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Dedication

To Poppy Joe

Chapter 1

I crossed my legs and clutched the edges of a photocopied textbook chapter on my lap. I needed to focus. I lifted one thigh off of the other, set my feet hard and flat on the floor, and began curling the corners of the manuscript in such a way that they resembled rolling waves of sea water.

For a brief moment, I felt calm.

Dr. Weinstein busied himself with some papers in his briefcase and, with a bored expression, took a sip of coffee and sat across from me. He had dark folds under his eyes from what I assumed was an accumulation of decades of sleep deprivation and obsessive compulsion. He was a stereotype: the average research scientist, overwrought with ambition, overflowing with ideas, and dreadfully overtired.

“Sarah,” he said, lifting his heavy brow.

I stared down at my manhandled pages.

“Your midterm scores came in.” He pinched his lips together with his fingers.

I shifted uneasily, swallowing hard. “I know,” I said. “I received them last week.”

“You passed one out of four,” he said, still looking bored. “It was for the English class that we require all the pharmaceutical science undergrads to take to make sure they can read and write halfway decently. You failed biochemistry, cell biology, and statistics.”

I squared my shoulders. “OK. I know. I’ve been giving this a lot of thought. I’m only five points away from passing in cell biology and statistics, and one point away from passing biochem. So all I really need to do for my finals is...”

“Sarah.” He interrupted me with a cough and a wave of his hand. “You’re talking about getting grades that will allow you to barely pass your courses. Is this what you really want?”

My face became warm.

“I was able to get you through freshman year by rearranging your schedule and mixing in more of the easier classes than we usually do for first-year students.” His tone was that of gentle exasperation. “And I figured you could take the harder courses later, when you became better adjusted to the environment here. But, Sarah... This *IS* later.”

I felt my mouth and throat get so dry that I was starting to have difficulty swallowing. My body seemed to know where this conversation was heading even if my brain didn’t yet.

“You’re a sophomore now,” he said, “and these classes not only have to be passed, they have to be mastered. It only gets harder from here on out.” Dr. Weinstein shifted in his plush swivel chair. He placed his hand over taut lips.

My stomach growled. Not from hunger, but from nerves. It did that every so often, and helped make a difficult time for me just that much more difficult. I pressed

my fist firmly against my abdomen in a futile effort to keep all volatile, gurgling acids where they belonged.

He cleared his throat, and let out a heavy sigh. He lifted a pile of papers off his desk, glanced briefly at it, and carelessly threw it back down. “I wish I’d kept a closer check on you, Sarah.”

I unfolded the jumbled mess of papers in my lap. I kept my head bent down while he let out another heavy, frustrated sigh and tapped his fingertips on the surface of his desk. A few more seconds of degrading silence went by, but it might as well have been a few hours. I cast my eyes toward the floor. Mentally, all of me was there, splattered on the linoleum.

“Sarah, I... really don’t know what else to say.” He looked down at his desk and then thoughtfully at my mutilated chapter.

I stood. I was willing this torture to be over.

It would be at least another few minutes of debasement before my wish was granted.

I walked quietly out of his office. With a quick flip of my wrist, I tossed the manuscript in the wastepaper basket by the secretary’s desk. Glancing at the time on my cell phone, I realized that there was no sense in staying any later than I already had. I shot out of the building, flipping posted notices up in the air with a rush of wind furiously whipping behind me.

The train station was a few blocks away. A soft breeze

caressed my face, begging me to still love Boston. But it didn't woo me with its charm as I started toward the "T".

I'd been terminated.

Finished.

Done.

I thought about what I'd just gone through, but the state of shock and disgust I was in wasn't allowing it to fully register. I sat down on a metal and wood rail track bench in a shady shelter that marked the Longwood T stop. There was no one around, and so no one to watch me bury my face in my hands and cry. The tears felt hot against my cheeks as they slid downward and clung to the bottom of my jaw. Warm and salty, they trickled over my upper lip, and I quickly swept the side of my forefinger under my nose. I sniffled, and then forced so much air out of my lungs that I gasped.

I wanted to blame somebody.

I needed to blame somebody.

I physically ached to blame somebody.

But who could I really blame for washing out? For maybe following a path that I probably never should have been on in the first place? My mind darted back to the cell biology lab... the pain, the boredom, and discomfort of counting cells smashed under a coverslip in a hemocytometer, much like the images seen in *The Far Side* except without the humor. I winced as I thought of how often I would catch myself staring up at the analog clock hanging over the doorway, literally watching the hours of

my life pass me by. The only times I would feel even the slightest bit of levity were when I was asked to write something, like a lab report. I very much enjoyed writing, and feeling that little jolt of satisfaction that came with my fingers hitting the last few letters on the keyboard and turning hazy, amorphous concepts into something concrete and meaningful.

