water. I wondered if I was going to throw up.

That snapped Professor Leavenworth out of her trance. She hurried forward to check Sarah's head, pushing her thick hair out of the way to look for an injury. "Oh my God," she mumbled as Sarah blinked up at me, shaking almost as badly as I was. No one else moved.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I said hoarsely, turning and walking towards the door. I ignored the hall pass hanging next to it. "Then, I'm going to the Principal's office. You don't have to take me."

Then, something strange happened. Someone's chair scraped at the back of the room. I turned around to look. Alicia was walking towards me, curls clinging to her damp neck. She swallowed nervously. "Wait, I'm coming with you."

"What?" I said stupidly.

"Come on," she said, grabbing my arm and steering me out of the room. The door closed behind us, leaving all of the eyes and whispers and judgmental thoughts on the other side.

~*~

The door to the bathroom shut with a loud thud. I never pictured myself in a second floor bathroom with my girlfriend's ex, standing in my underwear while she tried to get the red stain out of my skirt. Most of my anger had dissolved in to fear and confusion. That was okay, Alicia was mad for me instead.

"I can't believe that whore," she said, clenching her teeth as she attacked my skirt with a wet paper towel. "You didn't do anything to provoke her."

"I sent pictures of her wearing a black thong under white capris from my cell once," I blurted out. It was a stupid thing to say, but Alicia kept battling the stain. She didn't even turn around.

"I am *so* glad that you cracked her stupid head on that window. Maybe it knocked some sense through her thick skull." She was really getting into it, rubbing so hard that pieces of the damp brown towel flew into the sink. My ruined stockings were in one clenched hand, wadded into a tight ball.

"I'm going to get expelled," I said, rocking back on my heels nervously. My heartbeat tripped along twice as fast as it was supposed to go. My forehead still felt warm. "I assaulted another student. I'm fucked."

Alicia held the skirt in front of her. Only some of the stain was gone. There was a big blue wet patch around what was left of the red. "Here, that's all I can get out of it," she said, handing it to me. I didn't know what to do with my stockings, so I tossed them into the trashcan and took the skirt. It was still too wet to put on. At least I was wearing plain white underwear that covered

everything instead of a thong today.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. The question just slipped out. "Why are you helping me?"

Alicia closed her eyes and let out a huge sigh. Her chin fell against her chest and she took in a deep breath through her nose. When she straightened her neck and opened her eyes, she said, "because I know what it feels like."

"Know what it feels like?"

"A lot of things," she tried to explain. Her face was intense, pleading, like she wanted me to understand. "I know what it feels like to be a lesbian. I know what it feels like to be teased. I know what it feels like to lose your virginity. It's special. Anyone who makes you feel ashamed of what you did is sick. They don't even have any proof except that you aren't denying it."

I wasn't sure whether my heart was breaking or being put back together. I had basically stolen Mandy from right under Alicia's nose. But here she was, helping me anyway. Even saying that she understood. I didn't know what to say.

"I don't know what to say," I said. My voice sounded hollow in the tile and porcelain-filled bathroom. My face looked tight and pale in the mirror. I could only see the back of Alicia's head. It was easier than looking at her face.

"I know I'm not your favorite person. But I've always liked you, Gwen. You make her happy... I-I guessed that Mandy was in love with you before... when she touched me, she wasn't looking at me... she was seeing you. I don't want to compete with you. I need to find someone that sees *me* when we make love, someone that needs *me*. That's what I want. But you've got what I want, the best thing in the world, and damn if I'm going to let anyone else ruin that."

I couldn't stand it, I had to look at her face. Alicia blushed shyly. "Maybe it sounds stupid... I don't know... I'm Catholic." I almost started laughing. Quiet, shy Alicia was back, and there was no trace of the angry, vengeful spirit from before. The change was that sudden.

The laughter came out as gasping sobs instead, and I started shaking terribly. "Oh God," I choked out, "only a huge dyke would dump this on her girlfriend's ex."

"The lesbian relationship web." Alicia stepped forward and patted me awkwardly on the back. I was upset, but not far gone enough to collapse onto her shoulder. But it was nice to know there was a shoulder there. "Here, put your skirt on. I can't do this with you half naked."

"Sorry, forgot," I said, stumbling back into my skirt. I didn't have any stockings, and the back of the skirt was still wet, but at least I was covered. "Now I have to go to the Principal's office..."

"Here." Alicia grabbed me a towel from the dispenser and I wiped my eyes.

"Thank you," I said when I was done.

Alicia chewed on the corner of her mouth. The concerned look on her face almost reminded me of Mandy. "Go to the Principal's office. I'm sure Leavenworth's going to come in here looking for you. I'll tell her you went if I see her on the way back."

"Great, another ex," I moaned, covering my eyes with the towel.

"Technically, Mandy doesn't have any exes. You're the first person she's officially dated." That little reminder actually made me smile for a moment. Mandy could make me smile through anything.

Chapter Eight: Mandy

The vibrating ring on my phone nearly made me fall out of my chair when it went off in the middle of sixth period. Making sure that the teacher's back was turned, I opened the purse on my lap, peering at the illuminated screen without taking it out. It was a text from Alicia. My throat went dry as I read it. *Oh, angel, what did you do this time?*

Zippping my purse, I stood up from my desk. The sound of my chair scraping over the floor startled everyone, including the teacher writing on the black board. "I need to... go..." I stammered, twisting through the maze of desks to find the door.

"Miss Swift, are you sick? Do you need someone to come with you?" the professor asked, reaching out a hand. I flinched away.

"Yeah. I don't - feel well... I can go myself." I hurried out of the classroom before anyone could follow me and made a left, down the stairs to the first floor. I had been in the Principal's office before when the rumors about Drew and me started. I denied them. Since Drew was such a goodie-goodie in every other way and there was no proof of any kind, Principal Allen chalked it up to gossip.

Several doors down from Principal Allen's office, I could hear voices carrying from inside. "It shouldn't matter why she did it! She smashed my head against a window! How much clearer do I need to be?" Sarah's loud voice was easily recognizable.

"Excuse me? Everything you've done to me qualifies as sexual harassment! That's grounds for suspension! So don't play the innocent victim here, you bitch."

"Dyke!"

"Slut!"

"Miss Caradoc, Miss Ackerman, sit back down!" Principal Allen shouted.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I ran to the door, almost tripping in my heels, and knocked just underneath the golden nameplate. Without waiting for a response, I opened the door.

Gwen and Sarah were both out of their chairs, fists clenched, staring each other down. Even though she was a few inches shorter, my petite lover didn't seem intimidated at all. In fact, she looked ready to claw Sarah's eyes out.

"All right, ladies, you're going to stop playing Queen of the Mountain right now, or I'm expelling both of you!" Under the Principal's hard stare, both girls went limp.

"Whoa, come here," I said, grabbing Gwen's upper arm and trying to pull her away from Sarah. When she saw who was touching her, Gwen looked shocked. She let me help her back into her chair. I stood behind her, keeping my hand on her shoulder. Still angry, Sarah thumped back down into her own seat.

