

THE GHOST WHISPER: A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

KARI CASE. Ghost Whisperer: A Young Adult Novel
(Under the direction of DR. ELIZABETH GARGANO)

This is a creative thesis telling the story of a young girl who finds herself when she goes away to college. This is a portion of a larger novel telling Kacey Alan's story. The synopsis follows.

Kacey Alan is starting her new life as a freshman at Cazenovia College. She has always been quiet and shy, never feeling like she belonged. After living with her grandparents through high school and dealing with her grandmother's controlling dominance, Kacey craves independence and freedom, as well as an escape from her misfit identity. She has no father, her mom abandoned her, and she has a secret: she is sensitive to ghosts. Despite conflicts with her roommates, stalking from the resident dorm witches, and disturbances from spirits trying to haunt and protect her, she learns to control her gift of communicating with ghosts, discovering the confidence to be herself, and realizing she is stronger than she thought.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my mom. She is my angel and watches over me each day.
Without her, I would not be here, writing this.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Critical Introduction	1
Prologue	9
Chapter One	12
Chapter Two	35
Chapter Three	57
Chapter Four	81
Bibliography	98

Critical Introduction

I have chosen to write a coming-of-age story of self-discovery for Kacey Alan, my main character. However, in many ways, writing this novel has become a process of self-discovery for me as well. I began my thesis journey by planning and formulating a traditional thesis about family in adolescent and children's literature. I, personally, have found a form of family in people unrelated by blood, so I am attracted to the role that it plays in literature for young readers, especially those who lack a true family of their own. As I worked through my classes, I became increasingly more enticed by writing a story featuring a character who finds her family. Not just the family she is related to, and honestly doesn't want, but the family she is meant to have. The story of Kacey was born, and I transitioned to a creative thesis instead.

I have never considered myself a creative writer. I have often received good feedback whenever I have taken creative writing classes or completed assignments, but I tend to have a very literal mind and a tendency to follow rules, so "creative" is not a label I would apply to myself. I even go so far as to say that I am a talented line dancer because I can follow the choreography taught to me, but I'm horrible at inserting artistic flair into my movements. Then I began writing for Dr. Gargano's creative writing class and received incredibly positive feedback from my peers for the work I was generating. I was not expecting that. My dirty little secret is that I have always wanted to be a writer of young adult fiction, and my classmates and professor were giving me the confidence to think it might be a possibility. I hope it really is, because I have enjoyed writing this story and would like to continue it to a point where it could be published. The novel still has a long way to go, but I look forward to continuing this journey.

I had to grow up early in life. Much of Kacey's backstory is actually based on my life experiences. I spent a lot of my childhood taking care of my parent, so I didn't have a lot of chances to be a kid. That is likely why I have always been attracted to children's literature. I was an early advanced reader, so I began reading books geared towards preteens and teens when I was in elementary school. When I got older and passed that age group, I still found joy in many of the books I read as a kid. I could relate to the storylines and emotions the characters experienced, but they also gave me a regular opportunity to see life through a child's eyes. A life I did not really have. They also gave me a chance to see a person who had many of my negative experiences come out successful and relatively normal at some point. They showed me there was a light at the end of the tunnel. My all-time favorite trope is that of a Cinderella story. A young woman went from a life of servitude to a life of riches and love. Who wouldn't want that?

I was in my undergrad studies when *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer Stone* made its debut. I had been reading fiction most of my life, but fantasy with witches and wizards was a relatively new thing for me. I instantly fell in love with J.K. Rowling's work. Her characters sung to me in so many ways, and I could relate to both Harry and Hermione throughout the book. I realized that this was the kind of writer I wanted to be. I wanted to write characters who were not only fun to read, but who the reader could totally relate to and see themselves in. I could relate to Harry, so I felt connected to the story.

In a lot of ways, my character Kacey has had a similar experience. She has been left living with her grandparents who don't really want her, and she is embarking on a life at college where she will have a chance to grow away from her oppressive grandmother

and figure out who she is. I didn't intentionally write it to parallel Harry's life, but I did write her to parallel my own. She has been bullied for being the strange kid and for being the kid without parents. Harry experienced much the same thing. In order to thrive, Kacey needs to escape the life she has been living under her grandmother's thumb. In order for Harry to discover he is truly a wizard, he needs to leave the Dursleys. Like Harry, Kacey will learn a lot about herself when she is away from her grandmother.

Part of Kacey's storyline is that she has an unknown talent to sense ghosts. She has been aware of ghosts since she was a child, and she regularly let the adults around her know that the ghosts are near. However, the adults have spent years convincing her that she is imagining things, weakening her self-confidence and any positive view of herself. They have taught her that she can't trust what she sees, feels, and hears, so she has a very limited reality that she can count on as truly existing. Part of her self-discovery is realizing that she can sense ghosts, and that they believe in her even if she has not believed in herself. That realization gives her the opportunity to grow. This is very similar to Harry's journey as well. Once he realizes he's a wizard, an entire world of identity opens for him, and he learns how to stand up for himself. With that also comes a family of friends who give him a support system and someone to fight for and protect. Realization of his gift gives him purpose.

Unfortunately, though, Kacey has a small rise to fame that comes crashing down to the basement. She becomes popular too quickly and, in turn, is the target of jealousy. In finding her own strength and independence, she offends the people who have the power to pull her down. Her inexperience works against her because she doesn't know

what to do with her popularity, or how to approach people who can help her work through the sabotage. This is where the stories diverge and Kacey loses it all. At this point, her narrative follows the storyline of Nobody Owens in Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book*, when he realizes that he really doesn't belong in the common world with all the other normal people. Bod wants to attend school like everyone else, but he knows he is safer if he is invisible. Despite his best efforts to just learn and be himself, malicious peers work to make him miserable. Their jealousy spurs them to victimize Bod and expose him for his strangeness. Kacey is not quite as confident as Bod is, so the plot to victimize Kacey is much more effective than the plot to destroy Bod. Kacey eventually finds herself completely alone, but Bod can go home to the graveyard.

Then there are the ghosts. I have often read Nancy Drew mysteries and have loved the stories that include ghosts. As a child, I lived in old places with old family members and would believe that I had heard and seen ghosts on numerous occasions. Of course, it was also chalked up to my over-active imagination and my affinity for storytelling. As I grew older, I learned not to share when I thought places were haunted, or that strange things were happening. I knew no one would listen, and most of the adults would just roll their eyes. Once I got to college, though, there were locations in the town that screamed of spirits. My sister-in-law, a historian, was once contracted to write a book about the haunting of a local bed and breakfast there, so I now know that it wasn't completely my imagination. I thought sensing ghosts would be a nice touch as a sort of super power for Kacey to find herself and her inner strength. When a person has no family, no friends, and no allies, ghosts make the next best asset.

I also liked the idea of the ghosts as part of the story line because they can be an independent catalyst, but still be somewhat in the control of the main character. The power that Harry Potter subconsciously triggers in himself plays this role, but unlike Harry, who establishes control over his gift, Kacey will find some sort of harmony with hers. That relationship will more relate to the family that Bod formed with the ghosts in the cemetery near his home. Those ghosts are his family, friends, and companions. However, he has a somewhat physical relationship with his spirits, but Kacey's is more ethereal rather than physical. As long as she is at peace, they will be at peace and relatively invisible. Whereas Bod matures out of his ability to interact with the ghosts, Kacey's ability will be a lifelong gift.

I am still working on my story, but it will have a family aspect to it. I firmly believe that family is not just the people we are related to by blood, but also the people who can relate to us and are there for us when we need. For Harry, that was Ron, Hermione, the Weasleys, and many others. For Bod, that became Mr. and Mrs. Owens, Silas, Miss Lupescu, and others. For me, I had tons of family around, but no one I could really count on. My friends were my family, and my experience building that family is illustrated nicely in *The Lunar Chronicles* by Marissa Meyer. Cinder, with her step-mother and step-sisters, has family she lives with, but they aren't the support system she needs. Throughout the four-book series, Cinder grows her family through the people who need her as much as she needs them. This will be the experience Kacey will have. She thought she was growing her family, only to be betrayed by Carla and abandoned by Robert and then by Mel, but she will soon find that the ghosts will give her strength and confidence, and a new roommate, Jeannie, will help her to trust again. Jeannie will also

need to find trust and lean on Kacey for strength. She will gain confidence in herself, and like Kacey for being weird. She will accept her and the ghosts that protect her. Together they will become sisters. Although the general structure of the story parallels Harry's journey from his step-family to his found family at school, the feeling of the mish-mash family Cinder develops with friends who would not normally have found each other is more of what I am looking for Kacey to find. She'll have to work at it a bit harder than Harry did, but she will find herself as she assembles her family.

The hardest part of writing the story has been the pace. I tend to do a lot of development to attempt to make the characters relatable and give enough background to support actions and decisions they are making. Part of why I love JK Rowling's stories so much is because she has a wonderful talent for planting hints and references throughout her storytelling that links to different points in her timelines. I have tried to do much of that myself. However, I don't pull it off as well, and my attempts slow the pace. I hope to be able to find an effective way to tell the reader more about my characters, their motives, and their flaws, but I feel as if I need more experience to figure out how to do this. I don't want to slow the pace, but I want to make sure my readers see my characters inside and out.

I have some books I have enjoyed reading recently, such as *Tree Shepherd's Daughter* and *Cinderella Boy*. They are absolutely fantastic stories, but they have so many holes. They have relationships that are supposed to be strong, but the bonds are completely implied with no development. There is strong conflict that is present, but no reasons have been established for the differences. The characters and their relationships have not been fully developed, and I crave to read some of the mundane

activities and conversations they have that give those tidbits of relatability. Because of that desire, I have tried not to sacrifice the development of my characters. However, I have yet to find the balance between including the details but keeping up the pace. In the long run, I may rewrite the story to include all the boring stuff, then go back through and find out how to keep some of it in.

I have plans for how this book is going to progress, but one of the things I have discovered about myself as a writer is that I seem to be the type who merely records the story as it develops rather than forcing a story that I plan. I have a general outline and I have mapped out some of the characters, but I have often gone back into that plan and bent it to adapt to the story forming on the page. I plan for Kacey to hit a second rock bottom. Her false friendship with the witches, Lydia and Jennifer, will reveal itself to her, and she will take action to separate herself from them. This will leave her alone once again. However, in the background, her family will be forming. In my original proposal, I had her boss create a lifeline for her, but I think that having her English instructor, Professor Myers, take on the mentor role will be more within the flow of the story. I didn't know that until I made the point of having Kacey leave her class abruptly. Who better to notice she needs support and intervention? Professor Myers will be the thread for Kacey until she connects to Jeannie and reconnects to Robert and Mel.

Kacey will also have an opportunity to begin growing her relationship with her estranged mother, from a distance. She will be slow to trust again, but with Kacey's new strength and growing confidence, she will have the courage to try. This discovery will also give her the idea to move, continuing her growth in a new location and possibly

with a new extension of her family. In many ways, she will be starting over again, but this time, it will be on her own terms and by her own choice.

If I ever pitch this to a publisher, I hope that I am able to keep the story. My fear, after all the critiques and edits, is that an editor will want to change the story I am writing, and it will become the story I never had in mind. Even if it were to become an incredibly popular novel, it wouldn't be the original path Kacey was on when I began typing in my creative writing class. I'm trying hard to preserve what I started with. I like this story, and I like this character. I understand that to publish a work is to give the audience what they will buy, but I don't want to destroy what I have created for sales and ranking on lists. I hope that a publisher will love the story for what it is and that edits and suggestions will encourage Kacey as a character rather than change who she is.

At the very least, I plan to finish the novel. My goal is to see it to the end. As Stephen King suggests in *On Writing*, I plan to continue writing regularly as if it is my job and see where this story goes. I do hope that it goes beyond the confines of my hard drive, but if it doesn't, at least I can say that I tried.

The Ghost Whisperer

Prologue

Kacey's eyes pop open. No light comes through the bedroom curtains. The pressure around her sucks all the sound away, making her feel deaf and blind.

She hates these nights, the darkest nights. Her mommy fell asleep early, so she had to put herself to bed. The mean ghost always comes when there's no one to help her. He must have been a bully in life.

She is frozen with terror, too scared to pull the blanket over her head. Her eyes search the room for any hint of light.

"Leave me alone." She forces herself to sit up, still searching the room in vain.

In answer, a darker shadow emerges from all around her and closes in. The pressure increases. She pulls her knees up to her chest and covers her ears with her hands. She squeezes her eyes shut.

"Leave me alone!"

His taunting laughter fills her mind, but there's nothing she can do. Her mom will never hear her scream.

Suddenly, she feels a breeze, like a gentle touch. This is what a grandmother's touch feels like. The room was cold before, but now it is warming up. Peace enters the room. Her protector has come.

She opens her eyes and sees a misty cloud in front of her. Its outline undulates and shifts. A dull light pulses in the center mimicking a heartbeat, brightening the room.

In Kacey's head, she hears a growl. The shadow is angry that the mist has come to her rescue. This is often how it goes, but the shadow usually gets more time to toy

with Kacey. The temperature drops and the darkness smothers her when the grandmother ghost is slow to come. She doesn't feel the shadow other than the cold and pressure, but the grandmother touches her with the breeze and fog. Sometimes, Kacey finds dew on her skin and pillow in the morning when she wakes. Her mommy usually thinks she has had night sweats. She has many nightmares of the mean ghost, so her mommy is probably right.

The breeze brushes her hair, and she feels a warm breath on her face. She relaxes just a little and sinks into the bed.

"Help me," she pleads.

In answer, the fog enlarges and becomes more solid. The light in her middle becomes brighter and reflects off Kacey's face. The shadow growls and moves to the corner of the room. Light appears under the bedroom door, catching Kacey's eye.

The door! I can get out!

Kacey launches off the bed, opens the door, and sprints down the hall to the next bedroom. Her nightgown tangles in her legs and around her ankles. She looks back at the shadow chasing her and hopes she doesn't fall. The darkness shifts up the walls and onto the ceiling, closing in fast. Her footsteps beat a quick rhythm on the wooden floor, but the mean ghost is silent. Sometimes he lets her go, but tonight he follows her. He hates it when she gets away.

She grabs the door jamb to pivot into the room and jumps on the bed, shaking her mom.

"Wake up! He's here."

"Mmm? wh...?"

“Get up!”

It’s too late, the shadow is there, all around her. He’s blocked the door. Kacey can’t see the light from the hall. She can’t see the grandmother ghost. The pressure around her hurts.

She leaps off and scrambles under the bed, hitting her head on the bed frame. Bright lights sparkle across her vision. They are welcome in the pitch black.

The pressure comes down to the floor but not under the bed. She has been safe here before.

“Go away. Help!”

“Shhhh, sweetie,” her mommy whispers vaguely from over Kacey’s head.

She can hear his growls and laughter, even with her ears covered. Maybe he’ll never leave this time.

A strong, sudden wind blows around the room and dust sweeps around Kacey’s face. Her hair flies forward and tickles her nose and lips. “*Get out,*” commands the grandmother ghost. “*Now!*” Kacey smells...honeysuckle?

The shadow screams and flees, fading from the air. The room instantly brightens and a beam of moonlight shines under the bed from the window. The clouds have cleared outside and crickets are chirping. It’s as if it had all been in her imagination.

