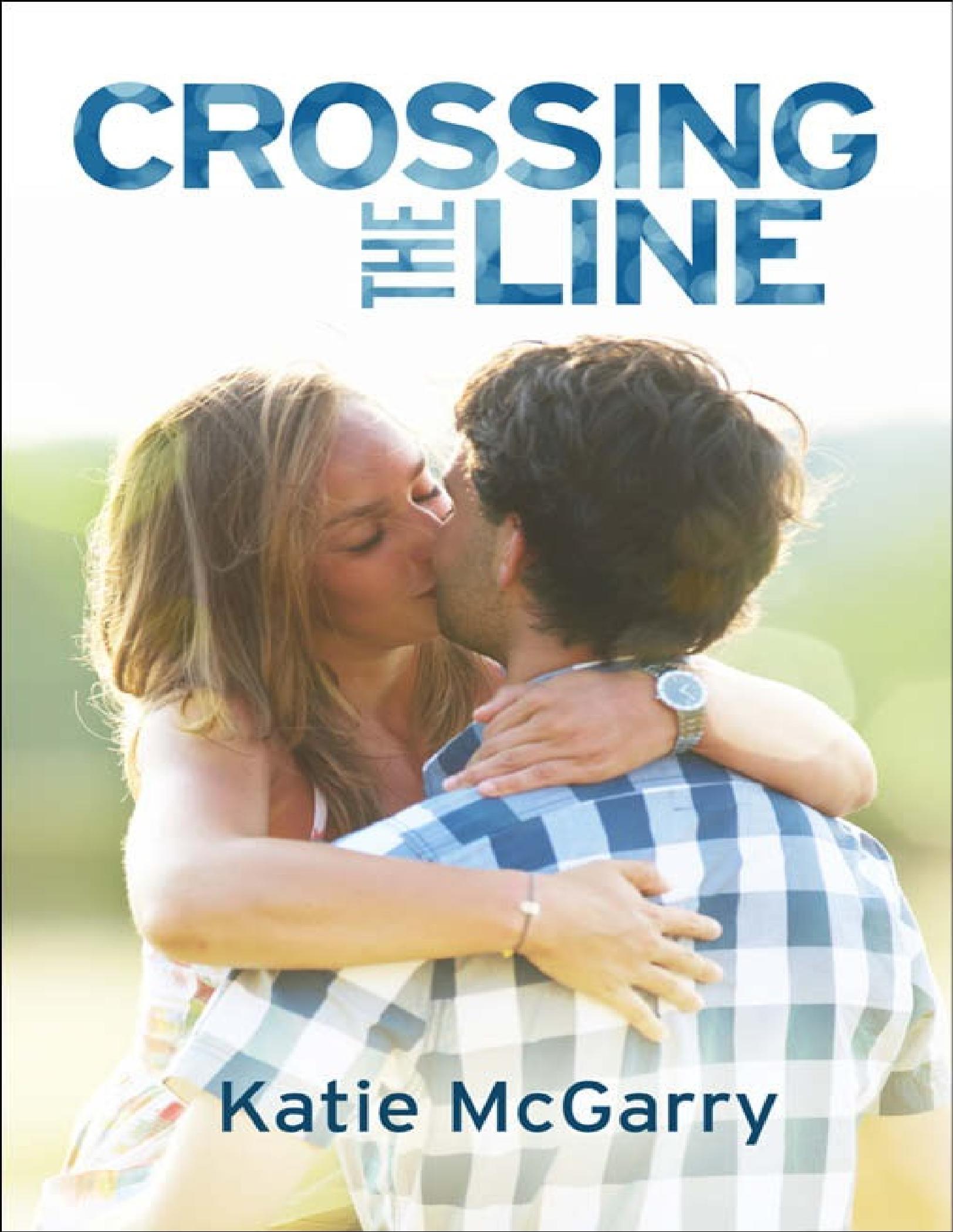


CROSSING #LINE

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The woman, on the left, has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a light-colored, patterned dress. The man, on the right, has dark, wavy hair and is wearing a blue and white checkered shirt. They are outdoors, with a soft, golden light suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The background is a blurred landscape of green hills. The overall mood is intimate and affectionate.

Katie McGarry

Crossing the Line

Katie McGarry



Katie McGarry captivated readers with her “riveting, emotional”* Young Adult debut, *Pushing the Limits*. In this gripping novella, she tells the story of Lila and Lincoln, who discover that sometimes it’s worth crossing the line for love....

Lila McCormick first met Lincoln Turner when tragedy struck both their lives. But she never expected their surprise encounter would lead to two years of exchanging letters—or that she’d fall for the boy she’s only seen once. Their relationship is a secret, but Lila feels closer to Lincoln than anyone else. Until she finds out that he lied to her about the one thing she depended on him for the most.

Hurting Lila is the last thing Lincoln wanted. For two years, her letters have been the only things getting him through the day. Admitting his feelings would cross a line he’s never dared breach before. But Lincoln will do whatever it takes to fix his mistakes, earn Lila’s forgiveness—and finally win a chance to be with the girl he loves.

Look for more contemporary YA by Katie McGarry with *Pushing the Limits* and *Dare You To* from Harlequin TEEN.

***Simone Elkeles, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Perfect Chemistry* series**

**“Brimming with dark memories, veiled secrets, and steamy moments.”
—*Publishers Weekly* on *Pushing the Limits***

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Dear Lincoln,

I saw this card today and thought of you. I know that I wasn't who you came to meet, but I'm glad we had a chance to talk. Even though I was just his little sister's best friend, Aires still felt like a brother to me.

Between you and me, I keep smiling when I think of the look on your face when we decided to sneak out of the wake without being caught. That was a strange, messed-up night, and I'm grateful you were there to help me through it.

I know how I miss Aires so I can only imagine how you miss Josh. Just remember that I'm thinking of you.

Can I write you again? Will you write back? I hope you do. I sort of feel like we were meant to meet.

~ Lila

Dear Lila,

Thank you for the card. I'm going to admit, I'm not much of a kitten guy, but I appreciate the thought. Mostly, I appreciate your note.

Yeah, I agree, the night of Aires's funeral was messed up, but messed up in a good way. Mom and Dad thought if we met Aires's family that it would help us with losing Josh. I thought Mom and Dad had it all jacked up, and in a way, they did. It wasn't meeting Aires's family that helped, it was talking to you—so thanks.

And no, I don't mind if you want to write me again. Even if you do it in one of those kitten-hanging-from-a-tree cards.

~ Lincoln

Lincoln

Is it weird that I feel close to you even though you're hundreds of miles away and we've only met once? I hope not. I'm glad that you're in my life.

~ Lila

On the computer screen, the question “Why?” glares at me like the correct accusation it is. This dialogue between Lila and me, it breaks every unsaid rule about our relationship. We never plug in like this. Never. Not that part of me hasn’t wanted a faster connection to her. A link beyond the letters, but there was something about the written word that made our relationship safe.

And now we’re crossing lines. The one relationship I need, the one relationship I depend on...I’ve jacked it up. Fitting since I have a natural inclination toward destroying anything good. It’s genetic, my sister tells me. Anyone sharing our bloodline is inherently doomed.

“You should have talked to me before buying it,” my father shouts at my mother in the kitchen. “I made a budget.”

My home is a volcano, a constant gurgle of hot lava on the verge of explosion. I try to ignore my parents, but it’s difficult. We have one computer in the house, and it sits wide open in the family room. From the corner of my eye, I have a clear shot of how Dad’s hands shake with anger and how Mom’s frustration paints her cheeks a frightening scarlet.

“Why should I have to ask your permission for anything?” A chair slams into the wooden kitchen table and Mom’s high heels stomp against the tile floor. “It’s my money too. And as for the budget—you never asked me what I wanted.”

I asked you why. Lila’s words appear on our direct message conversation.

I rub at the lines on my forehead, and a tense uneasiness paralyzes my fingers over the keyboard. I don’t know why I did it. That’s a lie, I do know, but I don’t know how to tell her. I don’t know how to salvage this.

I’m sorry, I reply.

I didn’t ask for an apology, she rapid-fires back, *I asked WHY!*

Because I love you. It’s as if someone places two hands around my heart and chokes it. I love her. I’ve fallen for a girl I met only once, a girl I’ve exchanged

CHOKES IT. I LOVE HER. I've fallen for a girl I met only once, a girl I've exchanged letters with for two years. There's no way she can feel the same about me. Those words would push her over the edge.

I want to keep her, but what do I say? What can I do?

Like the warning tremors before an eruption, my parents' argument becomes more heated. Mom turns on the blender to drown out Dad. In response, Dad yells louder and bangs his hand against the table, making the china clink against the water glasses. The baby who was sleeping moments before, my nephew, begins to cry. It's not a cry, it's a shriek—one that causes my skin to peel back from my bones.

The noises press against my skull, scattering my already screwed-up thought process into more of a mess. *I can explain*, I type. Though I'm not sure I can.

Then EXPLAIN! She's a fast typer. Too fast. My heart thumps in my ears. I mentally will the chaos around me to stop and pray that Lila will...what? What is it that I expect her to do?

"Where the hell is Meg?" my father roars. "That baby is her responsibility! I never agreed to be her babysitter." He never agreed to be a grandfather at forty-five either.

My eyes dart to my father, dressed in his polo shirt and slacks in preparation for my graduation, to the baby dressed in a blue onesie pulling himself up in the playpen placed in the middle of the spacious living room. His entire face flushes red. Drool pours from his small gaping mouth. He wails again, the sound like a tornado siren.

"Meg's out," Mom screams over the blender still grinding away. Meg just turned seventeen and is gone—at eight in the morning, meaning she never came home last night. She left Junior with us. With me. I also never agreed to be a babysitter.

As if on cue, the front door clicks open. Impressive—my sister has returned before noon. Maybe today, she'll hold her son.

I don't acknowledge Meg. I don't even glance at her. Instead, I focus on the cursor blinking on the screen. I have seconds before I completely lose Lila. *I made a mistake*, I type. *I—*

The screen flashes to black. "What the hell!"

"I need this," Meg says as she straightens from resetting the computer. She tucks her freshly dyed chin-length blue hair behind her ear. "Get out of here."

The new guy, the one who isn't the baby daddy, the one who hates kids, stands in the front doorway with his hands shoved in his sagging jeans.

"Meg!" Mom rushes in from the kitchen. Does she know she left the blender

running? Does anyone notice the baby still howling? “Where have you been? Lincoln’s graduation ceremony is in an hour—”

“What did you do?” I mutter as I press my fingertips against my head. Lila. I lost Lila. The only sane person in my life.

“Why should I have to go?” Meg throws her hands out to her sides, barely missing her own child’s head. “It’s not my graduation.”

“What did you do?” I say louder. Anger gains traction in my bloodstream.

Dad knocks over a chair in his charge into the living room. “Pick up your baby! Pick him up! He’s your responsibility.”

Mom’s voice is smothered by Meg shouting over and over again that she’s not attending my graduation.

“What did you do?!” I yell above them all, and slam my hands onto the computer desk.

They fall silent: Mom, Dad, Meg. Everyone except the baby. “Someone pick him up!”

No one does. They all continue to watch me with wide eyes because they know I’ve cracked. I never yell. Not once in eighteen years have they witnessed me lose my temper. I’m the odd one, yeah, but I’m the steady one. The unemotional one. The one who didn’t cry at my brother’s funeral. The one who never demands more of anyone or anything—even from myself.

The cries reach a higher pitch. In a quick motion, I slide the kid out of his prison and he immediately places his head on my shoulder, his thumb stuck safely in his mouth. The sweet scent of formula and baby powder drifts from his tiny body. We must look ironic: fifteen pounds of premature warmth curled into six feet and a hundred and seventy-five pounds of rock-climbing muscle. Part of me hates that he’ll calm down for me, because it makes him my burden. The other part...at least I can help someone feel better.