OK. I didn't just enjoy writing.

I loved it.

But I hadn't been accepted into a B.S. program in the pharmaceutical sciences to do what I loved.

And it showed.

I walked outside the shelter and half-heartedly embraced a cool, evening wind that made the trees lining the train tracks rustle and sway. The sky dimmed slightly, and a little green trolley with bright headlights emerged from the brush in the distance. The train slowed to a halt not far from where I stood, and an elderly woman who had just crossed a wide wooden platform a few feet away climbed carefully into it. I turned my gaze away from the steps of the train's entrance, rubbed my eyes, and flopped back down on the bench behind me. After a minute or two, the train doors folded and, seeming nearly as spent as me, it wearily dragged itself away.

A man wearing a cowboy hat became visible upon its departure. He quietly stood with his hands pressed against his hips on the other side of the wooden platform. He looked at first to be waiting for the arrival of a train going

in the opposite direction. Then he limped across the tracks and stood close by to where I was sitting. Too close. He pulled a cigarette pack out of the pocket of his shirt, tapped it loudly against the palm of his hand, and stared at the hilly road running parallel to the tracks.

He cleared his throat. "Aren't there usually more people here this time of day?" he asked in a deep smoker's voice. He lifted his hat, swept his hand through long, sandy brown fringe that hung over his eyes, and turned toward me. His eyebrows raised.

I could only stand to look at him peripherally, as I would the sun. I looked down at my cell phone. "It's seven."

"I didn't ask you for the time." Strands of oily hair again fell into his face. He placed his hat back on top of his head and gave me a wide, greasy smile.

I looked away from him. It was just my day to be branded an idiot, apparently. I wondered if I had mascara stains on my cheeks.

"You're here a little early." He continued to smile.

OK. That spooked me. "Excuse me?" I suddenly wasn't concerned about looking like Alice Cooper anymore. The hat and hair covered his eyes, which for a split second, when I caught a gutsy glance of them, almost made him look familiar to me. But I knew I was in about as right of mind as he apparently was at that moment, and so I didn't pay it another thought.

He let out a guttural laugh. He scratched his chest underneath a t-shirt that revealed a patch of protruding beer belly. “I usually see you here later.”

I pretended to search for something in my purse.

“I guess you’re a nurse?” he asked.

“Student,” I said, my busy hand slowing to a halt and fingering the edge of a slip-in eyeglass case. I could feel the warmth of the blood rushing to my face as my heart began to thump loudly in my chest. It was such an odd sensation, as I was otherwise drained to the point of being listless. Did I really want to be giving this person any information about myself?

“What kind of student?” he asked.

A crappy one. “Science. Drug development.” I started mumbling, shrugging, “Research. Sort of. I don’t know...”

“Drugs, huh?” He placed a cigarette between his lips. “Research, eh? In what? Cancer or heart disease?” He smiled with the cigarette held firmly between his clenched teeth and carefully slid the cigarette pack back into his shirt pocket.

I looked down at the concrete below my feet and pretended to study swirls of dried pink goo wedged in between some crevices. But it was pointless. This was not the kind of man to pick up on social cues and *shut up*.

“I could’ve guessed science and research and whatnot by just looking at you.” He laughed. “You have this... *aura*.” Then he began laughing uncontrollably. The fit culminated in a loud spewing of phlegm behind a wall of

the shelter. He cleared his throat and spit a ball of saliva at his feet. "I want to get to know you."

I looked up at him, and no doubt my face told him what I thought about that prospect. There were a number of deal breakers here, not the least of which was the hawking up of mucus.

He clamped his fingers on a metal bar that jutted out from the top of the shelter. His large stomach poked out from underneath the frayed edges of his shirt, and he swung his body back and forth. He was staring at me with a surprised expression, as if I had just appeared in front of him. I supposed he had been gunning for me to squirm or run, as I was just staring back, looking unimpressed.

I should run, really, I told myself. It was the sane, rational thing to do. If nothing else, I was likely to pick up a drug-resistant strain of TB right there on the platform if I stayed. But I was tired. I was tired of running and quite frankly too tired to be afraid.

I opened my mouth. Nothing came out. I looked around, willing a train to appear, willing someone normal and purposeful to stop the nonsense and free me to continue agonizing over what had happened to me earlier in the day. I wanted to focus on having been kicked in the teeth. I'd just been humiliated. Sized up and brought down. And I'd been a nearly willing partner in it all. Was this how the rest of my day would go? The rest of my life?

It was only getting more surreal. My inner city leech laughed and pulled the cigarette pack out of his shirt pocket again, as if this were his signature Hollywood move.

