

C I N

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C I N

“Lynn, Lynn, the City of Sin”



“You Never Come Out The Way You Went In.”

Written By:

Christina Leigh Pritchard

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Table of Contents

One

Amber Checks in012

Two

Lynn, Mass018

Three

Midnight Visitor028

Four

Aunt Millie031

Five

“You Better Hurry Home”041

Six

Becoming Vegetarian052

Seven

Absolute Humiliation065

Eight

The Big Wake.....072

Nine

The Electrifying Truth084

Ten

Erase Your Pain094

Eleven

Donna Denning096

Twelve

The Woods hold a Secret102

Thirteen	
<i>Ally Makes Some Changes</i>	115
Fourteen	
<i>Saturday's Bonfire</i>	130
Fifteen	
<i>Clown Fish</i>	140
Sixteen	
<i>Cin Boarding School</i>	148
Seventeen	
<i>Truth has Many Faces</i>	158
Eighteen	
<i>Charades Come To an End</i>	169
Nineteen	
<i>Jealousy Shows Itself</i>	176
Twenty	
<i>Mysterious Happenings</i>	186
Twenty One	
<i>Rat Has a Secret</i>	203
Twenty Two	
<i>Jimmy Finds His True Love Again</i>	220
Twenty Three	
<i>Confrontation</i>	224
Twenty Four	
<i>Tough Decisions</i>	233

Dedication

A great big special thanks to Tony Lazzara. Without him, this story would never have been written. Before he intervened, I had only one paragraph and no direction. He introduced me to Lynn, to the old saying “Lynn, Lynn the city of sin,” and told me all about the economy and geography...

Thank you Tony for everything!

With all my Love,

Christina Leigh Pritchard

The Doctor said I should be dead.

My heart beat furiously. I looked up at the flashes of lightning in the sky. Yes, I should be dead.

Why wasn't I?

C I N



A Novel by Christina Leigh Pritchard

One

Amber Checks In

“Lisa, if you don’t finish packing your things, I swear you’ll go with nothing.” My mother, Amber, threatened. She wrapped duct tape around a medium sized box and carried it out to the car.

Our home foreclosed and it was eviction day. My mother couldn’t keep a job; no matter how simple or easy it was. She was beautiful with long blond hair and bright green eyes that sparkled when she spoke. She landed every job she applied for but several weeks later and her new employer realized all Amber really was; was a pretty face.

I looked nothing like my mom. I was seventeen but still didn’t fit into my body. My hips were too big, my boobs too small and I had Dumbo ears which of course meant that I had to wear my hair down-*always*. I had long bangs that helped cover up my oddly round, black eyes and I could never find shoes that fit my big feet.

“Lisa, I am not going to tell you again, we leave in twenty minutes. I can’t afford to miss your train.”

“Yeah well you could try to hide your enthusiasm.” I rolled my eyes and grabbed an empty box. I surveyed my room. What could I

possibly take? I lived in Florida, the sunshine state. I was going to Lynn, Massachusetts. The old saying, “Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin” played over and over inside my mind. How could my mother just drop me off in such a place? Lynn was filled with high crime rates, lack of good paying jobs and supported virtually on nothing more than fish markets and the GE factories. At least it was by the water. I couldn’t imagine life without the ocean and sand between my toes. I could do without the sun tans, I guess, or the hot skaters who practiced on the benches but not the salty water and my toes buried in the warm sand.

“LISA! Get in the car.”

I evaluated the few things I had. I grabbed two pairs of jeans and anything with sleeves. I picked up my sneakers and my Adidas jacket from off the floor and I tossed my book bag over my shoulder. Inside the box, I put the only family heirloom I had; a picture of my mother and father; before I was born. ...When they still loved each other, still laughed, still hoped. That must’ve been something to see. The only time my mother smiled or laughed was during an interview. It was never real and when her eyes set on me, she only frowned.

I placed my few articles of clothing on top of my picture and carried the box out to the trunk. My mom had an old 1993 Mitsubishi Mirage with hardly any paint left. The worst part-the air didn’t work; complete suicide in a place where the temperature

stayed around '90 degrees.

"Just take your sweet, precious time there Lisa," She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. "I hope you don't act up with your Aunt Millie. She would be just devastated and when she falls over with a stroke or heart attack from your disrespectful behavior you will have to carry her twenty miles to the nearest town."

"A little dramatic, don't you think?" I snapped, tossing my book bag into the back. The seat belt automatically locked me in when I closed the door. (The air conditioning didn't work, there was hardly any paint left on the vehicle but, hey, at least the automatic seatbelts still worked!) "Roll the windows down, it is hot in here." I leaned my head out the window to catch the last, hot Florida breeze I'd probably ever feel.

"Aunt Millie said you could help her out with her chickens and she'd pay you so that you could buy some warmer clothes while you are there. I am sorry I am such a bad mother."

"Why are you leaving me with some woman I don't know? *That's* bad parenting. Mom, you've never met this lady. What if she is a serial killer or a chicken thief or some kind of lunatic?"

"I have to do this." Her eyes stayed glued to the road, "I need to figure out what is wrong with me. I ran off your father with my emotional problems and I don't want to drag you down with me too."

"Mom, I don't want to go stay with some stranger." She

couldn't hear me. She blasted the radio and sang loudly, bouncing her head from left to right. She slapped me in the shoulder. "Stop!"

"Sing with me, Lisa, it may be a long time before we get to do this again. I may be in that loony bin for a while."

I didn't think it was funny at all. Who wanted a mother that was crazy? What would I tell people when school started? *So, Lisa, where is your mother? Oh, new potential friend, she's probably in her padded cell wearing a strait jacket. How about your mom?* I'll be miss popularity for sure.

Amber turned into the train station and with a deep breath; she took my hands gently in hers. "I am sorry for being such a screwy mother but I promise I am going to change and we will look back on the past five years and laugh about it all. You believe me, don't you? That, I am going to change and be a better person?"

"Of course, mom, acknowledgment is half the cure."

She was doomed. But, who was I to be the one to tell her that? At least she was signing herself over to them. They'd keep her there until they could fix whatever was wrong inside her brain. "I better go before I miss my train." I reached into the backseat and grabbed my backpack. "Pop the trunk, mom. I have a box in the back."

"Please be careful. There are some real crazies on the train."
Now she cared?

“I will be fine, I promise. I have taken public transportation before. Get better soon. I love you.”

“Okay,” Amber wiped tears from her eyes. She never said she loved me back. It was a little disturbing. “Don’t talk to strangers.”

“Aunt Millie is a stranger.” I retorted. My mom started her car and sped out of the parking lot like she was escaping a burning building.

“Goodbye mother.”

I carried my things across to the other side of the tracks. I had to take an elevator up to a ramp, cross above the tracks and then take another elevator down so that I could wait for the north train. This was going to be the longest ride. It didn’t seem fair really that I was the one who had to travel from the southeast coast all the way northeast just so my mother could ‘stabilize’ herself or as I called it, get more legal drugs that kept her in fairy tale world. She was just a pill popper and I couldn’t stand it.

What did I know about Aunt Millie? She’d lived her entire life in Lynn, Massachusetts out in the woods-what was left of it anyway-and worked as a dean at a boarding school for gifted boys and girls. She lived right behind the old school and had her own personal pond, a chicken coup and two pets. One dog named Pig and a Himalayan cat that she called Rat. During the one conversation I had with her she admitted that her pets didn’t really care for her but showed up for dinner and that I was *not* to pet the

cat. Who had pets that did not want to be touched? Since she was a dean at the boarding school, she pulled some strings and was able to enroll me, even though I wasn't a genius. She made sure to repeat the part about my not being a genius at least three times before moving on to dorm room arrangements. I'd have to dorm with some girl named Donna Denning. Aunt Millie promised to introduce us ahead of time. She said she was a sweet girl.

To be completely honest, I was kind of happy to be moving to Lynn. I hated leaving my friends behind but, a little change of pace didn't sound so bad. I just wished my mother would come too. Maybe that was all she needed; new surroundings. No, that never helped before. I had a gut feeling that I'd seen my mother for the last time. I didn't want to accept such a horrific reality so I shoved the idea into the very back of my mind; *a place I refused to visit*.

"Ticket?" I looked up at the train conductor. He held out his hand. "Do you have a ticket?" He asked. I nodded, reaching inside my bag.

"Sorry, I was daydreaming." I handed him my crinkled confirmation page. "I ordered over the phone and they told me to write down this number for you."

"You will have to pay with cash once the train starts moving. Did you bring your ID?" I nodded and showed him my learner's permit. Thanks to Amber, I couldn't drive yet. I'd never had the chance to practice driving. Maybe Aunt Millie would teach me.

“Your assigned seat is 38A.”

“Thanks,” I carried my box up the three steps and carefully placed it up above my assigned seat. I should’ve packed more clothes. Oh well, too late for regrets.

The train gradually moved forward and I stared out the window. I placed my hand on the glass and sighed.

“Goodbye Florida, Goodbye Mom.”

Two

Lynn, Massachusetts

I climbed down the train steps and surveyed my new surroundings. It was a chilly evening. The grey cement walls were covered in spray painted gang symbols, there was trash piled in corners and a bum underneath a wet, limp cardboard box. It was certainly not the kind of place one would want to hang out in. I squinted to see if I spotted Aunt Millie. She said she was stout with short reddish-brown hair. So, I looked for an obese woman with cheaply dyed red hair. I didn't have to be a genius to know when someone was seasoning their words with salt. I was the queen when it came to showy words and false compliments.

Besides the bum and some rowdy teenagers; there were only three people waiting and none of them fit the description of my Aunt Millie. So, I sat down on a metal bench and dug in my box for my addias jacket. I wrapped myself up and crossed my arms. I'd really have to get used to this weather. It felt like winter in Florida and it was only summer in Lynn. Could you imagine winter time? I looked down at my watch. It had been my one and only

gift from my father since he'd left us five years ago. He said this way I'd be on time for things. It didn't work. I just knew how late I was. It is always better to not know the time. It is easier to show up late and if someone says, "Do you know what time it is?" you can genuinely answer with, "No, I forgot my watch, what time is it? Am I late?" People forgive you when you leave your watch at home. Aunt Millie was an hour late. I wonder if she forgot her watch...

I turned around and took another peek at the people congregating around the train station. There was a woman with three young children, an old man with a suitcase on wheels and a teenage boy about my age. He leaned against the ticket booth with his hands in his baggy jeans. He had on a Red Sox Jersey and a beanie cap shoved down over the top of his head. Did he have hair? Well, he had some facial hair. I squinted to see what was on the side of his arm; a tattoo maybe? He pulled his hands out of his pockets and cupped them around his mouth.

"Is there a Lisa Brown here?" He looked at me. I raised my hand. "You Lisa?" He asked again. I nodded. "Lisa Brown?"

"Yes, would you like to see my ID?" I rolled my eyes. "Who are you and where is Aunt Millie?"

"She had an emergency meeting to attend to. I am Michael, one of the students at Cin Boarding School." He crept closer. I could see his tattoo now. It said 'C I N'. He had long brown hair

underneath his beanie cap and it was a go-tee that he sported on his face. He dug in his pocket, pulled out a package of cigarettes and a lighter.

I shook my head and frowned. “I thought the kids who went to Cin were geniuses?”

He smiled, catching on immediately. “When you are as smart as me, the sooner you die the better. Besides that, I have an addictive personality. I can watch the same shows, read the same books, and do the same activities over and over. It is sad, really.”

“Yeah, that is sad.”

Michael ignored me. He took my box and led the way out to the parking lot. He didn’t say anything else. His eyes studied the trees and sky. He seemed to be deep in thought or *prayer* maybe. *Please save me from this dreadful female Floridian.* Then again, he was a genius... Maybe he did have deep thoughts running through his mind.

“I have to stop at the store. Do you mind?” Michael opened the passenger side door of an old white Isuzu Pick-up truck.

“No, that’s cool.” I rolled up the window so that the chill didn’t freeze my face.

“I have a jacket you can borrow until you get a heavier one.” Michael offered. “It gets pretty chilly at night.”

“That’s okay, this one is good.”

Michael dug behind the seat and pulled out a wrinkled ski

jacket. "Here, wear this." He tossed it in my lap.

