

~ Never Too Late ~

by Ambrosia

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Language/Sex/Violence: Yes, some/No, but certain characters do get passed 1st base/None

Feedback: Care to share your thoughts with me? If you'd like to, you may reach me at: SumrBrezze@aol.com. Thank you!

I had no intention of attending my 1st high school reunion (or any of them for that reason), but somehow I allowed my mother and Julie to talk me into it. If someone were to ask me to think back on a favorite moment in high school I would have to reply that mine had been graduation day. After four years I was thrilled to finally break away from the confines of those crowded and noisy walls of Dunfield High. Not that I harbored any ill feelings toward my classmates (okay, maybe a select few of them). I just wasn't sad about saying goodbye to the Class of '94.

From freshman year to senior, I had three close friends--actually they were my only friends. And I preferred it that way. Julie, Tiffany, Karen and I had our own little clique and except for Julie who would be intending the same college as me starting in the fall, I would miss my friends. Over the years Julie and I did keep in touch with Tiff and Karen but we haven't been as close as we were in high school.

So there I was seated in a chair that I had pulled to a corner of the hotel's large banquet room that had been rented for this event. Julie, who turned out to be a social butterfly after high school was working the room greeting people that she hadn't seen in ten years. If you haven't guessed by now, I have a tendency toward antisocialism. I like to keep it simple. Have a few people around that I enjoy spending time with and leave it at that. I'm not timid--I just don't care to be around a lot of people. This was my main reason for not wanting to attend this shindig.

I wanted to go up to the suite that we had rented, but I promised Julie that I would mingle (yeah right) for at least an hour and a half. One glance at my watch informed me that I had thirty-six minutes to go. Crap. I was certain that this was the longest hour and a half in history. Every minute was taking three times longer than it should have to end.

As I lifted my plastic cup to take another sip of the weakest punch to ever touch my tongue, a tall curly haired slim blonde was purposefully headed in my direction. It was too late for me to make a run for it because we had already made eye contact and she was now less than ten feet away. Double crap.

"Well as I live and breathe, it's Cooper Knight! How ya'll doin' sweetie?"

I lifted an eyebrow in question. Sweetie? How did we get from the head ex-cheerleader of the

Dunfield Dragonflies referring to me by such names as 'Little Lesbo' and 'Baby Dyke' (seemed to be popular) during our high school years to sweetie now? The endearment sounded as fake coming from her lips as the too firm looking boobs spilling out of her suggestive crimson dress. Tanya Gunther *was* one of the people I harbored ill feelings toward. I hadn't thought about her in years, but I discovered the feelings were still present as she stood in front of me with this fake bright smile on her face. I looked a little closer. Yep, Tanya had a nose job too. I can't fathom what she thought was wrong with the old one.

"Ya'll is doing just fine," I glanced at her nametag although I had remembered her name. I have the mind of an elephant, you know, "Tanya." I vainly hoped that she would move on to her next victim, but she refused to move. Oh dear God, did she want to have a conversation with me? Triple crap.

"What have ya'll been up to?" She asked, a strong Southern accent dripping from each word. Now I usually think a Southern accent coming from a woman sounds adorable, but hearing Tanya speak always grated on my nerves. Also it annoyed me when she said ya'll and yet was only referring to one person.

I shrugged. "This and that." I didn't care if I sounded rude. I wanted her to take the hint and leave me alone. Of course she didn't. Disappointedly I watched as she pulled up a chair and sat next to me. An already short dress further rose, showing more of imitation tanned thighs. Was none of this woman real anymore? If would have been sad had I liked her even a little.

"Are you still...you know?" Raising a hand with long manicured fingernails painted a bright red, she shook it from side to side as though she expected I knew what that meant.

"Am I still what?"

I could smell her pungent perfume as she leaned toward me. "A homosexual?" Tanya pointed at my naked left ring finger. "You're not wearing a weddin' band."

I gritted my teeth to keep from spewing some unsavory language. "Tanya I will always be a lesbian." I've always hated the word homosexual. It sounds degrading to me. "I was born one and I'm proud to be one. Also, if you think being gay means that you can't wear a wedding band, then you're wrong. Sure, some dumbasses want to 'protect the sanctity of marriage' by not letting gay couples legally marry although we've had shows like *The Bachelor* and *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*. However, gay couples can still have a ceremony and wear wedding bands." My tone had been civil enough, yet Tanya looked as though I had slapped her. Good, maybe she would leave me to my solitude now.

"Um, well, do you have a um...partner? Is that what ya'll would call it?"

"No, I'm single."

"Any children?"

Was she writing a story on me? "No."

Smiling again, Tanya unzipped her purse and pulled out a small photo album. "I'm married to that wonderful hunky doctor over there." She pointed toward a man who appeared to be a good fifteen years her senior having a conversation with two other men, one I recognized as the ex-quarterback of the Dragonfly varsity football team. "We met while I was in college and it wasn't long 'fore we fell in love and got married. We have three beautiful children. You wanna see their pictures?" She didn't give me a chance to answer. She was already opening the photo album and spent the next half an hour explaining the details of each photograph and of her life in general. By the time she snapped the book closed, I was sure that I knew more about her children than I did my own nieces and nephews.

Dropping the photo album back into her purse, Tanya gave me a quick one armed hug, said that she would talk more with me later (not very likely because I planned on going to my room and watching a ten dollar pay-per-view movie while drinking a three dollar Coke from the soda machine) and left, heading toward a group of used to be cheerleaders. The best thing about her visit was that it made time fly by a little faster and now I could officially exit the reunion. Catching Julie's eye, I waved and hurried toward the double doors leading into the hotel's lobby.

When the elevator arrived instead of pushing the button that would take me to my floor, I pressed the one leading to the top floor. For some unexplainable reason I felt like going to the roof. After subjecting my lungs to that congested banquet room for an hour and half, I wanted fresh air and the roof sounded like the perfect place to get it.

Arriving on the top floor, I found the door that led to the roof. Walking up the short staircase, I pushed open another door already feeling the soft warm night breeze. Closing the door behind me, I took two steps and then stopped, startled eyes falling on the figure dressed in all black balancing on the ledge of the roof. Since they were facing away from me, I didn't know what they looked like, but the long body was so shapely that they had to be a woman.

Okay, try as might, I could only think of one reason why a person would be standing on the ledge of a roof. Squinting my eyes, I saw the half-filled glass bottle in her hand. My guess, the amber liquid inside was alcohol. She was drinking alcohol while one step away from falling twenty stories. This was not good. I started to leave as quietly as I had come to go get help, but I was afraid that when I returned she would be missing because she had decided to go bungee jumping without the bungee rope.

"Beautiful night, isn't it?" I found myself saying, hoping that the sudden voice wouldn't frighten her causing her to fall because of me. She neither moved nor spoke. With a sigh, I walked up to the ledge, resting my arms on it. Adopting a casual expression, I looked up at a familiar face. Sapphire eyes stared down at me, momentarily stealing my breath until I remembered that she was on the same shit list as Tanya Gunther. Actually she was at the top of the list.

But that didn't mean that I was going to turn my back on her. It was obvious that she needed help. "Brooke Berry, right?" I intentionally tried to keep my voice soft and calm. "In high school people would call you B.B. sometimes." She didn't answer, but I knew it was her. I couldn't

forget that face. Despite holding the number one spot on my shit list, I had to admit that Brooke was gorgeous. Time had been kind to her. Although she looked dismayed, she was even more gorgeous at 28.

"So how are you?" She looked at me like I was crazy. Funny considering she was the one threatening to jump. Not telling me how she was, Brooke refocused ahead as she brought the bottle to her lips and drank. I asked if I could have a sip and was surprised when she thrust the bottle out to me. Accepting it, I took one small drink, the strong alcohol burning my throat as it slid down.

"Cooper Knight," she stated, her eyes on me again. I gave her the alcohol back while nodding. "I remember you. Treated you like shit didn't I?" Based on the way she said it, I realized that she wasn't actually looking for verification.

Treating me like shit was the reason she was at the top of my appropriately named shit list, but I thought it best not to confirm. I mean the woman was already on the edge--literally and figuratively. I shrugged. "Well that was ten years ago. We were kids."

She kept staring at me. "17 is old enough to know better so that's no excuse."

My thoughts drifted to the last week before senior year started. Tiffany's brother who was entering his first year of college and still living at home decided to have a party, some of his guests consisting of people who were still attending Dunfield High. Being Tiffany's friend I of course was one of those invited though I wouldn't have gone if it hadn't been for Tiff, Karen and Julie's insistence.

"Hey you."

Needing my seclusion twenty minutes after arriving at the party, I had escaped to Tiffany's room because I knew that she wouldn't mind. I would have gone home, but I had ridden with Karen in her car and she seemed to be enjoying herself. That would leave walking and I didn't feel like trekking the two miles to my house. So instead, I selected one of Tiff's magazines and lay on her bed reading an article.

