

Downtown Dandelions

by Kevin D. Hendricks

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for Abby

Where do I fit in this puzzle?
What good are these gifts?
Not a martyr or a saint
Scarcely can I struggle through
All that I ever wanted was to give my best to You

Lord, search my heart
Create in me something clean
Dandelions
You see flowers in these weeds.

“Dandelions” by Five Iron Frenzy
from *Quantity is Job 1*
Lyrics by Reese Roper

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I have a lot of people to thank, and since this may be my only published opportunity to do this, I hope you'll indulge me...

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I'd also like to thank U2 for waiting to release their newest album until I'd finished my novel.

And finally, thank you. It humbles me immensely to know that someone would choose to read my story.

My very life should acknowledge God, but it often falls short. So thanks God, for giving a tiny speck of inspiration to a broken man such as myself.

Preface

I've always wanted to write a book and what follows is my very first attempt, in its very raw and barely edited form. Anne Lamott (and I believe Hemmingway before her) have said that publication is shit, and I believe them, though it doesn't lessen my yearning to see my story in published form. I know this bound volume you hold in your hands is merely a boost to the ego, but sometimes that's what you need—something to hold in your hands and remind you that it really happened.

I wrote this novel in the space of 20 days in November 2004. The once-through editing occurred a week or two later, and one day I hope to give this story a real editing job. It happened so quickly thanks to the creative boiler that is National Novel Writing Month. They challenge you to write a 50,000-word novel in 30 days. It's a brutal deadline, but it's something you can get your head around. The idea is that among all the crap you'll inevitably generate, there may be a few diamonds in the rough. Hopefully that's what you'll find here (the diamonds, not the crap—or at least not too much crap).

Writing a novel has always been a dream, and a distant and daunting dream that was completely unattainable. I could never focus on a single idea long enough to refine it to the point of committing myself to it. I couldn't imagine the effort and time involved in plotting and writing a book-length work of fiction, and so I never tried. I can legitimately call myself a writer. I've got the degree, the day job, the bylines. But writing a book has always stood as the ultimate pinnacle. A novel is the ultimate confirmation that, yes, I am a writer. It's a badge of honor. A symbol of pride.

Yet, until now, I've never been able to motivate myself to make it happen. Looking through my blog reveals entry titles that hint at my unmet desire:

March 19, 2001: I want to write a book

March 31, 2001: I've started writing a book

Jan. 4, 2002: More Whining About Wanting to Write a Book

Aug. 8, 2002: I Still Want to Write a Book

March 21, 2003: Publication is Shit

April 29, 2004: Why Aren't I Writing a Book?

You get the idea. And it goes back much farther than that. In mid-October 2004 I said no more and told all my friends I'd be writing a novel in November. I asked them to mock me should I fail. They obliged.

And I triumphed. It's no award-winner, it's not even properly published—but it is a novel. I should have done this long ago, and I can assure you I'll do it again.

The story centers around a character named Sedgewick, a character that came into my head years ago during a college creative writing class. I wrote character sketches and random scenes about a little boy named Sedgewick. He captivated me, and for a final project I collected the sketches into a little unfinished narrative I so aptly titled '5 pages of Sedgewick.' That's exactly what it was, there was no plot or theme or complete story, just 5 pages of this character. After college I returned to Sedgewick, writing a few more pages. This time he was older, high school-borderline college. He grew up a bit, but he was the same little boy.

When I had to pick a character and a plot for National Novel Writing Month, Sedgewick kept coming back to me. I was afraid what a month-long writing spree might do to Sedgewick, but I'm thankful he was up for it. It's probably the only way he'd ever inhabit more than a few random pages.

I also find it necessary to explain that while many things in this story are connected to my life in some way, this is fiction. I made it up. Mom, that means you.

I wrote this book for myself, but there's incredible satisfaction in sharing it with others. I hope you enjoy it.

Kevin D. Hendricks
December 3, 2004

Chapter 1

Sedgewick stepped off the bus and began his slow walk home. The city bus pulled away in a cloud of fumes, and Sedgewick held his breath until he passed through the cloud. He paused for a moment, turning to watch the bus go and wonder why public transportation couldn't smell better.

He breathed clean air again, wrinkling his nose at the fumes, and set off for home. Despite the exhaust that burned his nostrils, Sedgewick liked riding the bus. Liked might be an understatement. He loved riding the bus.

There were so few worries and commitments about bus riding. At most Sedgewick had \$15 per month tied up in his bus pass, which was subsidized by the university. If the bus broke down, another one would come. If all the seats were full, he could stand and in a few stops a spot would open up. If he missed the bus, another one would come in seven minutes during rush hour, 11 during off-peak times. 15 minutes on the weekends. At least for the #16. The other routes seemed to come as often, but Sedgewick didn't have the schedule memorized.

Bus riding didn't require a car payment, which Sedgewick would never be able to afford. But a car payment alone isn't what kept Sedgewick from owning an automobile. Sure, there's the financial considerations. A down payment, a monthly payment larger than most he's ever had to make. There's the insurance, the gas, the upkeep. Even if he bought a used car all those expenses exist. \$15 a month for unlimited rides seemed so much simpler.

But more than all the money, Sedgewick couldn't stand the thought of having to pick out one car all his own. Despite being a champion of public transportation, as some might say, Sedgewick has a great love for cars, probably thanks to his grandfather. He loves the way they look, the unique styles that hearken back to earlier years or evoke certain feelings. Sometimes it's a stifled laugh, but other times there's a sense of quiet awe or wonder. The few times he's ridden in a friend's car he's like poking around at all the nooks and crannies, the arm rests, the glove compartment, the penny slots, the cup holders.

And then there's the color. He'd never be able to pick a color. And even if he bought a used car where you don't have a choice in color, he's still be deciding on color. It'd be the maroon verses the marine green, not the \$1,400 Toyota verses the \$2,700 Ford like most people would think about it.

Sedgewick thought the color of a car really meant a lot. It gives off a certain feeling when you step inside a red car compared with a blue car. And that feeling mattered to Sedgewick. People don't buy white cars, they settle for them. That's how Sedgewick felt anyway, deep down somewhere where he kept all these thoughts to himself.

That's part of why he liked the bus so much. They all came in a standard color, usually white with the blue and red Metro Transit stripes. But they all had ads plastered to the sides, the front, the back. Interchangeable ads. One week they'd be pitching TCF Bank, the one Sedgewick happens to use, another week they'd be telling him how many people were infected with HIV/AIDS. One week they'd tell him to buy a Toyota (which made him laugh—why advertise cars to people who ride the bus?), the next they'd be pitching a new theatrical performance downtown. If you didn't like one of the ads, don't worry; it'd probably be something different tomorrow.

And best of all, occasionally the little ads placed on all sides of the bus would be replaced by an entire paint scheme. The mostly white and boring bus would suddenly explode with color, promoting the grand opening of the new downtown Target store, or heralding the opening of the Twins' baseball season, or encouraging you to open a totally free checking account at TCF (sometimes Sedgewick wondered if it was a multi-colored bus that subconsciously prompted him to open his own account at TCF).

All of these thoughts swirled in and out of Sedgewick's head as he walked home, blurring the lines of reality to the point where he felt like he was sleepwalking. He didn't like it when his mind drifted like this. He slowed his pace for a moment, looking to the right and the left to make sure he wasn't being watched. He breathed in and sighed, then took a quick glance up to the blue, blue sky.

Yep. Life goes on. Satisfied that he hadn't missed too much, and committed to not zoning out again, Sedgewick continued his pace for the last several blocks home.

He thought for sure that one of these days his drifting mind would get him into trouble. The don't walk man would flash and Sedgewick would keep right on walking and that'd be the end of him.

The light was green at the coming intersection, but Sedgewick knew he wouldn't make it unless he hurried. And today wasn't a day to hurry. He slowed his shuffle, and his eyes fell to the strip of green grass next to the sidewalk, to the bright yellow dandelion clinging to the edge of the green.

The light turned yellow, giving Sedgewick pause to stop, but he didn't really notice. He couldn't look away from the autumn dandelion, struggling against hope to make its presence known. Something made Sedgewick want to pull the dandelion and take it home, plop it in the mason jar like he did every spring. But this wasn't spring, and he couldn't do that to the lone, struggling dandelion.

In the spring it didn't seem so bad, pulling a handful of dandelions when the stretches of green grass were just covered with them. But this was the only dandelion Sedgewick had seen in weeks, if not months. A late bloomer with little chance for survival. The temperature was dropping at night, and any day now this little weed would freeze. Dandelions don't deserve to be alone, but plucking it wouldn't help. A mercy killing would only negate the remote chance that another yellow flower would pop up nearby, however incredibly unlikely that might be.

The light turned green and Sedgewick kept walking.

He climbed the steps to the early 1900s sagging story and a half where he lived with his grandmother, grabbed the mail from the floor of the porch and went inside. The late afternoon October sun had warmed the porch to a summer day, but inside was cooler, feeling more like an October day should.

"Sedgewick?" a voice called from the kitchen, an older, weathered voice. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, Gram, it's me." Sedgewick kicked his shoes off in the entryway and joined his grandmother in the kitchen. Kitchens were more important in the 1900s, and it was large enough for a whole family to crowd together and make dinner, keeping each other warm and company. A small table sat in the corner, droopy and as old as the house. Sedgewick's grandmother sat at the table, a mug of water in front of her next to a pile of half-chopped ingredients.

Sedgewick piled the mail on the counter and sat down across from his grandmother, in the corner, the spot where his grandfather used to sit for hours and hours at a time. Before his grandmother insisted on tearing down the decades-old wallpaper and painting the kitchen, there used to be a worn spot, right at the height where his grandfather's head would rest. Sedgewick liked the head groove, though he hadn't quite grown into the spot. By now it would probably fit perfectly, but in high school, when his grandmother figured he could handle a paintbrush and an important job, his head didn't quite line up with the worn groove. So Sedgewick didn't protest. Now he might, but only slightly. Sedgewick wasn't big on sentimentality, not that he didn't like it, he just didn't need it.

"School was good today, Gram," Sedgewick said before she could ask. She looked up from chopping vegetables and smiled, setting the knife down and taking a sip from her mug.

"And did you learn how to save the world?"

"No, not today. Not unless derivatives and equations have anything to do with it."

"Those equations can be mighty powerful."

"Maybe so. But I don't think they'd be giving the keys of the kingdom to undergrads, Gram."

She smiled, warmly, and took another sip.

"I don't think I'd want to use math to save the world anyway," Sedgewick said. "Though that would be kind of funny," he added, imagining a dorky mathematical superhero, armed with a protractor and a graphing calculator.

"The geek shall inherit the earth," his grandmother said with a slight inflection, the one she reserved for quoting those older and wiser than her. She smiled and Sedgewick did, too. He always loved these after school discussions, and was so happy when they continued into college, even if they weren't at the exact same time every day. Some days he'd take the bus home before work, if only for a few hours, just for the chance to sit in this kitchen and talk with his Gram before going to work. It'd be easier to do homework in the library and then go straight to work, but Sedgewick never liked to do what was easy just because it was easy.

"How about you, Gram?" Sedgewick asked as he got up from the table to get a glass of water. "How was your day?"

"Fine, fine," she said, brushing off his question.

“And you’re feeling fine and fine?” Sedgewick asked, returning to the table.

“You know how it is, but I can’t complain. I can’t complain.”

Complaints rarely found voice in this house.

“Do you work tonight?”

“Yeah. Four to midnight.”

“Oh, Sedgewick, that’s so late.”

“Not any later than I usually work.”

“I know, I know.”

“You wouldn’t want me to be a bum, Gram, would you? I’ve got to earn my keep.”

“You’ve more than earned this keep,” his grandmother said.

“But I know you need the job. It’s good for you.”

“Like carrots?” Sedgewick asked, taking a slice from the table and popping it in his mouth. She laughed and shooed him off, telling him he better go get ready to earn his keep.

The bus dropped Sedgewick off at 3:45 p.m. in front of the Cub Foods grocery store, giving him more than enough time to stow his things in his locker and stash his lunch in the dairy fridge next to the damaged product. He lived close enough to the store that he could walk, and often he’d walk home after a long day of work. But he usually rode the bus to work, if only to make sure he was there on time.

He pocketed his safety cutter and checked his price gun, then wandered through the back hallways to the loading dock and the rest of the crew.

“Hi guys.” Jimmie and Alex grunted and nodded in acknowledgement, hardly pausing as they unloaded the pallets and sorted the boxes onto the L-shaped carts depending on aisle. Missy sat on one of the half-emptied pallets, drinking a Mountain Dew and avoiding work, like usual. The banter had quieted when Sedgewick came, like usual, but he could tell the guys were giving Missy a hard time and vice-versa. Some things never changed, and it made Sedgewick smile.

“All right then, should I get started on aisle five?”

Jimmie paused before lifting a case of mayonnaise, and turned to survey the room, which was quickly filling with loaded carts.

“How about you do aisle three?” Jimmie motioned to the row of three carts overburdened with juice and noodles. Sedgewick nodded, grabbed the handle and carted it out to aisle three. He liked doing aisle five, but it was never the first aisle. Some of the other aisles had big products, like half-gallons of juice or boxes of cereal, and they’d take up seven or eight carts in one night’s load. The store didn’t have that many carts to go around, so they’d have to keep ahead of the unloading. Paper products were another first-run aisle, though those weren’t so bad since one cart could only hold seven or eight boxes, and you could finish in ten minutes. Sedgewick liked that feeling of accomplishment.

Aisle five, on the other hand, was the baked goods aisle, full of small boxes and even smaller products, like spices and 1.5-ounce packages of walnuts. It took a lot longer than toilet paper, but it also reminded Sedgewick of his grandmother. The smells brought him back to her kitchen and the tastes and scents of her cooking. It was hardly work to stock shelves in aisle five.

Sedgewick started by distributing the boxes throughout aisle three, dropping or sliding each package to its approximate location on the shelf. It seemed faster to spread the boxes out across the aisle and then price and shelve each one.

He knelt down next to the first box, a case of apple juice, and reached for his safety cutter. He flicked the razor forward and sliced the edge of the box on all three sides, careful not cut too deeply and damage the jugs of apple juice. Then he’d flip the cardboard case open with one hand and stow his razor in his back pocket with the other, grab the price gun and check the price. With a few turns of the knob he’d have the price entered in the archaic price gun, \$2.79, and then would whiz up and down the rows of apple juice slapping price stickers on the top of each jug. He’d slip the price gun into his back pocket by the handle and pick up the case of juice. In a quick motion he’d rest his leg on a lower shelf and balance the case on his knee, then start sliding jugs of juice onto the shelf.

Sometimes he had to rotate newer products to the back and bring the old stuff to the front. Sometimes a few extra bottles wouldn’t fit on the shelf and he’d have to decide between back stock and hiding it on the shelf, slipping an apple juice behind a grape juice. Depending on the product, it was usually easier to hide two or three items than put up with the hassle of back stock. More than likely the juice would

sell within a day and when they went through early in the morning to face all the shelves—pull the items to the front and make everything look clean, organized, and well-stocked—they could put the hidden apple juice where it belonged.

Case after case, cart after cart, night after night. It wasn't exactly rocket science. It was retail. And that's what Sedgewick liked about it. He didn't need a job where he had to think, which actually gave him plenty of time to think if he felt like it. Or if not he could zone off into wonderland and it really wouldn't affect his ability to put a \$1.79 sticker on a can of peas and put it on the shelf in the right spot.

Of course there's always more to the job. There was break time, the chance for some back and forth banter with his coworkers. Alex and Missy were both high schoolers, the ever-changing crew of after school workers, some who stuck around for a few years, others only a few months. Missy was fairly new, but Alex had been around.

Jimmie used to be an after school worker, but after graduation he started the transition into lifer. At least that's what the guys in the meat department said. Jimmie kept talking about college, and he'd tried taking classes here and there. He was a part-time student working a full time job, on track to being a forever student, which really means it's only a matter of time. Sedgewick liked working with Jimmie. He may be on his way to a deadend grocery store job, but at least he knew where he stood. He did his job, did it well, and got on with his life. Sedgewick liked that. Jimmie didn't gripe like half the high school workers did about what a dump this Cub Foods was and how eager they were to get out of here. It's a job, and you have to appreciate your job.

Work is work. That's probably something Sedgewick's grandfather used to say. In the break room Sedgewick would listen to some of the other adults, the real lifers, and he got the feeling that it wasn't so bad. You do your job and you enjoy it while you can. You're helping people buy their groceries. It's nothing glamorous, but it has to be done.

There are always deeper thoughts about the retail world, all sorts of customer service junk, but Sedgewick left that to the Assistant Manager, Roth Maxwell. Roth was fresh out of the university's business school, eager to apply his book learning to the real world. Which meant he didn't know anything.

Both Roth and the real manager, a guy who split his day between stalking the aisles in his stiff suit and sitting outside smoking, didn't have time for anything more than berating the employees. A simple conversation about the benefits of customer service might have helped, it might have kept Sedgewick from spreading his cart full of juice across the aisle so it got in every customer's way, but nobody thinks to share business class knowledge with the part-time stock help.

"Scuse me," Sedgewick mumbled as he pulled a case of Gatorade from the floor and flattened himself against the shelf to give an elderly shopper pushing a cart dangerously down the aisle plenty of room. She smiled at him and plodded along, Sedgewick gave a tight-lipped smile in return, his muscles straining at the weight of 288 ounces of purple Gatorade.

When the woman had passed, Sedgewick dropped the case and stooped next to it. He could hear conversation floating over from aisle one, the bread, candy and mixed nuts aisle. A child wanted some chocolate treat and his exasperated mother didn't want to give in. It seemed pretty clever to Sedgewick to stick the candy in the first aisle. Parents have barely gotten past the produce section when their already bored kids could eye the candy and strike. The poor parents had to fight to get their kids in the door, they were lulled into thinking it might not be so bad in the vibrant, colorful produce section, and then wham. Candy. The begging and pleading would begin, and with such a necessity as bread in the same aisle, there was no avoiding it. Retail brilliance.

But it had the dual-effect of exasperating any poor employee working within earshot. Sedgewick exchanged glances with Dave in produce as the kid's pleas went a notch higher. Key change. Get ready for the pay off.

Twenty minutes later Sedgewick had finished off his cart of juice and egg noodles and was pulling the empty cart to the back room. The day's truck was two-thirds unloaded, which was apparently cause for celebration.

"Break time?" Sedgewick asked.

"Yeah, I've been here since one," said Jimmie, seated on a half-cleared pallet of dog food.

"Oh, me too," said Alex, half snickering.

“You didn’t get here until 3:30,” said Jimmie, “So shut up. You can break with Sedgewick in another hour or two.”

The one thing Sedgewick could say for union-backed grocery work was that union breaks were enforced. For an eight-hour shift you had two 15-minute breaks and a half hour lunch. Though lunch was off the clock, you were required to take it, which meant you worked an eight and a half hour day. But from start to finish it meant a break every two hours.

Alex and Missy usually had five-hour shifts, at least on school nights, thanks to state law, but they’d work eight-hour shifts on the weekend or Friday nights, like tonight. For as tough and cool as Alex tried to be, Sedgewick could never understand why he worked on Friday nights. It seemed like a prime social opportunity, but message didn’t always fit the hype.

Sometimes they’d all take an early break together with Jimmie and then take their breaks every two hours from there on out with Jimmie, then working a longer stretch at the end. Or taking an unofficial break, as Alex usually did. And sometimes Jimmie would save his break and take it with Sedgewick and the others, which usually meant he had an extra break and could justify sneaking off 15 minutes early.

As long as the work got done the grocery manager didn’t care.

Chapter 2

“Break time?” the cashier asked. Sedgewick nodded and gave a half smile, taking his pop and heading outside.

Alex was already there, sitting on the bench in front of Cub. Missy must have been busy with something else, or annoyed at Alex for whatever reason. The two of them had a strange, contentious relationship. Sometimes they flirted enough to make Sedgewick and Jimmie sick. Other times they hardly spoke.

Hardly speaking was fine with Sedgewick. It meant sitting outside on the bench would be a quiet, peaceful break, save for Alex’s noxious cigarette. The four of them had spent most of the summer working late nights at Cub unloading trucks. They were all working close to full time then, and it made more sense, three major shipments per week, two days to catch up and deplete the back stock, two days off. With school starting there wasn’t as much flow, not as much consistent help. But it somehow still got done. It just seemed more important in the summer.

Breathing the usually fresh air and seeing daylight motivated Sedgewick to come outside. Though he couldn’t have put words to it, the fluorescent overhead lights felt oppressive. Alex, on the other hand, came outside to watch for girls and smoke. The combination didn’t make a lot of sense. But Alex didn’t make much sense to Sedgewick.

Alex wore torn baggy jeans and a faded black Yankees hat. He slouched on the bench and liked to see how many times he could say ‘fuck.’ Sedgewick spent an entire break counting. 23 times. Alex averaged one and a half per minute.

“Oh, fuck.” Alex said, yawning and stretching at the same time. Sedgewick didn’t say anything. He looked at the ground and took another drink.

People continued to stream in and out of the store, mothers with kids in tow, grandparents poking their way along using the carts as canes. The elderly population of shoppers dwindled as the evenings wore on, but more single men would come in, buying frozen dinners and beer. There’d be the afternoon high school crowd, kids lucky enough not to be working, but unlucky enough to be sent on grocery store errands.

“How far along are you guys on the truck?” Sedgewick asked.
“Far.” Pause. Puff of smoke. “Fucking far.”

The sound of laughter echoed from across the parking lot, and both Sedgewick and Alex watched as a car emptied of four giggling girls.

“Oh yeah.” Alex snubbed out his cigarette on the sidewalk. “Must be Friday night. The college chicks need some groceries.” Alex leaned forward on the bench, watching the typical collegiate girls make their way into the store.

Sedgewick slowly shook his head. He went to class with most of these girls and didn’t understand Alex’s fascination with college girls who had to buy groceries. He thought it was some kind of flirting game, they came in to buy milk and fruit and macaroni & cheese, but they really wanted to watch high school senior and Cub stock boy Alex hike up his jeans and lift a case of Prego spaghetti sauce off the floor. At least that’s how Sedgewick envisioned the thought process in Alex’s head, which wasn’t so far from the truth. Though in reality it was much more explicit.

“Everybody needs groceries,” Sedgewick said. “C’mon, break time’s over.”

“By your watch. Sit down.”

Sedgewick stood there, watching Alex enjoy the bench. He waited a full ten seconds, long enough to watch a dad help his toddler-age son from the car. Then Sedgewick turned and went inside without a word.

“Fuck.” Alex got up and followed him in.

Sedgewick couldn’t help smiling. Jimmie was in a productive mood and had managed to get most of the truck unloaded. He was working away at the paper aisle with Alex, Missy was busy in aisle eight with the personal products, and Jimmie had told Sedgewick to start on aisle five, baked goods. This meant Sedgewick could look forward to the next few hours working contently by himself in his familiar aisle.

When they came back in from break they could hear the college girls in the store. It was getting late now, around 10, and the store was generally quieter in the later hours. But that’s when the nightlife came in, or the kind of nightlife a grocery store can attract, and you could usually track their progress throughout the store by

outburst of laughter. Sedgewick could never understand what was so incredibly funny about grocery shopping.

He grabbed a case of salt in one hand and toothpicks in the other, and started carrying them down the aisle and piling them in the appropriate places in front of the shelves. He picked up a package of brownie mix when he heard a muffled sob from the next aisle. He stopped to listen.

It sounded like a child. The sniffles and snobs, the restrained cries of a child. Sedgewick shifted his feet. He listened again. He could hear the thump as cases of paper towels landed on the floor in aisle ten. College girls were laughing in aisle two. The constant beeps and blips came from the front of the store as items were scanned at the register. Beneath it all he could hear the faint sniffing.

Tucking his price gun into his back pocket, Sedgewick slowly walked to the edge of his aisle and peeked out. A woman was inspecting hotdogs in the meat case to the right, and to the far left a few people were picking up milk and yogurt.

He turned to the display at the end of the aisle, the end cap, and pretended to straighten the Cheerios boxes, on sale two for \$5. He started close to aisle five, but moved over a few rows of cereal boxes so he could peer into aisle six and continue straightening the display.

There on the far side of the aisle, twenty feet or so from Sedgewick, in the little alcove created by the end of cereal shelving and the start of the recessed section of cheap toys, sat a little boy. He was alone. He sobbed every few moments, his head tucked into his knees. There was a racecar on the floor next to him, one of the plastic toys the store sold in the cereal aisle as another temptation for children and their poor parents, an overpriced piece of junk. No one else was in the aisle.

Sedgewick looked both ways, as if he were crossing the street, and left the end cap and closed the few steps between him and the child. His pulse quickened as he stopped in front of the child. He kicked at a discarded gum wrapper and then reached to straighten a box of granola bars. He looked both ways again, and then crouched next to the boy. The kid didn't look up.

“Um, hi.”

Sniffle.

“I... uh, saw your race car there.” Sedgewick pointed to the blue and white car. “That’s one of my favorites. Old number six.”

Sniffle.

Sedgewick waited.

The boy slowly looked up, uncovering his head just enough to see Sedgewick. He saw an older boy, definitely older than his brother, but not as old as his dad. This guy was wearing a Cub uniform and had messy hair. He wasn't looking at the boy, but was staring at the racecar.

The boy pulled his head back and dropped his hands to the floor.

"I can't find my dad."

Sedgewick could barely make out the voice, but he didn't ask the boy to say it again. He understood. The boy stood up, coming eye to eye with Sedgewick. He held out his hand.

"I'm Connor. Connor Olson."

"Sedgewick." The boy wrinkled his brow in response, but didn't say anything. He held out his hand to Sedgewick. He took Connor's hand and stood up, starting down the aisle after him.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Sedgewick asked.

Connor stopped and looked back. The #6 racecar sat on the floor. Connor turned, picked up the car, and put it back on the shelf. Sedgewick watched him carefully.

"Sorry." They were about halfway down the aisle, towards the front of the store before Sedgewick responded.

"I thought—I thought you wanted to keep the car." Connor looked up at Sedgewick, and a smile spread across his face.

"I have more race cars at home." This apparently settled it.

Sedgewick led Connor up the cereal aisle to the front of the store and towards the customer service counter. He stopped a few feet away, while a customer picked out lotto tickets. Connor looked around, one hand holding Sedgewick's and the other pulling at his lip. Sedgewick could feel the eyes of the cashiers on him, their minds trying to decipher the scene, each of them softening as the situation dawned on them.

"Hey Meg," the cashier in the express lane called to the Customer Service Manager, who was busy with the lotto tickets. Meg looked up, and the cashier gestured with her head towards Sedgewick, her hands continuing to scan items, each one blipping as it passed from one conveyor to the next. Meg turned to Sedgewick, who looked

down to Connor without saying anything. Oblivious, Connor was still looking around the store.

“He can’t find his dad,” Sedgewick said after a moment.

Warmth broke out in Meg's face, not a complete smile, but closer to it than anything Sedgewick had ever seen. The Customer Service Managers were in charge of the cashiers and things at the front of the store. Sedgewick rarely dealt with them and only saw their tired interactions with complaining customers or slumped over a Tupperware lunch in the break room.

Meg finished with the lotto customer and looked down at Connor.

“So your dad got lost, huh?”

Connor nodded.

“Well c’mon up here and we’ll track him down,” Meg said, patting the counter with her hand and looking up at Sedgewick. Connor looked up at Sedgewick, too, and Sedgewick hesitated for a moment, realizing what he was supposed to do but not sure how to go about doing it. He picked up cases of juice all the time, but not kids.

Sedgewick lowered to one knee and picked Connor up with a hand under each armpit. He turned to set Connor on the customer service counter, but Connor latched onto him instead. He hesitated, awkwardly trying to figure out where to put his hands to get a better grasp on Connor, before finally turning the kid and wrapping an arm around his back. Connor clung to Sedgewick’s Cub Foods vest and Sedgewick tried to hide his panic.

Meg thought this was adorable, as did Nancy, the cashier in the express lane, and the two could hardly contain their cooing. Sedgewick could feel his ears turning red, could hear other cashiers whispering about it, could feel himself losing his grip on Connor. He shifted the child’s weight and looked at Meg, hoping she’d do something.

“What’s your dad’s name?” Meg asked. Connor didn’t say anything. He was burying his head into Sedgewick’s chest, probably rubbing his face against the hard plastic nametag. Meg looked at Sedgewick.

“Hey Connor.” Sedgewick mumbled to the boy in his arms.

“Your dad... what’s his name?” Connor didn’t say anything.

“Olson. He told me before, his name is Connor Olson,” Sedgewick said. “Is your dad’s name Olson?”

Connor nodded and Meg turned to page Mr. Olson to the customer service counter. Sedgewick turned to lean on the counter, both to hold up Connor's extra weight and so he wouldn't have to look at Meg watching him. But now he was facing the rest of the store, and had to watch everyone else watch him and Connor. Another father had a knowing smile, as he turned the corner into the freezer aisle. An older kid, maybe eleven or twelve watched the two as he walked by, but turned away when Sedgewick looked him in the eye.

Then Alex came around the corner of aisle eight, headed for the trashcan by the customer service counter with a rolled up ball of tape. Surprised, he exchanged glances with Sedgewick, but didn't say anything. Sedgewick was sure he'd seen Alex mouth his favorite word.

As Alex walked away the quartet of giggling college girls approached, headed for the check out. Sedgewick saw them coming from the bakery, four girls with one half-full cart. They were stocking up on diet pop, bottled water, ramen noodles, bread, cereal, milk—the usual college survival food.

A few of the girls looked strangely familiar, but Sedgewick had that feeling about most girls approximately his age. He'd seen so many, and knew so many, and felt half-attracted to so many pretty girls his age that they always struck a chord of familiarity, even if he'd never seen them in his life. Most girls seemed pretty to Sedgewick, not just the skinny college blondes who had an eye for fashion and a fake smile. Sometimes the girls who wore baggy jeans and dyed their hair wild colors struck Sedgewick as incredibly beautiful. Sometimes the bigger girls, the plus-size ones who understood the futility of competing with checkout magazine covers had a beauty that attracted Sedgewick.

The ones who lived and died by these covers, the ones who flirted with the wrong guys, the ones who sometimes tried to buy alcohol at Cub with fake IDs (Who would ever think a corporate grocery store would sell beer to underage college girls? Cub had been to known to card grandmothers.), the ones who knew how jaw-droppingly beautiful they were—Sedgewick found them attractive, but not in the same way. While Alex would let a 'fuck' slip while his mouth dropped open at the site of one of these girls, Sedgewick felt a hint of pity.