"I'm sorry for barging in, Principal Allen," I apologized. "I wanted to make sure nothing... unsafe... was about to happen." *I wanted to stop my hotheaded girlfriend from kicking Sarah's ass and getting expelled.*

To my surprise, the Principal let her head fall against the leather back of her chair. She looked exhausted. "It's all right, Mandy. I don't want to think about the paperwork I would have been required to fill out if two students started fighting in my office. Besides, you seem to be involved in this, too."

Principal Allen adjusted the gold-rimmed glasses that sat high on the bridge of her nose. She was a neat looking woman, about fifty, with stout shoulders and clipped, silvery-brown hair.

"I'm going to be very blunt. The last thing the school board needs is two legacies with donor fathers trying to drag each other through the mud." Gwen had the decency to stare at her lap guiltily. Sarah just glared at her from the other side of the room.

"But-" Sarah tried to interrupt, but the Principal silenced her with a glare over the frame of her glasses.

"If there is a disciplinary hearing and paperwork on this, both of your colleges would have to be notified. Don't give me that look, Miss Caradoc. I don't care how high your SATs were. There are plenty of other seniors just like you with rich parents that would take your spot in a heartbeat. Miss Ackerman, I understand that the Admissions board at your father's Alma Mater takes student records very seriously."

"I don't have a record," Sarah said, still pushing. "Gwen is the one -"

"Exactly. If you take action against Miss Caradoc, she is certainly going to charge you with sexual harassment."

"You bet your ass I will," Gwen snapped.

"You bitch -"

"I will not tolerate swearing in this room." Principal Allen's voice was icy cold. "You only have until the end of May, girls. Four months without killing each other. You go to college, and get away from all this with clean records. The school board doesn't have a scandal to deal with, no attorneys are hired, and everybody leaves happy."

Sarah and Gwen locked eyes, frowning at each other.

"You have a decision to make. You can fight dirty and try to get each other in as much trouble as possible, without caring who else you inconvenience in the process... or you can do what's best for everyone, including yourselves."

Gwen was smart enough to know a stalemate when she saw one. She had more to lose than Sarah - assault was a more serious charge than sexual harassment. "I shouldn't have tried to hurt you," she said to Sarah. There was no shame in the words, only empty resignation. "I lost it." I had to admire the way she admitted her mistake without uttering the words 'I'm sorry'. Her pride would never allow her lie and say that to Sarah.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. I squeezed Gwen's shoulder tighter.

"Miss Ackerman, go back to class." Sarah stood up with too much energy, pushing the chair back and practically running out the door. Gwen started to stand, but Principal Allen shook her head. "You two stay for a second." She sat back down. Too nervous and uncomfortable to sit in the empty chair, I stayed standing behind her.

"I'm not going to attack her again," Gwen said. "I just want to make it out of here. The past few weeks have been hell."

"That was what I wanted to talk to you about." She looked up at me for the first time since my rude entrance. "Both of you. Some of this is my fault."

Gwen snorted. "You didn't slam her head into a window."

"No, I didn't. But someone - a teacher - should have dealt with the issue sooner. That is not an excuse for your behavior, Miss Caradoc."

"What does this mean for us now?" I asked.

"It means that my door is open the next time something happens. I can help you file sexual harassment complaints, schedule meetings with other students or teachers, and resolve issues before they escalate to violence. There is some merit in working problems out for yourselves, but when an entire student body seems to be your enemy, you need allies wherever you can get them."

Gwen looked up at me, and both of our eyes got very wide. Both of us could guess why Principal Allen wanted to help us. *It's the short hair*, I thought.

"Both of you go back to class. You were lucky this time, Gwen. Make sure this doesn't happen again, or you're facing expulsion."

~*~

"I can't believe I didn't get expelled," Gwen said, more to herself than to me. Refocusing her attention, she reached for my hand, fingers threading with mine. We were lounging on my bed in our underwear and tank tops (she was wearing an adorable pink set), eating dry cereal right from the box even though it was past dinnertime. Neither of us felt like cooking.

"Mmf?" I tried to respond around a mouthful of cereal.

"I know, I was thinking the exact same thing," Gwen teased as I swallowed. I shoved her playfully. Of course, that meant she had to shove me back, and soon I had her pinned underneath me, tickling her sides mercilessly. The cereal box fell onto the floor beside the bed, completely forgotten.

"Mandy - Stop! Mandy..." At least, that was what Gwen tried to say when she wasn't giggling or gasping for air.

I gave her my best evil grin. "Mandy the merciless shall give no quarter!" I cried, going right for her stomach. She was laughing so hard that she couldn't breathe, her heart hammering in her chest. Eventually, I took pity on her and halted my attack.

It struck me suddenly. My beautiful, sexy, vulnerable lover stretched out beneath me, her tank top riding up just under her breasts to reveal the pale white skin of her belly, her dark, glossy hair spread over the comforter. Why had it taken me so long to notice this? I leaned down for a kiss.

One soft kiss turned into two kisses and then another nice, long kiss that gave Gwen time to push me off her and back me up against the headboard of the bed. She could be an aggressive little thing when she wanted attention. Somehow, she maneuvered herself onto my lap as she wiggled out of her tank top, revealing two small, perfect breasts that my hands immediately cupped. She arched into the touch like a cat and I swore I could hear her purr.

Still not satisfied, Gwen buried her face in my neck, moving my leg with her small hands until it was right where she wanted it, rubbing against her. "Hey, Princess, hey..." I murmured, pressing soothing kisses to the crown of her head. I wanted to slow things down. "What are you doing, huh?"

Gwen's eyes were screwed shut. The muscles of her stomach jumped as my hands left her breasts to stroke them. "You can't tell? Must be doing it wrong, then." She bit her lower lip, pushing harder against my thigh. This time, wetness coated my skin through the soft fabric of her panties. I could feel the outline of swollen lips beneath the damp, clinging material.

My hands cupped her bottom, helping her glide along a patch of skin. Warm, panting breaths hit my shoulder. She buried her face in my neck, her whole body shaking. As she got wetter, the

pumping motion turned into a smooth glide. "Can you come like this, angel?" I asked.

"Yeah..." she hissed through gritted teeth. "Close. Ah... Mandy..."

The heavy grind stopped. I could feel her quivering against my thigh, almost like I was cradling her with my hand. "Wait. I don't want to."

I looked down at her in shock. "What do you mean you don't want to?"

"I want you to do something else for me..."

"Anything."

Slowly, Gwen pulled away from me. Her hands traced patterns over my thighs and she wetted her lips with the tip of a small pink tongue. "Anything?"

"Anything," I promised. "What do you want, angel?"

Shyly, she pressed her stomach onto the bed, draping herself right over my lap. My hands immediately went to the round globes of her bottom, pushing the elastic of her cutesy underwear out of the way. It had looked sweet before, but now it was in my way, and I wanted it off. "You didn't answer the question, sweet cheeks," I teased.

Gwen just looked up at me with her beautiful gray eyes. Twin spots of red burned on her pale cheeks. Suddenly, I realized what she wanted. I was thrown for a loop. "Wait. No, no, no... I am *not* spanking you. Why the hell do you want me to hit you?"

"Please?" she whispered. And there were those helpless gray eyes. How could I resist that? "You don't have to do it hard... just try?"

I lifted my head to the ceiling and sighed, still tracing Gwen's backside with my hands. "My girlfriend is insane," I moaned, shaking my head. The idea was quickly worming itself into my brain and latching on. I found myself pulling her panties down, letting them catch at her knees.

