

The Beginning

Chapter 1

Dylan

I smiled the whole way home.

I was never out this late on any night, much less a school night, but this night was special. Remembered to turn the headlights off before pulling into the driveway. Instead of throwing the car door closed behind me, I eased it shut until I heard the soft click of the latch. Took both my hands to steady the key going in the lock. Twisting the doorknob, I opened it. Went five inches in and heard the hinges squeak. *Why didn't I fix that last weekend*, I thought. The infomercial of some old man selling vacuum cleaners blared from the television. Hoping it would drown out my pounding heartbeat, I headed for the stairs.

"Dylan..." A low and disoriented voice yawned out from a dark corner. I jumped, took me by surprise. I instantly thought, *MOM*, and envisioned the remainder of my senior year extinct.

"Crap," I murmured.

I walked over to the table lamp and turned the light on—ready to take my punishment. Saw my little brother Dalton squinting his eyes, steadily rubbing the rheum from the corners. Must have fallen asleep on the couch like always trying to watch late night horror movies. He looked down at his watch.

"Dylan...Dylan...it's 3:23 in the morning...what...I mean, ugh...do Mom and Dad know you're out this late?" he asked, still rubbing his eyes.

I sighed and released the tension that had built up in my shoulders. Relief relaxed me. It would have been an ugly night had it been one of my parents on the couch instead of my brother. I walked over and took a seat next to him patting the top of his head.

"What Mom and Dad don't know won't kill them, but you on the other hand—"

"Don't worry Dylan, I won't say a word."

"C'mon," I stood up. "Let's clean up down here and get to bed, we got school in the morning."

We took a few minutes to straighten the place up. Folded the blankets, fixed the pillows, picked up the empty chip bags and moved the table back. Dalton hit the power button and turned off the creepy guy on the T.V. I hit the light switch and we both walked upstairs.

"Goodnight little brother," I said. He nodded and walked to his room. "Dalton," I whispered. He turned around and I put my finger to my lips.

"Got'cha Dylan, not a word," he whispered and walked into his room.

I went into my room and started to gather my things for a shower. I made it all the way to the bathroom door and stopped. I didn't have much experience sneaking in the house but I was sure the running water from the shower would wake my parents. I could

hear Mom now, *“Dylan what are you doing showering at this hour?”* and then that will be followed by a thousand other questions. I walked back to my room, stripped down to my boxers, hopped into the bed, and forced myself to sleep.

The sunlight started to escape through the blinds repelling the darkness in my room and replacing it with brightness and warmth. As it tickled my face and feet, the rising sun began to ask me politely to wake up. I could tell it was six in the morning because the annoying sound of my alarm clock went off at the same time Monday through Friday.

Rolled over to confirm the time, hoping I was dreaming. Yep. It was six o'clock and time to get my day started. I yawned so hard as if I hadn't slept in days. Was still tired from earlier this morning but couldn't let that show when my parents saw me. For all they knew I was in bed and asleep at 10:30 last night. I hit the snooze button, drifted to the window directly to the right of my bed and pulled the curtains to the side.

“Hello New York,” I joked in my radio personality voice. “That’s right. It’s me, Dylan Perry, checking in with you guys all the way from the eight-five-four. That’s the beautiful city of Poughkeepsie for all you foreigners out there.”

I took a moment to enjoy the fresh morning air. Gave a big smile to the neighbors who were always up this early on their porch drinking coffee and reading the paper. They gave me this funny glare, then I realized that I was standing in the window with nothing but underwear, so I immediately closed it. Struggling to place one foot in front of the other, I walked out my room to the bathroom. At the same time, Dalton was exiting his room headed in the same direction.

“Have fun last night?” He laughed and pointed at me.

“Quiet, Dalton. You know how much trouble I would get into if Mom, or Dad particularly, found out I came in that late,” I said under my breath, looking over my shoulder.