Imagine my surprise when I glanced toward the now open door to see Brooke Berry, star player of the Dragonfly Girls Softball team standing there with a smile intended for me. I had a crush on her that had started during our freshman year yet we never spoke. Oh, there was the occasional 'hello', 'how are you doing', and 'nice weather we're having' conversations that all lasted less than a minute, but Brooke and I never sat down to have an actual chat. I wondered if things would be different that night as she walked into the room and closed the bedroom door, effectively shutting out the noise coming from the first floor.

"What are you doing up here by yourself?" She asked while occupying the space next to me on the queen-sized bed. I watched as she stretched her long legs out. I watched as her already short jean skirt rode further up her muscled thighs. I recalled those long legs carrying her through

each base as softball opponents frantically tried to obtain the ball her personalized bat forcefully struck. To my embarrassment, Brooke had to call my name three times before regaining my attention. I knew I was blushing as I looked at her grinning face.

Thickly swallowing, I held up the latest issue of Tiger Beat. "Reading."

She moved close enough for our shoulders to touch. "When there's a party below?"

"Yep." I wondered if she knew who I was. Over the last three years we had seven classes together, but I wasn't sure that she was aware of my name. Her next words answered my internal question.

"I know your name is Cooper but may I call you Coop? I like Coop." Brooke smiled causing me to wish that I had a camera so I could capture and keep it forever.

I casually shrugged. "Sure."

She shifted closer and I could smell the floral perfume that she had probably sprayed on her neck just before coming here. "You don't believe in wasting a lot of words, do you Coop?"

It occurred to me that I had only spoken three words to her. If I kept that up she might think that I wasn't interested despite my obvious appreciation of her lovely legs. I needed to broaden my vocabulary and fast. "Sorry...Brooke." Oh, that was **much** better. Two words that time!

Laughing, she rested her head against the headboard. "You like movies?"

"Yes." Oops, I was regressing. "I um...do. Dramas are my favorite."

She smiled at me again. "Mine too. Have you seen **That Night**?"

I shook my head. "Saw it on previews though. Juliette Lewis is so cute." To my astonishment Brooke agreed with me. Vehemently so. Hmm, I wonder...

"Are you busy tomorrow?"

I stared blankly. "Tomorrow?"

The softball player grinned. "Yes, as in the day after today. You doing anything then?"

I gave it a few seconds thought, though I already knew the answer. I didn't have anything in particular to do tomorrow, but she didn't have to immediately know that. "No, I'm not. Why?"

"You want to go see **That Night** with me?"

"And your friends?" She was friends with students such as Tanya Gunther and if she was going I would decline my invite. The only place that I was required to be near her was in the classroom

and luckily I'd only had two classes with Tanya.

"No, just us."

I asked myself why suddenly Brooke Berry was showing some interest in me. Was this a joke? Had Tanya and other cheerleading bimbos put her up to it? "Why?"

Her brow creased in the smallest frown. "Why what?"

"Why are you asking me to go with you to the movies?"

"Because I want to," Brooke replied in an 'I thought that would be obvious' sort of way. "If you don't want to go, you can just say so. Won't hurt my feelings." She smiled though I could see the disappointment in her blue eyes. Disappointment? I must have stepped into some outlandish dimension, because ordinarily the popular Brooke Berry wouldn't be disappointed that I Cooper Knight 'most likely to avoid social situations at all costs' turned her down for a movie. Ordinarily, she wouldn't invite me to see a movie with her.

"I just find it hard to believe that you'd ask me of all people. You have a lot of friends."

I questioned the resulting lackluster smile. "Some things aren't what they seem Coop."

My reply was interrupted when Tiffany opened the door, her eyes quickly finding me on the bed. "There you are! I've been looking for you." She glanced at Brooke curiously, but she didn't comment on our close proximity on her bed. Instead she walked toward us and tugged on my hand to pull me out of the bed while politely greeting the softball player.

Rising, Brooke stuffed a small piece of paper into my pocket and whispered in my ear. "Call me." Smiling at both of us she left the room.

At 10:00 the following morning I decided to dial the number scrawled on that slip of paper. A woman who I guessed to be Brooke's mother answered and proceeded to ask me 57 questions about who I was before she put her daughter on the phone. The first thing Brooke did when she came to the phone was to apologize for her mother's behavior.

"It's cool. She was only being cautious."

"Uh huh. So have you changed your mind about the movie?"

I lay across my bed on my stomach while playing with the little white tag attached to my pillow. "I never said no."

"You never said yes either," she sounded amused.

"Yes."

"You'll go?"

"Yes."

"There's a 1:00 showing at the Cineplex in the mall. You want to see that one? And then we can get something to eat."

"Cool."

Brooke laughed. "You're back to one word replies Coop."

"Sorry. It's a habit. Should I meet you?"

"Not necessary. I'll pick you up." She paused, and I surmised that she must have been searching for paper and something to write with because when she spoke again she asked me for my address. We discovered that we only lived a mile and a half apart. This pleased me but I didn't tell her that.

"I'll be at your house at 12:30, okay?"

"Okay. See you then Brooke."

Our trip to the theater turned out to be much more eventful than what I had imagined. Sitting toward the back of the uncrowded movie house, each of us had our own soda but we shared a tub of buttery popcorn. Each time we simultaneously reached into the tub our fingers would graze, sending tingles up and down my spine. After a while I started to cheat, raising my hand to enter the tub when hers lifted from the armrest. However, on some of those occasions she was only moving her hand to take a drink of soda or tuck a lock of black hair behind an ear.

The large tub was half empty when the both of us had our fill. Brooke put the remaining popcorn on the floor and before I could blink again our palms were pressed together, our fingers intertwined. I glanced toward our hands and then up to Brooke. Her eyes were glued to the screen, so I gazed at her for a moment longer wondering why she had initiated the handholding. I didn't remove my hand as I looked toward the screen. When the credits rolled I couldn't have fairly given someone my opinion of the movie because I hadn't concentrated on it. I couldn't remember one piece of dialogue but I remembered all too well the feeling of Brooke's hand in mine.

After lunch, which she insisted on paying for, we ambled through the mall talking and window-shopping. Though we didn't hold hands, I felt a growing connection between us. I couldn't explain it, but it was apparent. It was close to 5:30 when Brooke pulled up to the curb in front of my house. I asked her if she wanted to come inside, but she said that she had to go home. However, she did walk me to the door, which I thought was quite sweet. I thought the chaste kiss she gave me on the lips was even sweeter. Pleasantly surprised, I didn't take my eyes off of her

until her Corvette Convertible headed down the street. She honked so I waved before heading inside.

We saw each other the next day, and the next day after that, and the next--well you get my drift. I still hadn't figured out why she had taken an interest in me, but I was enjoying her company immensely. The closest we were to intimacy was holding hands and a brief kiss just before we separated, but I thought it was perfect. That was until three days before school started when I discovered what perfect truly was.

Saturday morning Brooke's parents went out of town for Labor Day weekend. Therefore, she would have the house all to herself until their return on Monday night. When she asked me if I wanted to stay over for the weekend my heart started pumping faster than I thought was safe. I waited to give her an answer until I asked my mom, though I was certain that she would say yes since she had approved of and liked my new friend within minutes of meeting her earlier in the week. Mom was a little wary of two teenagers living unchaperoned in a house for two days, but I assured her that Brooke and I were responsible young ladies. I did have to call her twice per day (once in the morning and evening) but that was a small price to pay to have all of that quality time with Brooke.

Most of Saturday we spent at the park where we met up with Tiffany and Karen for a picnic. I was delighted when Brooke seemed interested in meeting my friends. I was also delighted that they all got along so well. My friends didn't exactly know what to make of our relationship (hell, neither did I) but they teased me good-naturedly about finally having a girlfriend and Brooke Berry of all people when she wasn't within earshot.

That evening when we returned to her house, we took separate showers, put our pajamas on and then cuddled on the living room sofa to watch television. Television started watching us when Brooke suddenly began nuzzling my neck with her soft lips. When I turned my head, her lips touched mine. This was the first time that our mouths stayed connected for more than two seconds. It lasted five seconds and then she pulled away searching my face.

"How was that?" She softly inquired.

I nodded. "Good."

Her arms around my waist, she pulled me onto her lap as our lips reunited. I moaned when I felt the tip of her tongue flick against my lower lip. The moan intensified when Brooke suckled my lower lip. When she whispered for me to open my mouth I gladly did so. Never had I felt anything so sensual as Brooke's tongue swirling around mine. I buried my fingers in her hair, gently massaging her scalp as the kiss continued lasting--damn, I lost count after fifteen seconds.

Finally, she pulled away again. Our breathing was shallow as we gazed at each other. "And how was that?" She asked.

"Hot."

Brooke started to grin. "Coop, you may on occasion communicate with few words, yet you always speak the truth."

We spent the rest of the evening making out and talking about anything that we could think of. It was sweet and cozy, and at one point I wished that the night would never have to come to an end. Of course, it technically did when midnight arrived. Turning the television off we went up to Brooke's bedroom and for the first time in my life I slept with another woman. Nothing happened except for a little kissing, yet I couldn't have been any happier.

Sunday morning I woke up to breakfast in bed. I pulled the chef down for a kiss when she presented me with a single rose. It was the most beautiful rose I had ever seen. Or maybe it seemed like the most beautiful simply because Brooke had given it to me.