"You said anything I wanted," she said, looking over her shoulder with a sexy pout.

"Turn that pretty head back around." For a moment, I just stared at the creamy white skin finally revealed to me, not sure how to start. I had never done this before. I figured it would be easier to work my way up. *Okay, Mands, you can do this.* Slowly, I lifted my arm. The muscles in Gwen's back rippled. I brought the hand down with a light pat.

Gwen looked back over her right shoulder. "Amanda Swift, that was not a spank."

"You be quiet," I insisted. "If I spank you, that means I'm on top and I say what goes. You don't say a word. You can scream, but if you tell me to stop, I'm going to stop, and we aren't starting again." I knew that I would never hit her hard enough to make her scream, but I had a feeling

that Gwen wanted to be told what to do in addition to the spanking part.

I lifted my hand again. *She asked for it*, I reminded myself, and selected my target. Gwen jumped when I swatted her right cheek, but didn't make a sound. As I rubbed the place I had struck, I noticed a light pink flush to her skin. Teasingly, I dipped my fingers between her legs, finding my lover very swollen, very warm, and very wet. She looked up at me pitifully, her dark hair clinging to her cheek, asking *again*?

So I did it again. Harder this time. The palm of my hand stung a little, but only enough to make it warm. I started a pattern - rubbing her backside until all her muscles relaxed, spreading her delicate pink lips and stroking her until she started to rock against my fingers, and then bringing my other hand down with a firm smack. She made soft sounds with each stroke - little whimpers, tiny sighs, low groans.

She began to squirm, the muscles of her bottom twitching with every spank, still trying to rub against the slippery fingers that were teasing her. Seeing my helpless little lover wiggling on my lap, breathless from feeling so many sensations at once, was amazing... sexy... powerful... a little naughty. Mostly, it was overwhelming. My head spun with the trust she had placed in me.

"You can talk now, princess," I said. "Tell me what you want."

"Inside," she pleaded, her voice breaking.

Hearing her beg was too much and I cupped what belonged to me. As I eased two fingers deep inside of her, she came for me, sprawled over my lap and gasping for breath. I loved the trembling ripples that spread out from her stomach and the soft curve of her bottom. So beautiful. Pulling her up off of my lap, holding her close, I could feel her fast heartbeat. Still joined, her soft, fluttering velvet muscles clutched at my fingers.

"Thank you," she breathed, pressing soft butterfly kisses all over my face. "Thank you, thank you, thank you. I love you."

"I love you, too, Gwen," I said, nuzzling her hair as she nipped behind my ear. "I didn't hurt you, right, princess?"

"No..." she panted, still trying to catch her breath. "It just felt warm. And tingly."

Both of us looked at each other and started laughing. "I felt a little silly doing that," I confessed. "And a little nervous."

"I was embarrassed asking you," she admitted, her eyes flicking away.

"You didn't seem embarrassed," I reassured her, "just pushy." Both of us started giggling again. Teasingly, I wiggled my fingers, which were still wrapped in a warm, tight glove. Gwen moaned, shifting her hips to fit me more comfortably inside of her. "Oh God, I can't go again so soon, sweetheart. I think you broke it."

This time, I outright laughed. "Nooo... just broke it in."

"I feel like I just got run over by a truck."

"It was that big an orgasm?" I asked with wide, surprised eyes.

"Oh God, yes..." she purred, one of her small hands reaching for my right breast. I gasped as she tweaked a pebbled nipple. "But, you know, just because my body needs a little time to recover doesn't mean I'm not interested in continuing..." I was content to lie back on the bed while my lover began kissing her way down my body, intent on repaying me for her special treat.

~*~

A knock at the front door startled me in the middle of my cleaning. I was bent over, picking up the gray hoodie that Gwen had left on the floor. Since she had only left twenty or thirty minutes before, I figured she forgot something else besides the hoodie and decided to come back.

I left the living room and headed for the front door. "Princess, you're beautiful and I love you to pieces, but why do you have to leave your damn clothes all over my house? I'm your girlfriend, not your maid! If you don't start acting like a good girl, I'm going to have to spank you again!" I hollered, figuring she would hear me from outside and know I was coming. When I opened the door and saw glossy raven hair, gray eyes, and a pale face, I almost leaned in for a kiss. But before I even started moving, I realized it wasn't Gwen.

Gwen's mother looked surprised and a little uncomfortable, but not angry when she saw me. "Hello, Mandy," she said, even giving me a smile. It was not her beautiful fake smile. It was thin, unsure, but not forced, either.

"Uh, hi... Mrs. Caradoc, what are you...?" my voice trailed off and I stepped backwards, gesturing for her to come in. "Er, you probably don't want to stand outside. Right. This is Gwen's." I shoved the hoodie into her arms, wishing that I had just stayed in bed this morning after Gwen left.

She draped the hoodie over one arm, looking down at it, then back at me. "She didn't come home last night..." I suddenly noticed the dark circles under her eyes. "I guess you know that. I haven't always been the most attentive parent, but I do care. I thought she would be here."

"You just missed her. She left about twenty minutes ago. Do you want me to take your coat? Get you coffee? Something?" I felt ridiculous, trying to entertain Gwen's mother in a house that was nothing like hers. It didn't help that she knew I was sleeping with her daughter.

"No, it's all right, but thank you." She looked to one side and bit the corner of her mouth, as if she wanted to say something else. "But since I'm here, I want to talk to you about something..." This was not what I had been expecting to hear, so I just kept my lips pressed together and waited. "I love Gwen, but I realized a few days ago that I don't know a thing about her."

Suddenly, I wished that I had Gwen's hoodie back, something warm to hold that smelled like her. This was a very confusing conversation, and I hadn't even said anything yet.

"My husband is still having problems... accepting this. But I know that if we make her choose between you and us, she's going to pick you. No trust fund will change her mind. If there is one thing I know about Gwen, it's that she's stubborn."

I smiled a little then. "She is, isn't she?" But it was endearing. That's my girl, I thought. And I was flattered that she would pick me over her family. It was not a choice I wanted her to make, but it was a big ego booster. Gwen had told me that she would before, but hearing it from her mother was a totally different thing.

"Apparently, she hasn't changed that much since she was a toddler if she's still leaving her clothes everywhere," said her mother. I blushed.

"Not at all. Listen," I began awkwardly, "I don't want to take Gwen away from you... I'm not looking to mess up your relationship with her or anything."

"You love her. I would have to be blind not to see... you want her to have her family. And that's why I want your help."

Now the conversation had gone completely over my head, into the realms of the impossible. I was floored. "Uh... help?" It occurred to me that I had been saying 'uh' and 'er' a lot, and I wanted to make a good impression. This was my first real interaction with one of Gwen's parents since they had found out about our relationship. "I mean, why do you need my help?"

Morgan Caradoc took a deep breath. It was so strange seeing her with a serious expression instead of that too-happy smile. She still looked beautiful without it, but much more real. "I want my daughter back. I'm afraid that Matthew and I... somewhere along the line, we chose the wrong priorities. It started with wanting the best for Gwen. Wanting her to be well connected through us, to be wealthy through us - and it became a habit. We... this is hard to admit. Somewhere along the line, we lost her."