“Yes I know Dylan. You know I won't say a word. I'll let you go ahead and take a shower and get ready in here. I'll go use Mom and Dad's bathroom.”

“Thanks, little brother,” I said, walking by giving him a fist bump and shuffling his messy Mohawk even more.

He was right. I knew he wouldn't say anything. We had a good brotherly bond. I've always tried my best to be an example and lead him down the right path. I remember back when I was younger and for every holiday and birthday, I would ask not for a sister, but a little brother. At the age of six, my wish was granted.

I showered, brushed my teeth, conditioned my curly locks of brown and blonde hair, then went back to my room and picked out an outfit. I went with some cargo shorts and a black fitted V-neck. After I got dressed, I went downstairs to greet my parents and took a seat at the table where my dad and brother were already seated.

“Eggs, bacon, and biscuit for you honey. A Strawberry smoothie, banana, and yogurt for you Dylan, and cereal, toast with jelly, and orange juice for my little man,” Mom said to us.

“Thank you,” Dalton and I said in unison.

I finished my meal before Dad had a chance to realize there was food on the table. I tried to signal to Dalton to eat faster before the interrogation started.

“Have you decided which college you are going to attend in the fall, son?” Dad said, holding the morning paper in front of his face.

“What about a major?” Mom chimed. The very conversation I was trying to avoid. The same routine every day; we all sit, eat, and discuss Dylan’s future. I got irritated every time they wanted to play twenty-one questions.

“I’ve decided Florida State University,” I said. Mom’s pale white skin started to glow with joy.

“I didn’t even know you applied to that school Dylan,” she said with hidden excitement. She tried to hide her pearly white teeth. Her mouth was tight itching to smile. “Son I’m so proud...”

Before she could finish her sentence, “Psych,” rolled out my mouth.

The look of disappointment took over her face when I said that as if I crushed her dreams.

But I had no intention of following her footsteps into the medical field or if I even wanted to leave the state for college. I love the state of New York. She started to pick around at her plate like she was a child avoiding her vegetables.

“Dylan,” Dad crinkled his paper and peeped over the corner. “College isn’t a joke. In four weeks you will be graduating high school and experiencing life as a young adult. You have a damn bajillion acceptance letters and your mom and I pulled some strings to help you out on some of those colleges. You need to pick which college you will be attending so we can prepare, and you already know what school has my vote.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Yep!” I grabbed my book bag and grabbed Dalton by the back of the shirt, dropping his toast in the process of a bite. “That’s my cue to leave,” I said. I love my parents but sometimes they just talk too much, and this whole college thing was getting out of hand. They were more stressed about it than I was.

I went to the driveway and popped the trunk to my new jet-black Altima. My parents bought it as an early graduation gift at the start of senior year. I threw my backpack in the trunk and Dalton threw his in as well. I jumped in the driver seat with my brother riding shotgun. Every morning before I go to school, I pick up my best friend Marcus Peterson, or Macchiato as everyone at school knows him, and his little brother Elias. I pulled up to his house and sent him a text message to notify him that I was ready.

“You look rough, Dill,” Marcus said to me as he walked up and peeked in the cracked, tinted window. His voice always sounds as if he has a sore throat, but it’s just

naturally dark and raspy. I'd joke, saying he sounded like he smoked a couple packs a day. He has horrible posture. You can spot him out of crowd any day because it's extremely relaxed and almost always slumped over.

"You know the drill Dalton," he said.

Marcus opened the door and Dalton and Elias got into the back seats. Marcus hopped in the front. Marcus and I are almost complete opposites, but very alike in many ways. He runs track and plays golf, while I play basketball. I'm tall, and his height matches my neck. I'm popular and him, not so much. Despite us landing on two different social paths entering high school; he was still my best friend. Guess his nerdy personality and inability to hold a conversation with the opposite sex, gave people more than enough reasons to look past him; then add in the fact he's always dressed in basketball shorts, a t-shirt, and a pair of Nikes, the kids in school just made fun of him even more.