We didn't speak of the sudden change in our relationship nor did we attempt to define what was going on between us. We just spent the day basking in our growing closeness. That evening Brooke came up with an idea for us to check out a lesbian nightclub that she had heard of over the summer yet never visited. Since the minimum age to get in was 21, I doubted that we would be allowed access although she assured me that it wouldn't be a problem.

To the present day I never fully understood how two obviously underage girls were let inside, but somehow Brooke made it happen. I hadn't noticed her exchanging any hush money to the employee working at the entrance to the club, but the older woman's frank admiration of Brooke's body could have had something to do with her letting us inside the building so easily. That night I was able to feel that body against me as the athlete and I danced to song after song. By the time we were ready to leave, I was ready to pick up where we had left off last night at her home.

We decided that progressing slowly would be best, so laying side by side in her bed dressed in only our underwear, we kissed while our hands drifted, caressing each other. If someone had told me that the end of my summer vacation would end like this, I wouldn't have believed them.

"Coop?" Brooke whispered my nickname as she lightly kissed my chin.

"Yes?" My finger was stroking the ridge of her ear when she looked up into my eyes, a smile on lips that appeared so soft that I had to kiss them.

"Will you go to the senior prom with me?"

I didn't conceal my surprise. The prom? She didn't have a problem with others knowing that she rather attend the prom with another girl? For the hundredth time I hoped that the last week hadn't been a dream. "The prom isn't until next May, right?"

Brooke grinned at me. "I'm asking you in advance. I don't want Tiffany or anyone else asking you first."

I returned her grin. "Lucky for you my friends--all three of them--happen to be straight."

"Very good news. So will you go?"

"You sure that's what you want?"

Her pause, although small should have alerted me. "Yes, it's what I want Coop."

"Then it's what I want too." Cupping my face, Brooke made it her mission to kiss me senseless.

Tuesday brought with it the first day of school and in me mixed feelings. I wasn't that excited to be back, but considering that this would be my last year, I was counting down the days until graduation. Besides I had quite the incentive within these walls--Brooke Berry. My...was she my girlfriend? Smiling, I closed my locker having resolved that I would formally ask her tonight.

Turning toward the left, I nearly ran into Tanya Gunther. Crap. I looked up at her (I looked up at a lot of people because of my unimposing height) popping a wad of pink bubblegum. It was so annoying. Everything about the cheerleader was annoying. However, the taller figure standing on Tanya's right wasn't. I recalled that two out of the remaining three girls surrounding her were cheerleaders and the other on the Dragonfly Softball team with Brooke. I didn't remember their names, though one of those cheerleaders had secured a spot on my list. Not all of the Dragonfly cheerleaders were bad. Just those that preferred to hang out with Tanya and for the life of me I couldn't figure out the appeal.

Tanya's annoying gum smacking recaptured my attention. I hoped that I wouldn't have to strike her with the thick calculus book in my hands. I was determined to get through my high school career without having to attend detention or being suspended. "Howdy Cooper. How was ya'lls summer?"

I glanced toward Brooke. Her eyes were riveted to the floor. "Fine Tanya." I would have inquired about hers, but why pretend to be interested? I would have been wasting her time as well as my own.

She smirked as she looked between Brooke and I. "Ya'll know what I heard?" I supposed that was my cue to reply 'what did you hear' but I just stared at her, so Tanya went on. "I heard that you and B.B. were at the park with those lil' friends of yours on Saturday. That true?" She waited for either Brooke or I to confirm this. The softball player said nothing. I started to feel nauseous.

"What do you care?"

"We care because Baby Dyke shouldn't be hanging out with one of our own," what's-her-name annoying cheerleader #2 answered me. "B.B., what's going on between you and her? Haven't seen much of you since that party last week." When she pointed at me I wanted to snap her damn finger off. And just so you know, I don't usually condone violence. These people brought out the worst in me.

Finally looking at me with an unreadable expression, Brooke shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing," she softly responded. Clearing her throat, she spoke in a louder voice. "I was spending some time with Coop--Cooper, but uh it didn't mean anything. It was like charity. You know," pasting on a grin she looked toward her friends, "it was my good deed for the end of the summer." As they laughed I felt my heart crumbling. Now I wished that this had been a dream.

Throwing an arm around the softball player's shoulders, Tanya grinned at her. "Ya'll are so sweet to spend time with Baby Dyke B.B."

Brooke refused to look at me anymore. "Thank you Tanya. Hey guys let's go. I don't want to miss first period. Kyle is going to be in my class. He's so hot." Ignoring me, she walked right passed me along with the small group. Calculus book clenched in my hands, I headed in the opposite direction, tears stinging my eyes. I couldn't wait to get out of this hell called high school.

"Hey Brooke?"

She waited until she'd drained most of the brandy before responding. "Yes?"

"Is there a particular reason you're standing so close to the edge of a roof? Kind of dangerous don't you think?" I wished that I had brought my cell phone so that I could call someone such as an ambulance for backup. Unfortunately, it was tucked inside my suitcase in the hotel room.

"I was planning to jump," she matter-of-factly stated.

"Really?" My tone was relaxed yet I was quaking with fear on the inside. Within the last few minutes old feelings that I had tried to bury had resurfaced. Despite Brooke's treatment of me when we started our senior year, it might kill me too if she jumped from this roof. "Why would you do something so extreme?"

"Because I detest my so called life."

"So make it better."

"I don't know how."

"Learn."

When she began studying me, I wished that I could read her thoughts. "Wouldn't you rather push me than help me Coop?"

"No, I'm too small to go to prison." I realized that making her laugh wasn't such a good idea when she started swaying back and forth. Moving closer to her, I reached up and wrapped my hands around her waist in an effort to keep her steady. Once Brooke seemed to have her balance back, I released her. "What led up to this?" I indicated her position on the ledge.

She sighed. "You really want to know?" She asked. It occurred to me that her words weren't slurred although there was very little Christian Brothers brandy left in the bottle.

"If you don't mind."

She shook her head. "No." Her expression thoughtful, I figured that she was gathering her words. "My life...I've never actually lived it for myself. I've been living the life that my parents wanted me to. They wanted me to go to law school and become a defense attorney like them. Although, I didn't want to, I kept my mouth shut and went along with their plans. I hate my job. I hate most of my clients, because I know that 90% of them have been guilty but I had to defend them to the best of my ability even though it made me sick to my stomach knowing that I was helping to put these bastards back on the street." Brooke chuckled without any humor. "And I was damn good at it too.

"Then not only did my parents want me to be a lawyer, they wanted me to marry another lawyer or a doctor. I admitted to myself in high school that I was attracted to women and only women, but after you I put on a façade. I went to the prom with Danny Parish, one of the most sought after guys in our class. During college I met a man a few years older than I who was an intern at a prestigious hospital. We courted and married a year later. I loved him about as much as I could love any man. There weren't any romantic feelings on my part yet I pretended there were. During sex I would fantasize about other women and I felt very guilty about that, but it was the only way I could respond to his touch." Pausing, Brooke looked at me. "Most of my fantasies involved you." My mouth dropped open at the unexpected revelation. "I never forgot about you Coop. I never forgot about us."

Before I could respond she continued. "Two weeks ago my world started turning upside down. I kept a journal on the computer at home, which I added to every day. This particular day I neglected to close the program after I finished my latest entry and that evening when Robert used the computer, he saw it and read some. Unfortunately, what he read caused him to discover that I was living in the closet...that I had been living a lie with him. So unknown to me, he emailed the two months worth of entries stored on that disk to my parents and a few of my co-workers at the firm I worked at. And then he found me in the living room and told me that our marriage was over, why it was over and that soon my parents and people I worked with would know what kind of person I really was.

Brooke shook her head. "And I never did anything. I was never unfaithful to him...I never could have done that to him. The last time I acted on the feelings I had for another female was in high school with you. You were the first and last female that I ever kissed, touched...intimately held.

"Robert packed a bag that night and moved out. The next morning my parents read their email and promptly came over to confront me. I knew that they would be angry, which was the reason I never confided in them, but I had no idea that they would threaten to disown me. I was ordered to relinquish these 'wretched homosexual urges' or risk losing my parents forever. The last option sounded wonderful so two weeks ago was the first time my parents heard me tell them to fuck off. My mother slapped me...it stung for the rest of the day. They called me a few names that I

won't repeat and walked out.

"When I returned to work the following day, I was relieved to find that the majority of my co-workers were behaving maturely, however, there were the constant snickers behind the back from others. As I've mentioned I hated my job anyway and since my parents were no longer apart of my life there wasn't anyone to please, so I quit after finishing up my last case. To end this *wretched* story on a positive note, I do believe that my final client was innocent and after three hours of deliberation, a jury agreed with me."

Lifting the bottle, she tipped it to her mouth until not a drop remained. "So here I am on this ledge preparing to leap into nothing because my life has amounted to nothing and I have nothing to live for." She glanced at me. "Not trying to get pity from you Coop. This is just a fact. I've ruined my life by not living it the way I wanted to. And now all I want to do is stop it. I feel like I'm wasting valuable space."