I glance over at the shut-down computer. Lila. My hand covers the baby’s back as if I’m seeking his comfort. I lost Lila. There’s no way she’ll connect with me online now. No way I can wait long enough to see if she’d respond to my letter. To see if she will grant me another chance.

“Take your baby,” I say to my sister. Her eyes widen as her head convulses in tiny shakes meaning no.

“Take—your—baby.” I’m wrong. My house isn’t a volcano—I am, and the past two years have created a dormant giant who no longer will tolerate being ignored. I’m tired of this. Tired of how everyone’s become so obsessed with themselves, obsessed with the moment, that we’ve ceased caring what’s going to happen next

happen next.

I'm just as guilty, and that downfall has led to hurting Lila. Soon, the same damn poor decisions will devastate this family. God, I'm a moron.

I work hard at keeping my voice gentle, because it's not this baby's fault that I dropped out of reality or that his mother is so jacked up she's never held him or that his grandparents are so concerned about winning a fight that they can't comprehend what's happening to their future.

"Mom." I motion with my eyes for her to take the now-sleeping infant.

She bustles over like the busy bird she is and slips him out of my grasp. How the hell do I fix all of the mistakes I've made in the past two years?

My family still stares at me like deer waiting for the gunshot. I should start with telling them the truth, but the words escape me. No, not escape...I just can't stop thinking about Lila.

If she can find a way to forgive me, then I can find a way to fix this.

Lila

No, it's not weird that you feel close to me. Honestly? Sometimes knowing that I'll be getting a letter from you is the only thing pushing me through my days.

~ Lincoln

The moment I open the door, I immediately regret not heeding the advice on the yellow Post-it note clinging near the small round hole: *Lila, Always check the peephole before answering the door. You never know who's on the other side.*

Translation: serial killers knock before attacking. I watch *CSI*. It happens.

Standing before me isn't a serial killer but a different type of nightmare.

Stephen, the guy I've dated on and off since sophomore year, tilts his head with a way too smug *I'm concerned* look on his face.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

I sniff and use a crumpled tissue to wipe my runny nose. Let's see: swollen, puffy red eyes with dark circles? No, I'm not okay—and now I'm worse because he thinks I'm crying over him. "I'm fine. What are you doing here?"

"Checking on you." His green eyes survey the empty living room behind me. "I know your parents and brothers left yesterday for vacation. I wanted to make sure you made it through your first night alone."

First night alone—ever. And it epically blew. I've got six more days of alone and then, come fall, the rest of my life. "I survived."

Stephen scrutinizes me with a cocked eyebrow that says he can tell I didn't sleep. Which I didn't because I was too busy being terrified. My imagination boarded a train south to crazyville and convinced me that someone was scratching on the windows.

A hot June evening breeze drifts into the house, bringing with it the scent of the sickly sweet gel he uses to force his brown hair into a styled mess.

"Can I come in?" he asks when I'm obviously not offering.

No. I sigh. "Sure."

Stephen enters and fingers the purple Post-it on the phone reminding me to check the caller ID. When I woke up yesterday morning, I found the peephole note, along with about a hundred other Post-its stuck to various objects around

note, along with about a hundred other Post-its stuck to various objects around the house. All of them my mother's desperate attempts to teach me how to live on my own so I'm prepared when I head fourteen hours away from home to the University of Florida.

"You can call me if you're scared to be alone at night," he says. "I'll come over."

I snort. "I'm sure you will."

Stephen was my first...and last. When I gave him my virginity, I thought I loved him, and maybe I sort of did, but then everything became complicated. Not everything—me. I became complicated and I didn't want to have sex anymore. Stephen lacked sympathy.

And then there was Lincoln...

My lips tremble and a new pool of warm tears builds in my eyes.

Stephen turns toward me with his mouth popped open for his next witty suggestion. It snaps shut when he spots my face. "Whoa. Lila. It's okay."

It's not. My bones suddenly weigh too much for my body, and I collapse onto the couch. The tissue in my grasp balls into a rock. "I'm fine. Just tired." Just heartbroken. Lincoln lied to me this morning and then he cut me off. As if the past two years of letters meant nothing to him.

Letters—not emails, not texts—letters. It's what we promised each other when we met. Because somehow, letters made our relationship private...different...real.

I stare at the red-and-black amoeba patterns on the Oriental rug covering the hardwood floor. My stomach aches when I see the project that started or ended it all, depending on how I choose to view it, peeking out from underneath the cherry end table. The sturdy scrapbook paper represents hours of cutting and pasting and care meant to celebrate Lincoln's graduation from high school. The petals of the dried-out lilac-colored roses Lincoln sent me for my graduation last week create the border.

I'm so unbelievably stupid to have fallen for a guy I've met once. Stupid because nice guys only belong in the land of make-believe.

The other end of the couch shifts as Stephen half sits on the arm. How many times did my mother ask him *not* to do that? Stephen licks his thumb and rubs dirt off his new prized possession: the two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar athletic shoes he stood in line for overnight.

"Seriously, Lila." One more lick. One more rub. "I'll stay with you this week. No strings attached."

I blow out enough air that my hair moves. I'm not being fair. Stephen's a good guy. It's my fault I fell for someone else. Someone who doesn't really

exist. “I know, and thanks. But I’ve got to work this out for myself. How can I even imagine moving to Florida on my own if I can’t stay the night in my house alone?”

Stephen scratches his chin, indicating I’m going to hate whatever gushes out of his mouth next. “Look, I know you better than anyone else and here’s the thing...you’re not as strong as you make everybody think you are.”

“Oh. My. God.” A combination of anger and hurt splits open my stomach as my shoulders roll back. “Did you really say that to me?”

“Just listen,” he says in a rush. “Your mom told my mom that you haven’t turned down the offer from the University of Louisville. You must be having second thoughts, so I’m not saying anything you aren’t already thinking.”

My throat tightens and I avoid eye contact, ashamed that I’m close to trashing a dream because of fear.

“Stay home.” He softens his tone. “And you don’t have to worry about being scared. Echo’s staying. Grace and Natalie are staying.” He pauses and glances at the floor. “I’ll be here.”

I suck in my lower lip—half mad, half emotional basket case. The University of Florida has always been my goal, but I’m frightened of leaving home. Scared of leaving everything and everyone I’ve ever known. But I’m also tired of everyone wearing me down with their 1,001 reasons why I shouldn’t go.

When I don’t respond, Stephen continues. “I know that’s why you broke up with me last month. That you don’t think we can handle the whole long-distance thing. So stay.”

No, that’s not why I broke up with him, but it is the reason I gave. Two months ago, Lincoln sent this amazing letter and it shook me to the core. Actually, every letter he sends is amazing, but it finally hit me why Stephen and I could never seem to get it together. It was because I had given my heart to Lincoln.

I didn’t want to hurt Stephen then and I don’t want to hurt him now. Especially since I realize what a fool I’ve been. My eyes shut as I digest what I have possibly thrown away with Stephen. “I don’t know.”

The defeat crushes me in such a way that the couch no longer feels steady enough to carry my weight. Maybe everyone is right. Maybe all my crazy dreams of moving away are stupid and insane. Maybe I just think I’m capable of being more than what I really am: not strong, but a homebody.

All my strength and energy flows out of me and right into Stephen. He jumps off the arm of the couch. “Go to college here, in Louisville, Lila. It’ll be like high school. Chad’s staying. So’s Luke. All of us will be together, going to the

high school. Chad's staying. So's Luke. All of us will be together, going to the same school, and then you and I can start again."

My head snaps up. *But I'm not in love with you.* The words catch in my mouth. His green eyes shine and his face completely lights up. What do I honestly know about love? Obviously nothing after what's happened with Lincoln. "I don't know."

Why is that the only phrase I seem capable of saying?

His fingers spread out as he raises his hands. "That's good enough. For now. Look, I've got to get to work, but I'm serious—if you get freaked staying by yourself, call. Mom and Dad won't care if I stay with you."

I suck in a breath to try to explain to him that I need to do this on my own, but before I can form the first word Stephen plants a kiss on my cheek and strides out the front door.

I blink a few times, trying to let my mind process the turn of events. "Crap."

In the span of minutes, Stephen managed to drag me back into high school. Wasn't this drama supposed to end when I received my diploma?

Three quick raps on the door and a surge of angry adrenaline pumps in my veins. Good. He's back. Now I can really tell him what I think about him staying the night and implying that I'm not strong. Forget the fact he's possibly right. No guy should ever call me a coward.

With a particularly hard yank, I throw open the front door and yell, "You really are a jerk, you know?"

All the air rushes out of my lungs in a fast hiss. It's not Stephen. No. Not at all. This guy has hair the color of midnight. He's tall, built like no guy I've ever dated before—in an *oh, hell yeah* sort of way—and possesses soft blue eyes that entice me to hold him already. And he's clutching a bouquet. Roses. Purple ones.

Something nags me from the back of my brain. Then I remember that I'm required to speak. "Can I help you?"

He shifts his footing, shoving one hand into his faded jeans. "It's me, Lila." *Me?* "Sorry?"

"Lincoln."

I really should have taken my mother's advice on the peephole.

Lincoln

I know I should stop gushing about the card you sent for my birthday, but I can't. See, Stephen forgot about my birthday. It's cool. Really. He remembered eventually, and bought me roses, but I need to complain. I know I'm going to sound like a snot, but he got me red roses.

Red. Whenever I see red roses I think of my grandma's funeral, and then I want to cry. I've told Stephen that—twice.

I've dropped hint after hint that purple are my favorites. Of course, I told him that I loved his present and gushed about it, but what do I need to do? Tattoo it on my forehead? Purple!!!

Or at least not red.

Here's the reason why I don't care about Stephen forgetting: you made my birthday special. No one has ever made me a card before. So thanks, Lincoln. Sometimes I think you're my best friend.

~ Lila

She's stunning. Yeah, she was drop-dead gorgeous two years ago, but now...

I'm staring and I need to stop, but seeing her inhibits brain function. Girls don't know it, but standing in the presence of beauty impairs guys. At least, it impairs me.

Screw it. It's Lila. Lila impairs me.

The ends of her golden hair curl near her shoulders. She cut it and I like the new style. A lot. When I first met Lila, she was between—not quite a girl, not really a woman. With those curves, she left between in the dust.

I was only a few inches taller than her then. I grew. She stayed the same height. Lila would fit perfectly under my arm, tucked close into my body. She let me hold her hand the night we met, and I never forgot how her skin felt like satin. I hope she'll let me touch her again.

That is, if she can forgive me.

Her bewildered sky blue eyes travel along my face, over my arms and chest. Crimson stains her cheeks as she prevents herself from checking out anything

Crimson stains her cheeks as she prevents herself from checking out anything lower. I clear my throat to disguise the chuckle.

I want to laugh because she looks so damned cute, but she wouldn't see it that way. She'd think I was belittling her. Lila can't tolerate guys who view women as beneath them. I received more than one letter from her with that rant.

Lila's house sits in the middle of nowhere. Its zip code exists in the city of Louisville, but acreage borders three sides of her house and across the street is a state park. The only beings watching me beg for her forgiveness on the wraparound front porch are the crickets and God.

It's better this way. I'm not a people person.

Her blessed pink lips pucker to form a *w* and then flatten. She repeats the cycle three more times until she finally decides on a word beginning with *h*. "How did you find me?"

"Google."

She gives me the you're-crazy stare.

"Maps." Very awkward pause. "I know your address by heart."

The worry lines on her forehead disappear as the lightbulb turns on. "But you live..."

"Ten hours away. Yeah, I know."

"Twelve, actually," she mutters.

My world blanks out for a second. Does that mean she calculated the distance between us too? "I didn't exactly adhere to recommended motor vehicle regulations."

Her mouth twitches; she's well aware I've never been a fan of rules. "You sped."

"I bent suggested limits."