"Thanks," I obeyed overlapping my jacket with his. I placed my hands in front of the warm heat flowing through the vents. I wanted to tell him I was from Florida that this was as cold as our winters ever got but he never asked where I was from or why I was so cold. He didn't put the radio on either; just drove in silence.

I tapped my foot on the floorboards and whisked my fingers in front of the warm air as if I was conducting a symphony. Michael glanced at me. "So Michael, what's Cin like?" I practically sang. If he wasn't going to entertain me, I'd have to just compromise.

"Like any other school, I guess. I've gone there since forever." He turned off the highway and entered the Lynn City Limits. I shook my head and pounded my palms against his dashboard. He jumped. "What are you doing?"

"Wrong! Most kids live at home and not at their school. It can't possibly be like every other school. It is a 'special' school."

Michael stared blankly.

He parked in front of a little food mart. "I am going to get some milk. I will be right back."

I dropped back against the seat and sighed. Michael was boring. I couldn't imagine a bunch of Michaels all around me night and day for an entire school year. Thank goodness I was in my senior year of high school. I could leave Aunt Millie's house as soon as I was eighteen and live on my own.

I looked out the window. Lynn smelled like fish. There were two fish stands outside the old worn out buildings and overflowing garbage cans. Two glass windows next to the food mart were covered in spray painted obscenities. Bass and loud lyrics blared as two cars whizzed by. I saw a hooker loitering in the narrow alley behind the convenience store. Her eyes were red and empty. Where had my mom sent me?

I glanced in the side mirror. A girl with long stringy blond hair and thin red highlights glared at me with her hands crossed over her chest. What was her problem? I turned around and pushed my face against the back window, puffing my cheeks out like a blowfish and waved. She narrowed her eyes and stomped away. I sat back down and laughed.

Michael climbed into the cab with his milk. He frowned, “That’s Ally. I wouldn’t get on her bad side if I were you. She is what the Cin kids call our personal Nazi Commandant.”

“Oh.”

We drove through thick woods and around a large lake. There was an old stone school with a faded sign that said ‘Cin Boarding School’. The school sat behind the lake. Two small cottages were on the other side of the water. One of those homes must’ve been Aunt Millie’s. I saw a chicken coup in the center of the houses and a cat sitting on top of the chicken wire.

Michael grinned, “By the way, Ally, the girl you made faces at,

lives with Millie.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Are you crazy?” I twisted sideways and slapped his arm.

He slammed on his brakes. “Ouch, what did you do that for?”

I flew forward and banged my forehead on the dash. “Oh, I am such an idiot sometimes. I should’ve minded my own business.”

“I hate to be the one to tell you this but it might be you who is a little crazy.” He started his truck, stalling the engine. “Promise not to slap me again and I will tell you who else lives with Millie.”

“I won’t.”

“Ally has a brother named Alex. He is the smartest guy in our school but not very social.” Michael parked in front of Aunt Millie’s wooden cottage. It was painted bright yellow with a pale green trim. She had flower boxes in the windows and a little lion statue by her front door.

“She isn’t one of those people who have a bunch of knick knacks all around the house is she?” I studied the house but Michael covered his face with his hands.

“Are you really that slow?”

I blinked. “I am following you just fine. You said Alex was a troubled soul who finds all the kids at Cin boring.”

Michael didn’t find me funny in the least bit. His eyes narrowed and he motioned for me to get out of his truck.

“I am not boring.”

I shrugged my shoulders. "No one said you were."

"You are ridiculous. Now I know why my parents wanted me to go to school with people at the same intelligence level. You, Lisa Brown, are--"

"Well, it was nice meeting you Michael. I appreciate the ride." I grabbed my box and backpack. "Want your jacket back?" I slowly let it slip down my arms. It dropped into the dirt.

Michael's lips pressed tight together. "No, I wouldn't want you to freeze to death." He peeled out of Aunt Millie's driveway. "Mind the cat!"

I watched his truck disappear in amongst the trees. Maybe Michael wasn't boring after all. There was definitely some potential; he could be taken out of his glass bubble with a little persuasion.

The jacket lay limp at my feet. I bent down and put it back on my shoulders. It was dark outside and I could hardly see the front door. I picked up my box and climbed the three steps onto the wooden porch. There was a porch swing painted purple of all colors and Aunt Millie had a chipped red door. I lifted my hand, making a fist, ready to knock. Before I could, the door cracked open an inch.

"Who are you?" A male voice called from inside.

"I-I'm sorry, is this Millie's house? I am her niece from Florida."

The door swung open and a boy about three inches taller than me stood in the doorway. He had pale blue eyes and nearly bleached blond hair. His lips were thin and his fingernails bitten and chipped.

“You must be Alex.” I forced a smile. “My name is Lisa. Are you my cousin?”

Alex did not return my smile. Instead, he spun around so that his back faced me and then quickly stomped down the hall.

“It was nice meeting you as well.” My voice echoed inside the empty room.

I put my stuff by the front door and inspected Aunt Millie’s house. It was small. To the left was a formal living room with just two love seats and to the right was a round, wooden table with four chairs. A galley kitchen was to the right as well. In front of me was a narrow hallway with four doors. I gulped. One had to be a bathroom, one must be Alex’s room, Aunt Millie’s and the last one meant I’d be sharing with, Ally, the cranky girl at the store. Life couldn’t get any better. Maybe I was wrong and there was another door that I couldn’t see from where I stood. Maybe Ally lived next door by herself. Maybe this was all just a dream. Yeah right. I was sharing a room with the Nazi.

I sat on one of the sofas and put my hands between my knees. In the corner, between the two sofas was a black and white Boston terrier. “Pig? Is that what they call you?”

The dog looked up at me with his big, bulging eyes and snarled. I scooted over to the other end of the couch. Wow. I'd entered my own personal house of horrors. Pig lay back down and fell asleep.

Alex stood in the hallway. I jumped when I saw him. He'd entered so quietly. "I thought you were the dog, coming to attack."

Alex frowned. "He doesn't like to be bothered. Millie will not be home for a while. It would be wise for you to go to your room. If you are hungry there is food in the refrigerator."

He turned to leave. I opened my mouth and Alex twirled around. "What? What do you want?"

"Where is my room?" *He really was everything Michael described.* "Also, I need to know where the bathroom is so I can take a shower."

"Sounds reasonable, I suppose. Follow me." He took two steps backwards and opened the first door to his left. "This is your room. The bathroom is directly across the hall." He took a deep breath. "Anything else you'd like to inquire about?"

I just stared. His light blue eyes danced with anger. Had I said something to offend him? Did he hear me tease him with Michael? I'd been inside the truck, right? Michael said it, not me. I was just an innocent bystander. If this guy was my cousin-

"I am not your cousin." Alex blurted. My heart beat furiously. Could he hear what I was saying? "My family is out of town and Millie offered to stay and watch us until school started. This is my

house, not Millie's. She lives next door."

"Thanks," I frowned. "Do you have a TV here?"

Alex rolled his eyes. "What in the world would we need a TV for?"

"To pass the time, I guess." It felt like a trick question. "Who painted your house all those different colors?"

"You have to feed the chickens early so I suggest you go to bed." He disappeared into the room next to mine. I closed my eyes as his door slammed shut.

What was the matter with this place? I turned around and the little Boston terrier stood in the entrance of the hallway, blocking me from passing. "What's your problem? Pig..." He glared at me intently. "You are supposed to greet people when they come to your house. You are supposed to be man's best friend." I went into the bedroom. It was tiny and there was only one bed. I wouldn't have to share with the Nazi, would I? I sure hoped not. Pig stood in my doorway. His head peered around the corner with his bug eyes. I sat down on the bed and stared back. "So, I am not allowed to touch the cat but what about you? Are you friendly?"

Pig growled. I crossed my legs and put my hands on my knees. "Well, Pig, I am going to change your name to Bipolar. One second you want me to pay attention to you and the next minute you act like you want to kill me." Pig crept closer. He was halfway in my doorway now. He turned and lay in the entrance, almost as if

he was on guard over my room. What was he protecting me from? The cat? Pig turned his head sideways and sort of nodded. I chuckled. First Alex can read minds and now the dog. I must be really tired. I looked up at the tiny shelf next to the bed. There were black and white photos inside beautiful handcrafted frames. The kids in the pictures looked just like Ally and Alex. Maybe the fair came here and did those old fashioned photos? If I were crazy I would say they were authentic from maybe the 1920's. Maybe it was their great-great-grandparents or something. That sort of stuff happened all the time; right? Nearly twins several generations later...

I needed to brush my teeth but the Bipolar Pig would not let me leave the room. He growled when I tried to step over him. So, I just went to bed. What was the point in getting bit? I probably forgot to bring a toothbrush anyhow. Maybe in the morning I could meet Aunt Millie and she would at least take me to the store to get the necessities. I sure wish I hadn't left all my things behind. What was I thinking?

Three

Midnight Visitor

Pig barked and snarled. I jumped up. I'd fallen asleep. What time was it? Midnight... Maybe Aunt Millie was home. I flipped on the light. Pig stood in the doorway with his hair raised and his teeth barred. But, this time it was not at me. He was vicious. The little ten pound pug nosed dog scared me worse than a Doberman Pincher or Pit Bull.

"Who is there?" I twisted my head around the corner. Pig did not get upset that I stood so close to him now. His only concern was for the dark shadowy figure crouching in the hall. Was it the cat? What was wrong with the feline? Did she have rabies and they wouldn't put her down or something? My eyes adjusted and I squinted to get a better look at the invader.

It was a human for sure.

We were being robbed. Why else would Bipolar Pig be attacking? I needed something to defend myself with. I looked around the barren room. The only thing with substance was the shelf pelted into the wall. I doubt Alex's parents would approve of me ripping their shelf off the wall but what else could I do? My

heart pounded. I looked under the bed and spotted a painter's stick with a purple tip. I grabbed it and held on tight. My fingers trembled and I couldn't breathe.

Pig snarled and snapped at whoever lurked in the hallway. Footsteps echoed in my ears. The burglar was advancing. "Get out, whoever you are! There is nothing here that's valuable! They don't even have a TV!" I pounded my fists on the wall. Maybe if I was quiet they wouldn't come near me. It was too late for that brilliant idea. "I know karate and I am not afraid to use it!" Who was I kidding? Karate?! Pig snapped at the darkness, growling louder than before. He barked and barked and lunged forward. His teeth bit into someone. His jaws locked onto them and he wouldn't let go.

"Pig, you stop that."

I looked up and Alex stood in dim light. Was the dog biting him? No. He wasn't moving. But whoever Bipolar was biting wasn't screaming or struggling. Maybe Pig didn't have any teeth. No, I saw them. They were razor sharp.

"Who is he biting?" I leaned firmly against the closet door. "Not you, right?"

"He is biting me." A girl's voice answered. She flipped on a light in the hall. "Pig likes you."

I poked my head around the corner and came face to face with Ally. She was the snotty girl at the food mart that I made faces at in

Michael's pickup truck. She was the Nazi. "Bipolar was protecting me?"

"Yeah, Pig isn't going to let me near you." Ally admitted. "Smart dog... You should heed his advice and do the same." She flipped her long blond hair over her shoulder. Red highlights glowed in the hall light. Pig sat at my feet and snarled at Alex who stood inches away.

"Keep your door closed." Alex said. He then disappeared inside his room. Where the heck was I? What sort of people own animals that attack them? And why didn't she scream when he bit her? She should be in the bathroom bandaging her leg. Instead, Ally the Nazi was leaving the house again. Did she come and go whenever she wanted? Aunt Millie wasn't a very good babysitter at all.

I looked down at Pig. "Do you even like your name? Why do they call you that?" Pig snorted almost like a real pig. He backed up so that I could close the bedroom door. I crawled back in bed and Pig lay on the floor at the foot of the bed.

"Thanks for watching out for me, Pig."

He snorted and I turned out the light.

Four

Aunt Millie

“Morning, Lisa.” I rubbed my eyes. It was still dark outside. I looked down at my watch. It was only six am. “I am your Aunt Millie. It is time to feed the chickens. Get dressed. It is cold out so bundle up.” A short, round woman with mud brown hair said. I didn’t see any red highlights at all. She wore a white dress shirt buttoned all the way up and her eyes were pale. Pig did not growl at her. I peeked over the side of my bed. Where was Pig?