"You feel like you don't deserve to live because you've always allowed others...mainly your parents to control the direction your life goes?" As I asked this, I speculated if I could drag Brooke away from the ledge. I estimated that she outweighed me by at least twenty pounds, but perhaps I'd have enough strength to do it. Her polishing off a bottle of brandy might work to my advantage.

"Coop," she sighed. "Why are you here? I was horrible to you."

"I said it before and I'll say it again. We were kids." I stopped breathing when she began to move, her feet shuffling along the slender ledge. I wanted to say something, but I was too afraid to speak. I allowed air into my lungs the moment she turned to face me and carefully perched on the ledge. I noticed that she was wearing a reunion nametag with her name written across it, so she must have checked in at the party taking place many stories below. I wondered if any of our classmates had an indication that something was amiss with her. She had to have been showing some signs if she decided to commit suicide by leaping from the roof.

Since she was now seated, I convinced myself that this was progress. "Brooke please don't do this," I pled. She didn't say anything but I knew that I had her attention. "Despite what happened between us in high school I don't want you to die. Despite everything, I still care. You say that you don't like your life. Okay. So change it, don't end it. *You* take control of *your* life and you live it the way that you see fit to. What you're thinking about doing now is the easy way out. I'll be blunt--choosing to take your own life isn't displaying any courage, it's stupidity. But choosing to live, that's showing courage and though until tonight I haven't seen you in a decade, I believe that there lies some courageousness inside of you. So let it out. Show me--show yourself some courage by abandoning that ledge and coming to me." Stepping backward, I outstretched my hand, hoping that she would take it. "Brooke it's not too late to start your life. To start a brand new life and I'm willing to help you. But first I need you to take my hand."

Although her hands remained around the neck of the empty bottle, she slowly began to smile at me. Keeping my hand elevated toward her, I returned the smile. "Coop?"

Her voice had grown so soft that I failed to hear her speak, but I was able to read my name on her lips. "Yes?"

"There's a shooting star." She pointed her index finger toward the starry night. "Make a good wish."

Immediately looking upward, I searched for the elusive star for a total of three seconds before giving up. "Must have been too..." Once again that night Brooke robbed me of the ability to breathe.

She and her drained bottle of Christian Brothers were missing. There were no signs of her as I glanced toward the left, right and even behind me. Hurrying toward the ledge, I leaned over scanning below. It was so dark that it was impossible for me decipher anything but a large Dumpster. As I ran toward the door, I didn't want to think about the fact that the only way Brooke could have disappeared so quickly was to go through with her original plan. Either that or she was a hell of a magician.

Forgoing the elevator, I went down the numerous flights of stairs at a breakneck pace. As I emerged into the lobby, I couldn't remember the last time that I had shed tears, but my vision began to blur. I couldn't care less that those walking through the lobby stopped to look at me as though I was a woman who had just fled from the insane asylum--I had to find Brooke. Someone called my name as I rushed through the exit, yet I didn't bother to turn around.

With my body covered in a light sheen of sweat and breathing in short spurts, I arrived in the alley. I slowed to a jog as I looked from side to side. I even looked up as though I expected to see her dangling from a window, holding on for dear life. She was nowhere to be found and neither were the shards of glass from her brandy bottle, which should have shattered from the distance it fell from. It didn't make sense because Brooke couldn't have vanished into thin air. She hadn't gotten passed me on the roof. I was as certain of that as I was my own name.

Looking toward the sky, I cupped my mouth and yelled her name five times in succession at the top of my already overworked lungs. Brooke didn't answer. Though someone else did.

"Hey Cooper, what's going on?"

Turning, I watched as Kyle Dupree, the man who had taken Brooke to senior prom walked up to me. The concern was evident on his bearded face. He started to smile in greeting, but with one look at my tear-streaked face it ceased. "What happened? Were you calling for Brooke? As in Brooke Berry?"

I nodded. "Yes. Have you seen her?"

He shook his head. "I happened to run into her a few years ago at the airport, but that was the last time I laid eyes on her. Why? Did you guys argue about something tonight?"

Sighing, I angrily wiped at my cheeks. "I have to find her Kyle. I have to know where she is."

"Okay, I'll help you Cooper," he replied, his tone gentle and hushed as though he was talking to a frightened child. "Where was the last place you saw her?"

I'm not exactly sure why, but I impulsively hugged him. Looking up into his startled face, I offered a smile that I didn't feel. "Thanks for offering your help Kyle, but I'll find her." I knew I must have seemed like a certified lunatic as I hurried out of the alley away from Kyle.

Back in the lobby a minute later, I headed in the direction of the check-in table for the reunion. Our senior class president Jamie Monroe whom I'd voted for was sitting behind the table talking with another classmate that I didn't remember. After apologizing for interrupting them, I asked when was the last time they saw Brooke Berry.

Jamie shook her head as she perused a long list of signatures. "I'd remember if Brooke had checked in," she commented although she continued to search just in case. She went through the list three times before looking at me. "I'm sorry Cooper. I was hoping that she would come too because I looked forward to seeing her again." She paused, her expression thoughtful. "Honey have you been crying?" Her companion handed me a tissue and I thanked her.

"No, allergies," I lied, not wanting to get into it. "Are you sure? Maybe someone else was at this table when Brooke arrived and she forgot to sign her name." Jamie was shaking her head before I could finish.

"Cooper I'm so sorry," she sounded genuinely so, "but I've been here the entire night. I did take a restroom break and go into the banquet room a couple of times, but only for a few minutes. And those moments I wasn't here Lily was." She looked at the woman seated next to her. Lily confirmed what she was explaining with a nod.

None of this was adding up. Brooke had a nametag adhered to her shirt, yet according to Jamie and Lily she hadn't signed in. So where had the nametag, which matched everyone else's except for having Brooke's name on it come from?

"Do you know who was in charge of sending out the invitations to the reunion?"

Jamie indicated herself. "It wasn't easy tracking everyone down, but with some assistance I accomplished it."

"That means you have Brooke's address, right?"

"Well yes, but..."

"Oh please Jamie, don't turn me down. I need to see her." I gave her a wobbly smile that I figured probably wouldn't help my case. "I promise that I haven't turned psycho in the last decade. It's just imperative that I talk with her."

The ex-class president stared at me a good ten seconds before she pulled a stack of stapled sheets

from a portfolio and leafed through them. Coming to a page containing information about Brooke, she jotted her address and home phone number on a post-it, which she handed to me. Smiling Jamie winked saying, "I have no idea where you got that."

"I understand. Thanks Jamie. Nice seeing you again."

"You too Cooper."

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It turned out that Brooke's house was fifteen miles from the hotel. Driving faster than the speed limits posted, I pulled into the driveway of her two-story home in half the time that I should have. In such a rush to get to the front door, I almost forgot to switch the ignition off. As I knocked on the door I took notice that though the curtains had been drawn there was a light burning. When no one answered within two minutes I grew impatient.

There was a rock about the size of my fists combined lying on the ground below the window, but I wasn't thinking properly. Instead of using it, I balled my fist up and rammed it into the window only cracking it. Though that hurt like a son of a bitch (I've never quite understood that expression, but I've used it often over the years) I repeated, this time using as much strength as I could muster.

Thankfully, the window broke because I didn't think that my hand could handle round three. It was throbbing and blood seeped from various cuts. Removing sharp pieces of glass still hanging on, I jumped up and climbed through the window. I grimaced when a piece of glass pierced my thigh, but I kept moving until I ungracefully landed on the carpet. I had already called out Brooke's name twice before I stood. Since it didn't seem that she was in her living room, I ran up the stairs, choosing one of the closed doors on the second level at random.

It was the master bedroom and there laid the woman I had been searching for on the bed. She looked as though she was just asleep, but the empty vial with a prescription label for sleeping pills affixed to it alarmed me. Next to it was a half filled bottle of Christian Brothers brandy.

My hands on Brooke's shoulders, I attempted to awaken her with gentle shaking. The only movement from her body was what I caused. Anxiously, I pressed two fingers to her throat to feel for a pulse. It took me moment, but I finally located a pulse. It was thready, but at least she had one. Her breathing was labored and her fingertips and lips had taken on a faint bluish hue. Although I tried calling her name, I knew that it wouldn't do any good.

Having retrieved my cell when I went to Julie's and my hotel room for the car keys, I pulled it from my pocket dialing 911. I kept my eyes on Brooke as the phone rang once before the operator answered inquiring about the nature of my emergency.

"My friend overdosed on sleeping pills and we need an ambulance." I watched as Brooke's chest slowly rose and fall. It seemed to get slower with every breath. "Please hurry."



*"Ma'am, you're using a cell phone so I'm not able to locate your whereabouts. Could you tell me where you and your friend are?"*

Having programmed it into my memory bank on the way here, I gave the emergency dispatcher Brooke's address. Seconds later she assured me that an ambulance was on its way and that they would arrive in less than seven minutes.

*"Ma'am is your friend conscious?"*

"No. When I got here she was seemingly asleep, but I can't wake her up. She's not responding to me at all." Using my good hand, I cleared my eyes of the salty moisture that had collected. There was no need to cry again. Brooke would be fine.