The blush fades, leaving her cheeks pale. "Is that how you view what you did to me?"

The hand grasping the roses begins to sweat. "I got these for you."

Silence.

"They're roses. Purple." Keep talking, man. You're losing her. "Your favorite."

Lila folds her hands over her chest and juts her hip out to the side.

Stupid, moronic idiot. The girl has eyes and an IQ. Didn't she score a twenty-seven on her ACT? She can think fast enough to figure out what I'm holding.

"Anyway, you're right."

"What?" Her eyes scrunch together.

"You called me a jerk when you opened the door."

“Not you. Stephen was. Is.” She closes her eyes, then reopens them. “I take that back. You are a jerk.”

My head snaps to the side. Stephen? Her ex-boyfriend? The kid will not give up and, when it comes to Lila, he has a proven track record of winning. This is the third time they’ve broken up. He groveled twice and both times she took him back. When we first started writing, it didn’t bother me. Lila and I were friends. But then I fell for her and Stephen became a sharp rock wedged in my side.

I trash all the questions I have about Stephen and his appearance at her house and focus on what’s important: Lila. “I’m sorry.”

“You. Lied.”

“I know.” I run my hand through my damp hair. It’s ninety degrees with the sun setting, though it could be her microscopic stare making me sweat. “I can explain.”

Her head falls back. “God, Lincoln. If you had come here two days ago or last week or last month, I would have been ecstatic. But now? I thought I knew you.”

I step forward as my heart surges out of my chest. “You do.” She does. Better than anyone else. “Yes, I lied. But everything else is true.”

The way she sucks in her lower lip as her head shakes no tells me that the odds are against me.

“I don’t believe you,” she says. “For all I know you’re the serial killer the Post-it note warned me about.”

“What?” Never mind. It doesn’t matter. “Lila, you are the one person who knows me. I swear it. I lied to you about one thing. One minor thing.”

“Minor!” Her eyes redefine the term *frigid*.

I retreat a step. Bad choice in words. “Minor could be an understatement.”

“Understatement!” she shrieks. “You didn’t graduate from high school, Lincoln, and you had the balls to lie to me about it.” Lila bursts forward and stabs my chest with her long pink fingernail. Each poke a piercing reminder of my mistake. “I...was...depending...on...you.”

“You still can. I’m going to fix this.”

“Go to hell.”

A gust of air hits my cheeks as she slams the front door in my face. My arm drops and the leaves rustle together as the roses slap the side of my thigh. A few petals float down to the wooden porch. With a heavy sigh, I sit on the steps. Not that I ever wanted to know, but this is what being set on fire must feel like—everything shrouded in agony.

If I feel this way, how must Lila feel?

I glance to the left, then to the right. Disoriented. Lost. Not knowing which

I glance to the left, then to the right. Disoriented. Lost. Not knowing which way is home. But that's been the problem since the beginning. The root of all my evils.

Lila

So the guidance counselor asked me what I wanted to do with my life. I answered—rock climbing. He said it wasn't a profession and to get serious. That if I wanted to get into a decent college I needed to apply myself now.

I told him I was serious. That I loved rock climbing. He said that was a hobby and that I needed to become realistic about my "goals."

I told him it wasn't my damn fault he pissed away his life to make thirty grand a year and to drink cheap coffee. And then I asked him to kindly stop dumping on my dreams. He gave me two days' detention. Did I mention the guy's an asshole?

Do you know the last time I had detention? Never. I'm no saint, but I keep my mouth shut and head down. Rules suck. Society sucks.

Josh followed the rules and now he's dead. He liked riding horses. Maybe if he had looked that damn counselor in the eye and said, "I want to ride horses for the rest of my life," then my brother would still be alive today.

~ Lincoln

Sitting cross-legged in the middle of my bed, I turn over Lincoln's letter. My fingers slide over the deep indentations of words obviously written in agitation. Words written so quickly, I wouldn't have been able to decipher most of them if I wasn't already familiar with his handwriting.

He sent this one to me in the fall, a week after he started his senior year. Lincoln hated his guidance counselor. He was the one who convinced Lincoln's brother to join the Marines out of high school. It's because of that fateful decision that I met Lincoln.

"Lila," says Echo, her voice a bit disjointed from the speaker. "You still there?"

"Yeah," I say and glance at my phone lying on the bed next to me. My best friend is in freaking love with the freaking love of her life on their way to

men is in breaking Iowa with the breaking love of her the on their way to freaking Colorado. Right now, I despise happy people. “How’s Iowa?”

“Kansas,” she corrects.

“Whatever, it’s flat and they have tornadoes.” I pick up one of the many stacks of letters from Lincoln cluttering my bed and easily find the one I’m searching for. The one that promised he’d come with me to Florida.

Cluttering isn’t the right word. Nothing about me is cluttered. Each stack represents the month the letter was sent, and each letter is arranged by the date on the postmark. My favorite letters have a pink highlight marking the side.

My entire life is systemized like this. My books alphabetized by author on my cherry bookcase. Within the matching glass hutch, my Precious Moments figurines are organized by date received. My scrapbooking materials are boxed in color-coordinated Tupperware. I like plans and organization and not boys who promise to attend the University of Florida with me and then screw it all up by not graduating from high school.

“Lila?” says Echo. She pauses for way too long. “Did you give him a chance to explain?”

The envelope crunches in my hand. “He didn’t graduate from high school, Echo, and he didn’t tell me about it. Do you have any idea how I felt when I had to find out on my own that he lied?”

I found out only by accident, when I searched online at his local newspaper to print out the list of graduates to complete the scrapbook page I made for Lincoln’s present. His name was not listed among the one hundred and fifty graduates. I should know. I checked—three times.

She sighs through the phone. “Maybe you should talk to him.”

“You’re biased,” I snap. “You’re on Lincoln’s side because of Aires.” Lincoln’s older brother, Josh, and Echo’s older brother, Aires, were part of the same military unit. No one knows the whole story, but they died two and a half years ago in Afghanistan, in a roadside bombing. I met Lincoln at Aires’s funeral.

“If I remember correctly,” Echo says with an attitude that has very rarely emerged over the past two years, “I’m the one who said you shouldn’t be writing a stranger and I’m the one who said you needed to stop writing him because you were falling for him.”

And I’m overwhelmed with the urge to punch something—hard, because... “I know. Sorry. That wasn’t fair.”

“No, it wasn’t.”

We’re silent for a few moments. I crossed a line with her by throwing Aires

into a fight. I pick at my thumbnail. We've been best friends since birth and we never stay mad for long, but I don't want to get off the phone with her angry at me. At least not tonight.

"Hotel, motel or tent?" I slur the last word as a curse. More silence, then a rustle of sheets. Please, please, please play along, Echo. I need my best friend.

"Motel. We slept in the tent for the past few nights," she says in a light tone that causes me to smile. Yeah, I hate happy people, but Echo deserves happy. "Noah's in the shower."

"So..." I draw out the word. "Have you had sex?"

"No." She chokes. Hand to God, she chokes. I giggle as she coughs.

"Well, if you do," I say when she recovers from her hacking fit, "don't let your first time be in a tent. That would be awful."

"I think a tent could be romantic."

"Traitor," I say. Echo used to be in the only-if-there-is-room-service camp, like me, but then she permitted the hot and mysterious Noah to sway her to the dark side. "Dirt and bugs and snakes, Echo. Just saying."

In the background, I hear Hot and Mysterious's deep voice. Echo fumbles with the phone while she answers him. I check out the clock on my nightstand. Midnight. My mouth dries out as I smooth back my hair. Another night by myself.

No moon tonight so the entire world beyond my window is pitch-black. I don't want Echo to let me go because then I'll be alone again in this big, empty house.

Part of me hates Noah. If it wasn't for him, she wouldn't be in Iowa or Kansas or where the hell ever and would instead be staying the night with me. She wouldn't be spending all of her time with him and his friends: that scary guy with all the tattoos and Biker Chick Beth. Tattoo Boy and Biker Chick Beth also live with Noah's foster parents, and they were a year behind me and Echo at school. Echo says they aren't a couple, but I'd bet the new heels I received for graduation they are.

If it wasn't for Noah, she would need me more...she would still be insecure, she would still be obsessing over the scars on her arms. She possibly wouldn't have recovered her memory of the night she got them. If it wasn't for him, she wouldn't be moving on with her life. Damn him for being a great guy.

"Guess I should let you go." Yep, I said it in a way that indicated that is so not what I want to do.

"I'll stay on," she says. "We could keep our phones on all night. Just like we did in elementary school." Only then it was landlines. She would, because that's

and in elementary school. Only then it was pandemics. She would, because that's what best friends do.

I swear I hear Noah groan in agony. Guess he doesn't like BFF breaking in on make-out time.

"No. I'll be fine." It's a lie. I stare at the scrapbook page that I lugged back to my room earlier and wonder where Lincoln's sleeping tonight. I should think I could sleep tonight, but the exhaustion only increases my terror...and deepens my sadness over Lincoln. I should have heard him out. Why didn't I listen?

"I think you should talk to Lincoln," Echo says, reading my mind like always. "Maybe wait until you'll know he's back home, like tomorrow evening, and DM him again."

My thumbnail clicks as I mess with it. "I thought you wanted me to stay away from him."

"Yeah, well, you already fell for him. Now I don't want you to have regrets."

Regrets. The moment I slammed the door on him, I sort of regretted it, and then I fully regretted it when I heard his engine accelerate down the road.

I hate that he won't be in Florida in the fall. I hate that I'll be alone at a strange college, in a strange state, and not know a soul. I'll be a complete and utter outsider. But what I really hate is that I'll never get to figure out if Lincoln and I would ever have been more than just friends.

Even with the lie, what I don't hate is Lincoln.

Echo remains on the phone with me as I lock every single window and every single door. It's only when I reach the front door and peek out onto the porch that I finally let her go.

My heart does this funny little tumble. Lincoln left the roses and an envelope.

I should have kept Echo on the line, and I almost press Send to reconnect, but curse myself. If I can't open a door and grab flowers and a letter then I should kiss Florida goodbye.

I undo the lock with an audible click. Thoughts of every urban legend and horror movie I've ever heard or seen flood my brain. My hand hesitates over the doorknob and adrenaline pumps into my blood. Oh my God, I'm such a wuss.

With disgust I wrench the door open and step out into the humid night. It's not an envelope but a piece of paper with the words: *I'm sorry. I haven't given up on Florida. I swear. Lincoln.* He listed his cell phone number under his name.

I drop to the top step and caress the roses. Even in the heat, the petals are silky and cool. Lincoln is the only guy who has ever bought me purple roses. Sure, guys have bought me plenty of red ones, but not purple. Not my favorite.

Is it possible that he does know me that well?

I jerk my head toward a rustle in the thick overgrowth next to the driveway. My entire body pulses. Part of me panics and begs to run back inside, but the frustrated part stubbornly stays planted on the wooden steps. I've sat here countless times by myself in the middle of the night. Granted, my parents were asleep inside at the time, but why should now be different?

I swallow and dig deep for courage, snickering at my patheticness. With a sigh, I press Lincoln's number into my cell. Yeah, it's midnight, but he's either driving home or asleep somewhere. Either way, I'll leave a message.

The phone rings once, but then all I hear is footsteps: the snap of rubber hitting blacktop. My hand lowers from my ear as my eyes strain to scrutinize the dark road. The sound becomes louder, indicating it's coming nearer. I stand, my hands shaking at my side. My heart misses beats as it drums in my chest.

And that's when I see it: a silhouette, a shadow...blackness in a form. Then there is breath. I scream.

Lincoln

...and we'll be about an hour from the beach and I think we should go there every weekend. Oh, Lincoln!!!! You're going to the University of Florida too!!! This makes everything better.

I'll tell you something that I haven't told many people. Actually, only two other people: I was thinking of backing out of Florida. The thought of being away from home and knowing no one, it scared me. I don't have to be scared now. I have YOU!!!!!!!