“What happened to the dog?” I looked under the bed. “Bipolar?” He snorted. I leaned up and Aunt Millie pointed to the shelf above my head. Pig lay along the shelf with his head against the old photographs.

“You renamed the dog?” Aunt Millie inquired. “You named him Bipolar? I don’t know what is worse; Pig or Bipolar.”

“Do you have a spare toothbrush? And thank you for allowing me to stay with you while my mother-”

“It is my pleasure to have you here. I have extra toiletries over at my house. Once you finish feeding the chickens and collecting eggs you can shower and eat there. I will cook you a nice big breakfast.”

“It is so refreshing to meet someone who is nice.” I tied my

shoelaces. “I’ve never fed chickens or collected eggs so please be patient with me.”

“It is not very hard. Alex said he would help you. Go on outside and meet him.”

Michael’s ski jacket really came in handy. It had to be below fifty degrees outside. There was frost on the ground and my teeth chattered. I was happy he didn’t take it back.

Alex stood in the middle of the chicken coup with a bucket of feed. He sprinkled seeds out in a long thin line. Chickens gathered round, pecking furiously. His blond hair fell, covering his face. I could still *feel* him looking at me though. I smiled and peered down at Pig who stayed at least an arm’s distance from me.

“Are you going to let me do all of your chores?” Alex asked. I jogged over to the coup and crawled through the opening in the chicken wire.

“Sorry. I am not usually up this early or in such cold weather.”

“Grab a basket,” Alex pointed to a wooden weaved basket. “Fill it with eggs. You need to make sure the chickens do not see you or else they will peck you.”

“Now I see why you feed the chickens. It is easier than collecting the eggs.”

Alex did not smile. He glared at me with his pale blue eyes. Now that the sun was creeping up behind us, the rooster crowed. I laughed. Alex was Mr. Scrooge and I was up before the rooster. It

couldn't get any worse.

Aunt Millie stood a few feet away. "Alex, honey, could you fetch me one of the chickens, please. I want to fix a nice dinner for Lisa." Alex nodded his head and snatched a passing chicken by her neck. She clucked and scared all the other hens. They scurried around and hid inside their coop. Alex looked up at me. His eyes were blank.

"I better go get the eggs." I mumbled; frozen.

Alex took out an axe, stretched the hen's neck across a tree stump and dropped his weapon. The headless body ran around. That poor chicken. She didn't even see it coming. Alex didn't even flinch.

I doubled over and vomited.

I think I am going to become a vegetarian. At least while I live here. A chicken free diet never hurt anyone; especially not the chickens.

Pig inched closer. He sniffed the air and snorted. "I know, I know, get the eggs." I took a deep breath. Pink's song, 'Funhouse' played inside my head. *This used to be a funhouse. But now it's filled with evil clowns.* Yeah that is how I felt. *It's time to start the count down. I am gonna burn it down.* I think someone already burned this family. They were cranky and angry. Even the animals seemed troubled.

Alex stood inches away with the dead twitching body of the hen

in his hand. "Breakfast is ready." I turned and narrowed my eyes at the chicken killer. He glared back. My heart beat irregularly almost as if I were afraid. I wasn't going to let some blond, blood thirsty punk with evil pets, scare me. Well, maybe just a little.

"I have to get the eggs." I turned my back to him. "I-I have to get the eggs." I smacked myself in the forehead. Why was I repeating myself like some idiot? He was not going to get the better of me. I'd met worse people.

"I have to get the eggs." I repeated. What was my problem? I glanced over my shoulder to find Alex gone. I was alone with the hens and bipolar dog. Pig did seem calmer today. He wasn't snarling at me when I made sudden movements but he still would not let me pet him. What kind of dog hated to be touched? Even the meanest dogs liked a pat on the head every now and then. Pig didn't even want commendation.

I stepped into the henhouse and gasped. Alex was there. His basket was overflowing with eggs. How'd he get in there? I was standing in the doorway the whole time.

"How'd you get in here?"

He didn't respond. "Take this basket of eggs inside. And don't drop any." He brushed past me, barely grazing my ski jacket. He twirled around. "Why'd you touch me?"

I stepped back. "I didn't. You are the one moving. What's the big deal anyway if I did touch you?" I reached my hand forward. I

was going to poke him in the shoulder.

Alex jerked back; angry. "Never touch me again."

I froze. He really was crazy. Maybe my mom sent me to the loony bin and is at the beach laughing at the mix up.

"It was an accident. Chill out already." I squeezed the basket of eggs tight. "I better bring these inside." I inched my way around him and hurried up the small dirt pathway to Aunt Millie's house. Pig trotted alongside me. "Why don't you growl at him when he is being mean?"

Pig growled at me. *Evil dog...*

"If you are going to be mean to me then go away. Get!" Pig barked and kicked dirt up behind him. "I mean it. Go away." I knocked on Aunt Millie's door. Pig sat at my feet. His eyes drooped and he looked sad; almost sorry. "I'm sorry, Pig."

Aunt Millie turned the handle and welcomed us inside. Her house was filled with at least two of everything. She had two televisions in the main room, two matching clocks on the wall. They were of a red rooster and when the clock struck noon it crowed. *How freakin' delightful.* I mean that with total sarcasm of course.

Aunt Millie had two matching lazy boy recliners that pointed at their own television and two bistro tables in her small dining room.

"Sit here with me at this table." Millie pointed at the one closest to the kitchen. "Alex may join us and he likes to sit at his own

table.”

I rolled my eyes. “I seriously doubt he is going to join us.”

“Oh?” Aunt Millie placed a plate of warm pancakes in front of me. There were fresh strawberries and homemade syrup on top of them. My mouth salivated. When was the last time I ate? “He is my star pupil at school and he also lives next door to me so I suggest you peacefully coexist.”

“I would like to, believe me, but he is awfully moody.” I complained, stabbing my fork into the pancakes. “This looks so good. Thank you Aunt Millie.”

“Funny you should say that. Alex’s last name is Moody. Oh, and you did an excellent job collecting eggs.”

I shook my head and swallowed. “Alex got them. I wish I could take the credit but it was all him.”

Millie disappeared inside the galley kitchen. Her house was designed exactly the same as Alex’s house. At least she didn’t have her home multicolored and it was nice to see she had a TV. Excuse me, *two* TV’s. Can you say compulsive?

“Do Alex and Ally come here often?” I inquired. Millie put sausage links on my plate and a bowl of grits down on the table.

“Yes, their parents are out of town a lot and when they go away I stay with them at night but entertain them here during the day. Please do not try to touch the cat. She is very temperamental and you will regret it.”

“When do I get to meet Donna?”

“Sometime tomorrow,” Millie went to the front door. She opened it and Alex crept inside. “She is still out of town on summer vacation.”

Alex took a seat at the other bistro table. He snatched *my* bowl of grits and sprinkled it with pepper. I wanted to tell him that those were my grits and that he had some nerve coming inside and taking them like that. But, the anger that protruded from his eyes stopped me. There was something dangerous about him. I could feel it.

“Aunt Millie, did my mother call to check on me?” I leaned back in my chair balancing on the back legs.

Pig barked and Alex stood straight up like a private in the military. “Don’t break the chairs.”

I let my chair drop back to the floor so that I was on all four legs. “Excuse me.” He was a real piece of work. But, I had to coexist. Isn’t that what Aunt Millie asked of me? I’d only have to deal with him as long as it took for my mother to get better. She’d never been long; a week, maybe a month.

“Your mother didn’t call but I am sure she will soon. Let me bring you some more grits. Alex, would you like some pancakes?”

“No, thank you.” Alex kept his eyes fixed on mine. He took a spoonful of grits and shoveled it into his mouth. As he swallowed I scratched my fork against the china plate.

“I am sure she will get better soon and I can get back to Florida.

I didn't even bring a lot of clothes; just two outfits and some sneakers. When does school start? Will I have to wear a uniform?"

Alex dropped his spoon inside his empty bowl. "She is not going to get better." He declared. "Your mother is not going to change."

I wanted to slug him. My eyes filled with tears and I couldn't swallow. There was a thick cloth stuck right in the center of my throat. How could someone be so bluntly cruel? Amber was going to get better and she was going to come save me.

"How dare you speak to me like that! You don't know anything about my mother; or me."

"You know she won't change. And why are you wearing Michael's jacket?" Alex took my plate of half eaten pancakes. "You've lost your appetite, right?"

I pushed myself away from the table and ran out the front door. I raced along the dirt path past the hens and around the lake, halfway to the school. I fell to my knees in the grass. Pig skidded to a stop and lay, facing me.

Aunt Millie didn't defend me. She said nothing. Alex could've told me I was an ugly toad and she would've sat there passively. What did he, like, own the school? She was my aunt. Aunts were supposed to stand by their nieces not the kids next door with absent parents. Well, I guess Alex and I weren't too different. His folks left him too. At least he knew they were coming back. What about

mine? I hated to admit it, but the reason his words stung so badly is because I really did think my mother's recovery was hopeless.

"It is the truth." Alex whispered. I jumped. "You feel like she is not going to come back." I closed my eyes and counted slowly to ten. I didn't want to lose my temper. This was Alex, Aunt Millie's star pupil. I needed to be respectful even though he obviously had zero manners.

Screw politeness.

"Were you raised with the chickens?" I snapped. "Because you sure cluck a lot about things you don't know." I climbed up and stomped further away from the two cottages.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Alex. He kept rhythm with each step I took. Why would he follow me? Did he have his axe with him? Was he going to chop off my head too?

Alex chuckled. His eyes danced.

I flipped my hair and picked up speed. To the left of the school was a forest. I raced inside, hoping he wouldn't follow but, he did. So, I stopped abruptly and Alex plowed into the back of me.

He screamed.

Just like a little girl would have.

My skin throbbed and for a split moment I could almost feel his pain. My fingers twitched and I wanted to touch him again. *I felt like a junkie.* Alex pulled off his jacket and tossed it at me. The whites of his eyes were red and he stormed out of the woods.

“Stop touching me! How many times do I have to tell you?”

He disappeared around the corner.

I shook my head. Alex was insane. What if something horrible happened to him and he didn't like to be touched? Maybe I was bringing up old nightmares of his. What happened to him to make him so cold? I bent down and picked up his jacket. The weather was freezing. Tripling up was exactly what I needed.

Pig barked. I looked down at the black and white dog and smiled. “Why can't I pet you or the cat? What happened to you guys? What about Alex? Is there something I am missing?” I knelt and Pig backed up. “I am not going to touch you and don't you dare growl at me.” I pointed my finger in his face.

Pig crept closer. He was only a few inches away. I could feel the heat that permeated from his skin. He panted and stared at the two cottages. “Do you want to go home?” Pig jumped to his feet and wagged his little nub. He barked excitedly. “I guess I can check out the woods tomorrow.”

We jogged back to the cottages and Pig pushed his head against Aunt Millie's front door. He entered the galley kitchen and sat. Aunt Millie scraped scrambled eggs from a skillet into his dog dish.

A Himalayan cat sauntered over to Millie next. She meowed and turned in a circle. On top of bistro table where Alex had ate his breakfast, was a cat bowl. Millie scraped more scrambled eggs into

her dish.

“They eat eggs?” I blurted, sitting down in one of the recliners in the living room. “I have never seen a cat eat eggs before. A dog, yes, but a cat-”

“Please understand, Alex and Ally are not like most teenagers their age. They are gifted; highly intelligent and seem a bit eccentric to those of lesser intellect.”

I was beginning to think Millie thought I was an idiot. Some, brain dead, noncreative nobody without a clue to what was going on around me.

“Intelligence does not give a person the right to be cruel. I will try my best to stay out of his way. I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“Thank you,” Aunt Mille grinned. “Mind the cat.” I rolled my eyes. What was with them and the cat? She looked sweet enough. Pig wasn’t too terrible. He was a little weird but nothing too major to really concern yourself with. I studied the cat. What did they call her? I think her name was Rat.

“Psst, Rat, do you have rabies? Is that why everyone is afraid of you?” Pig growled at me. “Sorry Pig, but if I don’t laugh I just may cry.” I rocked myself in the recliner until I fell asleep.

Five

“You better hurry home.”