*"Is she breathing?"*

"Yes. And she has a pulse. It's slow though."

*"Keep your eyes on her. If she stops breathing you'll need to perform mouth-to-mouth. If her heart stops beating I'll have you give her an external cardiac massage. Are you familiar with either of these procedures? If not, I'll talk you through them."*

"Shit." Without answer the dispatcher I dropped the phone and leaned on the bed beginning to do chest compressions because Brooke's chest had risen once more before stilling. Moments after my confirmation that she had a pulse and was breathing, both stopped. Fortunately, though an occasion never arose for me to put such skills to use, I did have knowledge of CPR. As I gave Brooke fifteen chest compressions followed by four breaths, I could hear the concerned voice of the dispatcher coming through the speaker of the tiny phone laying on the carpet, but I couldn't answer her because that would mean temporarily abandoning the one woman I had come the closest to romantically loving.

Inwardly counting compressions as I pushed the heel of my palm into Brooke's sternum, I screamed our location when I heard the voices downstairs. After a cacophony of footsteps on the stairs, the ambulance team rushed into the bedroom. I stood back as they took over, asking me questions as they worked on Brooke. Most of them I wasn't able to answer. The only information I had was her age, name and that she had probably swallowed the pills that used to be in the vial on her nightstand with brandy. I didn't know how much she took or the time she took it.

I could have informed them that I saw and spoke with her less than an hour ago fifteen miles away from there, but I wasn't so sure that I had anymore. A thousand questions were running through my head with no answers.

If Brooke was on the roof at the hotel, how had she gotten away without my catching her? Obviously, she hadn't jumped if she was able to drive home and swallow enough pills to put her in a coma. It wasn't possible for her to survive that fall.

It seemed that I was the only one who had seen her. Where had the nametag she was wearing

come from if she didn't check in at the reunion?

How much Christian Brothers could this woman consume? Why hadn't she appeared intoxicated while on that ledge after downing an entire bottle?

So upon arriving home she took the time to change clothes before attempting suicide? Earlier she had on a black pantsuit and now boxer shorts and a T-shirt.

Noticing my bloodied hand, one of the female ambulance workers insisted on wrapping it in bandages until we reached the hospital. She and I were both sure that my hand would require stitches at the very least.

Her breathing and pulse having returned, Brooke was carefully placed on a stretcher with an oxygen mask covering her nose and mouth. They wheeled her out and I started to follow when something caught my attention. Walking toward the desk, I picked up the envelope with my name written on the front of it. Shoving it in the waistband of my pants I headed out of the bedroom.

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Sitting in the waiting room, my eyes were on the television but my mind was a million miles away wondering how Brooke was doing. Not long ago, a doctor informed me that they were going to perform a gastric lavage, which is fancy doctor talk for stomach pumping. They were done with me. X-rays revealed that I hadn't fractured any bones, but I did have a few nasty lacerations that required stitching. My sprain hand had been secured in a bandage that I would have to wear for a minimum of ten days. There was a row of tiny stitches on my thigh as well from when I'd climbed through the window. I had more than a couple of curious looks thrown my way in the emergency room when I explained how I obtained these injuries. I half expected someone to call the police on me, but so far the boys and girls in blue hadn't shown up to arrest me.

Finally making up my mind to read it, I picked up the envelope that I had put on my lap. I was about to tear it open when my phone, which I'd had to clean, alerted me to a call. Answering, I heard the simultaneously relieved and fretful voice of my best friend Julie.

"Where did you disappear to? People were commenting on how you were running around like a chicken with its head cut off!"

That was quite an image. I had to chuckle. "Everything is alright Julie," I assured her in a calm voice. "I'm fine." The pain reliever that the doctor gave me had kicked in, so I really was fine pain wise.

"I'm happy to hear that, but you didn't answer my question. Where are you? I heard something about you searching for Brooke Berry?" Julie didn't try to conceal her derision at mentioning Brooke. After the completion of our first day as seniors, I had confided in her what happened between the ex-softball player and I. She promptly hated her and would have confronted Brooke

had I not begged her to let it be.

"Julie, do you trust me?"

"You should know the answer to that."

"Okay, then know that in time I will tell you everything, but not right this moment. Not tonight."

"Cooper what's up? Something's wrong. I can tell."

"Just trust me. Please Julie. I promise that I'll fill you in soon."

She didn't give an immediate response. I could just imagine the redhead frowning at the phone because I wasn't in the room to either frown at or throttle. Or perhaps option C, all of the above.

"Tell me one thing at least. Whatever you're doing, does it involve Brooke? Is she there, wherever there is with you?"

"Yes." She sighed through the phone. "Julie I know what I'm doing. This is important."

"You're a grownup now, but Cooper I feel the need to remind you that she broke your heart once. What's to stop her from doing it twice?" She asked as gently as possible. *"And this time you won't stop me from killing her."*

I wondered how she would react if she were aware that Brooke had attempted to kill herself tonight. I shuddered, thinking back to when I found her sprawled on her bed. That visual would most likely haunt me for the rest of my life.

"Julie you're sweet to threaten to commit homicide, but that won't be necessary. I like that you have your freedom. Let's keep it that way."

"When will I see you? I have a feeling that you're not returning to the hotel tonight."

"No, I doubt it. I'll pick you up at noon tomorrow to take you to the airport."

"You're not going home tomorrow? Does she have you tied up? Should I tell your mom to be expecting a ransom note?"

I chuckled. "If she did I probably wouldn't be using the phone. Be ready at noon okay?" A 'fine' was grumbled through the phone. "I love you Julie." I didn't tell her that enough and suddenly I regretted it.

Based on my friend's pause, I figured that she was surprised by my declaration. *"I'll be ready. And I love you too my Knight in shining armor."*

I smiled at the rarely used long-winded nickname. Hence the reason that it was rarely used--too many words. Ending our conversation, I switched the phone off and pushed it back into my

pocket. Opening the envelope, I pulled out a sheet of stationery paper bordered with miniature angels. I noted today's date written in Brooke's neat script at the top right hand corner of the sheet.

Dearest Coop,

This is the hardest letter that I have ever had to write. That's an original opener isn't it? Words cannot express to you how sorry I am for what I did to you in high school. I was an ass--plain and simple. I don't expect you to believe that my intention wasn't to hurt you, but it truly wasn't.

Cooper as hard as it may be to believe, I wanted to be with you, I wanted to be the one to deserve your love. But I wasn't. I threw my chance away because the moment Tanya Gunther called attention to the fact that you and I had been spending time together, my newfound braveness was a thing of the past.

I couldn't go through with it. I couldn't tell them how I felt about you and it about killed me to see the hurt in your eyes, knowing that I had been the cause of it. You would have been better off if I had never approached you at that party. After three years of having a secret crush on you, I pulled you into my life and then pushed you out of it because I was frightened of what my 'friends' and parents would think. I've hated myself ever since.

It's an overused phrase, but Coop you are the best thing that has ever happened to me and despite my turning into a cowardly bitch, the week I spent with you was the best week of my life. Till this day, I have never been as happy as I was when I got to talk with you, hug you, hold your hand and kiss your lips. It was incredible--you are incredible.

I often wonder where we would be if I hadn't backed down that day. Would you and I still be together? In my imaginings we are. I pushed myself into relationships after you, yet you are the only person to remain in my heart.

I wonder if you'll ever receive this letter. I don't even know where you live but I had to write this before I left. Again, I'm so sorry. I wish you all the happiness and love. You will if you haven't found that special person already, make some woman very lucky. You take good care of yourself sweetheart.

Love always,

Brooke

Tears slid down my cheeks as I carefully refolded the letter and placed it back in the envelope, which I put in my pocket. I grabbed a tissue from the box sitting next to a stack of mostly outdated magazines and wiped my face with it. All this time I had believed that she just used me and by the time we restarted school she had grown tired of having me around. I'd convinced myself that our week meant nothing to her. She had me convinced.

"Cooper Knight?"

Glancing toward the entrance to the waiting room, I spotted two uniformed police officers holding their badges for me to view. "That's me." I was about to stand when one of the officers motioned for me to stay seated. Walking over, they pulled two chairs in front of me and sat there.

"Ms. Knight, we want to ask you a few questions about what happened tonight." I nodded for him to go on. "How well do you know Brooke Berry?"

"Not well at all. Before tonight I hadn't seen her in ten years. Tonight was our high school reunion." I glanced toward the second policeman. He hadn't uttered a word. He just sat in his chair silently observing me. Perhaps he aimed to intimidate me. I started to question if I would actually be arrested. If they wanted, they could have me for breaking and entering.

"You saw her at the reunion and later at her home?"

I answered in the affirmative, although I was deciding whether I had been delusional earlier or not. Was it just a huge coincidence that Brooke in reality was trying to commit suicide and an identical bottle of brandy had been involved? No, I couldn't have been hallucinating.

"Did you argue at the reunion?"

"No."

"Then why did you break into her home?" His eyes fell to my bandaged hand for a couple of seconds.