The good ghost isn’t usually that loud. She isn’t always good at getting the mean ghost to leave. Kacey presses her forehead into the floorboards and takes her hands from her ears. As she exhales, her shoulders release and a few tears of relief escape. *Thank you.* The fog will stay to protect her tonight while she sleeps under the bed. She just needs to make it to morning, when there is light.

Chapter One

“Kacey, we’re entering the town,” says her grandmother.

Kacey wakes up out of her nap with a start. She blinks and looks around. She can never really sleep in the car, but it’s easier to avoid her grandmother’s comments if she naps when they travel, especially on a day like today. This is an important trip to a new life, and she doesn’t want to hear anything negative her grandmother might say about it. She looks down and brushes the wrinkles out of her “Class of ‘92” senior tee-shirt. She can’t believe she is finally eighteen, leaving home, and about to start college.

From the back seat of the Suburban, Kacey sees the historic buildings and shops glide by. Her grandpa is playing Big Band music on the AM radio, and it somehow fits with the old-fashioned scenery. Cazenovia is a small college town. There wouldn’t be much commerce or population without the students attending the school.

Kacey’s grandpa turns right. She glances down Albany Street, with its faded, red-brick shops, sidewalks, and paved road. The light becomes dimmer and an opaque cloud takes over the scene as the street morphs into an old dirt road with horse-drawn carriages rattling past each other. A woman in an old outfit with a long skirt walks up the slight hill to the shops. The wind blows her hat as she puts her hand on it to keep it from flying away. A man with a long mustache and wearing overalls opens the door for her. He nods and tips his hat to her as she enters the shop. The buildings look new and original, with horses tethered in front of the mercantile.

Kacey shakes her head and squeezes her eyes shut. When she opens them, the dusty street has disappeared from view and everything returns to normal. She must

have nodded off for a moment. She likes the little village and how many of the original buildings still seem to be there.

“We’re here,” announces her grandpa. He looks over his shoulder and flashes his perfect smile. Kacey loves how it touches his warm eyes and wrinkles the corners of them. He’s always been a good-looking man, even now as his flawlessly styled hair has turned white.

She looks up as they enter the parking lot in front of the dorm. The sign over the door tells her she is in the right place, Shove Hall. *Here goes!* She takes a deep breath and pulls the door handle. She hops out and her feet strike the blacktop a little too hard. *Calm down, little girl.*

Kacey walks up to the sidewalk and retrieves a flatbed cart. She packed a lot for her freshman year in the dorm, but sharing the load of necessities with her two new roommates allowed her to keep it under control. They put a list of stuff together when they met during orientation last month, so they have been able to divide everything up pretty equally. Her grandpa helps her unload her refrigerator, two steamer trunks, a couple of boxes, and some cinder blocks to raise her bed.

“At least you fit it all onto one cart. It would have been ridiculous to take two trips,” says her grandmother, supervising as usual.

“Let’s get this up to your room,” her grandpa says, “Then I’ll come back down and move the Suburban while you unload.”

“That sounds like a plan.” Kacey smiles and turns on her heel toward the door, navigating the other carts filled with dorm supplies. Acorns crunch under her shoes. Fall

started a little early this year, so the trees are already shedding. The breeze through the branches is a little louder with the dying leaves rustling in protest.

They enter the building and head toward the right-side hall. Kacey pushes the button to the elevator while her grandpa maneuvers the flatbed to roll in. The doors open slowly with a groan. They navigate into the tight space and push the button for the fourth floor. The doors hesitate a moment before squealing shut, and the elevator lurches up. It vibrates and seems to be traveling in a shaft that is too small, but they eventually get to the top.

With relief, they hurry out of the elevator, pushing the flatbed ahead of them, and search the row of rooms on the left. When they get to room 410, Carla, one of Kacey's roommates, is already there with the top bunk made and the desk beside it claimed. Move-in started less than an hour ago. *Looks like Miss Productive was anxious to get here.*

Kacey's grandpa leaves to move the car and Kacey sets about unloading the flatbed.

"Hi, Carla." Kacey notices her brownish red hair is bit frizzy. In the sunlight, it looks as if it could be on fire. Kacey has to look twice to make sure it isn't smoking.

"Hi, Kacey. I went ahead and picked a bed. I like this desk so I took it. I hope that is okay."

"Sure. I can pick the bed on this side." Kacey points to the right of the desk Carla is occupying. She never really liked bottom bunks, so she'll leave that to the other roommate, Mel. "I'll figure out which desk I like later."

Kacey's grandmother steps forward. In her ruffled blouse and neatly pressed slacks, she looks elegant, but like a woman who doesn't know her age. With her chin slightly raised, she looks down her nose at Carla. "Hello, I'm Kacey's grandmother." She quickly turns away without waiting for a reply. Carla and Kacey exchange looks in the awkward silence. Her grandmother is just five feet, but she can make anyone feel small.

Within a few minutes, everything is off the cart. Kacey pushes it into the hall and goes back into the room. For a moment, she realizes how sterile it is, with its white cinderblock walls and its grey laminate flooring. It's cold and unfriendly. Kacey rubs her arms to try to get rid of the chill, wondering if the window should be open.

"I'm going to need the house key from you," says her grandmother, bringing her back to the moment.

"What?" Kacey's stomach drops.

"I need the house key. You are here now, so you won't need it."

Carla is in the background attempting to act like she can't hear the exchange.

"What if I want to come home and you aren't there?" Kacey asks, glancing at her roommate.

"You live here now. If you are going to come back, you will need to call first and make sure we are home."

And just like that, I am discarded.

Kacey digs out her keychain and returns the tiny brass garage key to her grandmother's possession.

"Well, time for us to go." Her grandmother turns to her grandfather as he comes back in the room.

"Wait, what? I thought you were staying for lunch? Grandpa just parked the car."

"We have a golf game later. We need to get going if we are going to make it on time."

"You scheduled a golf game today? We made these plans almost two months ago."

"We got a great tee time that wasn't available until the day before yesterday. You know how hard it is to get a reservation this close to the end of the season."

"Sure." Kacey looks over at her grandpa. He shrugs and looks to the floor.

"Nice to meet you, Carla," her grandmother says flatly as she turns towards the door.

"I'll walk you out," says Kacey.

"You can stay and unpack. We can find our way back to the car. We'll talk to you soon."

"Okay." Kacey hugs her grandmother, pecks her on the cheek, and then walks to her grandpa.

"I love you Kaceykins," he whispers in her ear and bends down to hug her. His face is a little scratchy, but it tickles her cheek.

"I love you Grampakins." Kacey smiles into his shoulder. He always smells like Old Spice aftershave. It is one of her favorite scents.

She lets go, and her grandparents walk out the door. Her grandmother doesn't look back.

A chilly breeze blasts through the window, slamming the door behind them. Kacey and Carla jump at the loud echo. They hear startled squeals come down the hall

from other residents. *Great. Grandmother probably thought it was intentional, as always.*

“Wow. Your grandmother is intense.”

“You have no idea.” Kacey rolls her eyes. She goes back to the door and opens it, propping it with one of the cinder blocks. “That should keep it from getting blown shut.”

“What should I unpack first?” she asks Carla.

“Well, the dresser by the door is empty, and I made sure to leave the other wardrobe for you and Mel to share.” She crosses the room and closes the doors of her overstuffed closet.

Geez. I didn't realize she was so assertive. Good thing I don't have anything to hang up.

“I'll leave the wardrobe for Mel.”

“Did I hear my name?” Melanie peeks around the door, her face framed by her short curls. Her eyes are just as blue as Kacey remembers. Kacey's eyes are dark brown, so she is always a bit jealous of blue eyes like Mel's.

“As if summoned by the spirits.” Kacey walks over and gives Mel a quick hug.

Mel and Kacey talked on the phone a bunch during the summer, so they got to know each other pretty well.

“This is a cute room.” Mel looks around with curiosity. “Whose stuff is already unpacked?”

“Mine,” replies Carla. “I liked the top bunk, and that desk near the window, so I claimed them. Is that okay?”

“Sure.” Mel catches Kacey’s eyes and raises her eyebrows. “I prefer the bottom bunk anyways.” She pauses and bites her fingernail in thought. “Well, let’s get this place set up!”

Kacey beams and the girls start unpacking. The room is tight, but they’ll make do.

“Geez, Mel,” Kacey says, “You got enough Buffalo Bills jerseys?” Carla laughs. “It looks like you have at least ten of them hanging up.”

“Hey! Don’t bust on my team.”

Kacey puts her hands up in defense and giggles.

“We need music for this. It’s too quiet in here.” Mel puts a cassette in the boom box. It blares a U2 song from a live concert.

“I prefer the *Footloose* soundtrack, but this is good,” says Kacey. “Carla, what is your favorite music?”

“I don’t really have any. I like to read.” The mood in the room turns awkward before the girls get back to sorting their possessions.

An hour later, everything is put away.

“It looks like we’ve been here a semester already!” says Mel.

They take in their homey little room with satisfaction. It’s not as sterile now.

“We need a carpet,” says Kacey. “I didn’t realize how hard the floor is.”

“There’s probably one at the bookstore. We can go eat first and then head there.”

“Perfect. I’m good to eat, so that works.” Kacey picks up a stuffed Coca-Cola bear that had rolled off the bed.

“Why do you have that?” asks Carla. “Do you sleep with it?” She smirks and looks at Mel.

Ouch. Rude much?

“That’s nothing. Did you see my buffalo?” Mel dives into her bunk and pulls out a flattened hand-sewn pillow in the shape of the Buffalo Bills mascot.

“Awesome.” Kacey laughs. *Thanks for saving me, Mel.*

“I think stuffed animals are for children.” Carla’s nose wrinkles in offense. “We should be acting more mature if we are in college.”

“I don’t know if you have noticed, but I’m still an adolescent.” Mel turns and tosses the pillow onto her bed.

Kacey hides her half grin. “Looks like we are all a bit hangry. Let’s fix that.”

The girls close the door to the room and head down the hall.

“Can we take the stairs? I am not a fan of the elevator.” Kacey angles into the stairwell.

“Sure. Carla, you good with that?” asks Mel

“Whatever.”

They walk down the stairs and into the lobby.

“Do you guys have your IDs? You’ll need them to get back in,” asks the attendant at the door.

“Yep!” they reply together.

They open the door and turn towards the next building. The campus is beautiful with trees everywhere. Evergreens share space with oak and birch trees. It looks like a Bob Ross painting, just a touch of orange and yellow mixed with the green and white.

The air is warm, but the breeze is a bit chilly. Fall is definitely coming.

“What is the cafeteria called again?” asks Kacey

“Seven-to-Seven. It kind of sucks it’s only open certain hours. My kitchen is open 24-7,” Mel jokes. “My brothers are always hungry.”

“Yeah. I’m going to need to get some ramen or something. I get a little snacky about ten,” adds Kacey.

They get to the entrance, and walk in. The air is warm and musty despite the chill outside. Kacey’s dark hair blows back as she walks through the doors and up the stairs. She catches a glimpse of a young girl about her age standing just off to the side when she gets to the landing. She’s wearing a tan blazer and a small, light-colored beanie on her head that contrasts with her brown hair. Kacey remembers seeing pictures of the girls who attended when Cazenovia was a women’s college back in the forties. She does a double-take to make sure she really saw the clothing, but when she looks over, the girl is gone. She pauses to search the nook near the wall and glance down the side hall to see if she could catch sight of the person.

“What are you looking for?” asks Carla.

“There was somebody standing there, I thought.”

Mel and Carla look over. “I didn’t see anyone when we came in,” says Mel.

Carla shrugs. “Me neither.”

“You didn’t?” sighs Kacey. “I guess it must have been a trick of the light.” She takes another moment to be sure, but then jogs to catch up to the others.

They turn to the right and swipe their cards to get into the cafeteria.

Ew, what is that smell?

“Oh, this looks fun.” Mel practices her best sarcasm as they enter the line for hot meals.

“Um, what is that?” scoffs Kacey, stretching forward to get a better look at the questionable food.

“Sludge. That is sludge.” Carla turns a little pale and looks away.

The apron-clad cafeteria ladies lean over the glass counter to ask students what they want to eat. Each of the girls takes a tray and slides it down the smooth metal rails to follow the line of hungry students. A menu on the wall has the special of the day listed:

Pot Roast

Mashed Potatoes

Baked Beans

Boiled Carrots

Green Bean Casserole

Dinner Roll

The first lady in the serving line raises a large metal spoon full of a mushy brown substance with a bit of a green tinge to it. “Pot roast, Sweetie?” Kacey makes eye contact with her, noticing a brown fluff of hair escaping her hair net, and shakes her head. “No thanks.” She turns to the others. “I think I’m going to see what’s on the cold bar.”

“Ditto,” shivers Mel.

They pick up their trays and escape to the main dining room.

After a quick skim of the food options, Kacey settles on a salad and some pasta delight. *Rabbit food for a new vegetarian.*

Carla calls to her from a table in the corner. She chose a turkey sandwich and some chips. Mel joins with a bowl of cereal and a glass of chocolate milk.

“Oh. I need a drink.” Kacey jumps up and heads to the soda machine.

Good ole Coke. She gets a glass from the rack and fills it with ice and bubbly soda.

“Excuse me. I believe I was here first.”

Kacey jumps and spills some of the sugary liquid down her hand. She backs up to keep from spilling it on her clothes too. Glancing up, she sees bright green eyes shining back at her from a mischievous lopsided grin of straight teeth. The deep voice comes from over six feet up, forcing Kacey to follow his chest to his face. He’s good looking with dirty blond hair and obvious cheek bones. His shoulders are broad enough to block the bright light coming from a nearby window. *Geez.*

“I didn’t see you. Where did you come from?”

“Actually,” he replies, “I’m joking. I followed you over here and thought you looked like someone fun to talk to.”

“You followed me?” she looks past him to see her roommates watching the whole thing. *Great. Witnesses. Just what I need.*

“Yep. I’m Robert. You’re Kacey, right?”

“Y-yes. How did you know?”

“I saw you at orientation with Mel. She says you’re pretty cool, so I figured I would introduce myself.”

Sure. That’s a new one.

“Coke, huh? Did you know that can dissolve rust on an old car?” he points at her glass as if she could do that right now.

“Are you a chemistry major?”

“Um. No.” he takes a step back and looks at his shoes. “I actually tend to spew stupid useless facts when I’m nervous.”

“Nervous? Apparently, I spill soda all over myself.” Kacey blushes, looking down to assess the damage.

“Oh. Here.” Robert reaches to a napkin holder near the soda machine and hands a couple napkins to Kacey.

“Thanks.” She wipes the bottom of the glass, but it has mostly dried.

“Sorry I surprised you.” He looks a little sheepish.

“No. It’s good. I’m a primo klutz.” She shrugs, crinkling the napkin in her hand, and looks up to meet his gaze.

Robert laughs with a twinkle in his eye.

“Uh, not to be rude, but I’m a bit hungry, so I’m going to take my sticky glass of soda over to my table and eat.” *How long does it take to die from public embarrassment?*

“Uh. Sure.” He steps out of her way to let her pass. “I’ll see you around? Maybe we’ll have some classes together.”