I blinked. "I think I understand," I said, swallowing hard. What I said next would be important. I couldn't screw it up. "Gwen... Gwen can be very cynical, and she likes to hold a grudge. But I know she loves you back."

I continued in a quieter voice, wanting to lower my eyes. A part of me felt guilty about betraying Gwen's confidence, but I thought this was important. "She feels like the people around her don't understand. She's been playing a role for so long, it's drained her."

There was a startled look on Morgan Caradoc's face, but I was not sure which part of my little speech had prompted it. "I should have been around to notice..."

"No, she did a great job hiding it. No one had any idea. But, you know... when you get to know Gwen again... I think you'll like her. She's blunt, but honest. Really smart, really loyal once you

get on her good side. She won't back down once she hooks her nails in to something. Brave. And very sweet and... vulnerable... when she trusts you."

I immediately imagined Gwen and I making love, her small body beneath mine, tilting her head so that I could kiss her soft throat. Parting her legs to let me inside. Warm velvet quivering around my fingers. My angel. So much trust.

Gwen's mother did not notice my glazed eyes, or if she did, she ignored it. That proved how in love with Gwen I was. I could even fantasize about being with her while her mother was right in front of me. My eyes had stopped working and turned inward to watch what was happening in my brain, so at least I hadn't really been looking at her.

"Mrs. Caradoc?" I gave her a shy, hesitant, slightly embarrassed smile. "Go back and find her."

~*~

"I'm not going all the way back to her!" Gwen whined, tossing her colored card into the middle of the board and crossing her arms over her breasts. She stuck out her lower lip like a sulking child - basically what she was. Gwen was not very good at playing board games

"This is your fault! If you hadn't made me stay on that stupid 'Lost in the Lollipop Woods' dot for all those turns, I would have already won, and wouldn't need to go back to Gramma Nut!"

"You're a nut," I said, stroking her cheek. "This is the 1984 version of Candyland, you have to play by the original rules. You can't move from the dot until you draw the right color."

"But -" Gwen turned pleading gray eyes on me, hoping to get me to bend the rules. I remained firm.

"But nothing. At least you didn't have to go back to Mr. Mint."

Gwen's pathetic expression transformed into one of annoyance. She flipped me off and muttered, "suck on this candy cane, then. Candyland is a stupid game."

"No, you're just a poor sport."

"Fine, see if you get any tonight."

I wiggled my eyebrows at her, trying to brighten the mood. "I always get some. My girlfriend is really hot."

Gwen raised her eyebrows back at me. "Oh, is she?" She pretended to sound interested.

"Yeah. But yours is way hotter."

Gwen snorted, rolling her eyes. "Fine, draw your stupid card so I can win and we can finish the stupid game." I knew that Gwen was only pretending to be irritated. I usually beat her at most

games we played, except for Monopoly. For some strange reason, just like in real life, money seemed to stick to Gwen's fingers. Even though she usually lost, she liked playing with me. There was a time, in the distant past, where I had cheated to let her win, but she got so upset when she caught me that I swore never to purposely let her beat me again. I knew better now.

I picked a card and moved to the next red square, well past Queen Frostine. "You kind of look like her," I said, studying the cartoon woman in the upper right hand corner of the board.

"You look like the Molasses Monster," Gwen quipped.

I gave Gwen a fake look of anger. "If you don't straighten out, I'll have to spank you again," I threatened. "Wait, that doesn't work. If you DO straighten out, I'll spank you again."

That made Gwen's cheeks blush bright pink, and for once she stayed quiet. I smiled, satisfied that my threat would stifle any complaints from my opponent. "I talked to your mother today," I told her as she drew her card and moved forward to the next blue square.

"I know," she said calmly, studying the card with unnecessary intensity. I touched her hand, moving the card out of the way so that I could see her eyes. Our hands and the card rested on her right thigh.

"She was worried about you."

"I know," she repeated.

"I told her I'd talk to you..."

"About forgiving her?" I nodded. "It's not that simple, Mandy," she said, lowering her pretty gray eyes. Her face was sad now, not playful or pretending to be annoyed. To add a pause, she drew the next card and handed it to me. It was yellow. "It's complicated."

"I don't see how it's complicated. Your mother wants to get to know you better, because she's realized she doesn't have a very strong relationship with you. I think you should give her that chance."

"I gave her that chance every day." Gwen's voice was strained, and her eyes were bright, but there were no tears. Instead, she looked resolute, stony cold. "She could have asked me about my life any time. I did try to tell her. She never listened. Neither did my father. And what about him? He hasn't tried to change anything between us. He can hardly look at me..."

Ah, so that's what's really bothering you, sweetheart... I understood. Gwen wanted to distance herself from her parents as much as possible so she would not be hurt if she disappointed them. Having a gay child was rough on even the most accepting mothers and fathers.

I chose my words carefully. "It's not easy to open up to your parents again, especially when they have let you down in the past. I know you don't want them to be disappointed in you and it's

easier to just pretend you don't care." Gwen did not deny anything I said. "But is it worth the risk?"

"What risk?" she asked.

"The risk of losing your chance forever. My Mom was taken away before I finished growing up. She never got to help me pick out my first bra, or teach me how to drive. She won't be around to see my high school graduation or come visit me at college. When - when we get married, she won't be able to come to our wedding. She won't be able to hold our children in her arms and be a grandmother."

Gwen was stunned. Her face was completely blank, but I could tell that she was listening intently. I was so determined to get my message across to her that I didn't realize that this was the first time I had mentioned having children with Gwen, or a big wedding. We had discussed marriage once before, but that was pillow talk. This was over a children's board game. It could not be blamed on the heat of the moment.

"All I'm saying is, don't blow your chance. If it doesn't work out, at least you'll have tried. Rushing to burn bridges just leaves you stuck on the other side of the shore with no one there to share your life."

"You will be there," Gwen said in a soft voice.

I held her hand. "Yeah, I'll be there. But if it's just us two, we might get a little lonely."

"I dunno." Gwen sounded a little more cheerful. "I could never be lonely with you around."

"You don't have to choose between me and your Mom. You know you'd be happier with us both. I actually told her that."

"My Mom?"

"Yeah."

Gwen's thumb rubbed gently over my knuckles, exploring the four dips. "Well... when you're right, you're right," she sighed. "What do I have to lose?"

"A lot," I admitted. "But you have so much more to gain. I'll be here for you if things get worse."

~*~

The nightmares and memories started getting worse. They were thorns, choking me and sucking the life out. They rested in the dark and waited.

Nothing helped. Even Gwen's arms only pushed them back for a little while. I could only sleep if she was holding me, and sometimes not even then. I noticed that I was hiding in the pantry more and more often. Sometimes I would wake up at night and throw the covers off, bolting out of bed

and running for the kitchen as fast as possible. Sometimes I managed to stop myself halfway there and override whatever had hijacked my brain. Usually not.

It was disgusting. I was nineteen years old, hiding in the pantry just like when I was seven. I wondered why I always returned there when I was little. I should have been smart to realize that using the same hiding spot over and over again didn't work.

I hated the pantry, but at least it was safe. Sometimes I came out with stinging pink gouges on my arms, wet but not bloody, or a yellow-purple bruise where I'd slammed my head into the wall. I made sure there wasn't anything I could hurt myself with in there, unless I wanted to stab my eyes out with Special K.