I was dreaming about my mother bursting through the front door in an Eskimo suit, arms raised and singing. “I am cured, Lisa, can you believe it? Let’s go home!”

“That’s great, mom.” I said, grabbing my brown box. “I’ve been ready to leave since I got here!”

Cold ice slid down my arm. I jumped up. My heart pounded and I gasped. Michael stood in front of me. He doubled over and laughed hysterically. Pig barked and stood in between the two of us. My dog didn’t seem too concerned with Michael.

“What are you doing here?” I wiped melted ice from my arm. I looked up and spotted a clean chin. He shaved. I thought the go-tee looked nice on him. It was easier to see his lips though and they were thick and full. He smelled nice too.

“I pick up Millie’s eggs during the summer for my mother and take them into town.”

“Are you wearing cologne?” I stood up and sniffed him. “You are! Michael you smell nice. What is it?” His face burned red.

“Just Axe from the grocery store. It is no big deal.” He disappeared inside the kitchen. “You on the other hand stink

horrible.”

I covered my mouth and raced down the hall to the nearest bathroom. I dug around in Millie’s medicine cabinet for a toothbrush. It wasn’t like me to not worry about hygiene. It wasn’t like me to sniff people either. Pig scratched his paw against the door. I opened it and let him inside.

After I brushed my teeth and took a shower I realized that I didn’t have anything to wear. I cracked the door slightly. “Aunt Millie?”

“She isn’t here.” Michael answered. What was he still doing at the house?

“Could you, um, do me a favor, please?” I took a deep breath. Michael trudged down the hallway. He leaned against the opposite wall. I could see him through the tiny crack of the opened door. “I forgot my clothes. They are next door in a box by the bed in the first room on the left.”

Michael cleared his throat. “I am not allowed to enter their house.”

“Geez, Michael. Why not? I need my clothes. Can’t you knock on their door or something?”

“I guess I could try. I will be right back.” He stopped, chuckling softly. “You could just wear my ski jacket.”

“Not funny,” I smiled. “Please just go get my clothes.”

A few minutes later and he dropped my box by the bathroom

door. I wrapped myself in a towel and snatched it. What was the matter with me? Why didn't I bring more clothes? So what if they weren't warm. I think maybe it was a way for me to not accept that I was being deserted by Amber. It was one thing when my dad left but my mom too? Sometimes I couldn't understand people. They were so complicated and yet at the same time always predictable. Alex certainly wasn't; predictable, I mean. He was definitely complicated.

"You should dry your hair. It is cold outside."

"Why, where do you think I am going to go?"

"Oh, you are going out with me of course. I am taking you to a party."

"Not with kids from Cin, right?" I gulped. Did I forget to bring make-up too? I did. Maybe Ally had some somewhere and would let me borrow it. That is, if she ever came home long enough for me to ask.

"Sure of course, I don't know anyone else except from school." Michael sprawled out in a recliner. "So, hurry up and dry your hair. It is a long walk from here through the woods."

Woods? Was it going to be inside or out? Could Pig come along? I doubt it. "Can I bring my dog?"

Michael roared with laughter. "Who Pig? He doesn't like anyone and you've made him your dog? Does he let you pet him?" I didn't respond. "That will be the day when Pig lets anyone touch

him.”

I came out of the bathroom and stood in front of Michael. The TV was on and he flipped through the channels. “I tell you what, when Pig here lets you pet him then you can officially claim him as yours. Until then, don’t call him your dog. It’s politically incorrect.”

“This isn’t a democracy, Michael. He watches out for me. I like him.” I blinked. Wow, I actually liked the bipolar freak dog.

“If he follows us then I suppose he can come but you are responsible for him if he attacks someone. I am not getting sued for his sake. He should be forced to wear a muzzle.”

Pig growled and snapped at Michael’s feet. I realized when Pig’s hair was down that he wasn’t serious. His hair was down with Michael. His hair was always down with me too. Pig was all bark and no bite; except when he meant it, of course.

I put on my Adidas jacket and Michael’s ski jacket. He helped me into the sleeves. We walked outside and followed the dirt path towards the lake. Alex sat outside in his purple porch swing. He stared at us as we passed him. Michael waved and I stared back. Alex wasn’t going to acknowledge us so why bother?

“What is the story with Alex and Ally?”

Michael inched closer. “They are subhuman.” I smacked him. “What is it with you and violence?” He rubbed his arm. “You’ve hit me twice in less than a 24 hour period.”

“Is Aunt Millie paying you to take me to this party?” I blurted. Michael stared numbly.

“No, I just thought I’d be nice.”

“Sorry, I just thought after how mad I made you yesterday that-

“Lisa, please. You don’t faze me. I’d like to think I was a bit more mature than that.” He poked me in the cheek. “I will race you.”

“Hey, no fair!” I grabbed his jacket and ran along with him.

I turned around to check on Pig. He stood at the entrance of the woods. I stopped. “Bipolar, come on, boy!”

Michael leaned over my shoulder. “You named him Bipolar? Well, if that isn’t just the perfect name for him. He will be right there waiting for you to get back, don’t worry. He is not a people dog. It is a miracle that he follows you around. Actually, it’s weird and disturbing.”

“Leave my dog alone.” I shoved him. He gently pushed me back.

“Lisa Brown, I think you just might be alright. I didn’t really like you at first but when you dared to make faces at Ally, well, let’s just say you practically stole my heart.”

“You better hurry home.”

I turned around to see where the voice came from. It wasn’t Michael’s. I searched the woods. It almost sounded like Alex but he was still on his purple porch swing.

“Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Someone said that we should get home. You didn’t hear them?” I scratched my head and examined the treetops. My heart fluttered. Was someone playing a practical joke on us? “Pig, where are you?” I clapped my hands and the Boston terrier came to my side.

“Let’s go, Lisa. I think these woods have you spooked. I promise they are not haunted.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and dragged me forwards.

The sky grew dark and thunder rumbled. Pig barked and stood on his hind legs. I giggled. He looked almost as if he were a prancing show dog.

“Who would’ve known, Pig can do tricks!” Michael laughed too. “What did you do to him? He is a different dog. I have been coming here since forever and that dog has never been so friendly.”

“How old is he? He doesn’t look old.” I knelt down and searched his face for any gray hairs. There weren’t any. “He looks almost like a teenager.”

“You better hurry home.”

There it was again! The voice rang in my ears and I winced with pain. The same pain I’d felt when Alex touched me. He was still on his porch, right? I turned to double check. He was still swinging; staring intently at Michael and me.

Suddenly, lightning flashed in the sky. I grabbed Michael's arm and Pig barked. It shot through the sky like a bullet of fire. It was pink in color and rain pelted me in the forehead. It began to pour.

"We better go back to Millie's house until this rain stops." Michael guided me out of the woods. He pulled the hood of his ski jacket over my head so that I did not get drenched.

When we got inside Millie's house I stripped out of my two wet jackets and stood in front of her small portable heater shivering. On one of the bistro chairs was the jacket Alex tossed at me in the henhouse.

I reached over and snatched it.

Michael sat in one recliner and I sat in the other. He smiled at me. "So much for the party, we have them every weekend except when it rains."

"Tell me the dirt on Alex and Ally. I think I have asked a hundred times already and still you evade the question." I leaned over the arm of the chair so that I was close to Michael's face.

"I told you, they are subhuman. And don't hit me." He raised his arms to block any potential smacks.

"I thought you were a genius? You were totally serious yesterday and now you can't keep a straight face."

"Being serious with you didn't get me very far, now did it?" He leaned forward in his chair. "But, if you insist, I will get serious. That is something I can definitely do."

I turned my chair so that it faced him.

“Alex and his sister have the highest GPA’s in our school and their aptitude scores are off the charts. They really never interact with anyone and no one except Millie has ever met their parents. They are always out of town and even though Millie swears they are nice people I have seen their kids and beg to differ.”

“What is it with the no touching rule Alex has?”

“Why would you want to touch him?” Michael barked. I shrugged my shoulders and pointed at the dog.

“It’s weird.”

Michael looked lost in thought. How hard was it to answer my question? He tapped his fingers on the armrest. “I am not completely sure why but I can tell you this-Alex screamed when one of our classmates fell to the floor during an epileptic seizure. He held her down but screamed as if he were in horrible pain; as if *he* were having the seizure too.”

Alex kicked the door open. Michael and I both jumped at the sound. He stood in the entrance with his eyes narrowed at us; as if he heard every word we spoke. “It is time to come over to my house now. Millie wants me to lock up.”

“Can’t I just stay at her house? I think I would be less of an inconvenience to you.” Alex looked away. “No, I will manage. Hurry on home.”

I swallowed hard. That's what the voice said earlier. *Hurry on home*. ...Total coincidence; right? He was in his porch swing the whole time. I checked; twice.

"I guess I will see you tomorrow." Michael smiled. "Millie wants me to introduce you to Donna Denning. She is going to be your dorm mate in another week."

I followed Alex back to his house. He left the front door wide open for me but did not linger in the living room. "Are you going to bed?" I asked.

Alex stopped abruptly in the middle of the hallway as if he were waiting for me to speak.

I took a deep breath, "I heard someone in the woods say to me 'hurry on home' right before it started to rain. Do you know who that might have been?"

Alex slammed his bedroom door. I sat on one of the loveseats in the living room and clasped my hands together. I'd forgotten my box at Millie's house. I didn't see Alex lock her door. Maybe I could go grab it real quick. It had my family heirloom inside. Well, my photograph anyway. "Come on Pig," I whistled. He crawled out from under the sofa. "We are going on a secret mission and you can't tell Alex."

"Can't tell Alex what?"

I twirled around. Ally stood in the hall with her hand against the wooden framework. She'd tied her hair up in a pony

tail. I grabbed my chest. What was it with these two? They showed up everywhere like sneaky little-

“Can’t tell Alex what?”

“I left my box next door and I-I just wanted to go get it.”

“I brought that over for you already. There was some old flimsy photo in the box so I put it in a frame on the shelf in your room. Are those two your parents?”

I though Ally was the enemy? Why was she asking me personal questions? I nodded. “That is a picture of my mom and dad before I was conceived.” They were in love back then. Should I tell Ally this? Did she know what love was? Were her parents in love? Had she ever been in love?

“Well, it is on the shelf for you.” She turned abruptly.

“Ally.”

She let out a long sigh but turned to face me. She looked irritated and antsy to get back to whatever it was she was doing.

“Who are those people in the handcrafted frames? Are they older relatives of yours? I mean, they look just like you and Alex.”

“Mind your own business, Lisa.” She sauntered out into the living room and took a seat on the opposite sofa. I stuffed my hands under my butt so that she couldn’t see them tremble.

“I just thought-”

“Don’t think, Lisa, stop trying to make Alex and I into some exciting mystery for you to solve. You will be disappointed.” She

crossed her legs and picked at her fingernails. Hers were perfectly manicured. Not like her brothers or like mine. There was dirt in my nails and the nail polish I wore had chipped. I wonder if Millie would get mad if she found out about my little incident at the food mart? Would she expect me to treat Ally well too? I took a deep breath.

“I am sorry I made faces at you at the grocery store. I was just playing around. I saw you staring at me and thought it would be funny.” I tapped my feet against the floor boards. She did not look up.

“What did you do to my dog? He hates me now.” Ally narrowed her eyes at me the same way Alex did. “You’ve turned him against me. And also, my brother; who are you Lisa Brown?”

“Millie’s niece,” I replied. Ally sent chills down my back. I needed to try and get a long with her. I’d have to live with her at school and next door as long as I was here. Peace. I needed to find some way to bring peace; a treaty of some sort. “Ally, what can I do to make you dislike me a little less?”

“Go home.” She answered. She leaned forward with a sly smile on her face. “But, that’s impossible, right?”

I wanted to slug her. Ally was down right mean. “I-I think I will go to bed now.”

“Stay, we were just getting to know each other. Besides it is too early for bed. We didn’t even have dinner yet.”

I wiped the tears that threatened to spill. “I am afraid I don’t want to learn anything else about you. Goodnight, Ally.”

Pig followed me into the room. When he entered, I slammed the door shut. Ally was pure evil and I *hated* her.