“That sounds good,” Kacey says over her shoulder as she ducks away with her glass dripping on the tile.

“Who was that?!” asks Carla.

Kacey tells them his name and the fact that he pranked her a little.

"He says he knows you," she levels at Mel.

Mel smiles broadly. "Yep. We've known each other since we were kids. Our families are close. He's a pretty good basketball player, and kind of a nerd. He's a catch, but no one can seem to catch him." She winks at Kacey and giggles.

"Why is he talking to me? I don't usually get guys coming up out of nowhere."

"He was in one of the small groups with us in July. He started asking questions about you when we got back home. You had said something he liked, so he wanted to get to know you."

"Okay. I'm totally not sure what to do with that. I'm in strange territory here."

"I'll help you out!" Mel leans across the table and picks a cherry tomato off Kacey's plate, popping it confidently into her mouth. Kacey laughs and picks up her fork.

Carla looks over at Mel as if she has committed a felony.

"What? I'm hungry." Mel holds her arms up and shrugs. "I already finished all my food, and that tomato was about to fall off Kacey's plate. I had to save it."

"It's seriously not a problem," Kacey says to Carla.

"I'm a huge food mooch, so be prepared to share the next time you have food, Mel," warns Kacey.

"Absolutely," replies Mel. "My plate is your plate." They smile and high five.

"Whatever," grunts Carla, returning to her sandwich. "I don't share, though."

"Noted." *This is going to be a long semester.*

* * *

Kacey's alarm blares at 6:45 am. It's the first day of the semester. She reaches over, turns off the alarm, and wipes drool from the corner of her mouth. A bit of sunshine

is coming through the window, but it isn't overly bright as far as she can tell with her eyes still glued shut with sleep. She puts her arms straight above her head, arches her back, and quietly squeaks as she stretches. She rubs her eyes and forces them open. She jumps as she catches motion from the right of her vision. Carla is sitting at her desk running her fingers through her straight red hair, staring at Kacey. Again.

"Uh. Good morning"

"Morning," replies Carla. She continues to stare at Kacey without any change.

"How long have you been up?"

"I got up about 5:30. I like to get ready before anyone else is up so I can relax and hang out."

"Oh." Kacey sits up and looks towards the light. The sky is overcast and the trees are rustling in the breeze. "You have the window open?" She rubs her arms in the chill.

"Yep. I prefer to have fresh air when I get ready in the morning."

"We won't be able to do that when it gets colder."

"Oh, no. I do it at any temperature. It will be fine for me. I don't get cold that easily."

"I do," Kacey mumbles under her breath.

She swings her legs over the bed, slides her shower caddy from underneath, and heads out to the bathroom with her towel and bathrobe. The laminate floor is freezing on her bare feet, so she puts on yesterday's socks. The winter is going to make the floors even colder soon. She glances towards Mel's bunk. Mel chose later classes at registration, so she gets to sleep in a bit.

The dorm is co-ed, but the girls have the top three floors. Kacey opens a heavy door that squeals as it swings shut. The communal bathroom is intimidating with a dozen stalls. They remind her of the locker rooms in high school, where mean girls would pick on her constantly. To add an extra element of personality, the water system has a strange quirk. If she is in the shower when someone flushes the toilet, the water becomes scalding hot. The girls are supposed to warn people in the shower with “FLUSH,” but most forget. *Who needs mean girls when the water is a bully?* If she can get in there before the crowd, then she can beat the flush.

She walks towards the showers at the end of the room, nearly running into a blond girl dressed in black coming out of a stall. Her hazel eyes light up when she looks at Kacey.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“No problem.” She backs up to let Kacey pass. “Hi.”

“Good morning.” Kacey shyly smiles.

The goth girl moves forward to the sinks and washes her hands. She takes out a washcloth and begins scrubbing her face. Kacey sets her caddy on a shower bench and walks back out to take a bathroom break.

The girl looks over her shoulder. “Aren’t you Kacey?”

“Yes.” She steps into the stall and closes the door. *Am I famous or something?*

“That’s what I thought! I’m Lydia. My roommate is Jennifer.”

“That’s cool.” Kacey blushes. She is not used to strange people talking to her while she pees. She finishes up and flushes. She forgets to give the warning, but she realizes no one is currently showering, so no worries.

"Yep. We saw you talking with Robert the other day. He's pretty cute. He plays basketball, ya know." She begins to apply foundation and dark blush.

"I've heard that." Kacey comes out to wash her hands. "I haven't seen him since then."

"We went to high school together. He is pretty popular back home. It's cool he talked to you." She adds black mascara and dark gray lipstick while she talks, making fish faces in the mirror.

"I guess so."

Lydia finishes the look with a dark eyeshadow and black eyeliner that comes to a point at the ends of her eyes. "Well, I have to go. I don't know what I was thinking when I registered for 8:00 am classes." Lydia shrugs her shoulders, picks up her caddy, and leaves by the side door to the other hall. The dorm is in an L-shape, so she must be at the other end from Kacey's room. "I'm sure I'll see you again soon."

"Nice talking to you." Kacey shivers and shakes her head.

She takes her shower, barely dodging the torture by fire a few minutes in. She doesn't do anything fancy to get ready for class, wrapping her hair in a towel to keep it from dripping down her back. She retrieves her caddy and goes back to the room to finish up. Her grandmother always tells her to blow dry her hair, but it's too much work to style it every day.

Carla is right where she left her, still playing with her hair and staring at Kacey's bed. It's kind of creepy having her roommate just stare at her while she sleeps. Honestly, she wouldn't have agreed to room with her if she had known they were so different from each other. She seemed like a completely different person during the

summer. She was shy and nice, and she went with the flow. Kacey never dreamed she would be such a possessive and controlling person.

She pulls her favorite “Save the Whales, Protect the Dolphins” T-shirt out of the drawer and pairs it with high-waist jeans. They are light acid-washed with buttons up the fly instead of a zipper. She doesn’t always have something in style, but these are all the rage. *The nineties were made for acid wash.* Her best friend Jill has a closet full of the latest fashions, but Kacey is much chubbier, so she can never borrow any of it. She saved up for a couple months to buy these jeans, so she is pretty proud of them.

“I’m going to get some breakfast before class,” she says to Carla.

“Mmm. Okay. See you later.”

She grabs her bookbag, swinging it over her right shoulder, and leaves the room glancing back at Carla. *She could be a statue if her arm wasn’t moving.*

Honestly, she was kind of glad that Carla didn’t jump to join. She has been clingy since the first day and won’t leave Kacey alone. In fact, she’s been like a shadow following her to the bathroom, the cafeteria, and even to the corner store to look at grocery prices. Kacey is glad to get ready by herself this morning.

She walks to Hubbard, scans her ID, and places her backpack in the cubbies. She has already learned not to bother with the hot food line. Any day now, she’s sure that news of food poisoning will confirm her suspicions of a secret plot to kill all the students and keep the tuition money for themselves. She chuckles a bit at her fantasy. Instead, she heads straight for the Cap’n Crunch Berries. She hadn’t tried them before last week, but they have quickly become her go-to. She also gets a yogurt, some fruit, and a chocolate milk. At this rate, she should have no problem losing weight.

She sets everything down and walks away to get a spoon. She returns to find another person's milk and blueberry muffin next to hers. She scans the area nearby but sees no one close.

"Kacey!" she whips her head up to see Robert walking towards her. He braved the line and has a plate of eggs, bacon, and waffles. His green sweater sets off his eyes, but his high-top sneakers clash with his khakis.

"Hey, living life on the edge, I see."

He glances down at his tray. "Someone has to give these ladies something to do." He smiles and shrugs, then puts his food down with the rest of the items on the table.

"Are you the mystery guest?"

"Yep. I spied with my little eye that you were sitting here, so I decided to join you." He pauses. "Is that okay?" He looks worried that she'll say no, making him appear younger than he did when she first met him.

"Uh, sure." Kacey blushes and sits down.

"Excellent!" Just as he sits down, a breeze blows across the table scattering his stack of napkins around the room. "Dang!" he runs to collect them.

Kacey looks around to find the open window, but all the windows are closed. *Where did that come from?* A nearby curtain moves, but without a breeze, as if it is laughing at Robert's embarrassment. Kacey shakes her head. *Great. Looks like my imagination is catching up with me.*

Robert returns with a new bunch of napkins and sits down. "That was a little awkward. I had to go chase them from under the tables."

Kacey giggles. "Happens to all of us," she reassures him.

"Sure it does." He picks up his fork and digs into his eggs.

"So, you have an early class?"

"Yep. English at 8:00 with Professor Myers."

"Oh. Me too." Kacey's eyes widen and her brows go up as she dips her spoon into her cereal. *Great.*

"Perfect. That'll be good. We can form a study group."

"Okay." Her stomach drops. "I haven't done much with study groups."

"No?" He looks at her with a surprised expression.

"Nope." She looks away hoping she hasn't blown it. She wasn't the most motivated student until she was a junior. "I didn't do much studying until a couple years ago, so no one wanted me to join."

"Hmm. Interesting. I wouldn't have thought that."

They chew in silence for a few minutes.

"Mel says you played basketball?"

"Yep. I'll be playing here, too."

"That's great." She stabs a piece of pineapple and pops it in her mouth. "You also know Lydia?"

"Ugh. Yes. We had a couple classes together." He puts his fork down and takes a sip of milk. "She's okay, but she's usually only friends with people she can use."

"Really?"

"Keep your guard up with her. She can be tricky, that one." He folds a strip of bacon and puts it in his mouth, chewing.

“Why do all of you know each other? I don’t know anyone here, at least not well. Only one of my high school classmates is here.”

“Caz did a big recruitment fair at our school and offered a lot of money for the athletes to come play. I think a bunch of people just followed because it’s a small town and everybody does the same things together.” He shrugs and scrapes the last of his breakfast onto his fork and eats it.

“Makes sense.” Kacey finishes her milk and piles all the dishes and trash together.

“Looks like we’re done. We should head to class.” Robert stands, reminding her that she is only five-four. He dazzles her with his grin again and holds out his hand to help her up.

“Sounds good.” She ignores his hand and stands on her own. He nods and picks up his tray.

They drop their dishes and trash at the kitchen on the way out.

“Thanks for letting me join you.” Robert makes eye contact with Kacey, making her heart skip a beat.

“Did I have much of a choice?”

“Absolutely! If you don’t want me to join next time, let me know. I will be glad to give you space.” He smiles and bumps her with his arm.

“Thanks. I appreciate that.” She gives him a cooked grin and returns the bump.

* * *

Kacey sits on her bed. She rereads the same sentence she’s been reading for the last twenty minutes. A room at the end of the hall is blaring music, and the girls

inside squeal and laugh like they are having a sorority party. The smooth floors in the hall carry the sound like a bull horn. The door was closed, but people kept knocking, so Kacey and Mel decided to leave it open rather than constantly answer it. The R.A., Jodie, came to check on them to see how their first day went, Robert came by to see if Mel wanted to play some frisbee in the quad, and two separate guys came looking for a girl named Elizabeth. Mel and Kacey wondered if she was giving out the wrong room like girls give out fake phone numbers. *It would be less distracting to put in a rotating door.*

“Hey, Mel, I’m going to study in the library. Do you want to come?” asks Kacey
“This is too much chaos for me.”

“Nah. I’m going to stay here. It’s been a long first day, and I’m done for a bit.” She closes her text book and yawns with a big stretch.

“I don’t blame you. I’ve got a ton of homework today I have to finish. If I stay here, I’m never going to get anything done.” Kacey packs her books into her bag.
“Honestly, I’d rather take a nap right now.”

Mel laughs. “Actually, that’s the plan!” Her eyes crinkle as she leans to snuggle her buffalo pillow.

“Okay. Good luck with that.” Kacey smiles and swings her backpack over her shoulder. “See you for dinner?”

“Of course.”

Kacey leaves the dorm and walks across the quad to the library. Most of the campus has trees, but the quad is completely open and green with fresh-cut grass. Students are studying in the sun and throwing frisbees.

“Kacey!” Robert yells to her from across the quad. He’s playing football with a dark-haired guy about the same height as Robert. His bare chest is dark and he has tan lines around his ankles. He seems to like short shorts.

“Hi, Robert.”

He smiles as he runs up to her with the other guy in tow.

“I want you to meet my roommate Jack.” Jack smiles and waves, a little out of breath.

They exchange greetings and talk for a short bit.

“Listen, I don’t want to be rude, but I’m on my way to the library. Can we catch up later?”

“Absolutely. See you soon! Glad you two got to meet.” He waves over his shoulder as he and Jack run, tossing the ball back and forth again.

Kacey walks into the next building and turns down the hall to the library. The doors look like classic old library doors made of wood and frosted glass. She can hear whispering on the other side, almost like white noise. *It must be packed.*

She reaches out and opens the left-side door. She steps into...a silent room. She stops dead and looks around. She could have sworn she heard whispering. The librarian is behind the counter with the soft beeping of the computer as she scans books in. Another student is pulling a book off the rack on the back wall, and two girls are sitting at a big study table to the left. One looks up, and Kacey realizes it’s Lydia.

Lydia stares at Kacey for a minute, then looks around the room as if searching for someone. *Why does she look so surprised?* She taps on the other girl’s shoulder and

points at Kacey with the pencil in her hand. Kacey waves hesitantly and shuffles over to the closest study table.

What the heck just happened? Did I step into a different dimension? Where did all the whispering go? She checks the room again to see if she missed the crowd of people she heard.

Lydia gets up and pulls her friend by the sleeve. They walk over to Kacey's table.

"Hi Kacey! I told you I would probably see you again."

"Hey," says Kacey.

"This is my roommate Jennifer." Jennifer waves as if on remote control. She doesn't look entertained to be meeting Kacey.

"This is the girl I met in the bathroom this morning," Lydia directs at Jennifer. With that, Jennifer's eyes widen and her head whips back to Kacey's face.

"Oh! Hi! Lydia told me about you."

"She did?" *This is getting weird. Is Lydia some kind of stalker?*

"Yep. You're Robert's new fascination." *That is a bit advanced for breakfast and class together.* She blushes thinking it could even be a possibility.

"I'm not sure about that. Seriously." Kacey turns to unload her backpack. "You two here to get your homework done?"

"Not really," Lydia takes point on the conversation. "We're doing some research, and the Caz library has some pretty old books to help us out."

"Interesting. I had no idea."

“Did you know that there are five churches in the town of Cazenovia? And that they mark the five points for a star, like from a pentagram?” Lydia is giddy with her facts complete with a big cheesy grin.

“Um. No. I didn’t. Is that important?” asks Kacey.

“There’s a cemetery in the middle of the pattern. People say weird things happen there all the time. Isn’t that cool?” The air is becoming electric in the library, feeding off Lydia’s excitement.

“I guess so? I like old cemeteries.” Kacey notices a buzzing sound coming from the lights above.

“Well, we are doing some research to see who is in the cemetery and why the churches are placed like they are.”

“Why would you want to know that? Isn’t it creepy stuff?”

Lydia lowers her voice and leans in as Kacey bends forward to hear. “We’re witches. If we can find some of that stuff out, we might be able to do some spells.” She squeaks out a giggle.

Kacey straightens up, confused. A lightbulb explodes overhead and the room goes dark.