"Well hello to you too Marc. If you must know, I spent my night with Jessica at the park for a romantic walk down by the lake. Didn't get home until 3:30 last night," I boasted.

"3:23 to be precise," Dalton interjected as he pushed his way up to the front seats.

"Dalton shut up, and what did I tell you about your seat belt?" I growled at the rearview mirror.

"Dude, 3:30 and with Jessica? That sounds stupid and crazy all at the same time," Marcus barked rolling his eyes.

"I still can't understand why you two could never just get along."

"Uhhh, because she hates me and is bent on making my life a living hell like half the other kids at school."

"You're just misunderstood that's all. Once people get to know you they will like you."

"Yeah, well, people can't get past the fact that my family is poor, and besides, we've been in the same school for how many years now? They don't want to know me."

I know how Marcus feels about his home situation and I try to make him feel as comfortable as possible. He's known for stressing himself out about things he has no control over.

"Well, in a few weeks we will be walking across that stage and before you know it, you will be at Harvard University starting a new life," I reassured him.

"That's if I get in and get enough money to cover my tuition. I still don't know what is taking so long for a damn letter. I should have gotten it already. I was lucky enough to even get an interview. Where have you decided to go to?"

"I've gotten a few acceptance letters, but I haven't decided. As long as I get to go to college, I will be happy."

Marcus shook his head as the right side of his mouth sank. He turned on the radio and ended the conversation.

First, we pulled up to the middle school located near our high school and dropped the boys off at the front entrance. "See ya guys later," I called out to them. We pulled up to our student parking lot next, which was always a party first thing in the morning. Homeroom was the first period of the day, and as it was assigned alphabetically, therefore, Marcus and I had the same teacher. As the 7:30 bell rang Mrs. Sampson took roll, making sure no students were tardy. The remainder of the twenty-five minutes was used for small chit-chat, latest gossip, laughter, and finishing homework people forgot from the night before.

When the first period bell rang, we all gathered our things and traveled to our first class. Advance Senior English with Mr. Green for the both of us. We took our seats and finished our discussion on *Beowulf* the epic poem about the hero Beowulf and the monster Grendel who attacks resident warriors at the mead hall. The story reminded me of when I was a kid and would play with action figures. I would always make myself a superhero that had super strength and could fly like Superman.

Damn I wish I could fly.

We separated to our next classes after. AP Chemistry and Advance Theatre for myself and Trigonometry and Latin IV for Marcus. Marcus always took advance classes and always pushed himself past human limits in all aspects of his life. He was determined to be somebody and believes it starts with Harvard. I only pray that he gets in with a scholarship that will cover majority of his tuition.

All seniors had a free block between our first three classes and our last three classes, mixed with a lunch. Marcus and I would meet back up during this time to relax and eat in the student lounge.

"Macchiato, Dill. Over here you guys," a cool and harsh voice called out as we walked in.

"Hey, look Dylan, it's Trey," Marcus said nodding his head in his direction.

We walked over and took a seat at the table with him. He took off his letterman jacket and held a bag a chips to his mouth and started chomping.

"You guys are coming to my party tonight, right?" Trey spit out potatoes with each word.

"Don't you get tired of wearing that jacket? It's not even football season," Marcus said.

"We wouldn't miss it for anything." I nudged Marcus.

"Jessica coming too?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet, but I'll ask her. I'm sure she will."

"Umm...speaking of Jessica...here you go," Marcus hesitated.

He pulled out a folded up piece of paper that had the scent of cherry blossoms. It was our way of communicating during school sometimes since we didn't have any classes together. Marcus hated the fact that he had both Trig and AP biology with Jessica.

Knowing he can't stand the sound of her voice, she continuously taunts him by speaking. He describes it as the annoying sound of a dial-up modem.

I laugh at the both of them.