~ Lila

Each word from the letter she sent to me this past fall is embedded in my brain. From the moment I left my entire family slack-mouthed and shocked in the living room, I've been trying to form a plan to fix all the mistakes that led to me not graduating. If I can clean up this mess and somehow go to Florida, then maybe Lila will forgive me.

The windshield acts as a recliner while my legs stretch out on the hood of my car. My clasped hands serve as a pillow. The air doesn't move. It's stagnant and strangles me like a twisted blanket. Sweat drips down my back as the cicadas celebrate the heat by chanting in the woods. From a few campsites over, children giggle near a crackling bonfire.

Josh, Meg and I used to laugh when we roasted marshmallows at a campfire. That was before Mom and Dad began arguing over money, before Josh left for the military, before Meg got pregnant, before I started ditching school.

Today was jacked up. I walked out on my family and drove ten hours for Lila to slam the door in my face. Lesson learned: I need to talk faster. Or type faster.

In general: just be faster.

My parents remain ignorant of the fact that I didn't graduate today and of my exact location. But I'm not that bad a son. I called, so at least they know I'm alive.

On the hood next to me, my cell brightens and vibrates. I peek over and practically slide off when I notice the area code. Lila! The hood makes a booming, popping noise as I grab for the phone. It slips from my grasp and falls

booming, popping noise as I grab for the phone. It slips from my grasp and falls to the ground with a thud. “Shit!”

The buzzing continues. I scramble over the side and search on my hands and knees through the dirt. A quick wave behind the tire and I snatch the cell, pressing Accept. “Lila, I’m sorry.”

As I take a breath to tell her what happened and how I plan to fix everything, I hear a high-pitched scream.

Chills spread across my skin as ice enters my bloodstream. “LILA!”

She sobs, begging God to help her. My hands dig into my jeans pocket, yanking out my keys. “Talk to me!”

My engine growls and the people from the adjoining campsite shield their faces from the glare of my headlights. Rocks kick up and hit the belly of the car as I tear out of the camp. “Lila!”

A thump on Lila’s end accompanied by tapping draws my attention back to her. She continues to cry. A rush of panic washes over me. Lila’s alone. Her letter last week told me about her parents leaving and how she was terrified of an empty house.

And I abandoned her.

Then there’s no noise. No tapping. No cries. Silence. A glance at my cell and my gut rips open. Call disconnected. The car shakes as it veers off the winding forest road. I jerk the steering wheel to the right. My eyes dart between the gravel and my desperate attempt to reconnect. Her phone continuously rings. Lila’s cheerful voice fills the line. But it’s a recording. A damn recording.

“Shit!” I slam my hand against the steering wheel. What the hell is wrong with me? I left her there—defenseless.

Near the exit to the campgrounds, a park ranger waves at me to stop. As he opens his mouth to explain campsite hours, I spit out, “Call the police! Call them now!”

* * *

Red and blue lights become a homing beacon. My fingers drum the steering wheel as I coast into her driveway. The fear recedes as I see no ambulance, but then my frayed nerves explode in terror. What if the ambulance already took her? What if she’s dead?

Nausea spreads through me, making me dizzy. I can’t lose someone else I love. I can’t. Please, God, please let Lila be okay.

I dash out of the car, the memories of my parents breaking the news of Josh’s

death replaying in my mind like a sick movie. I never got past the front door. I just saw them there, my parents crumpled together in a heap on the living room floor. My father holding my mother. My mother holding my father. Both of their faces consumed by tears.

I knew in that moment my brother had died.

My chest tightens and a crazy panic causes my hands to shake and my feet to quicken their pace. Not Lila. Not Lila too. A police officer spots me and turns his head as if he's going to say something, but I move faster—my feet pounding up the wooden stairs, my hand twisting the sun-baked knob, my shoulder forcing the door open.

My legs wobble when I see her standing in the middle of her living room, and if it weren't for the two police officers in the room, I'd fall to my knees.

She runs a trembling hand through her rumpled golden hair as she wraps her other arm around her stomach. Even with the warm summer air creeping into the air-conditioned living room, goose bumps form on her arms. She wears only a tank top and shorts.

"Lila," I say to expel the idea that I could be dreaming.

Both she and the police officer who speaks to her in a low, soothing tone glance at me. Relief smooths the lines on her forehead, and her arms drop to her sides. "Lincoln."

My name leaves her mouth in a relieved, airy rush, as if she's glad to see me. As if she wants to see me. And those gorgeous blue eyes stare at me like I'm her man. My heart squeezes.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She bites her bottom lip while nodding.

Having no clue what to say, I scratch the back of my head. "I—"

And I don't finish. Lila half stumbles, half runs into my body. The fact that she's touching me, holding me, causes me to lose my balance. I quickly recover as her arms become steel bands around my waist.

I inhale, trying to figure out what to do. Ah hell, she smells like her letters; like lavender. I press my cheek against her silky hair and ease one hand onto the small of her back while the other hugs her shoulders.

Lila falling into me is peaceful, like landing on a feather bed. She's warm and soft, all curves and gentleness—alive, fitting perfectly into my body. Just as I imagined.

"It would be best if Miss McCormick isn't alone tonight. Will you be staying with her, sir?" asks the police officer, but the way she tilts her head and smirks at her partner informs me she can guess my response.

“Yes,” Lila answers for me as she burrows her forehead into my chest. Her grip on me tightens. “I know him. He’ll stay.”

Everything stills. I have never heard sweeter words. She knows me and she wants me to stay. I’m not a stranger to her. Not some guy she barely identifies with. She *knows* me.

“Sir?” the officer prompts.

“Yeah,” I say. “I will.” I slide my hand along the curve of Lila’s spine. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Her nose moves against my chest as she nods. “Yes. Just freaked.” She pauses. “I’m sorry for sending you away.”

Lila peeks up at me and I give her a half smile. “I deserved it.”

For a split second, light shines in her eyes. “You sort of did.”

The police officer clears her throat and Lila steps away from me. My arms feel empty without her. It’s crazy. I’ve dated more than a few girls and have never had this reaction.

“Are you okay now, Miss McCormick?” the officer asks.

“Yeah,” she answers. “Thanks for coming.”

The police officers inch toward the door and I block their path. “Whoa. Wait. You’re leaving?”

“Lincoln...” Lila rubs her biceps. Her mouth scrunches to the right, calling my attention to her lips. “I...uh...was calling you...and I thought I saw someone...and I guess you answered right as I screamed...and I, ah...dropped my phone...then it turned off...and then the police came and said you called them and...yeah.”

And...yeah. Not buying it. “Blood. Curdling. Scream.”

Her eyes dart to the police, then away. “Well, I thought I saw something, but I was probably wrong.” Then she looks at me, her eyes pleading, begging for me to drop it.

The muscles in my neck tighten.

“We searched the property,” says the officer with a pitying smile at Lila. “And we didn’t find anyone. Miss McCormick knows she can call us if there’s an issue.”

They think it’s her imagination, yet I heard her terror. That type of scream can’t be created by a fear in your head. That’s death hovering in front of you wielding a bloody ax.

Lila thanks the officers and shows them out. With a click, she shuts the front door and, for the first time in my life I’m completely alone in a room with the girl I’ve fallen in love with. What the hell do I do now?

I should immediately tell her what happened with school. I should tell her my plan to fix things, how when I return home I'll sign up for summer school. I should tell her that the thought of losing her paralyzes me. Instead, I follow my gut. "You saw somebody, didn't you?"

Lila collapses against the door and her face drains of all color. "Yes. No. I don't know."

Her head dips forward. "I can't prove it. The police think I'm crazy. And ninety percent of me thinks everything's okay because if there was somebody outside they would have hurt me. But ten percent of me is pretty positive that someone is messing with me."

I fold my arms over my chest, not liking the thought of anyone screwing with Lila. "What are you saying?"

She shrugs and smiles at the same time, making it clear she doesn't believe the words. "Maybe I have a stalker."

Maybe? Knowing what to do to help calm her nerves, I hold out my hand. "Start talking, because I'm not leaving until I know you're safe."

Lila

When Josh first died, my parents got close, but as time has worn on, they've grown apart. The worst moments are when my entire family is in the same room. With the people I should love the most surrounding me, I feel the most alone.

~ Lincoln

Lincoln assesses the orange Post-it note on the oven meant to remind me to turn it off as he stirs milk over the stove top. From the second he knotted my fingers with his in the living room and led me into the kitchen, I've found it impossible to tear my eyes away from him.

He grew—stunningly so. Taller. Thicker. His blue eyes are aged beyond his years, but when he smiles at me he becomes carefree and eighteen.

“That’s it?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I respond. I downloaded everything, except he’s not humiliating me with condescending looks or a lecture about overactive imaginations. I spilled about the scratching on the windows last night, the sound of shoes against the pavement tonight, and the shadow walking toward me and the sound of his breath.

The police didn’t take me seriously, but the way Lincoln’s shoulder blades tense, I can tell he believes me. “Why?” I ask.

“Why what?” He empties the steaming liquid into a mug.

“Why do you believe me?”

Lincoln slides the mug into my hands. His finger accidentally skims mine. Electricity! A fantastic chill runs through me that reaches the tips of my toes.

“You don’t like liars and you’re not big into hypocrites,” he answers.

Those were my words to him a few months ago when my sort-of friend, Grace, tormented Echo. Lincoln and I share a knowing smile and stare into each other’s eyes. The world fades away and it’s just me and him and a fragrant cup of hot chocolate in the palm of my hand. Lincoln breaks the link and withdraws his fingers. I’d give anything for him to touch me again. But first...

“You have some explaining to do,” I say. “As to why you didn’t graduate.”

He turns away and washes the pot in the sink. “Let’s figure out your problem

He turns away and washes the pot in the sink. "Let's figure out your problem first. Then we'll handle mine." The water beats against the pot. "Are you still mad at me?"

My finger circles the rim of the mug. Hurt—yes. Angry—"No." How can I be mad at a guy who drove ten hours to see me and returned after I rejected him? "So you believe me? That someone was outside?"

"I heard you scream. No one's imagination works that well."

He grabs a dish towel and dries off the pot before placing it back on the hook on the wall. Lincoln's so efficient, especially for a guy who "bends rules." With a scrape against the tile floor, he pulls out the chair next to mine and angles it so he's facing me. "Just so we're clear, a stalker suggests multiple run-ins over a period of time. I think this is more of a prank."

The skin between my eyes squishes together. "A prank? Really?"

Lincoln relaxes into the chair, his long legs kicked out, an arm resting on the table. I feel like a dwarf next to him. He drums his fingers once against the table, causing me to focus on his hands. The skin is tough, rougher than the hands of most of the guys I've dated. It's not an imperfection, but a reminder of how he dangles from rock walls.

I wonder if he'd ever let me watch him climb or if he'd teach me. My stomach tickles as if fuzzy bunnies are jumping around. Would he catch me with those strong hands if I fell?

"You're the *CSI* dictionary," he answers. "Didn't an episode talk about how stalkers have patterns or some crap like that?"

"You started watching *CSI*?" I'm grinning from ear to ear, and his cheeks redden in response. The big, strong rock-climbing guy folds his hands across his chest and switches his gaze to the floor. It's my favorite show ever, and I've written a few letters to him detailing certain episodes.

He sloppily shrugs one shoulder. "I caught a few shows here and there."

I don't know why, but the fact that he showed interest in something I like creates giddiness. I swirl the hot chocolate in my mug and blow on it in order to hide the glee. "What makes you think it's a prank?"

"You said it yourself. If someone wanted to hurt you, you'd be hurt. Your parents are gone, and I'd bet someone thinks it would be funny to scare you."

My forehead furrows with the idea that anyone would want to freak me out. "Why?" I ask again.

"Because people can be stupid."