"I panicked because she wouldn't answer the door and I feared that she would try to hurt herself," I truthfully replied.

"Why is that? Did Ms. Berry give you an indication that she wanted to hurt herself?"

Standing perilously close to the edge of a roof belonging to a twenty-story building while swigging brandy like it was only water was a strong indication of wanting to do permanent damage to ones self. "Yes, she did."

"How so?" Mr. Intimidator spoke up. Arms folded across his broad chest, he continued to stare me down.

"When I saw her at the reunion, she was standing on the roof preparing to jump to her death. I tried to talk her out of it. I thought that I might have been getting somewhere when she suddenly distracted me by telling me make a wish on a falling star. By the time I took my eyes from the sky she had disappeared. My initial belief was that she had jumped but after looking over the edge and then running downstairs to check the alley it became quite clear to me that she hadn't."

"What happened next?"

"I obtained her address and drove to her house. I knocked on the door but when she didn't answer, I broke the window near the front door with my fist and climbed inside. Hurrying up the stairs, I discovered her lying unconscious on her bed and then I immediately called for an ambulance. Now we're here."

"What would you say was the time period you spoke with Ms. Berry on the roof?"

I shrugged while glancing at my watch. "I couldn't give you an exact time, but around 8:30-8:45." I supposed that he was writing down those times in the small black book he held. He then asked when I arrived at her home. "Oh, around 9:30."

"Ms. Knight," the first police officer started, "we spoke with Ms. Berry's neighbors and the neighbor to her immediate left informed us that she had driven into her garage at approximately 8:20 and as far as they knew she never left again. However, let's say that she did. How did Ms. Berry get to the roof of Destiny Hotel ten minutes later?"

Good question. Okay, perhaps I was delusional after all. "I honestly don't know."

"Can anyone confirm that you saw Ms. Berry at the hotel?" Mr. Intimidator inquired.

"Not that I know of. Am I being accused of something? Besides breaking Brooke's window I didn't do anything wrong--I'll gladly pay to have it fixed. And breaking her window wasn't necessarily wrong considering what might have occurred had I not shown up."

"We're aware that you saved her life Ms. Knight," the first policeman spoke in a kind tone. "We're only trying to figure out what happened. The ambulance arrives, they see the shattered window, and Ms. Berry has your blood on her clothing and her bed where she's laying near death. It was obvious that you unlawfully entered her home and the question was why. What was your intention?"

"Did you think that I forced her to take those pills? I admit that Brooke and I aren't on the best of terms, but I wouldn't want her dead."

He shook his head. "No Ms. Knight, we aren't accusing you. Although a suicide note couldn't be found, there's no doubt that Ms. Berry attempted to end her life. We wanted to find out where you fit into it."

Running the fingers of my left hand through my closely cropped blonde hair I loudly expelled a breath. "I have my times mixed up. My watch must need a new battery." I knew that my watch was in perfect condition, but I was hoping that my statement would prevent them from asking more questions about the conflicting times. If her neighbor truly had seen her arrive home at 8:20, then she hadn't been on the roof of Destiny Hotel. I had no idea how to explain that I had talked with her there.

Finishing up their interview with me, the policemen asked for my information in case they needed to get in contact with me again for further questioning and then left me to my solitude.

That ceased when I heard a light knock and looked up to see Kyle standing there with his hands shoved deep in his pockets. A faint smile on his boyishly handsome face, he greeted me.

"Kyle! What're you doing here?" Coincidence that he had shown up at the exact hospital Brooke and I were at? I think not.

Walking into the room, he sat beside me. "I followed you...sort of."

"Sort of?" Why was he following me? I doubted that we said more than ten sentences to each during high school. Kyle was never on my list. Actually, I always thought he seemed like a good guy. We just were never acquaintances.

"Ah," he rubbed his goatee, "you had me worried in the alley. I wanted to know what was going on with you, so I followed you back into the hotel and discreetly listed when you asked Jamie Monroe for Brooke's address. After she gave it to you and you left my goal was to get that address too. However, I could imagine Jamie telling me no so I walked up and started a conversation with her and Lily. Lucky for me she hadn't put the paper with Brooke's address back in that portfolio so while we spoke about something I don't remember, I kept glancing toward it until I had the address committed to memory.

"Once I arrived at her house I saw an ambulance. I started to get out of my car and walk over when Brooke was wheeled out on a stretcher with you walking not far behind. I decided to follow the ambulance, but um," he looked sheepish, "I'm not much of a tailer so I lost it. I've been to three hospitals and finally I've found you here."

I chuckled. "You must be tired."

He smiled again. "No, I'm okay. How are you though? And Brooke? What happened?" Kyle quickly asked one question after another.

"I'm fine. Brooke will be fine and I can't answer that last one Kyle. If Brooke wants to tell you okay, but I don't feel it's my business to."

Kyle nodded. "Alright. But could you tell me what happened to your hand?"

"I struck a window."

"What did the window do to you?"

I chuckled more. "Nothing actually. I owe it an apology."

"Is there anything that I can do?"

I was about to decline when I suddenly thought about my promise to take Julie to the airport tomorrow. Although my hand felt fine at the moment, I wasn't so sure that I should be driving a vehicle. I winced just imagining wrapping my aching fingers around the steering wheel.

"Actually there is something you can do Kyle. You remember my friend Julie?"

"The cute little redhead with the big um," he blushed. "Yeah, I remember Julie."

I smirked, knowing what he was about to say. Summer vacation after completing our sophomore year, Julie's bust turned busty. She had been quite proud that she could stop stuffing her bra with tissue. The only downside was that she was no longer handy when one suffered with a stuffy/runny nose.

"She and I are supposed to return home tomorrow, but I won't be able to make our flight which is at 1:40, so could you pick her up at the Destiny Hotel and drive her to the airport? My hand is sprained so I shouldn't be driving, but I promised her that I would pick her up at noon."

"No problem. It'll be easy to pick her up since I have a room at the Destiny too. Also, my bus doesn't leave until 3:00."

"Thanks Kyle. Where do you live now?"

"Not too far, which is why I decided to save money and take a bus, although the five hour ride was boring as hell." He grinned. "I live in Phoenix."

"Really? Julie and I are a hop, skip and a jump away from there." I paused in thought. "Why don't you take my plane ticket? No use in it going to waste. You'll get home in under an hour and a half."

"Couldn't you get a refund?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't bother trying. Take the ticket."

"You sure?" Kyle started smiling before I could assure him further.

"Yes. I'm sure." Subconsciously was I trying to play matchmaker? That just wasn't like me. Although, Kyle and Julie did have cute couple potential. By the way, you never heard me say that. Never.

"Great. Thank you Cooper."

"You're welcome. You want me to call Julie and tell her to expect you?"

He shook his head. "No, just give me her room number and I'll stop by there to tell her of the change in plans tonight." His bright smile let me know that he would be more than happy to do that.

When I gave Kyle our room number, he squeezed my shoulder, wished me a good night and headed out. He was just about to turn the corner when he looked back at me. "You know I took Brooke to the prom right?"

I arched my brow in curiosity. Where was he going with this? "Yes." Against my better judgment I went to the senior prom as well. All year I mentioned several times that I didn't intend to go, but when I heard that Kyle was taking Brooke I had this masochistic need to see them there. Karen ended up being my 'date' since her boyfriend who played street hockey on a regular basis with his friends, broke his leg in two places just days before the prom.

"She was with me, but only in body." I gave him a quizzical stare. "I mean, I think her thoughts and heart were with you. I swear that 90% of the time I looked at her her eyes were on you. You looked beautiful by the way. That dress looked like it was made just for you."

"Er, thanks," replied the girl not used to receiving compliments on her wardrobe. My normal wardrobe consisted of jeans and T-shirts. The now wrinkled and grubby suit I wore was one of the three that I owned.

"Welcome." He smiled at me. "Anyway, I just wanted you to know that."

I slowly nodded, digesting that information. If true, it proved to validate the letter she wrote me today. "Thank you for telling me Kyle."

"Let Julie know how Brooke is doing so she can tell me, okay?"

"Okay."

He waved and I returned it. "Goodnight Cooper."

"Night Kyle."

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Quietly entering Brooke's hospital room, I grabbed the chair against the wall and brought it over to the bed where she lay in a deep sleep. The gastric lavage went smoothly and the doctors felt confident that Brooke would make a full recovery. However, they informed me that she would most likely sleep through the night.

Seated, I patted her nearest hand, which had an IV needle inserted into it. Not speaking right away, I gazed at her face while listening to the gentle noises of the machines attached to her. They were calming because they assured me that she was alive. And I vowed whether she wanted that or not, she would stay alive. The main doctor assigned to her case, mentioned that she should have a psych evaluation when she awakened because this had been an intentional overdose.

"You gave me quite a scare tonight," I said as though Brooke could hear me. Maybe she could. "Gave me more than one actually. I wouldn't be surprised if I found some gray hairs while looking in the mirror."