Six

Becoming Vegetarian

A few hours later and Aunt Millie pounded on my door. “Lisa, come out for dinner.” I swallowed. If she made chicken-

“I will be right out.” I shouted. “Pig, where are you?” He snorted from on the high shelf. “How do you get up there?” I shook my head. It really didn’t matter how he managed to climb so high. He was like a miniature mountain goat. He jumped down and I finally spotted the new photo frame. It was carved wood with sea shells and starfish glued to its corners. The frame was beautiful and very unique. My mother and father fit well in between. A photo frame didn’t change the vile things Ally said. She could give me whatever she wanted but it wouldn’t make me like her. Still, it was a nice gesture.

“Lisa, are you coming?” Aunt Millie asked, tapping my door lightly.

“Yes Ma’am.” I put the picture back on the shelf and hurried to the table. There were two place settings only. Ally and Alex weren’t going to join us. I was sure of it. Why should they? That would be polite and they were the epitome of rude.

“Alex and Ally eat in their rooms.” Millie placed a bowl of steamed vegetables on the table. She cut some French bread and put that down too.

“Millie, where is my place setting?” Alex asked. I turned sideways to get a better look. Alex stood in the hallway with a pained expression on his face; almost like he was forcing himself to eat with us.

“I didn’t think you’d be joining us.” She exclaimed, nearly dropping the butter. “Sit down and I will get you a plate and utensils. You can cut the chicken.”

“I suppose I might as well be social,” Ally sighed. My eyes bulged. Not her too. I could handle Alex and his rude remarks but Ally-

“Where is the Rat? She is late for dinner.” Ally opened the front door.

The cat raced inside and jumped up in Aunt Millie’s chair. She put her front paws on the table.

“She eats at the table like a human?” I laughed. “That’s interesting.” Alex frowned. “Does she use a fork and knife?” I tried to hide my smile but it was too funny. Aunt Millie cut up little thin strips of chicken and placed it in a dish that said ‘meow’.

“Here you go Rat.” Millie placed her cat bowl on the table. Rat bit into the meat. Ally sat down across the table from me and smiled. I pretended not to notice. I focused all my attention on Rat.

She certainly acted like a normal cat. I hadn't seen her attack anyone or act crazy. Cats were independent right?

Alex came out of the kitchen with the carved chicken and placed it in the center of the table. He chuckled when he sat down next to me. "Are you hungry?" I didn't respond. He'd seen me throw up. How could they expect that I would want to eat something that I fed? They were almost like their pets; weren't they?

"Aunt Millie, aren't you going to sit down?" She stood in the kitchen wearing an apron with apples printed on its pockets. She shook her head and went outside. "Where is she going?"

Alex grabbed the plate of chicken and picked out all the dark meat. He handed it to Ally who took half a breast. "She isn't going to eat the meat." Alex laughed, stuffing chicken into his mouth. "She thinks I am a murderer."

Ally found this information amusing. She stared at me with her almond shaped eyes. "Are you one of those overly emotional types?"

"Where did Aunt Millie go?" If Alex or Ally didn't feel the need to answer my question then I most certainly wasn't going to answer any of theirs. "Is she okay? Should I go check on her?"

"No, leave her alone." Alex ordered. He shoved the steamed vegetables towards me.

Rat, the cat, jumped down and stretched out on the sofa furthest

from the table. “The cat doesn’t seem all that bad. She just does her own thing.”

Alex’s fork dropped. He narrowed his eyes at me and took a deep breath. “For some reason the animals do not mind being near you. Be weary; they cannot be trusted; especially the cat.”

“Well, maybe they just need to be socialized properly. Animals are afraid of people if they are not used to being around them. Maybe we could take Pig to a doggie park.”

Ally burst into laughter. “I see now why everyone tolerates you so well.” She shook her head; still laughing. “Millie is going to be humiliated when school starts and she has to introduce you as her niece.”

“That’s enough,” Alex growled.

I pushed myself away from the table.

“Where do you think you are going?” He snapped. I ignored him and hurried to the front door.

“I wouldn’t go out there if I were you.” Ally warned. She covered her mouth with her hand.

Alex stood and pointed at me. “Where are you going?”

I didn’t answer.

He chose which questions to respond to so I’d do the same.

I opened the front door and stepped outside. Within an instant, the sky rumbled and lightning flashed. My cheeks burned with anger. Ally was out to get me. I could see why the kids at Cin

called her a Nazi. She cared for only one person and that was herself. She looked down on me as if I were a lower life form.

“Come inside before you are struck by lightning.” Alex stood next to me. I was really getting sick of him sneaking up on me constantly. He just appeared whenever he wanted. It was very frustrating.

“Would you please leave me alone? When you want to be left alone I don’t bother you, do I?”

Alex blinked. His eyes softened and he closed the front door. Pig scratched at the door and barked. I didn’t let him outside with me. He didn’t need to get wet. It was ridiculous how much it rained here in Lynn. It set the mood for sure. The thunder was Alex, angry but controlled and the lightning was Ally all the way; beautiful on the outside but if you got too close she’d burn you. Together, they were a force to be reckoned with.

Lightning bolted across the sky in zigzag patterns.

I sat down on the porch swing and pushed with my feet. I swayed, listening to the pitter patter of the rain.

Thunder rumbled through the sky like a locomotive derailing and tumbling into a metal wall. Lightning struck a tree just a few feet away. It was as if an ax chopped; splitting the tree in two. Electrical lines broke and flicked in the dark sky; lighting it up like sparklers.

I jumped. My heart beat furiously. I could hardly stand. “Will

you please come in the house?” Alex insisted. I nodded my head and raced back inside. I shivered from the rain and took a deep breath trying to calm myself. That could’ve been me. Imagine if the lightning was two feet closer? I’d be a shish-ka-bob. Ally would love that.

“Sit down,” He pulled out my chair and I sat while he pushed me in close to the dinner table. He sat back down next to me and handed me the French bread. “We never have guests over. Please pardon our eccentricities.”

“Are you speaking to me simply because I am here invading your privacy?” I ripped the bread into tiny pieces. I was slowly becoming less and less hungry.

“I only talk when I want to. You are a very mixed up girl. You feel one thing but say another.”

“I try to have a positive outlook. If you pretend to be happy then odds are you will become happy.”

“Do you really believe that?” He got up and went to the fridge. “Your eyes tell a different story.” He returned with a roast beef and Swiss cheese sandwich. “I made you a sandwich. You are going to starve to death if you refuse to eat chicken.”

I took the sandwich and tried my best not to lose control. Hunger pains invaded my stomach. I hadn’t realized just how famished I was till just then.

“To answer your question, I *want* to believe only the good but

that doesn't mean that I do not doubt or question things."

Ally came back out and sprawled across the empty loveseat. She kicked her foot uneasily. "Alex, why is it still raining?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I guess the lightning keeps Lisa in the house doesn't it? I think I will stay home tonight." She yawned, stretching her arms above her head. "That means Lisa will have to share her bed."

I gulped.

Nazi was going to sleep in my room? Why?! Where had she been so far? What room was she always sneaking off into? Was the other room her parents' room? Where was Aunt Millie? Was she always missing at night?

"I think the bed is too small for two persons. I can't guarantee that I will not accidentally touch you in the middle of the night while I sleep." That ought to scare Ally a little. Didn't this family hate touching? She'd be horrified at the thought. Ha, ha, ha, Ally, you evil witch.

"I don't care if you touch me. It's Alex who has a problem; not me."

I was doomed. Would Millie let me share a room with her? Maybe I could sleep on the couch or even at Aunt Millie's house. Millie wasn't here so what would be the difference with me going and staying at her place? Why did I have to stay with the freaks?

"Maybe I should sleep on the couch and let you take the room.

That way I do not get in your way.”

“You are always in my way, Lisa Brown. You are like a big mole that isn’t going to go away. I might as well get used to you. Besides, I’ve never spoken to a person of average intellect before. Your philosophies are quite amusing. I now understand why fantasy novels are popular; for people like you.”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t put me down. It makes it very hard to respect you.” I pushed myself away from the table. “I am going to find Aunt Millie and see if she will allow me to stay at her place. I see I am not welcome in this house.”

Alex stood up, walked across the room and barricaded the front door. “Millie will not allow you in her house at night. No one goes there after dark.” I got the goose bumps all over my arms.

Ally sighed, rolling her eyes; she took off her shoes and flung them at the cat. Rat arched her back and hissed. “Shut up, Rat. Get out of here, you are getting on my nerves you stupid cat!”

Rat jumped down with her back still arched. She backed away from Ally slowly before racing down the hall.

Pig crawled out from under the table and sat at my feet. He growled lightly. Ally leaned forward. “Don’t worry Pig. I am not going to throw anything at Lisa.”

“Ally,” Alex began, “Clear the table.”

“I will do it.” I offered. He frowned.

“Lisa, you sit and eat your stupid sandwich.” He inched away

from the door and disappeared down the hall.

Ally groaned loudly. She stomped dramatically towards the dining table. She made sure to slam the dishes onto the kitchen counter and to bang anything that could possibly be banged.

I couldn't wait until Michael came back to get me. I was going to get a chance to meet Donna. Millie said she was nice and Michael didn't have any horror stories to tell concerning my future dorm mate; anything to get out of this house and away from Alex and Ally. Maybe she had some make up I could borrow. I hoped she liked slumber parties and movies. Movies were my biggest vice. What about the boys at Cin? It would be nice to have a girl friend to go to the parties with who could give me the dirty details on all the available bachelors. I really missed my friends back home. I'd never been around such cruelty before from someone. Ally wasn't the ideal housemate. Could you imagine getting stuck with someone like her in college? Oh man, that would be a nightmare!

"What are you thinking about?" Ally stood inches from my face. "Hello in there!" She waved her hand in front of my face.

"I was wondering what Donna Denning was like." I answered, getting up from the table. "I was hoping she and I could be good friends."

"What is it with people always wanting a best friend?" Ally placed her hands on her hips. "I mean, think about how few

actually stay best friends; only a handful. Some people end up with a new best friend every school year. It is pointless to share all your secrets with someone.”

“Why would it be pointless Ally?”

She shrugged. “Then they have something to blackmail you with.”

“You sure are selfish. Having a close friend is like a chocolate sundae on a hot day; pure heaven.”

Ally followed me back to my room. She sat on the edge of the bed. “Did you ever have a best friend?”

“Back home I did. But, I moved here.”

“So now you are not best friends anymore?”

“We will always be friends and I even promised to write to her while I was here. Sometimes people grow apart but that doesn’t mean that the friendship wasn’t real. I miss Katie more than you could imagine.”

Ally touched a single strand of my hair. Pig jumped into the bed and growled.

“Shut up, Pig.” She looked into my eyes for a few seconds as if she were trying to make a difficult choice. “How does one act when they are best friends?”

“Are you serious? Haven’t you ever had a friend before?”

“I am not asking you to be my friend, Lisa Brown; I am asking what one does when they are close.”

“Well, we share secrets, do each other’s hair and make-up, talk about boys, hang out, talk about boys some more, just do stuff I guess.”

“Let’s play this shallow game of yours then.” She skipped out of the room and came back with a cosmetic bag. “This is my mom’s. I don’t have any make up of my own. I think it is stupid but since you like it I will see what the big deal is.”

“Curb your enthusiasm Ally.” I mocked, rolling my eyes. I opened the bag and found dried out bottles of mascara, lipstick and nail polish. The make-up must’ve been ancient. I didn’t really want to play dress up with Ally but maybe she would cut me some slack and maybe we could ‘coexist’ as my Aunt wanted. Where was Aunt Millie anyway?

“Okay, this is just for experimental purposes.” Ally informed me. “This does not make us friends.”

“I wouldn’t dare think that you were my friend.” I retorted. “Sit closer so I can make up your face.” She obeyed, leaning forward. I brushed on loose powder and some bronzer. I put a little water in the mascara and applied it to her eyelashes. Her eyes were very bright. I put some lip gloss on her lips and smiled. Ally was beautiful naturally but with make up she looked like a totally different person. She actually appeared normal.

“Go ahead and take a look in the mirror.”

She got up and went into the bathroom. She stayed in there a

long time before returning. Her eyes danced just like my mom's did when she was happy. Was Ally enjoying herself? What a miracle! I couldn't believe how easy it was to make her happy. Maybe she wasn't so bad after all.