Of the four college girls stocking up on a Friday night, only one of them struck Sedgewick as the type deserving pity. She was already ahead of the others, paused at the magazine rack in lane one, her hand on her hip (coincidentally clad in a short skirt featured on pages 17, 34 and 114 of the actual magazine she was looking at).

The second of the four was tall and skinny, with her hair tied up in two oblong balls on the back of her head. She turned to the left, away from Sedgewick, when his eye fell on her, and the complete image reminded Sedgewick strangely of a giraffe.

The third girl was shorter and squatter and her eyes lingered on a display of pastries, but she walked on. She had straight blond hair and blue eyes that Sedgewick could see from twenty feet away. She was smiling, chatting with the fourth girl. She wore a long khaki skirt and a tucked in blouse, reminding Sedgewick of a schoolteacher. She looked like the kind of girl Sedgewick would gladly ask for help from, the kind of girl most guys would gloss over, to their complete and total loss.

The fourth girl slumped over the cart as she pushed it; laughing at something the third girl said when Sedgewick looked at her. Her laugh was pure and real, not a giggly echo that could be heard across the store, but a quieter, softer, and funnier sound that made you think the comment must have been a good one. Her hair was dyed black, or had been at one time, and was tied into a short ponytail. She wore black cargo pants, the kind with big bulging pockets, and a baggy T-shirt. She had clompy shoes, the kind that just poked out from under the near-bell bottoms.

As Sedgewick watched them pass and join the line at register three, Mr. Olson had made his way to the customer service counter. Sedgewick hadn't noticed him coming, and neither had Connor, who by now was almost asleep in Sedgewick's arms.

"Connor!" the man cried out, quickening his pace. Connor's eyes shot open in surprise. He had been asleep.

"Is that your dad?" Sedgewick asked before loosening his grip. Connor hadn't let go either, but he nodded with three short nods. Sedgewick lowered Connor to the floor and watched him walk over to his dad. Mr. Olson seemed to breathe a sigh of relief, nodded at Sedgewick, and took Connor's hand as he led him back to wherever he had left his cart when he heard the page.

Connor turned back to Sedgewick, smiled, and kept walking with his dad. Sedgewick couldn't help smiling himself, exchanged another glance with Meg, and headed back to aisle five and his case of brownie mix.

As he turned he shoved his hands in his pockets and looked right into the green eyes of the fourth college girl, who had apparently been watching the entire child handoff with Connor and his dad. Her eyes quickly fell to the floor and the slightest hint of color came to her freckled cheeks. She hadn't been smiling, but a grin spread across her face as Sedgewick watched and continued past.

Just before it was too late she looked up again, right into Sedgewick's eyes, and this time it was his turn to look away. He self-consciously ran his hand through his shaggy hair and turned down aisle five, not knowing but feeling like that fourth girl watched him the entire length of the aisle. She did.

Chapter 3

Sedgewick walked home that night. He didn't always walk home after work, sometimes he was simply too tired. But tonight was a good night to be alone with his thoughts.

They often ricocheted around his mind like bullets, and tonight was no exception. He bit his lip as he turned the corner on his block, realizing how far he had shuffled along in a daze. His nose felt cold in the October air, and he was eager to get inside.

The cycle started over again on Monday, with a week of school and a few random evenings of work. The weekend had gone by in a blur, miscellaneous yard work on Saturday, a short shift at Cub, and a day off on Sunday.

It was dark and early as Sedgewick walked to the bus stop. Alone, again, with his thoughts. As you can imagine, they kept going back to Connor and the green-eyed girl. Well, probably more the green-eyed girl, but Connor was certainly in the mix as well.

Children were new and different for Sedgewick. Certainly he had been a child once, in many ways still was, and though he remembered some of what it was like, enough to remember certain looks and certain feelings of joy or panic, he had no preparation for this side of children, the older, more responsible, parental role. He simply had minimal, if any, interaction with kids and it left him lost, dazed and confused.

Other people Sedgewick's age have a similar lack of interaction with kids in their daily lives. They usually don't have kids themselves, and only the childcare professionals routinely encounter that in the workplace. Unlike other teens, Sedgewick never did any babysitting. He didn't have any younger siblings, not even one close in age so he could at least mimic the mothering and fathering skills he saw in action.

Examples for mothering and fathering skills were short in Sedgewick's life, but you could also say they were beyond measure. He also never had any cousins who lived close by. He lived most of his life quietly with his grandmother and grandfather, and then just with his grandmother. There was never the late night wailing of a child in distress. Nor the quiet giggle of a happy baby.

So with Connor, Sedgewick had made it up as he went along. And what was really surprising him, why the matter was still on his mind a weekend later, is because Connor had responded so well. It worked. Either Sedgewick had legitimately figured out how to interact with a child, or Connor could just sense Sedgewick's uneasiness and responded with pity. Pity, strangely, seemed to flow both ways.

Sedgewick rounded the corner to see the bus shelter empty and checked the bank's clock to see that he was right on time. It was also 53 degrees, not cold by any stretch, but it was definitely getting colder. The frigid temperatures would begin setting in and the frost would start to appear on the grass blades and roof shingles.

Sedgewick plopped down on the bench and his thoughts turned to the other matter. The fourth college girl. Girls—women—were a mystery to Sedgewick, as they are to most guys, especially young college age boys—men—like Sedgewick. His eyes couldn't help following them, sometimes overwrought conversations developing in his mind, when in reality the only interaction he could ever hope for was "Sorry, we're all out of Diet Coke," or "I got $x=72.3$." Neither had much potential, though that was okay. That was reality.

But Sedgewick also knew that while not every girl who passed by and made his eyes quietly follow was worth following, not every girl he had these flirtations moments with in his head could ever see him that way, while that was true, there were, maybe, quite possibly a few girls out there who were worthwhile for his eyes to follow, who just might see him in the same flirtatious way, though hopefully in a deeper way that still mattered when flirting dissolved with familiarity. Maybe.

As Sedgewick sat on the cold metal bench a few others joined the wait for the 7:04 bus. A black man, his hands buried in the pockets of his jacket, shuffled along, followed by a business man in a suit and tie, briefcase in one hand, coffee in the other.

Then came another college girl. Sedgewick had seen her before. She didn't have green eyes, but she did have dirty blonde hair, a messenger bag over one shoulder and often read history notes on the bus. She lived a few blocks away, at least that's what Sedgewick guessed. He'd seen her turn a corner and join Sedgewick's route to the bus stop only a few blocks from here. She probably lived on that

street. But she was consumed with history notes and the pavement and keeping her hands in her coat pockets.

Not every girl would captivate the imagination. Sometimes it was a tyranny of the new. There was something about the inherent potential in a fresh encounter with someone you didn't know. They hadn't seen you sitting at the bus stop by yourself for two months, they didn't expect you to be as quiet and reserved as you were, and frankly you didn't know what to expect from them. You didn't know whether they'd sit on the bus and bury themselves in history notes, or if they'd at least spend a minute, maybe more, pretending to just sit and stare ahead, leaving the door open, just a crack, for conversation with the slightly handsome, curious looking fellow they just sat down next to and, barring an accident, would probably be sitting with for the remainder of the thirty minute ride.

Not that Sedgewick thought himself handsome. That might be a stretch. But he did wonder if the same curiosity that arose in him every time a member of the opposite sex of approximately the same age passed by was perhaps aroused in said member of the opposite sex by him. We're not talking attraction, just simple curiosity. Sedgewick would settle for being noticed.

The #16 pulled up to the stop light at the corner and Sedgewick stood up. He let the college girl get on first, though more by silent acquiescence than any gentlemanly gesture. He followed her on and watched her sit down near the front and go instinctively for the notes in her bag. Sedgewick took an empty seat near the middle, towards the back of the middle, but not as far back as the back of the bus where the seats faced one another instead of towards the front.

Sedgewick liked the idea of riding in the back of the bus, it seemed like the cool thing for school children to do, and on a city bus a white boy choosing to sit in the back seemed to ensure those years of racial segregation that were shattered by Rosa Parks in the 1950s were indeed overthrown, though it was only a gesture in Sedgewick's mind. But the seats that faced each other weren't very comfortable, and they made it hard to read.

Of all the things you can do on the bus, reading was Sedgewick's favorite. There were certainly other good things, sometimes sleeping didn't feel so bad, and sometimes leaning your head back and just staring out the window, letting the feel of the tires on the pavement lull you into a daze was a fine way to pass the bus

ride. But reading seemed the most efficient use of mind and time, and so that's what Sedgewick usually did. The consistent reading time meant he usually finished an inordinate number of books.

At the next stop a black man in an ill-fitting suit and trench coat boarded the bus. He looked older, with gray hair taking over and a worn, stretched look about his face. He sat down in the empty seat next to Sedgewick.

"How you doin' there, boy?" the man asked.

"I'm good."

The man nodded.

"And your weekend?"

"You know, Charles, it was a blur." Sedgewick said. "A good blur, but a blur nonetheless." Another good way to pass the time on the bus was conversation. Sedgewick didn't normally talk to strangers often, though the bus was a social sphere where it was perfectly acceptable to do so, and with routine schedules some of those strangers became acquaintances and sometimes even friends. Charles was a bit more, a man who got on a stop or two after Sedgewick and got off at the university with Sedgewick.

"I know what that's like, I do," said Charles.

"How about yours?"

"Wasn't a blur, that's for sure." Sedgewick smiled, waiting for more. "I savored it. Went for a walk on Sunday morning with my woman. You can't beat a good walk on an autumn morning, 'specially not one with a fine young lady on your arm. Am I right?"

Sedgewick grinned and nodded, trying not to laugh. He didn't have that many Sunday morning walks in autumn with pretty girls, but he had to imagine they'd be worth savoring.

"I'm right," Charles said when Sedgewick didn't answer.

Charles worked at a non-profit near the university, some type of desk job that Sedgewick didn't understand. It sounded as though Charles had worked there all his life, or at least quite a long while, judging from his stories of days gone by.

"Your wife, you really love her—don't you?"

Charles turned and looked Sedgewick in the eye.

"Boy, you're full of surprises, aren't you?" He slapped Sedgewick on the knee, just like his grandfather used to do, and turned back to the front of the bus.

“Yes,” he answered quietly. “I do.” They sat in silence for a block or two. The bus slowed as it pulled up to another stop.

“I said those two little words some 35 years ago. I meant ‘em then, and I mean ‘em now.” He paused, “That’s right, she’s my light,” and chuckled softly to himself. The bus pulled away and another block passed.

“And why are you asking?” Charles knew the answer. Sedgewick did, too.

“So who’s the girl?” Charles asked, leaning forward slightly and nodding his head as he spoke. Sedgewick looked to his knees and shuffled his feet, suddenly bothered that he couldn’t stretch his legs more. He bit his lip.

“She’s nobody,” Sedgewick said. “At least not yet.”

Charles nodded. Sedgewick exhaled and drooped his shoulders.

“It’s so stupid, Charles, I saw a girl at work, I see a thousand girls at work, but I thought about this one all weekend. We didn’t even say a single word to each other. I didn’t even see her for more than a moment, but I haven’t had a moment when she’s not in my head.”

Charles started laughing, slowly at first, but harder and harder as Sedgewick got going, bringing the tirade to an abrupt end.

“I... I just...” Sedgewick exhaled and grew quiet. Charles smiled, but didn’t say anything. He watched a punk rocker with a leather jacket and metal studs board the bus.

“You’ve never felt like this before, have you?”

“No. ... Well, yeah. But, no.” Sedgewick could only shake his head.

“Does it feel ridiculous to have feelings for a girl you’ve never talked to?” Sedgewick nodded in response.

“That’s okay. You know that, right? We’re wired that way.” Sedgewick didn’t say anything.

“And it never really ends. 35 years of marriage and I still notice the girls go by.” Sedgewick smiled weakly at the thought of Charles checking out women semi-retired like him.

“But I’ll tell you what,” Charles said, leaning in close. “Actually getting to know that girl of your eye is so much more amazing than those little butterflies you’ve got messin’ up your system right now. You’ll either find those pretty eyes are just a hollow façade and there’s nothin’ goin’ on upstairs—in which case there’s no sense wasting any

more weekends on her. Or you'll find yourself falling for the deeper mystery behind those eyes, a mystery you'll never fully understand or tire of experiencing. I've gone 35 years and my wife is still a joyous mystery."

Sedgewick didn't say anything. His mind was wrapped around what Charles had said and was trying to figure out what that meant for him.

"I apologize for talking your ear off, boy. It looks like our stop is coming up."

"Thanks, Charles."

"Any time, my boy, any time. You'll find that men my age can be founts spouting knowledge and wisdom to anyone who'll listen. The problem's getting us to shut up. See, here I go again."

Sedgewick smiled as he made his way out of the seat and followed Charles off the bus. The two walked in silence to the corner, and just before they went their separate ways Charles spoke.

"You'll let me know, won't you, just how far those eyes go?"

"I will." Sedgewick adjusted his bag on his shoulder and headed to class.

Chapter 4

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Allison.”

Sedgewick just about fell out of his chair. He’d been eating in a quiet corner of the cafeteria, his back to the world and his eyes scanning his art history notes. A girl came up behind him, practically sprinted, and jumped to a stop right in front of him. She rested her leg on the chair opposite Sedgewick and retied her running shoes, showing smooth legs that weren’t tanned or sculpted to perfection, but still got his attention. She wore a baggy pair of green running shorts and a black long-sleeve t-shirt with the slogan “Petra means rock” plastered across the front. It was faded and thin, suffering from a few too many washes (her mother had actually tried to throw the shirt away, but Allison rescued it from the trash). Her hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, though strands of hair had come loose and were shifting in the air.

She was smiling, almost on the verge of bubbling, but managing to keep it in. She had watched Sedgewick’s reaction when she first bounded up, but quickly turned to tying her shoes to avoid his gaze.

She looked tired, though energized, from her morning run, and was still breathing heavily. She had bright green eyes and Sedgewick found himself wondering just how deep the eyes of this fourth college girl went.

Sedgewick opened his mouth to speak after what felt like minutes, but was only seconds, though it was now becoming an awkward pause. He closed his mouth again and smiled. He leaned back in his chair and his left hand dove for his pocket and he started twirling his pen with his right hand.

“Sedgewick,” he finally managed. “I’m Sedgewick.” He was totally unprepared for this. It couldn’t be right. Such an encounter usually required a hundred failed tries, hours of watching and waiting and wondering when the right time would come. But it had all been stolen from him, snatched out right before his eyes, keeping him from all the longing and drama and forever waiting. Sedgewick couldn’t believe his luck.

“Sedgewick?” she repeated, as if taken aback. “Well, it’s good to put a name to a stock boy.” She smiled. There was no second-

guessing it now. She was definitely the green-eyed fourth college girl, and she was definitely talking to Sedgewick. But her manner, her style seemed to indicate a bad end. Stock boy?

Sedgewick nodded. He kept fiddling with his pen.

“Look,” she said, reaching and grabbing Sedgewick’s pen. He could feel the heat in her fingers, a sensation that went all the way to his toes, and his fingers went limp and he let the pen go. “I don’t normally do this. But it’s a big campus and I didn’t think I’d see you again until we ran out of ramen and Diet Coke.”

She paused, and Sedgewick realized her cheeks were red, bright red, not from running, but from this. Her fingers twitching slightly, just like Sedgewick’s, and they happened to still be touching, faintly, as if to keep Sedgewick from reaching for his pen again. Sedgewick smiled, remembering the grocery cart of college survival food. He always wondered what ramen actually was that it could be so cheap, and was thankful he could live with his grandmother and not brave the dorms.

“Here,” she said, taking Sedgewick’s hand in hers and picking up his pen, the cap bent and twisted from absent minded fiddling. She wrote a series of digits across the back of his hand, careful to let the ink flow and not press too hard on his skin. “I know this is an incredibly high school thing to do, but I’ve got to get to class. Give me a call sometime.”

She dropped the pen and stood up, ready to take off as quickly as she’d come.

“Wait,” Sedgewick said, reaching for her arm. “Why...” he trailed off, unsure of what to say. But Allison knew what he meant. She wondered herself.

“Because I believe...” she said, trailing off but smiling slightly. She walked away. Sedgewick watched her go, and then turned back to his art history notes, carefully copying her number above the dates for American expressionism, in case something should happen to his hand before he could get to a phone.

Outside the sky was a pale blue and the leaves were flame. Sedgewick could have soared across the sky. But no matter what, he couldn’t sit there and read about expressionism. This was so beyond the history of art in digestible university format.

He packed his notes and pen and left the cafeteria, not really sure where he was going. Outside would be a good start. He pushed open a door and felt the crisp autumn air. He didn't realize he'd been sweating. His mind moved faster than his legs could carry him, and he quickly dropped on to a bench. His mind kept reeling and tried to understand what just happened.

Students were heading in every direction, swarming the campus on their way to class and work and home.

Allison. Her name was Allison.

He still didn't know anything about her, except she appeared to go running in the morning, and it bothered him that he was so fascinated. Charles seemed to think that was perfectly normal. But what's normal about it?

Sedgewick watched the churning sea of students, noticing plenty of college girls, and noticing a few who walked arm in arm with a college boy. He wondered if that's what was in store for him. That was the last thing he had on his mind, that wasn't exactly what he pictured when he thought about girls. But what did he picture? He didn't know. There would be a few imaginative scenes in his mind, mostly introductions, though they were nothing like the real thing where he barely managed to say five words. Less if you didn't count his own name. And those suave introductions in his mind never went farther than that. It seemed ludicrous enough that he was even having the conversation, it was too much of a push for his mind to go farther.

Allison believed. It was what made her cross a crowded cafeteria and say something to a stock boy she'd only seen once. It made her do something she wouldn't normally do, at least that's what she claimed. But what did that really mean? Wrinkles formed on Sedgewick's brow and he bit his lip.

Love at first sight? True love? Sedgewick suddenly felt like he was in the midst of some romantic drama, probably a teen flick, one of those dramedies that intersperse their touching scenes with witty dialogue to keep the teens laughing and enjoying themselves and buying more movie tickets the next week. No one is that witty in real life.

Does anything like that even happen in real life? It seemed to be happening to Sedgewick, but he couldn't believe that's what it really was. He still didn't know what was behind those deep green eyes. What's the point of all these mushy feelings if it's all for naught?

But Sedgewick wondered if there was any way to win this game without going through the ups and downs. The only way to find out what was behind those green eyes, it seemed to Sedgewick, was to dive right in. And hope he was right.

He stood up from the bench and headed to class, hoping against hope that he'd be able to manage something productive that day.

She must have been looking for me, Sedgewick thought. He started to realize all kinds of meanings in the few words she said, though they were more than he said. She must have been thinking of going back to the grocery store as the only way she could find Sedgewick again. She must have had the same blur of a weekend, thinking about someone in that new, strange, floating on air kind of way. That someone was Sedgewick.

He also realized, with a touch of panic, that he had given her so little to go on. He had managed to squeak out five words. Hardly a complete sentence among them. He had been aloof, stammering, fidgeting, unsure of what to do or say. Not that he was ever completely on top of his game.

The thoughts swirled and swirled and practically drowned Sedgewick. Class finally ended it and he took off. Trying to continue like this was crazy. He walked across the campus, against the flow of hurried students late for class. He adjusted the messenger bag across his shoulder, resting one hand on the strap and sticking his left hand in his pocket. He walked slowly, enough to be the slightest nuisance to the people behind him, but Sedgewick didn't care. His mind kept moving so quickly that he couldn't let the rest of him go very fast or he'd slip off the ground and lose touch with this reality.

He watched a bus lumber through the intersection and then he crossed the street, heading right for a block and then ducking down a side street. The sun was higher now, giving warmth through the bitter air. It was still October though, and that bitter air made Sedgewick's nose cold.

A mother and child walked in front of him, about the same slow pace he managed. The mother looked worn down, practically dragging the child along, who didn't seem to notice. The kid kept stumbling along, bright eyes darting to the left and the right, taking in the strange new world of a college campus.

Sedgewick remembered that feeling. His first days on this campus were crushingly overwhelming. So many students. So many buildings. So much sidewalk going in every direction at once. It took a few weeks to adjust, days of getting his bearings and realizing that it wasn't as immense as it first seemed. He smiled, realizing the child wasn't overwhelmed with classes and schedules and confusing maps. The child probably wanted to run in the green grass, watch the city buses come and go, and toss the Frisbee around with the older boys who never seemed to actually go to class.

Sedgewick crossed another street, leaving the mother and child, and took a flight of stairs down the embankment to the river. The University of Minnesota campus straddled the Mississippi River, which wound its way through the Twin Cities, through the fields and bluffs of Minnesota, through the heart of the Midwest and on south before finally emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. To be so connected to such a major artery made the world seem a little smaller, a little more manageable.

Most people in the Twin Cities took the great river for granted. They forgot it was their source of drinking water, forgot that it wound through the cities, only remembered when one of the many bridges was scheduled for reconstruction and their daily lives were interrupted.

Sedgewick stepped off the last stair and crossed the green strip of grass. At the bottom of the bluffs there was a flat stretch of land that slowly and gradually sloped towards the river. At flood stage this little park would be the first to succumb to the rising water.

Sedgewick had seen those rising flood waters before, years and years ago when his grandfather took him to a secluded little park in St. Paul. Everything was under water then. The street signs and parking signs stuck out of the water like buoys. You couldn't tell where the parking lot ended and the grass began, where the picnic tables were or where the beach started. The water looked calm and eerie, like it was slowly taking back the world, rising and rising until every last mountain peak gave in.

A few days later the water crested and finally began to recede. Sedgewick remembered coming back to the river again with his grandfather weeks later, seeing the sand and dirt and rocks and junk the water had left in its wake.

But that was years ago. While the river rose every spring, fueled by melting snow and April showers, it hadn't risen nearly so high since. Just before the water's edge the manicured lawn ended and wild vegetation, shrubs and twisted trees took over the final eight- or ten-foot drop to the river's sandy edge. The higher bluff Sedgewick had just come down blocked out much of the city's noise. In this part of the city the river ran at the bottom of a gorge, essentially dropping out of sight and going unnoticed. It made for a quiet retreat, only interrupted by the knowing nods of fellow wonderers.

Sedgewick stopped at the last drop, looking down the steep, eroded slope. There were huge rocks and fallen trees, pulled down by the strong, continual sweep of the river. Someone sat on one of those rocks, perched on top with their knees pulled up to their chin, arms wrapped around their legs, not unlike Connor had been when Sedgewick found him alone in the cereal aisle.

It was a girl in a black shirt and green shorts. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but the wind kept pulling loose strands away. Sedgewick stood there on the bank, looking down on her, wondering.

He turned back to the manicured lawn, looked to the picnic tables and swings to the right and the parking lot to the left. There. At the edge of the parking lot. Sedgewick crossed the lawn, and stuck a hand in to his pocket, digging around for loose change.

The pay phone was half graffiti covered, designs and words that were meaningless to Sedgewick. In one movement he picked up the receiver and plunked his change in the slot. He breathed. He looked at his hand and dialed the seven slightly smeared digits. There was a pause, silence, then the phone began to ring.

Faintly, ever so faintly, he could hear a noise like tinkling chimes, but the wind kept carrying it farther and fainter. It rang a second and third time in his ear, and with his other ear he strained to hear that faint tinkle. When it rang a fifth time he was about to hang up when he heard a click. There was another moment of silence and then what sounded like muffled wind.

"He—hello?" the voice cracked and broke, fragile when it did finally squeak out.

Sedgewick hung up. It was her. And he knew what was wrong, what made her voice crack and stammer, though he hoped against hope that he was totally, completely, utterly wrong.

He crossed the parking lot, slow but sure. At the edge of the bank he looked down to the boulder and the black and green and flesh ball perched on top. Her head was again buried. Sedgewick picked his way down the slope, carefully placing each foot. At the bottom, where the bank washed away to stones and sand, he stooped and picked up a few golf ball size rocks.

He stood about ten feet behind the boulder and the crumpled girl. He looked down at the rocks in his hands, the girl still oblivious. One was pockmarked and beaten, chunks missing and broken off, jagged. Another was smooth, polished and worked over by the continual passing of water and minute grains of sand. He took the pockmarked rock in his fist, clenched it, and then hurled it with all his might up into the clear blue sky and out over the blue water of the Mississippi.

The rock hung in the air and Sedgewick held his breath, waiting for the sploosh that would shatter the silence and announce his presence. He closed his eyes and counted. One. Two. Splash. Three.

He opened his eyes and fell into the deepest well of tears drowning the greenest eyes he'd ever seen. The lump grew in Sedgewick's throat. A lump he hadn't realized was back, a lump that wanted to choke him. It was a lump he knew well.

Allison had the same lump, and from ten feet away Sedgewick could see her lip quivering slightly and a tear break from the pool in her eye and follow a well-worn path down her freckled cheek.

Sedgewick walked forward and stopped a few feet from the boulder. He pushed the sand with his shoe.

"Sometimes it helps," he said, holding out the smooth rock and looking past Allison to the Mississippi. Her body convulsed with the slightest of giggles, but it could have been a sob. Sedgewick couldn't tell.

She pulled herself from the boulder, stood on her own two feet, which were bare and sunk into the sand, and took the rock from Sedgewick's outstretched hand. She didn't wipe the tears from her eyes, but closed them, tightly, letting the tears run freely, draining her eyes. She finally opened them, looked out across the water and hurled

the rock, hard and violently, letting out a pained scream as she did. She dropped to her knees with the effort, but kept her head up to watch the rock scream over the water like a baseball and then slowly drop into the water. When it sunk into the river with a splash she dropped her head.

Sedgewick just watched. He toed the sand some more with his shoe, and turned the third rock over and over in his hand. He could see Allison sobbing again, see the muscles ripple through her body with each wave. Her cries became louder and louder, and Sedgewick bit his lip. When he stepped forward Allison raised her hands and clenched both fists, then erupted, smashing both hands into the sand and punching, punching as she screamed and her body racked with sobs.

He put his hands on her arms to steady her, to stop the violent outburst, but she kept going. Sedgewick closed his eyes, as tight as they would go and wrapped both arms around her, not tight and suffocating like a bear hug, but still strong and firm. She continued to punch with her fists, lashing out at anything and now that was Sedgewick. More than hugging her, he was containing her from exploding out of herself and leaving nothing but an empty, broken shell. She landed seven, eight, a dozen blows to Sedgewick's chest before she finally stopped. And they weren't weak, light punches either. They hurt. Allison did more than run in the mornings, she played soccer and worked out.

She finally collapsed into Sedgewick, burying her face in his chest, the chest she'd just pummeled and quite possibly bruised. Her knees sank into the sand, and Sedgewick's did too as he pulled this girl close and held her in his arms on the edge of the Mississippi.

"Did it help?" Sedgewick asked, his eyes lost in a daze, his grip on Allison not loosening. She didn't move either but nodded her head.

"How... how did you know?"

"I know."

"I just can't believe..." The sobs overcame her again.

"I know."

"I can't believe she's gone."

"Your mom?" Allison nodded.

"Was it... did your mom...?" The question never fully came out. She just stopped.

“No, she didn’t die,” he answered. “I don’t—I don’t think. But I did lose her.”

“But, the rocks...”

“My grandfather...” Sedgewick started, feeling a tremor in the depths of his soul. His eyes grew heavy with the weight of it all, and he closed them.

“...my brother...” Sedgewick continued, “my dad.”

Allison pulled herself away and looked into Sedgewick’s face. His eyes were still closed against the world. He was biting his lip. She reached out her hand, bits of sand still clinging to it, and touched his cheek. He turned his face into her hand and slowly opened his eyes.

The tiniest of smiles broke out on Allison’s face and she began to cry again, this time for her mother and Sedgewick’s mother and grandfather and brother and father, and it just as well have been the entire world. She smiled only because she couldn’t understand how one lone person could endure so much loss and still not be lost himself.

Tears were still coming from her eyes, but now they flowed from Sedgewick’s as well, a single tear at first, but then another and another and another. They dropped from his face, some falling to hers, others falling to the sandy beach.

Together their tears fell, tributaries to the mighty Mississippi, winding through the heart of a nation before finally emptying into the salty ocean hundreds of miles away.

It was just this morning he’d even learned her name. Allison. Sedgewick’s mother was named Allison.

Chapter 5

“Why the long face, boy?” Charles asked. “I thought you were in the chase.”

Sedgewick hadn’t said anything, and he didn’t want to. But after this morning, he could understand, even appreciate, Charles asking. But it didn’t change the fact that he was reluctant to talk about it.

“Ooh... that bad, huh?” Charles said, studying Sedgewick’s face. “I’m sorry, boy, I didn’t mean to bring it up and pull you down into the dirt again.”

Sedgewick pursed his lips and the bus pulled away from the curb.

“It’s—it’s not that.”

Charles waited, relieved at what seemed like decent news, but he realized this meant something deeper. Slowly, forcefully at first but then with a little more ease, Sedgewick told the story of how Allison sauntered up to him in the cafeteria that morning. Charles grinned, and did everything he could to keep from slapping his knee and letting out a whoop.

“But then...” and Sedgewick grew quiet. The woman sitting in front of them got off the bus, and a blind man with a white cane got on, feeling his way to an empty seat in the front. Sedgewick watched the man move about with careful ease, seeming to know where everything was, even though he couldn’t see.

“Oh Charles, her mom—her mom died today.”

Charles’ grin fell flat.

“Oh, my boy,” he said, putting a tired arm around Sedgewick. They didn’t say anything the rest of the trip, just a gentle silence between the two and the sound of the bus driver announcing stops over the intercom.

When Charles’ stop approached, he lingered for a moment.

“Do you want to come with me today, boy?” Charles asked. Sedgewick looked up at him, considered the option, the thought of being at home so soon, and nodded. Together they got off a few stops before Sedgewick regularly did and crossed the street together.

“I’ll need to make a quick stop at home first, and then we can go.” Sedgewick nodded and they walked the six or seven blocks to Charles’ house in quiet. They turned the corner, pushed the gate open and walked up the steps. It was a tiny little house, a single story, but Charles always said there was plenty of room for him and his wife, Rita, and their little dog Dobbie.

When they opened the door they heard a bark from the other room and scurrying feet. Sedgewick closed the door and turned to see the little Jack Russell tearing down the hall. In the entryway it launched itself, practically landing in Sedgewick’s hands.

“Now you make Sedgewick feel welcome, Dobbie,” Charles said, giving the dog a good scratch behind the ears. Sedgewick laughed as the dog tried to lick his nose, or maybe the inside of his nose. He put the dog down and it ran a circle around him and stopped in front of him, then ran another circle or two, first clockwise, then counter clockwise. It stopped in front of Sedgewick again and sat on the floor, its butt firmly planted but its tail thumping back and forth on the hardwood floor. Sedgewicks scratched the dog’s head and it leaned into his hand, savoring the attention.