Sitting back, I lifted my left leg so that I could rest my ankle on my right knee. "Just so you know I'm not going anywhere tonight. Although I'm not related to you and we haven't seen each other in ten years, the staff was pleasant enough to let me stay. I would call someone for you, but I don't know who to call. But you can tell me when you wake up." I yawned while rubbing at my face. The vacant bed near the window looked inviting, but I wanted to stay close to Brooke, so scooting down into the chair, I leaned my head against the back of it and allowed my eyes to shut. A couple hours of rest would help to revitalize me.

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The process of being revitalized wasn't completed until minutes after seven in the morning. A chair wasn't an adequate place to rest. I felt like every inch of my body was in need of stretching in order to relieve myself of the kinks. I was about to stand to do just that when my eyes opened to notice the sapphire ones watching me. Having been removed, her oxygen mask rested on her chest. Forgetting about my pains, I pressed my bandaged hand to her cheek as I softly smiled.

"Hey you," she huskily greeted.

"Hey yourself. How are you?"

She shrugged or at least I thought she had. Her shoulders didn't move that much. "Tired, but fine." She paused, staring at me. "Although you could be an angel, I'm assuming that I'm not in heaven."

My smile broadened. "You're still on earth."

Brooke faintly nodded. "That's what I thought." Her lips curved upward into a smile. "It's been a long time Coop. A decade."

Quadruple crap. Brooke had been my only proof that I truly had seen her on that roof the night before. Now it sounded as though she had no recollection of it occurring. Either she had forgotten or I was delusional. In my opinion the latter was most likely true. However, if it was how did I know that she was in trouble? I think if I were psychic, I would have figured it out by now.

I sighed. It didn't matter really, did it? The most important thing was that Brooke was alive and hopefully she would stay alive for many happy healthy years to come.

"How did you find me?" She asked.

I pondered the best way to answer that. I wasn't about to reveal that I talked with her on the roof of the Destiny Hotel and then followed her home. "Ah, speaking of angels, I believe that one guided me in your direction." As her eyes drooped, she smiled. I supposed that she was too fatigued to question what that meant. "Are you disappointed?"

"Disappointed? How could I be? I missed you."

That touched me and the expression on my face showed it. "But are you disappointed that you're still on earth?" I thought she had fallen asleep because she didn't immediately reply.

Brooke finally opened her eyes once more as she said, "I'm grateful that you saved me Coop." She turned her hand until her palm faced the ceiling. By the time I pressed my palm against it with our fingers intertwining Brooke had succumbed to sleep.

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. "I missed you too."

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The phone rang and because I didn't feel like answering it, I let the machine do its work.

*"I assume you know who I am, so I won't say. If you want me to get back to you, leave your name and phone number. Ciao."* **BEEP!**

*"Coop answer the freakin' phone!"*

Snickering, I reached the required three inches to pick up the cordless. "Is that any tone to use when calling someone?"

My caller snorted. *"What kind of message is that? You sound like a biotch."* I only laughed. *"It annoys me when you screen your calls. Damn."*

"I'm so sorry."

She snorted again. I was on the verge of telling her that she sounded like a horse, but she seemed agitated enough. *"What're you doing?"*

"Your mama."

*"Why can't you ever be normal?"*

"Because I don't wanna," I replied, sounding like a petulant child. "What do you want? I'm surprised you can come up for air with that new boyfriend of yours," I teased.

*"Don't be jealous."*

"Please. I don't want him."

*"Yes, I know--penises hold no interest for you. I have a strong feeling that I know who you want though,"* she teased back.

I groaned as I stretched out on my couch. "Let's not start with this subject again Julie. How are things with Kyle?" I asked, changing the subject before it really started.

*"Fabulous. How are things with Brooke?"* All traces of anger when she mentioned Brooke's name had disappeared by now. Four months into our steadily growing friendship had caused Julie to warm up to her, which I hadn't known possible considering the amount of animosity she had in high school.

"Fine," I answered. "Our friendship is just fine."

*"When is it going to be more?"*

"Julie have you ever heard of the expression if it ain't broke don't fix it?"

*"And Cooper have you ever heard of the expression love is friendship set on fire?"*

"When did we start talking about love?"

*"Just now. Try to keep up with the conversation."*

"I *could* just hang up."

*"And I could just come over there and kiss your ass if you do."*

"You have got to be the sweetest best friend in the world Julie."

*"I know--my sweetness is a cross that I must bear. Now I asked you what you were doing? And please don't bring up my mother again,"* she warned me.

"Nothing," I truthfully answered. I had been channel surfing before she called, but since that didn't sound intriguing, I decided not to mention it. The remote now rested on my stomach and the television on the Game Show Network. I was quite the Family Feud and Russian Roulette player.

*"What are you wearing?"*

Grinning, I replied, "Clothes."

Julie muttered something and I was pretty sure that it was a curse word. *"What kind of clothes?"*

I glanced down at my sweat pants and T-shirt. "The cotton kind."

*"Cooper..."*

"Alright. Gray sweats and a white T-shirt with a small red sauce stain on it."

*"So you've already eaten dinner?"* She sounded disappointed.

"No, I'm heating up a can of ravioli and when the stuff plopped out of the can some of its sauce splashed on me."

*"Turn the stove off, take a bath--"*

I interrupted her. "Hey, Julie I'm clean. I took a shower less than an hour ago and scrubbed every part of my body."

*"Good! That will save time. Turn off the stove and put on something presentable enough for the public to see."*

"I'm in for the night."

*"No you aren't. We're going out. Pick you up at 8. Bye!"*

Swiftly sitting up on the couch I practically yelled her name into the phone, but Julie had already hung up. For two minutes I contemplated calling her back, but then I changed my mind. If she wanted to go out then we would go out. After turning the television off, I walked into the kitchen and tossed my mediocre dinner in the garbage disposal. Going up to my bedroom, I stared at the clothes hanging in my closet. Something presentable enough for the public to see. Alright.

Within five minutes I was dressed in blue jeans and because I sensed that Julie wanted me to look a little nice, I chose my only cashmere sweater to wear with it. Lightweight, it consisted of two colors, sky blue blending into white in the middle, which blended into a darker blue toward the bottom of the sweater. Although freelance web designing afforded me a comfortable lifestyle, I didn't usually purchase pricey clothing, but when I saw this sweater it called out to me. This was the first time that I had worn it. It felt good. Julie probably wouldn't believe her eyes. Just to shock her further, I added a touch of lipstick and slipped in the dainty diamond stud earrings that Mom gave me for my 25th birthday.

Wallet tucked into my back pocket, I returned to the living room where I watched one of the newer game shows until the doorbell rang at precisely 8:00. I was impressed. Julie was never really on time. For example, pick you up at 8 actually meant pick you up at 8:15. Shutting the T.V. off again, I pulled my sweater down as I stood up and went to the front door. I smiled at the tall woman leaning against my doorframe with her right hand hidden behind her back. This was a surprise.

"Hey you," the brunette softly said.

"Hey back at you." I looked her up and down liking what I saw. Brooke was dressed in a perfectly pressed black suit with her pants legs flaring at the bottom. Beneath her matching two-button jacket was a royal blue dress shirt, which brought out the color of her eyes. A geometrically patterned silk tie done in shades of blue and gold hung from her neck. There was two feet of space between us, but I could smell her spicy and intoxicating fragrance. When I asked Brooke what was the occasion, she showed me what she had in her concealed hand. Inside a plastic case lay a wrist corsage consisting of small white roses and baby's breath.

"I asked you to the senior prom, but I didn't take you," Brooke spoke with evident regret. "However, if it isn't too late, I'd like to take you out now. I don't know of any proms that we could crash, but hopefully I'll show you a good time." Her smile was so endearing that it would be impossible for me to refuse. "So you want to?"

"Of course it's not too late. I'd love to go somewhere with you. Oh, and just so we're clear, Julie knows about this, right? She called me a little while ago saying that she and I were going out."

Brooke grinned. "Yes, she's my pimp."

I laughed as she reached for my wrist, slipping the corsage on. "It's beautiful. Should I change? Next to you I don't look dressed up enough."

"You think that you could look better than what are you--amazing?"

Damn it, she made me blush. My cheeks were probably shining like Rudolph the reindeer's nose. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Walking outside, I locked my door.

"If this were the prom, I would have rented a limo for us. Have you ever ridden in a limo?" Brooke asked as we headed down the three steps attached to my small porch. I wondered how I had missed the long black stretch limousine parked on the curb. The driver's door opening, a sharply dressed man walked toward the rear of the large automobile and opened a door for us.

"Nope." Offering our driver a small wave I slipped in beside Brooke. Grinning, she informed me that I was doing it again. Because I didn't know what it was, I asked her to clarify.

"The one word replies. I see that you haven't grown out of it."

