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The first day of my senior year arrived, leaving nine months until graduation. Nine months. It sounded like a pregnancy. I had never been pregnant, though I believed school could be as excruciating as giving birth. The tantalizing and bullying that went on here. The pressure from the teachers and our parents.

“Kat, I want so much more for you than I had,” my mom once said.

I know that she did want more for me, but that didn’t change the way these kids treated each other. School was every kids’ worst nightmare, almost like a Freddy Krueger movie, except you don’t get killed only emotionally abused, sometimes physically.

The school bus jolted to a stop, snapping me out of my daydreaming. Students younger than me were scattered about. Was I the only senior who didn’t have her own car? Sure, I could drive my father’s, but not until six in the evening. I didn’t want to think about the car in the garage. The one under the blue tarp. The one I hadn’t been in for almost a year. If I were being totally honest, I had nowhere to go or any friends to hang out with anyway.

I sat tight while everyone else clambered off the bus. Then, I scooted out of the green, leather seat and ambled down the aisle. The blazing sun warmed my face as I stepped off the bus and onto the cracked concrete sidewalk. The bus doors swooshed closed behind me, then jerked forward, gears grinding as it drove away. Exhaust fumes hung in the air then drifted up my nose. I coughed, tasting the carbon fumes in the back of my throat. I reached for the water bottle in the side pocket

of my backpack when my body propelled backward. For only a split second, my feet left the pavement. I stumbled backward, colliding into another kid.

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I regained my footing, stepping out of the line of traffic that materialized on the sidewalk. My head whipped around to see who had bumped into me. A boy I hadn’t seen stopped and glanced over his shoulder back at me.

“Watch where you’re going,” I shouted.

He smiled at me.

Completely taken aback. I stood there blinking. A flutter of tingles swirled inside my stomach as I drooled over his muscular build and good looks. I turned, shaking away the images. What was wrong with me? I didn’t normally gawk at guys, especially ones I don’t know.

My chest rose and fell, a sigh escaped between my flesh-colored lips. I rolled my shoulders back, letting them slump beneath my light blue cotton sweater. A semi-warm gust of wind whooshed my auburn hair into my face. I tucked the lock of hair behind my right ear and peered out into the parking lot.

I scanned the scenery, everyone around me was also staring out into the parking lot. Less than half of the students who attended Hoffman High were rooted on the sidewalk, ogling a parked car.

I believed it didn’t have anything to do with the car, but who was sitting inside the car. There were rumors about Trevor and Mia breaking up when I returned home from my trip. Just a little surprised the rumors were true. Something drastic must have happened for them to break up. I couldn’t imagine him or her cheating on one another. So, what tore those two love birds apart? I’d

have to keep my ears alert, as I was sure the other students here at Hoffman High would gossip about it.

I shook the thought from my mind and fixated back on the car. What I and everyone else saw was not his girlfriend in the passenger seat. At least it didn't look like her. It didn't look like a person with blonde hair or was even female. Trevor wasn't gay. Not that him being gay was wrong. It was that Trevor was definitely into girls, or should I say, a girl. Mia was the love of his life, and vice versa. I wouldn't be surprised if they got back together.

At that very moment, whispers filled my ears. The same words heard through the halls of Hoffman High for years.

"Oh my God, I can't believe it."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Trevor and..."

"I hadn't heard. Did you hear anything?"

"Is he gay?"

"No way! It will destroy Mia."

"No wonder she broke up with him."

And on and on. More gossip.

We all stood on the sidewalk waiting for the person to get out of the car. It reminded me of a movie playing in slow motion, except no one was moving. A *creak* as the car door opened. Trevor Chapman, the all-star football champion, stepped out of the car. He extended his left arm, which

I'd seen him do a million times and ran a hand through his flowing, brown, shoulder-length hair then slammed the car door shut with his right hand. I must admit; he was gorgeous. He acted like he was on a Gap commercial the way his shirt clung to his chest and biceps. Let's not forget the way his hair cascaded along his shoulders, as if someone were styling it where he stood. His shirt rose, showing off his muscular abs. Did he feel like a movie star with everyone flaunting over him?

I swallowed and glanced down at the ground. I shouldn't be thinking about him in that way. Never had I ever viewed Trevor as a piece of meat. Scanning the crowd, I detected I wasn't the only girl fantasizing over his body. The rest, I believed, were having difficulty wrapping their heads around what the hell was going on.

"Is that Gavin Bowers?" Someone said, from the crowd of onlookers.

My head whipped back toward the car. My eyes followed Trevor as he glanced to his right. The passenger door opened, and Gavin appeared with a wide smile spread across his face. He stepped out of the vehicle, soaking in the scene.