“I’m pleased to introduce you,” Charles said, as Sedgewick looked up to see a shorter, rounder version of Charles, an older woman full of just as much spunk and joy, “to my beautiful wife of 35 years, Rita.”

She bowed slightly at Sedgewick, and he smiled and bowed back, causing her to cry out in laughter and reach out both arms to hug the boy she heard so much about from her husband.

“To the boy who keeps my man from falling asleep on the bus and waking up in Bloomington: Thank you, my boy, thank you.”

“And I’ve heard so many stories about you,” Sedgewick said, feeling an air of joyful formality in the air, but also playfulness. Rita gestured for the boys to join her in the living room, pointing Sedgewick to a threadbare recliner.

“We don’t mean to stay for tea, Rita. Got to get going says we.” The couple laughed, and kissed with protruding lips, like two birds pecking, and Charles disappeared to another room.

“So you’re going to go with Charles today?” Rita asked.

“I guess so.” Though he hadn’t really thought much about it. He jumped at the chance to delay going home. It wasn’t something he normally did, but repeating the story to Charles had been more than

enough, and though he would eventually have to tell his grandmother, and he wanted to, he also didn't want to do it just yet.

"You ready, boy?" Charles asked. He was standing in the entry way, a dirty, plastic toolbox in one hand, dressed in raggedy pants that looked suspiciously like old dress pants, and a faded zip-up sweater with a hood and lined with long-john material. The sleeves were worn and the lining poked out through holes in several places.

Sedgewick said goodbye to Rita and gave Dobbie one last pat. Sedgewick and Charles left the house and headed up the street.

They approached Midway Baptist Church, an ancient brick and stone building perched on a corner lot, a literal anchor in the neighborhood. The front entrance was massive, towering above the street with great double doors and a bell tower. Baptists didn't usually ring bells, but a good bell tour was a fine way to top any church.

It had been in the neighborhood for generations, longer than Sedgewick or Charles or even Sedgewick's grandmother. Though from the look of it, the worn bricks and sagging woodwork, it wasn't a sure thing if it would be there for many generations to come.

Charles led Sedgewick passed the massive front entrance and towards a little shed in the back and a fenced-in side lot. Charles unlocked the shed and disappeared into the darkness. He came back with several buckets of paint and handed one to Sedgewick. He unlocked and opened the wooden fence to the side yard, and let it hang open.

A tall wooden fence surrounded the entire lot, a fence that looked like it might last longer than the church itself. It encircled the entire yard, which must have been a lot or two, and butted up against the church on one side. The entire yard was grassy and open, with a few towering trees providing shade here and there. In the middle was a sandy play area, with old time playground equipment, swings, a slide and some monkey bars.

Charles set the paint cans down and returned to the shed for more supplies. Sedgewick walked closer to the fence. Charles had been working on it for weeks. A vast scene stretched across the back of the fence, colorful and vibrant, full of life and wonder. There were faces and huge splashes of color, children laughing and playing and the stars in the sky and the sun rising and so many, many other things.

Charles had been telling Sedgewick about the playground mural for months, if not longer. Sedgewick didn't even remember how long ago he'd first heard the idea. But it had grown and grown, with more elaborate descriptions, as long as the bus ride would allow. Sedgewick had even done some research for Charles, exploring the art of mural painting, finding books and articles on the subject, the proper preparation of the surface, the history and political ramifications of the art, and the many wild examples of murals across surfaces throughout history.

Sedgewick walked up to one particular section. Standing only a foot or two from the fence, the broad strokes were visible, the blocks of color that made up the face. The massive eyes were three dimensional despite the flatness of the wood-planked fence. Sedgewick wanted to reach out and touch the face, but he restrained himself.

"So what do you think, boy?" Charles asked. He had been standing behind Sedgewick for a few minutes, silent.

Sedgewick turned and smiled and Charles slapped his knee and started laughing, a loud, echoing laugh that carried up into the branches of the trees.

"Now that's what I wanted to see," Charles said. Sedgewick dropped his head, his smile now beaming.

"Thanks, Charles."

"Now if you really want to thank me, you'll give me a hand."

"You don't want me—want me to paint, do you?" Sedgewick asked, his smile fading.

"I want a hand—what does it matter what I put that hand to work doing?" Charles asked. He started setting out buckets and brushes, mixing paints here and there and testing it on a piece of old wood. Sedgewick helped spread tarps and set out buckets. They worked quietly for a while, Charles occasionally giving gentle instructions as they did the preparation work.

When it came time to start painting, Charles set up near the middle of the yard along the back. He set up an array of colors on the rickety card table before him, and started work finishing an extension of the playground that looked like it stretched beyond the fence, spilling into the neighborhood.

Sedgewick watched, and then Charles pointed him to a corner of the fence and gave him a brush and a few colors. Sedgewick started to weakly protest, but Charles cut him off.

“I’m not asking for a masterpiece,” he said. “I’m asking you to put some color on the wood over there.” He put his brush down and looked at Sedgewick.

“I didn’t bring you here to be a spectator. There’s no spectators allowed.”

Sedgewick nodded and turned, meandering towards the corner of the fence. The back wall of the fence went all the way to the corner, then ended abruptly as the clean, fresh face of the natural wood showed all the way down the side and along the front. The wood was old and weathered, but close up looked smooth and shiny, the old damaged face of the wood probably sanded away so the paint would take better and last a little longer. By their nature murals were a transitory art form.

Sedgewick looked down at his hands, the thick stubby paintbrush and a few jars of greens and blues. He looked up to the sky and saw a clear patch of powder blue between the branches of an elm.

He sighed. Dipped his paintbrush. Spread a streak of green across the virgin wood. He did it again, and again, and again, spreading the color across the dead wood, bringing it slowly back to life.

He splashed color on the fence, but it wasn’t just painting a fence, like Tom Sawyer on a Saturday. Charles wanted a swatch of color, an interesting mix of swirling shades and hues, not a flat stretch of solitary color. Charles wanted a diversity of blues and greens even hints of purple and yellow. Sedgewick concentrated, chewing his bottom lip most of the afternoon, spreading paint across his canvas.

The knots in the wood were hard to paint, and at first Sedgewick tried to drown them with copious amounts of paint. But the end result was a gross looking blob that probably wouldn’t dry and was likely to smear in the next rain. Instead, Sedgewick applied darker and darker blues up until the edge of the knot, making it appear like part of the fence slowly receded until suddenly it went dark. He highlighted others with bright bursts of color, darkened by a blot in the middle.

He had finished four or five feet of the fence, an hour's work when Charles walked up behind him.

"Nice work, my boy," he said. "You painted a masterpiece after all." Sedgewick finished his stroke and turned with a sheepish smile. He didn't know if masterpiece was the right word, but he'd had more fun than he expected. He could handle painting splotches of color.

"I hate to send you on your way, but it's time to call it a day. I imagine your grandmother is wondering where you're at."

"I should get home," Sedgewick said. His grandmother never worried about him if he didn't come home immediately after school, and Charles knew that. But it was time to go home.

"The kids will be here soon, too," Charles said, referring to one of the church's neighborhood programs. "I like to clean things up a little before chaos begins." Sedgewick smiled, imagining a playground full of kids and how long it would be before each one found their own brush. It'd be fun for a while, but then one masterpiece would run into another and there'd be more running with brushes than actual painting (though it is less dangerous than running with scissors).

Sedgewick put away his paints and cleaned his brush in the little shed. He came back into the yard to see Charles examining his work, nodding his head and rubbing his chin.

"Thanks, Charles. I'll—I'll see you tomorrow."

"Like kids and snacks, you'll be back." Charles turned and smiled and Sedgewick waved goodbye.

The walk home was about the same distance as usual, just a different route with different sights. Different fences and different houses, their intriguing architecture from the early 1900s, different lawns and yards and different colored leaves falling to the earth.

It seemed like days, months since Sedgewick had been studying his notes that morning and Allison came bounding up, full of life and energy. It had been a long day, a momentous day, and it wasn't even over yet. Though Sedgewick liked the idea of climbing into bed and saving some momentum for another day.

He walked in the front door and could hear his grandmother in the kitchen.

"I'm home, Gram!" he called.

"And how's my boy?" she answered.

Sedgewick left his bag in the front hall and headed back to the kitchen. He pulled out his chair and sat down across from her.

“I started eating without you,” she said apologetically. “I hope you don’t mind.” She motioned to the pot on the stove, Sedgewick’s dinner and leftovers for the next few days.

“No, Gram, that’s fine.” Sedgewick said. “You don’t have to plan around me.” He sighed, breathing in the smell of his grandmother’s cooking, pesto pasta with chicken, and—Sedgewick glanced at the counter—fresh baked bread. And some people didn’t understand why he lived at home.

“I’m—I’m good,” Sedgewick said in response to her initial question. “Today’s been... well, I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“One of those days?” his grandmother asked, her eyebrows raised. Sedgewick seemed in too high of spirits for that.

“No. Sort of, but mostly no.” He thought for a minute. “More like a one-of-a-kind.”

His grandmother stopped mid chew and put her napkin to her mouth to hide her smile. Her eyes gleamed and she looked at Sedgewick with a renewed wonder, but also love and happiness and sadness all at once.

“And how is that?” she asked when she swallowed.

“I met a girl today,” Sedgewick said, his eyes on the floor.

“Oh...” his grandmother nodded and beamed, putting her fork down to hear the whole story.

“Her name is Allison.”

“Oh...” her beaming smile faded slightly. “Oh, honey.”

“I saw her at Cub on Friday... just exchanged glances, nothing more. But this morning, she—she must have spotted me by chance. She came up and talked to me, out of the blue.”

“Must have been out of the blue for her, too,” his grandmother said warmly, beginning to beam again.

“But then, later, I saw her a—again.” Sedgewick’s voice wavered. He kept going, trying to get it out all at once before he couldn’t speak at all. “Her mom, she—she died today. A car wreck, up-state... some business trip, and...” He couldn’t finish.

His grandmother set her napkin down and stood up, she crossed the few feet between her and her grandson and awkwardly wrapped her arms around him while he sat in his grandfather’s old spot. Sedgewick buried his face in her stomach and let the tears come, again. His grandmother stood there, arms around her grandson,

feeling the pain of years gone by that never seem to go away. She wondered if this would ever get easier, but knew in all her years it only got harder.

She just wished it wouldn't happen so often, at least not to Sedgewick, her poor grandson who had seen more pain and death in his short life than any of the women at the bingo hall could ever expect to see, not that she would wish it on any of them. No one deserves to go through what Sedgewick had.

"Oh, Gram," Sedgewick said after several minutes of silence. Her comfort was so dear and, well, comfortable to Sedgewick. He didn't like turning to it, never liked needing it, but when the time came there was nothing better.

"When I found out we threw rocks, together."

"Oh, honey." Tears welled up in her eyes this time, and she pulled Sedgewick close. She had a fitting quote ready on the tip of her tongue, but it didn't quite fit. For Sedgewick it always seemed like the loss came before the love. So she held the boy instead.

Later that evening Sedgewick called the number written on the back of his hand again. He sat on the edge of his bed, just under the eave, with the phone cord stretched from his desk in front of the window. He had told his grandmother he didn't need a phone in his room, but when he graduated from high school and decided to stay at home and attend university his grandmother insisted. He insisted on paying rent, since he was no longer a minor under her care, but the idea brought tears to her eyes and Sedgewick quickly dropped it, a rare moment in his life that brought unnecessary pain to his grandmother.

He twirled the phone cord around his fingers, eyes nervously darting around the room, fingers smoothing his hair as if she could see him.

After the fifth ring the voice mail picked up, and Sedgewick could feel his stomach relax. A bright cheery message sounded in his ear, much more like the Allison he had met that morning.

After the beep, he left a short message: "Hi—hi Allison. It's me—Sedgewick. Sometimes coffee helps, too. Well, not so much the coffee. But, anyway. Coffee—or maybe breakfast. It's just something else—something else I—I know." He left his number and hung up the phone.

Chapter 6

“I like breakfast.” Allison grinned weakly, and raised her eyes to Sedgewick’s.

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll—we’ll do that.” A half eaten cinnamon roll sat between them, evidence of how not very hungry either of them were. Allison was on her third cup of coffee and Sedgewick nursed his second cup of hot chocolate. He didn’t drink coffee, and immediately felt stupid when they sat down together for coffee. Hot chocolate seemed like a reasonable alternative.

She called late Monday night. Sedgewick’s light was still on, his book still open across the bed, but his mind was elsewhere. He’d read the same page so many times he’d lost count (something about freeing color from reality). The ringing phone startled him, and he dove for it before it woke his grandmother up.

“H-hello?”

“Sedgewick.” Her voice sounded tense and tired, yet suddenly relieved at the same time. It had been a long, impossible day for her, responsibilities that didn’t care about death, and responsibilities induced by death. She couldn’t stand being at home anymore, and they agreed to meet at Perkins, the usual late-night restaurant hangout.

Sedgewick threw on his jacket and headed for the door. He paused in the entryway and went back to write a note for his grandmother. He didn’t usually leave her notes, but he didn’t usually leave the house so late at night. It was almost 11, and he didn’t think he’d be back very soon.

The Perkins shared a parking lot with the Cub where Sedgewick worked, so it was a short walk, 10-15 minutes depending on how quickly he moved. Once Sedgewick, Jimmie and Alex tried to grab lunch at Perkins during one of their half-hour breaks. It was a joke that turned into a 45-minute venture. It was a late night when they tried it, but the waitress wasn’t in the mood to move quickly. She had dealt with too many funny college students who come in for a cup of coffee and something to munch on while they studied late into the night and early into the morning. She didn’t have time for a trio of blue-collar clowns who wanted something more substantial than

McDonald's for once. She was an older woman, with an incredibly cranky persona. Sedgewick never saw her smile the entire time they were there. She wasn't necessarily slow, but she wasn't interested in moving quickly for their benefit.

Sedgewick felt so guilty he left an enormous tip, something approaching 50 percent, and then worked a half hour late to make up for being late. They were paid by the hour, so it didn't make that much of a difference. The quarter hour just would have come out of his paycheck. He'd even punched out seven minutes early, which is where the time clock rounds to the nearest quarter hour, so he wouldn't be paid 15 minutes of overtime, but it would work out to an even 8 hour shift with a little extra padding in the clock to assuage his conscience.

Sedgewick walked into the mostly empty restaurant and glanced around for Allison. He figured he probably beat her here, since she had to drive from the University. It would probably take about 20 minutes driving time.

The same cranky woman who served Sedgewick and his coworkers grabbed a menu and asked him how many. If she recognized him she didn't let on. Sedgewick mumbled two and she sighed, snatched another menu from the stack and lead him to a corner booth.

"Thank you," he said, louder than usual, and she huffed and sauntered off. Sedgewick flopped into the booth, sitting in the corner so he could keep an eye on the front entrance. He rested his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands. He wasn't sleepy, but he was tired.

"Hi." Sedgewick looked up to see those green eyes, deep and sad. She hesitated a moment, lingering there next to the table like she didn't know if she should sit down or not. Sedgewick pulled his elbows off the table and sat up, hoping he didn't look tired or exhausted. But he probably did.

"Do you want to..."

"I should sit..."

They spoke at the same time, both rushed and then suddenly trailing into silence together. Sedgewick stopped and smiled. Allison closed her eyes tight for a moment and then looked to the ceiling. She took her coat off and tossed it into the booth, throwing herself down next to it.

“I’m sorry, you look tired and I probably shouldn’t have called you so late and maybe we should just forget it...” Her voice trailed off again when Sedgewick reached out and touched her hand, lightly with his own.

“I’m glad you—you called.”

“It’s just that...”

“I know.”

They sat in silence and the cranky waitress sped up to their booth, “Can I get you something?” There was nothing pleasant in her voice, but she wasn’t particularly cruel either.

“Coffee,” Allison said. The waitress turned to Sedgewick, and he stammered, “Umm, do you have, could I get a, uh... hot chocolate?”

“Anything else?” the waitress asked as she started to turn away.

“Wait, I’m hungry. I think. Do you have one of those big sticky cinnamon rolls?” Allison asked. The waitress didn’t say anything but nodded every so slightly and took off for the kitchen.

“Hot chocolate sounds good.”

Sedgewick smirked.

“I don’t really drink coffee.”

Allison laughed, then rubbed her eyes which were red from shedding tears of all kinds today. She set her hands on the table and looked at Sedgewick.

“So you invite me out for coffee and you don’t drink coffee?” He smiled and looked down. He started trying to explain, but she cut him off.

“Coffee’s not important. I know.” Sedgewick’s eyes held hers for a moment, a silent thanks.

It hadn’t been more than a minute or two, but the waitress came back with a steaming cup of coffee and another of hot chocolate. She set them both down quickly, and Sedgewick watched his whip cream ride the waving chocolate up and down. She dropped a cinnamon roll in front of Allison and set a pot of coffee on the edge of the table. She walked off without saying anything.

“That was quick.”

Allison doctored her coffee with cream and sugar while Sedgewick stirred his whip cream into his hot chocolate and took a few tentative sips. Allison unfurled her napkin, setting the paper ring

on the table. She took her fork and cut off a small bite of the cinnamon roll.

“You can have some if you want. I’m not as hungry as I thought.”

“Thanks.”

Sedgewick unrolled his napkin and silverware, taking a moment to fold the paper ring into smaller and smaller squares. He left it sitting on the table, something his fingers could fiddle with when necessary.

They ate in silence. Both took small bites, one at a time, watching the other cut off small pieces from opposite sides of the roll. Sedgewick didn't know what to say, but he also knew that silence could be okay. Given the circumstances. But given other circumstances, silence was definitely not on the top of the agenda. That didn't usually go over well. The warring circumstances, the two completely different social events that found themselves inexplicably happening at the same moment lost Sedgewick. He didn't know what to do. So he took another bite of cinnamon roll.

“You need anything else?” The waitress had come back, speeding from the kitchen and stopping quickly at several tables. Sedgewick asked for another hot chocolate, and she brought it back almost immediately.

“One of those days, huh?” she asked, surprising both of them. Her efficiency didn't seem to allow for conversation. Sedgewick smiled.

“More like one of a kind,” he answered. The waitress nodded and set the bill on the table.

“Let me know if you need anything else.” That was her subtle way of saying she was finished serving them.

“One of a kind?” Allison asked when the cranky waitress left.

“My grandfather.” Allison nodded. “He never—he never liked saying a day was ‘one of those days.’ He thought—he thought it implied all days were, were somehow the same. And ‘one of those days’ days usually aren't so great.”

Allison nodded. Today had been the farthest thing from a good day for her, but it did seem insulting to call the day her mother died one of those days.

“He thought every day, should—should be a new day.”

“Well, today's been one of a kind.”

“Yeah... I know. For me, too.” Sedgewick grinned the tiniest bit and looked into her eyes. He looked down to the folded paper ring he’d been playing with, and then quickly back up to her and down again.

“Your grandfather... when did he—when did he die?”

“It was a long time ago. I was young, maybe six, and he died at home during the night.”

Their eyes met again for a moment.

“I’m sorry.”

Sedgewick nodded.

“Did you live with your grandparents?”

“I still live with my Gram. They took me and my brother in a long, long time ago. After everything—after it all happened.”

Sedgewick took a long sip and Allison stopped asking questions. So much remained unspoken and silent, and in some ways it was easier that way.

“I should probably tell you now,” Allison began. Her eyes settled on the table and maybe Sedgewick’s hot chocolate, but she didn’t look at him. “The funeral will be on Thursday... I know it’s kind of awkward, having just met this morning, but...”

“I’ll be there.” Their eyes met and Allison smiled. A single tear rolled down her cheek, but she had shed so many that day she didn’t even notice.

“So a stock boy, huh? How’s that working out for you?” They both laughed, a little forced, but it was a laugh, and they consciously moved on.

Allison was a sophomore, the same year as Sedgewick. She studied social work, which is part of why she noticed Sedgewick holding Connor. She wanted to specialize in children and families and somehow help children in need. She didn’t know what that meant just yet, but watching Sedgewick in the grocery store hinted at what it could be. Sedgewick didn’t have a major. He took a little bit of everything, undecided, but not exactly uncommitted. The art history classes he’d taken especially interested him, and he thought about doing something with art. But he hadn’t taken a single studio class yet.

Allison lived on campus, though her family lived in a suburb just north of the cities. Sedgewick wanted to know about her family,

her parents and any siblings, but she grew quiet and he didn't want to push. It was getting late now, almost one in the morning.

"Maybe—maybe we can do this again, s-some time."

"I'd like that."

"It wouldn't have to be so, so... you know. I thought it might help."

"It did."

"It doesn't have to be—be coffee, either. We could get breakfast." Sedgewick was getting lost in her green eyes—of course—but he couldn't help but notice the rest of her; the long sleeve T-shirt, ragged at the sleeves, the baggy pants and the brown hair, hair that had not too long ago been died black (an act of rebellion against her mother that backfired when her mom actually liked it).

"I like breakfast." Allison grinned weakly.

"Okay. We'll—we'll do that."

They got up from the table and headed for the door, Sedgewick holding back a few steps to drop a \$5 on the table. He paid at the register and held the door for Allison.

Outside the air was fresh and cool. Sedgewick followed Allison to her car, not exactly knowing how else to begin his walk home. They walked single file between the rows of cars, Allison in front, her arms stiffly held at her sides, her feet moving purposefully one in front of the other. Sedgewick followed, his feet shuffling on the damp pavement, his hands stuffed in his pockets, clenched in fists against the cold.

She unlocked the door and then turned to him. Sedgewick was looking at the ground.

"Thanks." She opened the door and watched Sedgewick give a half wave and turn to go.

"Wait." Sedgewick stopped and turned back. He stood at the front of her car, in line with her bumper. She glanced up to the night sky, and looked back to him with tears in her eyes. Again.

"I just can't do it." She half laughed and half sobbed. He smiled, knowingly, sympathetically, and took a few tentative steps back to her. They stood with the open car door between them, tears flowing freely down Allison's face.

"I'm not even going home," she blubbered, "I'm just going back to my dorm, but there's something about the familiar, it's just so, it's too..."

“Painful.” Sedgewick finished. “I know.” With the door between them Sedgewick reached up and wiped the tears from her eyes, though they just kept coming.

“I thought—I thought the coffee might help, a bit,” he said with a smile and a wounded look.

“It did,” she repeated, smacking him on the shoulder. He smiled and looked down. “Does it get any easier? Ever?”

“No.”

They stood in silence in the half-full parking lot of Perkins, well after midnight.

“Is there anything that makes the hurt, this burning empty hole in my heart go away?”

“Some things can help. Coffee, breakfast. Throwing rocks.”

“The rocks...?”

“My grandfather. When my dad died, he—my grandfather took me to the water and we threw stones. I was small, but it felt like it helped.”

“It did.”

“When my brother died we, we did it again. It wasn’t the same, but trying it seemed to help.” Sedgewick exhaled slowly, remembering things he hadn’t remembered in a long time, things no one else knew besides his Gram.

“When my grandfather died I went out alone. I didn’t think I could throw enough rocks, and Gram found me. We—we threw one last rock together and held each other and cried.” Sedgewick could feel his eyes burning, the tears welling up. He swallowed the lump in his throat and tried to continue.

“Sometimes something violent and physical like throwing a rock can help, can make you get the hurt out of your—out of your bones. Sometimes coffee or breakfast or something visceral you can taste will help—help dull the pain for a little while. But none of them will make it go away. Nothing will bring your mom back.”

“I know that.” Allison had looked into Sedgewick’s eyes with wonder and pain, trying to imagine him as a little child violently throwing rocks to the wind every time pain struck. His last statement struck her deeply, and she felt anger growing with her misery.

“Sometimes I think—I think I can bring my mom back.” With that admission Allison softened. Sedgewick couldn’t stop it now. He

tried to shake his head back and forth, look to the ground and swallow hard, but it was no use. Salty tears dripped down his face.

“But she’s—she’s gone. She may be out there somewhere, but she’s gone to me. Even if I could find her again, it wouldn’t—it wouldn’t change anything. At some point you have to face up to it. You can temper it with rocks and coffee, or whatever helps, but at some point you have to walk through it.”

“But not alone.”

“No, not alone,” Sedgewick laughed at the thought, through his tears. “You—you take somebody’s hand and you walk through it.”

“Don’t leave me alone.” There was anger in her voice. Sedgewick hadn’t seen this side of her before, but he knew the emotion. He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder, gently pushing her back a step or two, then he closed the car door enough to move around it so there was nothing between them. It was an awkward movement, giving Allison pause to drop her gaze and wipe her eyes.

He took her hand and she looked up, their eyes meeting for a moment. Sedgewick mouthed the words ‘I won’t’ and squeezed her hand.

“I just can’t go home tonight. Not to my dorm, and definitely not home. I’m not ready to face it tonight.”

“That’s okay.”

Enough words had spilled out, and they both felt empty and cold. But they still held each other’s hand and the pain hadn’t totally consumed them. Minutes passed in the parking lot. Sedgewick wondered if he should just wrap the other arm around her and give her that warm embrace and she wondered the same thing, but neither of them did it. They just stood there, lost in each other’s eyes, their hands tingling.

After a few more minutes of quiet Sedgewick said they should go. She looked into his eyes with a question and he answered back with a nod. She asked if he could drive and he took the keys, following her around to the passenger’s side to unlock and open the door.

He shut the door for her and realized the car was blue. He liked blue.

They drove silently back to his place, the streets quiet and empty, the red lights slow and quiet, nothing but the noise of the engine and the whir of the fan. He parked on the street and led her

inside. They hadn't spoken since the parking lot, and weren't about to now. Sedgewick led her upstairs, pointing down the hall to the bathroom and then leading her into his room. He clicked the bedside lamp on and headed for the door. He spoke quietly and softly: "There should be enough blankets on the—on the bed. There's extra clothes in the closet if you want a shirt or something to sleep in—or for the morning. The bathroom's down the hall, and Gram—Gram's in the next room. I'll be downstairs on the couch."

She stood stone-faced in the middle of the room half turned towards Sedgewick. She nodded as he finished, slowly, realizing how tired she was.

"Sedgewick," she said as he pulled the door closed. He stopped and poked his head back into his room. "Thanks."

Sedgewick smiled, shook his head and closed the door. She stood still in the middle of the strange room, listening to his footsteps in the hall, then heading down the stairs and into the living room. She stripped off her coat and kicked her shoes off. As tired as she was, the draw of Sedgewick's room tugged at her, and she slowly wandered around, taking it all in.

A single bed was pushed into the corner, under the eave. The pillow was in the far corner, and she wondered if Sedgewick ever hit his head on the slope. A desk sat next to the bed, with the warm lamp lighting the room, a small stack of books and an alarm clock. Opposite the bed was a dresser and a wall of bookshelves, and a window along the wall with the bed and another one above the desk.

The room had been painted a dull gray, a color that looked orangeish-brown in the soft light. A red comforter covered the bed, half thrown back from this morning, with a few extra blankets folded at the foot of the bed. A soft rug covered most of the hardwood floor, coming out from under the bed and barely touching all four walls.

She was drawn to the picture frames on the shelf, and she picked them up, one by one, studying the faces. One in the middle showed a little boy at the beach, smiling with two older people, presumably Sedgewick and his grandparents. She smiled at the simple joy of the little boy on the beach, his sand shovel held aloft as if in victory.

Another frame showed a solitary man, standing with his arms crossed in what looked like an art gallery. His mop of curly hair

reminded her of Sedgewick's hair, and she thought this might be his father. Another picture, higher up on the shelf, showed what looked like a full family, gathered around a birthday cake. A pretty young woman smiled at the camera, holding up one finger. A younger version of the man at the art gallery stood opposite her, looking down at a baby in a high chair. A toddler, maybe two or three sat at the table, with a huge smile for the camera. Allison couldn't remember if Sedgewick's brother had been younger or older, and she couldn't tell which child might have been him. An older woman, majestic and joyful stood in the back, and she guessed this was Sedgewick's Gram. Allison realized she would probably meet her in the morning—she couldn't leave without doing it. The thought made her smile. She wanted to know the strength of such a woman. But the thought also scared her. Any other protective mother, for that's really what she was, would be at least a little wary after realizing her boy had given up his room for a girl. Allison knew she shouldn't be here, but it also felt right. It felt like the right thing to do for the time being. Any other time and any other place, and even any other person and it wouldn't have been right. But tonight, after today, and with this stock boy from Cub Foods, seemed more right than anything Allison had ever done before.

She picked up a final frame. It was a beautiful portrait of Sedgewick's grandmother, her face strong and aged, but also full of hurt and weakness. It was taken from the side, in sharp relief—the background faded and the creases of her face captured in perfect details. Her eyes were lost in the distance, taking in something miles and miles away. Allison ran her fingers along the glass, tracing a loose wisp of the grandmother's hair. She wondered who took the picture. She wondered if it could possibly be Sedgewick.

She set the frame down and turned to the bed. It was nearly two in the morning now, and she'd probably have to skip her morning class. She was tempted to set the alarm early and try to slip out quietly, but she suspected Sedgewick would be up early, and thought the same for his grandmother. She couldn't bring herself to get up early enough to ensure she beat them both, and the very thought took too much energy. She rather liked the idea of waking up later, of letting the sun rise and apologizing and thanking Sedgewick and his grandmother together in the morning over breakfast. She liked breakfast, and she had a feeling Sedgewick did, too. It was actually her

favorite meal, the thing that got her started in the morning more than anything else.

She pulled her socks off and let her pants fall to the floor. She stripped to her undershirt and was about to climb into bed when she stopped. She smiled, sheepishly, and made for the closet. She found one of Sedgewick's button-down dress shirts, like the kind he wore that day at Cub under his vest. She pulled off her undershirt and unhooked her bra, then slipped into Sedgewick's shirt. She pulled the shirt around her, breathing in a faint smell of the boy she met that morning. She swam in the shirt, but that's exactly what she wanted. She buttoned the top several buttons, and stood there in the middle of the floor smiling, goose bumps spreading on her bare legs. She remembered her mom on rare Saturdays, coming down in nothing but her father's dress shirts.

She climbed into the warm bed, pulled the covers up over her head, and shut the light off.

Chapter 7

She awoke to birds outside her window, a noise that seemed out of place and strange. She rolled over, pulled the covers closer, and slowly opened her eyes. Sunlight streamed in the front facing window, lighting up Sedgewick's room. The alarm clock said 8:37, and that woke her up. She pushed the covers back and remembered her impromptu pajamas. She smiled weakly and rubbed her eyes, amazed at the last 24 hours and this boy named Sedgewick.