True. Tired of thinking about it, I change the subject. "Hot chocolate?"

"I made it for Meg every night after she found out she was pregnant. It

seemed to help calm her down when she'd get all worked up."

Translation? He believes I'm about to crack. My heart beats a little faster when I replay the image of the shadow walking toward me. Maybe he's not wrong. "Has she held the baby yet?"

Lincoln subtly shakes his head. "I keep wondering how jacked up the kid will become because his mother can't get her shit together."

The way his blue eyes darken into hurt causes a sharp pain in my chest. I reach out and claim one of the hands resting against his crossed arms. Lincoln weaves his with mine and we hold hands on the table, both of us staring at our combined fingers. God, his hands are warm—strong—and I swallow as I imagine him caressing my face.

"How's Echo?" he asks.

"Good. She's in Kansas or Iowa or someplace." Not here with me, and that sucks. She no longer needs me now that she has... "She's with Noah."

"So she's moved on," he says almost as a whisper.

From me? Yes. But she hasn't moved on the way Lincoln suggests. Sadness envelops me like a cloud. I've witnessed Echo grieve for her brother. Hell, *I'm* still grieving for Aires. He was like my older brother too. "She's living. Not forgetting."

Lincoln removes his hand to rub his face. I leave my hand on the table for a second, hoping he'll wrap his back around mine. When he lowers it into his lap instead, I curl my arm into my own body—hating the rejection, missing his warmth. But I'm not mad at him. I can see I've lost him to memory. Echo has done this mental retreat several times herself.

We lapse into silence, I guess both of us processing the past couple of hours. The silence feels comfortable, like an old quilt, and I revel in it. But then my eyes dart to him. What if he's not comfortable? What if the written connection in our letters is all we possess? What if we don't ignite a real life spark?

What does it matter since he lied to me? We need to talk about it, but not now. Not when I've barely slept in almost two days and my mind's a disoriented mess. He could explain basic addition and I'd drool like an idiot.

Sleep—I crave it, but can I have it? My thoughts shift back to the idea of someone pranking me. "Who would want to scare me?"

"You tell me." He kneads his eyes, and for the first time I notice the dark circles beneath them. He's tired and as I sip the warm drink, I realize my exhaustion is contagious.

"I have no idea." And the unknown terrifies me.

Lincoln

It's crazy how you brought up feeling alone. I feel alone a lot. Oddly enough, I feel the most alone when I'm in a room full of people. Everyone I know is changing. Echo's distant. Grace wants new friends. Even Natalie is spreading her wings.

To be fair, I'm changing too. At times I feel like my skin is too tight on me. All the time, I fight the urge to cut my hair and buy new clothes. I mean, who exactly am I going to change into? I'm still me, but not.

~ Lila

Lila's fingernail taps repeatedly against the table, like a machine gun firing off multiple rounds. "I'm too tired to deal with this now." She slams her hand on the table, silencing any more discussion on her possible prankster.

She stands and I follow, wondering if the park ranger will allow me back into the camp. Otherwise, I'm screwed. "Can I come back in the morning?" Then I remember what time it is. "Late morning? Afternoon?"

Lila freezes the same way Meg does anytime she's near the baby. Hell, Lila hates me.

"Will you stay? I told the police you would. *You* told the police you would. If you leave that would be like breaking the law or something, so you have to stay."

I raise an eyebrow at her logic—or lack of logic—but there's no way I'm blowing this opportunity. "I'll stay."

"Good. Because you have to."

Lila leads me back into the living room and mumbles for me to stay put. Her footsteps are light down the hallway. The one-story house is the size of a mansion and decorated like one of Mom's *Better Homes and Gardens* magazines. Nice and breakable shit—everywhere. After several abrupt sounds that indicate Lila must have accepted a wrestling match with an alligator, she reappears with blankets and a pillow.

"Do you mind sleeping on the couch?" she asks.

I'd sleep on nails in order to be near her. "No."

I'd sleep on nails in order to be near her. NO.

She hands me the ingredients for a temporary bed.

"Thanks," I say.

"You're welcome." Lila's fingers draw toward the hem of her tank top, and I remind myself to breathe when I catch sight of the sun-kissed skin of her flat stomach. In seconds, she pulls at the hem and her belly button disappears.

"Well, good night," she says while tucking her golden hair behind her ear.

"Night," I respond. Should I hug her? Kiss her? Shake her hand? Get on my knees and start begging for forgiveness?

She shifts her footing but stays in place. "The bathroom is down the hall."

"All right."

"You can take a shower if you want."

"Thanks," I answer.

"You're welcome."

And we've already had this conversation. Lila sniffs as if her allergies bother her, and she lowers her head. I want to comfort her, but I have no clue how to tread on this territory. "Are you okay?"

"I don't want to be alone," she whispers. "Not even alone in a room. Isn't that pathetic?"

"You could never be pathetic," I say. Not the girl I've come to love from the letters. The girl who defended her best friend, even though taking that stand cost her other friendships. The girl who tells me exactly what she thinks of me, even when the truth hurts. The girl who dreams of being more—the girl who dreams of Florida.

Her lower lip trembles. "If you think that, then you don't know me very well."

I know her better than she realizes. I know the letters she writes to me late at night are more emotional than the ones written during the day, as if a lack of sleep inhibits reasoning. I ditch the blankets and pillow on the arm of the couch and plop myself onto the cushions. "Come here."

Her gaze switches from the space on the couch to me. "I don't understand."

I snatch the extrahuge pillow and drop it on my lap. "Sleep here."

Lila stretches the hem of her tank top over her hips as she moves toward me. When she sits, it's with her thigh melting against mine. Her heat radiates past my jeans to my skin. Every single cell within my body sizzles to life. *Play this right, Lincoln. She deserves a man, not a boy.*

Without saying a word, Lila rests her head on the pillow and extends her legs on the couch. I drape the blanket over her body, and I love how she flips to her side, knees curled up in the fetal position.

Her eyelids flutter as she talks. “I’m sorry I slammed the door in your face.”

A lock of her hair strays onto her cheek. I shouldn’t, but I do it anyhow. With the same care I use when handling my nephew, I sweep the silky strands behind her ear. I’d give my left arm to comb my fingers through her hair until she falls asleep. “I deserved it.”

Her chest expands and she yawns. “Why didn’t you graduate?”

“Because I was stupid.” A nauseating pit forms in my gut. Stupid—it’s what Lila must assume about me. A moron who can’t put two words together to form a sentence, a moron who can’t add, a moron who didn’t graduate. But that’s not what happened. I didn’t graduate because I stopped caring.

Lila closes her eyes and lazily mumbles, “You’re not stupid. I’ve read all your letters—several times. You’re a good writer. And you got a twenty-nine on your ACT. That’s hardly stupid.” She pauses. “Not unless that was a lie too.”

“It wasn’t,” I say. “I only lied about graduating.”

“What about getting in to the University of Florida?” she asks. “You told me you were accepted through early admission.”

“I was,” I answer. “But admittance was contingent on graduating.” I struggle to find the right words. How do I prove to her that I’m not lying? “I’ll send you my official ACT scores. I’ll send you my acceptance letter. Whatever you need in order to believe me.”

“I believe you.” She’s motionless long enough that I wonder if she’s drifted to sleep. Then she pats my knee and whispers, “Tell me what happened.”

Lila removes her hand, but my skin still burns from her touch. She believes me. Maybe, someday, she’ll trust me. I prop my elbow on the arm of the couch and lean my head against my fist. I should keep my other arm resting on the back of the couch. Instead, I cave to temptation and snake it around her body. She nuzzles closer to me in response. For a girl who is just my friend—just a pen pal—this feels incredibly right.

“Lincoln?” she urges.

“We should wait until morning,” I say.

“It is morning. And I’m impatient.”

I chuckle. She is. Lila informed me of her unhappiness anytime a letter from me ran a day later than she thought it should have. I take a deep breath and jump.

“I began skipping in the fall and then skipped more days than I should have. By the time I realized I hadn’t earned enough classroom hours to graduate, I was already screwed.”

Her eyes flicker open. “Did you skip because you missed Josh?”

Hearing his name on her lips causes my chest to jerk. The familiar unwanted

hearing his name on her lips causes my chest to jerk. The familiar, unwanted pain spreads from my heart to my brain. She'll never know him. Never meet him. "Yeah, Josh. And everything else."

I told her in several letters that I had skipped. That when I woke in the morning and felt the emptiness of Josh's death, the burden of feeding a baby, the anger of listening to my parents argue, I'd feel like I'd explode if I didn't break free. So I'd drive to the state park and climb until my fingers bled.

Her head rocks in my lap. "I should have seen it coming."

"Seen what coming?"

"That when you can't handle things, you run." She wrote the same criticism in her letters to me when I told her I had skipped school.

"I don't," I say.

Her only response is the rush of air blowing out of her mouth.

"I don't," I repeat with the stubbornness of a dog gripping a chewed-up slipper in its jaws.

Lila fiddles with the frayed corner of the blanket. "Today was your graduation day and you drove here to see me."

"So?"

She shrugs. "Only stating the evidence."

"I came here for you." The tension in my muscles begs me to shift, but if I do, I'll give Lila an excuse to move. "You were upset with me."

A nagging pang of guilt causes my spine to straighten. What I said, it's not a lie. I came here for Lila. But then I remember my mom and dad fighting, the way Meg panicked when I asked her to hold the baby, and the nausea when I considered telling my parents about my failure.

Then my mind redirects to how summer school starts in forty-eight hours—on Monday. I drove here with the intention of telling Lila that I was going to fix everything, but all I really wanted was to mend things between us. I rub a hand over my head. Is Lila right? Am I running from the real issues in my life?

"I'm not running," I say one more time. Even I notice the doubt in my voice.

"Whatever," she mumbles, exhaustion weighing down her words. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because..." Because she'd be disappointed in me. Because I was disappointed in myself. Because her dreams became my dreams and I failed us both. Because I was chicken shit.

Two years ago, Lila began writing about the University of Florida. She talked about it enough that I checked out the school. Way before I fell for Lila, I fell for the dream of heading to another state for school. To possibly gain my degree in

forest resource and conservation; to work around rock walls for a living.

How the hell could I lose sight of my future?

My right leg begins to tingle and all I can think about is getting up, walking around, heading back to the campsite, exploring the trails—even in the dark—and finding a rock wall. Then I glance down at the beauty cuddled close to me.

Her breathing becomes light and she flinches in her sleep. The baby does the same thing when he enters REM sleep. I tuck the blanket around her and permit myself to touch her hair one more time.

No, I'm not a runner. Not this time. She'll have more hard questions, and I'm determined to answer them—standing right in front of her. It's time I start facing the problems in my life instead of avoiding them. It's time that I create a plan and follow it through. And hopefully, Lila will forgive me and be by my side as I go forward.

“I didn't want you to hate me,” I whisper as I respond to her last question. “Because I've fallen in love with you.”

Lila

I thought of you when I climbed today. You should try it sometime. I think you'd enjoy the rush.

~ Lincoln

My entire body seizes at the sound of pounding. I jump, my hands flail, and then I finally crash onto the hardwood floor, a disheveled mess. That crack had to be my tailbone. "Ow."

I blink several times as I nurse my lower back. What am I doing in the living room?

"You okay?" The gravelly, sleep-deprived voice causes my heart to thump hard once. My eyes dart above me to the couch. Lincoln stretches his arms over his head. Absolutely amazing. He slept sitting up, holding me, the entire night.

"Morning," he says. His gorgeous eyes fall on me, and my cheeks warm when the corners of his mouth lift. Echo would make fun of me for the silly smile forming on my face.

Feeling suddenly shy and self-conscious, I comb my hair with my hand. Oh hell, tangles. Why, why, why do I always wake up resembling a troll? "Hi."

The doorbell rings several times and the pounding resumes. Sunlight streams through the venetian blinds. The brightness definitely hints at more of a midday than a morning situation. "It's probably Stephen," I say.