Chapter Two

Kacey enters the dorm room and sets her backpack on the floor. She sighs and slumps onto her bed.

"Where did you go?" asks Carla, turning from her desk.

Wakened by the conversation, Mel sits up in her bed digging sleep out of her eyes.

"Well, I had gone to the library, but the lights went out and the librarian couldn't get them back on, so I found a study area in Coleman Hall near the mailboxes and got my stuff done there. It was quieter than I expected.

"I would have gone with you," Carla replied with her shoulders hunched. If her hair hadn't been held in place with super strength hairspray, it would have fallen over her face as she looked at her hands.

"You weren't here when I left. I asked Mel, but she opted for a nap." Kacey glances at Mel receiving a nod of confirmation.

"You could've left a note. It would have been nice to be included." Kacey senses that this is leading into dangerous territory. She really doesn't want to invite conflict so soon.

"I'm sorry. I will leave a note next time. I had a lot of work to do and I need to get everything done to keep up. I didn't really feel like I could hang around."

"Roommates are supposed to do things together. Let me know when you go next time."

"Absolutely. I will." Kacey turns away, relieved that went as well as it did. *Clingy much?*

"She wouldn't have been there anyway," chimes Mel. "Did you say the lights went out?" She swings her legs over the bed and leans forward with curiosity on her face.

"They did!" Kacey explains in animated detail about what happened. She talks with her hands, overwhelming Carla and Mel with her charades. "The whole experience was super weird."

"Why do things like that happen around you, Kacey?" asks Carla.

"What do you mean?" Kacey is genuinely surprised.

"Doors slam, winds blow, lights flicker. Those things don't happen around other people. I have never seen so many doors slam in my life." Carla rolls her eyes and glances at Mel.

"You haven't?" *They happen all the time around me.* "It's not breezy where you live?" The irritation is bleeding into Kacey's tone. Her grandmother thinks she makes a habit of slamming doors on purpose.

"Um...weird things are kind of common around you, come to think of it," Mel hesitantly confirms. She looks to the side as if she is trying to recall a memory. "I guess I just didn't really notice." She shrugs and offers a crooked smile. "It really doesn't matter to me."

"It's annoying, honestly," counters Carla. "And it's strange." Carla makes intense eye contact with Kacey.

"Wow. Okay." Kacey puts her hands up in defense and turns to unpack her backpack. "I had no idea." *What do I do now?* Kacey bites her lip in thought. Carla's not wrong, weird things do happen around her, all the time. When she was a kid, she blamed it on ghosts. What does she blame it on now? *It's just my imagination.*

Mel breaks the long silence. "I'm hungry. Is it dinnertime yet?"

"That's a shock. You want to eat. Again." Kacey laughs. The room had gone frigid for a few minutes, but now it seems to be warming up with Mel's and Kacey's banter. *I swear there is always a window open in here.*

Mel laughs with her. "Of course! Let's go!"

The three girls gather their stuff and walk to the cafeteria in silence. Kacey thinks about what they said. The negative energy is flowing off Carla, so she has no desire to ask questions. It's the first time anyone has ever said something to her about it.

A table near the middle of the room is available, so they claim it and get their food. As if on cue, Kacey returns to two additional trays of hot food.

"Whose are those?" quizzes Carla with a sneer. Kacey shrugs, pulling a chair to sit in. Carla puts her food down and turns with a huff to get silverware.

"Hey, Beautiful." Kacey follows the deep voice. She looks up to see Jack behind her with a playful smile. *Beautiful? He knows I exist?* His dark hair is just long enough to fall over his brown eyes.

He pulls out the chair next to Kacey and sits, putting his soda on the table and switching the two trays.

"Uh, Hi Jack." Her shock comes through in her hesitation.

"Hey, that's my seat!" Robert walks up and bats Jack in the head in mock anger.

"You snooze, you lose," jabs Jack.

"Dang, Man. I thought you were my friend."

"I am, but all is fair in love and war."

"Do you have an encyclopedia of cliché phrases?" Kacey directs at Jack.

Jack blushes. Robert releases an exaggerated guffaw. Kacey clearly got the upper hand.

“Actually, it’s one of his talents,” chides Robert, punching Jack in the shoulder.

“Uh huh. Sure,” Kacey mocks playfully and picks up her fork.

“What are you two doing here?” interrogates Mel with a smile.

“Apparently, there were no other tables available.” Carla exhales loudly returning to take the seat on the other side of Kacey.

Mel glances at Kacey and side-eyes Carla. Kacey shrugs and looks at Mel quizzically. *What did I do?*

“She is absolutely right,” Jack announces. “There were no other tables with you wonderful girls.” Carla rolls her eyes in response and continues to eat.

“Actually, we wanted to get to know you all better.” Robert tries his best to smooth out the situation. “We know Mel already, but we don’t know much about you and Kacey.” He smiles in Kacey’s direction.

“Sure. You want to know something about me.” Carla’s sarcastic tone is obvious.

“Do you two have a death wish?” Mel jabs her fork in the direction of Robert’s plate, attempting to lighten the mood. “Have you not learned that the hot food is dangerous to consume?”

“We like living on the edge.” Jack flashes a flirtatious smile at Kacey, then picks up his fork. His large glass of soda tips over and shatters all over his plate, washing gravy and peas off the tray and into his lap. Everyone bolts up from the table to avoid the flood of caramel liquid. The cafeteria goes silent as all eyes turn to the group abandoning the table. Jack cusses loudly and brushes off his pressed khaki shorts. The

hem of his powder pink collared shirt falls victim as well. "What the hell? How did that happen?"

Carla gives a level stare to Kacey, then picks up her tray. "I think I will move to a less crowded table." She turns without hesitation and moves to the other side of the room.

Robert leans down to Kacey's ear, "Seriously, what IS her problem?" Mel looks over, but she can't hear Robert over Jack's ranting.

"No idea," she quietly replies. "I wish I knew so that I could stop ticking her off."

"Dude," Robert directs at Jack. "Stop being overdramatic and let's get this cleaned up. You can get another plate of food from the line. It's no big deal"

"Right. I think my pants are ruined." He shovels everything back onto the tray and walks away to toss all the trash, mumbling under his breath as he goes.

"He can be petty," Robert comments as he uses all the napkins on the remaining hodgepodge of sludge.

"It's okay. I totally understand why he's upset," Kacey placates.

"That was crazy. I didn't know that kind of mess could come from one drink. It was like something knocked it over on purpose," Robert muses.

Mel glances at Kacey with a pointed look. *I guess they were right. Weird things do happen around me.*

* * *

Kacey gets up from the table to throw her trash away. It took a while to get the mess cleaned up, but it all went fine after that. Robert and Mel follow Kacey's movement.

"I'm going to go by the bookstore and pick up some Ben and Jerry's. I need some decent desert."

"Yum. That sounds like a good idea." Mel pushes her chair away and gathers her empty plates.

"I would go, but I have homework to do." Robert winces.

"I have to go change. I wonder how many people are going to stare on the way back to the dorm." Jack scans the room. He looks embarrassed and ready for a fight. "I'll see you tomorrow, Kacey. Bye, Mel." He gives a half-hearted wave and walks away.

"I'm going to go with him. I'll see you two later." Robert hurries after Jack.

"Looks like it's just us, Roomie." Mel smiles at Kacey.

"Sounds good! Let's get some ice cream."

They walk across campus to the bookstore. It's an old house on the corner that the school took over many years ago. Supposedly, an old professor and his wife left it to the college when they passed away. Kacey hasn't been in it much, but she loves this place. It has a convenience store set-up on the main floor, complete with snacks and a few groceries.

"Let's go downstairs and look around first. We can come back up and pick flavors on our way out."

"That's a plan."

The girls descend the steep narrow steps into the basement where all the other stuff is. The metal railing looks like it should be cold, but it's warm to the touch. The space has low ceilings, and wood paneling is visible behind the racks of clothing. Kacey

loves how it smells down here: old fabric and school supplies. A radio is playing a local station softly in the background.

"It feels like a hug down here," observes Kacey.

"That's a good way to describe it. I think this is one of my favorite places on campus. I wish they had a big chair in the corner I could just sit in and study all day. I would get a ton done."

"Me too!" Kacey smiles and her shoulders relax as they explore the room.

They sift through the shirts, look at the binders and pens, then settle at the poster station. Kacey picks a poster of dolphins jumping out of the water in the sunset. Mel picks a poster with Bono on it.

"I love U2."

"As much as you love the Bills?" Kacey pushes her lightly.

"Never. Nothing takes priority over the Bills." Mel giggles and gestures towards the stairs. "Let's get going so we can try to get some work done tonight."

"We probably should. I don't have that much money. If I stay here too long, I won't have any left at all."

The girls go back to the upper floor and search the freezer for their favorite flavors.

"Should we get one for Carla?" asks Kacey.

"Probably. Any idea what flavor?"

"Nope. I'm sure whatever we get...or don't get, will be wrong."

"Yep. But at least it would be a peace offering."

"Vanilla Bean?"

“That’s pretty neutral. Let’s do it.” Mel reaches into the chest and retrieves the container.

They check out and return to the dorm, talking about all the shirts and sweatshirts they plan to buy when they go back.

When they enter the room, Carla is sitting on the top bunk taking notes. Her school books are spread around her with her notebook in her lap.

“Where did you guys go?”

“The bookstore,” offers Mel. Kacey is relieved Mel is taking point on this.

“Why didn’t you ask me?”

“You weren’t at the cafeteria when we left. I looked for you.”

“You could have come back here to check. Then I could’ve gone.” Carla’s eyes shift back and forth between Kacey and Mel. She doesn’t look happy.

“Well, it was a short walk over to the bookstore and they close kind of early. We didn’t want to miss it.”

“Sure. Whatever.” She writes in her notebook for a short pause. “I feel like you two always exclude me.”

“We got you some ice cream.” Mel retrieves the bag and holds out the pint. “We didn’t want you to feel left out.”

“Is that vanilla?” Mel turns it to check the label. Carla’s snide tone confirms Kacey’s prediction. “I don’t eat vanilla.”

“Oh. Okay.” Mel’s arm drops and her shoulders slump. “We’ll just save it for later.” Kacey takes it from Mel and puts it in the dorm fridge. The little freezer inside is just big enough for a couple of ice creams and a microwave meal.

"Maybe come get me next time so I can get the flavor I want."

"Sure thing," agrees Mel. She and Kacey look at each other.

Kacey gets a couple spoons from the drawers under the fridge and hands one to Mel. They break into the pints and savor the cold treat. Kacey leaves half for later and adds it to the stash in the freezer. Mel polishes hers off after a few minutes.

"Study time," sighs Kacey. "I still have a ton to get done."

"Ditto." Mel reaches for her backpack and drags it onto her bed. Kacey gets comfy on her own bed and situates her books and binders.

The girls work silently for about an hour. Kacey is working on a rough draft for English.

"Hey, Mel?"

"Mhm?" Mel finishes a math problem and puts her calculator down next to her knee.

"Can you read this rough draft for me? I need some advice on wording."

"Sure. Come on over." She clears a side of her bed and shifts over.

Kacey gets her pencil and notebook and hops over to Mel's bed. She hits the top of her head as she bounces on the mattress to get comfortable.

"Ouch." Kacey rubs her head vigorously.

"Nice," Mel chides. The metal bed squeaks as Carla shifts on the upper bunk. *I'm sure she is rolling her eyes.*

Kacey hands her notebook to Mel for proofreading.

"Can I write on this?"

“Absolutely,” Kacey answers a bit excitedly. She’s glad to have someone to look over her work.

“SSshhhh,” Carla commands from above.

“Sorry. I’ll try to be quieter,” Kacey placates.

The scratching of Mel’s pencil makes Kacey a little nervous. She was a horrible student until a couple years ago, so she is still getting used to actually trying to do her work. She’s only had someone look at her papers a couple times. Her teachers have told her she has a talent for writing, but her grandmother always said they were just trying to get her to work harder. Kacey’s determined to do well now and show her grandmother that she was wrong all along.

“This actually looks pretty good. You need to make a few changes to your support for your argument, but it looks fine otherwise.” Mel moves the pencil over the page to illustrate where the changes need to be made.

“Excellent! Thank you. Can I stay here in case I have more questions?”

“Sure.”

“SSSHHHHHhhh.” Carla is getting aggressive about her need for silence. “I’m really trying to concentrate.”

“Okay. Sorry again,” Kacey directs up to the top bunk.

Kacey flips a few pages forward into her notebook to a blank page and writes a note to Mel.

Kacey: Thanks again!

Mel: No Problem. Glad to help.

The roommates work in silence for a while. Kacey and Mel keep writing notes back and forth as questions come up.

Mel: It would be easier to explain to you if we could talk.

Kacey: Do you think we can whisper?

Mel: Probably not.

Kacey: I don't know what I keep doing to make her so mad.

Mel: No idea. I think she is just jealous.

Kacey: I think she is just weird. I thought I was weird, but she is leaving me in the dust.

Mel: You ARE weird!

They both snicker a little too loudly and lean into each other's shoulders.

"SHHHHHHHHHhhhhh. Seriously. I need it quiet."

Mel looks up as if she can see Carla through the mattress and returns to writing in the notebook.

Mel: She is weird. Her staring is creepy. And it's annoying that we have to be silent.

Kacey: At least she isn't facing you in the morning. I hate it when she sits at her desk staring at me.

Mel: I'm not sure why she does that.

Kacey: Then she's been following me everywhere. I don't want her to go with me most of the time. I was glad she didn't go to the bookstore with us. She would've ruined it.

Mel: Probably. It was nice to go with just the two of us.

Kacey: Honestly, if I had known she was going to be like this, I wouldn't have agreed to have her room with us. I feel trapped all the time when we are all together.

Mel: I agree. She is suffocating.

Kacey: Absolutely. I'm tired of her being so cling-

Carla jumps off the top bunk startling Kacey as she writes. Kacey flips back to the essay pages. Carla glances at the notebook then looks Kacey in the eyes.

"Were you writing notes about me?" She squints as she speaks.

"We were writing questions back and forth about her essay so that we could be quiet for you," Mel defends with her agitation showing. Kacey never hears this tone from her. She didn't even know Mel could get upset.

Carla shifts her attention to Mel. "Great. Now you two are talking about me behind my back." She reaches up to the top bunk and shoves all her books into her bag. "I'm going to find somewhere else to study." The door slams behind her as she leaves the room. Kacey is sure Carla did it herself this time.

"Whew." Mel's eyebrows shoot up. "That was intense." She tucks a curl behind her ear.

"I'm not going to get on her good side, am I?" Kacey feels guilty for writing things about Carla in her notebook. They shuffle off the bed and stand up.

"Doesn't look like it." Mel shivers. "It feels like it's about thirty degrees in here." She reaches over and pulls the window shut.

It's always cold when Carla's angry. Is this another weird thing that happens around me?

"Thanks for your help with my paper. I'm going to try to get it finished up."

"Glad to help. Sorry that came out so badly. If she hadn't demanded silence, we wouldn't have been writing the notes about her." Mel looks up to the ceiling exasperated.

"No. I'm sorry. I need to just figure out how to deal with her." The room is already getting warmer. "No more notes from now on."