She crawled out of bed, thankful for the rug on the floor. She shivered and reached for her pants, but then stopped and tiptoed over to the dresser. She opened the top drawer and saw several neat piles of folded T-shirts. The second drawer had more shirts, but the third drawer had jeans and pants. She pushed a few piles aside and found a pair of sweat pants. She pulled them on, enjoying the loose and comfy fit.

She opened the bedroom door to a subtle quiet. The house was warm, bathed in sunshine, and savory scents drifted up the stairs from the kitchen. She made her way down the stairs, pausing at the bottom. A lump of blankets and an extra pillow were piled on one end of the couch. She walked down the hallway towards the kitchen and there was Sedgewick's grandmother, seated at the table with a cup of coffee and a book.

“Good morning, dear.”

“No, don't get up, it's okay,” Allison said, wrapping her arms around herself. Sedgewick's grandmother gestured to the chair opposite her, where Sedgewick usually sat. Allison sat down, taking in the kitchen and then resting her feet on the bottom rung of the chair, curling her toes around the bar.

“Well, unless Sedgewick brought other girls home last night, you must be Allison. I'm very pleased to meet you. And I can assure you I'm the only old lady in this house. I'm Sedgewick's grandmother, Gertrude.”

“I'm so honored to meet you, Miss Gertrude. Sedgewick's told me a lot about you.” Gertrude laughed and pushed her chair back from the table.

“Gertrude is fine dear. The proper attire for this kitchen is pajamas or bathrobes—you seem to fit right in. There's no need for

formality. Would you like some breakfast?" Allison nodded. Gertrude piled a plate with eggs and bacon from the stove, setting it in front of Allison, whose eyes widened. She turned to the fridge for a glass of orange juice.

"There's coffee if you like," But Allison shook her head. "Sedgewick never drinks the stuff, but I always start the day off with a little black juice."

"Where is Sedgewick?" Allison asked between bites. Gertrude sat down again took a sip from her mug, smiled and winked at Allison.

"Oh, that boy. You know, I came down stairs this morning and saw the blankets on the couch and I wondered what was going on. Then I saw the note on the table. Sedgewick doesn't leave notes often, doesn't need to, but of course by the time I woke up this morning he'd left three." She pointed to a piece of paper, covered in a quick, sure writing:

Gram,

I'm off to Perkins for a late night coffee with Allison. I'll be home late.

*Love,
Sedgewick*

And then below that:

Gram,

Me again. Allison couldn't go home last night, so I brought her back her. She's in my room. I hope that's okay.

*Love,
Sedgewick*

And finally, below that:

Gram,

I imagine Allison will be sleeping in this morning, but I had a class I couldn't miss. Tell her I said good morning. She'd probably love some breakfast, if you don't mind. Thanks so much!

*Love,
Sedgewick*

Allison smiled and curled her toes. She set the note to the side.

"Thank you, for breakfast and letting me stay the night. It wasn't that I couldn't go home last night, I just..."

"I understand, child. You're most welcome. Sometimes we could all use a hand." She reached across the table and patted Allison's hand the way only a grandmother could. "And I'm sorry about your mother." She left it at that, turning back to the counter to clear her dishes, and Allison just nodded.

"I imagine you're missing classes this morning?"

"Yep. I suppose I am."

"That's okay child, you're allowed to skip a few now and then. Especially now. Though I don't suppose Sedgewick's class was as early as he let on this morning. It's not very often that he beats me out of bed." Allison didn't say anything.

"Absence makes the heart grow fonder," Sedgewick's grandmother quoted with her usual inflection, making Allison snicker.

"It's not every night that he brings girls home either, and I think it all might have been just too much for him." She smiled and winked, and Allison giggled.

"Do you mean he left because of me?"

"Oh, I don't know dear, I can only guess. But a lot of thinking goes on in that boy's head, sometimes more than necessary. I can imagine he's a bit head over heels with you, and going from meeting you one morning to a sleepover the same night, well, that requires a bit of thinking. He did meet you yesterday morning, didn't he?"

"Yep. It seems so funny now, but we did just meet yesterday morning."

"And that's okay child, no need to feel sheepish. Love doesn't follow a storyline."

"Is it love?"

"Well, I don't know dear, I can only guess. But there's not much else, other than grace, that would draw together two people who

need each other so much. That's probably the other reason Sedgewick snuck out early this morning. No disrespect to you, but this isn't very easy for him, with your mother and all."

"No, it's not." Allison remembered his tears, wondered how many other college guys would openly weep. "Do you think Sedgewick needs me?"

"More than you know." Sedgewick's Gram sat back down again, reaching out to hold Allison's hand in hers.

"Child, I don't mean to interfere or get in the way. Sometimes we old ladies like to talk. But Sedgewick is my baby, as much of a man as he is, and I can't help but hope for the best. Like him, I've only just met you myself, but you seem like a beautiful young woman, and if love is involved, I have no problem with that. But I don't need to tell you that's not my place. That's for you and Sedgewick to figure out, and with the week you've had, please don't feel like you need to figure it out anytime soon."

Allison looked into her face, past her wispy gray hair and creased lines, and into her deep eyes. She could see hints of Sedgewick, not in the eyes or specific facial features, but just in the general glow, the depth, and what felt like love.

"I don't imagine you came prepared for a sleepover, but you're more than welcome to use the shower if you like. We have plenty of extra towels." She could tell Allison was considering the idea, weighing the options. Gertrude stood up to clean away the remains of breakfast. "And as for clean clothes, you seem to have found some suitable pajamas, I imagine you could find something presentable. Could give Sedgewick quite a shock to see his wardrobe wandering about campus. Serve him right for taking off."

Allison smiled as she stood up and crossed the kitchen. She stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame watching Gertrude pile dishes in the sink.

"I think I will take you up on that shower." Sedgewick's grandmother told her where the towels were and turned back to the dishes. "And, thank you."

"No, thank you, child." Sedgewick's grandmother watched Allison nod and leave the kitchen. She turned back to the dishes in the sink and the warm, soapy water. She picked up a mug and her tired

eyes were drawn out the kitchen window and beyond. She could hear Allison upstairs.

“Love knows nothing of order,” Gertrude inflected to herself. She nodded her head solemnly, like a prayer, and started scrubbing the mug.

Upstairs, Allison found what she needed in the bathroom, stripped off Sedgewick’s clothes and stepped into the shower. She winced at the stream of water, but then slowly let it wash over her, first her face and then her head and then down her back and over her body. She stood under the warm, steaming shower, letting it wash over her, rinse her body and her mind and her soul.

An hour or so later Allison was walking back to her dorm from the parking lot, feeling like she was stepping back into life. The sweater she wore, a loose, itchy one with an ugly striped pattern was her only physical tie to her night at Sedgewick’s. His pants didn’t look like they’d fit and it wasn’t like her clothes were toxic. But she wore the sweater because she could.

She had classes to get to that afternoon, but she hadn’t decided yet if classes were something she could handle. She planned to get back to her dorm and taste a bit of reality, see if it was anything she might be able to stomach.

She unlocked the front door and took the elevator up to third floor. Her room was at the end of the hall, in the corner. It was just before lunch, and she hoped the place would be quiet and empty. Everyone knew about her mom, and there was that quiet awkwardness in the air.

“Allison?” she turned to see her roommate, coming in from the stairwell behind her.

“Hi, Kallie.” She stopped and waited for her roommate to catch up, and they continued down the hall together.

“How are you doing?” The question came slowly, and not immediately either. They were almost in their room when it came out, and Allison was grateful for the restraint. She knew Kallie hated to ask the question, but it needed to be ask.

“I’m okay... I think.”

“Where were you last night? Did you spend the night at home?” Kallie was genuinely concerned, and Allison appreciated that. She smiled as she told the story, telling Kallie how she didn’t want to come home and spent the night at Sedgewick’s house.

“Sedgewick? Is he the guy you saw at the grocery store?”

Allison nodded. “The one you ran off to introduce yourself to yesterday at breakfast?” Allison nodded again. “No way.”

“I know.” Allison flopped down on her bed, grateful that they’d opted against lofting their beds. It made for a tight room, with furniture circling the room, but it also meant she could throw herself onto her bed. It worked for long days of class, over dramatic Friday nights, and for times like this.

“You spent the night with him?”

“Well not with him, but at his house.”

“Where was he?”

“He slept on the couch.”

“Wow, a gentleman?”

“Yep—I guess.”

“And what happened this morning?” Allison dropped her gaze to her shoes.

“I don’t know. He took off early. I had breakfast with his grandma, which was actually... she’s a pretty amazing woman.”

Kallie couldn’t take this. She pulled out a chair and sat down herself.

“He lives with his grandmother? And he left you to have breakfast alone with her?” Kallie shook her head. “Allison, who is this guy and what fairy tale did you find him in?”

“I know, though it feels more like a tragedy than a fairy tale. Something out of Shakespeare.”

Kallie grew quiet, then asked softly, “Because of your mom?”

Allison sighed and tried to wrap her brain around it.

“In some ways, yeah, but Sedgewick was tragic long before I came around.” She told her friend what she knew, or the extent of it, which was that Sedgewick’s mom had abandoned the family, that his father and brother both died, and he grew up with his grandparents. His grandfather also died when he was fairly young, and he’d been living with his grandmother since.

“Well, talk about meeting the right guy on the right day.”

“I know. How many first dates do you have that will cry with you?”

“Oh, Allison.”

“The funny thing is I don’t know where to go from here. What’s next when you spend your first day crying in each other’s arms and sleeping over? What kind of second date does that make for?”

The two sat in silence for a few minutes.

“His grandma said something about love this morning, something about love not following a script, and I can’t help but wonder if this really is love. He’s been an amazing friend through an awful time, but he’s a friend I hardly know. Can you love someone you don’t know?”

“Does it kind of feel like a movie?”

“Yep, like the Hollywood plot where I cry on his shoulder and the weepy music plays and we get through it together and go on to get married and have lots and lots of babies to make up for our pain.”

“Lots and lots of babies?” Kallie asked, and two broke into giggles.

“Oh, Kallie, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Do we ever?” Kallie stood up and pulled a few books from her bag, swapping them with other books for the afternoon. She pulled out a binder and sat down at her desk to finish up some last minute assignment.

“Nope,” Allison said quietly to herself.

She rolled over and picked up the dorm phone to check her messages. Her dad called, and the R.A., and her dad again, and a couple girls from down the hall, and her coach, and a couple professors. Word had apparently traveled fast. Thankfully her R.A. had called most of her professors and took care of some of the time and emotion heavy contact work, which would effectively excuse Allison from classes for the week if she wanted. She didn’t know if that would help or not, but the choice meant something to her.

“Are you heading to class soon?” Allison asked.

“Yeah, I just came back to swap books. Do you need anything?”

“I should probably call my dad back.”

“Oh, no problem. Do you want me to go? Or do you want me to stay here for after? Or...”

“Well, it’d probably be easier if you weren’t here when I talked to him. But thanks.”

“Whatever you need.” Kallie packed up her stuff and headed for the door.

“Thank you.” Kallie stopped at the door and nodded, giving her friend as much reassurance and support as she could.

Allison sighed and picked up the phone to call her dad.

“Hi daddy.”

Chapter 8

Darkness hung in the morning air like a mist, a blackness over the living room. Sedgewick blinked, trying to clear his eyes and adjust to the pre-dawn lack of light. He stretched on the couch, first bending his knees and extending his back, then arching his back and stretching out his legs. He didn't fit on the couch, and he felt it this morning.

He sat up, keeping the blanket wrapped around him against the morning cold, still trying to adjust to the darkness. He buried his face in his hands and rubbed his eyes and shook his head. A dull ache spread from the base of his back, and he wondered if people were like something you crammed into a tight space, and then when you pulled it out it retained the shape and took several hours to drift back to its original shape. That's how his back felt, like it might take a while for the pain to fade away.

He glanced at his watch and realized it was as early as it was yesterday. His mind was just coming out of the fuzziness, but it wasn't too early. Sedgewick rarely found he woke up too early. If he took his time actually getting out of bed, it was always the right time.

He wandered into the entryway and looked out the front door. Allison's car was parked on the curb where they'd left it the night before. A white sheen of frost covered the grass and the shingles on roofs, and Sedgewick tried to remember if this was the first frost of the year.

He ran a hand through his early morning mess of hair, and sauntered upstairs. He went to the bathroom and splashed water on his face, rinsing away the final remains of sleep. He buried his face in a towel, letting the water absorb into the softness and feeling refreshed and awake.

He slowly lowered the towel and looked into the mirror. Standing in the doorway, watching him, was Allison.

"Taking off early again?" A slight grin appeared on Sedgewick's face and he shook his head from side to side. She wore another of his dress shirts, transformed into pajamas.

"Not today." His eyes caught hers, full of sheepish apology, and her eyes shone brightly.

"Well that's good. I don't think I'd be able to take a runaway twice in a row. It's a little disconcerting."

“I’m sorry, I just...”

“I know.” She stepped into the bathroom with Sedgewick and put her arms around him. She leaned her face against his chest and he slowly wrapped his arms around her, a little surprised and shocked. He then realized she wasn’t wearing any pants.

The day before Sedgewick awoke much the same way, finding himself on the couch, his back kinked and a girl in his bedroom. He was up before anyone, and the whole situation was too much. He knew his Gram would understand why he’d brought Allison home. There was nothing wrong with it. But he still didn’t want to face her. It was all oddly new and the day before he wouldn’t have dreamed of any of it.

But at the same time it wasn’t a dream. It was a nightmare. He hadn’t told anyone about his family in a long, long time. He kept reliving portions of it in his mind, seeing the faces again and feeling the rocking, rolling spew of emotions come on that would drop him to the floor. He’d managed to hold off the worst of them, managed to stay strong and not be reduced to Jell-O. He wondered at the power of past pain and loss, the way it snuck beneath the surface, ready to come alive again at the slightest provocation, and just as sharp and debilitating as it always had been.

He didn’t want to avoid his family. He loved them. He always would. He kept pictures in his room, memories in his head, and a deep, deep love in his heart for his mother, his father, his brother, and his grandfather. Their loss was painful, but he never wanted to forget about them or shove away their memory because of pain.

But Allison. Her pain was so fresh and so sharp that it brought back those immediate feelings. The night before as they left Perkins he wanted to push her away, to tell her she had to get through it on her own, to leave her crying at her car and walk away. The desire welled up in him, but he couldn’t do it. He knew she wasn’t ready, knew that wasn’t what she needed. She needed a place to crash that wasn’t full of reminders. Sedgewick could understand that.

But today he needed a morning that wasn’t full of reminders. Unfortunately, that meant her. He didn’t want to run away, to leave her here alone with his grandmother, whom she’d never met. But he also knew he needed time alone.

He remembered back when his grandfather had died. It was in this very house, in the chair in their bedroom, the recliner where Sedgewick had been told so many stories and had fallen asleep so many times. He couldn't sleep that night and had fallen asleep in his grandfather's arms. He must not have been able to sleep either. He awoke to his Gram's face, full of love and warmth, but also streaked with tears. She picked Sedgewick up and carried him downstairs and they sat on the couch in the living room for what seemed like hours. Sedgewick was half awake, but his Gram was mourning her loss, trying to gather the strength she would need to face that awful, painful day.

Sedgewick remembered being confused and lost. He was only six or seven, and had a vague understanding of what was going on. The house was full of people and as much as he tried to cling to his Gram, he couldn't be with her all the time. At one point she broke down, her sobs filled the house and they cut to Sedgewick's soul.

A neighbor had taken him by the hand and led him outside. They sat on the back steps, the high sun of mid-morning warming them. Sedgewick the little child had tried to understand why he couldn't be with his grandmother.

"Sometimes people need to be alone."

"But my Gram, I—I need her."

"And she needs you. But sometimes grief can only happen when we're alone, when we can let out the moan—that's a path we need to walk by ourselves."

"Will she come back?"

"She'll come back, I promise." Sedgewick looked into his face, this older neighbor he didn't know. Today it's an even older face, but so familiar. It was Charles. That was his first encounter with Sedgewick, a child who knew more grief and tragedy than anyone Charles had ever met.

Sedgewick remembered that day and that conversation, and today he knew that he needed to be alone. Allison probably needed him, but he knew Gram would be there in amazing ways like only she could, and if Allison truly did need him, then he had to do this for himself.

He rose from the couch and silently got dressed and gathered his things. He found clothes in the half finished laundry in the basement, and thankfully had never gotten around to putting all his

books away the night before. He scrawled a quick note, a third note, for his grandmother, and quietly slipped out the front door.

He turned onto the street and glanced back to his house, to his bedroom window. Allison was asleep, warmly wrapped in his blanket, the one his grandmother had made for him. She wouldn't wake up for hours and Sedgewick hoped she'd understand.

He arrived at the bus stop to find people he didn't recognize. He was at least an hour earlier than normal, and he realized with a certain sadness that he wouldn't see Charles on the bus this morning.

He stood off to the side, a few paces from the bus shelter in front of the newspaper racks. Three people sat in the shelter and a fourth stood off to the other side. The fourth was a business type, wearing a full suit and carrying a briefcase. A plump woman with a jug of water sat on the bench, a blue-collar guy with a tool belt kept shifting from one leg to another, and a young woman sat closest to Sedgewick reading a book. There were no college girls at the stop today.

Sedgewick never expected so much when his eyes were continually drawn to college girls. He never thought anything would ever happen, and he certainly never expected this. It was the kind of story Alex would tell during break at work, only it wouldn't include so many heart-wrenching details. But something about meeting a girl one day and spending the night with her that night didn't seem far off from a typical Alex tale. Sedgewick wondered how many of those stories were total fabrications. Perhaps the girl had existed, perhaps Alex had talked to her, but Sedgewick seriously doubted that all of Alex's stories could be true.

The bus lumbered up to the stop and Sedgewick boarded last, after the blue-collar man. He slipped his bus pass into the slot and pocketed it again, heading towards an empty seat in the middle of the bus. He flopped down and looked out the window. The sun was coming up now and he imagined his grandmother would be waking up and finding his note, realizing all that had happened the night before.

He hoped she'd understand, hoped she would be loving and caring to Allison. Somehow Sedgewick knew he could rely on his Gram to do the right thing.

The bus rolled on, cruising past Charles' stop because no one was there. Sedgewick bit his lip, wondering when he might get to talk

to Charles again. In the midst of everything that happened yesterday that mural had been cathartic. Knowing Charles, that's probably what he intended. He had talked with Sedgewick about that mural for months, but never invited him to see it and certainly hadn't hinted at Sedgewick actually helping out.

There was still a bit of blue paint under his fingernails. Sedgewick remembered the feel of the paintbrush in his hands. It had been so awkward at first, so strange and alien, but as he went it became more and more natural. Manipulating the paint on wood had been something new and different, and trying to get the tones right, even though there wasn't a certain correct tone, had been a challenge Sedgewick enjoyed. Much more than he thought possible. Charles probably intended that, too.

The bus rolled past the usual storefronts Sedgewick recognized. The bartending school. The drum shop with the funky logo and bright yellow awning. The YMCA and the art school next to it. Sedgewick had noticed high school kids with art portfolios in tow boarding the bus and getting off at the school. He wondered if it was some sort of magnet school, wondered if they spent the entire day painting or drawing or sculpting, wondered what it would be like to be so immersed in art.

Sedgewick's father had been immersed in art. He never knew his dad very well, since he died when Sedgewick was so young. He was maybe three or four at the time, and he had vague, misplaced memories. The kind of memories where he couldn't tell if they were actual, first-hand memories, or if they were stories repeated from his grandfather or grandmother. Some memories had a photo to go with them, and it was even harder to distinguish actual experience from retold and rehashed memory.

His dad had been an artist, at least part time anyway, but serious enough to have constant gallery openings and showings to attend. Sedgewick remembered a Saturday afternoon spent in his dad's studio, at least he thought it was a memory. There were also photographs and stories and even artwork, a painting from his dad and a crayon drawing from Sedgewick, all to prove the day really happened. But Sedgewick was never sure what he really remembered.

The bus came to a jolting stop and a man rushed along side the bus, jumping into the door panting and clutching his bag. He gushed a breathless thanks to the bus driver and turned to find a seat.

Sedgewick was watching out the window when the guy sat down next to him, and he made room as best he could. The man looked towards the window, half at Sedgewick and half at the scenery. Sedgewick gave a half look back and a slight nod.

“Barely made that one,” the man commented. Sedgewick stole a glance out the window, realizing he had given a little too much bus etiquette and had allowed a conversation. He didn’t usually care for bus conversations. Sometimes they could be enlightening, characters he would rarely ever get a chance to talk to, but he’d also talked to a few characters he wished he hadn’t.

His worst bus conversation was with a drunk ex-Marine who kept prattling on about Mario Cumo. Sedgewick made the mistake of acknowledging the drunk and spent the rest of the trip listening to the beer-tinged monologue. The hatred of the rest of the bus was palpable.

“Yeah, looked like you—like you it cut close there.” The man adjusted his bag on his lap and let out a sigh.

“Yeah, late start today. How ‘bout yourself?”

“Actually, I had an early start this morning. I usually don’t catch the bus for another hour.”

“Early bird, huh? Must be nice.”

Sedgewick nodded and turned back to the window. Today it had certainly worked out. A morning with Allison could have been awkward, fraught with a first meeting with his grandmother and the whole awkward shower/pajamas/changing thing. Sedgewick just wasn’t prepared for these kinds of interactions with girls. He thought he would have plenty of lead-time, but it all just happened so quickly. That awkward morning encounter, probably with breakfast and questions from his Gram to fill the silence, was something Sedgewick was glad to leave behind. Maybe another day he could handle that.

Actually that probably wasn’t fair to Gram. She’d let him suffer with the silence himself. Make him figure out how to deal with it. But it wasn’t so much the silence that bothered him.

“I always seem to be pushing the bleeding edge of lateness,” the man continued. “My wife hated that. Probably why she left me.”

Sedgewick nodded, turning back to the man. As much as he liked to avoid awkward bus conversations with strangers, he was also curious. Sometimes it was worth pushing through the awkwardness, especially when someone else carried the conversation.

“How long ago did she leave?”

“Oh, four or five years ago. Picked up and left one day. Took the kids with her.”

“You have kids?”

“Oh yeah, a daughter and two boys.”

“Must be rough—on them.”

“It’s rough on everybody. Never easy when something like that happens. But we make do. Always manage to make do.” The man slowed for a moment, looking out the window on the other side of the bus, as if suddenly taken aback by Sedgewick’s interest in the conversation. But then he kept on.

“Yeah, I get to see them every other weekend, so it’s not so bad. Last weekend she came over to drop them off and we all ended up staying together for the night, like old times.”

Sedgewick didn’t give an answer, but turned to look the man in the face, nodding for him to continue.

“I think she was probably lonely, dumped by another of her hotshot young boyfriends or something, I don’t know. That’s what I like to tell myself anyway. But she stayed. Slept on the couch and the kids were a little surprised to see her still there in the morning. So was I.”

“She didn’t get up early and sneak out?”

“No, she’s not much of an early bird either.”

Sedgewick nodded.

“How old are your kids?”

“Oh, my daughter’s 14—she can be a handful—and my boys are 11 and 8. They’re a blast. We spent our Saturday mornings wrestling and watching TV.”

“Sounds like a handful all the way around.”

“Nah, my wife probably has to deal with all the real messy stuff, the day to day problems and worries and punishments. It’s really not fair. She wins custody and I get weekends, but it really means I get fun and spoiling the kids, and she gets reality and doling out groundings.”

“I guess that’s not how it’s supposed to work.”

“No, probably not. But sometimes people drift apart. I’d hate for my kids to have to live with that every day. I certainly couldn’t live with it.”

Sedgewick didn't say anything. He wondered if that was really true. If the kids would rather be ferried back and forth between mom and dad versus putting up with parents who fight. Sedgewick hadn't known either situation, so he couldn't imagine which way would be better, though neither seemed all that bad.

The bus pulled up to the university stop, and Sedgewick gathered his bag and excused himself.

"Nice talking to you." It actually had been, and Sedgewick wondered how the man's kids really felt about Saturday morning wrestling as their one strong memory of time spent with their dad (those kids actually loved wrestling with their dad, but then they grew up and needed more than wrestling).

Sedgewick stepped off the bus and headed for the cafeteria. He'd left quickly, without breakfast, and he needed something. He wasn't particularly hungry, but he also knew completely skipping breakfast wouldn't be the smartest idea.

The campus was just beginning to wake up, the crowds of people were thin, but the usual lanes and avenues of moving people were starting to establish themselves.

The cafeteria was quiet, only the most dedicated breakfast eaters were here this early, mostly the ones who needed to grab a bite to eat while finishing homework or cramming for a first class test. Sedgewick grabbed an apple and a cereal bar and headed out again. The morning air was cold and sharp, but not enough to keep him inside. He walked across the familiar campus, down a sidewalk and towards the river.

He followed the same path he'd followed yesterday afternoon, hoping to take the same reflective walk he'd planned yesterday when he stumbled across a crumpled and broken Allison sitting on a rock and grieving her loss. Sedgewick had intended to walk along the river by himself, maybe toss a rock in the river, but it wasn't for pain, it was for the butterflies he'd felt after Allison practically jumped into view and introduced herself.

But those butterflies disappeared with the news and it was an entirely different experience at the river. Today would be somewhere in between, certainly not butterflies, but he hoped he wouldn't ball his eyes out on the river's edge. Once a week was more than enough.

He crossed the green lawn and dropped down the steep slope. The boulder sat empty, perched on the edge of the river, and Sedgewick was drawn to it. He could still make out their footprints from the day before. He stepped up to the rock and climbed on top of it, but not to sit and mope. He stood tall and looked out across the river.

It was a fairly narrow crossing here, for the Mississippi, maybe 30 yards or so, thanks to the looming walls of the river gorge. It looked swimmable, though Sedgewick wasn't much of a swimmer. Occasionally he'd come by the river to see the university's crew team practicing, gliding up the river and then back down again.

From his perch atop the rock Sedgewick flung a stone high and far, watching it splash into the middle of the river. It felt good.

Stepping off the rock, Sedgewick's hands plunged into the pockets of his jeans and he shuffled along the shore. He kicked at a rock or a stray stick as he came upon them. He liked the very edge, where the water lapped against the sand and it was always moist. His feet sunk into the wetness and his footsteps were slowly lapped away by the waves.

He liked Allison. He liked the fact that she introduced herself the way she did. He liked the way they talked at Perkins the night before, even if it had been awkward and slow. He also liked the way they drove home. The air was charged and there was a certain friction between them, but it wasn't exactly a bad thing. He didn't like feeling like he always had to talk, always had to keep a conversation going. Silence wasn't a bad thing. A silence uneasily and too quickly covered was a bad thing. He liked listening to the silence sometimes.

But as much as he might like Allison, he didn't know where to go from here. Girls weren't exactly his specialty. Not that he had a specialty. Relationships were new and different and awkward for Sedgewick, like much of the life people expected and took for granted.

One of the bridges towered above the water, the massive concrete supports jutting out of the water. Sedgewick looked up to the massive bridge, a few hundred feet above. It seemed so easy to forget that the Mississippi River wound through the Twin Cities. Sedgewick thought that kind of forgetting, the blatant overlooking, happened too freely behind the wheel of a car. It was yet another reason Sedgewick rode the bus or walked—so he wouldn't overlook.

Sedgewick had often come here, so he never took it for granted, but he got the feeling from friends and acquaintances that they had no idea such a famous body of water was in their own backyard. It seemed sad, to overlook something so grand. Not everybody had a river close to home, much less a massive waterway that provided drainage for an entire continent. That was big stuff. And yet some people drove over it everyday, lost in their concrete maze and missing the natural beauty beneath the bridges and overpasses.

Relationships hadn't always gone well for Sedgewick. There were awkward elementary school crushes, even a few junior high hopes. He went to a dance in seventh grade, encouraged by his well-meaning Gram. He didn't know any of the music, though he tried to listen and take it in. He didn't know how to dance, but that wasn't what bothered him the most.

What he found the most distressing was when a slow song began and the lights went low and the dance floor cleared. The other kids began to pair up, slowly at first but then more and more desperately, especially as the night wore on. And they weren't always dancing for fun or romance or some other motivation. Half the time their eyes were on someone other than their dance partner, taking in who was dancing with whom and who stood alone and who was pretending to get another drink at the punchbowl.

Sedgewick just wanted to dance, to have a good time. He could imagine his Gram dancing with his grandfather, a twinkle in her eyes and a spring in his step. He wanted to feel that.

There was a girl he'd known from elementary school, a girl who used to gently tease him. He'd seen her at the dance, standing against the wall for a slow song or two. He didn't want to ask her right away, in case some other guy, a guy more appealing than him should ask her. He'd never thought of her as a girl before, as a potential dance partner, but in the dim lights of the junior high cafeteria, he thought she looked pretty and despite a school yard taunt or two, he wouldn't mind dancing with her. He thought he might even like it.

And so he asked her. He had to work up to it first. He eyed her from across the dance floor, standing alone in a sweater and a floor length skirt, not too casual but not too dressy, the perfect junior high, uncommitted middle ground. She kept looking from side to side, her

eyes darting around, watching her friends pair up and dance away. She fiddled with her hands, picking at her hangnails.

Sedgewick began to cross the dance floor, not assured and confident, but at least not zigzagging to obscure his motives. He shuffled his feet a bit as he walked, and tried to keep from shoving his hands in his pockets. He caught her eye half way across and committed to keep going. He could see her looking back and forth more and more frantically, and he wasn't sure if this was nervousness at knowing she would soon be dancing, or nervousness at knowing she would soon be dancing with him.

"Hi Kristin... Would you like to—like to dance... with me?" It took a lot for Sedgewick to get the words out, though he had managed it. He didn't think it'd be as easy as it was, not that it was as easy as asking about homework, but it certainly wasn't the most difficult thing he'd ever done. Now that he'd done it, he thought he could manage it again.

Kristin had looked to the ground and hesitated for a moment, and for a second Sedgewick thought she might say no. Butterflies swirled in his stomach, and he could feel a lump in his throat, even though it was just a dance. But she said yes and joined him on the dance floor. He saw her shooting glances at her friends, exchanging entire sentences mouthing every word, and Sedgewick wondered how they could possibly understand each other. Lip reading must be a skill junior high girls practiced for this sort of situation.

Her hands were damp and Sedgewick thought his probably were, too. He smiled weakly and they moved in a slow circle to the creaking, wilting song. His hand rested in the small of her back, her hand on his shoulder, their sweaty hands holding each other.