Lincoln's head jerks. "Your ex?"

I'll admit it. I sort of like the alpha-male pissed-off stare he's got going on. I scramble off the floor and for once heed my mother's Post-it note advice by glancing through the peephole. Nope, not the ex. Which is good since Lincoln looks annoyed enough to chop the boy into deer steaks.

"Lila!" Grace yells. "Are you in there?"

"Yes!" I shout back to my ex-best friend. "Give me a sec, Grace."

I turn to explain to Lincoln that it's Grace and ram right into his chest. Both of his hands land on my shoulders to steady me. "I thought you two weren't on speaking terms after what happened with Echo."

"We aren't. Which is why I need to answer. The world must have collapsed into a zombie apocalypse if she's here."

into a zombie apocalypse if she's here.

His grip on my shoulders changes into a massage that causes me to close my eyes. He could touch me like that for the rest of my life and I'd never move.

"Then answer," he says.

My stomach knots into a big ball of dread. Lincoln's appearance screams that he just rolled out of bed and I'm in my pj's and my parents are out of town and Grace is a huge gossip. "Crap!"

"I can hide," he says as if reading my mind. His hands slide off my shoulders and I have to fight the urge to pout. "But you'd have to explain my car."

I brighten for two point one seconds and then deflate. "I'm not that creative."

"I'll give you a few minutes alone with her. Maybe she won't notice the car." Lincoln starts down the hallway, then pauses to eye me in a way that suggests my clothes are riding up. "You look good right now. All ruffled and drowsy."

The back of my neck explodes with heat, and I immediately focus on the muscles of his biceps. Lincoln flashes a flirtatious grin, grabs an extra pair of jeans from his backpack, which leans against the door to my room, and disappears into the bathroom. Good Lord, he's hot.

Tangled thoughts of him and me muddle my groggy brain. He touches me and talks to me as if we've known each other forever. Is it possible he's into me too? As more than friends?

Grace resumes her banging. I bat at the hair sticking on top of my head and open the front door. "Hey."

In a cargo skirt that grazes her knees and a white lace tank, Grace hitches her thumb toward the car. "Have a guest?" She takes in my clothes. "An overnight one?"

Not interested in playing her games anymore, I say, "Yes."

Shock and giddiness burst onto her face. "Really? Who?"

Once upon a time, I would have told her. She knew all of my secrets—including my writing relationship with Lincoln. That is, until she chose her new friends over Echo. Echo and I have always been a package deal. What sucks is that I miss Grace. "I'm guessing you want to come in."

She does and practically pees her pants when she sees the pillow and blanket on the couch. "You had a guy overnight!" she squeals.

I shush her while waving my hands for her to keep it down. Embarrassment creeps along my skin. Lincoln must be laughing his ass off. "How do you know? It could be a girl."

"Your girlfriends sleep in your room. So who is it?"

"It's..." And I can't think of anything believable, because the truth is

unbelievable. “Lincoln. And you better keep it to yourself. This is private, Grace. I mean it.”

She grabs my hand, not missing a beat, acting as if our friendship didn’t disintegrate in a shower of flames months ago. “Lincoln? Pen pal Lincoln? Oh. My. God. That is so...so...is he hot?”

This is what I miss about Grace: her passion, her enthusiasm. And when she decided to, she could be a great friend. I clasp her hand back. “Smoking.”

And I have the urge to call Echo and Natalie and force the four of us to be what we used to be—inseparable.

“How long is he staying?” Grace asks.

My energy fades and I release her. “I don’t know.” Will Lincoln leave soon? Have I squandered the only time we may ever have together? Remembering last night’s late conversation, I remind myself that leaving would be Lincoln’s M.O.

Grace’s cell phone chimes to indicate a text. She reads it, then shoves the phone into her purse. “I’ve got to bolt, but I have something to tell you. Which is why I came.”

I circle my hand, motioning for her to continue.

“I overheard Stephen, Chad and Luke talking about how they’ve been showing up here at night, trying to scare you since your parents went on vacation.”

My mouth gapes and I go completely numb long enough to tense when the rush of anger pummels my bloodstream. “Excuse me?”

“I know. Stupid, right? Stephen thinks if you get scared, you’ll call him, and then you guys can work things out.” Grace glances at the blanket on the couch. “Guess he didn’t count on the dark horse pulling up late in the race.”

Disoriented, I lean against the arm of the couch for support. Holy crap, I’m not crazy. Someone was pranking me. But the relief is short-lived.

I lost my virginity to Stephen. He’s the first guy I ever said the words *I love you* to. And he’s betraying me? He’s trying to scare me? What has he become?

I feel my eyes dart, even though I’m honestly looking at nothing within the room. My mind rapidly tries to sort through the anger, the confusion and the weird emptiness. I’m mad at Stephen—all right, that’s the understatement of the century. The next time I see him, I’ll fry him like the catfish my brothers catch at the lake, but what I’m lacking is the epic sense of betrayal, the massive pang of hurt, the emotions I experienced last night because Lincoln lied to me. I mean, Stephen and I were together for two years. That should count for something, right?

“I lie?” Grace refocuses my attention on her. “Are you okay?”

Lina: Grace refocuses my attention on her. Are you okay?

“The bastard is going to hang from his toenails, but, yeah, I’m fine.”

Astonishingly so.

She fidgets with her class ring. “Don’t let him find out I’m the one who told you, okay?”

“Yeah. Okay. Sure.” Grace and Chad are an item. She’s worked hard over the past year to claim him as her guy. “Why did you tell me, anyway?”

The fire that always consumes Grace dissolves. “Because I want us to be friends again. I made some really bad choices, and I’m sorry. You’re leaving for Florida and if we don’t fix this now, it won’t be fixed.”

Just as things will never be fixed between her and Echo. She doesn’t say it, but it’s there, hanging in the air like the stench of rotten fish.

A lot of bad blood has been shed, but maybe people can change. As much as that thought makes me happy, it also saddens me. No matter what, the relationship between Grace and me will never be the same. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

Grace stands there, looking like a damn puppy locked in a cage at the store. Unfortunately, I’ve got a soft spot for imprisoned animals. “Maybe we could go shopping together sometime.”

She cracks a smile. “Yeah. That’d be great.”

I close the door behind Grace and walk to my bedroom. Across the hall, water beats against the tub as Lincoln takes a shower. A black T-shirt pokes out from the backpack still resting against my bedroom door. I told him to store the pack in my room last night as he was warming the hot chocolate, but I didn’t realize what he’d see: the stacks of letters still lying on my bed and the scrapbook page I made for his graduation.

I sink to the corner of my bed and stare into the room as if I’ve never seen it. Everything is changing. My relationships are changing, my future is changing, my feelings are changing. My life is one big constant state of flux. I grew up scared of spiders, bees and dark corners in dimly lit basements. But this foe...change...it terrorizes me like nothing before.

For the first time in my life, I wish I wasn’t growing up.

Lincoln

A rush? Heights and rocks sound like a huge risk. But if you were there, I think I would consider climbing.

~ Lila

The high-pitch creaking of drawers being opened and closed greets me when I exit the bathroom. Across the hall, Lila yanks a manila file from her desk, flips through it, then dumps it onto the growing pile on the floor. The papers of the folder spill out, creating a fan.

“Lila?” I ask and step into her room. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t find it.” She hammers the drawer shut and opens the bottom one with such force that it falls out of the desk. “I can’t freaking find it!”

My letters to her still sit on her bed, stacked neatly. My chest squeezes again at the sight of them. I can’t believe it. She kept all my letters—just like I kept all of hers.

The room represents Lila perfectly—order, discipline. Yeah, everything fits, except for the golden-haired pixie set on mass destruction. “Can’t find what?”

“My acceptance package from the University of Louisville. The one that has the paperwork for me to return. I put it in a file. I labeled it. I would have filed it in alphabetical order under Colleges, but it’s not here.”

She frantically searches through the files. Once. Twice. A third time. Lila slams her hands on the floor next to her. “Where is it?!”

I approach her slowly. The way I had to with Meg when she found out she was pregnant. I bend my knees to crouch in front of her. “Why do you need the file?”

Lila tilts her head as if she’s noticing me for the first time. Her eyes are too wide for her delicate face. “I’m going to accept.”

I blink. “Accept?” I suck in air to steady myself. It’s as if the girl socked me in the stomach with a bat. “What about Florida?”

“Stephen’s the one pranking me.” The words tumble out as she clasps her hands over her chest. “He wanted to scare me, and it worked. I was terrified. Terrified! I can’t do it.” She chokes on a sob. “I can’t go to Florida. Not by myself.”

myself.

I bolt upright. Rage explodes through me—the eruption of the volcano complete. The bastard's dead. No question. "Tell me where he is."

Her eyebrows scrunch together. "Who?"

"The asshole who has you doubting yourself. The asshole who scared you, Stephen."

Lila jumps to her feet. "All he did was point out what he already knew. That I can't handle being on my own."

"That is bull." Unlike yesterday morning, I don't yell. This emotion burrowing through me, it's an eerie, deathly calm. Since Josh's death, I'm used to numb, and Lila's letters have been the only weapon strong enough to slip past that wall. Since realizing I could lose the connection with her I've felt anger, despair, guilt, hope, love and now pure, unadulterated rage.

"Before the prank you were ready to head south," I say. "Your entire last letter was filled with what you wanted to do the moment you crossed the state line."

"But that was before!" She throws her arms out at her sides. "That was when I thought I had someone."

The anger dissipates—gone in a flash—leaving emptiness behind. "You have me."

"No, I don't." Her eyelashes become wet as they flutter. "You were supposed to be right there beside me, and now you're not. I thought I'd be able to convince Echo to come with me, but then she found Noah. I'm by myself now. I can't do it. I'm not capable of going to Florida alone."

I scratch at the stubble forming on my jaw as she wipes at a renegade tear streaming from the corner of her eye. She glances away and I feel sick.

Lila was depending on me and I jacked it up for her. For my family. For me.

An overwhelming urge bubbles inside me to head home—to talk to my family, the counselor at school, to fill out Florida's spring admissions paperwork, which the counselor gave me to motivate me to do well in summer school. Since Josh died all I've been doing is ignoring my life, my future—just like how Meg ignores her baby. Yeah, going home, it would be running, but not the kind I've been doing for two years. It would be running forward instead of away.

When I left home to find Lila, I felt the first spark of awareness that things needed to change, but seeing Lila doubt herself, seeing her backtrack, it clears up my vision of what I need to do to get my life in order.

My grandpa once told me never to provoke an injured bear, especially one nursing its wounds, but sometimes the bear needs to be poked. "Who's the

runner now?”

A flash of fear shivers up my spine at the way her ice-cold blue eyes strike through me. “Excuse me?”

Hope I know what I’m doing. “I came here for you, Lila. For the girl who would never let anyone walk all over her. For the girl who wouldn’t be feeling sorry for herself because someone pranked her. Maybe I’m not the only one who told a lie. Maybe you invented the girl in the letters.”

Her mouth drops open; her cheeks redden as if I had physically slapped her. “You are a jerk!”

“You mad now?”

“Yes!”

“Good. Now stop focusing on what you can’t control and start focusing on what you can.” Like summer school, working toward college, applying for spring admissions and not on my parents, my sister, my nephew...my brother’s death.

Lila shakes her head, as if she’s waking from a dream. She leans against the desk for support and runs her hands through her hair. “You’re right.”

This is the girl I know: one hundred percent in or out. No waffling. A girl who treats life like a missile with a locked-in course.

Her eyes roam over me and I’m confused by the slant of her lips.

“Lincoln?” she says as the silly smile grows.

“Yes?”

“You’re not wearing a shirt.”

Embarrassment heats my body and my hand darts to my chest, feeling the exposed skin. “Sorry.”

Those blue eyes smolder. “I’m not. But you may want to get dressed for this.”