"I think that's an excellent idea." Mel exhales.

Kacey tears her rough draft out of the notebook and puts the notebook in the top drawer of her dresser. She uses it for journaling, so it lives with her underwear.

* * *

"Happy Saturday Morning!" Mel greets Kacey as she returns from the bathroom.

Kacey's eyes light up. Mel's smile always brightens the room. It's been a long few weeks and Kacey's ready for a break. She glances around the room for her other roommate.

"Where is Carla?"

"She decided to go get breakfast without us." Mel's matter-of-fact tone tells Kacey that she is not too broken up about Carla's early departure.

"I actually have some money this week. I got my last paycheck from my job back home. Do you want to go get some lunch today?"

"Of course! Food. Duh." Mel puts on her trademark Bills jersey and a pair of jeans. Her white turtle neck accents the logo. She rolls her hair up into a curly bun.

“Excellent. Pepperoni rolls?” Kacey’s dressed, but she runs a brush through her hair. It’s starting to get long, but it is too straight to copy Mel’s hairstyle, so she pulls it into a simple ponytail.

“I love Caz Pizza. I could eat there every day.” Mel licks her lips and goes into a dream trance.

Kacey shakes her head and laughs. She’s never known someone who likes food as much as Mel. *How does she eat like that and stay so skinny?*

“Then it’s a roommate date.” The girls high five and giggle.

“Should we invite Carla?” asks Kacey.

“She isn’t here to invite. We’ll leave her a note if we don’t see her before then.”

“Good idea.” Kacey nods. She gets a yogurt out of the fridge and retrieves a spoon from the drawer. She sits on her bed while Mel takes a seat in Carla’s desk chair.

“So. Does the saga continue? Was she there again today?”

“Carla? Yep. Staring again.” Kacey shivers. “It drives me insane.”

“I don’t blame you. How early does she get up?”

“I have no idea. She mumbled something about not being able to sleep last night, so she could have been there for hours. I’m glad I’m not a light sleeper.”

“We can change the room around. Make it so your bed isn’t right there.”

“Oh, I’m sure she will absolutely agree to that.” Kacey’s frustration shows in the sarcasm.

“Why does she have to agree?”

“Um. Because she thinks that she should have control over everything in this room, especially me.” Kacey gestures at herself with the spoon.

"You're right, honestly." Mel looks down at her hand and picks at a hang nail.

"Listen. I'm sorry I suggested that she room with us. I had no idea she was like this." Mel makes eye contact with Kacey, looking guilty and sorry at the same time.

"Hey. I agreed, didn't I? We needed the third to be able to claim the room. She didn't seem so bad at orientation," says Kacey. She loves the room. She loves that the window looks out onto the street, and it is one of the larger rooms on the floor. She couldn't imagine being in an even smaller room with Carla.

"I still feel bad."

"Don't. It is what it is. We couldn't have predicted this."

Mel walks over to the shelves and picks a bag of Chex Mix for her breakfast. Kacey adds an apple juice to her meal.

"Maybe we should go talk to Jodie?" offers Mel. "It's the R.A.'s job to help with this kind of thing."

"About what? 'Carla is staring at me and it's creepy' I'm sure that will sound mature." Mel laughs at Kacey's impression of a toddler sounding spoiled.

"Yeah. You're right. That does kind of sound like a 'she's touching me' complaint."

"Yup." Kacey throws her trash away and adds her spoon to the wash bin for later. "No one will believe me anyway. If I didn't have you here, I would just assume I'm being dramatic. My grandmother tells me I overreact all the time and that the world doesn't revolve around me."

"Does she really? Geez." Mel gives Kacey a look of compassion that she shrugs off.

“Enough of the bad stuff. What’s on your agenda today, other than our lunch plans?”

“I’m going to go play flag football in the quad. Want to join?”

“Me? Football?” Kacey is not athletic. She has traditionally been the last kid picked in gym for any team sports. “Probably not. I can watch, though.”

“Okay! Something’s better than nothing.” She pauses and puts on a mischievous expression. “Robert and Jack will be there.”

“They will?” Kacey’s heart flutters a little at the prospect of seeing Robert. “By the way, what’s up with Jack? Is he just a serious flirt?”

“He’s okay. He has been in Robert’s shadow since we were kids. He is usually second best. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride.” Mel smiles.

“Is he a nice guy? He seems like a nice guy, but something keeps nagging at me.” Kacey searches through her memories for something specific she can find for her impression.

“I dunno. He has definitely left a trail of scorned women. They never say why they don’t like him anymore.” Mel looks thoughtful. “Most of them simply stop talking to him or avoiding anywhere he is, come to think of it.”

“Interesting. He doesn’t really sound like the guy for me.”

“Honestly, and I don’t mean this in a bad way, but I was surprised he even paid attention to you. You are not his kind of girl, no offense.”

“None taken. I was shocked he knew my name,” Kacey admitted, blushing.

“I hate to say it, but I think he is only interested because he sees you as a trophy he can win before Robert does.” Mel sucks air through her teeth as she winces.

“Great. A competition,” Kacey sighs. “Wait. Is it a competition? Do I even have a chance with Robert?” she inquires, half to Mel and half to herself.

“You do,” Mel says thoughtfully. “You’re not his typical girl, but he has needed to find better matches anyways. He might be a jock, but he’s a pretty cool guy. I think you two would make a good pair.” Kacey blushes furiously at Mel’s comments.

“Let’s head to the game. It starts in about thirty minutes.” Mel pulls a hoodie over her head and picks up her room keys.

“Sounds fun. Let’s go.” Kacey grabs a Coke from the fridge and follows Mel out the door.

* * *

Kacey rounds the corner back into the room. It’s full of her friends. This is the first time she could ever think of that people wanted to be around her and talk to her.

She hops back onto her bed where Robert is sitting with his back against the wall. The twin size mattress makes a good couch with the pillows behind them. Mel and Sarah are laughing on Mel’s bed.

“Seriously. That was a crazy touchdown,” Mel says to Robert. She has to talk loudly to be heard over the radio. The door is open, but no one has complained yet.

“I know! It was supposed to be a flag football game. I wasn’t expecting that girl to tackle me,” Robert scoffs.

“That chick just wanted to get some Robert for herself.” Jack reaches from his seat at Carla’s desk and attempts to fist bump Robert, but Robert waves it away with a laugh. It’s chaotic in the small room with so many people and so much noise.

“What about Kacey’s sideline receiving?” Robert nudges Kacey in the shoulder.

“That was great!” shouts Mel. “You told me you didn’t play sports, Kacey.”

“I don’t. I can’t even tell you what kind of luck that was. I was just as shocked as you all.”

Everyone laughs loudly. Janet and Mike had tagged along after the game and were sitting in the two remaining desk chairs. It’s a full house.

Kacey has never experienced this kind of attention. She feels like the star of the show. All of her unpopular days are behind her. She looks around the room, surprised that these people want to be here, with her. She wouldn’t have had this in high school where everyone thought she was strange and unattractive. This is like waking up from a deep sleep.

Without warning, Carla rushes into the room impersonating a winter wind, destroying Kacey’s thoughts. Despite the music, dead silence consumes the room and all eyes turn to her. Mel reaches over to turn off the radio completing the effect.

“What are you all doing in here?” she demands with her hands on her hips.

Kacey and Mel look at each other. The fun is gone and the warmth has left.

“We came back after the game to hang out. I hope that is alright,” Robert offers.

“It’s not. I didn’t tell you that you could be here,” Carla decrees. They all exchange guilty glances. Carla and Kacey are about the same height, but Carla looks seven feet tall standing in the middle of the room and looking down at everyone.

“Okay. We will leave.” He shimmies off the bed and turns to Kacey and Mel.

“Thanks for having us over. It was a lot of fun.”

Mel stands and gives Robert a side hug. “Glad we got to hang out.” Robert pulls Kacey in with his other arm, hugging both girls at the same time. “Till next time.”

The others leave sullenly.

“Geez, Carla. You could have been a little nicer,” attacks Mel as soon as they are alone.

“Why do I need to be nice. You let people come into my room without my permission.”

“We share this room. We don’t need to ask your permission when you aren’t here.” Mel’s voice rises in anger.

“You do! I don’t want anyone in here at all. Especially when I’m not here.”

Kacey and Mel turn to straighten their beds and the chairs. Kacey gathers the trash to throw in the can. The tension is so heavy that Kacey feels like she has a wet blanket draped over her body. It’s almost as if the room is darker and has shrunk two sizes. The paint on the wall has dulled from light cream to gray.

“Where did you two go all day?”

“We went to the flag football game,” offers Kacey.

“Without me. Again,” Carla accuses.

“You weren’t here when we decided to go,” growls Mel.

“You are supposed to leave a note.”

Kacey stomach drops. They had talked about leaving her a note, but with the conversation about Robert and Jack, they forgot.

“We meant to leave a note. We were talking about things and left without writing it. I’m sorry.”

"I'm sure you forgot," Carla counters snidely. "You two are supposed to be MY friends. You are supposed to be MY roommates. WE are supposed to do things together, but you keep leaving me behind."

"We did," confirms Mel. "We're sorry."

"Whatever." Carla gets her bookbag and storms out of the room. "I'm going to study."

A cold wind follows her through the threshold, but Kacey catches the door before it slams. She props it open with one of the desk chairs.

"Great. She kicks all our friends out, then she leaves. Way to kill the party." Kacey observes. *Possessive much?*

"I'm sure that's exactly what she intended," agrees Mel. "I'm done with her controlling attitude."

"Same."

"Hey." Mel has a glint in her eyes. "Let's go ahead and change the room around."

"I have a feeling that would totally piss her off." Kacey is hesitant to add more to the stack of sins.

"What better time to do it. She's already angry, she can just get over both things instead of making her mad again after she calms down."

"You're probably right." Kacey sighs in resignation. "Let's do it."

The girls go to work creating a kitchen area where Kacey's bed was and moving her bed to line up with the bunks along the wall. A couple of residents stop by to watch the show. The noise of moving the furniture even attracts the R.A. to their doorway. After about an hour and a bit of chaos, the room is complete.

"You know, I actually like it this way, I think," Mel says with a bit of surprise.

"I do too. It feels like we have rooms now, instead of having all the furniture randomly tossed in. Unless she sits with her back to the desk, she shouldn't be able to stare at me now."

"And that's a good thing." Mel pats Kacey on the shoulder while brushing hair out of her eyes. The room is warm and humid, so Mel's hair is fizzing out. Kacey had long stripped her sweatshirt and is sweating profusely.

"Those dressers are heavy!"

"Absolutely. Glad I got my strength and cardio in today," jokes Mel. "Between the game and the furniture, I'm going to be buff." They both laugh.

Kacey stops laughing and straightens up. *Did the pressure in the room change?*

"What's wrong?" Mel is on full alert with wide eyes.

She isn't quite sure what got her attention, but the room suddenly turned cold, something she now totally associates with Carla. She and Mel turn towards the door, and the blood drains out of Kacey's face as she meets Carla's enraged expression. *This is not going to be good.*

Chapter Three

Kacey walks through the door with her laundry basket in hand. She grazes her knuckles once again on the door jamb as she goes through. She rolls her eyes and wonders how the machines got in the room when the door is so narrow.

This is different than the laundry room in the basement at home. That room is quiet and close and smells like her grandmother's sewing fabric and a little bit of must. This one is bigger with flickering fluorescent lights. The sounds of zippers and snaps in the dryer clang and echo off the walls. Today, most of the washers and dryers are filled and roaring, rare for a Saturday morning. Usually, everything is quiet and abandoned after a hard night of partying and drinking. Residents tend to stay in bed and sleep last night's Beast off. But for some reason, today is different.

Kacey meditates in the ritual of doing laundry. She puts in the soap, then puts in the clothes, careful to distribute them evenly, and closes the top to the washer. She places four dull quarters into the slots on the coin arm. They click into place perfectly. When she was a kid, she and her mom used to go to laundromats all the time. Kacey's favorite job was putting the quarters in and starting the machine. Her mom used to lift her up and put her right on top of the machine so she could get leverage to push the arm in. It is always a reminder to Kacey that she isn't a little girl anymore. She easily pushes the arm in as it clicks and catches in place, then it springs back hungry for more from the next student.

Kacey places her basket on the washer to claim her machine and turns around. She is startled by a shadow in the corner behind the door. It looks like a man with dark hair and coveralls when she sees him out of the corner of her eye, but when she looks

directly at the shadow, there is no way it could be a man. *Just a trick of the light.* She catches her breath, shakes her head, and walks quickly through the door, skirting wide of the area where the shadow is.

Kacey heads back up to her room. She still insists on taking the stairs up all four floors over the elevator. It is too small and jiggles as it passes the floors. It tends to hesitate and hang a bit when it finally gets up to the top, so she always feels like she is going to be trapped. She hasn't ridden it much since the first day she came to the dorm.

As she climbs the tile-covered stairs, she makes way for John carrying his bike down from the second floor. He probably stayed in Colleen's room last night because the dorms go co-ed on the weekends. She waves at him wondering why he is up so early. He usually stays snuggling with his girlfriend until at least mid-morning. It really does seem as if no one slept last night. The stairwell smells of dirty rubber from the slip grips on the stair edges. They pull at the bottom of her Keds with each step slowing her down just a bit.

As she exits the stairwell, the phone on the wall shrills loudly. Kacey has learned not to answer it unless she knows it's for her or she'll end up hunting down the L-shaped hall forever looking for the girl the caller is asking for. Nothing frustrates her more than hunting for people and having to knock on every wooden door to ask for someone she wouldn't know on sight.

She turns left at the phone, waves at Jodie in the room to the right, and turns into her room. It is open and a cold breeze flows from the window into the hall. It smells like frost, cold soda cans, and her roommate's hair. The sickly-sweet strawberry smell drives Kacey nuts. She can never escape it.

The tension has been getting out of control. Nothing has been easy since Kacey and Mel changed the room around. That was the breaking point for Carla.

“Good morning,” says Kacey.

“Mmm,” replies Carla.

“Mel and I are going to get some breakfast. Want to join?”

Carla turns around with a deadpan expression. “Now you are interested in having me join you? I don’t believe that for a minute.”

“Listen, I’m sorry about changing around the room. I don’t know what else to say.”

“It’s too late to apologize. You clearly think you are too good for me.”

“I don’t think that at all. Is there any way we can just start over and try again? I hate that we are always at each other’s throats.”

“No. There isn’t.” Carla stands up, pushing her chair under her desk. The top is completely cleared off for a change. She picks up her keys and her backpack and moves towards the door. She turns back to Kacey.

“I thought we could be friends, once. I didn’t know you were actually a mean girl.”

The room fills with a cold wind and the tree outside the room sways. The door slams as do a few more down the hall. Carla just stares icily at Kacey.

She steps back to open the door, then walks into the hall and leaves Kacey behind with her jaw hanging. Carla’s words cut through her like ice. *A mean girl. Me? No way.*

Kacey moves to close the window, noticing that the trees are completely still now. *Seriously, where did that wind come from?*

"What just happened?" asks Mel as she walks in from the hall. She puts down her shower caddy, checks her hair in the mirror, and turns to Kacey. "I heard some loud bangs."

"A wicked wind just slammed a ton of doors. Carla didn't even flinch this time."