The fact that she always gives him letters to deliver to me really drives him mad. I am positive that if she asked him to give the letters to anybody other than me, he would refuse.

Immediately I snatched the note and began unfolding it. Gusts of cherry blossoms attacked my nostrils as I unfolded each crease; a reminder of why I was with her. It's those small details that kept my attention focused on her and only her. She was like Poison Ivy...had some power that made me lust over her.

Whatever it was, I liked it.

Her silvery voice started to echo in my head and speak to me as if she read the words herself:

Dill Pickle,

I had so much fun with you last night on our "after-hour" date, but sad to say my mom caught me trying to sneak in. I told her I was with Jenny and Marcia. I had a feeling that if she knew I was with you, she would blame you and not allow us to go to prom together. As a punishment, I was grounded and my cell phone was taken away for 2 weeks. I guess that's not too bad since we still get to go to prom together. I will meet you at your car after school. Have a great rest of the day.

Hugs and tons of kisses, Jessica

I was upset yet relieved. Upset that she got caught; relieved she didn't rat me out and that prom was still a go. "Well, looks like Jessica won't be in attendance tonight boys," I said as I folded the note back. I goofed around with the boys for about fifteen minutes more before grabbing a chicken sandwich and a bag of cookies for lunch.

The rest of my day dragged until my final class --- Home Economics. Home Ec was the most entertaining class of my schedule. Between the AP Chemistry and Calculus classes, Home Ec was the little break in my day. Out of twenty-three students in the class, twenty of them were women.

Murmurs and whispers filled the class as the guys and I walked in. "Look, Dylan is here," Tori said.

"Ladies, the guys are here," Dakota said, playing with the ends of her hair.

"Kenny is looking mighty fine, as always," Lindsey said smirking as she tossed her hair.

It was the same routine every day. The guys and I would walk in and transform into Hollywood stars. We walked in wearing confidence and big smiles on our faces. I took my seat in the back with my usual partner Amanda. Amanda was a shy, quiet girl with long straight brown hair, a tall-slender figure, and wide brown eyes. Although she

didn't talk that much, we always had great conversations when she did and everyone loved her.

"Hey Amanda," I chimed putting my books down on the table.

"Hey Dylan, how's your day been?"

"The usual."

Her arms started to shiver. She looked cold, but not just cold, freezing cold like it was snowing outside cold. I looked outside and thought to myself, *it's eighty-five degrees outside and it feels great inside.*

"Amanda you're shivering," I laughed.

"I'm just cold that's all," she said as her teeth chattered.

"Are you kidding me? It feels amazing in here."

"Time to start on your final recipe for the school year," our teacher announced.

Amanda and I decided that we were going to make our own version of "Death by White Chocolate" cupcakes. We finished the recipe yesterday. As we began to head towards the cooking station, I turned around and Diana --- the most flirtatious girl in the entire senior class --- was standing so close to me we were practically kissing. She had on red-fitted pants that hugged her best asset, and heels that complimented her long legs. Her lips were full and moist from all the lip gloss, and her blue eyes was set off by her dark hair, which always flowed down her back.

"Can I help you?" I asked. Her hands began to stroke slowly up my arms.

They quivered.

"I just love your body, Dylan and your curly hair too Dylan," she said so seductive.

This was nothing new for Diana. I wanted to tell her to stop but at the same time, was interested to see where she was going with it this time. I had to admit she was quite striking. I knew she used to have a crush on me, and was the kind of girl who was not afraid to express her feelings. Guess that's why Jessica doesn't care too much for her. I've never had a problem with her.

"I love your golden skin next to mine," she said.

I laughed it off. I looked out the corner of my eye and Amanda was still shivering.

"Here she goes again," Amanda mouthed out. We were starting to gain the attention of some of the other students as they snickered and watched. Our teacher glared but never said a word.