"My turn," Ally grinned. "Close your eyes. I am going to use liquid eye shadow on you."

"Okay." I didn't remember seeing any in the bag but I hadn't looked too carefully either.

"I've never put make up on myself let alone anyone else so be open minded."

"It's okay, we aren't going anywhere we are just having fun." She painted my eyelids, lips and even my cheeks with her liquid stuff.

"Okay, I am done. Go ahead and take a look in the bathroom." Ally smiled from ear to ear. "I really think you will like it."

I got up and went into the bathroom.

I flipped on the light.

Pig snorted.

I looked in the mirror.

...And gasped.

There was permanent black magic marker all over my lips, cheeks and eyelids. "ALLY!!" I looked like a clown. She really was heartless. I thought we were having fun. She couldn't be nice even for a few minutes. "You, evil selfish jerk! No wonder you

don't have any friends!"

I ran down the hallway and out the front door. I slammed the door in Pig's face. He didn't need to follow me. I wanted to be alone anyways. Why did my mom send me to this horrible place? Who were these people and how could Ally do such a mean thing? If I had half a brain I would punch her right in her nose. But, then where would I go? Millie made it very clear that Alex and Ally come first then the animals and then, if I was lucky, me. At least I was more important than the hens.

I stopped running when I got to the chicken coup. I scrunched down behind the henhouse with my head between my legs. I wasn't going to cry. Ally didn't deserve my tears. Well, maybe a few drops but they were not for her. They were for me. I wiped away the non-tears that trickled down my cheeks.

Rat jumped down from the hen house and stood in front of me. She flicked her tail and growled. "Leave me alone. Do you see what Ally did to my face?" I pointed at my clown face. "It's permanent marker so it will stick for days."

Rat continued to growl at me and finally she stepped closer and hissed. She extended her claws.

"You don't scare me." I rolled my eyes and turned my back to her. "You look like a Halloween cat when you arch your back like that. It is stupid and you are a poor excuse for a cat."

Rat sat down and began grooming herself. I curled up in the

fetal position. I wanted my mom. I wanted to be back at home in Florida away from this crazy family. When would I get to go back? When would my mom call and send for me? She said it wouldn't be too long and that I could come back to Florida and finish the school year off with my old friends. That would be nice. Rat meowed. I looked into her round eyes. She purred.

"Is this some kind of trick? Are you trying to seduce me into touching you so that you can attack me?" Rat pranced in a circle. "Yeah, you are twisted just like Ally. I am going to call you Two Faced Cat."

Rat didn't approve. She hissed inches from my nose. I could smell her warm breath. "If you don't want to be my friend then get lost already." Rat obeyed, jumping up above me and back onto the henhouse.

I lay flat on my back and looked up at the stars. They twinkled. The skies cleared so beautifully after a storm here in Massachusetts. It was a little chilly but not like last night. I could just sleep out here. Alex and Ally wouldn't mind. I certainly wouldn't either. I turned to look at the house. Two silhouettes stood in front of the window just in my line of vision. Inside, I could hear Alex and Ally shouting.

When Alex yelled, the lights in the house flickered on and off.

...Probably just coincidence.

Seven

Absolute humiliation

In the morning I found myself in a bed. I didn't remember ever coming back into the house. I was on a twin with a feather top mattress. The room was dark and the windows were boarded up so that only very little sun leaked in.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. Pig jumped up onto the bed and wagged his tail as if he wanted to go outside. "Where are we Pig?" It felt weird not being able to touch him. I wanted to pick him up and squeeze him tight to my chest. He'd probably have a heart attack. Poor, crazy dog...

My eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness and finally I could see my surroundings. There was a shelf on the wall just like in Ally's room and a recliner chair. In it, it looked like a man sat sleeping. *Impossible*. Where was I? Was it Alex?

"Alex?" I whispered. The man's head jerked up. He lifted his hand and turned on a reading lamp above his head.

It was Alex.

"What?"

"How'd I get in here?"

"Would you rather sleep in Ally's room with her?"

"No, I-

“Then just be happy already.” He turned on his side and closed his eyes.

“What about the chickens?”

“Done, go to sleep.”

“I can’t. Did I sleep outside all night?”

“No.”

“Well, who brought me in here? It wasn’t you, obviously seeing as you don’t touch people.” I crossed my arms. This was one question he was going to answer. I was sick of being ignored and bossed around by him.

“Lisa, do you really want to get in an argument over how you ended up sleeping in a bed instead of outside in the dirt?”

“If I have to; then yes. I would like to know.”

“Who do you think put you in my room? Do you think that Ally or Millie could possibly lift you?”

“You do not have to talk down to me.”

“You are like a child. Why is the sky blue, why is the grass green; why, why, why. I carried you in here.”

“I kind of figured...” I rolled over onto my side so that my back faced him. “Why did you break your ‘no touching’ rule?”

“You looked cold.”

“You could’ve just brought me a blanket. That wouldn’t violate your rule.”

“Do you always talk so much?” Alex looked up. He flipped the

switch and light filled the room. “Why can’t you just-”

“Have you ever had a girlfriend before?” I doubted it. He was harsh and didn’t seem to be interested in anything. Was he so smart that all he thought about were his studies? That would be sad. I couldn’t understand people like that. Didn’t they want to have someone to hold hands and cuddle with? I sure did. I would be happy to have the dog hug me! My standards had really suffered since coming to Lynn.

“Why would you ask me that? Do you want to be my girlfriend?”

I jerked back; shocked. “I was just trying to get to know you.”

“Well, if I wanted to tell you something I would.” Alex leaned forward in his chair. “Can’t you just let things happen?”

“I am waiting very patiently for Pig to let me pet him. So, yes, I can wait.”

“Do you want a boyfriend? Is that why you are asking me this?”

“It is just that you can be so obnoxious sometimes and blunt that I was curious if you treated your girlfriends that way too. If you ever had any, that is.”

Alex grinned. “I guess I should get myself a girlfriend. Will that get you off my back?”

“No, I was just curious. Why is it so difficult for you to answer a simple question? I get a response for maybe one out of five inquiries. It is so annoying.”

“When school starts I will get a girlfriend and then I will be able to answer you.” He turned out the light again and I knew he was done with our conversation.

“You’d have to touch her.” I threw the blanket over my head. Pig didn’t like that too much; me covering my whole body-disappearing underneath the covers. He grunted and let out a sigh.

Ally pounded on the bedroom door. “Lisa, you have a guest. He says you are supposed to go out with him today.” She stomped down the hall. “All these visitors are really getting to me! My life used to be so simple now with that girl, it has turned into an avalanche of people and drama.”

I had to admit, I didn’t understand a word she said. I think she was trying to say I was messing up her routine but with Ally you never could be sure. I crawled out of bed and Pig followed me down the hall. I figured she wouldn’t invite whoever it was inside so I went out to the porch.

Michael sat on the purple porch swing in his beanie cap and a long sleeved shirt. His eyes widened when he saw me. My hair must be sticking up. I ran my fingers through my hair and smiled. “Hi, I just woke up so I am sorry if I look a mess.” He grinned, lowering his head. “What’s so funny?”

“Did you look in the mirror?” I gasped. *Ally*... She made me so sick.

“I have black magic marker all over my face don’t I?” Michael

nodded. "Terrific. I hate that girl."

"Ally did this to you?" Michael's eyes widened. "I knew she was horrible but I never thought she'd do something so cruel-"

"You are the one who called her a Nazi Commandant!" I screamed.

He jumped up from the swing and covered my mouth with his hand. "Are you crazy? She will hear you."

I shoved him away. "I could care less if she heard me. Look at my face. LOOOK at it!" I kicked the wooden railing on the porch. All that did was hurt my foot. I fell down and grabbed my toes. "Why did I just do that?"

Michael leaned over me and placed his hand on my shoulder. "Let's go next door to Millie's house and get you cleaned up. A little hairspray and it will be off your face in no time." He lifted me up and guided me across the yard to Millie's house. Pig followed with excitement. "What in the world did you do to that dog?" Michael shook his head.

When Aunt Millie saw my face she froze in the center of the room. "What did you do to your face?" I frowned. What did I do? Figures she'd assume it was me who did it and not her star pupil.

"Ally did this to my face. She tricked me into thinking we were going to do each other's make-up."

"Ally doesn't wear make-up."

"Yes, I know. She brought in her mother's old make up and we

used that-well I used that on her face but she used a permanent marker on my face. What good times we had last night.” *Where were you* Aunt Millie, when all this was happening? You should’ve been home so that you could’ve intervened.

“Do you have any hairspray?” She nodded and pointed down the hall. I followed Michael into the bathroom.

I looked into the mirror and forced myself not to cry. I looked hideous. I was surprised Michael hadn’t run for the hills just so he could get away from me. MY FACE HAD BLACK MARKER ALL OVER IT. I was going to kill Ally. She’d played her last practical joke on me. Who did she think she was?

“Close your eyes,” Michael ordered, pointing a bottle of hairspray at me. I jerked back.

“What are you doing?”

“I am going to spray your face with it. This helps get ink out. Trust me.” He half smiled. I closed my eyes and Michael squirted. The hairspray stuck to my skin and it felt gross. He took a wet wash cloth and scrubbed.

“This is awful,” I pushed against his chest.

“Stop moving, this stuff is really tough to get out.” Michael squirted my face with more hairspray.

“You could warn me before you spritz my face!” I smacked him in the shoulder.

He laughed, “Even when I am trying I help you, you still hit me.

Hold still,” he directed, rubbing my cheeks with the cloth. “Hmmm, I think you look better now; a little red but much better.”

I opened my eyes and stared at my reflection. Most of the ink was gone. It looked like I had some gray eye shadow on my lids and you could barely tell there was ink on my cheeks. My lips were still completely black.

“I kind of like the black on your lips. It looks cool.”

“Well, it is coming off.” I decided, grabbing the hairspray. I rubbed my lips until they burned. “I can’t believe Ally would do something like this. What happened to her to make her so mean?”

“I think she is just a bad seed. She’s never done anything this horrible before though at least not to my knowledge but I guess none of the girls at Cin would ever admit to having been painted with magic marker to anyone.”

“I certainly won’t be telling anyone.”

Michael chuckled.

I rolled my eyes at him. “You wouldn’t be laughing if this stuff was on your face.”

“No, probably not; it is a good thing it was you she did this to. I would have a hard time explaining to my mother why I was putting make-up on.”

I laughed. That would be funny.

“I think maybe you should meet Donna this Saturday at the Bonfire by the ocean. All that ink should be gone from your face

by then. Don't worry; I will keep this a secret."

"You are just too kind. Want to stay for breakfast?"

He shook his head. "It's noon. You've slept the morning away. I have to go meet Donna and let her know you can't join us. We were going to take you into town to the mall."

"Are you trying to make me jealous? ...The mall? If I didn't look like a clown I'd so be there."

"Sorry about your face, Lisa." Michael smiled and I beamed. It was a good thing I didn't run him off the first day I met him. He wasn't so bad after all.

I sat down in one of the recliners and turned on the television. Michael waved before disappearing through the front door. I turned on the TV and flipped through the channels. On the news there were reports of three hurricanes forming around near Florida. I leaned up and squinted to read the small print. California suffered a slight earthquake and a tropical storm had devastated Puerto Rico's coastline.

Eight

The Big Wake

Millie sat down in the opposite recliner. She sighed loudly. What did she want? Was she going to lecture me about being honest about her horrible students?

“Yes, Aunt Millie, is there something we need to discuss?” She nodded her head and twisted her chair to face me. She wore a blue dress shirt buttoned all the way up today and her hair was in a tight bun.

“I spoke with Ally and she said she would like to make amends.” I didn’t believe it for a second. Ally; sorry? That would be a first. She just said that to stay on Aunt Millie’s good side.

“I really do not want to speak to her right now. She is not a very nice person.” Millie tapped her fingers on the armrest. She looked irritated. Was I disrupting her life?

“I would appreciate it very much if you let her mend the mess she has caused. I think that if you gave her a chance, you’d find her to be a very darling girl. (*Let her do YOUR make-up then...*) Most girls at the school are jealous of her because of her grades (*I don’t think it is jealousy...*) but you never have to worry about

competing with her academically. As friends, you and Ally would be a perfect match.”