"You having a good time tonight?" He didn't know if you were supposed to talk or not during a slow dance, and he figured it didn't hurt to try. But apparently it did.

Kristin mumbled something and squeezed his hand, then went silent again.

"I'm probably not the best dancer, sorry about that. I just thought it'd be fun." Her body felt tense and it made Sedgewick tense and self-conscious. He hoped she'd loosen up a bit, swing to the music, but it never did happen. They spun in slow, lilting circles, almost out of sync with the music, like they were both trying to keep pace with a different song.

When the song finished their hands dropped and they stepped apart. She mumbled thanks and bolted for the comfort of her friends.

“Thanks,” Sedgewick had said as he watched her go. It was just supposed to be a dance. A meaningless three and a half minutes on a darkened dance floor where they could move to the music and have some fun. But apparently that’s not what junior high dances were for. Sedgewick never understood what the real purpose was and he never went back to another one.

Kristin hardly teased him after that dance, hardly spoke to him. It wasn’t like they were on constant speaking terms anyway, but there was a definite cool silence now. And all for a dance. If it had been that damaging Sedgewick wouldn’t have asked. He kind of quietly wished she had said no, though he couldn’t imagine how that would have felt thirty seconds into a slow song in the junior high cafeteria. Crushing defeats seem to be amplified in those settings.

As Sedgewick walked along the shore he remembered that dance well. He remembered Kristin, too, remembered thinking she was a pretty girl long after that awkward and fateful dance. But that thought remained quietly his from a safe distance. A distance she never let him close again, save for the random group project or a fleeting sentence or two exchanged at the class graduation party.

It was an ominous welcome to the rollercoaster world of relationships. Sedgewick thought it a wonder that he kept trying after that experience. But girls seemed to have that strange and curious draw that kept boys interested. Though for Sedgewick it was a different kind of attraction. Curves and skin had the same appeal for him as any other guy, but it went deeper for him. At least he hoped it did. Sometimes he wasn’t so sure. But there was an indescribable draw nonetheless, like moths to a flame.

The sandy stretch of shore kept getting narrower and narrower. Up ahead the beach disappeared entirely. A paved biking path continued along the river flats, though up ahead the gorge walls butted up to the river and the path turned into a cantilevered bridge over the water for at least the length of a football field.

Sedgewick would need to turn back now or else risk being late for class. He hesitated, pawing the dirt with his toe, then turned back the way he came with some reluctance.

He left the sandy edge and lapping water behind and climbed the embankment. He crossed the grassy flats and ascended the steep flight of stairs that snaked their way up the gorge walls.

When he slid into his usual seat in class he was there a minute or two earlier than usual. A few other people were there, but the room was mostly empty and quiet. Sedgewick would rather be early and sit quietly by himself than come in late. He pulled out his notes and a pen and in a few minutes the professor and the rest of the class came and things got underway.

It was a low-level cultural studies class Sedgewick had signed up for as a way of avoiding foreign language classes. He had enough trouble mastering English and didn't want to tackle another language. Besides, the idea of studying other cultures and customs piqued his curiosity. The American culture he lived in was odd enough, and seeing how other people lived across the world and throughout time confirmed to Sedgewick that he didn't need to do everything exactly the way everyone else did.

The professor began lecturing, making notes on the board and Sedgewick dutifully copied them down. But his mind kept wavering, kept straying from the confines of the windowless, nondescript classroom.

He still had girls on his mind. Allison specifically, but his meager attempts at relationships generally. At this moment he was surrounded by college girls, but the allure wasn't quite there. The girl sitting in front of him had a soft face and a cute smile. Today she wore gray pants with cargo pockets and the cuffs rolled up to reveal bare, slightly tanned ankles and no socks.

Sedgewick had worked with her on a group project before and occasionally they'd talk before class or when the professor asked them to discuss something in groups. Her name was Julie, though Sedgewick had heard her friends call her Jules. She was nice, rather thoughtful and pretty, though she didn't stir up any feelings inside Sedgewick the way some girls did. Definitely not the way Allison seemed to. He didn't understand why this was, why his brain or his heart seemed to have some attachment, some attraction to certain girls. That feeling was deeper depending on the girl, but sometimes it just wasn't there. It reflected nothing about Julie—it all seemed to be in Sedgewick's head.

He shook his head slowly and tried to focus on the lecture again, scribbling to bring his note taking up to speed.

In high school there had been a girl who got Sedgewick's attention. She was as tall as Sedgewick and solidly built, but quiet and shy. She had an amazing smile, if you had the chance to see it. She had an awkwardness about her, didn't quite fit the social circles of high school—not that Sedgewick ever did—yet she still managed to befriend some of those social circlers, walking down the hall with a cheerleader one day, a combination that forced a double take.

Her smile grabbed Sedgewick's attention. In the course of a school day it didn't make an appearance very often, but when it did it was worth the wait. He had spent weeks watching her from afar, wondering who she was and what made her tick. He never had any classes with her, but he'd see her in the library every so often and it gave him the opportunity he needed.

He'd been sitting at the computer finishing a homework assignment when she came up with a friend of hers and sat down at the computer next to him. She had said hello—not the casual 'hi' of high school, but 'hello'—and smiled.

Sedgewick smiled back. He could feel his heart hammering and he bit his lip.

"I'm Sedgewick," he said, sounding as self-assured and confident as anyone, but not exactly feeling the part.

"Beth," she said. Sedgewick half expected to shake hands, but that would have been entirely too awkward. Their initial meeting didn't go much farther than that, though Sedgewick could feel the leering eyes of Beth's friend, and he somehow knew that this encounter would be rehashed in private. He never knew if that was a good thing or not, but it always made him feel uneasy.

A few days or weeks later Sedgewick heard about a local pop-punk band that was playing at a local club. The guitarist's girlfriend had been passing out flyers in class. She was your typical pop-punk band girlfriend, with bleached blonde hair cut close like a boy's. She wore leather bracelets on her skinny wrists and actually fit the part of a pop-punk groupie better than her boyfriend fit the role of rock star, so Sedgewick thought after the show.

She gave a flyer to Sedgewick and he asked what they sounded like. He had a vague idea what pop-punk music was, not that he was

entirely interested, but the idea of a local band of high schoolers sounded unique. She rattled off a few famous flash-in-the-pan punk bands that Sedgewick had never heard of, and he nodded like he knew each one.

He wanted to go to the show, and he imagined his grandmother would let him borrow the car for such an event. Though at the same time he really didn't want to go alone. Sedgewick never minded being alone, but some social functions went better with company.

Later that day Beth walked by and Sedgewick decided he'd ask. He could take her to the show and not be alone, two birds with one stone. He could actually have a chance to talk to her.

When he approached her, heart hammering and lip bit, he didn't realize the ramifications of what he was asking. It was a genuine and certifiable date. He just wanted to see a concert, but that's not how it worked. She smiled and looked suddenly more nervous than Sedgewick. Beth said yes.

The date would later be described as a complete and total disaster and never be spoken of again. But that wasn't exactly the reality. It had been quiet, yes, and slightly awkward, as outings with a teenage boy and girl often are. Sedgewick picked her up and drove across town, trying to remember the directions in his head. He didn't drive often, and had a hard time concentrating on keeping any sense of conversation going. He asked her the same question twice.

But she didn't help matters any, hardly talking at all and seeming to be too giddy and happy and joyous to do anything other than smile. Sedgewick liked her smile, but seeing it continuously when it normally made infrequent appearances kind of freaked him out. He wished she'd stop smiling, if only for a moment or two.

Sedgewick and Beth entered the local club, a hole in the wall called Fred's House of Rock, walking side by side. Sedgewick buried his hands in his pockets. He paid the cover charge at the door, fumbling with bills and thankful for the few dollars he had. He'd completely forgotten about the cover charge and almost didn't have enough.

Fred's House of Rock seemed to be an old restaurant converted into a club. A makeshift bar served drinks in the corner, but it was really just cans of pop and bottles of water. The stage was set in the opposite corner, the band raised on a platform, and the room never

completely opened to give a good view of the stage. In one direction there was only 20 feet of standing room in front of the stage before a dividing wall obscured the view. The building stretched in the other direction, making for a strange concert venue. The sound was terrible.

The band had just started when Beth and Sedgewick entered, the music echoing off the walls and sounding louder than it was. Sedgewick committed his first of many social faux pas when he made for the bleachers in the back rather than joining the throng of misfit teenagers standing near the stage. Beth sat next to him, a little closer than necessary and they didn't move for the entire 45-minute set.

Rash Dangerously, the burgeoning pop-punk band comprised of high schoolers who could barely play their instruments, thrashed around on stage, creating more noise than art. Sedgewick could see the guitarist's girlfriend, the one who had given him the flyer, rocking out in the front corner, putting more energy and enthusiasm into her slam dancing than was really necessary. The music wasn't half bad. It was louder than Sedgewick would have liked, which made it hard to hear and appreciate, especially in the tiny club. Some of the songs had promise, a few lyrics were actually quite witty, and one or two songs Sedgewick wanted to hear again.

He would lean over and whisper something to Beth, usually having to repeat it a second or third time, trying to have some sense of conversation going. She never responded with more than a nod, and if it wasn't for her intense smile Sedgewick would have thought she was having a terrible time. The fact was she'd never been on a date before and could hardly believe someone had asked her. She was so shell-shocked at the idea she wasn't herself. A second date might have gone better, but the outlook wasn't good.

As Sedgewick looked back on the evening of Rash Dangerously, completely oblivious to the professor and the tribes of southeastern Indonesia, much of that night was a complete blur. He didn't remember the ride home, which at that point must have been awkward to the point of physical pain. He didn't remember how long they stayed at the club, but he seemed to remember leaving right after Rash Dangerously finished their set with the lead singer throwing himself into the meager crowd. If that were true, it would have made for the shortest outing in dating history, probably a grand total of an hour and a half, from picking Beth up to dropping her off.

Sedgewick didn't realize what had happened until it was already over. He just wanted to watch a rock band, maybe get to know a girl from school. He wasn't looking for a dating experience. Oops.

The memory still caused him physical pain, and he glanced at his watch hoping class was nearly over. A few minutes later the professor wrapped things up and Sedgewick bent to gather his things.

"Did you get that part about the shaman's role in the tribe?" Julie asked him, twisting in her seat and still holding her notebook in her hands.

"You know, I must—I must have missed it." Sedgewick had half a page of notes, and he could tell Julie's continued for several pages.

"Are you a little out of it today?"

"Yeah, my mind is somewhere—somewhere else." She nodded and said she understood, then turned to someone else to fill in the gaps in her notes. Sedgewick's notes were more gap than notes, and he left the classroom.

Life didn't have to be a series of failed, tragic relationships, did it? Sedgewick wouldn't have to walk around seeing so many glimmers of hope, but knowing that each one would crash and burn, would he? He hoped not. He seriously hoped not.

Later that day he sat in a quiet corner of one of the university's art galleries, killing time before his art history class, letting his mind wander in the room lined with pseudo-realistic paintings.

Not all of Sedgewick's romantic leanings had crashed and burned in a pile of emotionally drained wreckage. Early in high school, long before Beth, there was Constance. She had been a positive experience, a ray of hope in Sedgewick's dating history. Dating history; you could hardly call a single dance and a failed Rash Dangerously concert a history.

But there had been something with Constance. It was his freshman year of high school and there were phone calls and notes exchanged, even a single flower at one point. They walked down the hall together and may have even held hands. She liked to talk to Sedgewick, more than most girls did, liked to ask him questions and peer into his quiet little head. They told stories and laughed together, so innocent and free.

When it ended neither of them were really sure what had happened. Looking back on it, Sedgewick chalked it up to the tumultuous times of high school. They were both changing rapidly,

growing away from one another. It may not have been so much change in one another as it was trying to find their place. And the places they found didn't have room for each other. At least that's how she felt. Sedgewick didn't quite understand, but he could see the anxiety on her face, could see an uneasiness that hadn't been there before and he didn't know what else to do. So he let her go.

It was amiable, and they still talked and smiled in the hallways. There wasn't a crushing awkwardness that would follow them everywhere. Their relationship just fizzled away. Perhaps it was tragic, but Sedgewick could at least look back with fondness.

Sedgewick stood up and meandered throughout the gallery. A quiet peacefulness filled the gallery, something he didn't always find in the university library. Sound echoed off the hardwood floors, so even when people did come through they tried to be especially quiet.

One of the paintings—hung in an enormous, gaudy frame, which was probably part of the artist's statement—featured a person, stretched and pulled in several directions. It was pseudo-realistic, a person that looked real in a way, but was also stretched and caricatured. The bright yellowish orange of their skin popped against the darker, hazier background.

Sedgewick thought about the painter, the artist who had created this. He wondered what it took to go from an idea in their head to paint on canvas. Did they have the finished product in mind when they began, or did it come about through hours and hours of work? Was there a dumpster somewhere filled with halfway approximations of this work that didn't quite cut it: maybe a reddish person on a green background, maybe a yellow person on a red background, maybe less pop, maybe more realism, maybe less realism and more stylized?

He wondered, and missed his father. And he missed Allison.

Chapter 9

“I thought I might find you here.”

Sedgewick turned to see Allison. She stood in the entryway to the gallery, taking in the spacious room and vibrant artwork on the white walls. She was wearing one of Sedgewick’s sweaters. He smiled at the floor.

“I like this one.” He pointed to it and she walked over, her steps echoing. “I like the color, and I like how—how he’s stretched in all these directions, not quite sure which way is up and which way—which way he’s going.”

“How do you know it’s a he?”

“I guess—guess I don’t.”

They both stared at the painting, taking it in.

“Did you—did you get breakfast and everything okay this morning?”

“Nope—your grandmother chased me out of the house with a broom.” A sly smile spread across her face and Sedgewick started chuckling at the image of his Gram chasing a girl out of the house with a broom. “I’d be naked except I managed to nab this sweater on my way out.”

Sedgewick’s laughter turned to a sheepish grin.

“It’s kind of ugly though.”

“Yeah—yeah it is.”

They stood across from each other, in front of the pseudo-realistic painting of the stretched ambiguous-gender person. Sedgewick bit his lip.

“I’m sorry I took off so—so quickly. It’s just...” He trailed off without an answer.

“I know.”

“Do you? Do you have any idea what I’m feeling?” The sudden outburst surprised both of them.

“I’m—I’m sorry.” Sedgewick sighed and shook his head, trying to find the right words. “Some days I feel like my life is—is a walking tragedy. Most days I can forget, I can find hope in—in something and it makes it okay. But with your mom, it all comes flooding back and I’m—I’m right in the middle of it... again.”

Allison didn’t say anything.

“I just needed some time.” Sedgewick sighed again, not satisfied with the words he’d chosen. He leaned against the wall and slid down to where he was sitting before. “Though I don’t know what—what the time did for me.”

Allison recognized his confusion and crouched in front of him.

“I’ve spent my time thinking about—about Gram and my grandfather and dad... and girls.” Allison smiled, wondering about Sedgewick’s romantic past.

“You need some time to think about girls?”

“I like you Allison, but this is an awful time for—for warm squishy feelings.”

“Is that what you’re feeling?”

“That and soul-crushing grief. It’s a great combo.”

“So you don’t know where we’re going either?” Sedgewick shook his head. “Well, we’re agreed on one thing then. And we both think this sweater is ugly—that’s two.”

“And—and your mom. I’m sorry about your mom.”

“Me, too.”

“That makes three.”

“Three’s pretty good.”

“It’s a good—it’s a good start.”

Smiles spread. Allison looked to the floor and Sedgewick felt some of his confusion lift, or at least dissipate enough that he didn’t feel so lost.

“How are you doing, about your mom?”

“I just talked to my dad.” Sedgewick winced.

“How’d that go?”

“He wants me home.” Sedgewick nodded. “But I don’t know. My dorm room is one thing, but heading back home is another. I think he wants me there until the funeral, until Thursday.”

“I can see why.”

“Yep, me, too. But that doesn’t make it any easier. I think I’ll go up this afternoon and see how long I can take it.” Sedgewick nodded and bit his lip again. “Will you be around tonight?”

“I’ve got to work until 10, I’ll be home after that. I guess—I guess you know where to find me.”

“I might need to do that.” She reached out and took Sedgewick’s hand. “I know we don’t know what’s going on here, but I

still need you.” She squeezed his hand, and he squeezed back. They sat in silence for a few more minutes, and then Sedgewick made to get up.

“I’ve got class in a few minutes. I should—should get going.” Allison nodded, still holding Sedgewick’s hand.

“You running off again?” The words could have crushed him, but the smile lifted his heart.

He exhaled and said, “Yeah. Call me if you—if you need anything.” He turned to go and she held his hand, extending her arm until the last possible moment before letting go. Sedgewick smiled again, and it lifted her heart as well.

She watched him go, and then turned to look at the pseudo-realistic painting again. A few minutes later she left. She stopped off at her dorm room before going home, and Kallie was back.

“Heading home?”

“Yep—I think my dad needs me.”

“Are you doing okay?”

“I’m not too bad. I got what I needed.” It took Kallie a moment, but the smile gave it away.

“You saw Sedgewick?”

“Yep. In one of the art galleries.”

“How’d it go?”

“Well, neither of us knows what’s going on, and I think we’re okay with that.”

“So you’ve decided to accept reality? That’s a good first step.” Allison smiled. “I can tell he’s good for you—I can see a little happy in there”

“A little happy? Yep.” She sighed. “A little. I’ll need it.”

“Do you need anything? Do you want me to come with you?”

“Oh, Kallie. You’re amazing. But I think I should do this on my own.” Kallie nodded, and then stepped forward to give her friend a hug.

Energized and strengthened, Allison went home.

The ride home would take 45 minutes or so, depending on traffic. At first Allison turned on the radio, listening to the local alt-rock station. But alt-rock didn’t fit her mood. She flipped through the presets, trying a classic rock station, the oldies station and the classical station before settling on country. Allison didn’t like country music, but it seemed to fit her mood just fine. She promptly tuned it out.

She wasn't as weepy as she expected to be, considering she was on her way home. She told herself it was a good thing, not wanting to have to wipe tears from her eyes and stay on the road at the same time. She also didn't want to walk in the door with puffy red eyes. She'd be that way before the night was over, but there was no need to start off that way.

Her dad was fragile, understandably so. He'd been arranging details and stowing casseroles from concerned neighbors in the fridge. He hadn't done anything but dwell on this, and Allison knew he was probably ready to collapse and drain.

Then there was Schmitty, her brother. She smiled at the thought. Nicknames began in the high school locker room and her brother Mitch hadn't been prepared. She saw it coming and threatened her teammates with great bodily harm if they called her Schmitty. She became Allie instead, a nickname that didn't stick off field. But Mitch hadn't been so lucky. As if a name like Mitch Schmidt wasn't bad enough, they dubbed him Schmitty that first season of soccer.

When he came home and slammed the door and announced to everyone that he was now Schmitty all Allison could do was laugh. He was pissed, but she could tell part of him liked it. It meant he was part of the team, that he wasn't the worst player.

"It's better than Messerschmidt, isn't it?" Schmitty punched her in the arm for using the childhood nickname. She punched him back and their parents put an end to it.

Her mom never liked how Allison and Mitch fought, and she usually blamed it on Allison. She was older and more mature and blah blah blah. Allison had that speech memorized. And now she'd never hear it again.

Schmitty was a senior this year. The high school soccer team was actually doing well. Their mom had been to the last game on Friday night, when Allison was shopping for groceries and getting lost in the eyes of a certain stock boy. She knew Schmitty would be silent and strong, as tough as a rock. But she also knew her kid brother was in there somewhere.

Her junior year of high school she'd been getting ready for the homecoming dance. Her mother was a buzz, as if it were a first date. But she usually went to the school dances, hanging out with her

friends and dancing with the occasional sweaty-palmed boy. She loved the pageantry of it all, dressing up in some knock out dress and watching the boys' eyes pop out of their heads. On a normal school day she'd be wearing baggy pants and a ball cap pulled low over her eyes. They'd seen her on the soccer field, running like mad and plowing over opponents. She'd always feel like Cinderella when she came downstairs and her date just stared.

That night her mom was hovering, asking too many questions and checking the camera for film too often. The recently christened Schmitty had seen the Cinderella act before and didn't buy it. He usually stayed out of the way. That night he was behind the closed door of his room, probably playing video games.

The doorbell rang, sending her mom into a tizzy. In retrospect it was kind of cute. She could hear her father opening the door, shaking her date's hand with a firm, semi-menacing grip. She checked the mirror once more and smiled. She remembered thinking that night would be fun. She could hear her date's attempts at small talk downstairs with her father, and she decided to check her hair again, though it looked fine, just to draw out the suspense.

When Glen Allen (Yeah, that was his name. Sounds like a city, doesn't it? Turns out it's a small town in Alaska.) asked Allison to homecoming it set off a buzz in the women's locker room. Glen played football but wasn't quite an all around jock. He had a sense of humor, and a sense about him that he understood what a joke high school could be. He had potential, and Allison liked that.

When she finally came downstairs her mother snapped pictures, but for the most part restrained herself. Allison kissed her dad on the cheek and gave her mother a hug.

"Be safe, dear," her mother had said and watched her Cinderella daughter head out the door with a boy she hardly knew.

As Allison drove north on I-35 she remembered what foresight her mother had. The dance had been fun, the usual blaring music and shaking bodies and spine-tingling slow dances. After the dance her and Glen headed out to a local restaurant with several friends. They drank coffee and cracked jokes and flirted shamelessly. Couples left one at a time until Glen and Allison were left and they headed back to his house to watch a movie.

By now the fancy dress was grating on Allison and her hair felt sticky. She longed to slip into her pajamas. But she also loved the

thought of kicking back on a couch and watching a movie in attire fit for a downtown 5-star restaurant. They settled on a couch in the basement, some classic 1980s teen flick on the TV. Glen was content to watch anything, and Allison quickly learned why. Distraction ruled his mind.

Glen had been a nice guy. He wasn't so interested in the high school cliques, and he seemed to move among groups effortlessly. He seemed to be above high school politics, somehow more mature, more adult. He had fun and was genuinely nice. At one point during the dance the two had noticed one of Allison's friends looking downcast, and he suggested they make it a threesome. It was awkward and funny, but Allison thought it was such an amazing thing to do.

But for all his smooth moves and genuine nice guy charm, he had other things on his mind. As the title credits finished he pulled Allison close and kissed her on the cheek. Her face warmed and she turned and kissed him, once, and then took his hand in hers and turned back to the movie.

A few scenes later his arm went around her and they readjusted, closer, snuggling against one another. Glen had tossed his jacket over a chair and rolled his sleeves up, but he still wore his tie. It had thick diagonal stripes, and her father actually had one just like it, but on a high school guy who rarely dresses up it seemed positively handsome.

Glen's free hand casually worked its way around, first resting on her arm, then her leg, then her stomach. It was natural and easy and they both enjoyed it. She cherished it, sitting back in his arms and feeling wanted, needed, secure and happy.

And then his hand was groping her breast. It happened so casually she didn't notice, though Glen had been steadily working up to it, repeatedly telling himself if she kept smiling and snuggling and not telling him to stop then he'd keep going.

It took her a moment, and then she moved his hand lower, back to her stomach, and whispered no. He caressed her stomach, pretending nothing awkward had happened.

The movie came to the requisite party scene, where everyone in the film, no matter their social standing, showed up at a massive party in the home of some rich student whose parents were

conveniently out of town. Allison wondered where these parties really happened.

And then it happened again. His hand was feeling her breast again. This time she didn't hesitate.

"Nope. I don't think so." She pushed him away and scooted over on the couch. Glen retreated, turning back to the movie he'd been ignoring and wondering why he had to push the issue.

The movie's lead inevitably became drunk, and Allison thought of her friends sipping coffee hours earlier. These movies were the farthest thing from high school as she knew it, but they made her laugh.

As the movie continued the couple moved back together on the couch. His arm went around her again, and his free hand started again. She took his hand absent-mindedly, and he continued to caress her hand. It started to feel comfortable again, started to make her slip into the butterflies again. The lead in the movie was making out, and Allison wondered how it happened so quickly.

And just like that Glen reached up to touch her breasts through the shiny material of her dress and the padding of her bra. Her stomach turned. She pushed him off and punched him. Square in the jaw. Hard.

She felt dirty and violated and mad. She gathered her dress in her hands and went upstairs, leaving Glen sitting on the couch mumbling an apology and rubbing his jaw. He was as shocked as her, caught up in it all, and now flooded with guilt and realizing what a jerk he'd been.

Later that night she cried into her mother's shoulder after telling her what happened. Her mom helped her ice her swollen hand, and collaborated her later story that it happened during soccer practice. Her mom had told her to be safe, and she had. She could take care of herself, though her father wouldn't admit it, which is why they never told him.

On Monday Glen looked broken. He could hardly look Allison in the eye. She so wanted to tell everyone what happened. But she didn't. She let it go. He got what he deserved.

Thinking back on it, Allison wondered what kind of guy tried that sort of thing. He was more interested in sex than her, more determined to cross lines and experience a thrill than just be with her. It wasn't quite the stuff of after school specials, a sleazy guy with

roaming hands in the backseat of a car. But a nice dress and some slow dancing was still no permission slip for what Glen tried.

Her mom had been so understanding, picking her up from Glen's house (and you can imagine the awkward wait, Allison sitting in the kitchen across from Glen, his mother awkwardly checking in on the sullen couple) and keeping the story quiet. The truth was she was proud of her daughter. Allison finally cried into her mom's shoulder more from frustration and anger than any feelings of the victim. She was just mad that Glen could be such an ass, that such a fun evening could end so predictably.

"Honestly, mom," she remembered saying through her tears, "What kind of an asshole does that?"

"Sometimes boys think that's what they want, honey."

"Forcing it on a couch in the basement with his parents upstairs?" She couldn't see how this was anyone's fantasy, and her mom tried to hide her discomfort.

"Not all boys are like that."

"And someday I'll meet a handsome and chaste gentleman? I'm not looking for a fantasy either."

"I know, honey. Some day you'll meet a boy you won't have to punch." Her mom's patience had paid off and she finally broke through Allison's funk. She smiled, despite her tears.

"Thanks, mom."

Allison changed lanes to pass a slower car. There had been other guys besides Glen. There had been a handful actually, though Glen had proved to be the most dramatic. Most of the others were nice and had moved in and out of her life with a minimum of tragedy. Okay, so at the time it had been a major ordeal, but looking back she had no hard feelings.

Her senior prom was picture perfect. She went with a large group of friends, everyone amicably paired off and they shared a limo and finished the night crashed together in a friend's family room with a string of movies. At the time there was an eerie similarity to Glen, but the entire feeling was different, gathered with a crowd of close friends. She felt safe and snuggled with her date, a guy named Johnson, Seth Johnson, but somehow everyone called him Johnson. It didn't make any sense in Minnesota where Johnsons were as common as automobiles.

Seth had been a good friend and it was more a date of convenience, so they could have fun with their friends and enjoy the spectacle that is prom. There were no expectations of anything more.

Allison's mom liked Seth. After Glen she was more protective than usual, though she tried not to let it show. But she genuinely liked Seth. Allison met with Seth a few times after graduation, during that last summer before college. They could have been called dates, but they seemed so insignificant, just trips to a fast food joint or a coffee shop.

Seth was heading to Notre Dame in the fall, and Allison had no illusions about a long distance relationship, even if things did get interesting between the two. But the romantic fires were cool and slow, if ever, to warm between the two. They were good friends, and whenever they had coffee or met for a burger it seemed silly to make more of it than it really was.

Last she'd talked to him he'd dated a few college girls and didn't come home last summer. Last summer Allison lived at home, working at the local library and at the same time dreading and hoping for the start of school. Living at home again after a year away was a rough transition. Her body was on a different schedule and she was just getting going when everyone else was slowing down. She remembered several late night conversations with her mom around the kitchen table when her energy was just building and her mom had long since peaked.

Allison would be bubbly, unable to sit still, occasionally getting up and sitting down again, or hopping on to the counter top. Her mom would be in her bathrobe, all but ready for bed, usually a cup of tea keeping her hands warm.

Those conversations were gone. She could hardly remember what they talked about. Boys, certainly. Her mom would talk about Schmittie or her father or the gossip from the extended family or what was happening at work. She would subtly push for details from Allison, wondering how college life was really going, wondering if there really weren't any new guys, wondering what would become of her daughter. Some days Allison would be cooperative and give her mom a glimpse of her new life, but other times Allison would be protective and want to keep things to herself. Her mom never pushed too hard.

She took the familiar exit and several turns to her neighborhood and street. Turning down her street had a strangely otherworld feel. She hadn't been home since school started, and the memories were flooding in. She parked in the driveway and sat in the car for a moment, the engine humming as it cooled. She wasn't crying yet. She knew she would as soon as she walked inside, but for now she had her composure.

She opened the door and stepped out of the car.

"Hey." She turned to see her brother at the bottom of the driveway. Schmitty looked like he'd grown a foot. His eyes looked dark and bloodshot, but he was smiling.

"Hey there, Messerschmidt." The siblings embraced there on the driveway in front of their childhood home.

"Are you doing okay?"

"Yeah. I just had to take a walk. I've been doing that a lot lately."

"Is dad all right?"

"You know dad. Sometimes he seems like nothing happened, other times he's wound way too tight and ready to explode."

"I better go say hi." Together they went inside. Allison braced herself, expecting an overwhelming wave of emotion when she walked in the front door. But seeing her brother outside had helped prepare her. More than anything there was a smell of home, a smell that reminded her deeply of her mother. She tried not to look at the pictures hanging in the entryway.

Her dad sat at the kitchen table, his back to them, leaning over a pile of papers.

"Hi daddy." He turned around and she could see the pain and grief in his face fade as he smiled, for the first time in days. Allison hugged her dad, clinging to him both for his sake and hers. Tears were inevitable, but they were joyful tears.

Later that afternoon she heard more details about the aftermath of death than she cared to know. Her father was swimming in insurance forms, funeral plans, and all the rest. She could see he was near the breaking point, but when she offered to help he declined.

"No, Allison, I need to go through this. If I need you or Mitch for something I'll ask."

"You sure? This doesn't look like it's very easy on you."

“No, it’s not easy. But it shouldn’t be. I need to feel... I don’t know, some closure or finality or something. And these lifeless forms and minor details somehow help.”

She saw her father in a new light after that day. He had always seemed somewhat disconnected. Some what aloof. Details were certainly his thing. He thrived on covering details, like Allison’s school loans and the massive piles of college paperwork, or her car insurance or making sure her car’s oil was changed every three months. It seemed only fitting that he’d deal with his wife’s death by arranging every last detail of the aftermath.