I shook my head, smiling just a little. "Nope."

~~~~~

After eating the most delicious porterhouse at a romantically inclined steakhouse in Scottsdale, Brooke asked me if I wanted to go to a bar, however, she wouldn't tell me what type of bar she had in mind. Parting from the chauffeur and his limousine at the steakhouse, my uh...date led me to a black Jaguar, which turned out to be hers. Enveloped in supple leather, I enjoyed the ride to our next destination.

"Coop?"

"Hmm?"

"I've been thinking about when you told me that you thought you saw me on the roof of that hotel back in June and I might have an idea of what happened."

I turned my head in her direction. "What? The punch I drank from the reunion party was spiked with hallucinogens, rendering me temporarily delusional?" As she laughed I added, "It did taste funny."

"No, that's not my theory."

"What's your theory?"

"Fate."

"Fate," I dumbly repeated.

"Yes. The nonhuman force that is often believed to decide events in human life." Noticing my questioning look, she explained, "I've been reading the dictionary among other books across the street from my therapist at the library. Though I strongly believe in free will, what if some fate decided to give you a nudge in my direction to achieve two main things. It wanted you to save my life. So it was fate that took my image on that roof. It wanted you to come find me and stop me from doing something irreversibly stupid."

My eyebrows rose as far as they could. "Huh. Fate." I shrugged. Not a day passed that I didn't think about that night, and yet I hadn't come up with a reason that sounded sane. "Could be. Are you sure that you weren't there? Maybe you forgot." Every time that I asked Brooke this, she was adamant that she had never been to the Destiny Hotel.

"I realize that I swallowed 30 sleeping pills and half a bottle of brandy, but I didn't forget because I was never on that roof. It wasn't me."

I was quiet for a moment. "Could have been your guardian angel."

"*You're* my angel."

This blushing thing was getting really annoying.

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When we pulled into a busy parking lot, I read the sign. "Karaoke Knights. You found a bar with my last name in it."

"Not quite." Beaming, she explained, "When I first saw this bar, it was named Pop's Brewery, but Pop wanted to sell because his business was declining and he wanted to retire anyway. So I bought it, fixed it up and now refer to it as Karaoke Knights." She touched the tip of my nose with her index finger. "I named it in honor of you."

Good thing that there were no flies in Brooke's car, because my mouth fell wide open. I glanced back to the glowing sign and then to her. "Me?" I pointed to me. "You bought a business and named it after me?"

She nodded. "Out of everyone on this earth, you're my favorite Coop."

"I don't deserve..."

She pressed two fingers to my lips, stilling them. "I'm not sure what you were about to say, but whatever it was, it was invalid. I'm the one who doesn't deserve you." Even in the dim lighting I could see her blue eyes welling with tears. "I love you Coop. You're my best friend and these last four months of getting to know you have been the best. Thank you for saving my life so that I could have a second chance. I didn't realize that being this happy was possible for me. I don't think you have any idea of how much you've influenced me for the better."

Removing her fingers, Brooke smiled at me before exiting the car. Hurriedly wiping at the tears on my face, I got out and walked with her into the bar. When she held the door open for me, I started to walk inside, but then halted. Looking up at my friend, I softly smiled and stood on tiptoe to kiss her cheek.

"And I love you Brooke."

We were seated at a table near the stage where people had been performing. There was a twist to the karaoke competition that night. Sitting toward the left of the stage were three judges (customers who received complimentary appetizers for participating) and at the end of someone's performance they obtained 1-10 points from each judge. If their score totaled at least 21 points, they would get a free drink. If their performance earned them a perfect score of 30 points (had yet to happen) they received a free drink and an appetizer, which could be anything on the menu from buffalo wings to fried zucchini.

Leaning toward me, Brooke said that she would be right back. I watched as she walked up to the stage and adjusted the microphone to her level. When she greeted the audience, she received a hearty greeting in return. Her jacket having been placed on the back of her chair earlier, she rolled up the sleeves of her dress shirt, exposing bronzed forearms.

"I would like to thank all of you for attending this grand opening week of Karaoke Knights. If it were not for the gorgeous petite blonde seated right there this wouldn't have been possible," Brooke pointed to me and a spotlight was soon to follow. My initial response besides blushing was to hide underneath the table, but I remained in my seat, waving at the various people offering me smiles. Someone clapped me on the back, but I didn't turn around.

"Will everyone please give Cooper Knight, the fine lady whom this establishment was named for, a huge round of applause?" While the audience clapped I wondered if severe blushing could cause a fever to develop. When Brooke called my name, I looked up at her expectantly. "Coop, if



there was a transmitter that would allow me to broadcast how I feel about you to every person in the world, I would find it and use it for that purpose." I know she wasn't drunk after only taking three sips from a mug of beer. She didn't sound or look drunk. She was glowing up on that stage and she looked happy. And despite my 'flattered embarrassment' Brooke's happiness was of great importance to me.

"I love you Coop." A small group of women seated together uttered a collective 'aww, how sweet' as I guessed that same person clapped me on the back. If they kept that up I'd be bruised by morning. "You're like the sister I never had, my best friend, my warrior and it's my opinion that you're my soul mate too. We parted ways for ten years but miraculously...suddenly found our way back to each other and this time it's ten times better than it was before." When she smiled at me as though I was the only person in that room, I forgot to be embarrassed. "This time I don't intend to let you go and I don't mean that in a stalkerish possessive way." The audience chuckled and I grinned. "I just mean that I'm going to spend every day letting you know how appreciative I am that you've given me this second chance. I'm going to let you know how appreciative I am of you, of your caring, your kindness and your love. I won't ever take you for granted again Cooper Knight."

Brooke spent a few seconds talking with the D.J., before she returned to the microphone. "And now I'd like to sing a song performed by the awesome Aretha Franklin. Coop, this one is for you." Oh, she was going to sing! My eyes lit up. I hadn't heard Brooke sing since high school when during our junior year she agreed to star in a musical play that another student wrote. The only reason I went to the play was because I knew that she would be in it. Unfortunately, the play had sucked big time, but Brooke's voice was unforgettable.

*Lookin' out on the morning rain,  
I used to feel so uninspired  
And when I knew I had to face another day  
Lord, it made me feel so tired*

*Before the day I met you  
Life was so unkind  
But your love was the key to my peace of mind*

*'Cause you make me feel  
You make me feel  
You make me feel like a natural woman*

*When my soul was in the lost and found  
You came along to claim it  
I didn't know just what was wrong with me  
Till your kiss helped me name it*

*Now I'm no longer doubtful  
Of what I'm livin' for  
Cause if I make you happy*

*I don't need to do more*

As she repeated the chorus, Brooke walked down the steps and toward our table where she kneeled on one knee in front of me. Gazing into my eyes, she held the cordless microphone with her right hand as she grasped my hand with her left.

*Oh baby what you've done to me  
You make me feel so good inside  
Good inside  
And I, I just wanna be  
Close to you, you make me feel  
So alive*

*'Cause you make me feel  
You make me feel  
You make me feel like a natural woman*

This loving thing was getting really...well, good. I liked it, but you didn't hear that from me.

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A few minutes passed midnight we arrived back at my house. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask Brooke inside for a nightcap, but my tongue hadn't budged to help me enunciate words as she walked me the short distance to my front door. Smiling, she spoke first.

"Did you have a good time?"

Finished unlocking the door, I caught her smile and tossed her one back. "Yes, I did. Best prom ever. Thank you Brooke."

"It's my pleasure to please you."

I playfully rolled my eyes. "Mushy much?"

"You know that deep down you like it." Grinning, she leaned down and caught me by surprise with a kiss on the lips. Although quick it was enough to warm me up quite nicely.

"Mm, what's the second thing?"

I could tell that she was thinking, but she didn't have a clue what I was referring to. "What second thing?"

"When describing your fate theory, you said that there were two main things that fate wanted to accomplish. The first was for me to find you, help you. You never mentioned the second."

"Oh, that." Brooke slowly nodded. "The second thing was for you and I to possibly explore what

we could have."

"And what could we have?"

"This." If I was warm following her innocent little kiss, I was positively scorching as Brooke pinned me against the wall, her soft lips moving against mine, her tongue reintroducing itself to my mouth. And I thought she was a good kisser at 17! My arms wrapped around her shoulders, I wantonly pressed myself against her. If they were into voyeurism, my neighbors could be getting a good show.

"How was that?" Brooke breathlessly inquired.

I sighed with pleasure. "Best kiss in the history of kisses."

"You flatter me."

"Okay, I'll narrow it down. It was the best kiss in the history of kisses that *I've* received." I reckoned that she liked that answer since she kissed me again. This was officially more than just a friendship. I recalled Julie's quote--love is friendship set on fire. I had to tell her that she was correct.

"I should go."

I nodded. "Okay."

Brooke didn't move. "It's getting late."

"Yep." She kissed me again, whispering goodnight against my lips. "Goodnight," I softly returned.

"I'll call you tomorrow--or later."

I smiled. "Great." Winking at me, she started to turn when I grabbed her tie, tugging on it until she faced me again. "Sleep with me." Her eyebrows lifted and a saucy smile appeared on her lips. "It's the first date--no sex."

"Then what's the point?" I could tell that Brooke was only kidding, but I punched her arm anyway. "Ow."

"We should take this slow. No rush."

Her dark head nodded. "I can do slow."

Our lips meeting, I began to walk backwards into the house while gently tugging on Brooke's tie to bring her with me. I hadn't decided whether I would attend the next Dunfield High reunion, but I would forever be grateful that I had gone to the first.

THE END

**Ambrosia's Scrols
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