I hated Aunt Millie. She was just like Alex and Ally. They thought I was stupid. My ignorance amused them. I’d show them dumb alright.

“Okay, Aunt Millie, I will be a naive idiot and go next door. A smart person would take last night’s incident and realize great caution was needed when around Ally, but since I am intellectually stunted, I will do the unwise thing of allowing myself to be exposed to her tyranny again, for a second time.” I got up from the chair and slammed the front door.

Ally sat on one of the sofas with her feet propped up. She did not look up when I entered the room. She kept her face buried inside a thick book.

“Writers aren’t as original as they used to be. Why do you think that is, Lisa?”

“I apparently do not think so why bother asking me?” I crossed my arms in front of my chest. “Millie says you want to apologize for what you did.”

Ally turned a page of her book. She read quietly for a moment. “I don’t think you are dumb,” she whispered, “just too hopeful.” What in the world did that mean? I was too hopeful? Was she trying to make me miserable and negative just like her?

“Everything you say ends with a slap in the face.”

She looked up from her book. Ally placed the novel in her lap and stretched. "I am going to take you kayaking. You can borrow something of mine to wear since you packed for a two day weekend getaway. Did you think your mother was going to miss you and come right on back that fast?"

"There it is again; another slap in my face. Thanks, Ally." I growled, twirling around.

"Oh, you're welcome. You are so silly."

"How am I the silly one?"

"You are full of ideas on how people are supposed to be. Let me give you some advice, Lisa Brown. What I say is what everyone else just thinks. I am the most honest person you've ever met. *That* is why you hate me; because I don't lie to you like everyone else."

"You put permanent marker all over my face. How is that honesty?"

"You were painting me like a clown. So, I painted you back." Ally sneered. "Hurry up; we need to make Millie happy. Let me get you something to wear."

"What a paper bag?"

Ally came out of her room with red shorts and a black tee shirt. I tossed them on the sofa. "Would you prefer to wear something else?"

"I am not going out of this house with marker on my face. This is your fault, Ally, so don't roll your eyes at me."

“Alex!” Ally pounded on his door. “Lisa is being difficult again.” She looked down the hall at me and giggled. Was this fun to her? Did she enjoy making my skin crawl? What could Alex possibly do to make me cooperate?

Alex trudged down the hall. He held something in his hand. It was an old bottle with the words scratched off. He shook it and applied it to a cloth. “Don’t move,” he ordered gently pressing the cloth against my face.

Even though his fingers did not brush my skin, he still winced as if in some horrible pain. His eyes watered and he peered up; glancing at my face. A rush of calmness came over me. Alex hurt all over. I could feel his pain straight through the cloth. Was that normal? I’d never been able to feel anyone else’s pain before. He brushed the rag over my lips softly. My heart jumped. I could feel intense emotion coming from him. The worst part of all was that I didn’t want him to remove the cloth from my face—ever.

“There, go look in the mirror.” He tightened the cap and placed it on the table. “I am going to go with you so that Ally won’t play anymore practical jokes.”

I nodded and went to the bathroom. All the ink was gone. “Why didn’t you do this before I went out and embarrassed myself in front of Michael?”

Alex covered his mouth with his hand. “You called me obnoxious and blunt. I figured I was the last person you wanted

help from.”

I wanted to slug him.

I put on Ally’s clothes and borrowed some flip flops. It was warm outside and felt good. At least she shared her things. Ally was cruel hearted but not stingy. Pig stayed home. It was probably a good thing because the odds were good that Ally was going to try and drown me. Alex would hold down my head while she hit me with an oar. I was so going to give my mother a lecture for leaving me with this crazy group. I should just check myself in wherever she was. Amber still hadn’t called. Maybe they wouldn’t let her make calls. Sometimes doctors did that; right? She hadn’t forgotten about me that fast, did she?

The ocean was different from Florida’s. There wasn’t a very wide sandy beach and the sand wasn’t warm. It was gritty and the water clearer. Ally and Alex paid a vendor that sat on the beach and motioned for me to come help carry the kayaks. It felt nice to sink my feet into the sand again. I had to admit that it made me homesick. I wanted to be in my bed, in my house... But, we’d lost our home; even with me working too. I didn’t have a home anymore.

Alex took his own kayak and Ally and I got a double to share. It was pretty light; made of some sort of plastic material. “I haven’t done this in years.” Ally admitted. “Do you remember when we last went this far out into town?” Ally asked her brother. He

shrugged his shoulders and crawled into his kayak. “The beach is beautiful-different but still lovely.”

Ally climbed up front and put me in the back. I had on a life jacket and held an oar in my hand. We both took our oars and dug them into the sand so that we could push off. Together we cut through the water like a knife slicing butter; in perfect unison. It was as if we both had one brain; knowing when to paddle and how hard.

“This is great, thanks Ally.” I said. I sure hoped she didn’t tip us or something.

“Is this something you would’ve done with Katie; that ex best friend of yours?”

“Yes, but without the fear of drowning. Let’s just sit for a second and take in the scenery.” She stopped paddling and so did I. We let the current take us wherever it wanted to. I could see fish swim underneath us and Alex shined in the sunlight. He held his oar behind his head and faced the sky with a nice smile on his face. He almost looked peaceful. There were two small kids making sandcastles at the shoreline.

“Have you ever had a friend before? I am sure you have; I was just wondering if something happened to make you not want a best friend.”

“I had a few friends in my lifetime.” She was seventeen not sixty. She made it sound like her years surpassed my own. “It is

easier to not have them; I think.”

“You think?”

“Well, it is just that when you have to watch them grow old-”

Alex banged his kayak into ours. “Ally, what nonsense are you rambling about now?” She shook her head and blushed. “We better get back to shore.” He decided. “Our rentals are about to expire.”

“Let’s rent them a little longer.” Ally pleaded, “Lisa you want to stay too; right?”

I nodded.

It was the best time I’d had so far since coming to Lynn.

Alex paddled away from us and Ally and I let the current continue to take us out further. There were sailboats and jet skis. Someone in a motorboat whizzed by; causing little wakes that rocked our kayak. It was nice to be rocked back and forth by the ocean. The waves that crashed us splashed up and sprayed our faces. Ally laughed. I smiled. It was nice to see her happy. Maybe she could change or was she just being good because her brother was here; watching her every movement? Why did he concern himself with my safety?

Two jet skis pulled up to Ally and I. Michael was in one of them. He was with a tall, skinny boy with spiked black hair. His nose was long and so was his face. “Hi Lisa; hello Ally,” Michael smiled. “What are you doing?”

“Just enjoying this beautiful day, the weather is perfect; don’t

you think so?"

Michael nodded. "This is my friend Kurt. He goes to Cin too so you will see him on campus next week when school starts."

"Hi Kurt, I am Lisa." I waved, holding my oar in the opposite hand. He smiled and waved back.

"Ally, do you know Kurt?" Michael's face was filled with caution.

She did not respond. "Let's go, Lisa." Ally tapped me with her oar, "The Ocean is getting too crowded now."

"I wanna stay. Hey, Michael can I climb on your jet ski and hang out with you for a while?"

Michael's face beamed. "You bet, there are a whole bunch of other kids from school a few sailboats out. I will introduce you. Ally you are more than welcome to come too."

"Ally, come on," I whined, "Let's hang out with them. It won't kill you; will it?"

She turned sharply. "No, it will not. I thought we were having fun? Did something change?"

"No, just the more people the merrier. Besides, I want to meet the kids from our school. How else do you make friends unless you socialize?"

"Alex is not going to like this, but, let's go." I took a deep breath. Why would Alex care? "We are taking the kayak. I am not touching those creeps."

“Fine, Ally, whatever you say.”

Michael led us to a nice white sailboat with pale green sails. There were maybe fifteen other teenagers around sixteen to maybe eighteen years old in the boats.

Some of the girls on the boat stopped talking and stared at us with wide eyes. “Is that Ally?” One said, “Who is that girl with her?” They were in bikinis sunbathing. I looked down at myself in my shorts and tee shirt. I’d be the nerd at CIN for sure. Before I came to Lynn I’d always thought that geniuses were geeky and not very attractive but almost all of the kids from CIN were good looking making me look all the more average; average looks average brain...

Ally glared back up at them. “They’re looking at us!” She complained.

“Be nice, Ally.” I rolled my eyes. “It won’t kill you to be nice. Think of it as an experiment.”

“I will tolerate them; I suppose.” She snarled. “Michael, help me up.” He grabbed her hand and hoisted her into the sailboat.

I tied the kayak to the side of the boat next to the bumper guards and Michael pulled me up next. Maybe Donna would be here and I could meet her finally. Most of the guys wore knee length swim trunks or skater shorts. A few wore wife beaters but most went shirtless. Michael was one of them. He was ripped. His arms were strong and his chest tight. He had the beginnings of a six pack too.

“What are you staring at?” Ally followed my gaze. “Oh,” is all she said.

“This is what best friends do,” I whispered. She actually giggled. We followed Michael over to a group of guys from the school. One was Kurt with his long face and there was one with a round chubby face (he wore a shirt) and another short, young guy with braces.

“You know Kurt,” Michael pointed. “This handsome guy here is Big Al, (chubby face) and this little guy is Metal Head or as his mom calls him, Anthony (guy with braces).”

“Hi, I am Lisa and this is Ally.” The guys just stared. It was as if they were seeing a ghost. Ally crossed her arms over her chest and frowned. “We were out kayaking, do you guys hang out here often?”

Metal Head grinned. “Sure, (his voice was squeaky) every Sunday. There really isn’t much to do in this town.” He stretched his hand out. “I’m Anthony.”

I smiled. Ally turned her back to us. Was she nervous? Scared? Why didn’t she just try to speak to them? Maybe she wasn’t really as mean as I thought. Did she have a fear of rejection?

“Hi Ally,” Big Al grinned. “It’s nice to see you out. How’s your summer so far?”

“It’s been wonderful. I’ve had company; as you can see.”

What exactly was wonderful about her summer so far? Me?! I

doubted that for sure. Maybe her summer was good *before* I arrived. What did I know? She was more complex than I'd thought. If I didn't know any better I'd say she wanted friends. What was stopping her from trying?

The sky grew dark. Thunder rumbled above us. This was the wrong place to be in a storm. I'd seen how violent lightning was here in Lynn. "We'd better go," I decided. Ally nodded.

"Yeah, see ya Saturday. We are having a bonfire here at the beach. A last big bash before school starts." Big Al said. "A-Ally, you should come."

She took a deep breath, "I will try to make it." I was so proud of her. She was really trying to hold back on her nasty remarks. If only she'd edit herself with me too.

We climbed back into our kayak. Michael held it steady for us and we began paddling back to shore. "What is it with this weather?" I complained. "It just rains whenever; without any warning."

"It's temperamental." Ally answered. I laughed.

"I was really impressed. You weren't rude to any of them. Ally, you were even civil."

"You asked me to be nice so I was. I know how to be nice, Lisa Brown."

"Why do you always say my whole name?"

"I don't know. It sounds more dramatic; don't you think?"

Lightning flashed behind us. “Where is Alex?” I surveyed the darkened waters. The water was rough and almost pushed us toward the shore.

“He’s right over there.” She pointed at a lone kayak a few yards away. “Let’s get out of the water.”

Waves rocked us. Our kayak swayed sideways; jerking furiously. I set my feet firmly on the floorboards to balance myself. “Good idea.”

All of a sudden, a huge wave, three times our size, collapsed on top of us. The kayak tipped over.

I was upside down under the water. My throat stung from the salty water and it hurt to hold my breath. I struggled to free myself but my legs were caught inside the seat. I swayed back and forth, trying to lift myself forward.

I really was going to die in Lynn.

Accept it wasn’t Ally who was going to kill me.

I was going to drown.

My eyes burned and I slapped the side of the boat. I needed air in my lungs. They were about to burst from the pressure. What would my mom say when she came to get me? *Millie where is my precious daughter? Dead?! You only watched her for three days!*

Who was I kidding? My mom wasn’t coming to get me and she wasn’t going to miss me if I drowned.

I still didn’t want to die.

I struggled to free my leg. It wouldn't budge. I'd caught it underneath the safety bar. Yeah, real security...