A group of kids headed toward the hut. They stopped at a nearby street lamp and huddled closely together. They exchanged glances and laughed loudly. And I was jealous.

The man looked away from me and stared at a couple of young girls. He turned back toward me. "Red hair. Soft. Long. You have what I like." He made wave motions with his hands and then, when I was not facing him and aware of what was coming at me, he gently traced his grubby forefinger along the side of my cheek in slow motion.

My glasses slid down the bridge of my nose and I quickly pushed them back up. I lifted a clothing catalog that someone had left behind on the bench. I began flipping through it. Mentally, I conjured the long hot shower I would need to feel clean again.

The man kicked some dirt and pebbles with the tip of his untied sneaker. "You been living here long?"

I shook my head. "I don't really feel like talking." Understatement.

He smiled a broad, confident smile. He repeated himself. "Have you been living here long?"

I cocked my head and drew a deep breath, pretending I was OK with all of this, in control. "No. Have you?"

He laughed and drew hard on his freshly lit cigarette. "Nah." He released the smoke through his nostrils. "This could never be my home."

I heard a rumble in the distance yet couldn't decide from which direction the sound was coming. After looking toward my right and then to my left, I saw that two trolleys going in opposite directions were arriving at the T stop at the same time. I walked quietly past the man and toward the kids who were gathering at the train's entrance.

"I'll get us seats," the man said, taking his place in line in front of me.

I looked away from him. I'd had more than I could handle for one day. Defeated and demoralized as I was, I wasn't the silly putty in this weirdo's hands that he apparently thought I was. *Please piss off. Take a hint, or two, or a thousand, and GO AWAY!!!*

"I said I'll get us seats," he said again, more loudly. He was testing me, banking on my broken girl passivity. I must have seemed too delicious of a treat, because I heard him cough up a tittering little laugh. I was his willing victim. And was that really who I was going to keep being?

One of the kids turned around at the sound of my Beantown stalker's voice and looked curiously at us. The man turned his face abruptly away from me and hustled past the kid. He stepped up onto the train and looked over his shoulder to see if I would follow. When our eyes met, I wanted him to see someone transformed. Someone filled with anger, on the verge of overflowing with rage at him, at Weinstein, at myself, at the world.

It was sort of a quiet explosion that left my lungs.
"Screw! You!"

The other train had just closed its doors and was preparing to leave. I frantically fumbled in my purse for change or tokens while running across the tracks to try to catch it. The driver must have seen me coming, for as I approached, the doors flew open again. I tossed an extra quarter into the coin receptacle and swung around a nearby metal pole into an available seat. See, world? I was not a complete loser... even if I was now on the wrong train.

The green trolley sluggishly pulled itself away from the stop and began chugging away from the direction of where I lived. Breathing heavily, I looked hard out the window at the dark, passing landscape. I glanced over at a freckle-faced teenage girl sitting on the other side of the trolley. My glance turned into a stare, and I stared until I could no longer distinguish what was her long, silky blond hair and the upturned tip of her shiny, young nose and what was just a reflection in her window. She became a blur, a fuzzy mass that grew more and more distorted as the water in my eyes raised and my lids lowered. Soon, very soon, she was gone.

I stayed on the train as long as I was allowed to. I used my time to drive as many thoughts as I could completely out of my head. I wanted to see nothing, to hear nothing, to feel nothing. I wanted to be in the midst of a void, a soothing, distancing, dulling state of sheer darkness. I wanted no light, no music, no poetry, no conversation. I wanted to be utterly alone.

I listlessly stepped out onto the platform of the last stop and made my way over to a bench that smelled like stale urine. I started to hold my breath and sit down, when another train arrived at the stop. I slowly climbed up its steps, wasted more of my loose change, and then sat down in an empty seat. I tried to ignore the sensation of wetness from some unknown liquid soaking through the backside of my jeans.

The day's events flashed in rapid succession in my mind, and a wave of nausea came over me, forcing me to close my eyes. I rested the backs of my knuckles against my clammy forehead. Once the train pulled away from the platform, I leaned my head against the shiny cold wall next to me and began to feel some relief. The squeaking of the brakes against the rails grew fainter and the rocking motion of the train caused me to drift off into a light sleep.

The train lurched, jolting me awake, causing me to fall forward and hit my chin on the metal back of an empty seat. I rubbed my aching jaw and looked outside the window for clues as to how far the train had traveled since the time I had fallen asleep. It was passing through a moss-covered stone tunnel that looked vaguely familiar but that said nothing about exactly where I was.

The seats ahead of me were mostly vacant. There were just an elderly man and woman sitting a couple of seats away. I was considering asking them what train stop we were approaching when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“You missed your stop.”

The low, gravelly voice was unmistakable, as was the big oily grin that accompanied it.