“Well, if you need anything...”

“I will.”

His seeming composure gave Allison a chance to head upstairs to her room. It was much the way she’d left it, half empty and strange since she’d left for college, but still thoroughly hers. She sat on the bed and looked around, feeling a quiet sadness. It wasn’t crushing or overwhelming or heart wrenching. It was just quiet. She just sat there and felt it, letting it be there as she remembered her life in this house, in this room, and her mom.

Chapter 10

Charles was standing at the bus stop when Sedgewick walked up.

“Where were you this morning, boy—running late, or thinking about your date?” Sedgewick gave an embarrassed grin.

“Hi Charles. I missed you, too.”

“You can’t fault an old man for wondering.”

Sedgewick clapped him on the shoulder and stood next to him as they waited for the bus. He told Charles everything that had happened since he’d cleaned his paintbrushes and left the playground mural. He told Charles about the late night coffee at Perkins, about Allison not wanting to go home and spending the night at Sedgewick’s place. He told him about getting up that morning and leaving early, wanting to be alone. He told him about the afternoon in the art gallery, seeing her again and feeling that maybe everything would be okay after all.

Charles quietly took it all in. Before the story was half over the bus came and they boarded and sat together near the back, and Sedgewick continued his story. Charles let him finish and then let silence fill the space before speaking.

“You know, I heard stories about you long before I ever met you. Your grandmother, Gertrude, she used to play cards with Rita and some other ladies at the church. Some community gathering of seniors. Rita would come home and tell stories about this woman who was raising a grandchild. We always had such sympathy for her.”

Sedgewick watched Charles while he spoke, never remembering his old friend to talk much about their past.

“Then we heard about your grandfather. It was crushing news. I remember that’s when I met you for the first time. Your grandmother needed some space and I took you outside. You were just a little squirt.”

“I remember that.”

“Yeah, I suppose you do. I’m just saying so because times like these often require help unlooked for. Nobody can ask for it, because they don’t know what they need. But when it comes, they cling to it.”

Sedgewick nodded and looked to the floor. He could handle that part. Being there with Allison was hard, it was painful, but he could manage.

“What I don’t know, Charles, is what—what happens next.”

“Are you asking for advice about girls?”

“Yeah, I suppose I am.”

“And you think an old fool like me would know what to do?”

He chuckled and gave Sedgewick a shrug of his shoulders.

“Well, Rita hasn’t left you—not yet anyways. I figured you might know something.” Charles laughed and slapped Sedgewick on the knee.

“Let me ask you this, boy, is she a girl or is she a pearl? You can treasure a pearl, you put it on a necklace and display it or you get it appraised and keep it safe and valued. But that’s not enough for a girl. Sure, they love to be treasured and protected, and they don’t mind walking arm in arm, but if that’s all you do you’ve just got a trophy. A girl’s worth a whole lot more than that.”

Sedgewick didn’t say anything but nodded slowly. The bus rumbled on and the two sat quietly.

“That’s all this old man knows,” Charles said after a while. “So she slept in your bed, huh? And borrowed your sweater?” Charles raised his eyebrows and made Sedgewick laugh.

“C’mon, boy, that mural needs some more work. Do you have time today?” Sedgewick nodded and followed Charles off the bus.

The mural was such a new thing for Sedgewick, and it filled him with dread and joy at the same time. He wanted to create. He wanted to take the brush and watch something amazing flow from his hands. But at the same time, he didn’t know such a thing was possible. He didn’t think he could capture with his frail hands what he saw in his mind’s eye.

“You know, boy, it’s all in how you look at things,” Charles said as if he were reading Sedgewick’s mind. “Painting a masterpiece is a daunting task, but painting a shoe isn’t so bad. You’ve got to take it one piece at a time.”

Sedgewick nodded and wondered if it was really as simple as that.

“It’s kind of like the whale. If you take—take manageable bites and keep at it you could eat the thing head to tail.”

Charles smiled. “That’s Silverstein—right?”

“Yeah, grandfather—he used to read that one to me.”

Sedgewick remembered cold winter evenings curled up in his grandfather’s lap and stories upon stories being read by the warm, orange glow of a lamp. Shel Silverstein had been one of many. And Sedgewick knew these were actual memories, not just fabricated thoughts generated from stories his grandmother told or second hand remembrances.

The two kept walking down the sidewalk toward Charles’ house and then on to the church. As they approached the church Charles asked Sedgewick if he’d do something.

“Yeah, what do you need?”

“I’d like you to paint more than just colors today. I’d like you to paint a river scene for me.” Sedgewick didn’t speak, but his eyes dropped to his scuffed shoes. “It doesn’t have to be the Jordan or the Rhine or anything fancy. Just a river. One ripple at a time.”

Sedgewick just nodded, trying not to think about the details of what he just committed to.

Inside the church yard, Charles gave Sedgewick a brush and paints and pointed him to an unfinished, bare section of fence.

“Have at it, boy.”

Sedgewick approached the section of fence, set his paints down and sat down next to them. He picked at the grass and then scratched his head and finally focused on the fence. He gazed at it for so long it finally disappeared in a blur and was lost in middle distance. He began to imagine all the great rivers he’d seen, all the artistic renderings of flowing water, all the perfectly captured photographic prints of rushing water, carving its own path in the land.

He finally settled on an image in his mind and began to bring the fence back into focus. He could see his image on the fence, but that was the easy part. Actually putting it there seemed impossible.

He narrowed his gaze in his mind and looked at one minute speck of river, the smallest ripple he could see, and then brush in hand he quickly soaked it in a rich blue and slathered it on the fence. It wasn’t the right color, it wasn’t the right stroke, and it wasn’t the right spot. But that was okay. Sedgewick had begun.

He mixed colors on his palette, a raggedy piece of cardboard, searching for the perfect tint of white and blue that would capture the curling wave of water he saw in his mind.

He came up with another color and spread it atop the first with a lighter stroke, a smoother, more fluid motion. This one looked better, but it still wasn't right. He spread it a little farther and wider, thinking it might work for another section of the river. He wiped his brush on a rag and tried again, this time pulling in a tint of gray.

Painting with colors wasn't like the crayons Sedgewick and every other child had worked with so long ago. Crayons were crayons. You put a color down and that was what you got. They didn't mix very well, and if you tried the swirl of wax and crayon bits was too much. But paint was a different animal. The colors would mix and bleed, revealing new and different colors and shades, not just bits of wax. It gave you an artistic edge, but also a medium that required much more mastery than simple motor skills.

The third time had been the charm, and Sedgewick stopped biting his lip for a moment and smiled. From a distance it looked like a grayish-blue gash on the fence, nothing to look at and nothing to wonder at. But in Sedgewick's mind it was a tiny glimpse of a great stretch of water.

On the other side of the yard Charles watched and he did wonder. He expected more of a protest from Sedgewick, more of a fight at the request to paint something more than abstract patches of color. While he didn't protest, he did tremble. And that's what Charles liked to see. An artist that trembled at the thought of a monumental task had the right mindset. Art was to be approached like you approach deity, with fear and trembling.

Sedgewick had that fear, but he also had the raw determination to face his fears. His past had uniquely trained him for that. Sedgewick had learned early on that life did not allow you to crawl into yourself and escape. There was no escape that way; only suicide.

On the other side of the yard, Sedgewick's ripple was becoming a real ripple, a tiny stretch of color that still didn't look like anything. But Sedgewick saw the tip of the iceberg.

His mind was adrift as he painted, at some moments so fully consumed in what he was trying to do that he couldn't imagine thinking of anything else. At other moments his mind had wandered a million miles away from applying oily paint to a rough wooden fence.

He thought of Allison. He couldn't help it, not that it was a problem. He hoped her evening at home was going okay, that she

could handle all the remembrances of her mom that would surely come, Sedgewick had always found that dealing with those unexpected memories had been the worst. At times he'd come out of a sudden recollection and expect life to return to those days gone by. He'd expect to see his grandfather sitting in his chair or walk into his father's studio again. But then the reality would set in and it could be crushing.

He stopped to mix another color, finding the perfect slate gray with a mix of blue for a calm stretch of water between the ripples.

He also thought of work and school and what classes he might take next year and the year after, and what he might be doing in that first year after college, assuming he continued with the traditional four-year college plan. Sedgewick had never been very traditional.

He liked learning, he liked classes, but he wasn't sure where to go with it. He wasn't sure if a college degree was something he needed. He liked Cub Foods. He didn't know if he wanted to be a lifer, but at the same time he didn't see such a position with the same stigma. People had to work, and what did it matter if they shelved cereal or flipped burgers or drew detailed architectural plans in front of an expensive computer? Did it really matter? You still had to put in the hours, put in the time to make do. As long as you enjoyed what you were doing, found some sort of happiness in doing your work, wasn't that all that mattered?

For Sedgewick it wasn't a complicated question, but it also was. It wasn't that complicated because he found joy in many things. He liked to work. He liked to feel useful, like to accomplish something. Even the worst jobs at the grocery store, the ones others would piss and moan about, Sedgewick would tackle with the same shrug as if he'd been asked to work in the baking goods aisle. Work was work. He wasn't the type to look for an easy way out.

Sedgewick didn't believe in get rich quick schemes. More than anything, they seemed like an escape. And why would you want to escape from life? What's the point of not living the life we all have to live?

So Sedgewick kept working at the grocery store. He didn't jump at job opportunities that came along; he didn't get excited about other avenues. He was content where he was.

School was another matter. It was the fast track to making something of yourself, to doing something with your life and becoming something. Sedgewick didn't know what he wanted to become. He wondered what was wrong with him the way he was. Certainly knowledge was useful, but would it really change him that intrinsically? He didn't think so.

He thought about dropping out—again that negative stigma—though it seemed early for such a move. Part of why he was even taking classes was to try things out and see if there was something beyond stocking groceries that would capture his attention. Life was hard like that. You have to try things out and see what fits and though some people think they can figure it out early on and be set their entire lives, Sedgewick thought it would be more of a continual working and refining and relearning and refiguring process.

Surely what he enjoyed now wouldn't always fill him with the same wonder. Things can get old and tired. Sometimes you have to rediscover them. Sometimes you owe them that much. But sometimes it's just time to move on to something else.

Moving on wasn't always the answer. Sedgewick thought that sometimes people had their priorities flipped, that they were willing to stick with something longer than it deserved, but other things they were willing to jump ship and leave lost and alone when really they owed them so much more.

He stepped back from the fence to see a tiny section of river, perhaps four inches square.

"I told you it didn't have to be the Jordan." Sedgewick looked up at Charles and smiled.

"It's not. It's the Mississippi." He paused. "But I guess it needs—needs some more work."

"It always does. You can't imagine how many times the great masters stood back from a future masterpiece and said the same thing."

"One bite at a time."

"You got it, bit by bit." Charles took his brush and Sedgewick gathered his paints. Before leaving he turned to Charles, but Charles kept humming and just smiled at Sedgewick. Gratitude didn't always need words.

Chapter 11

The band playing on the stereo in the back room reminded Sedgewick of Rash Dangerously. It was loud and unfocused, a bass line that tore across the scale, drums and guitars that hardly matched, and a voice that grated across the speakers and somehow hurt your own throat. Occasionally there was a glimmer of hope: a surprising chord change, a voice not-quite tolerable, which was a vast improvement.

The back room stereo was a direct challenge to the Cub Radio they piped through the store, the top 40 slush that somehow encouraged people to buy tortillas and milk. But the music kept Jimmie and Alex on task, pacified them enough that they managed to do good work. The manager overlooked the infraction as long as they could still hear the occasional pages, not that anyone ever paged the back room stock boys.

Late at night in the summer after the store closed they would jimmy one of the intercoms so it stayed on and rest it on the stereo speaker, broadcasting their thrash across the store. It was a jarring sound when you were out on the floor, but it also made you want to rock your head to the music, to jump up and down a bit as you walked to the back room to refill your pricing gun. It made you want to do things that weren't exactly acceptable when customers were filling their carts with groceries. It was a minor perk that slightly made up for working into the wee hours of the morning.

Sedgewick walked into the back room, ready to tackle a short shift at work, a four-hour evening stint that worked well with his class schedule. As he came in, he remembered those late night shifts and the wee hours. Walking home so late at night Sedgewick appreciate the term wee hours. They were quiet and slightly magical hours, completing fitting the term.

"Hi guys," Sedgewick said, feeling an energy he didn't always have.

They nodded at him and Jimmie paused before lifting a case of instant macaroni and cheese. He asked Sedgewick to work aisle 10, to make a dent in the pallets of paper products that were clogging the backroom. Sedgewick nodded and started loading a cart with the

massive boxes of paper of all kinds. An entire pallet of paper products might consist of only a dozen boxes, two complete trips to the floor.

He pulled his cart through the tiled produce backroom and onto the floor, making sure the tall stack of boxes made it out under the door. He crossed the store, passing the long meat section in the back, the aisle of freezers in the middle, and turning down the paper aisle, just short of the pop displays and the beginning of the dairy section in the corner.

A child walked past, a tiny little person in an orange and red wrap (Sedgewick wasn't sure 'wrap' was the proper term—but it seemed the best he could do, it was longer and lacked buttons like a blouse, but it wasn't simply a sweater or a shirt. 'Wrap' seemed to do the trick.), loudly clomping her feet as she walked. She lifted each knee as high as possible and brought her bulky shoes down on the tile floor with an echoing thump. Her mother looked back with a glare, but the girl's eyes were following Sedgewick and his massive cart piled with boxes.

She caught Sedgewick's eye and he smiled at her, then lifted his knees high into the air for a step or two. She stopped walking entirely and her mouth gaped open. Her mom called and she rushed ahead.

He pulled the first box down and slid it across the floor to the shelf where it belonged. He never imagined there could be so many different types of toilet paper before. He'd always thought there were two: the nice quilted kind his grandmother bought and the cheap tissue-thin stuff you found in public restrooms. But Cub devoted an entire quarter of an aisle to paper products for the toilet.

A woman wearing black stockings and a short skirt came walking down the aisle. Her body looked square and her face matched with sharp angles and short hair that accented the look. She pulled at her skirt when she thought Sedgewick wasn't looking, and when she needed toilet paper above where Sedgewick was working he gladly pulled it down for her and apologized for being in the way.

She flashed a smile that brought a softness and unexpected roundness to her square features. Sedgewick thought she should smile more. Lots of people should smile more (accept maybe Beth at Rash Dangerously outings). He finished the box of toilet paper, flattened the box, and moved on to the next one. Ten minutes later he'd finished with the cart and headed back to the stock room for another load.

The night was going quickly for Sedgewick, and before he knew it Jimmie and Alex had declared break time. They all collapsed in the break room, the evening October air too crisp for an outdoor break. Missy sauntered in a few minutes late and sat in Alex's lap, a bit of excessive workplace flirting they probably did more to annoy Jimmie and Sedgewick. Jimmie cracked a joke or two, but quickly ignored it. Sedgewick tried to as well. In his experience affection had always been something private and personal, something magical that stretched time and made you see the world in a different light. It wasn't something to toss around in front of others like an old rag.

After the break they headed back to work. The truck had been completely unloaded and Jimmie and Alex were hitting the floor to help Sedgewick and Missy stock all the new groceries. Missy and Alex were still flirting and headed to aisle two by themselves, the usually slow and time consuming aisle of canned fruits and vegetables.

Jimmie shook his head, but let them go. At this rate he didn't think he could stomach working with them all night anyway.

"C'mon, we'll tackle aisle six." He grabbed a cart and Sedgewick followed him out to the floor. By now it was after eight o'clock and the grocery store crowd began to thin out. The supper rush was gone and families were no longer coming in for their massive full-cart trips. The late night runs of single men and well-prepared moms (the ones who knew when the grocery store was busy and when it wasn't) were beginning.

Aisle six was the cereal aisle, the aisle where Sedgewick had found Connor the Friday before. Cereal lined an entire length of the aisle, except for the last ten or fifteen feet where the cheap plastic toys were displayed. On the opposite side were condiments of every type and variety, from ten feet of pickles to mustard, ketchup, mayonnaise, horseradish and the several varieties of atomic hot sauce. Granola bars and cereal bars held a small section of the aisle near the end, towards the front of the store.

Jimmie didn't need conversation to work. He was just as content to stock shelves in silence as he was to banter about bands or managers or whatever was on his mind. Mocking the products they stocked was always a favorite pastime.

"You know what I can't stand? Cereal mascots." Jimmie dropped a case of fruit loops and sliced the top open.

Sedgewick nodded, thinking of the few commercials he'd seen, and glancing up the aisle at the cartoon mascots who covered every other breakfast cereal box.

"What's even worse are the wussy mascots, the ones who can't seem to hang on to a single bowl of cereal. Some kid always nabs it at the last minute. What kind of mascot doesn't get to eat the cereal?"

Sedgewick laughed, thinking of the hapless rabbit.

"I can never understand the—the attraction. What does a rabbit have to do with fruity cereal? Carrots I'd understand—but fruit?"

Jimmie laughed at this, and pointed out that at least a toucan is tropical and there's a mild fruity connection.

"They're fruity, I tell you." Jimmie said. The conversation faded as they both stocked several more cases. Later in the night they returned to foolish mascots when Sedgewick pulled down a case of bran cereal.

"Hey, check it out: it's Bran Man." He held up the case to show Jimmie a cartoon bran flake flexing its muscles.

"Muscles? I don't think that's what bran does for you."

"And aren't cereal mascots really to—really supposed to entice the kids? What kind of kid is going to be drawn to Bran Man?"

"I'm telling you," Jimmie said, "They're fruity."

The conversation paused again and Sedgewick knelt to slice and price another case of cereal. He looked up to see a familiar pair of green eyes, the fourth college student from the Friday before. He smiled and returned to the case, using his pricing gun to shoot labels in quick rows up and down the case. He stowed the gun in his back pocket, picked up the case and stood to put the boxes on the shelf as Allison walked up to him.

"Can I help you, miss?"

"Hi." Allison hadn't quite laughed, but the smile was worth it.

"How are you? Was everything okay at home?" Sedgewick managed to give her his full attention while still slapping boxes of oat cereal on the shelf. He was always annoyed when other employees stopped to chat, as if stocking shelves required your undivided attention.

"Yep, I survived. It wasn't easy, but I didn't expect it to be."

Sedgewick nodded and turned to grab another case. He picked one in roughly the same spot so he wouldn't have to walk up and down

the aisle and make Allison follow him. Jimmie grabbed another case and gave Sedgewick a look.

“Oh, sorry. Jimmie, this is—this is Allison. Allison, Jimmie.” Allison nodded politely and Jimmie returned the nod and gave Sedgewick a sly grin.

“So are you two... am I going to need to work a different aisle?”

“Shut up, we’re...” he gave Allison a look and she returned it, but didn’t say anything. “...friends.”

“Friends, huh?” Jimmie hitched up his pants, grabbed a case of pickles, and headed for the far end of the aisle.

“You should see our coworkers in aisle two,” Sedgewick said when he saw the curious look on Allison’s face. She smiled and let her eyes fall to the floor.

“So this is the dedicated job of a stock boy, huh?”

“Yeah, pretty glamorous, I know.”

“I had to see for myself.” Sedgewick smiled and set the last box on the shelf, breaking down the case and adding the cardboard to the pile.

“Actually, home was kind of rough, and I wanted to see you.” The quiet tenderness in her voice cut to Sedgewick’s heart.

“I get off in half an hour, if you don’t mind waiting. I suppose it’s kind of—kind of boring watching me stock groceries.”

“Nope—it’s fascinating.”

“You should have been here earlier. We discovered Bran Man.” Sedgewick pointed to a bran cereal and the well-built flake. Allison managed a small laugh.

“You could wait for me at Perkins if—if you like.”

“Maybe I’ll do that. I’ve got a book or two to read for class. Not that I’ve been going, but I should probably try not to fall too far behind.” Sedgewick nodded and agreed to come find Allison at Perkins when he finished.

“I’ll see you then.”

“See you.” She took a step back, slowly, then smiled and gave a quick wave and turned to go. Sedgewick just smiled and watched her go. He finished his case and turned to see Jimmie standing at the empty cart, waiting for him.

“So she’s a friend, huh?” Jimmie gave his sly smile. “C’mon, let’s grab another cart.”

“I actually just met her yesterday.”

“Yesterday?”

“Yeah, it’s kind of a long, strange story.” Jimmie pressed as they headed to the back room and Sedgewick reluctantly filled in the details, leaving out as many as possible.

“Then her—her mom died.”

“Oh,” Jimmie said, his eyes widening. “Oh, man.”

“Yeah.” Jimmie didn’t know much, if any, of Sedgewick’s past, and Sedgewick let it stay that way.

“That’s heavy.” Sedgewick nodded and they hauled another cart out to aisle six. They continued working in silence, neither sure of what to say. Romantic thoughts and flirting jokes were nothing in the face of death. But as Sedgewick hauled boxes back and forth and lined up bottles of ketchup and packages of cereal, he knew that death didn’t have the final say.

He thought about Allison sitting alone in Perkins, and he wanted to do something for her. Quietly and desperately he wanted to do something for her. But he didn’t know what. He didn’t know what would be appropriate, didn’t know what would be thoughtful, didn’t know what would capture anything he was feeling at all.

10 o’clock rolled around and the stocking ended for the night. Sedgewick offered to take the cardboard pile to the back, and Jimmie headed up front to punch out and go home. Alex and Missy had already called it quits and the back room was quiet and still. The overnight crew hadn’t come in yet. Sedgewick flung a load of cardboard into the bailer and was about to pull the gate down and let the aging hydraulics crush the cardboard when he saw a muscled flake staring back at him. He pulled out the flattened case that once held 12 boxes of bran flakes and smiled at the little Bran Man emblazoned on the side. He thought of Allison and her smile, and inspiration struck.

He reached for his safety cutter and sliced the side of the box free, leaving a one-foot by two-foot piece of cardboard with a flexing bran flake smiling from one side.

Sedgewick sat down on an empty cart, placed the cardboard on his knees and pulled a thick black marker from his pocket. Sometimes they used the markers to make notes, indicating what back stock had been run when, or writing a list of what ice cream needed to be restocked. The felt-tipped marker always died in the cold of the

freezer, but the bold and blunt strokes worked great on the handy writing material of choice, cardboard, and could be read at a distance.

On the back side of the cardboard Sedgewick started sketching. He used fast, firm strokes, and the blank side of cardboard quickly grew black. He filled in the outer edge roughly and then concentrated on the center. With black as his only color, he used the negative space, the color of the cardboard, as best he could.

He finished in a few minutes, and stopped to survey his work. He added another line and a scribble here and there to the outer edge. He smiled. It was rough. It was odd looking. But it closely approximated the image he had in his mind, and he thought it just might make Allison smile.

He flipped the cardboard card over and penned a few words, careful to make sure the ink on the other side wasn't wiping off on his pants. He wrote a few lines beneath the Bran Man and then paused to sign his name. He wasn't sure what to put before his name. He had told Jimmie they were friends, and Allison hadn't objected. But she hadn't protested for more, either. Sedgewick considered it for a moment more, and then wrote a single 'v,' and signed his name below.

He unbuttoned his vest and headed to the front desk to punch out for the night. Jimmie was gone and the few cashiers were under-worked and bored. The store would close in another hour. Sedgewick paused at the front desk after punching out, looking across the registers to the produce department and the little floral section. He hesitated, toying with the idea for a moment. He looked at his rough-hewn cardboard card and felt a bit pathetic.

He wandered across the lanes to the floral section and glanced at the teddy bears beaming out of perfectly arranged flowers. A little plastic stick poked up from one arrangement, wishing the recipient well. A wall of refrigerated cases held more arrangements and buckets of single flowers. Sedgewick walked up to these and looked at the roses, the carnations, and the other flowers. None of them looked right or appropriate or even appealing to Sedgewick at all. The plastic looking flowers just didn't say what needed to be said.

Sedgewick shook his head and walked out the door. One of the remaining cashiers stood at her post, no customers in sight, and watched him go with an odd piece of cardboard under one arm.

Chapter 12

Allison sat stretched out in the booth, a second cup of coffee and a half-eaten cinnamon roll in front of her. She half-buried her face in the book she held in her hands, blocking out the other customers and the cranky waitress who had served them the night before. The waitress dropped off a pot of coffee and hadn't come back since.

Burying her face in a book meant she wouldn't keep looking at her watch or glancing at the entrance for Sedgewick. He was late, she knew that much for sure.

Being back home wasn't easy, and she was glad she had an escape. She wished she could take her brother with her, and wondered what Messerschmidt would think of Sedgewick. She could almost imagine bringing him along to Perkins, at least for his sake, but the thought of trying to interact with Sedgewick and her brother all at once seemed impossible. She couldn't quite imagine holding up through all of this without Sedgewick. She'd probably be taking lots of walks if she were still living at home like her brother.

Her dad was getting through all of it as best he could. She could hardly believe his reluctance to let others help with the arrangements, his odd need to do it all himself, to be there for every excruciating detail. It was a strong and brave thing to do, to stare down pain like that. It was also a methodical, ordered thing to do. It was very much something her dad would do.

She remembered a story her mom had told her years ago. She smiled sitting there by herself in Perkins.

She had been somewhere in the midst of the emotional turmoil that was junior high. Something had happened—she could hardly remember now if it was an awkward first kiss or a 24-hour relationship followed by a harsh break up—though it really didn't matter what the precipitating act had been. Her mom sat down with Allison in her bedroom and had what could only be described as “the talk.”

It wasn't purely a sex talk. They never really had that official talk and somehow managed to avoid it, thanks to playground talk and sex education. But there was still room for talk about dating and the expectations of her parents and simple advice that a teenager might actually accept if delivered with humility and care and tenderness.

This had been one such tender moment, not meant so much to teach or instruct Allison, but simply to share.

Allison's mom had been a teenager. She was young and excited and happy and wildly in love with a boy. The boy's name was Wayne and one day he would be Allison's father. Allison's mom told the story softly and gently, reminiscing of her husband and their early dating years in high school. Allison was both mystified and slightly horrified at the thought of her parents dating, but she was also intensely curious. She sat quietly on her bed, half wrapped in a blanket, listening to her mother.

"It was a summer night after a local softball game. I don't even remember who played. Your father drove me home and we were taking a late night walk around the neighborhood like we often did. We held hands and the air was warm and the night clear and beautiful. I was giddy with energy. I don't know how your father could stand it."

Allison settled in for the story, picturing her younger, happier parents in this romantic, idealized past where the future was already sure.

"I had a wild idea that night and it seemed like the perfect time to talk your father into it. I whispered in his ear and his eyes widened and a mortified expression filled his face. But I pushed and he consented. We dashed back to my house, half running, and I snuck inside for a few things and slipped out again. We set off through the neighborhood, new electricity tingling between our grasped hands.

"There was a lake and a neighborhood beach a short walk from my house, and that's where we headed. The beach officially closed at sundown and by the time we arrived it was pitch black. There weren't any lights, not even in the sandy parking lot outside the fence. A few houses stood nearby, but trees and the darkness blocked out any view, giving me the boldness I needed.

"I hopped the fence before your father could protest, grabbing the chain link after I landed to keep it from rattling. Your father reluctantly followed and we crossed the grassy park and went down to the beach. Out by the sand there wasn't as much protection from the trees, with the water opening around us. We hid on the far side of a tree, thinking that surely the neighbors kept a watchful eye on the beach all night long.

“I told your father to turn around, and I stripped to my underwear and dipped a toe in the warm summer lake water. It felt cold and exhilarating, and I took a few steps in and then a few more and then went completely under, trying not to splash and disturb the surface of the water. Your father watched from the tree. For the longest time I thought he wouldn’t join me, but then he motioned for me to turn around and he stripped down and joined me in the water, shaking his head and muttering to himself the whole time.

“I couldn’t believe I’d talked your father into swimming in the lake with me at night. It was such a sneaky thing to do, something so reckless for the two of us. And it was wonderful. The moon rose and your father put his arms around me and we kissed softly and tenderly.”

Allison could hardly believe it. The thought of her parents almost skinny-dipping—and she wondered to herself if her mom was editing the story for her sake—was wildly romantic for her stable parents.

“But we were cold and mosquitoes were swarming and our little swim didn’t last long. We crept out of the water and towed off behind the tree, dressed again and walked back home as if we’d been on a walk the entire time. I was horrified my wet underwear would soak through my clothes, but no one ever noticed.

“I don’t know what this story has to do with anything, Allison, but I guess I want you to know that love can be wild and exciting and the most exhilarating thing. You need to be careful not to lose your head—I imagine late night skinny-dipping wasn’t a brilliant idea, but it was really rather harmless. And I guess I want you to know that your father and I were once young and reckless like you, though it was a very long time ago. I want you to be able to talk to me, because believe it or not I do actually understand.”

Allison reached out and hugged her mom, thankful for the words that somehow healed her early romantic embarrassment.

“Thanks mom.”

“But don’t you dare tell your father.” They both laughed and Allison’s mom left her to ponder the idea of her parents swimming under the moonlight.

Even now Allison could hardly believe her father had done it. Though thinking back, she realized the questionable detail about them swimming in their underwear that had seemed like such an obvious

edit was actually positive proof for the veracity of the story. There probably was an edit, an omission of the argument they had over whether or not to swim completely nude and Allison could be sure her conservative father had suggested swimming in their underwear as a compromise. She couldn't imagine him being willing to swim naked, and frankly she found this line of thinking disturbing and quickly moved on to something else.

In reality, Allison was partially right. The underwear was no family-friendly edit; it actually happened. But the compromise had been suggested by Allison's mother, not her father.

She smiled at the memory of her mother, her heart swelling, and she tried to dwell on details so as not to drown in it all. Not that she wanted to follow her parents' example, but she could almost imagine stripping and stepping into the dark water on a cloudless night. It would be exhilarating, and the boy would have been an added element of giddiness and woozy romance. The exposure, the almost-but-not-quite nakedness of the idea didn't bother her. A bathing suit would be just as revealing, just as exposed. Her parents had simply been practical. She could understand that. The nakedness wasn't the thrill (though things may have been different if actual nudity were the case), it was the reckless pursuit of an experience.

All this time Allison had her face half-buried in a book she wasn't reading, but it did cause her to miss Sedgewick, and when she finally looked up he was standing there with a grin on his face.

He stood there awkwardly, hiding something behind his back. Something big that he really couldn't hide behind his back.

"What do you got there?" she asked.

"What this? It's a little—a little something for you." He handed her the giant cardboard card and sat down after realizing he couldn't exactly hide it. The thing was bigger than a menu, and Allison took it gingerly.