Taking her time to toss her hair so that it lay perfectly against her back, her tone all of a sudden changed from seductive to serious, "...but I hate your blue contacts. When did you get contacts?" she asked with a disgusted look.

"What are you talking about Diana my eyes are brown and I don't wear contacts."

"Not today. But..." she looked at me with this confused look. "That's weird...they were just..." she whispered walking back to her seat.

I was confused. This girl was a nutcase, I don't wear contacts and if I did, blue would not be my color of choice.

"Diana what are you talking about?" I asked as she walked off. She ignored me.

"Take a seat Mr. Perry," our teacher yelled as the class laughed at my semi-demise.

All of a sudden, my lunch started to turn in my stomach and I felt like the chicken sandwich was about to crawl up my throat and jump out my mouth. I placed my hands on my stomach and hunched over trying to catch my bearings. I could hear Amanda's voice in the background telling me to sit down and start on the cupcakes, it sounded as if it was miles away. The constant chattering of her teeth annoyed me.

"Can I please be excused," I asked. The sensation was too much. I didn't wait for an answer.

I just left and made my way to the closest bathroom.

My stomach was still doing numbers and my vision was beginning to go blurry. My hand trailed the row of lockers, as I steadily placed one foot in front of the other. The chattering sound of Amanda's teeth haunted my ear buds. Seeing the goose bumps on her arms as she shivered played over and over in my head like a bad dream. I couldn't get Diana's laugh out of my ears, the words *blue contacts* kept replaying over and over again.

I finally got to the bathroom and scanned the area to make sure no one else was present.

Walking towards the mirror, I hesitated scratching my hand the entire time; and as sure as the sky was blue my eyes were too. I stared in amazement looking at myself, touching my face, widening my eyeballs, anything to give myself some explanation to the mystery.

I wanted to vomit.

Turning on the faucet, I took a few seconds to let the relaxing sound of the running water calm me. My hands tightly grasped the edge of the sink and the sweat from my forehead ran down my face, hitting the counter. I felt very uneasy as I splashed some cool water onto my face. I slowly raised my head not wanting to look in the mirror but at the same time very curious to see. I looked closer and closer into the mirror staring at myself in shock. "No way...no freaking way."

I was in awe.

I was so in awe, I didn't even see him walk in.

Chapter 2

Marcus

“Ahh, man, come on...” I glanced down at my watch. “Dad let’s go. It’s 9:45,” I screamed. He was in the back putting away the last of the fruit.

“Almost done Marcus. Give me a few more minutes,” Dad yelled out from the pantry.

He knew I had a ton of homework like I did every night. Between track, golf practice, and working with my dad in the evenings; schoolwork was always done late at night.

“Ok, Marcus. Let’s just lock up and then we can get out of here and finally head home,” he said.

I sighed, grabbed my book bag and the slice of chocolate cake in the to-go box and followed him out the door.

“Hear anything back from Harvard yet?” Dad said as he started up the old rusty pickup truck.

“Nope.” I pulled out my phone and started scrolling through my empty inbox. “Still waiting Dad.”

“No matter what son, just know I’m proud of you for all your accomplishments. You know me and your mother couldn’t give you the best life you deserve but—”

“Please, don’t Dad.” I kept scrolling through my phone.

“I’m just saying Marcus—”

“Dad it’s ok. Some people ditched me a few weeks after I was born and you and Mom had enough heart to take me in and raise me as your own. You’ve given me more than enough.”

“I just wish we could give you more and afford to send you to the college of your dreams.”

He backed up van and began heading home.

“Dad do you mind if I have tomorrow night off? I really would like it if I didn’t have to work on a Friday night for once.”

“Sure, you’ve earned it.”

I was adopted shortly after my parents married. Mom was starting a new job as a nurse and Dad was, well he was in between jobs. They really wanted a baby but Mom didn’t want to have to take off from work. That led to adoption and me becoming part of the Peterson family. Later on down the line, my siblings Elias and Katie were born and blessed our lives even more.