“You missed your stop,” he whispered in my ear, the sour smell on his breath wafting past my nose. He reached toward my elbow and squeezed it. I flinched and pulled away from him. My heart was racing. Instinct and adrenaline willed my feet to do the same but there was nowhere to run.

The train slowed as it approached a station. The old man stood up and began walking to the central exit of the train, trailing his hand along a piece of upper railing. I quickly stood up and followed closely behind him.

“So do you want to get to know me?” The low gravelly voice and oily grin were inches away from the back of my head.

I whisked around and felt the hair I had parted to one side collapse and hang loosely over the center of my forehead. Usually whenever my hair did that, I felt sexy and catlike. Alluring. A vixen. If there was ever a moment I did not want to feel this way, or even worse, *look* this way, it was now. I quickly parted my hair again.

“I still want to get to know you,” he said softly. “I *need* to get to know you.” He gently took hold of my arm and tried to draw me closer to him.

I felt a sickly chill race through my body. I writhed out of his grasp and shoved him away from me. I pushed against the elderly man’s back with my thumbs and tried to

hustle him off the train as best as I could without hurting him.

My stalker stepped off the train shortly after I did. "I didn't mean to scare you." The softness of his voice was cloying.

I wasn't sure why, but I stopped walking and looked back at him, curious to see what he would do next. He passed under the diffuse orange glow of a couple of streetlights and leapt onto a wide, wooden platform overlaying the tracks. He dug his hands inside the pockets of his jeans, and staggered away.

I crossed my arms and pressed them tightly against my chest. My eyes followed him until he was completely out of sight. But even then, I wondered, *is he really gone?*

I lay awake that night in bed, unblinking, wide-eyed. I curled my toes under a tiny afghan and fought for some warmth while gyrating over hills and valleys in the mattress.

"Sarah, this is really the academic dean's place to say this. But I want you to know that Dr. Vogel and I have talked. The general consensus is that you'd probably do better... re-evaluating your long-term goals and plans." He placed his fingers on his lips and stared blankly ahead. *"Your grades last year were marginally acceptable. Had*

you not made it through general chemistry, we would have had grounds to ask you to leave the program then.”

I felt an aching tightness in my neck.

He drew a deep breath and slowly let the air out of his lungs. “I wish you the best with whatever you decide to do. You can discuss this with Dr. Vogel, but I’m pretty sure he’ll tell you the same thing.”

I had to leave. I knew I had to leave. For quite some time I’d known, and yet I still stayed. I had stayed just to tread water and finally drown. *Even hippos can swim*, I thought perversely. And on this night that I lay awake thinking about all of the wrong choices I had made, everything had come together in such a way as to practically escort me away.

I have to leave, I thought, mouthing the words but saying nothing out loud. I dug the pointy nail of my index finger into the lifeline of my palm. *I shouldn’t run and hide. I shouldn’t, but...* I wondered if I could start fresh by going home, by going back to the place where I never really had the chance to start at all. Home was the hardest place to teach myself to stop being a victim. But it was also likely the most important place to do it.

So I’ll go, I thought, the disappointingly elusive sense of courage starting to leak away. It was all too easy to picture myself sitting in a corner of my little Boston loft, not eating, not sleeping, not drinking, not bathing. I would sit there until rigor mortis set in and I’d have to be

physically removed and either buried in a local cemetery or propped up at the main gate entrance of one as a gargoyle.

But instead I stood up, brushed my teeth like the good girl I've always been, and flopped back onto my bed to think about which would be the first of the suitcases I would pack. *You ARE going, kid.* I repeated my mantra out loud. "You are going."

Through the floral, transparent curtains of my bedroom window, I watched shadows of tree branches quivering in the moonlight. On the other side of a set of heavy black bars, the window pane was partly lifted up, allowing me to hear the sound of soft breezes flying through the trees. The hypnotic scent of the evening air crept its way through the window screen. I felt myself just starting to relax a little.

Something hard hit the screen. I envisioned a night-blind bird or a sonar-impaired bat slamming into the side of the building and falling unconscious to the ground. I got up and looked out the window, almost wanting to see the stranger standing under a tree in the perfectly mowed grass, looking up at me with his slick grin. I could flip him off. There was a self-tormenting part of me that craved for the nightmare to continue, as if too much of a bad thing would overwhelm me and just leave me numb.

All I saw, though, was the trunk of a tall birch and the dark, shadowy ground beneath it. When I turned back around and looked toward my bed, for a second I saw what looked like the silhouette of a person lying down. I stopped

short and felt my knees weaken. I blinked my eyes and the image disappeared.

I lay back down again in my bed, pulled the afghan to my chin, and tried to shut my eyes. I had come to Boston half-crazy, and this latest stint almost finished the job.

You are going.