Lila

...and on the rock climbing—I think you're underestimating yourself.

~ Lincoln

Lincoln walks beside me through the open field toward the tree line. He has a wide gait and I struggle to appear casual as I attempt to match his stride. His shirt's back on, which is a sin. He could definitely give Echo's guy a run for his money in the abs department.

At the wooden shed, the combination lock whines as I spin it to the right, the left and then back to the right. With a click, I unlatch the lock and open the door. Sunlight streams in and dust particles dance in the beams.

"Want to tell me what we're doing out here?" Lincoln asks.

"Reclaiming my pride." Stupid Stephen and stupid me. The past six months of our relationship flip through my mind like a bad award show montage: how I told him I was going to Florida, how he balked and then started talking about how scared I'd be once I moved. He played me. He played me so well that I almost abandoned my dreams.

If I'm being deep-down honest, though, Stephen's prank was just the excuse I'd been searching for to drop Florida. And I could include my anxiety over Echo leaving and Lincoln not heading to Florida in the fall in the pathetic-excuse category. The truth is I've doubted going away to school because I've doubted me. I'm afraid of being alone.

I don't know how to fix my fear, but I do know how to fix Stephen.

Once my eyes adjust to the darkness of the shed, I walk in and grab my brothers' paintball guns. Lincoln was completely right. It's time to stop being scared and start being proactive. It's time someone turned the tables on the slimy little bastard.

I toss Lincoln one of the guns. He raises his eyebrows once he realizes what he holds in his hands.

"Shoot for their feet," I say. "Their shoes cost two hundred and fifty dollars and they'd be pissed if they got stained."

His wicked smile answers that he understands the plan and that he's on board

HIS WICKED SMILE ANSWERS THAT HE UNDERSTANDS THE PLAN AND THAT HE'S ON BOARD.
“Have you ever used one of these?”

“Yep.” But it’s nothing I’ve ever broadcast to the world. “Have you?”

“It’s been a while.”

Good. “We’ve got six hours until sunset, and then it’s on.”

Lincoln’s eyes travel over my body, his gaze lingering on my curves. “I think I’m falling in love.”

At the word *love*, my insides flutter. I tuck my hair behind my ear, trying to imagine how sexy I could possibly be while wearing a pair of ratty cutoff jeans and a T-shirt and cradling a paintball gun. And then I wonder what it would be like if he really was falling for me, because Lincoln in real life is a million times more intense than Lincoln in letters...and I’m seriously falling for him.

Lincoln

Will you go outside on the 28th and watch the meteor shower? I know what you're thinking: 3:00 a.m.? But I think it will be beautiful. Besides, it will be cool to know that you're watching the sky at the same exact time as me.

~ Lila

With a hip cocked in the door frame of Lila's room, I watch as she towel-dries her hair. Earlier, I witnessed Lila hit bull's-eye after bull's-eye with that paintball gun. The girl ain't playing. Experiencing her Rambo side brought on some fear.

I chuckle to myself. It also turned me on.

The late-afternoon sun floats into her bedroom. We've got a few hours until nightfall. Being a natural climber, I called the high position in the trees. Lila plans to be at ground level.

She tosses the towel into a hamper and combs through her hair. "When will you have to leave?" she asks.

"I called my parents while you were in the shower. I told them I'd be home by Monday morning." I also told them to expect major changes when I finally did arrive home—that I was going to focus on my future, not on the past. They weren't happy I left so suddenly and that I didn't graduate, but they weren't irate.

She bites her lower lip and sinks to her bed. "So you'll be leaving tomorrow."

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you came," she says.

"Me too." Our gazes meet, and it's the most comfortable I've ever felt staring into someone else's eyes. "Will you be okay by yourself?"

She nods. "I'll probably wake to every little sound, but I'll be fine."

"That's my girl." My eyes widen as I realize what I said. Lila's not my girl. I want her to be, but... "I mean—"

"No, I like what you said." Lila glances away, her hair swinging into her face.

Could she possibly feel what I feel? Lila and I were once strangers who met at a funeral. We became friends through letters, bonded by a shared dream of

a funeral. We became friends through letters, bonded by a shared dream of college in another state, and then I fell for her. Could she have also fallen for me?

In a handful of hours, I'm going to head home, and the one lesson I learned from Josh's death is that life has to be lived now; the future isn't always guaranteed. I have this one shot with her, and I'm going to take it. "This past fall you told me that you felt close to me even though we're hundreds of miles away."

Lila's eyes jump to mine, I guess in shock that I remembered.

"Well," I continue, "that's what it's been like for me too. I've never shared my private thoughts with someone other than you, and I can't imagine sharing them with anyone else."

I pause, terrified to continue. If I'm wrong on this, I'll ruin the relationship Lila and I share. Lila fidgets with a strand of her wet hair and keeps those gorgeous innocent eyes locked on me. No, I've fallen for her and I'll regret walking away from this moment.

"I like you, Lila. As more than a friend. I wake up in the morning and I think of you. I go to bed at night and you're the last thought in my mind. I dream of you. The best days of the week are the ones when I get your letters."

She blinks once, her face frozen. My stomach sinks. "But if you don't feel the same way, it's okay. I swear—"

"Lincoln," she says before I can finish. "I feel that same way...for you."

I inhale as if it's the first breath I've ever taken. Lila cares for me. I step into her room and pause beside her. "Can I sit?" Because it's her bed and there's no way I'm assuming I've got permission for a place as sacred as that.

She scoots over, creating a space for me. I lower onto the bed and my heart picks up speed. I rub my hands against my jeans and release a slow, steady stream of air. "I'll be starting summer school on Monday."

Lila angles her body toward me, a sure sign I've got her attention.

"My guidance counselor said that I've got a good chance at spring admission to the University of Florida because of my ACT and SAT scores and my grades before this year. He thinks if I can focus on summer school and write a kick-ass essay on how I learned from my screwup, the admissions board will look past my mistakes.

"I'm going to admit, until I came here, I was still ignoring what needed to be done. I knew I wanted to fix us, but watching you tackle your fears has helped me realize that I've got to tackle mine. I've made mistakes and I'm going to make it right."

Her thin, delicate fingers rest on her knee. Two and a half years ago, Lila and I sat outside a funeral home and she had the courage to reach over to me when I described my relationship with my older brother. No, I didn't cry at Josh's funeral, but what I never told anyone was how I wept like a baby to a girl I had never met before...to Lila.

Channeling the same strength she showed that night, I place my hand over hers. Lila immediately laces her fingers with mine.

I continue. "I should have told you the truth about not graduating before, but I didn't want you to be disappointed in me—I didn't want to admit that I let you down. I know I'm going to be a semester late, but I'm coming to Florida, Lila, and I swear I won't let you down again."

A tender smile eases onto her lips. "And I'll be there—waiting."

My chest expands as I lean into her. Her lavender scent engulfs me, and those sky blue eyes draw me in. "I like you," I whisper as I nuzzle the satin skin of her cheek. More than like, but I don't want to rush things.

Lila tilts her head and whispers against my lips, "I like you, too."

Her kiss is soft and warm—inviting. We both explore, a hesitant dance as we glide over lines neither one of us imagined crossing. I let go of her hand to push the damp hair away from her face. My fingers trace her cheekbone, then drift to the nape of her neck.

My skin vibrates when a feminine sigh escapes her lips—a sound of approval, a sound of longing. Lila shifts and I take advantage by wrapping an arm around her body. She weaves her fingers into my hair and pulls me closer. My blood heats and so does our kiss.

I suck in her lower lip and in our next breath our tongues slide against one another. Hands—my hands, her hands—roam. Over arms, over backs, memorizing curves, lingering near shirt hems.

We kiss and touch and continue to kiss. With hearts beating hard and breath difficult to catch, we press our lips together one final time, then break away.

Yeah, we've crossed lines today, but there are some borders neither one of us is eager to breach. Lila's eyes shining up at me confirm her approval of the new path we've chosen, and on this path we have time to explore, we have time to kiss, and we have all the time in the world to fall in love.

Lila

The entire sky erupted into hundreds of streaks of light. I never felt so alive. I wished that you were here with me or me with you. But I think you were. Call me crazy, but it was a moment, Lila, and I'm glad I shared it with you. Even if it was from a couple hundred miles away.

~ Lincoln

“I need a code name,” Lincoln says over the walkie-talkie I confiscated from my youngest brother’s room. It’s midnight and the two of us have been hunkered in our positions since nine.

If I squint and stare long enough, I can decipher Lincoln’s shadow fifteen feet in the air in the large oak tree near the front of the house. It almost looks as if the tree has a cancerous growth springing from it. For the first hour, I worried over how he dangled from the branch, but I soon discovered that Lincoln’s as comfortable with heights as I am at a sale at Macy’s.

“What do you have in mind?” I ask. Behind the row of bushes and up against the trunk of a weeping willow, I scan the midnight horizon. The sky’s clear. Beautiful white stars twinkle down on us, but there’s no moon tonight. A good thing, as Stephen and his traveling band of hyenas won’t see us. A bad thing, as it makes it hard for us to spot them.

“Something dangerous, like Razor or Blade.”

I hear the tease in his voice and accept the bait. “How about Abe? Or Honest? Those sound like perfect code names.”

“Har, har. How about you lay a president joke I haven’t heard before.”

It’s been like this for the past three hours—a comfortable steady stream of conversation. Earlier, Lincoln kissed me...and I kissed him back. Before coming out here, we spent a couple of hours wrapped in each other’s arms on my bed, alternating between talking and kissing.

My heart aches when I think of him leaving in the morning, but we have a plan and both of us are sticking to it.

“When did you know?” I ask. “That you had feelings for me.”

Static on the other side. Crap. Maybe I went too far.

stare on the other side. Clap. Maybe I went too far.

“I don’t know,” he says. “It grew over time. I guess I first knew something was up when I wanted to scratch out Stephen’s name from your letters.”

I giggle, totally unashamed that I like that he was jealous.

“Honestly, though...You wrote me a letter back before school started and I took it with me on one of my climbing trips. At the top of the rock, I read your letter and realized you were the one person I wished I could share the view with.”

My lips tilt up with his words.

“What was the letter about?”

He chuckles. “Nothing. That’s the strange part. You’ve sent me letters about Echo and Stephen and Grace and your family and Florida and I loved those letters. I knew you were sharing your soul with me. But this one letter, you talked about lying in your backyard and watching the leaves in the trees blow. When I was done reading, I found a four-leaf clover tucked into the envelope. I knew then that I wanted to share the big moments with you, but more important the small. I want to climb rocks with you, Lila, then spend quiet time at the top sharing the view with you.”

Warmth curls around my heart. I want the same exact thing. “I sent you the clover so you’d have good luck with your admissions letter.”

“It worked,” he says. “And it’ll work again.”

“So I have to find you another clover?” I tease.

“Nope. I still have the first one tucked safely in my wallet. I like having something from you close to me.”

Overwhelmed, I feel my throat swell a little. He kept a gift I gave him. In his wallet. That is unbelievably sweet.

“How about you?” he asks hesitantly. “When did you know?”

“The night of the meteor shower,” I answer automatically. “And then the letter you sent after it.” I think of the hundreds of lights dancing across the night sky. “I knew you were watching. I know it sounds stupid, but I felt you with me, and then when you sent that letter describing that night...” I drop off, unable to find the right words to explain the emotion.

Lincoln rescues me. “I know. Me too.”

We sit in silence for a few seconds, both of us absorbing the moment. Finally, I clear my throat and ask, “How many hours is the University of Florida from you again?” We’re going to take turns driving back and forth to visit on the weekends and we’ll talk on the phone and we’ll Skype and, of course, write letters.

“About four if I stick to the recommended posted limits.”

“It’s the law,” I remind him. “Like the get-a-ticket-if-you-break-it type of law.”

“A suggestion,” he responds.