"Nerves of steel, that one," Mel says.

"Yep. Ice cold nerves of steel."

Kacey walks over to her bed and straightens the comforter. Mel takes the slamming doors in stride, knowing that they are a common occurrence at this point.

"I tried to apologize. Again."

"How did that go?"

"The door slammed. I think that was the answer."

"Geez. I'm sorry Kacey. This got really out of hand. We should definitely talk to Jodie about it."

"She called me a mean girl." The guilt rising in Kacey's chest is overwhelming. She has always been the bullied kid. She has always been picked on. Popularity was never even an option, unless she counts how many people knew her as the town reject. High school really sucked, and she hates that she has made Carla feel that way.

"Don't listen to her. She is just lashing out," Mel consoles.

"I don't know what to do at this point."

"Really nothing you can do. We just need to ride it out. She'll eventually get over it."

"I hope so." Kacey sits on her bed hugging her Coca-Cola bear while Mel finishes getting dressed. She pulls her notebook out of her underwear drawer and journals for a

little bit. It helps to get some of the drama off her chest. It seems that when she writes it in the notebook, she can push it to the back and not overthink it. While writing, Kacey remembers that the dorm is already awake for the day.

“Hey, did you notice everyone is up early today? What did I miss? Is there something special going on? Even you are up a bit earlier than usual,” Kacey inquires.

“No idea. I couldn’t sleep. I had bad dreams all night and I kept waking up to weird sounds. When I was awake, I would hear nothing but Carla’s snoring, but every time I would fall back asleep, it was like someone was whispering in my ear. It started getting light outside, so I just went ahead and got up.”

“Okay. That’s not strange at all,” Kacey muses flatly.

“I dunno. It might just be the way the heater sounds. It’s hard getting used to a new place to live. Although, maybe the food is really as bad as I think it is and it’s giving me nightmares. What else could it be?” Mel chuckles as she digs her student ID out of her desk drawer. “Ready for breakfast?”

“Sure. Let’s do it.” Kacey returns the notebook to the dresser and pulls a tie-dyed hoodie over her head.

“Are you really going to wear shorts this morning? I think it dipped down below freezing last night.”

“Yep. I’m hanging on to the last bit of summer. It should be sunny and a little warm today, so why not? It’s still October, so there are a few warm spots left.” Kacey smiles and walks through the door to head down the stairs.

“I’m from Buffalo and I think it’s chilly. You’re a nut.” Mel shakes her head.

“Better a nut than a Bill.” Kacey play punches Mel in the arm. Mel shoves Kacey away.

On the way out of the dorm and to the cafeteria, Kacey and Mel wave at a few students going by. It’s a short walk and the weather is nice, so they take the sidewalk around the front of the buildings and into the quad. The tunnels under the buildings are pretty neat to walk in, but they are better saved for the snowy days when no one wants to be outside. Kacey and Mel don’t want to waste today’s sunshine.

The girls scan their ID cards and enter the cafeteria.

“MMMMMmmmm, those powdered eggs look yummier than usual today,” Kacey comments, noticing a worker spooning a yellow heap of fluff onto a plate.

“That’s what I was thinking. I knew we applied to the right school when that first day’s roast had the consistency of cardboard. It can’t get more gourmet than that!” joins Mel. Nearby students laugh at their humorous banter.

They pass through the line without taking any food and head into the main room.

“Cap’n Crunchberries it is!” exclaims Kacey as she walks over to the cereal bar and gets a bowl. “Who would have thought that my freshman fifteen would be in the negative category?” she shrugs.

“Not me. My mom keeps asking me if I’m eating. I can’t bring myself to tell her that I think my life is in danger when the lunch lady scoops food onto my tray.”

Kacey turns the knob on the dispenser to add some cereal to her bowl, then adds milk from the machine next to the cereals. The whole milk is from a local dairy and is absolutely delicious. She usually hates the taste of milk, but they must feed the cows good grass here. Mel chooses frosted flakes and adds a banana to the meal. They walk

their breakfast over to a round table in the corner and Kacey sits and turns sideways to put her feet up in the chair next to her. She picks up her spoon and starts dunking the sugar berries. Mel sits beside her.

Kacey startles at a light touch on her knee and looks up from her food.

“Hi Kacey!”

“Hi Jack.”

It’s weird to have boys touching her. No one has ever accused her of being remotely attractive. The college is mostly girls, but the guys are not shy to say hi, especially to Kacey. They like to touch her shoulders and back, and if she has her legs up like today, they will absolutely take advantage of the situation. It is all a new experience for her.

“Can I join you guys?” asks Jack.

“Sure.” Kacey takes her feet out of the seat as Jack attempts to pull the chair from the table.

“It’s stuck on something.” The chair makes a clinking noise as if it is caught on the foot of the table, but Kacey can’t see where it is caught.

“Geez. Are you challenged? Just put some muscle into it,” Kacey tugs on the chair and it comes right out. “That was a little too easy.”

“You have super powers.” Jack grins as he sits down.

“Absolutely, you just remember that.” Kacey notices Lydia and Jennifer watching the show from the next table. *Take a picture. It will last longer.*

“You’re missing a roommate. Where’s Robert?” Mel glances behind Jack to see if Robert is coming.

"I knocked him out and left him on the dorm room floor. I wanted to make sure I got the seat next to you." Jack smiles and winks. "Actually, he's sleeping in."

Mel rolls her eyes at the rabid flirtation. This is becoming the routine when going to the cafeteria with Kacey. Well, anywhere with Kacey, come to think of it. As if on cue, Ben and Sarah show up to the table.

"Hi Kacey. Hi Mel," says Sarah.

"Hey Sarah."

"Can we join?"

"Yep. Pick a seat," says Kacey.

The noise level in the room goes up. She had no idea she was applying to a party school when she filled out the application. She loved the location of the school and that it had an equine program, but she never knew college students could party so hard. The first couple of weekends, she hid in the dorm room when all the music and drinking began. She never partied in high school, and that hasn't changed one bit. Walking into the bathroom and realizing she had to share it with a drunk guy in the next stall was a shock. The only man she has ever been around for any period of time is her grandpa, and he wears old-man pajamas when he sleeps. She never expected to see a guy in boxers walking down the hall. So, Saturdays are usually pretty quiet because everyone is sleeping off the night before. Today is different.

"This house is rockin'," Jack says as he surveys the crowded cafeteria.

"I noticed," replies Kacey. "Why is everyone up so early anyways?" she asks as she looks around the table at everyone who has joined the group.

"I couldn't sleep," says Jack.

"Me neither," agrees Ben.

"I had super weird dreams all night," chimes in Sarah.

"Me too," says Mel. "That's what I was telling Kacey this morning."

"Wait. You all had bad dreams?" asks Kacey.

Heads nod all around in agreement.

Strange. Kacey feels something nudging the back of her mind.

"What about you, Kacey?" asks Jack.

"Honestly, I never sleep well, but I slept okay last night. I have an overactive imagination, so I usually have bad dreams all the time, ever since I was a kid."

"Really?" asks Sarah.

"Yep. What did you all dream about?" asks Kacey.

"I don't remember," says Mel. "It was mostly just shadows and bad feelings. I already told you about the whispering."

"Did you say whispering?" Ben whips his head to Mel.

"Yep. I would wake up and hear nothing, but as soon as I would fall back asleep, it would start back up." She glances to each person as she talks to the group.

They all fall silent as everyone looks at each other. The mood of agreement is overwhelming.

Just like my dreams when I was little. Not cool.

* * *

Kacey decides to walk back to the room alone after breakfast. She needs some time to figure out what she is going to do about Carla and decide if she should talk to the R.A. She really doesn't want to move out, but someone is going to have to leave to

keep the peace. Mel is an innocent bystander in this war. Kacey hates that she's getting sucked into this mess. Lost in her thoughts, Kacey takes the nearest door into the dorm. She climbs the stairs to the top floor and comes out into the hall opposite hers. She rarely comes down this hall, so she doesn't see these people too often. She tries not to be nosey when walking by open doors.

"Hey, Kacey."

She stops and backs up wondering who called her. To her right, Lydia waves from the doorway she just passed.

"We want to talk to you," Lydia says. Her roommate Jennifer is sitting on the bed in the corner. They motion for her to come into the room.

Kacey is a little suspicious at this point. She has found herself avoiding them lately. They are usually in the background, so Kacey is starting to feel like she's being followed all the time. It's almost as creepy as Carla's staring.

"Listen." The corner of Lydia's mouth turns up in a smirk and Jennifer has a twinkle in her eye. "We know your secret."

Kacey's stomach drops. *I don't exactly go around hiding secrets from everyone.* She has absolutely no idea what they are talking about, unless they're referring to her desire to chuck her roommate out a window. Robert is the only other person who has picked up on the tension between her and Carla.

"What secret?" she asks with genuine curiosity.

"You are a ghost whisperer."

Um...this is news to me. She must have looked confused.

“You can feel the ghosts, and they know who you are. AND, they are scared of you!”

Kacey feels the same nudge in the back of her mind that she did at breakfast. *Is this related to the strange things Carla always notices?* Her eyes widen. *The shadows?* Despite her connections forming, she is still skeptical. She smooths her features and narrows her eyes.

“What do you mean they know who I am? Why would they be scared of me?”

“Well, not scared of you, but they are a bit shy. Oh, and they get kind of protective.”

“What gives you that idea? Where are you coming from?” Kacey searches for reality in the conversation. “This is kind of ridiculous.”

“We told you that we dabble a bit in the witchy arts. In doing so, we come in contact with a few spirits. Some of them aren’t too happy with us, so they tend to stick around a bit to try to annoy us.”

“Okay. What does that have to do with me?” Kacey’s not sure she likes where this is going.

“You are walking ghost repellent!” Lydia declares gleefully. “Unless, of course, someone makes them mad.”

“What? Ghost repellent? You two are absolutely cracked!”

“No. Really! Whenever you walk down the hall, everything gets really quiet and still. They split when you are here. But as soon as you turn the corner, they come back.” Lydia and Jennifer trip over themselves to explain this to Kacey. She feels like an idiot with her mouth hanging open. *This IS ridiculous.*

“Wait. Is this why you two have been following me?” Kacey asks. “You have been following me, right?” Kacey confirms her suspicions.

A guilty expression crosses Lydia’s face. She glances at Jennifer who gives her a nod. “Y-yes. We wanted to make sure it was true, so we’ve been watching.”

“That explains it.” Kacey’s exasperated tone shows in her sarcasm. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

Lydia’s excitement is all over her face. Kacey can’t miss her enthusiasm.

“Yes! The first time we noticed was the library. The ghosts had been trying to get us to leave, but when you showed up, they stopped.”

Kacey thought back to the first day she met Lydia and Jennifer in the library. She had heard a room full of whispering, but it all vanished when she opened the door.

“Then, we followed you to the area outside the mailroom. It was super quiet, and everyone who headed that way would zone out and turn around. No one would go near you.” Jennifer is excited to be able to give her play-by-play. Kacey had mentioned how quiet it was near the mailroom, corroborating Jennifer’s story.

“And, we see what keeps happening in the cafeteria. It doesn’t look like they like Jack too much,” Lydia observes, watching Kacey closely.

This is too much. They have got to be making this stuff up. Kacey unwillingly recalls all the stuff that keeps happening to Robert and Jack in the cafeteria. She closes her eyes tightly. She is suddenly filled with the dread she used to experience as a little girl. The dread she had when the ghosts would come. She shakes her head and opens her eyes.

“Um...I’m going to go now. Y’all should really lay off the drugs between classes, you know.” Kacey walks backwards towards the door, pointing with her thumb over her shoulder. She moves slowly so as not to trigger an attack from the rabid witches in front of her.

Jennifer and Lydia both laugh out loud breaking the stress level in Kacey’s head. She stops, dumbfounded. “I wasn’t trying to be funny, really. This is just too strange for me to take in.” she counters.

“No! We need you! We need you to help us with something,” says Lydia. Jennifer nods her head vigorously behind Lydia’s back, looking like a crazed backup singer. Kacey really doesn’t like where this is going. She holds her breath.

“We need you to go with us. We need protection.”

“Protection? Where?” She braces herself, afraid to ask.

“The cemetery.”

Kacey finds herself in shock. *I DEFINITELY don’t like where this is going.*

Kacey is able to break away from Lydia and Jennifer just before they give her the details of their plan. She continues her journey down the hall and resolves to take a long nap to sleep off all the news. It’s bad enough to be in constant fights with Carla, but to find out that she can feel ghosts is too much. She always had her suspicions, but the adults have made sure to blame it on her imagination. Her great aunt used to call her “precocious” to explain her unusual stories. This is just one more thing to add onto the heap of crazy she has to work through.

She opens the door and walks into the room, tossing her keys onto the top of her dresser. It's a habit to leave the door open now, despite the loud music perpetually blaring from the end of the hall. *Do those girls ever get sick of the same stuff all the time?* It's better than answering every time someone knocks.

Kacey sits down on her bed to take off her shoes. She thinks about how many times she thought she had seen ghosts as a kid and even more recently since she has started college. She also connects back to all the strange things that happen around her, the things Carla has noticed. *Has it really all been true?* She wonders how many people have figured it out, and if she has just been deluding herself all along. *What if I really can feel ghosts?*

The pressure in the room shifts and the music becomes muffled for a moment. Kacey looks up to see what has changed. There, Jack stands in the doorway. Kacey hadn't realized how big he really is. He takes up most of the opening with his broad shoulders and he could easily reach up to rest his hands on the upper door jamb without needing to stretch. He blocks the light from the hall, so he is silhouetted with strange shadows cast on his face from the window in the room.

He crosses the threshold.

"Hi Kacey." He doesn't look as intimidating once inside.

"H-hi Jack." She shivers. The room isn't cold for a change, but the pressure on her skin is uncomfortable.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay. You looked kind of strange after breakfast."

“Thanks for checking on me. I’m fine. Carla and I aren’t getting along much, so I wanted some time alone.” She is trapped on the bed, weighted down by the heavy room.

“Oh. In that case,” Jack turns to close the door, “you can talk to me. I will listen to you.”

Kacey hears a click and feels her panic rising. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

He steps toward her and Kacey cranes her neck to look up. He moves a piece of hair off her face and hooks it over her ear. She hopes her fear isn’t showing in her expression.

“I want to be here for you. You can trust me.”

The room protests. The door begins gently rattling in its frame. The tree outside the room sways as if caught in a rising tornado. The window whistles with frustration.

“Uh. I’m okay. I don’t really want to talk about it.” Kacey attempts to stand, but Jack places a hand on her shoulder and sits down beside her. He places the other hand on her bare knee. Kacey looks at it wondering what she should do. She intercepts it with her own hand to keep it from moving further up her leg.

“I like you, Kacey.” Jack leans in, moving his hand from her shoulder to the back of her head. “I think we could be good together.” His lips brush Kacey’s lips. She turns away and the kiss finishes on her cheek.

Kacey bolts up from the bed, surprising Jack. He stands quickly in reply looking down at her. He uses both hands this time to hold her in place as he tries to kiss her. Kacey squirms her way out of his grip in time to avoid his contact.

“What?!” Jack is enraged. “I thought you liked me!” Kacey wonders how he got angry that fast. His mood change was too quick to track.