Our family owns a local restaurant here in town called *The Carrot Cake*. Just from the name, you can figure out that carrot cake is the specialty along with our real fruit smoothies.

My Dad bought the place after we moved here from Brooklyn, right around the time I was in the third grade. I started working here a few days after my sixteenth birthday, which was almost two years ago. It started off really slow and closed down for a few years. He reopened it and although business is better this second time around, it's still struggling.

We got home at exactly 10:20 P.M. and I spent the next two hours doing homework. As I finished, I was exhausted and felt my body about to shut down. My eyes were turning red and burned from sleep deprivation. I decided to shower now so that I could get at least an extra half hour of sleep. I snuck around the room and tried to gather my things without waking my brother who shared a room with me. I took my clothes off, wrapped a towel around my slim waist and tiptoed to the bathroom.

I started the water and let it heat up before I got in. Took the time to reflect on my day and my life in general, as I looked at myself in the mirror. At times I feel as if I have the weight of the universe on my shoulders, kind of like the statue of Atlas. I remember when I first laid eyes on it; said to myself, *how do you do it, my friend*. I never thought that we'd be one in the same. My life has been one heck of a journey from birth until now.

I continued staring at myself striking a few poses, flexing my muscles, or lack thereof. I've been eating like crazy and attempting to lift weights. For some reason my body won't gain any weight.

Damn metabolism.

The water started to heat up and the room and became engulfed by steam. Entering the shower, the hot steamy water felt like a relaxing massage as it hit my body. Didn't want it to end, so I just stayed in a little longer than usual. I rinsed, cut off the water, reached out for my towel and dried off.

I put both hands down on the countertop and sunk my body down. Inhaled the good energy and exhaled the bad. Reached for my toothbrush, but as I reached for it, it fell into the sink and startled me. I snapped back into reality for a few seconds, then quickly went back to my relaxed state of mind. *I must really be tired if I'm starting to hallucinate over a toothbrush*, I thought. Grabbed my toothbrush, brushed my teeth, headed back to my room, threw on some shorts and went to sleep.

The next morning I woke up to Elias blasting music and running around excited that it was a Friday morning. I don't know why he had so much energy this early in the morning, but then again, all my family members were always up at the crack of dawn. I tossed and turned for a moment, squeezing the pillow over my head, trying to block out all the noise.

“Argh,” I grunted as I continued to toss and turn in my bed. I got up and threw a pillow at him.

“Hey,” he said as he fell onto his bed.

I laughed.

I didn’t get much sleep but there was no way I could really take it out on my brother.

I got up and ran over to his side of the room, jumped on his bed, and began a wrestling match.

I grabbed his arm and held it against his back turning him onto his stomach. “I learned that move from TV,” I huffed and puffed. My hold didn’t last long, because for a thirteen year-old, he was slightly larger than me. Coming in at one hundred and fifty pounds of pure beef and only two inches shorter than I, he was now winning the match.

We went at it trying to get the other to tap out until we heard the door open. It was Mom standing in the doorway, wearing her scrubs and shaking her head with a big grin on her face. Katie had her arms wrapped tightly around Mom’s leg with her teddy bear clinched to her waist. Elias was the spitting image of Mom. They both have the tan skin and dark hair. Mom’s came down to her chin and Elias has the short crew cut. I think it’s the round jaw, fat nose and perfect smile they both share that really made them twins.

“Not too bad for an eighth-grader,” I taunted.

“Just wanted to tell my two boys good morning before I head to the hospital,” Mom said.

Mom was a nurse who worked the morning shift so she could be at home with Katie and Elias while Dad and I worked at night.

“Come on Mom, you know we aren’t boys anymore. We are men,” Elias said standing in his pajamas with his chest out and proud.

“You’re right, I’m so sorry. Good morning, my two handsome young men.”