The front side was thick with black marker, and the scent still wafted from the card, not exactly the aroma Sedgewick was hoping for. But Allison didn't notice. Her eyes were taking in the drawing, the scrawled black edges and the flower in the middle, colored with negative space. But it wasn't just a flower. It was ragged and weak, yet strong—an upstart.

Allison realized what it was and squeezed her eyes shut and swallowed hard. Sedgewick sat there quietly, biting his lip, his hands fiddling with a stray straw wrapper. He didn't know what to expect, and seeing as Allison's face was hidden behind the enormous card, he couldn't gauge the reaction.

Allison remembered picking dandelions when she was a little girl, maybe only 5 years old, to give to her mother. She never really faulted her mom for it, for they were just weeds that lined the driveway, but her mom didn't graciously accept the bouquet and put them in water in a crystal vase on the table. It hadn't crushed Allison, it wasn't a traumatic childhood experience come back to haunt her. It was just a quiet moment, an early memory.

"I would have picked a real one for you, but they're kind of rare in October."

She lowered the card, and he watched a lone tear fall from her green eyes and drip down her pretty face. She let it fall, then closed her eyes and another followed, and another. She opened them again and reached across the table to grab Sedgewick's hand, to anchor herself. She mouthed the words 'thank you,' and Sedgewick nodded and squeezed her hand.

The cranky waitress from the previous night hustled up to the table in the middle of the scene, not exactly oblivious to what was happening, but not really caring either. Sedgewick ordered a hot chocolate and Allison waved off anything else, still speechless.

Her eyes were soft and round, a bit red and wet around the edges from crying, but they were full of love and tenderness and yearning. It seemed to Sedgewick they were yearning for the pain to go away, yearning for a better feeling to overcome, but also resigned to it. Sedgewick knew that feeling.

Finally she pulled her hand away from Sedgewick's and reached for a napkin to dab her tear-stained face. She set the crumpled napkin aside and looked at the card again with its thick cardboard and ragged edges. She turned it over to look at the back and smiled that there was more, and laughed that there was Bran Man beaming and flexing at her.

She read Sedgewick's words—gentle, careful, kind words—and his sign off. She had to read it again. It wasn't the brave and self-assured "Love, Sedgewick." But it wasn't the cold and distant

“Sincerely, Sedgewick.” It wasn’t even a casual “See ya, Sedgewick” or a stiff “Sorry for your loss, Sedgewick.”

Instead, in Sedgewick’s careful hand, it said “v, Sedgewick.” Allison studied it, wondering what the ‘v’ could possibly stand for. She looked up at Sedgewick, and she could tell he’d been waiting for this, expecting it.

“It’s from a poem I remember,” Sedgewick started, picking up the discarded straw wrapper to turn it over in his hands again. “Little kids were holding signs with letters on them, but none of them could make it. There was just one little girl holding a sign with a ‘v’. She was—she was all of love that could make it that day.”

A quiet joy filled Allison’s face. She broke her gaze with Sedgewick and her eyes fell on the book she hadn’t been reading before. Sedgewick looked at the book, then looked again. His eyes lit up and he reached across the table for the book. Allison started laughing and he smiled a huge smile and shook his head in disbelief.

He looked up and opened his mouth to ask a question, but he could only shake his head in wonder. The book was Shel Silverstein’s *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, which had the very poem Sedgewick had alluded to. It wasn’t exactly romantic poetry, but that’s precisely why it seemed so appropriate.

“I brought it from home,” Allison said, setting the card aside and running her finger over the words one last time. “I was going to do some reading for class but I just couldn’t bring myself to do it. So I pulled this out. My mom... my mom used to read this book to me and my brother when we were little. I haven’t read it in so long—years. But I thought that poem sounded familiar.”

Sedgewick couldn’t believe it either. His Gram and his grandfather used to read the book, and if he remembered he still had a copy on the shelf in his room.

The waitress came and set Sedgewick’s hot chocolate down with a clank, coming dangerously close to spilling, and hustled off again without a word.

Allison and Sedgewick sipped their drinks and picked at the half-eaten cinnamon roll (“This is becoming a tradition—an odd, half-eaten tradition,” Allison said) while talking about their favorite poems from the book, occasionally flipping through and reading them again, out loud, together. Sedgewick loved the one about the man being

swallowed by the boa constrictor and Allison the one about the dancing pants. They both liked the sister for sale, though neither of them ever had a sister. But if they did they could imagine wanting to auction her off.

They laughed and talked and remembered, moving on from that book to others, remembering old tales and stories that used to capture their imagination, perhaps back when it seemed so much easier to get lost in a good story. The cranky waitress returned and left again, leaving the bill and the strong hint that she wouldn't come back. Sedgewick finished his hot chocolate and the half-eaten cinnamon roll became three-quarters-eaten.

"I needed this," Allison said during a rare lull when they both stopped laughing and had finished telling their stories. "Thank you."

"Any time."

"Will you bring a giant card made out of cardboard every time?"

"I'll see what I can do. But don't—don't expect a scribbled picture every time."

"But I love the scribble."

"You do?"

"Very much." Their eyes met, and Sedgewick lowered his first. When he decided to do something for Allison he was thinking more along the lines of a bouquet of flowers or maybe a chocolate bar—sometimes his Gram liked chocolate when she was having a bad day. He hadn't expected to sit down and draw something. He never expected Allison to truly like it, perhaps fake it, maybe put on a good show of being touched, but she did like it.

"The memories have been coming so quickly today. It's good to just laugh, to do something besides cry and ache."

"They'll never stop coming."

"I know. But a reprieve is nice. That's all I need once in a while."

Silence overcame the booth, and Sedgewick swirled the glops of hot chocolate in the bottom of his mug that never completely dissolved.

"Do your memories still come?"

"All the time," Sedgewick set his mug down. "Some days it's a little tiny thing, an image, maybe—maybe a scent. Other days it's just a

passing thought you welcome and beckon towards you. After a while it doesn't hurt so much."

She started telling Sedgewick bits and pieces of stories about her mom that had come to her during the day, some welcomed and some not.

"I remember riding my big wheel in the driveway," she had to pause and explain what a big wheel was, the molded plastic tricycles that sat low to the ground and had huge front wheels and streamers coming off the handlebars. Allison's was pink and the back wheels clicked as they turned, louder and faster the faster you pedaled. "My mom would stand there and watch, holding my baby brother in her arms."

"I remember books, like the Shel Silverstein, and others, like Dr. Seuss and that little worm guy—Richard Scarry—and one about lots and lots of cats. I remember a brontosaurus a little boy kept as a pet—I always asked my mom if I could get one. I remember wild things and older books, books I read myself, but my mom would take me to the library to check them out. Books with annoying little brothers who were somehow cuter than my own brother. Books about soccer teams and mice that drove cars and strange schools and a great lion."

She stopped, realizing she'd been rambling.

"I like books," was all Sedgewick said.

"And I remember my first sleepover, when I borrowed my dad's old sleeping bag and my mom dropped me off and I was so scared." Some stories she finished, and others she didn't, letting them just hang there.

"I remember birthday presents I picked out for her, and other years when I copped out and just gave her a card from the store. I remember trips to visit our grandparents and summers on vacation and little league games with my mom sitting on the sidelines with a folding chair and a travel mug of ice tea."

Sedgewick didn't say much, instead letting her roll with the flowing memories. He noticed that she wasn't breaking down, that she was able embrace each memory. He realized what strength she had, how far she'd already come.

"And I remember dandelions..." this story trailed off and Sedgewick realized she'd gone as far as she could go with out being

overcome. He reached out and took her hand, just like she'd taken his earlier, and they held hands across the table in Perkins late on a Tuesday night.

"Do you remember anything of your mom?" Allison asked after a pause.

Sedgewick shook his head slowly from side to side.

"She left when I was really young. Sometimes—sometimes I think I have memories, I think I remember something, but I'm never sure if it's a story Gram told me or something I'm reconstructing from a picture or if it's an actual memory."

"And you still miss her?"

"Some days, yeah. I wonder why she left, I wonder what it would be like if she came back. She's still—she's still my mom, but it's not quite the same," Sedgewick looked her in the eye, and she nodded, understanding. Sedgewick didn't have a lifetime of memories to rattle off, didn't have as much to miss or as much to grieve over. It didn't mean it was something to dismiss, it just didn't compare.

"What about your dad?"

"Do I remember him? Yeah. It's still hard to tell what's firsthand and what's secondhand, but I remember a lot more of him." They were still holding hands, leaning across the table towards each other and speaking in quiet tones.

"He was an artist."

"Your dad?" Sedgewick nodded. Allison squeezed his hand and gave a knowing smile.

"I remember his studio. I remember I'd lay on the floor and color pictures with crayons while my dad would paint." Sedgewick looked down and grew quiet.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ask you so much all at once."

"No, it's okay. A few of his paintings are hanging up around the house."

"Really? That's cool."

"Yeah. I remember Gram saying that some friends had told her and my grandfather that they should take down the paintings, after my dad—after my dad died. But Gram refused."

"I can see that."

"She always said that life had denied me my father, but she wouldn't do it, too. She couldn't bear to do it." Allison admired her

strength, and could see her standing up for little Sedgewick despite her own loss. She wondered at Sedgewick's grandmother.

Finally they both quieted, their stories told and their questions asked, for now. They were still holding hands across the table, and they just sat like this in the late night semi-quiet of the restaurant. Their eyes would shift from the remains of the cinnamon roll, to the other tables throughout the restaurant, to the quick pace of the always cranky waitress, and then back to each other—somehow always at the same moment, always that same feeling of surprise and wonder and warmth.

Chapter 13

It wasn't nearly as late as the night before when they finally left Perkins, leaving a generous tip for the cranky waitress and paying the cashier. Sedgewick followed Allison to her car.

They stood there in the dark, unsure if they should hold hands or hug goodnight. Sedgewick bit his lip and kicked at a wayward stone. Allison kept swallowing and opening her mouth to speak but then closing it again. She gripped her cardboard card under one arm.

"I think my problem is I don't want to say goodbye."

Sedgewick nodded, feeling squirmy and nervous.

"I don't want to make this a habit, but do I have to say goodbye?"

Sedgewick's eyebrows furled.

"Can I stay at your place again?"

His face relaxed into a smile.

"Yeah, any time."

She motioned for Sedgewick to get in and she started the car and drove the two of them home.

As the car pulled out of the parking lot and up to the red light, she turned down the radio.

"It's not that I don't want to go home tonight. I think I'd be okay. It's just that I... I don't know. There's something safe and familiar about it—about staying at your place."

Sedgewick's hands toyed with the seatbelt absentmindedly. He nodded slowly, thinking that's how home always felt for him, but unsure of how that could transfer to someone else.

"Well, as long as it's not every night. Because if it is we're switching and you—you can sleep on the couch."

Allison laughed and reached over to poke him with her finger.

"You don't mind giving up your bed, do you?"

"Of course not."

"Because I could sleep on the couch."

"No, it's okay. I'm just being dumb."

The car rumbled through a stoplight and turned down Sedgewick's street.

"But I might start charging you rent." Allison tried to poke him, but he deflected the attack. The car stopped in front of the house

and Allison shut it off. They sat there for a moment listening to the motor settle.

“You are okay with this right? I could go back to the dorm if you want.”

“I don’t want to say goodbye, either,” Sedgewick said as he opened the door. Allison sat there a second longer, letting his words and her smile linger, and she opened the door and followed him.

The house was dark and quiet, as it usually was when Sedgewick came home late from work. His grandmother was already asleep upstairs, her steady breathing and slight wheeze could be heard downstairs if you were still.

Sedgewick followed her upstairs to get the blankets and pillow from the night before that his grandmother had put away during the day. Allison went straight to Sedgewick’s bedroom, turning the light on and laying her jacket over a chair. She kicked her shoes off and sat down on the bed.

Sedgewick came back to his room, standing in the doorway with a blanket and pillow in his arms. He meant to say goodnight, to turn around and walk downstairs. But instead he stood there, rocking back and forth as if trying to build up momentum. Then he finally stepped forward and sat down next to her on his bed.

“You know we still have to say goodbye.”

“Nope,” she answered. “Now it’s just goodnight.”

And they kissed. If it were the movies that’s what would have happened. But it wasn’t the movies, and that’s exactly what Allison was thinking. She could imagine them turning to each other, hands wrapping around one another and a tender hand coming up to caress her cheek. They both lean forward and their lips touch (in the background the music swells). It would have been a slow, soft kiss, first just one, but then a second, longer, tender kiss. Sedgewick would have said goodnight and she’d be left to melt.

But they didn’t kiss. And Allison wasn’t disappointed. She didn’t want the predictable Hollywood moment. Not that anything else they were doing was predictable.

Instead they just sat there awkwardly, close enough on the bed that they touched, but not close enough to be intimate.

Sedgewick hadn’t thought of kissing. He was still trying to figure out how the girl of his dreams had gone from shopping at Cub

to sleeping in his bed—not once but two nights in a row—in a matter of a few days. And all the while he didn't know what it meant, if he was establishing a deep friendship of mutual grace in helping her through this time, or if the tears would give way to something more and the hand holding they'd done at Perkins that sent tingles up and down his arm would become a common occurrence. He couldn't imagine such a feeling ever becoming common.

"I should—I should probably go. We could both use some sleep." He stood up, still clutching the spare blanket and pillow and headed for the door.

"Sedgewick?" He paused at the door. "Thank you." He just shook his head.

"Goodnight, Allison."

"Goodnight, Sedgewick." He stood in his own doorway for a moment longer, an innocent smile on his face, looking at Allison, sitting there in his bed with a tender warm look on her face. He took one last look and then closed the door. He stood outside the door another moment, unsure of why he wasn't heading downstairs.

Inside Sedgewick's bedroom Allison lingered on the bed, clasping her hands and hugging herself, still feeling the electricity of Sedgewick's touch and that last look from the doorway.

At the same moment they both realized they wished they had kissed.

Sedgewick went downstairs and crashed on the couch. It had been a long day, an early day, and he could feel sleep coming quickly. As he drifted off he realized for the first time that he felt something deeply for Allison. She wasn't just another passing college girl.

Upstairs Allison went to Sedgewick's closet and found another work shirt to sleep in. She changed in the warm light of the lamp and then crawled into Sedgewick's bed. She wanted to wander around his room again, read the spines of the books on his shelf and look at the photos of his family again, but she also felt like she knew what was there. She knew all she needed to know, and so she just pulled the covers tighter and settled into the pillow that smelled faintly of boy.

Allison didn't drift off to sleep as quickly as Sedgewick did. She could hear his grandmother's steady breathing in the next room. And her mind wandered. The overwhelming sadness that had consumed her the night before seemed to be lifting. Going home that day had been tough, but she'd done it. She walked through it and had come out

on the other side stronger. While sadness lingered that evening, coming in little memories and wisps, it wasn't crushing. It could suddenly be crushing again, but for once she knew a sadness she could accept and embrace.

It seemed odd to her that she should be having these moments with Sedgewick, these potentially romantic encounters the same week her mother died. But it also seemed like it wouldn't work any other way. She couldn't imagine embracing her own sadness without knowing Sedgewick's story.

She thought of the card he had made, the careful drawing of a dandelion in black marker. It wasn't just a touching and sentimental gesture. The drawing was actually quite good. She thought of the words on the other side and smiled.

"v, Sedgewick" he had signed. It was all the love that could make it that day, and Allison realized it was all the love she needed.

The next morning Allison woke in the half dark, half light of dawn. The warmth of the blanket and the closeness of the room reminded her that she had spent the night at Sedgewick's place again. She rubbed her eyes and slowly sat up in bed. She stretched and ran a hand through her hair, which was still pulled into a ponytail. She pushed the covers back and her feet touched the cold floor. It sent goose bumps up her bare legs and she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. She was still wearing one of Sedgewick's work shirts, which was oversized on her. But they made good makeshift pajamas.

She stood up and walked to the window, looking out on her car on the street and the frost that clung to the grass and the shingles and the car windows. It was the first frost of the year, a coldness that held everything tight, cold and stiff, but at the same time warm and safe.

That's how she felt. She didn't know exactly why she asked to spend the night again. She easily could have gone home and slept in her dorm, told Kallie about the card Sedgewick had made for her and readjusted to a normal life. But nothing seemed quite normal anymore. She knew normal would never be normal again.

It wasn't that she needed the escape like she did the night before. It was trying something new, something different, something hopeful.

She heard footsteps coming up the stairs. It was Sedgewick. She listened to him climb the stairs, walk down the hall and enter the bathroom. She could hear water in the sink and she crossed the bedroom to the door and reached for the knob. The morning before he'd taken off, and she wouldn't let him do it again. Not because she needed him, but because she knew he needed her.

She turned the knob slowly and quietly and opened the door, sneaking out and down the hall. She peeked in the open door and saw Sedgewick standing there, still wearing the same clothes from the night before, his face half under the faucet. She stood in the doorway and watched.

"Taking off early again?" He grinned and shook his head.

"Not today." His eyes were embarrassed, as if caught in the act or suddenly realizing what it looked like. Allison smiled.

"Well that's good. I don't think I'd be able to take a runaway twice in a row. It's a little disconcerting."

"I'm sorry, I just..."

"I know." She stepped into the bathroom with Sedgewick and put her arms around him. She leaned her face against his chest and he slowly wrapped his arms around her, a little surprised and shocked. Then she realized she wasn't wearing any pants.

But it didn't bother her. As much as it could have been a sexual moment, two college kids spending the night together and embracing in the morning, it wasn't. They were two people who needed each other, two people who had just woken up, whose mouths were thick with stale breath and eyes crusted over. As sexy as she may have looked standing there with Sedgewick's shirt falling just below her underwear and nothing else, it wasn't sexiness or lust or any kind of physical attraction that either of them felt.

It was something more. It was something deeper. It was something better.

Chapter 14

“So you’re here again,” Sedgewick’s grandmother said when she came downstairs and saw Allison sitting at the kitchen table.

“Yep. I hope that’s okay.”

“Child, there couldn’t be anything better. Unless of course that boy of mine is still here.”

“Hi, Gram,” Sedgewick called from the stove, which was just out of his grandmother’s line of sight. “Have a seat, I’m making breakfast.”

“Now this is more like it,” she said, hobbling into the kitchen, her body still stiff and tired. “Breakfast time with my boy and this wonderful girl—and I don’t have to cook.”

She sat down across from Allison, who was cheerful and bright, despite being up earlier than normal. Her hair was in the same ponytail and she was still wearing Sedgewick’s work shirt, but she had managed to find a pair of his pants. Sedgewick stood at the stove, whipping up omelets.

“So were you two out again last night, bothering the local restaurateurs?”

“Yeah, Allison stopped by just before my shift ended and we met at Perkins. It was easier for her to stay here again.”

“Well, we should open a hotel. I didn’t know there were so many college kids looking for a place to stay.” She laughed at her own joke and then turned to apologize to Allison.

“You know I’m kidding, child. We’re happy to have you any time.” She grew quiet and then spoke again more softly, “That kind of kidding is the sort of thing my late husband used to do. I suppose I’m making up for his absence.”

“Gram, I think if grandfather were here he’d be giving you a hard time for your meager kidding. He’d taunt you and ask if that was the best you could do.”

“Yes, I suppose he would.”

“I guess we both make up for him.”

“But you’re so much better at it, child.”

Sedgewick smiled from the stove, remembering his grandfather sitting in the corner where Allison sat now.

“He sounds like an amazing person,” Allison said from her corner, not realizing that she was sitting in his seat.

“He was, dear, he was.”

Sedgewick finished the omelets and brought two plates to the table. He dumped the pan and dirty dishes in the sink.

“I’m going to head upstairs and shower, if you ladies don’t mind. Despite the sleepover, I still—some of us still need to get to class.”

When Sedgewick left his grandmother leaned over and motioned with her head towards where Sedgewick had been standing.

“I think he’s feeling a bit out-numbered, what do you think?”

Allison smiled.

“I’m just glad he’s still here.”

“Yes, that is something. Though I’d be a little worried if he managed to sneak away twice.”

“Well, I did catch him in the bathroom this morning, so he could have been plotting something.”

“That would explain the omelets—guilt cooking.” Gertrude smiled, feeling like she was making up for her husband again. “No, I think I see something different in the boy this morning. I think he’s getting used to the idea.”

“The idea? The idea of what?”

“Well, you. I can’t say that he’s brought that many pretty young women home before. I think he’s been trying to figure out what he’s doing, and he might be getting closer.”

Allison didn’t say anything, just took another bite and enjoyed the chance to eat a real, home cooked breakfast. Especially one that Sedgewick had made for her.

“And what about you? How are you doing?”

“What? With Sedgewick? Oh, I don’t know.”

“Well, I wasn’t asking about him, child, but if that’s what you’re thinking about it certainly means something.” Sedgewick’s grandmother smiled warmly. “I meant about your mother.”

“Oh, yes.” Allison felt embarrassed.

“I can gather the reasons you spent the night last night were different than they were the night before?”

“Yep, I suppose you could say that,” Allison said, putting down her fork to think. How was it that she could have this intimate of a

conversation with someone else's grandmother, someone she just met the day before?

"I'm doing better, with my mom. There are still moments..."

"There will always be moments."

"Yep. I guess so. But they're not as—I don't know, not as overwhelming as they were at first." Gertrude flashed her warm smile.

"That's good, child. That means you're seeing the good in them, not just the sadness."

Allison leaned forward, her mind spinning.

"Is that okay, to see goodness?"

"Why yes, it is. If you loved your mother, which I can tell you did—and still do, then those memories should eventually bring you happiness. There will always be sadness at her loss, but at some point you come to a place where the joy of knowing your mother overcomes the pain of losing her."

Allison nodded, trying to understand it all. It was a lot for her to process, especially after only a few days.

"It's just so hard to believe. If I hadn't woken up in this house the past two days, I think I would have forgotten."

"Oh child, waking up is the worst. We're so often caught between the waking and the dreaming world that we can hardly remember which is which, and you can't blame yourself for that. I don't know how many times I've dreamed of my husband and rolled over expecting to see him. Or Sedgewick's father, or my grandchild, or even my daughter—and think how much I'd like to see them that day. And then something, the sun, the cold floor, or a sudden dawning in my head makes me realize that I won't see them that day, or any day." She paused for a moment, a tender silence descended on the kitchen.

"The sadness comes back then. Always does."

"And what do you do? When the sadness comes back?"

"I suppose you want me to say I think happy thoughts and it all goes away? Or I click my heels three times? Oh, I wish it were that easy."

"I don't suppose it is, is it?"

"No, it never is. On those days when the sadness comes I embrace it. I let it fill me, let it flood my soul and I wallow in it. Sometimes I cry and wet my pillow with the sadness. But whatever I

do I let it run its course, and I'm stronger for it. It's not weakness to cry or be sad. But it will make you weak to deny those feelings."

"Those sound like wise words."

"Well, honey, when you live as long as I do you tend to learn a thing or two. But it only happens from falling down, lest you think I've got a big head."

The two women smiled at each other, sitting there in the warmth of the kitchen, finished with breakfast.

"Was Sedgewick's mother your daughter?" Sadness entered the room again. Sedgewick's grandmother didn't answer at once. Her eyes focused on the distance, far off from the kitchen and that house and that very city.

"Yes, she was. She was my daughter." Allison didn't say anything. "I wish I could say she wasn't, I wish I could say Jackson—Sedgewick's father—had been my son. He practically was." She paused again.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"No, it's okay, child. There's no sense hiding from any of it." Allison's brow wrinkled, and she looked down.

"I suppose if Jackson were my son it would be too easy to be filled with hate. I'd be the overprotective mother—the mama bear: 'someone's been toying with my boys'" she intoned.

Allison smiled at the image, but her smile faded as she realized the greater reality of the situation.

"But no, she was my daughter—is my daughter," she corrected herself. "And that probably hurts more than anything else, knowing that some of the blame, a portion of the blame might possibly rest with me."

"No, you can't possibly blame yourself."

"But I do child, in some small ways I can't help but think something I did or didn't do could have stopped this, could have kept her from leaving. But it's done now." She paused again, taking a drink of orange juice from her mug.

"Her name was Allison, too, you know. I've always liked that name."

Allison nodded slowly.

"That doesn't mean anything, of course, it's just a fact." The silence lingered again, and Sedgewick's grandmother continued filling in the story.

“Sedgewick was just a little boy, 18 months old. His brother was just a babe. It was February—February 29, and Allison, their mother, said she had to go to the store and she asked me to watch them. It was no problem, nothing out of the ordinary. They lived fairly close and we watched the boys a lot. But that was the day she left.

“Jackson called later that day, asking if we’d seen her. He’d been at his studio and came home to find the place empty. She was gone. I told him she dropped Sedgewick and his brother off and went to run some errands. I told him he could come get the boys if he liked—he was my son-in-law and I often felt like there was that unspoken friction between us. I always tried to defuse it in those early days.

“But he waved me off, told me he’d finish up his work and if Allison hadn’t picked the boys up by supper time he’d come by. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, but I heard something in his voice, a hint of worry and fear. And he was right, though he didn’t know it then. I often wondered what he painted in those hours of unknowing—he was an artist you know. I wondered what the canvas would look like when he had such doubts and questions in his mind. But if there was a piece that captured that he never told anyone.

“He came over at supper time and neither of us had heard anything. We were starting to get worried at this point. We called the police and called everyone we knew. We went back to their place to look around, and Jackson went to their bedroom. I had Sedgewick in my arms when I heard his cries. My husband and I rushed into the room to find him sitting on the bed, his face buried in his hands. He was crying, tears just streaming down his face.

“We didn’t understand until we looked at the closet. It was wide open, with half the hangers swinging empty and free. The drawers on the dresser in the corner had been pulled open and emptied. She had packed in a hurry and left. Jackson just cried and Sedgewick started to fidget in my arms.

“I always thought that he could hear his daddy and he knew it wasn’t good. And it certainly wasn’t. I never heard from my daughter again after that day.”

She finally stopped, unable to continue. Allison had tears welling in her eyes, completely overwhelmed at the story.

“I don’t know why she left, I’ve never understood that, but I’ve always wished she’d just come home. I’d want to throttle her good, but I’d just take her in my arms.”

She stopped again and Allison reached over to put a hand on Gertrude’s. She smiled, weakly, and reached her other hand over to pat Allison’s hand. Allison looked up to see Sedgewick standing in the doorway. His hair was still wet, a bit tussled, but just as messy as it usually was—just wetter (she wondered if tussled happened by accident or if it required effort). He had an odd expression on his face, like he hadn’t been listening but somehow knew what they were talking about anyway.

Allison stood up and crossed the kitchen and wrapped her arms around Sedgewick without a word. He hugged her back and looked to his grandmother. She smiled, slow and proud, and then stood and hobbled over to join the hug.

After all of this, Allison took a quick shower and borrowed another one of Sedgewick’s shirts. She was beginning to feel at home in his clothes. The two left for class, turning to wave goodbye to Sedgewick’s grandmother, who stood at the door and watched them go, as if for the last time.

Chapter 15

“How’s my boy? Something tells me he’s filled with joy!” Charles walked up to the bus stop in the middle of campus with a big smile on his face. Sedgewick grinned and reached out to shake Charles’ hand.

“Hi Charles.”

“So?”

“So what?”

“How are you? Is that some joy I see poking through?”

Sedgewick looked to the ground.

“Yeah, I suppose it is.”

“Another good day?”

“Yeah, I guess. She spent the night again.” Charles feigned shock.

“Does your grandmother know about this?” he asked, reaching out to take Sedgewick by the arm, as if confronting him about some heinous act.

“Yeah, I made breakfast for them both this morning.”

“My oh my, that’s a step up from leaving ‘em high and dry.”

Sedgewick smiled weakly, wondering if he’d ever live that down.

“So things are going well then?”

“Yeah, I think we’re doing okay. She seems to be doing a lot better—”

“And let me guess, you have something to do with that?”

“Well, I don’t know if I do, but she’s doing better.”

Charles smiled and stepped forward to join the forming line as the bus pulled up.

“So are you treasuring her?”

“Am I treasuring her?”

“Yeah, do you listen to me, boy? Did you take my advice? Did you do something for the girl? You can’t just let her cry on your shoulder and sleep over at your house. I know that’s how some folks do it nowadays, but I don’t reckon it works very well.” Sedgewick smiled and nodded his head. They sat down and Sedgewick explained the night before at work how he’d fashioned a card for her and drew a

picture. Charles listened quietly, nodding his head as Sedgewick finished.

“You made her a card with some corporate ad man? Out of a piece of ratty cardboard?” He laughed out loud, and slapped Sedgewick on the knee. “Oh boy, that’s good,” he continued in seriousness, “I bet she loved it.”

“I think she liked it.”

“Boy, so modest! She thought it the best!”

“And you drew a picture? Tell me about it.” Charles leaned forward intently as Sedgewick described the picture he scrawled on the cardboard with a thick black marker.

“That sounds good, my boy, that sounds good. You didn’t know you had it in you, did you?”

“No, I didn’t think I did. But it—it just came out like that.”

“Now you’re getting it. I shouldn’t have to ask, but you’re coming over today, right? That section of the mural is yours now, and you’ve got to see it through.”

Sedgewick nodded and his thoughts returned to that stretch of gray-blue water he’d been working on the day before. It wasn’t long before Charles’ stop came and the two of them got off and walked the few blocks to Charles’ house. They said hi to Rita and Sedgewick knelt to pet Dobbie. They continued on to the church and got to work.

The tiny section Sedgewick had done the day before seemed so small and insignificant. It was smaller than the piece of cardboard he’d given to Allison, but he could still see the larger picture in his mind, stretching across the rest of the fence.

He mixed colors and pushed the paint around on his palette, biting his lip as he worked. He took up a brush and applied paint to the wood, letting it soak into the cracks. He looked closely and squinted, then stepped back and reached in for a stroke or two. He kept closing his eyes and looking down to his palette and mixing more paint. The water stretched out before him and started to look like a real river. He added the shore, putting in browns and dirty whites and hints of yellow for the sand. He added a rose colored stone or two and bits of green as weeds poked through.

As darkness descended the picture was starting to take shape. Charles whistled when he walked up and saw it.

“I think you’ve got it my boy.”

“Got what?”

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“You’ve got all the tones, right there in your bones.” Charles tapped Sedgewick’s chest with two fingers and turned for the shed to clean brushes. Sedgewick looked down to the smear of reddish brown Charles had left on his shirt, probably intentionally.

Sedgewick looked up to the sky, to the grayish clouds, tinted with reds and purples as the sun was going down. Frost had covered the ground that morning, but the sun had brought warmth and comfort to the day. He could feel the cold returning with the sun’s departure.