“Look.” Kacey has her hands up in defense as she tries to back away from him. “I think you’re a nice guy.” The door is rattling at a deafening volume, now. The whistling is a scream in Kacey’s ears.

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She hesitates, trying to avoid making him any angrier. “I just don’t think I’m the right girl for you.”

He clearly doesn’t agree. He lunges towards her and attempts to grab her again for another kiss.

Kacey hears a click from the door. It flies open, banging against the refrigerator and drawers behind it. Their heads whip to the sound.

Robert stands there with his fist raised to knock on the door. He is dumbstruck at the scene in front of him. He takes a few seconds to survey the situation.

“Kacey?” He makes eye contact with her. She tries the best look of *help me* she can manage. He picks up on it immediately and moves his gaze to Jack, dropping his fist to his side. He strengthens his stance, ready to swing.

“What are you doing?” His quiet, steady tone is terrifying. Jack steps away from Kacey, dropping his arms to his side. He shifts from foot to foot and puts his hands in his pockets.

“Kacey wanted someone to talk to. I was telling her that she could talk to me,” he offers.

"I bet you were." The loathing on Robert's face is blinding. "I think you should leave," he growls.

Jack glances at Kacey looking for defense. "Kacey? Tell him." She gives none in reply. Time is suspended as he realizes she is not going to speak. Betrayal crosses his face.

"I see how it is," Jack breathes. "You're right." He sneers. "You are beneath me." His eyes travel up and down her body in disgust. Kacey crosses her arms and hunches her shoulders at his scorn.

"Get out. Now!" Robert commands.

"Sheesh. Whatever." Jack brushes past Robert, shouldering him on the way out. Robert stands his ground, taking the charge.

The hall lights flicker as Jack's footsteps fade. The whistling from the window has stopped and the trees outside are still. Kacey stands in silence rubbing her arms. Robert's gaze is fire on her skin.

"Are you alright?" He speaks gently to her.

She glances up into his compassionate eyes, too ashamed to speak.

"Did he do anything?"

She shakes her head.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner. You looked like you needed to be alone after breakfast, so I didn't want to bother you. I called to you in the quad on my way to the cafeteria, but you didn't answer."

"He wasn't here long. You came just in time."

"I'm glad I changed my mind and decided to check on you."

Kacey nods in a haze. *Did that really just happen?*

"Thank you." Kacey shivers with her nightmare thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry he did that."

"It's not your fault." Kacey moves to the bed and sits. She pulls her legs to her chest and rests her chin on her knees. She feels tiny and fragile. "I think I need a nap."

"I'm sure you do. Are you going to be okay?"

"No idea. That was horrible. I had no idea he would do that."

"I can stay here and play guard while you nap." Robert displays a hesitant crooked smile, making him look like a boy rather than a college freshman.

Kacey contemplates his offer. *What if he is just like Jack?* She takes a moment to glance around the room. When Carla is there, the room is cold. When Jack was there, the pressure was immense. Right now, with Robert in the room, it is warm and calming. If this is all connected to her ghosts, then maybe she can trust Robert.

"Will you?" she asks hesitantly. She doesn't want him to think she's a baby.

"Yep. I will put my chair right here in front of the open door so no one can shut it on you." He slides a desk chair to keep the door propped open and sits back in the chair. He rests his ankle on his knee and puts his hands behind his head, impersonating a relaxed bouncer.

"That could work." Kacey softly laughs. She really does like Robert.

"What do you think Jack is going to do?" she asks.

He pauses to think. "Well," he starts gently, "he tends to be kind of possessive. If he can't have you, then he may try to interfere in other things."

“Great.” Kacey bites her bottom lip and rests her forehead on her knees. She hesitates to ask, but curiosity gets the better of her. “Why are you friends with him, Robert?” Her voice is muffled by her lap.

“Ugh,” he sighs. “We have been friends since we were kids because our parents are close. He’s practically my brother.” He rolls his eyes. “He can be a nice guy.”

“Sure.” Kacey glances at the ceiling trying to hold tears back. “He was a total nice guy just now.”

“No, really. He has helped me out of some tight spots. He would stick up for me when we were younger because I would get bullied a lot. He’s been my best friend for as long as I can remember, and I can always count on him.”

“That doesn’t sound like the person you just chased out of here.”

“Yeah. I didn’t know that about him. I had my suspicions, but I wasn’t sure. I didn’t want to know it, to be honest.”

“Suspicions?”

“He has left a trail of destruction with most of the girls in our hometown. They don’t want anything to do with him, but I didn’t really know why until today.” He crosses his arms and glances into the hall.

“How did you not know?”

“The girls don’t talk, and neither does he.” Robert shrugs and loosens a hand to pick imaginary lint off his pants. “I don’t ask.” He grimaces.

Silence hangs in the room. For once, the music at the end of the hall has stopped, and the hum of the heating system vibrates through the floor and walls.

"I've always admired him for not bragging." Robert sucks on his teeth as he digests what he witnessed. "A lot of guys brag when they get the girl. He never has." He pauses in thought. "Now I know why he doesn't." Expressions of fury and disgust mingle across his face.

"What are you going to do now?" inquires Kacey.

"He will have to move out of the room. I refuse to have that around me." Robert's eyes glint in the afternoon light. "He's lucky I don't kick his ass."

He probably needs it.

"I have to figure out how to explain this to my parents." He brushes at another piece of imaginary lint of his pants. "I wonder what his parents will say."

"I'm sorry." Kacey mumbles.

"Listen. That part's for me to figure out. You need to rest. I will be here until Mel or Carla gets back." He rocks the chair onto two legs. "No one is getting past me." His smile brightens his features and makes Kacey's heart swell.

"Thank you, again." She lies down on her side, resting her head on the pillow. Robert stands up to move a blanket from the foot of the bed to cover her. She turns to him and smiles.

She drifts off, dreaming of her childhood ghosts: the good, and the bad.

* * *

"What are you doing here?" Carla interrogates Robert with a venomous tone.

Carla's anger jolts Kacey out of sleep. Her body is heavy and her eyes are stuck shut. She is absolutely exhausted. Her dreams are fading quickly as she listens to the exchange.

Shhhh. Kacey is sleeping,” Robert whispers.

“Hi, Robert,” Mel says quietly.

“Hi, Mel.”

Carla tosses her keys onto her desk. Kacey hopes no one saw her jump at the harsh sound.

“I told you that you can’t be in here.” Carla’s volume hurts Kacey’s ears.

“What are you doing here, Robert? You look like you’re guarding the place.” Mel gives a half smile and puffs out her chest.

“I sort of am.” He blushes and rubs his palms on his knees. “But, it’s for Kacey to tell you about.”

“What do you mean?”

“She had a run-in with Jack.” He grits his teeth and looks away ashamed. “He wasn’t polite.”

“Uh-oh. That doesn’t sound good.”

“It wasn’t.” Robert stands up and shakes his legs out. He has been there over an hour.

“Well, sounds like Kacey got exactly what she asked for. Maybe Jack will stop flirting with her now.” Carla’s icy tone takes over the room. Kacey is awake now, listening to the exchange, but no one has noticed. She’s frozen as she hears Carla’s declaration. Guilt floods her mind.

Robert and Mel turn to stare at Carla in disbelief. The silence is oppressive. Carla returns their stares without concern. Robert shakes his head as if clearing his thoughts.

"I'm going to head out. I need to talk to Jack." He gives Mel a quick hug. He leans over and brushes his hand over the blanket covering Kacey's shoulder. His exhaled breath speaks compassion.

"Bye," says Mel.

Once Robert is down the hall, Mel rounds on Carla. She talks quietly, trying not to wake Kacey. "Why would you say something like that?"

"What? He's not supposed to be here. What else would I say?" Carla's voice can be heard well into the hallway.

"No. About Kacey getting what she asked for. How can you say something like that? No one deserves that." The shock in Mel's voice should have stopped Carla in her tracks.

"She does deserve it. Every mean girl does."

"She told me you called her that. She really isn't." Mel's shoulders drop.

"She is. And so are you." Carla doesn't notice Mel's jaw dropping.

"I think you need to look in the mirror. She hasn't done anything to you and all she wants is to get along." Mel's frustration is growing and so is her volume.

"She has a strange way of showing it. You at least play at being nice. She does nothing to include me." A couple students walk by the open door and glance in, curious of the argument.

"I think you need to look around more."

"I don't need to. I know exactly the kind of person she is." Carla points at Kacey in the bed. She's furious now.

"Listen." Mel releases a long exhale. "This is not going to work. We need to talk to the R.A. We can't continue to be at each other's throats, especially if you aren't even going to give her a chance." Mel's resigned posture lets Kacey know that the conversation is over.

"Sure. Whatever." Carla picks up her backpack and pulls her keys off her desk. "I'm going to go find somewhere else to hang out. I can't stand being here with you two."

Carla blows through the door. The lights flicker as she walks away, creating a strobe effect in the room. Clouds have moved in and it looks like it is going to storm outside. Kacey sits up in her bed and reaches to turn on her bedside lamp to counteract the growing darkness.

"I'm sorry." Kacey whispers faintly.

Mel jumps a bit and whips her head to Kacey. She had been staring out the door at nothing.

"What are you sorry for?" She sits on the bed and gives Kacey a strong hug. "Are you okay?" She leans back to look Kacey in the eye.

"I'm fine. I'm sorry to cause all this trouble with Carla. Robert stayed in case Jack came back. I should have just told him to leave." The weight of what happened sets in and Kacey fights rising tears. *Everything has gone all wrong.*

"I'm glad he stayed. Don't be sorry about that. And Carla has a warped sense of reality that you can't do anything to fix." Mel reaches around and hugs Kacey again, rocking just a little. "She's crazy."

Kacey smiles and sinks into the hug. She tells Mel about Jack. Mel nods in all the right places and listens intently to what Kacey says. Kacey's never had a close friend she can talk to. She likes this. She feels safe for a change.

"How did Robert get in the room?"

"One of those strange things happened." She reaches up to brush her tears from under her eyes. "The door swung open, and there he was, getting ready to knock." Kacey recalls the look on his face when he saw them. She was ashamed he had to see that.

"Crazy. That's the first time the door has opened." Mel smiles at Kacey and winks. "Good thing." She gives one more quick hug and stands up.

"Just in the nick of time." Kacey muses. She tentatively reaches out with her thoughts. *Thanks, Ghosts. I don't know what I would have done without you.*

A scent of honeysuckle fills the air.

Chapter Four

Kacey had vivid dreams all night, but she slept really well for the first time in a while. She stretches and pries her eyes open despite wanting to crawl back under the covers. She rubs her face and surveys the room. It's chilly, but the room isn't the brand of cold Kacey has grown to realize is Carla's energy. It is the chill of fall, and smells like dried leaves. It's comfortable, and the sun streaming through the window is warm.

As she sits up, she realizes that Carla's bed is still made. *Did she even come back yesterday?* Mel is asleep, so Kacey gets out of bed and quietly heads to the bathroom to take a shower. She wanted to take one last night, but she was so exhausted from everything that happened that she just crashed and went to sleep early. Kacey and Mel talked for a while about what they were going to do, but nothing seemed to have an easy solution. Either they are going to need to move out, or Carla is.

Kacey enters the bathroom at the same time Lydia comes in from the opposite door. *Great. Just who I need to see right now.*

"Hi, Kacey." Lydia smiles and waves.

"Good morning." Kacey feigns a smile, but she doesn't feel quite up to committing fully. She walks by to pick a shower stall.

"You okay? I heard what happened with Jack. That's a bummer."

Kacey freezes in her tracks and turns back to Lydia.

"What did you say? You heard about Jack?"

"Yep. I'm so sorry. It looked like he was interested in you, so I had no idea he would turn you down."

Kacey's mind is reeling. "Turn me down? Where did you hear that?"

“We were all at Caz Pizza last night hanging out. He told everyone that you had tried to kiss him, and when he told you that he didn’t want to go that far yet, you got super angry and blew up at him.”

All Kacey could do was stare at Lydia with her mouth hanging open.

“Then he said that you tried to kiss him one more time, and that was when he told you that he didn’t think he was the right guy for you and that he didn’t want to go out with you.”

“Did he?” Kacey searches her memory to confirm that she hadn’t made it all up in her head.

“He said that he never knew you had that kind of aggression inside, and he never thought you would try so hard to get him to like you.”

“That is not how it went,” Kacey mumbles.

“He also told everyone that you convinced Robert that Jack attacked you instead of the other way around.” Kacey is getting a bit dizzy now. “He said that you tricked Robert into staying in your room while you played the victim.”

“He had everyone on the edge of their seats with his story. No one could believe it until Carla said that you really were a mean girl and that you were super good at hiding it.”

Kacey’s stomach sank. “Carla was there?” She didn’t think it could get any worse.

“Yep,” Lydia continues. “She and Jack were eating together when Jennifer and I walked in, then it was like a campus announcement went out somehow and the place

filled up. It stormed really badly, so people were running in off the street to stay dry. The restaurant was hoppin' and Jack and Carla put on a show!"

"Great." Kacey turns back to the door, trying not to faint.

"I thought you were going to take a shower?"

"I was. Now I'm going to find a hole to crawl into." The door swings shut behind Kacey.

She walks back into the room, puts down her caddy, and crawls under the covers. There's no holding back her tears now. Everything comes crashing down and she begins to bawl. Loudly.

Mel sits up in bed to the sound of Kacey's crying. She rubs her eyes to make sure no one is there attacking anyone.

"Kacey. Are you okay?"

"No." Kacey's reply is muffled by the blankets.

"What happened? Did you have a bad dream?"

"I wish." She takes the covers off her head and sits up. Her eyes are already puffy and she is hiccupping with siffles. "Jack and Carla spread a story about what happened yesterday."

"What? When?"

"They went to Caz Pizza last night and told anyone who would listen that I came onto Jack and tried to seduce him. Then Carla followed up with her 'mean girl' thing."

"Geez. Are you sure?"

"Yep. I just heard the whole thing from Lydia."

"That's not good."

"You are telling me."

They sit in shocked silence for a few minutes.

"I don't know what to do, Mel," Kacey breaks the silence.

"Me neither. Now we do need to go talk to Jodie so that you can get this all straightened out."

"No one is going to believe me."

"I believe you." Kacey hesitantly gives Mel a half smile. She's glad she has one roommate she can count on.

"Let's skip the cafeteria today and go out to the lake. We can pick up something at the sub shop on the way and have a mini picnic. How does that sound?"

"I guess that works." Kacey shrugs. "That would help to avoid the crowd for a while. I am sure I am the talk of the town."

"Let's do it. Maybe it will blow over by the end of the day."

"I seriously hope so."

They gather their beauty supplies and go to the bathrooms to get ready. Lydia is gone when they get inside, and no one else comes in. They have the bathroom all to themselves.

"Did Carla come back yesterday?" asks Kacey.

"Not that I know of."

"Did you go out at all? I was out cold."

"Nope. I just stayed in the room with you. I didn't feel like you needed to be alone."

"Thank you. I really appreciate that." Kacey smiles at Mel. "I'm so glad you and Robert were there."

"Of course." Mel smiles back and pushes Kacey in the shoulder.

"I wonder where she stayed."