Somehow, Gwen knew not to follow me, but I could tell that she was getting scared. She tried once, but I wouldn't let her in. I knew it would happen soon. Soon, she would confront me. Maybe she'd threaten to tell my father. Maybe she'd leave me. Maybe she'd stay for a little while, working to make me better until she drained herself and gave up.

But she kept putting it off and putting it off - hoping, I guess, that I would talk to her about it without being forced. She wanted me to come to her, to prove to both of us that I trusted her, but she had it all wrong. I did trust her; I was just too scared of being crazy to ask for help.

Chapter Nine: Gwen

The phone call came in the middle of the night. I hung up after three rings, assuming it was a wrong number, and tossed my cell phone onto the floor instead of setting it back on the nightstand. When it rang again, I dragged myself out of bed and groped over the carpet, trying to follow the noise.

"Hello?" I answered, squinting my eyes at the brightly glowing screen. My voice cracked with sleep and my knees were sore from the rough texture of the rug.

No answer. Just muffled sobbing and choked gasps. I felt around for my glasses, cursing when I accidentally knocked them onto the carpet. "Hello?" I asked again as my fingers found the thin frames. I settled them on my nose and read the number on the phone's screen even though it burned my eyes. It was Mandy.

"Mandy, what's going on? What's wrong?" I asked, picking myself up and stumbling over to my closet. The crying got louder. If something had happened to Mandy, I needed to be there.

"I want to die." The words were so soft that I could barely understand them, but their echo in my head was deafening. It almost broke me because I knew she meant it. Every word. She did want to die. I could only hope that she also wanted to live.

"Where are you?" Silence for a few seconds, then more muffled crying and labored breathing. *Tell me*, I screamed inside, *fight it and tell me*. I knew that if I could just get to her, everything would be okay. Had to be okay. I could not consider the alternative.

"In my garage," she whispered. I felt my face go white.

"Amanda. Sweetie. Get out of there. Go to your room." My legs were shaking badly, but somehow I managed to run. I didn't even bother to put on shoes or a coat. I ran down the stairs as fast as I could, barely remembering to grab my car keys. I realized that I had left my purse and my driver's license upstairs, but didn't think twice about going back to get them.

"I shouldn't want to die. I love you. I love you so much. I don't deserve you."

"You do deserve me," I tried to say, but she interrupted.

"No. You're perfect. Even with the perfect girl, I can't be happy. It's because I'm bad. There's something... sick... in me. It wants to kill me."

I was too scared to understand what she was talking about, but I understood that I needed to keep her on the phone as long as possible. "I'm coming over, okay?" I told her as I ran into the cold garage and opened the door to my car. "I'm leaving my house now."

"You're a fucking terrible driver, Gwen. Did you know that?" She tried to laugh, but it cracked and she broke into a fresh round of sobs. "God hates me." She was leaping from one topic to another so fast that my mind couldn't keep up. I kept the phone cradled between my shoulder and my right cheek, pulling out of the long driveway, through the gate, and zooming out into the dark empty street. The streetlights cast a sickly pale glow over the concrete and tar.

"Oh, My Heart..." My eyes stung with tears. I did not have to see her to know just how much she was hurting. For one agonizing moment, I hated myself for not being able to take away that pain.

"I don't want to feel anything." Her voice was louder in my ear, almost frantic. "I don't want to feel anything anymore! I was fine. I was safe. Everything was gray before and it didn't matter, but everything matters now, and I can't take it. I can't... I hate feeling. I hate this. I hate me. I want to die."

Every bitter word scraped against my heart. I felt like I was bleeding on the inside. Bleeding thick, black rivers of grief instead of blood. Somehow, I pushed through it and drove, following the ghostly beams of my headlights. It was five after three in the morning, so I didn't even bother stopping at the stop signs as I headed for the city. No one was out anyway.

"I hate you," Mandy said. Those words did not hurt me at all. She was not saying them. It was the ugliness inside her. It was afraid. The demon knew that I was coming and it was frightened. I almost laughed hysterically. Gwendolyn Caradoc, demon slayer. Mandy was my brave protector, my rock, my support, my love. Now it was my turn to charge in and save her.

"I love you," I said back. "All of you. Every inch of your heart, I love it all. You can't do this, Mandy. You belong to me now, like I belong to you."

The rest of the drive was a blur. I know I spoke to her. Sometimes she spoke back. Sometimes she cried. Twice, she screamed. Sometimes we didn't talk at all and just listened to each other's breathing.

The time it took to get from my house to Mandy's felt like a second and an eternity, but it was probably around half an hour. The garage door was lowered. Leaving the keys in the ignition, I ran up and started pounding on the white wood and steel. It made an ugly rattling sound that hurt my ears, but I didn't care.

"Mandy, let me in!" I said into the phone, praying that she was still on the other end.

"No." The voice was flat and lifeless. Not her again.

"Let me in."

"No," said Not-Mandy. "I don't want to feel. Go away." She sounded serious, but I recognized those words for what they were. A death rattle. The last defense of the twisted ugliness she had been harboring for so long. It did not want to come out.

"Amanda Swift, you are *not* allowed to just give up and die! You can't do that until you marry me, get me pregnant, grow old with me, and finish loving me forever. Let me in!"

She hung up the phone. I had lost and the demon had won.

There was a groaning, screeching sound as the garage door lifted. In pajamas, bare feet, and only one arm stuffed through the sleeve of my coat, I ran inside to find her.

There was blood on the upholstery of her car. There were open cuts on her wrists and neck. They were not shallow hesitation-cuts. She had deliberately sliced herself open. Not deep enough to kill herself, just enough to hurt and punish. The windows were rolled down and she was holding the keys in a pale white hand covered in red streaks. Her green eyes looked almost black. My heart stopped for a moment.

"Amanda, please..." That woke her up, calling her Amanda. She dropped the keys and covered her face, her entire body trembling. "God, this is crazy. I'm crazy. What are you doing to me, Gwen?"

I opened the door to the car and moved onto her lap, not caring that there was no space. I showered kisses on her cheeks, the corners of her mouth, her eyelids. "Why won't you let me in? Why can't you trust me? We can-"

"I do trust you!" Her voice sounded far away, swallowed by the white noise in my head. My heartbeat was loud, thundering. "I don't trust me! I didn't save her. I could have saved her, maybe. Maybe..."

"You couldn't have saved her... She was-"

"I tried to wake her up. Her heart was all wrong. It was so fast. I fell when she jerked, but... in a minute... she didn't any more. The worst part is her skin being the wrong color. It looks like wet paper, all stretched up in some places like it doesn't fit right. And there are the bruises all over her arms, ugly purple-green bruises with red openings. I didn't know what they were then. Now, when I see them, I do."

"Amanda." Her eyes were still closed. I kissed the lids and she opened them. "Amanda, look at me." Her cheeks were wet, and she wiped tears from her lips. "An overdose kills you in minutes. There wouldn't have been any time. A doctor probably couldn't have done anything. How could a seven-year-old girl have saved her?"

"If she loved me, she wouldn't have done it. I could have made her love me more and then she would have stopped using drugs. He came to hurt me because I didn't save her. If she was alive, he wouldn't have."