Katie let go of Mom’s leg and ran to Elias. He scooped down and picked her up, lifting her into the air. She giggled. Elias might have been Mom’s twin but Katie was Dad’s. Blond hair covered their heads and pointy elf ears would make anybody think Dad birthed her alone.

“High-five, Kate?” I said.

She snapped her head away in the other direction. I thought she was going to give herself whiplash had she done it any harder. She buried her face into Elias’s chest. Elias was her favorite. Sometimes she came to me, sometimes she didn’t. It all depended on the day I guess.

“Before you leave Mom, can you grab that chocolate cake from the kitchen and take it to Mrs. Perry? She asked for some yesterday so she will be expecting it,” I said.

“Sure honey, no problem,” she said kissing me on my forehead.

“Elias do me a favor and take Katie to Dad and get ready for school,” I said.

He and I got dressed and headed to the kitchen for breakfast, so we could make it in time to meet Dylan and his younger brother Dalton. We said our goodbyes and headed outside soon as we heard the car hit the driveway.

“You look rough, Dill,” I said as I walked up to the window. Dylan had a nice all black four door Altima that had about ten miles on it when his parents bought it for him. I appreciate the fact that my best friend picks up my brother and I every day, but it would be nice to have something of my own.

When we got to school, I turned invisible. Walking down the halls to our lockers it was like Dylan was a celebrity. Everyone made it a priority to speak to him or to give him a high-five in the morning. I guess good looks and three years as a star basketball player would do that. I just walked behind going unnoticed like always.

When the eight o’clock bell rang, we left homeroom and went to our lockers to grab our books. I took out English, Trigonometry, and AP Biology. Right as I was closing my locker, I felt a pair of hands around my waist slowly rising up to my chest, taking my shirt for one wild ride. A smile slowly built up upon my face. I already knew who it was. Her head gently laid down on my back as if it was the perfect piece to my broken puzzle. Her perfume rushed from her body to mine. The hairs on my arms rose. My heart skipped a beat, maybe two, and suddenly my body went numb.

Her reserved voice whispered to me, “You’re so warm.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, only to have her arms still wrapped tightly to me. I miss this so much but I wouldn’t say it out loud.

“Monica,” I said as I turned my head slightly to the right to try and catch a glimpse of her face before she moved away. She ran her hands back down from my chest to my waist and moved away from me.

“Marcus,” I heard from a distance. It sounded so faint, yet so clear. I wanted to savor the moment.

“Marcus...hola Marcus,” the voice called out to me again but this time it sounded closer, clearer.

“MARCUS!”

I snapped around and there she was.

“Marcus, are you okay? I have been calling your name for like three minutes,” she said.

I must have been daydreaming of her.

Again.

Monica and I dated my junior year, her sophomore. We broke up because she said she wasn’t ready for a “real” relationship. Since then we remained good friends just as we

were before the break up. She walked up and interlocked her arms into mine right as Dylan walked up.

“Look at the love birds,” he joked.

Monica laughed it off. “Whatever Dylan,” she smiled. Her smile was flawless, and captivated my soul every time. She walked us to our English class like she did every day. We hugged each other and said goodbye.

After class, I decided to stop by the vending machine and grabbed a snack. I got some chips and went to my next class. I walked in and took my seat at the front of class.

“Geek alert,” I heard from the back of class. By the screeching sound of her voice I knew it was Jessica right away; my rival, my archenemy, my ultimate contender bent on making my life hell on Earth. We’ve never gotten along ever since I moved to Poughkeepsie. In Mrs. Gregory’s third grade class, we were building gingerbread houses for Christmas. Jessica replaced my frosting with glue, and when I went to eat it, tears started to run down my face. In sixth grade as I went to take a seat, Jessica moved my chair and laughed as I hit the ground. That was on more than one occasion.

Over and over she did stupid things to torment me and the worst part of it all is that she’s a girl. How embarrassing is it for a guy, at any age, to be bullied by a girl. I would rather get hung on the flagpole by the football team than be publicly humiliated by Jessica. Over time I started to build a resistance to her taunting and immature games.