Suddenly, the kayak flipped forward and I gasped for air. My lungs burned and I felt as if I were going to explode all over. I coughed up water from my lungs. Ally was coughing too. She'd been stuck as well. We gagged and spit out salt water.

Alex sat in his kayak with a pained expression. "That was a close one."

I couldn't speak. My hands, arms, face and the whole rest of my body trembled and shivered from the cold.

He held on tight to our boat. "I think we should hurry home."

I looked up at the sky. It was clear; as if it never threatened to rain just moments ago. The ocean waters were calm and relaxed too. "I lost my oar."

Ally laughed, "Me too."

Alex tied our kayak to his and pulled us back. He had to pay for the lost oars and he rented towels from the cabana boy so that Ally and I could dry off. We walked back up the road to the house. Our clothes dried some in the sun and when we arrived home there was an old Mitsubishi in the yard.

It couldn't be!

Nine

The Electrifying Truth

I ran, slipping and sliding in Ally's flip flops. Amber; she'd come back for me. I knew she couldn't stay away from me too long! I was going home! It was a miracle. And to think I'd almost given up on her.

Outside, sitting on the purple porch swing was my mom. She saw me and burst into tears. Her long blond hair was cut short, to her ears, and she wore overalls (of all things). I didn't care; my mom had come to take me back. She really did love me. Amber didn't say she loved me but why else would she drive across the country to come get me?

"Mom!" I raced up the steps and collided into her arms. She swung me around and squeezed me tight. Tears brimmed in her eyes and she pulled away to get a good look at me.

"You look different. Darker-"

"Yeah, hello to you too," I rolled my eyes. "What are you doing here? I have been waiting for you to call me!"

"I have called you everyday since you left. I kept getting Millie's answering machine and panicked. I thought something happened to you so I got in my car and drove all night."

“You must be tired.” I assumed. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving, let’s go out to eat some place nice. You can tell me all about Lynn.” She surveyed my wet clothes. “It looks like you are having fun.”

I forced myself to smile. There was no sense in telling her about my near death experience or about Ally and her practical jokes. I was going home so it didn’t matter anymore.

Alex and Ally stood a few feet away. They glared at my mother. She waved and smiled. “Who are they? Do I know them? They look so familiar.”

“That’s Alex and Ally. Aunt Millie watches them while their parents are out of town.”

“Well, why don’t you invite them to lunch too?” I shrugged my shoulders. I needed to change into dry clothes anyway and one more hour with the freaks wouldn’t kill me. At least I didn’t *think* it would.

“Would you like to come to lunch with me and my mom?”

Ally turned sideways and whispered into Alex’s ear. He nodded then looked at me.

“Yes,” he said. It sounded almost like he had to force himself into agreeing. Ally motioned for me to follow her into the house. She closed the front door behind her and locked the dead bolt.

“What are you doing?”

Ally glowered, “I do not like people in my house. I didn’t invite

her here.”

Thank goodness I was leaving!

“Can I borrow some more clothes? All of mine are dirty.” *I will mail them back to you. Ha.*

“Yes, I will bring some out for you.” Ally slammed her door. What was it with the two of them and slamming doors? Was she angry? She was finally getting rid of her mole; isn’t that what she’d called me?

I put on the jeans and tee shirt she gave to me. I looked nice. She had good taste in clothes for sure; at least for me anyway. She wore a long cotton dress that dangled around her ankles.

“Let’s hurry up and get this over with,” Ally crossed her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. Did she think my mother was going to leave without me?

My mom sat on the porch swing with her hands in her lap. She looked uncomfortable. Alex stood several feet away with his face turned. “Okay, we are ready.”

I sat in the front and Alex and Ally crawled into the backseat of my mom’s Mitsubishi. My mom looked at me with concern. She leaned over and whispered into my ear, “What in the world.”

We drove along the dirt road and turned onto the main highway. Alex and Ally stared out the window intently. “Look at this place,” Alex sighed. “It is so different.”

Ally said nothing.

“So, how old are you Alex?” Amber queried. She looked at him in the rear view mirror.

“Eighteen, I guess.”

My mom turned into a Denny’s and parked. “You guess?”

Alex nodded.

We took a table close to the door. It wasn’t crowded inside the restaurant which seemed to ease the tension a little.

“So, what happened at the ‘you know what’?” I smiled, swallowing. Amber avoided my eyes. She didn’t go to the psychiatric hospital. But, who was I to judge her? If she wanted to lie to me then that was okay. “Did they help you?”

“She didn’t go,” Alex answered. “She never had any intention to really go.”

Amber’s lip quivered. Why did Alex have to be so cruel? Couldn’t he just let my mother lie to me?

“It is okay mom. I am just happy you are here.” I grabbed her hand. She squeezed me back hard. “Alex can be a little blunt sometimes. I don’t think he means anything by it though. Millie considers them geniuses.”

My mom placed her hand on Alex’s arm.

She was going to tell him that it was okay; that she understood and that he hadn’t offended her. The truth was always the best policy. Yes, that is what my mother would’ve said for sure...

Alex screamed and smacked her hand away. He stood and

picked up his chair. His face burned red and I could see one of his veins popping out on his forehead. He lifted the chair above his head, as if he were going to hurl it at my mother.

“Alex!” I yelled, “What are you doing?”

He looked into my eyes. Alex took steady breaths, almost like he were counting to ten. The chair found its place on the floor again and Alex sat.

My heart pumped and my skin itched. What a lunatic. “Mom, don’t touch Alex, he doesn’t like it.”

“Uh, I can see that. So sorry young man.”

Alex nodded and scooted back to the table.

Our waitress inched her way over with a look of horror on her face. “I-Is everything alright here?”

Ally smiled. “Yes, of course. We are just very hungry.” I almost laughed. She was trying to pass Alex’s fit off as hunger. Who knows, maybe he *was* hungry.

“I will ask the kitchen staff to push your order,” The waitress said, backing away from the table slowly.

“That’s a very wise idea.”

“So, Lisa I thought we could leave for home today. I figured since you have your permit you could drive until it gets dark. I would have some time to rest up from my drive here and we could stay in some cheap hotel for the night.”

“Sounds good to me,” I hooted, raising my fist in the air.

Alex narrowed his eyes at Amber. “Why would you want to take her with you? Do you have a place to live? Aren’t you still sick?”

“Leaving my daughter here isn’t going to help make me better.”

“I am afraid *she* is your *problem*.” Alex crossed his arms and leaned them on the table. “Isn’t that right, Amber? It is hard to look at her now that she is older and looks so much like him?”

“Lisa,” My mom stood, banging her knees under the table, “Let’s get out of here. This kid is scaring me. I am sorry I left you with these freaks.”

I obeyed, pushing my chair away from the table. Ally grabbed my shirt and jerked me backwards. “What’s happening?” Her eyes watered. “Alex, what’s going on? I don’t understand.”

“Nothing, don’t worry Ally. Amber isn’t taking Lisa anywhere.”

My heart stopped. I gagged. I wasn’t leaving? What was he talking about? Was this another one of his games? Amber grabbed my arm and tugged. She led me out the front door.

“Get in the car, Lisa. Those kids are crazy. That boy is going to kill someone one day. He is like the next Ted Bundy or something.”

She started the car. I looked in the side mirror. Alex and Ally raced out of Denny’s and stood on the sidewalk. Ally was shouting at Alex, begging him for something. He just stared at our car.

My mom put the car in drive and pressed her foot to the gas

pedal. We hit the highway and took a deep breath. My mom blasted the radio and began singing. It was an old song from Cyndi Lauper; *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*.

We merged into traffic. I finally relaxed. They didn't have super speed. I laughed at this. What did I think Alex and Ally were?

"We are almost out of Lynn." My mom squealed.

"Almost free-"

I grabbed the dash and my mom clutched the steering wheel.

She hit her brakes and spun in a circle.

A bolt of lightning hit the roadway splitting the 'Lynn, Massachusetts' sign into two pieces.

Hurry on home.

The voice; it was back. It had to be Alex. It just had to be! I looked behind us for any sign of him. He was not there.

What about Ally? No. No, Ally.

I reached over and grabbed my mother's hand. We looked at the sky. It was clear; not a rain cloud in sight. Where did the lightning come from?

"Start the car," I demanded, "I want to get out of here."

My mom turned the ignition but the car stalled. She tried again.

Nothing...

What was wrong with the stupid car? Did it overheat?

Finally, the engine purred and my mom inched forward. She went around another car that had skidded to a stop as well.

Amber hit the breaks.

The road had a big hole in the center of it. There wasn't any way out; at least not this way. "Find another exit." I bit my fingernails.

"Did Millie tell you something?" Amber asked, backing out of the debris.

What was she talking about?

"About the night you were conceived?" Amber glanced at me. "Alex knew about it and I don't remember telling Millie anything about it; *ever*."

"What are you talking about?" My hands trembled.

"Good, it is better that you never know."

"Know what?" I screeched. "Stop the car!"

My mom hit the brakes. We were half on the sidewalk, trying to get out of the mess of vehicles backed up because of the lightning strike.

"Really, Lisa, it is not a big deal," She wouldn't look at me. "It is something that only concerns me."

"Mother."

"Lisa."

"If you don't tell me then I am going to get out and go find Alex. He will tell me for sure!"

My mother hid her face in her hands. "Jimmy, well, he is not your real father."

I blinked; stunned. How was that possible? She'd been married

to him years before I was ever even born. Did she have an affair and never tell me about it? Why would she?

“Who is my father then?”

“I don’t know,” She wiped the tears from her eyes.

How could she not know? Did she have multiple affairs with men? I thought she loved Jimmy?

“I came home after a long night of working; I went to the bathroom to take a shower because I was so dirty from running around at a catering party. When I close my eyes I can still smell the chocolate fondue that spilled all over me.”

Amber opened her mouth but nothing came out.

“What happened, mom?” I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

“Some man, with eyes just like yours stepped into the shower,”

“Mom?” My lips trembled. I didn’t want to process this information. She was right. It was better to not know. My heart pounded and I couldn’t breathe. My legs shook uncontrollably.

My father was a rapist.

“He slammed me into t h e w a l l, and then he-”

“Stop, I don’t want to hear anymore.”

Everything made sense. I now understood why Jimmy and Amber were so happy before I was born, why Amber never said she loved me and even why she looked sad whenever she peered into my eyes...

I was the problem.

I made my mother crazy.

“I can’t be near you, Lisa, without thinking about that night, but, another part of me cannot be *away* from you either.”

“Is that why you sent me away; because you didn’t want to face me anymore?”

“Millie never responded to any of my calls in the past. I always got her voicemail, then a few days later after I’d had one of my episodes; I was fine and didn’t want you to leave. But, out of the blue, Millie called me back two weeks ago. She said she’d help me out just this once. It was very out of character for Millie to do this. She’s never been a very good sister-in-law to me. But, I thought maybe if I had a little break to clear my head that maybe, just maybe I could see *you* for you and not *him*.”

“So, what do you want to do now?” Did she want to be rid of me? Had I destroyed her life? Why did she even give birth to me?

“I want to get you out of Lynn, That’s what I want to do right now.”

She hugged me. “Lisa, I am so sorry I told you.”

Amber and I got out of the car and took the sidewalk. The Mitsubishi had seen better days and so we figured we could walk to the next town and get two cheap bus tickets to some new place.

We were going to start over.

“I could get contacts. That might make it easier for you to look at me.”

“We are going to get some counseling together. That would probably be the best thing.”

We crossed the street.

The sky darkened.

My heart raced. *Not again*. What was wrong with the weather here?

“Lisa, I forgot my phone. I will be right back.” Amber ran back to the car. I stood inches away from the broken “Welcome to Lynn” sign.

Lightning never struck the same place twice. That’s what I’d heard anyway.

Thunder rolled above us and ambulances and police cars finally arrived from Lynn and the surrounding city. People climbed out of their cars, shouting and cursing filled my ears and I sat on part of the “Lynn” sign.

Droplets of rain pelted me in the forehead. My mom had been derailed. A policeman had stopped to question her.

“Come on, Mom,” I thought, “It’s going to get ugly.”

Maybe we could leave in our car after all. The police were already getting to work on organizing a detour. I got up and stretched.

Lightning flashed in the sky.

I looked up and saw two lightning bolts heading straight towards me.