"No idea. I didn't know she had any friends."

"Me neither. She has one now, though. Jack."

"I've been thinking about that. What were they doing together at Caz Pizza?"

"I wish I knew. I would not have put those two together in any context."

"Ditto. I guess we will find out soon."

"Robert told me that Jack can be petty and possessive. Do you think that, too?"

Kacey asks Mel.

"Honestly, yes." Mel thinks for a moment. "I can't tell you anything specific, but I would absolutely tell you that he can be."

"Great. I'm sure he and Carla make a perfect team then. I'm a little worried about what they're cooking up."

"It sounds like their plan is already in motion. I hope this isn't too wild of a ride."

"Me too."

* * *

Mel and Kacey have a full day at the lake. The weather was a bit cool, but the breeze is nice. They enjoy a picnic lunch and sunbathe for a bit.

"This sunshine feels perfect! I needed this. It's like my battery is getting recharged." Kacey smiles and releases a big sigh.

"You've got that right. I could stay like this forever."

"Ditto."

"However, we both have homework to do, and we probably need to head back to talk to the people in charge."

"I know." Kacey sits up. "We need to do it."

"Alright. Let's go ahead and get back to the dorm."

They gather their stuff and throw their trash away. They have been there for a few hours, but the park has stayed pretty vacant. It's usually busy on the weekends, especially when the weather is so perfect, but Kacey is glad there weren't too many students there today. She needed a chance to relax away from the drama.

"I have to stop by the bookstore for a minute on the way back," Mel says. "Are you okay without me once we get closer to the dorm?" She gives Kacey a sympathetic look.

"Sure. I'm fine," Kacey reassures her. "I'm sure nothing too big can happen in that short a time."

"Probably." Mel smiles and picks up the last towel.

Once back at campus, Mel splits off and leaves Kacey by herself. Kacey takes a big breath and opens one of the heavy double doors to the dorm.

She walks in and can feel something is off right away. It's as if someone is pumping white noise through the speakers, but only at the most minimal level to be heard. She also feels as if she has just entered a high-pressure system. Her head and body feel submerged in a deep pool. She knows this feeling, and it isn't good.

As she crosses the lobby, she sees one of the guys that lives on the main floor hanging in the hallway to her left. He is leaning with his shoulder against the corner of

the wall and his arms crossed. He is looking right at her. Kacey always gets stared at, but this is a bit obvious and excessive, even for her. He's probably heard the rumors.

Entering the hall to the right, she heads straight to the stairs. As she passes the first room, she notices a piece of paper taped to the door. It looks like a dorm notice, so she walks right past. As she passes the second door, she takes a quick glance at the paper. It looks more like a photocopied piece of notebook paper. That's not a normal notice. Her eyebrows crinkle together in thought.

She enters the stairwell and begins her long climb up the stairs to the top floor. Some days, she really does consider taking the elevator. The stuff in her arms is getting heavier as the pressure continues.

As she turns on the landing to the next floor, she sees another paper taped to the wall and freezes. It looks too familiar. She suddenly gets that feeling where her belly button gets sucked to her spine and all of her breath leaves her body. *No!*

She steps forward and rips the paper off the wall and frantically skims it. This isn't just some piece of paper, this is a page out of her personal notebook, her journal.

"What the hell?!?!" The stairwell echoes with her voice. *Time to panic!*

This is directly out of the notebook she keeps in her underwear drawer. HER UNDERWEAR DRAWER!

Who would go through my private stuff? She has a very good idea who would do such a thing without shame.

She speeds up to get to her room. She needs to check her drawer and see if her notebook is still there. She needs to know what else was copied out.

If she is being honest with herself, she has to admit it's her own damn fault. When she and Mel wrote those notes that night, Kacey never thought to tear the pages out. It wouldn't matter anyway because most of the journal is about how much she can't stand Carla right now. Every page is incriminating. She never dreamed Carla would go through her stuff.

Clearly, Carla is taking revenge. This must be part of her plan. Karma's a bitch, and she has Kacey in her sights. *Ugh.*

Kasey exits the stairs, and heads towards her room. The R.A. steps out and in Kacey's way. *Dammit!*

"Kacey."

"What?!" she asks. Her tone and volume are a bit too elevated.

"We need to talk," Jodie says. She is unflinching in her gaze and shows no warmth towards Kacey. *Well, this isn't going to go well.*

"Listen. I really just need to head to my room, can we talk later?"

"Nope. You have totally violated the Code of Conduct, so we need to talk consequences. We can do that in my room. Come on," says Jodie.

Kacey drops her shoulders and follows Jodie into the room, looking at the top of her shoes as she goes. She really doesn't need this right now.

"What kind of conduct have I violated, Jodie? I haven't done anything!"

"Have you seen the papers on everyone's doors?"

"Yes," replies Kacey.

"Well, I am sure you recognize where it is from."

“YES!!! MY JOURNAL. Why are you talking to me?! Why aren’t you talking to the person who stole my journal out of my underwear drawer and talk to them?! Why am I in trouble?! I have been violated!”

“Well. Yes. We will talk to that person,” she says. “However, you are the one who wrote about her. It looks as if you are writing notes with someone. Did you write to Mel?”

“Yes,” admits Kacey.

“Was Carla in the room while you were ‘talking’ behind her back?”

“Yes,” admits Kacey again.

“Well, that is why you are in trouble,” states Jodie. “Carla always comes to me and tells me how cold you are to her. You are disrespectful and rude.” Kacey had no idea that Carla has been talking to the R.A. all along. *Seems she’s been sneaking around and laying her plan for a while.*

“What about HER?! She invaded my privacy, copied the page without my permission, and then taped it up all over the building for everyone to see!”

Jodie looks at her unsympathetically.

“What I did was private. What she did was public. I don’t understand why I am the one in trouble. Now I’m humiliated!

The lights in the hall flicker for just a moment and dim. The movement of a shadow near the door catches Kacey’s eye. *Not now*, she thinks as she glances away from Jodie.

I just want to go back to my room. Quite frankly, this is more than I can handle at the moment. Carla has been a creep since day three, but you know nothing about what’s been going on. I don’t know why you are taking her side without asking mine.”

"I don't take sides," says Jodie.

"Bullshit," retaliates Kacey. "I'm going."

"We'll talk later about what is going to happen." Jodie's words follow Kacey out the door.

Kacey walks the twenty feet down the hall. Just as she puts her hand on the doorknob to her room, the lights flicker again with an added buzz for emphasis. "Stop it," she says under her breath. She turns the knob and opens the door.

All of Carla's things are gone. The bare mattress paired with the empty open wardrobe confirm that she isn't coming back. Kacey is first filled with shock, then relief.

"What happened?" Mel steps in behind Kacey. "I heard you yelling at Jodie."

Mel freezes and lets out a low whistle. "Geez."

"Looks like she is gone." All Kacey can do is stare.

"Well, at least we didn't have to kick her out."

Kacey tosses the stuff from the lake onto her bed, then hands the copy of the journal entry to Mel. "This should look familiar."

"What is this?" Mel's eyes widen as she reads over the words. "Is this the note we wrote that night we were studying?" she asks.

"Yup. Sure is." Kacey slumps onto the bed.

"Where did she get this?"

"I keep the notebook in my underwear drawer. I never thought to take the pages out, and I never thought she would go through my stuff." Kacey feels guilty Mel has been roped into the drama.

"Proof Kacey is a mean girl," Mel reads the handwritten title at the top of the page.

"Kind of hard to deny it's mine at this point," Kacey sighs. "I'm glad she doesn't mention that you are the other person in the conversation."

"Me too, honestly." Mel crumples the paper into a tight ball and tosses it in the trash can. "I'm sorry, Kacey."

"Don't be. You didn't do this. I did." Tears flow down Kacey's cheeks. She can feel them dripping off her chin. "I'm sorry, Mel."

* * *

When Kacey enters the cafeteria for breakfast, everyone stops talking and all heads swivel her way. The silence is confirmation about whether or not everyone believes Carla and Jack's story. Kacey walks over to the cereal station and gathers her customary meal. She sits at a table in the corner opposite all the food lines. The last thing she needs is to hear the gossip from students waiting to get food. Maybe she can disappear among the curtains at this end of the room.

This reminds her so much of how miserable she was in high school. She usually sat alone and would often hear students talk about her at the neighboring tables. They would talk about the fact that she was strange because she lived with her grandparents. They would laugh because her mother abandoned her and didn't want her. If her mother didn't want her, why would they. She hated high school, and she thought that was all behind her. *I guess I'm just too strange after all.*

She buries herself in her memories and sorrows until she feels someone staring at her. She looks up before she realizes what she is doing to find Carla's eyes burrowing into her from the center of the room. She is clearly taking joy in Kacey's

misery, sitting with Jack, Sarah, and Ben. How easy it was for Carla to take over Kacey's existence. *This is too much.*

Kacey stands, gathering her dishes and trash. On her way over to the kitchen, she bumps into someone, but doesn't look up. "Sorry." No one replies, but Kacey doesn't care. She prefers silence to what people could say.

She turns from the kitchen and realizes that she had bumped into Robert walking towards the center table. She expects him to pass it, but instead, he sits down. Right next to Jack. Jack reaches over and pats Robert on the back. Robert smiles and digs his fork into his food. Kacey's heart breaks and she leaves with tears in her eyes. *How did it all go wrong so fast?*

She enters the English classroom early and sits in the back row. It's her usual seat. She and Robert picked seats beside each other the first day. It has become routine to meet for breakfast and then walk to class. *Doesn't look like that will be happening anymore.*

The classroom slowly fills until Robert is the last to arrive. Unsurprisingly, all the desks around Kacey remain empty. Robert glances quickly in Kacey's direction, then averts his eyes and takes a seat on the opposite side of the room. He doesn't make any move to look her way. *Just like that, I'm discarded.*

She was foolish to think a guy like Robert would ever consider her worthy. It was ridiculous to believe she could ever be popular, or simply liked. It's just like high school all over again, and she has had enough for now.

Kacey gets up just as Professor Meyers is beginning class, and she walks out without looking back.

* * *

Kacey finds herself on a bench in the gazebo near the lake. A light breeze whistles through the branches on the trees. She can hear fallen leaves skittering on the boat ramp as they roll into the lake. She doesn't hear Lydia walk up behind her until her footsteps echo on the wooden planks of the gazebo deck.

Not now. Kacey stiffens as Lydia takes the seat beside her.

"Are you okay? It looked kind of rough in the cafeteria."

"Not really." Lydia is not the person Kacey wants to confide in right now.

"I'm so sorry." Lydia turns towards Kacey to look her in the eyes. "I want to let you know that I don't believe the stories they have been spreading."

Kacey looks up, noticing again the hazel color of Lydia's eyes. She looks genuinely concerned for Kacey.

"You don't?"

"No. I saw your reaction the other day. That doesn't come from a person who is as mean as Carla says. And I've known Jack a long time. He does not have a good reputation with the girls. I'm sure he was the one who came on to you."

"Okay. So, why are you telling me this.?"

"You are not alone right now. Jennifer and I are here for you. We will support you through all this."

"Why would you do that for me? You barely know me."

"We know that the ghosts trust you, so we do too."

There it is. Kacey knew there had to be a reason. But at this moment, some friends are better than no friends, and it is tempting to see where all this ghost stuff is going.

“So, you want to be my friends? Even though I leave destruction wherever I go?”

“Absolutely. And we want to help you discover your spirit power.” Lydia smiles broadly perched on the edge of the bench.

“Sure. How do you plan to do that?” Kacey cringes at the thought.

“We can start tonight, if you are up for it.” Lydia looks as if she is holding her breath.

“Tonight? How? Where?” Kacey surveys the lakefront wondering if she is making a huge mistake.

“The cemetery we told you about has been challenging to get into. The ghosts keep repelling us.”

“So, you want me to go with you to see if I can repel them.”

“Exactly! Then, we can see how powerful you are and if our theories are correct.” Lydia is getting giddy with the prospect. Her giddiness makes Kacey nervous.

I have to know. I have to know if it is real.

“Okay. I agree. When and where do we meet?”

“Perfect! Ten o’clock. We’ll meet by the bookstore and go from there.”

“See you then,” Kacey says.

* * *

Kacey is on the sidewalk when Jennifer and Lydia approach. She hates coming out after dark. She loves the town, but it gives her the creeps at night. She's rarely out when the sun goes down.

Jennifer loops her arm in Kacey's and they start walking. "So, you ready?"

"I'm not quite sure what I'm supposed to be ready for, but I guess so?" She replies.

A breeze starts up as they wander up the street. Kacey always feels like she is being watched and followed when she walks through the town. It intensifies at night. The pressure is uncomfortable.

The cemetery is a few blocks away, but Kacey gets the impression she is about to take a long journey. The animals are silent. Usually, frogs and birds sing and talk, even at night, but they are quiet now. The wind in the trees seems to be picking up.

As they get closer, Kacey gets more and more apprehensive. She wants to know the truth. She wants to know if it has all been her imagination her entire life. *But do I really want to know? What happens after this?*

The girls turn the corner, following the sidewalk along the fence. The shadows of the tombstones stretch long across the ground with the rising full moon. They flicker and undulate a bit with the branches of the trees swaying in the light behind them.

"They're getting mad again," says Lydia.

"I hate this part," complains Jennifer.

"What part?" Kacey asks. She surveys the scene and its growing chaos.

"They don't like us near the graves. If we go in the fence, they get very aggressive."

As she speaks, the wind picks up even more. The leaves in the trees are no longer rustling, they are howling. Kacey wants to go back to her room. *I'm a little too chicken for this kind of ghost drama!* This reminds her of being a kid and getting chased into her mother's room by a ghost bully. She doesn't want to remember that time, when she was alone with no one to help her. She doesn't want to do this all again.

Jennifer stops. "It's all you from here," she says.

"What? What do I do now?" Kacey asks. She feels almost terrified at this point. She desperately needs an out. She looks around as if she will be rescued any moment, like Robert saved her from Jack.

"You go through the gate. If what we believe is true, you should be just fine," Lydia says. That sparkle is in her eyes again.

I think I made a bad decision coming here.

Kacey takes a deep breath and realizes she has to do this. She has to find out.

"Okay..." She turns to the gate, barely able to see through her whipping hair. Jennifer and Lydia back up just a little and stand in the gutter. Kacey is alone on the sidewalk now. *Well, here goes.*

She has no idea if the ghosts can hear what is in her head, but she figures it's worth a try. *I promise I mean you no harm. I'm not sure what these chicks want from me, but I don't intend to hurt anyone, or anything.*

She fiddles with the latch, releasing the gate to swing open in the wind. She inhales deeply, holds her breath, and walks through. She ascends the small hill, slipping on dried leaves, and stops near the top. Her hair settles onto her shoulders.

The world instantly becomes silent and peaceful. The trees have stopped swaying and the wind is gone, replaced by a gentle breeze. A couple birds chirp, but they are in the highest boughs of the trees. Kacey feels like she is being watched. If she didn't know better, she would think someone is just about to put their hand on her shoulder, but she feels safe.

As she turns around, she sees it. In the road, the wind is still whipping at Jennifer's and Lydia's hair covering their faces. All she can see is their Cheshire grins.

I think I just became their new best friend.

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