I ignored her and went on with the day’s lesson. When the bell rung, I gathered my things and headed towards the door, but before I could make it through a tug at my elbow hindered me.

It was Jessica.

At that moment I felt as if a malevolent force possessed me, and I was on the outside looking at myself. I had so much built up anger. Anger that over the years, turned into rage. I looked down and my fist clinched up as if I were about to punch something. My heart raced as if I was on ecstasy. I tried to calm myself down, but this force wouldn’t hear what I had to say.

My aggression released.

“LISTEN!” I snapped. “I *know* you don’t like me, and if you haven’t noticed, I don’t like you either.” I moved closer and closer to her with every word. She started to back up until the desk stopped her. “And I know that as long as Dylan and you are together, I have to put up with your immature, hair twirling, gum smacking stuck up—” I stopped and froze in place. This wasn’t me. I was on her level for a moment and I didn’t like it. I turned around and walked out the door. I stopped before I made it out and turned back around. “You know I used to feel sorry for myself. Sorry that I didn’t have the money or sorry that I have a family who I look nothing like. Sorry that I’m not the most popular guy in high school. I was sorry for everything including even having to be

associated with you,” I continued. “Anybody who has to make someone else feel bad about themselves is hiding some kind of insecurities of their own.”

It was relief to finally get it off my chest.

I looked around and about half the class was standing, staring at me, even the teacher had a dazed look on her face. I must have really sparked up a fire because sweat gradually rolled down from underneath her brown bangs. A feeling of weight had been lifted off me; I was cured from the disease that plagued me for so long. She pulled a note out from her book and looked at me stunned.

“Could you give this to Dylan?” Her words trembled. Then she smiled.

I scared her.

Good.

I grabbed the note and left everyone in the class speechless.

I met up with Trey and Dylan later on and delivered the note. I didn’t want to tell Dylan about the encounter I had with Jessica right before that note was handed to me. I’m sure she would let him know later, that is, if I hadn’t shaken her up too much. We grabbed some lunch and departed to our separate schedules.

I had one more class with Jessica, fifth period AP Biology. She didn’t say a word or even look my way. After Biology, we had one more left for the day. It was AP History for me.

I went to my locker to grab my last book. Right when I put the first number of my combination in my lock, a swarm of jocks came running down the hall. I turned around when I heard all the commotion and one pushed me into my locker. “Urgh,” I fell to the ground.

I watched as they continued to run. No one even looked to see if I was injured, not even my other classmates in the hall. I got up and dusted myself off. I opened my locker and the bell rung shortly after.

“Great, now I’m late.” I slammed the locker. “Might as well use the bathroom now.”

I ran down the hallway humming the tunes to a song I heard on the radio this morning. I wasn’t paying any attention to where I was going when I crashed into a girl and knocked her books everywhere. “Sorry,” I whispered.

“What?” she yelled. “Just watch where you’re going next time.” She started gathering her things then jumped up.

“Le-le-let me ha-ha help you?” I stuttered. It never failed.

“Ugh,” she moaned. “No I am already late, Macchiato.”

“Just trying to be nice,” I sighed. She glared at me and stormed off.

I went into the bathroom around the hallway and walked inside. Dylan was staring hypnotically at himself in the mirror right when I walked in. He looked spooked, as if he saw a ghost.

“No way...no freaking way,” he whispered to himself. I don’t think he even realized I was in there with him. I felt a little unsure, like I was in a horror movie and the killer was about to jump out.

I would be killed before Dylan.

“Uh...Earth to Dylan,” I laughed waving my hands so he could see my reflection in the mirror. I got no response, not even a look in the mirror. I calmly walked up to him and placed my hand on his shoulder. He gasped.. It was like he was in a trance and me touching him snapped him out of it.

I knew something wasn’t right.