I opened her mouth and she jerked away, her limp hair whipping into her face and sticking to her skin. "I could have made it go away if you just let me! I could have killed myself in peace, maybe with sex, probably with a knife or pills or a gun, something. But then you made me fall in love with you and now I can't! I can't stop feeling!"

Both of us were shaking as I brushed her hair away. I tried to speak twice, but no words came out. Finally, "we'll make it better." She buried her face in my neck and I fell in love with her all over again.

"You haven't made it better yet," she said, her last defense. "I wanted you to."

"That's because you didn't let me. I love you. Your mother loves you. Will you let me now?"

She said yes.

Epilogue, pt. 1 of 3: Mandy

"Therapy? Are you serious?" I hissed at Gwen, refusing to get out of the passenger's seat of the car. Driving with my crazy girlfriend was a bad enough experience by itself. Carefully, I unwrapped my fingers from the handle above my door. Now I understood why she had insisted on driving. If I knew where she was taking me, I wouldn't have come.

"Yeah, therapy," she said, completely serious.

I crossed my arms over my chest, refusing to move even though the door was open, letting in the cold air. I decided to try the guilt tactic. "You think I'm messed up, don't you? That's why you want me to go to therapy."

Gwen was not surprised. She leaned forward and kissed my forehead, offering her hand to help me out of my seat, but I didn't take it. I just sat there, arms still folded over my breasts, lips pressed together. No way was I going to therapy. I didn't need to pay some shrink to tell me that my mind was messed up because of my drug-addict mother and my pedophile uncle.

"No, I don't think you're messed up," said Gwen. But she was lying. Even I knew that I was messed up. "Fine, you're messed up. Is that what you want to hear? Well, listen to this: you scared the life out of me that night and now you have to pay for it. I want you alive so you can stay with me."

"But I didn't kill myself and Psychologists are all intrusive," I protested, searching for more reasons to stay outside. "I don't want someone I don't even know poking around in my private life."

Gwen sighed, shaking her head. February snowflakes fell on her braids, scattering spots of white over the long, twisting black ropes. "Mandy, this isn't just some stranger, she's a trained psychologist. She's very nice."

I rolled my eyes.

"My psychologist recommended her. See, Mandy? I'm a normal person and I'm seeing a psychologist, too. It doesn't mean you're insane."

I frowned. "Yeah, but all rich white girls from old money see psychologists because of their overbearing mothers and absent fathers who try to buy affection with a credit card." A flash of hurt crossed my lover's face, but she hid it quickly. "I'm sorry," I said, feeling guilty. "I didn't mean that. Why did you keep it a secret?"

"You never asked," said Gwen. "Also, I knew how you would react. I'm seeing someone to try and deal with my parents and my random violent outbursts. I screwed up when I smashed Sara's head on the window."

"I'm not going," I said stubbornly, pulling myself together for one last attempt. "You're what I need, not some shrink. You're enough for me."

Gwen just shook her head, taking my arms and unfolding them. She grabbed my bare hand with her mittened one and pulled, leading me out into the snow like some kind of sacrificial lamb. "What the hell am I doing?" I asked myself out loud.

"You know you need this."

"I told you, I don't want to be another statistic. To her, I'll just be some rape victim with an

abusive past and a neglectful parent. I'm more than the result of those experiences..."

"Of course you are," Gwen said, opening the door to the office. Warm air washed over us, making my fingers and the tip of my nose tingle as blood returned to the cold, pale skin.

Gwen showed me the way to the elevator, pressing the up button with a covered finger. I wished I had thought to bring winter gear for the walk back outside to the car. I hoped to be making that walk sooner rather than later.

"Listen, Mandy," she said as we waited. I frowned, staring at my boots. That didn't work well, since Gwen was shorter than me and could put her face right under mine until our noses were touching. "Listen," she whispered again, "you want me to be the happiest girl in the world, right?"

"Right," I said, not sure where she was going with this.

She kissed me softly on the lips. "Good. And you think I deserve all the love you can give me, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, you can't give me all of you until you work on yourself a little first."

I couldn't think of a response to that. She was right. Broken, I could only give Gwen so much of myself. She deserved the best girlfriend possible. Right now, I was too crazy to be that girlfriend. Luckily, she loved me enough to stick with me while I worked on my problems. The sooner I got my head on straight, the sooner I could start giving Gwen everything she wanted and deserved.

With a ding, the elevator came to a stop. My stomach dropped. "Calm down, Lancelot. Go slay the dragon," she said, shoving me forward. "I am going across the street for coffee. I'll be back to pick you up in an hour."

"You're just going to leave me to the lions?" I asked, giving her most pitiful look.

I guess she felt sorry for me because she stood on tiptoe, grabbed the collar of my coat, and dragged me down for a lip-bruising, tongue-swirling kiss that seared my soul. I almost collapsed on top of her.

"Wow," I breathed, trying to regain my balance.

She smiled against my lips. "Yeah, wow," she said. "There's more where that came from if you're good for Dr. Miller today."

I swallowed nervously. I wanted to ask, 'are you sure I have to do this?' But now that Gwen had reminded me of my reason for coming to therapy - her - I couldn't back out. I had never been able to go for myself. For her, I would do anything.

"Swift, Amanda?" the receptionist called out, looking past her little glass window to see if anyone had looked up.

"Here," I said. "Do you need my insurance information?"

A couple of minutes later, I found myself sitting on a typical psychologist's couch across the room from a short, gray-haired woman with glasses. She was wearing a nice green sweater. Dr. Miller looked like somebody's grandma. She should have been baking cookies instead of helping victims of neglect and abuse.

"So, Mandy, I don't know very much about you, except for your medical history," she said, glancing down at her notepad. I felt uncomfortable as she scratched something out on it with her pen. She noticed. "You don't like it when I write stuff down, do you?" she asked.

"No," I answered truthfully.

She set the notepad on her desk beside her and put away the pen. I felt a little better. "Thanks," I said, grateful for the concession.

Dr. Miller did not look upset. "I was just going to take notes to help me remember, but I can write down my thoughts after you're gone. I sense you're a little uncomfortable being here. Want to tell me why?" She did not seem offended, only interested in a polite, slightly concerned way.

I twisted my hands in my lap, staring at my feet instead of into Dr. Miller's face. "I guess I don't like the idea of therapy."

She peered at me over her glasses. "Do you think you need therapy?" She really did look like a grandma. I guess I was expecting some guy in a suit and that was why she surprised me so much.

I struggled with that answer. "I think I might need it, but I don't want it."

"Then why did you decide to come here today?"

"Well," I explained, a little embarrassed, "I'm in a relationship with someone... they want me to go to therapy so that our relationship can be better. She's probably right."

"She?"

"Gwen." I felt more comfortable talking about Gwen than about myself. "She's my girlfriend."

Dr. Miller did not look or act surprised. She just smiled at me. "You're lucky to have someone looking out for you."

I smiled too. "Yeah, I am." I took a deep breath, committing myself. "Alright, Doc. I'll try and talk to you, if you try and fix my head so that I can make my girl happy."

"You've got a deal, but I'm not a miracle worker. I can only guide you. You have to do the work and the thinking."

"Okay," I said with a newfound determination.

"Since you're still getting used to this, why don't I tell you a little more about myself and what I do first?"

I felt a wave of relief crash over me. Anything to stall the probing questions. "Sure," I said, trying not to sound too happy about the idea.