His father. Sedgewick realized it suddenly. Charles was talking about his father. Sedgewick thought he should have known it himself. But then he thought he probably did know it, probably always did, it was just he’d never been able to figure it out for himself. He needed a little help along the way. Needed the prodding to put a brush in his hands and see what his stroke would leave behind.

It was all he needed that day. He stopped in the shed before heading home.

“Thanks, Charles.”

“What are you thanking me for, boy?”

“You don’t know?”

Charles smiled and Sedgewick turned to go. The walk home was quiet and sure, and Sedgewick appreciated every step. He didn’t have to work tonight, which was part of why he worked so late on the mural. He’d be able to spend tonight at home, with his Gram. Unless of course Allison called, which wouldn’t be so bad. He was looking forward to a bit of normal, though it all somehow felt normal.

He ate supper with his grandmother that night, and later in the evening Allison called. They talked for a while. Allison was in her dorm and planned to stay there for the night.

“Do you think you can manage?”

“I’ll be okay. I’ve still got your shirt to wear for pajamas.”

Sedgewick smiled as he sat on his bed, thinking to himself how Allison had been there the two previous nights.

“Do I—I get that back?”

“Nope. It’s mine now.”

The funeral was the next day, and they arranged details, figuring out when and where. Allison had considered staying at her house that night, but she really didn't want to, and needing to give Sedgewick a ride to the funeral the next day was a convenient excuse.

"Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Nope, it's okay. I'd like to limit the weepy family time as much as possible. There's only so much of that anyone should be forced to go through."

"Yeah, I suppose."

"And you don't mind coming to the funeral?"

"No, not at all. I want to be there."

"Thanks. I just thought it might be too much."

"Why would you think that? I want to be there for you."

"Just with all you've gone through..." Her voice trailed off.

"It's—it's okay. I've learned you can't spend your life avoiding these things. Sometimes you have to embrace it. Sometimes you need a push, but you just—you just have to embrace it."

"Am I your push?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose you are. I haven't been to a funeral since, not that I've been avoiding them. But it was so—it was so long ago. I don't know if I understood it all."

"Okay, as long as you're not doing it because you think you have to."

"Well, it is something I have to do, but not for those reasons."

They were silent for a moment, both amazed at their ability to understand one another.

"I should probably let you go. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

"Yep, I guess it will." They were quiet again.

"It is kind of hard."

"What is?"

"Well, saying—saying goodbye."

"Yep. It was easier when I knew you were downstairs and it was only 'goodnight'."

"Well maybe—maybe you can sleep over again soon and we'll take care of that problem."

Allison laughed and they finally said goodnight and goodbye and hung up. If any other guy had said that Allison would have rolled her eyes and been tempted to smack him. But when Sedgewick said it,

it was something completely different. Something so pure and innocent and loving. She appreciated that. She loved that.

Kallie was smiling at her, from her bed across the room.

“What?”

“You two. I never would have guessed you’d get so dreamy eyed over the stock boy.”

“Me neither, Kallie, me neither.”

“Though I am glad you’re not sleeping with him again tonight.”

“Kallie! I wasn’t sleeping with him.” She tossed a pillow across the room, and her roomie laughed, loving the wide-open opportunity.

“I know, I know. You just make it so easy.”

“It is good to be back here, home again, in a sense, with you.”

“I’m glad I rank.”

Allison shut the lamp off and rolled over to sleep. She wrapped her arms around herself, around Sedgewick’s work shirt, and she could faintly catch the scent of boy.

Across the river and across the city Sedgewick had turned the lights off downstairs, checked the locks, and returned to his room after hanging up the phone. He shut the door and turned on his bedside lamp. He sat down on the bed again, happy to be sleeping in his own bed again. As normal as it was, it seemed a bit odd as well. The strange schedule and late night meetings had been different, had been good. He liked them. He liked doing something different. And he liked doing something different with Allison.

He liked knowing that her and his grandmother had talked. He didn’t know what the morning hug had been for, why Allison felt compelled to walk across the kitchen and embrace him that morning. He didn’t know what his Gram had told her that would cause that reaction, but he didn’t mind. He especially loved that his Gram came across and joined them. It felt complete.

Chapter 16

The funeral had been a bit much for both of them. It was like taking a boyfriend home to meet the entire family, but in all the wrong ways. Sedgewick sat in the back wearing a pressed shirt, a tie and dark pants. Allison was up front surrounded by her family, protected and isolated.

Though she walked in with Sedgewick, holding his hand for strength, she didn't see him again until he came through the line, a custom he would have avoided but for her. When she saw him in the line she stepped ahead of her brother and hugged him, burying her head and lingering on his shoulder for a moment or two while her family wondered who this was (the word 'friend' came up again, which seemed easier than saying she'd slept over at Sedgewick's house—twice). There were awkward introductions and Sedgewick shook hands and expressed condolences.

He moved away from the line as quickly as he could, feeling like every eye in the place was on him. He didn't know anyone, save for Allison—and now her dad and brother—and he wasn't sure what to do.

He had been so young for his grandfather's funeral. Too young to expect him to go through the lines and shake hands and accept hugs from wrinkled relatives he didn't know. They let him play in his dress clothes, though he didn't feel like it.

Allison, though, had to hug the wrinkled relatives and exchange nods and dab her eyes. It was all so much, more pomp and formality than she could handle. It was a forced sadness, a forced, outward grief, and that's what made it so hard for her. She felt like she couldn't smile, like she wasn't supposed to, even if a happy memory came.

When it was finally over, when the family commitments were complete, and Sedgewick had stood around by himself for long enough, and then stood at Allison's side feeling just as awkward for long enough, they left.

Allison asked Sedgewick if he minded driving back to campus. He took the keys and they drove home in silence. Sedgewick flicked off the radio as soon as he started the car.

The grief and sadness Sedgewick remembered from Monday, when he first learned about Allison's mom and saw her sitting on the river's edge came back to him. She was back here again. It wasn't surprising or wrong or bad. It just was. That's the place she found herself.

But she wasn't sure where she was. She sat in the passenger seat of the car, but felt like she was just a passenger in her own life. The distance in her family had been a fleeting feeling before, random thoughts late at night after her parents had been fighting when she asked herself who she'd stay with if her parents divorced. Those are the quiet questions you ask in the dark, they're not supposed to come to light. Her answer had always been, unequivocally, her mother. It wasn't based so much on her closeness to her mother, or her lack of proximity to her father.

The way he used the funeral planning to keep her and Mitch away was systemic of everything he did. She couldn't imagine being Mitch, having to live in that environment now. It made her want to lash out. Made her want to cry. Made her want to scream. Such a terrible accident shouldn't fill her with feelings of hate for her own father, the only parent she had left, but that's what was happening. She couldn't help it, and it also filled her with an equally awful guilt.

Sedgewick sat in the driver's seat, quietly steering the car down the highway, back towards the downtown campus. He didn't know what to do or say. He could see Allison slipping in the seat next to him. Her internal struggle was visible in her face, in her distant green eyes. But Sedgewick had his own hurts, his own palpable feelings that came rushing back to him at the funeral, full of sadness yearning to overcome any possible sense of joy. It left him speechless.

She pulled at her skirt, the black skirt with a black top, a depressing funeral outfit she couldn't help but wear. She wanted something bright. Something her mom had picked out for her a long time ago. But no one would understand. And she didn't think she'd have the strength to explain it. So she wore black. It seemed to be pulling her in.

Sedgewick had undone the top button of his shirt and loosened his collar as soon as they got in the car. He looked handsome when she picked him up that morning, but she refused to think about it. Love and death were mixing, and it was more than she could stand.

The car finally pulled into the campus parking lot and Sedgewick shifted to park and shut the car off. As if the silence couldn't get any louder, it did. Neither of them moved.

Sedgewick sat there biting his lip, glancing around and taking a peek at Allison every few moments. She stared mindlessly out the window, her eyes red and bloodshot, a tear occasionally dripping down her cheek.

Sedgewick looked forward again, out the windshield and across the parking lot and the other cars, and then back. He settled on the car's blue hood. Blue was a good color for a car, it wasn't sporty and fast like red, but it also didn't draw attention to itself like yellow.

"Do you—do you want to go throw—throw rocks, down at the river?"

A moan escaped her lips, a painful sob that faded as quickly as it came. She squeezed her eyes shut and the tears flowed. She dropped her head into her hands and cried and cried. Unfortunately for today, the blue car seemed too appropriate.

Sedgewick's mouth hung open. He ran a hand through his hair and reached the other hand out to Allison, reaching first for her hand, then for her shoulder, then stopping midair and retreating, then reaching out again for her shoulder.

"Allison... I just... I don't... I..." He couldn't find the words, anywhere.

Allison's hands fell to her skirt. She wiped the salty tears away. She looked out the window, away from Sedgewick, her eyes closed.

"I can't do this." Her voice didn't waver. It was filled with an incredible strength, a strength backed with anger and grief. In one movement she unbuckled her seatbelt, opened the door and got out of the car.

The door slammed shut, shaking the whole car and leaving Sedgewick sitting there with his mouth gaping open. He sat there in a daze, still watching her go, walking down the sidewalk away from him. It took him a moment to shake the shock away, and then he grabbed the keys, unbuckled his own seat belt and took off after her.

It was midday on a college campus, the sidewalks crowded with people, heading this way and that, off to class and work and back again. Allison walked resolutely through the crowd, her fists clenched and arms wrapped around her.

Sedgewick ran, trying to catch up, through the crowds. The crowd thinned out a bit as Allison followed the path between two dorms, a grassy stretch extending on either side of the path between the buildings with a few trees and students scattered about.

“Allison!” She didn’t stop. He closed the final few paces and grabbed her shoulder. She finally stopped. Her teeth were clenched, her fists were tight, and her eyes were hard.

Sedgewick still didn’t have words to say. His eyes were filled with them, filled with love and beginning to well with tears of his own.

“What?” she demanded. Her voice trembled with the same anger, but the grief rang out as well.

“I know,” was all Sedgewick could say, in his own quiet, hurt voice.

“You know? You know!” Allison’s eyes overflowed. She swallowed the lump in her throat. “How can you know? How can you possibly know? You’re some tragic hero with all the answers, and what am I?”

“I don’t have—don’t have all the answers, I...”

“No, you don’t have my answers.” She turned to go, overwhelmed at the depth of her feelings, at the sharpness of her own words. In the smallest way lashing out sparked something inside.

Sedgewick stood there a moment, his mind and heart reeling, then he reached out again. He took Allison by the shoulder and turned her around. She didn’t resist. He looked into her eyes, then wrapped his arms around her. Then she exploded. Her clenched fists flew, lashing out at the air and Sedgewick. She landed three, four, five punches in his chest and stomach. He gasped for breath and started buckling over, but he kept his arms around her, holding her, hugging her. These weren’t weak punches, lessened by emotion and grief, but were full force, fueled by anger and sadness and every bitter emotion that filled Allison’s wounded heart.

People started looking up and watching the scene, heads turning and conversations dwindling to a stop.

Another punch and Sedgewick’s arms fell from Allison, freeing her from the awkward embrace. He looked into those green eyes, and though he didn’t have her answers, didn’t have the words to say to make anything okay, he recognized what he saw in those eyes. And he loved her.

She threw one last punch, hard and direct with her right hand that landed squarely on Sedgewick's jaw. His head whipped to his right and he staggered back. Pain seared through Allison's fist and she walked away, tears streaming down her face. Students watched with eyes wide and mouths open.

Sedgewick watched her go, reaching up tenderly to feel his swelling lip. He could taste the blood.

Chapter 17

“Is that the way it’s supposed to be?”

“What do you think?” Charles asked, turning from the mural to Sedgewick.

“I don’t know. Does it—does it look right?”

“It’s all in the eye of the beholder, a weight for your shoulder.”

Sedgewick looked to the ground and bit his lip. He winced. That’s what he expected Charles to say (though maybe not that exact rhyme). Thursday after the funeral, after the scene with Allison, he stopped by Charles’ office near campus, an unexpected visit for sure, and asked if he could work on the mural by himself that afternoon. They made arrangements and Sedgewick spent the rest of that day painting.

Before leaving campus he looked up Allison’s dorm room. He found the building and followed another group of students in. He climbed the stairs to her floor and looked both directions down the hall. He chose one hallway and wandered down it looking for her room number. A few students came down the hall, but passed by ignoring him.

Room 229. Here it was. The names ‘Allison’ and ‘Kallie’ were written in magic marker on the message board hanging in the middle of the door. Sedgewick swallowed and knocked on the door. He guessed she wouldn’t be here, and he honestly hoped she wasn’t.

The door opened and Sedgewick took a tentative step back. It was Kallie. She was short and squat with blond hair cut just beneath her ears. She was the third college girl. She looked like she’d just been laughing at something. Sedgewick could feel the contrast between their days.

“You must—must be Kallie. I’m—I’m—”

“Sedgewick?” A sweet smile spread across her face. It faded when she saw his swollen lip. He’d washed away the blood, but he couldn’t hide everything.

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I wanted to—to return Allison’s keys.” He held out the keys and turned to go. He wanted to go. He didn’t want to explain.

But then he stopped.

“Allison could use somebody, I think. Maybe not right now, but—but I imagine later today she’ll want somebody. Not me, obviously, but...”

“Okay.”

“Tell her I’m sorry.”

“Sedgewick—“ He stopped and turned. “It’s not your fault.”

He nodded and kept going.

Painting had felt so good. The world seemed to fade away while he created, but it also slipped into sharp focus. Every stroke felt like the most important thing in the world, but when his eyes fell to the blanket of green grass or the wisps of clouds above, he noticed so much more and felt it deep within his soul.

At first it seemed like he was breaking into the church, unlocking the fence and the shed by himself in the quiet mid-day calm of the neighborhood. But soon he was lost in thought and paint, adding to the slate gray river a green bank and pale blue sky.

The afternoon disappeared and Charles walked up behind Sedgewick to check in on his progress. Sedgewick was standing there taking it in, unsure of what it was, unsure of if it worked, unsure of himself. That’s when he asked if that’s the way it was supposed to be.

“I guess I see—I see something there. It’s not exactly what I pictured, but it’s what I feel. It’s about all these hands can create.” Sedgewick looked to his hands, which were smeared with a rainbow.

“And that’s all it needs to be: all that you can do.” Charles put an arm around Sedgewick and the two stood there, taking in the fence and the church’s side yard. It was starting to get late, the sun was fading and the unseasonably warm afternoon air was finding its usual crispness. The mural still had a long way to go. There were unfinished stretches here and there, and the entire side along the front hadn’t been started. Charles would be working on it for a while, and though Sedgewick didn’t know it yet, he would, too. But for now, this one section of river, this one stretch of fence, this opening fumbling chapter in Sedgewick’s life—it was finished.

He walked home in silence, the sun setting behind him. The air was colder now, and he pushed his hands deeper into his jacket. He wondered about Allison. Wondered how she was doing in the midst of it all. Today had been hard, a day you wish you could leave behind.

Sedgewick expected to her stay at her place again tonight, expected to sleep in his own bed again. Everything had seemed so extreme, so lofty and soaring, and now it felt like they might actually return to earth. It may have been a day to leave behind, but like every day, it would be one to carry with you forever.

He crossed a street and stepped back on to the sidewalk, noticing a child's chalk drawing. He paused to take it in, a flower in a pot with lots of colorful squiggles all around. Sedgewick looked up the street one direction, and then the other. It was quiet and empty. Despite being a city neighborhood the city side streets managed to stay so quiet, maybe thanks to the towering trees planted a generation ago.

He didn't see the artist, though he did see a name scrawled beneath the sidewalk chalk drawing: Grace. He smiled. It's the name of a girl, but it's a thought that changed the world. It stuck him as an observation Charles might make, or maybe his grandmother (in fact it was the rock band U2, a band Sedgewick didn't know, but he picked up the line from a former coworker who used to sing while she worked).

He smiled, humbly, at the thought and stepped into the grass to walk on without stepping on the chalk creation.

That night he sat at the table with his Gram while they ate supper together.

"You seem quiet tonight, more so than usual."

Sedgewick shrugged his shoulders, then realized he was doing it again.

"Sorry, Gram. It's just been—today's been one of a kind."

"A kind you'd rather forget?"

"Yeah, sometimes."

"Well, they can't all be sugar and roses. How's Allison doing? Today was the funeral, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, it was. I just felt—I felt so useless. It was so much easier when it was just—just me and her, throwing rocks."

"And you can't do that in a funeral home, can you?"

"Nope." Sedgewick put his fork down with a sigh. He hadn't eaten much, and there was no point in pushing it around on his plate.

"Oh honey, you know these days will come." She reached across the old, worn table for Sedgewick's hand and he looked into her

face, full of love and tenderness and age. He nodded and squeezed her hand.

“But you do know tomorrow can be a new day, a beautiful day?”

“Yeah, I just wish she were here. I wish we could go to Perkins again.”

“I know. We wish a lot of things. But we can’t spend every day walking on the water.” Sedgewick smiled at the image.

“No, I guess we can’t. I suppose—I suppose eventually we’d get used to it, and it wouldn’t be so—so miraculous.”

“No, child, it wouldn’t.” She stood up to clear the dishes, but then bent over to give her grandson a hug.

“Thanks, Gram.”

From the kitchen sink she looked back to Sedgewick. His eyes were lost in thought, his hand on his chin. His grandmother stood there for a moment and just watched the boy, like she’d done all her life.

Later that night Sedgewick had a short four-hour shift at work. His mind was distant and quiet. He stood in front of the time clock thinking. Some days the time clock confused him, not that he couldn’t remember his code or which buttons to push, it was just that the machine had no mercy. If you screwed it up there was no going back again, you couldn’t undo it or reset it.

You had to interrupt the customer service manager and fess up to your mistake. She’d sigh—first when you interrupted her, but again, longer and deeper when you told her what you’d done. All she had to do was make a note on the schedule and tell you to punch in again. It really wasn’t the end of the world, though she’d act like it. And Sedgewick hated to put her through the end of the world. Enough customers did that with their own ends of the world.

Sedgewick punched in his code and the appropriate buttons, gave a weak smile to the customer service manager who had raised her eyes when Sedgewick paused in front of the time clock, and continued on to the back room.

He had hoped for aisle five. He wanted aisle five. That would have been such a help on a day like today. He even considered asking for it, though that would have been a bit much.

“Hey Sedgewick, glad you’re here.” It wasn’t Jimmie, it was Dwayne, the grocery manager, the height of authority among those

who still had to do actual work. Another step up required at least a tie and the caveat that you could walk around the store and tell everyone else what to do. Dwayne usually worked the day shift and Sedgewick didn't see him. But he still gave the orders and made sure everything was finished.

"I've got Jimmie unloading the truck tonight, it's a smaller order, shouldn't be too bad. But Ike in dairy called in sick today. I need someone to fill in. Can you handle that?"

"Sure." Sedgewick hated dairy.

"Just remember that everything must be rotated and you need to check the dates. You'll also need to stock the milk every few hours—it probably needs to be done now. Thanks, buddy."

Dwayne had just summarized the downside of working dairy. Rotating everything meant it took forever. There wasn't the same sense of accomplishment. You also had to keep refilling the milk or customers would interrupt you and send you to the backroom looking for a half-gallon of skim. On top of it all, it was a refrigerated section, obviously, which meant your fingers would be cold all night. It wasn't like the frozen foods section where you could put on a jacket and gloves and no one would think anything of it. But dairy wasn't quite cold enough to warrant it, and Assistant Manager Roth Maxwell would wrinkle his brow if he saw you wearing a jacket in dairy. He had some strange fascination with customers being able to spot your red uniform all the way down the aisle.

Sedgewick shrugged his shoulders and headed through the backroom towards the dairy section. He nodded at Jimmie and Alex as he passed, who both looked grumpy at the prospect of working minus one, even if it was a smaller truck than usual. Jimmie nodded back. Alex swore.

The dairy section looked like no one had worked there all day. The milk case was more than half empty, starting to get to the ugly point where the empty bottom shelf was showing. This store was old fashioned. Newer stores had back loading dairy cases where you could stock the milk from behind, automatically rotating it and avoiding getting in the customers' way at the same time. It was a good system. But they didn't have that in Sedgewick's store. They just had regular shelves with a cooling unit on the bottom that had to be loaded from the front and rotated by hand.

On the plus side Sedgewick was working a new section, one he wasn't used to, and he had to pay attention more than normal. Not that it requires deep thought to stock milk, but he couldn't lose himself in his thoughts quite as easily. He couldn't dwell on Allison and his tender lip and where to go from here.

Sedgewick went back to the dairy fridge, loaded up a square dolly with milk crates, and got to work. He loaded the 2%, the best selling, then the 1%, the skim, the vitamin D milk, which he didn't understand what it really was, and the single row of chocolate.

Working dairy also gave you a workout. Each milk crate held four gallons of milk, which was fairly heavy to lift. You'd have to lift one crate at a time, moving them from stack to dolly and then push the dolly out to the floor.

Despite his banishment to dairy, work wasn't so bad. He liked the accomplishment of finishing a pallet, of facing off a fully loaded shelf. At the end of the night he could feel it in his muscles, but it told him he'd done something. It was a feeling you couldn't get from finishing a paper for class.

He came back to the floor with another dolly of milk, restocking the half-gallons this time. They were easier. You could get 12 half-gallons in a crate, which actually made the crates heavier, but you didn't have to bring out as many. Four gallons per crate meant a lot of loads.

His mind drifted from the dairy section to the side yard and the mural. Charles had been proud of him. He wasn't sure how he felt himself. He'd wanted to finish it for Allison, a humble offering to share with her. But now—he didn't know. He could still feel where her fists had fallen. He didn't know what that meant. But he did like the feel of the brush in his hands. It gave him that sense of accomplishment. It was something he could manage.

He stopped the dolly at the corner of the dairy case where it wouldn't be in the way. He waited while a woman and her daughter picked out milk and moved on to the yogurt. The little girl had pigtailed and reminded Sedgewick of someone.

A long time ago he'd gone sledding with a friend. His grandparents and her parents were inside staying warm and drinking coffee and Sedgewick and Taylor, the little girl he remembered, took off for the sledding hill pulling a single sled between them. It was just

after Thanksgiving, an early snowfall, and they were so happy and eager to be out playing.

They went down the hill and dragged the sled back up and went down again. They slid down the hill until they were exhausted and both collapsed into the snow, eyes staring up at the dark winter sky. The sun had gone down while they were sledding, and the darkness took over. But out of the darkness came white puffs of snow, enormous snowflakes falling from on high.

As they lay on their backs and watched the snow flakes rush towards them and rush past, or occasionally land on them and make them shudder at the cold, they realized that it looked like stars rushing past, like the Millennium Falcon jumping to hyperspace.

They giggled and rushed home, dragging the sled behind, Taylor eager to tell her parents, and Sedgewick his grandparents, about the snowflakes turned stars.

The little girl pulled on her mom's sleeve and asked if she could get purple yogurt. The mom told her daughter purple wasn't a fruit, and picked out a flavor with real fruit on the bottom, even though the little girl would just scowl and eat around it. She never liked the mushy fruit and would have preferred the real thing in purple yogurt.

Sedgewick watched them continue down the aisle, and then turned back to his dolly.

"Oh, sorry. Ex-excuse me." His eyes met the soft brown eyes of a college girl, long blond hair framing her smile. Sedgewick stepped back, letting her continue reaching for her milk, a half-gallon of 1%. Sedgewick's eyes fell to the floor. She wore high heels and jeans, black heels with a toe that narrowed to a sharp point. Sedgewick wondered if they were painful to wear. They certainly looked like it.

"Thanks," she said in a cheerful voice, her eyes flashing at Sedgewick. She moved on towards the yogurt, carrying a basket in one arm.

Sedgewick grabbed another crate of half-gallons and rotated the older ones to the front, pulling off one that expired that day. He turned to look at the college girl, and saw her looking back at him. Their eyes met for a moment, and she looked away. He thought he saw her smile as she picked out her yogurt and moved on towards the cheese and butter.

But Sedgewick didn't smile. He wondered how long a pretty girl like that would catch his eye, how often his mind would take in every detail and ponder her good nature and if she really had smiled at him and why their eyes kept locking. There were just so many pretty girls. Hardly a girl walked by that wouldn't catch Sedgewick's eye. She might not be drop-dead gorgeous, she might not elicit a long, drawn out 'fuck' from Alex, but she would have that smile, or that look in her eyes, or whatever it was that made Sedgewick wonder.

He didn't smile at this latest college girl in a line of thousands, but he did think about that fourth college girl, he did think about Allison.

He turned for another crate of half-gallons and she was standing there, next to the pop display. Her arms were crossed, embracing herself, her face looked tired and worn, and her eyes were still red—but filled with sorrow and tenderness and love and hope.

Chapter 18

“Can I open my eyes yet?” Allison’s voice was full of cheer and laughter and a tinge of embarrassment. Sedgewick had been leading her by the hand, her eyes covered with a blindfold, since they got off the bus.

“No.” Sedgewick had her standing in the side yard of the Baptist church, in front of the small section of mural that he’d painted. Charles was working on another section, but he kept looking over to watch the two.

The bus ride home had been entertaining, with Allison embarrassed and overwhelmed. She’d never taken public transportation, and it was a new experience for her. Sedgewick had insisted and she relented.

Charles had ribbed the two the whole ride home, though more Sedgewick than Allison. She took his ribbing in stride and fired back.

“I like this girl. She’s full of fire—a real live wire.”

Sedgewick stepped back from her, savoring the moment. She could take the blindfold off, but Sedgewick wasn’t quite ready. He looked at the mural once more, exhaled and said she could take it off.

She raised the blindfold with both hands and slowly peered out, then her eyes widened as she took in the scene. The blindfold stayed perched on top of her head, forgotten. She hadn’t been expecting this. Maybe balloons, maybe a park with a dramatic view—but not this.

The fence stretched before her, but she didn’t see the fence. She saw a slate-gray river, rushing, surging forward, a pale blue sky and a green bank and a sandy shore. There were rocks scattered about and shafts of sunlight beaming down, though she couldn’t tell if they were real or in the painting.

There was a large stone painted off-center, a bit to the left. Allison stepped forward, drawn to the large stone. The sand around the stone looked different somehow, like there were footprints. Then she realized. She flashed an amazed smile towards Sedgewick, her green eyes brimming with joy. She stepped forward again and reached out to run her fingers over the painted surface.

It was the rock where Allison sat crying when Sedgewick found her that very first day when he learned about her mom, there by the

side of the Mississippi River. Above the river, off to the right, were the towers of downtown Minneapolis. A bridge crossed the river at one point, and a lone, tiny bird crossed the sky. In the corner, not far from the large stone, just poking out of the grass, was a yellow, October dandelion.

As she turned to Sedgewick, overwhelmed with emotion, a commotion broke out across the yard. A door to the church opened and children flooded out. Allison's tender face, her tear-weary eyes, had been gazing at Sedgewick with softness and love and warmth and the beginnings of a smile. When she saw the children pouring out—running, hollering, buzzing across the yard—she broke into a full smile and her eyebrows raised.

She'd been hoping to step towards Sedgewick, to wrap her arms around him, to kiss his surprised lips. To let the pain and hurt and sorrow of the blows after the funeral wash away. But not now. Not the kiss anyway. She caught Sedgewick's eyes and reached forward to take his hand. She mouthed the word 'sorry' and Sedgewick just shook his head.

"I guess you two get to see the crowd—nothing but loud." Charles put his arms around the couple and together they watched the children.

"You know Allison, Sedgewick always managed to clean his brushes and get out of Dodge before this started. I always thought he might be afraid of 'em."

Sedgewick turned to Charles while Allison stepped towards the kids, laughing. A child took her hand and pulled her along with a string of others as they circled the yard in a child's sprint.

"Afraid of 'em?" Sedgewick asked.

"Yeah—you need a healthy fear," Charles said as Allison came swooping by with a string of kids. The last child hung back to grab Sedgewick and pull him along. Charles threw his head back and laughed, clapping his calloused hands.

The very next day Sedgewick and Allison took the bus downtown. It had been her idea, the public transportation. In fact, the whole idea had been hers. She wouldn't tell Sedgewick where they were going, payback for walking six blocks with a blindfold. But she broke down and told him on the bus. They were going to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

Sedgewick smiled. A week ago he would have been dumbfounded, captivated by the artwork maybe, but unsure why he should be there. But things were different now. They walked into the museum hand in hand, and Sedgewick wanted to take in each work, wondering if the artist pictured the end result when they started, or if it had been a surprise.

“Did you like it?” Allison asked outside, later, as they were meandering along the sidewalk, pretending to head back towards the bus stop but really just enjoying another autumn day and each other’s company.

Sedgewick nodded, unsure of the words.

“I thought you might.” She beamed. They kept walking in silence, but you could almost hear words in the electricity between their clasped hands.

The air felt warm on their skin, the sun shining high and bright. Ahead of them a family walked down the sidewalk, pushing a stroller and another child walking. They heard only snippets of the conversation.

Just as they were turning to cross the street the child broke away from its mother and hollered with child-like angst, “No, I hate you Mommy!”

Sedgewick watched as the little boy pulled away and ran ahead. The words were spiteful, and they came out in a moment of passion and defiance. But they meant nothing. The father chased down the boy and lead him by the hand back to the mom and the stroller. An exchange took place, but they were too far away. The mom and child embraced and the family continued on, fences mended and life well again.

A tear rolled down Allison’s cheek. A sob escaped and she shuddered, moving for a nearby bench. Sedgewick sat next to her, his hand resting on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, it just—it just came on me all of a sudden.” Tears dotted her khaki cargo pants.

“I know.”

“It doesn’t get any easier, does it?”

“No, it never—it never seems to.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, but they kept coming. She wondered if a person could ever run dry.

“I just wish, I wish...” her words failed her and she buried her head in Sedgewick’s chest. He wrapped his arms around her again, and held her in his arms.

The downtown buildings towered over this broken couple as Sedgewick rubbed her shoulder and started to sing softly in her ear. His voice was quiet and soft and not particularly good, but it didn’t bother Allison. Though it was a song she’d never heard before, she somehow knew it had been sung to Sedgewick by his grandfather at a time very much like this. And it filled her with hope—not peace or joy or even love—just hope, and that was all she needed.

the end

About the Author

Downtown Dandelions is Kevin D. Hendricks' first book. His writing has appeared in a number of publications and extensively online, especially in blogs. He started his own company, Monkey Outta Nowhere which does writing and editing for a range of national clients. After growing up in the far-flung suburbs of Detroit, he went to college, got married and currently lives in St. Paul, Minn. with his wife and dog. He likes computers, hockey and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He likes long walks on the beach—wait, scratch that.

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