I blinked, directing my attention back on Trevor, who wasn't smiling. Nope, today he was discreet. He didn't make eye contact with anyone, but everyone was watching him. In fact, he stared down at the ground, like an obedient dog. Did he sense our eyes on him? If so, he didn't let it show. Keeping his emotions sealed like a can of tuna. Something he had become good at doing. After what happened to his father two years ago, but I'll get into that later.

Then again, maybe I jumped the gun because now Trevor was smiling. Does that make him a liar? Not necessarily. He had to be the popular, good looking, all-star football player we visualized him to be. Winning the town its first undefeated state championship last year.

Trevor stepped away from his car, walking toward the school. Gavin slammed the car door and rushed to catch up to him. They had never been friends. I was sure of it. Had I missed this piece of information? I scanned through my memory but came up blank. Nope, I didn't recall hearing anything about them two since I'd returned home.

Trevor puffed out his chest. He didn't seem to care what anyone was thinking. To me it would feel like an itch I couldn't scratch in the middle of my back. I didn't like being the center of attention, but he did.

I scoped the scene with inquiring eyes. Trevor's posture was usually easy to read, but today I wasn't sure what he was thinking. His demeanor off. God, I hated not knowing. His teammates were going to ask him questions, and he better have a good explanation. I had to be there when it went down.

With my thumbnail between my teeth, a habit I couldn't seem to break, my mind whirled with judgments. I dropped my hand and placed it on the strap of my backpack. Turning away, I skittered up the walk, and into the school.

As I made my way through the hall lined with lockers, my ears crammed with more chatter. If it were a competition, there was definitely more babble inside the school than outside. *But they hadn't seen what I had seen.*

The students talked about what they did over the summer. The vacations they went on. This town wasn't huge by any means. Not that everyone knew everyone's business. Secrets could still be hidden away from nosy neighbors who loitered on their front porch. The hushed whispers in the aisles at the local grocery store. People in Crawford tried to mind their own business; they just failed in every aspect.

A week before school started, the administration office sent out everyone's class schedule and locker number with the combination. Orientation was an option. Being that this is a small school, I already knew most of the teachers and where my classes were. Besides, it was always something my mom and I did together.

I stood at my locker, turning my head toward the loud outburst coming from down the hall. Just my luck. My locker was in the same hallway as the dumb, loud jocks. They think they're so much better than everyone else. They have no respect for those around them. I watched as a couple of the jocks pushed one another in a rough, yet playful manner. But there were only two people who stood out from that crowd, and that was Gavin and Trevor.

Closing my locker door, I leaned against it and observed the scene. Yes, I'm a curious person when it comes to unexpected things like Trevor allowing Gavin to hang around him and his football buddies. Sometimes I got myself into circumstances I had trouble getting out of. But I liked the detective part of me. I get it from my father who was the detective here in Crawford. I enjoyed digging for clues and finding out the truth. But this summer, I promised myself I would mind my own business. Thing was, summer was over.

Gavin was a so-called loser at this school. Normally, I didn't put labels on people, but Gavin was different. I actually believed he relished being picked on. In fact, some guys from the team bullied him for years. Did that make him feel uncomfortable standing there with them? Wondering if the jocks were going to stuff him inside a locker like they did last year and the year before that? Or maybe he felt like the King of England standing next to Trevor. Could that be why he was hanging around Trevor? Was Trevor protecting Gavin? No, that didn't seem plausible. Trevor wouldn't jeopardize his reputation for a person like Gavin. Would he?

I searched my brain but came up with nothing. There was nothing that made sense about Trevor and Gavin being friends. Then again, did something happen over the summer, and they became friends? No, that couldn't be true. Trevor wouldn't be caught dead hanging around with Gavin, but here he was. So, what could it be? How did this happen? Why did it happen? I had to find out. I couldn't watch like everyone else. There goes not meddling in anyone's life.

I shoved off from the locker and walked down the hall, stopping several feet away from where the football team stood. I pretended to read something on the bulletin board.

"What's with the cockroach you have following you today?" Andrew asked.

I always considered Andrew as Trevor's bitch. He followed him around and wanted to be like him. I surveyed the scene. Trevor scanned from his friends to Gavin and then back to Andrew.

"Guys, you all know Gavin Bowers?" Trevor announced.

"Well, duh," Chad replied. "Who doesn't know this douche bag?"

Chad was a defensive lineman. His nickname to everyone was The Fridge. If you stepped in front of him on the field, you were going down, and it was going to hurt.

"I want you to be nice to him. He'll be hanging around with us from now on," Trevor announced.

My jaw went slack, my eyes widened. I didn't see this coming at all. *Hang out with them? What the hell!*

"You're kidding, right?" Andrew spat.

"No! So, get used to it," Trevor snarled, looking Andrew in the eyes.