"I've been working as a psychologist for over twenty years. I have a Bachelor's Degree from the University of Phoenix, and my Masters and PhD are from Columbia. I moved to Boston about ten years ago because my husband got promoted. I have two children, and five grandchildren. I like reading, baking, and woodworking."

That last one surprised me. "Woodworking?"

"Surprised you, didn't I?" She grinned. "I can make my own furniture, too. Don't judge a book by its cover." I felt a little better about working with Dr. Miller after hearing that. Hopefully, she wouldn't judge me quickly, either.

"I mostly work with survivors of rape and sexual abuse. There's no particular event in my own past that drew me to that kind of work. I just ended up with a lot of patients working through those issues when I started practicing, and it kind of stuck."

Understanding dawned. "That's why Gwen picked you."

"Your girlfriend told you which psychologist to go to?"

I smiled sheepishly. "I didn't realize I was coming here until the car pulled into the parking lot."

Surprisingly, Dr. Miller laughed. "Wow. She must have known you'd be really upset. Are you angry at her?"

"A little," I admitted. "But most of that is probably just me being defensive about my problems. I told Gwen I didn't want some shrink poking around in my head. I don't want to be treated like some statistic case."

"You aren't a case," said Dr. Miller. "You have a name. That's one reason why talk therapy can be so helpful for anyone going through problems in their lives. It's tailored to fit you, not like medication."

I winced. "You don't think I'll need medication, do you?" I hated the thought of being drugged up, especially after my mother's addiction. That was why I quit the pot, after all. Also because of

Gwen.

"I don't know yet, but if you don't want to take it, no one will make you. Lots of people I have worked with improve without chemical help." The knot in my chest loosened.

"Okay. I guess you want to know why Gwen sent me to you," I said. I gathered my courage, getting ready to say the words. She had probably already figured it out for herself. "My mom died when I was really young..." My throat squeezed up, but I forced the rest out anyway. The hardest part was already hanging in the air between us. Comparatively, the rest was easy. "I was sexually abused by an uncle after that. My father caught him, charged him, and he was sent to jail."

Dr. Miller was silent for a long moment. "You seem to have a harder time talking about your mother than about your uncle." She left the unspoken question out there for me to grab.

I chewed on my lip, tasting the pink strawberry lipgloss I had painted on earlier. "Yeah. She died of a drug overdose." My eyes fluttered shut for a moment. I imagined Gwen next to me, holding my hand. "I guess my brain thinks that I deserved what my uncle did to me because I couldn't save my mom."

"It sounds like you've thought a lot about this." Dr. Miller didn't confirm or deny anything I had said.

"Mmhmm." I had expected her to bombard me with questions about what happened to me. Instead, she seemed content to let me talk at my own pace. I began to feel more confident around her. "I was there when she died. I saw it."

"How old were you?"

It was her first direct question about my past, but I got the feeling that she wouldn't push for an answer if I didn't want to give one. "I was six." My voice was soft, but clear. "Do you think you can fix me, Doc?"

Dr. Miller shook her head. "You aren't broken, Mandy. Like I said, I can't magically fix all of your problems. You have to do that yourself. But I can guide you, and give you some ideas, if you let me. Okay?"

I smiled. "Okay."

Epilogue, pt. 2 of 3: Gwen

"Know what I love about opening the pool?" I asked, stretching my arms out to both sides and letting my shoulders sag against the wall of the hot tub.

"What?" Mandy was watching Alicia and Liz play volleyball against Callie and Cadee over in the kidney bean shaped pool. Alicia and Cadee wore string bikinis (Cadee's was more revealing), Liz wore a one-piece, and Callie, in a fit of rebellion, chose guy trunks and a tank top. She had tried to take the tank top off just to prove that she could do whatever the hell she wanted when Aunt Scary wasn't around. Fortunately, I talked her out of it. I also ignored the tiny voice in my head that reminded me how much nicer Callie's breasts were than mine. My confidence swelled when I remembered that Mandy only had eyes for me.

"Gwen?" I snapped out of my thoughts, startled by Mandy's voice. "Gwen! You can't ask me a question and then stop the conversation."

I stuck out my tongue, repositioning myself so that one of the massager jets pulsed against a sore spot in my lower back. "Oh, sorry. I was just thinking that opening the pool means it's almost summer. And once it's summer..."

"No more school, which means..."

"No more Sarah! Like, ever! Isn't it amazing?"

Mandy grinned. Her smile was dazzling. "Yeah. I would love to prank her on the last day of school, but I don't want to get Allen in trouble." Spring was treating Mandy well this year, just like every year. She was already beginning to tan and her blonde curls were several shades lighter. I swallowed and reminded myself not to drool.

"Spike!" Callie shouted, slamming the ball with an audible thwap. Of the four players, she was the only one with real athletic ability. She and Cadee were winning, partially because of Callie's skill and partially because Cadee kept flashing Alicia and Liz accidentally-on-purpose. They started stumbling over themselves with embarrassment. I wasn't fazed by it - I had seen her use the same trick in gym class many times.

"I call we trade teams!" Liz pouted, crossing her arms over her chest and pretending to sulk. She was really beginning to open up. Glancing over at the two of us soaking in the hot tub, Liz caught my eye and looked from Callie to Alicia. I got the message. My protégé was learning how to read body language and give subtle cues! I was so proud...

"Stop whining! Callie, go be on Alicia's team," I said.

Cadee, who had also picked up on the chemistry between them, jumped on the bandwagon. She was pretty good at recognizing sexual attraction despite being a total airhead. "Come be on my team, Liz. You can stand in front of me so Callie spikes the ball into your face instead of mine."

There was a lot of splashing and laughing and fussing as the two girls switched places. I cracked my neck, sighing as the stiff vertebrae popped back into place. "Mm," I groaned, reaching over my shoulder to rub a stiff spot that the massaging jets did not reach.

"Want me to help with that, princess?" my blonde bombshell purred, sliding behind me and

allowing me to settle between her legs. I leaned back against her chest, sighing and closing my eyes.

"I'll give you a thousand years to stop that," I murmured, leaning my head back against her shoulder. She placed a cool kiss on my cheek, her flesh a normal temperature compared to the steaming water.

My shoulders slumped as Mandy rolled her thumbs over my back, working out all the knots. One hand eventually wandered around my waist and started stroking my lower abdomen. She kept up the massage with her other hand, so I didn't complain. I hardly noticed when she turned on the bubbles and shifted so that our backs were facing the pool. When I felt her fingers graze the triangle of material covering my lower half, my eyes snapped open and I jerked with surprise.

"Mandy! What-"

"Shh..." she whispered in my ear, "do you want to get caught?" Pressing down only slightly, she began rubbing over me in slow, gentle circles. Even though the touch was very soft, I could feel every feather light stroke through the fabric. Suddenly, the Jacuzzi felt even warmer.

"Oh God, but what if they're..."

Mandy glanced casually over her shoulder. "They're playing volleyball all the way over there," she cooed, the tip of her tongue caressing the shell of my ear. I shivered despite the temperature.

Mandy never directly asked me if I was excited by the idea of semi-public lovemaking, but I wasn't going to resist her now that she had me aroused. I had a feeling that this was one of her unspoken fantasies.

I winced as Mandy's curious fingers explored my entrance. Even though she was being extremely careful, the hot water had washed away most of my wetness. "Ow... ah, careful... mmm, better. Gentle, sweetie," I muttered, trying to keep my voice as soft as possible. The other four girls shouted and laughed behind us, completely unaware.

"Shh. I'll be gentle, angel. Trust me and just relax..."

A light brushing of fingers over wet skin. Soft, smooth as a whispered secret. I submitted. Immediately, I drowned in a crashing wave of love, warmth, and safety. I was Mandy's through and through.

It took her only a little longer than usual to work a slender finger inside of me up to the second knuckle. Instead of the long, dragging thrusts that she knew I loved, she used a slow, gentle rocking motion that avoided friction, mostly staying inside me. It was not what I was used to. Though she never used more than two fingers, Mandy knew I liked it to hurt a little.

Her thumb swiped my sensitive bundle, bringing it to a straining point. Mandy's pleased gasp let me know that she felt me harden and swell against her fingertip. I shivered, unable to hold back a

small, helpless whimper of pleasure. Changing her mind, she pinched me between two fingers instead, careful not to rub too hard and hurt me underneath the water. I stared down in amazement. I could not see what was going on below the bubbles, but I could definitely feel it.

"Oh - oh please... Amanda..." I mouthed, too terrified to add breath to my plea. "Take me..." My heart was throbbing between my legs and my skin felt like it was coated with burning ice. My ears were awash with empty sound, my eyes glazed over. I had no idea what was going on around me or if anyone was watching. With my last rational thought, I realized I didn't care.

My hips still pumping lazily against my lover's hand, I came down from the height of pleasure with a few deep, shuddering gasps. I trembled as Mandy removed her hand, her nails scraping the soft skin of my inner thighs beneath the water. Her touch burned, every nerve ending was sensitized. Slowly, the hand drifted up my body, leisurely cupping a breast through my bikini top to confirm ownership, and began stroking my neck.

I looked up into her green eyes, which were darker than I had ever seen them. They fluttered shut for a moment, her lashes brushing her cheekbones. I leaned back against Mandy's soft form, closing my own eyes. I could feel the beating of her heart through the wall of her chest. It was good. Right. For a moment, I thought, *this is exactly where I belong. Who I belong with. I need to stay here for the rest of my life.*

Suddenly, sound returned to the world. The four girls were still laughing behind us. I jerked in surprise, startling Mandy and falling off of her lap. I gave her a sheepish smile as she shot me one of her best glares. "Sorry. Maybe if you *come* inside with me for a little while, I can make it up to you?" I purred, toying with my right shoulder strap.

Mandy's fingers slid along the side of my face, drawing closer until our lips almost brushed. "Maybe," she whispered. "What did you have in mind?"

"I was envisioning my head between your thighs. If you'd like that vision to become a reality..."

"We're getting lemonade!" Mandy shouted, lacing her fingers with mine and dragging me out of the hot tub.

Epilogue, pt. 3 of 3: Callie
(The ending of this book also works as the beginning of the next one)

"Pinch me," I said, nudging Alicia in the side. "I think I'm dreaming."

Cadee stared at me from across the net, her face still covered with make-up. A few stubborn drops of water clung to her cheeks, but somehow her mascara remained un-smeared. She was annoying like that. "You have dreams about your cousin getting nailed in the hot tub? That's sick, sweetie."

"Oh, come on. I saw the look on your face," I said defensively, tucking the volleyball against my

side with my left arm.

Cadee shrugged. "Yeah, sure. She's not *my* cousin."

"Okay, now you're just grossing me out. I meant 'I think I'm dreaming' as in - you know... this is so freaky and weird that I must be in some kind of alternate reality."

"Does it hurt?" asked Alicia.

I wiggled my eyebrows. "Should I be hurting somewhere? Do you wanna kiss it better?"

"No, stretching your leg up far enough to stuff your foot in your mouth." I blushed, wishing I had kept my big mouth shut. Maybe it was time to go back to not saying anything. When Alicia saw my worried expression she gave me a playful shove. "C'mon, studmuffin, get your game face back on. I don't want Cadee to beat me with her flash and tease routine."

"Hey," Cadee protested, "if you got it, flaunt it!"

"We're not guys, Cadee, we're lesbians. We have more self control." I tossed the ball from hand to hand, finally pushing it under the water and letting it pop back up. Water sprayed around us and Alicia squealed, splashing back in retaliation.

"Hey, I'm strictly dickly." Cadee gave me the up-and-down, an obvious nonverbal invitation. I had no idea whether she was serious or not. "Most of the time."

"I'm not - " Liz started to say, but Cadee shushed her.

"Whatever you say, Ellen."

"Ha ha. Very funny, guys."

The blonde senior reached over to mess up Liz's damp red curls, making them look even messier than before. "Sorry, k.d."

Liz began to look nervous. "Do I seriously look like a lesbian?" she asked, staring down at her swimsuit and examining her body. I had no idea what she was talking about.

"Does Gwen? What about Mandy?" Alicia pointed out. No, neither of them looked like a stereotypical lesbian. I realized that I was probably the closest. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. Self-consciously, I ran my fingers through short, wet spikes. I found myself wondering what Alicia thought of chicks with short hair. My mother threw a fit when I chopped it off.

"No, they look normal," Liz admitted.

"That's because they are normal," I said. "But yeah, Alex, you give off a lesbian vibe."

"Wait, Alex?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Sure. All sports dykes are named Alex. Didn't you know?"

"How should I know if I'm not a lesbian?"

Cadee smiled. "You just keep thinking that, Lindsey Lohan."

"What the fuck. Lindsey? We don't want her!"

"We? So you admit it!"

"I admit nothing!" Liz bellowed, picking up the volleyball, which had floated under the net in her direction. Instead of serving it to our side of the court, she lobbed it at Cadee's head.

"Hey, watch it, Xena!" She rubbed her skull sulkily, pouting and glaring over at an unrepentant Liz. There was a sudden awkward silence as we remembered the absence of Mandy and Gwen.

"Damn, how long are they going to be in there?" Liz asked, turning to look at the house. I took the opportunity to study Alicia out of the corner of my eye. Soft, wavy brown hair. Big doe eyes. A nice shape to her mouth. She had a cute nose and a round, heart shaped face, but what really attracted me was the way she moved. Every movement was slow and deliberate, like she knew I was watching her. Maybe she did.

Cadee nudged the volley ball, which had begun floating back in our direction. "It'll be a while. That orgasm probably just got Gwen warmed up."

"Wait, what? How do you know she..." Liz's blush clashed with her red hair and freckles in a way that made me smile. She couldn't say the word.

"Came? You couldn't tell?" Alicia and Cadee shared a secret look that I could not read. "Mandy totally knows what she's doing and Gwen's not such a prude anymore. They'll be out in another hour, without the lemonade."

The End

That's it, folks. Hope you enjoyed the ride. Two more stories in this series, one more in Wolf's Eyes, and another little fantasy surprise. Then we'll see about adding some Sci-Fi into the mix. And maybe *gasp* some query letters...

E-mail raedmagdon@yahoo.com or roxeant@hotmail.com with any questions or comments. Don't be shy. I don't bite unless asked. I love hearing from you guys.