Like outside, I could tell Trevor was hiding something. A secret. I hated secrets. But I loved discovering what the secret was. Because something was definitely up.

Andrew stiffened then glanced away like a shy child. Was he terrified of Trevor? Then again, who here wasn't? Trevor sauntered away with his tail between his legs. Gavin one step behind him like a lovesick puppy. He must have a moral reason for allowing Gavin to hang around him, right?

Two

I slipped in behind them, following until Trevor stopped outside one of the classrooms. He muttered something to Gavin but I couldn't hear what he said. He then turned and strolled into the classroom. I wanted to feel sorry for him but whisked the thought away like a mosquito buzzing around your ear. If you asked me, Trevor deserved whatever happened to him. If he got himself into trouble, then this was his punishment.

I skittered across the hall and into the restroom, ducking into one of the stalls. I flushed and turned to leave the small cubicle when the restroom door swooshed open. I'm not sure why I hesitated to leave but something pulled me back. Instead, I peered through the narrow slot to see who it was before leaving the security of the stall. I wasn't sure why exactly. I wasn't afraid of anyone. I wasn't being bullied. My stomach swirled with uneasiness. A feeling you get right before something bad happens.

This was turning into an interesting day after all. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. A wide smile spread across my face. First, hearing the words exchanged between Trevor and the football team. And second, as I perched behind a locked stall door, Mia Barnes breezed in and stood at the sink.

What were the chances that Trevor's ex-girlfriend would walk into the same restroom I was in? One out of seven, to be exact. There being only seven restrooms in the entire school.

Squinting, I peeked back through the narrow opening as Mia applied lipstick to her lips. The dull fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling gave off a yellowish glow. I couldn't be sure what

shade of color she was applying. Hopefully a color darker than her pale complexion staring back at me through the mirror.

My eyes traced over her hair which was once long and beautiful, but now appeared dried and split like straw. Had a vampire bitten her? Then again, I had been reading too many supernatural books lately. There was no such thing!

The sweater Mia wore draped over her shoulders like a shawl, hiding her thin figure. Probably so no one would notice how much weight she'd lost in a short amount of time. Was she on a diet? I don't recall Mia ever being fat. Was it why she and Trevor broke up? There were no other rumors about her since I returned home. Well, except about her and Trevor breaking up. I guess Mia was the only one who knew the truth of why she stopped eating. Besides, you couldn't always trust the things people said around here. A story could get all twisted like a root of a banyan tree. Especially with people adding their own philosophy.

But I do recall hearing an argument last night while walking the dog. Which came from inside Mia's house. "I need some normalcy, and school will help instead of being trapped in this house with the two of you," Mia had hollered.

Why would she have to beg her parents to go to school? Most kids would be thrilled to stay home. Though most parents wouldn't want their kids to stay home from school. They seemed to be worried about her. Mr. and Mrs. B, as I like to call them, had been strict with Mia all her life. Ethan, Mia's older brother, usually got all the attention. Did they wonder what had happened to their little girl with the sea-blue eyes? What had caused her to stop eating? Though the question should be, *why* had she done it? She was one of the thinnest girls at our school; along with being popular and smart.

I remember when we would challenge one another. She usually always won, but it was close most of the time. There are days I miss that. I miss her. Kat and Mia. Mia and Kat. The dynamic duo back in middle school, but we weren't in middle school anymore. And we weren't Kat and Mia, Mia and Kat any longer. We weren't friends anymore.

My back stiffened to attention as Mia dropped the lipstick back into a small black bag. She slipped the bag into the side pocket of her backpack, all while keeping her eyes on the mirror in front of her, occasionally shifting a glance at the stalls behind her. I pondered for a second if she sensed someone hiding behind one of the closed doors. She gave no sign or had the urge to look.

She let out a tiresome sigh, letting her shoulders wilt with exhaustion. I bet she was wishing she was anywhere but here. She was once a cheerful person. A person full of life and ambition. A laugh that stayed with you for a long time. She turned and walked toward the exit, pausing for a second then reached for the door handle. The small room filled with chatter as the door swished open. Mia shifted the backpack onto her shoulder. A single piece of paper fluttered to the floor. The folded note came out of the open zippered pocket of Mia's backpack.

Once the door closed, the room fell silent. I quickly unlocked the stall door, raced over to the piece of paper, and picked it up. Mia's name was scribbled on the outside of the note. My fingers searched for the edge of the paper to open it when the door to the restroom swung open. My heart erupted inside my chest, knocking against the bones of my ribs. I quickly cupped the paper in my hand and shoved it into the back pocket of my jeans. Then rushed to the sink to wash my hands. I glanced over my shoulder and spotted two girls from the cheerleading squad. Their laughter cut-off the moment they saw me standing there. Running water filled the awkwardness in the air. I hadn't meant to stare at them.