Before I can compose my comeback, Lincoln breaks in through the radio. “Incoming.”

My chest tightens. They’re here. My eyes sweep the yard around my house and my pulse begins to beat in my ears.

I wipe my hands on the side of my jeans to dry them of sweat and lie flat on the ground. Movement out of the corner of my eye causes my breathing to hitch. Three forms skulk against the side of the house. One of them raises its hand in the air, waving for the other two to head toward the front porch.

The lone stray shadow creeps to my bedroom window. Asshole. This has to be Stephen.

I ready the paintball gun, the tank tucked into my shoulder. I align my sight and decide against the shoes, aiming for the heart. Let’s see how he feels after I sink a couple of balls into it.

Lincoln’s under strict instructions—he’ll shoot only after I fire, and Stephen is mine.

After a few seconds, Stephen raises his hand and rakes his fingers down my window.

It is so not your night tonight, buddy. Last night, I was terrified. Now, I feel empowered.

I pull the trigger. Pop, pop, pop, pop. The figure yelps and bends over as each ball pummels his body. Shouts from the front of the house tell me that Lincoln has hit his prey.

“They’re on the move. On the move.” Lincoln’s voice crackles on the radio.

His silhouette swings down from the tree in effortless grace, and once on the ground he takes off for the front of the house. I refocus on Stephen. His head whips back and forth, looking for his attacker in the bushes. “Who’s out there?”

I drift up from the ground. Still hidden by the rain of branches from the weeping willow, I plug two more balls into the ground, right near his feet.

“Hey!” he yells as he dances away from the paint.

With a snap, I flick on my flashlight and aim it at his face. He places his hand above his eyes in an effort to see who approaches. Paint smears his favorite shirt and jeans. Good. I aimed too low, though, and barely stained his two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar athletic shoes.

I toss the flashlight in his direction on the ground. He blinks twice when he

I toss the flashlight in his direction on the ground. He blinks twice when he recognizes me. “Lila?” Shock widens his eyes. “I can explain.”

This time I aim directly at his shoes. Pop. Pop. Light blue bleeds over his ex-white sneakers. “I’m going to Florida, Stephen. Do you have a problem with that?”

Headlights flash near the driveway. “Stephen!” yells Luke from the driver’s side. “Let’s go.”

When Stephen hesitates, Luke honks the horn and beats his hand against the door of his car. Stephen glances at me one more time. “Lila—”

“There’re still some white spots on your shoes.” I set my sight on his obsession again.

“I’ll call when you’ve regained sanity,” he huffs as he retreats to his moronic friends.

“I’m shooting you with a paintball gun at midnight,” I shout after him. “I think we left sane behind a couple of days ago.”

When the red taillights of Luke’s car disappear, I drop the paintball gun to the ground, flop down beside it and rest my arms on my bent knees.

From the front of the house, a shadow emerges. Yesterday, I would have lost it if I were outside in the dark with a large figure looming. In fact, yesterday I did just that. Funny how much can change in twenty-four hours.

“You okay?” asks Lincoln.

Let’s see, my best friend has moved on, I’ve conquered my fear of moving away, I shot my pranking ex-boyfriend with a paintball gun and I’m alone with a guy who causes my heart to stutter. “Yeah, I’m great.”

And I mean it. It’s a small yet humongous realization: I’m always going to be scared of something—spiders, the dark, being on my own—but I don’t have to let the fear be in control.

* * *

“...and when I came around the corner, he ran into the door of his car and slammed right onto the ground.” Lincoln’s shoulders move with his laughter as he recaps tonight’s events, and I giggle along with him. We lie next to each other on my bed: me in my pj’s of a tank top and shorts and Lincoln in a fresh pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

Our laughter fades and we both stare into the darkness. The chirping of the crickets from the other side of the window fills the silence. My muscles have that good, exhausted jellyfish feel. It’s two in the morning and even though I’m

definitely tired enough for sleep, I'm not ready to give up this precious time with Lincoln.

As if reading my mind, he turns his head toward me. "Are you tired?"

"No." I flip so that I'm facing him and traitorously yawn.

Lincoln chuckles and mirrors my position. He runs his fingers down my arm, starting at the edge of the strap of my tank and ending at the tip of my elbow. I shut my eyes with the exquisite tickle. I inch closer to him and happily sigh when he cups the curve of my waist. It's a heavy, warm weight that creates the sensation of protection.

"You should go to sleep, Lila." Good God, his voice is beautiful—deep and smooth.

I shake my head. "I can sleep tomorrow and the day after that. I only have you for a few more hours." My stomach sinks and I open my eyes. "But you should sleep. You've got a long drive in front of you."

"I should." Lincoln shifts his head so that his mouth is wickedly near mine. I lick my lips and inhale to steady my breathing. We've kissed three times since this afternoon. Each time he's hypnotized me, and I'm greedy to be captivated again.

I nod. "You should." But I really don't want him to—not yet. "Sleep."

His hand slips to the small of my back and presses so that our bodies now touch. A rush of air escapes my lungs. Holy hell, he's solid. I allow a hand to skim along his back, and Lincoln smiles with the caress.

"I will," he says. My skin tingles as his mouth whispers against mine. "Sleep. But not now."

"No?" I try to ask innocently.

"No." He brushes his nose along the curve of my neck, and I could almost moan in frustration. I want kisses, lots of kisses, but I also love the slow burn. Lincoln has talent, and my heart beats faster when I think of all the hundreds of ways we could spend our evenings.

He slowly creates a trail along my cheek, and just when I'm on the verge of begging, his lips finally come within butterfly-inducing distance of mine. This is one of my favorite moments: the seconds before the kiss. It's like dangling on a ledge with gravity pulling me forward and the wind daring me to let go and fly.

Lincoln breathes out and I breathe in. A synchronized movement that causes my mind to disconnect and conscious thought to float away. A nudge forward on his part, a tilt of my head, and then we fall.

His mouth is hot against mine and my hands tangle in his hair in response. Our lips part and our tongues slide together, a delicious slow movement that

makes me want to purr like a cat.

Earlier, we let our kisses be just what they needed to be: simple, a sign of trust, a sign of what's to come, but this feels like more. After the words we've said to each other tonight, I'm tempted by more, but I'm not ready to give up that slow burn.

Lincoln draws my lower lip between his, releases it and then lifts his head. The warmth and sincerity in his eyes tells me he's not ready to leave the slow burn either. This is why I'm with him, because Lincoln gets me, understands me, possibly more than I understand myself.

"How about one more kiss?" he asks.

"How about more than one?" I counter. "Just a few."

"A few," he agrees. His body melts against me and our lips meet again—a warm, building kiss that causes me to arch into him. Beneath his massive body, I feel small, fragile and protected. I've never felt so feminine, so in tune with another.

Our movements are soft and deliberate. Fingers exploring skin, lips moving in time, feet rubbing against each other. Until it becomes time for one last kiss. One that will be singed into my memory and will carry over until I can be in his arms again.

Lincoln places his forehead on mine and caresses my cheek. My fingers trace the hollow of his neck, and I enjoy the beat of his heart against my chest.

"We should sleep," he says.

Unable to speak, I nod. Lincoln rolls onto his back and pulls me so that I'm cradled against him. He kisses the top of my head and combs his fingers through my hair. "Thank you, Lila."

Words are still hard, but I find the energy to ask, "For what?"

"For helping me find me again."

I mold myself around him and wonder what our future will look like. Someday distance will no longer be an issue and we'll have more than just letters—we'll be together. Who knows...maybe forever.

"You were always in there. You just weren't looking in the right place." I pause. He's not the only one who rediscovered himself this weekend. "Neither one of us were."

"True," he agrees and gathers me closer. "But we figured it out."

I close my eyes and hug my body to his. Two years of letters, two years of redefining myself and two years of falling for my best friend. As I cuddle into Lincoln, I know that I would relive it all in order to experience this moment

again.

Lincoln

I think sometimes things we don't like happen so we can appreciate the good. Like, can I really enjoy a sunrise if I didn't experience the darkness of night? Without her past, Echo would never have met Noah, and without her losing Aires, I would never have met you. So, yeah, I do mean what I said in the last letter. You are like a sunrise in my life.

~ Lila

Stretched out on her stomach with her face toward me, Lila sleeps. Her tousled hair falls over her shoulder, onto her cheek. I've been awake for an hour, watching her. She smiles when she dreams. Twice, little lines formed between her eyebrows and I had to stop myself from smoothing them out. She's too beautiful to wear worry. I'll do whatever it takes to ensure her happiness.

Birds begin to chirp outside Lila's window—a warning of the impending moment. Soon, I'll have to say goodbye.

I've got a long drive and a lot of work in front of me in order to catch up with Lila. After spending time with her, going back to letters will be difficult, but we also agreed to phone calls and Skype and weekend visits.

I skim my finger against the soft skin of her cheek, and her head angles toward my touch. Her eyes flutter open and her lips edge up when she sees me. "Hi."

"Hi," I respond.

Someday I'll teach her how to climb a rock wall, I'll introduce her to my parents, let her hold my nephew and I'll confess my love.

Lila reaches up and smooths the hair near my ear. "I feel like I've known you forever."

"Same here."

"I really like you," she says in a low, sexy tone. And I recognize it, the spark in her eyes. It's more than like, more than attraction.

"Me too."

Her hand glides down to my chest and pauses over my heart. When our eyes meet, I know she notices the spark within me too. I capture her hand and keep it

meet, I know she notices the spark within me too. I capture her hand and keep it against my chest as I lean in for a kiss.

“I still expect two letters a week,” she whispers.

Our lips move against each other’s, and in between breaths I say to her, “I’ll send you three.”

* * * * *

Read on for an excerpt from Echo and Noah’s unforgettable story, PUSHING THE LIMITS (available now), and an exclusive sneak preview of Noah’s friend Beth’s story, DARE YOU TO, coming soon from Katie McGarry and Harlequin TEEN!

Pushing the Limits

NOAH

I'd told Mrs. Collins the truth. I didn't have time for tutoring or counseling. In June, I would turn eighteen and graduate from foster care. That meant I'd need a place of my own, and rent meant a job. But Mrs. Collins had played me like a street hustler. An occasional supervised visit with my brothers wasn't enough. She dangled them in front of me like a damn needle to a heroin addict.

My shift at the Malt and Burger started at five. I glanced at the clock hanging over the reference librarian's desk. What part of "meet the guy you're tutoring directly after school at the public library" did my know-it-all misunderstand? Mrs. Collins might have mentioned who would be tutoring me, but I'd stopped listening after a few minutes. The lady talked too much.

I focused on the double doors. Five more minutes and I could happily call this session a failure, a fact I would be thrilled to throw in Mrs. Collins's face.

One door opened and cold air swept in, causing goose bumps to rise on my arms. *Ah, hell.* I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms across my chest. Echo Emerson glided into the library.

Her eyes swept the room while her gloved hands rubbed her arms. Like the cold could penetrate that fancy-ass brown leather coat. A light, sunshine smile rested on her face. It appeared Mrs. Collins had kept us both in the dark. The moment she saw me, her smile faded and her green eyes erupted with thunderclouds. *Join the fucking club.*

From under the table, I kicked out the chair opposite me. "You're late."

She set her book bag on the table and scooted the chair in as she sat. "I had to go to the office and find out testing dates. I could have gotten the information this morning, but some jerk got in my way."

Advantage Echo, but I smiled at her like I had the upper hand. "You could have stayed. I never asked you to leave."

"And let you harass me some more? No, thanks." She shrugged off her jacket, but kept on her knitted gloves. She smelled of cold and leather. Her blue cotton shirt dipped below her beige tank, exposing the top of her cleavage. Girls like

her enjoyed teasing guys. Little did she know, I didn't mind looking.

Catching me staring, she readjusted her shirt and her cleavage disappeared from view. *Well, that was fun.* She glared at me, possibly waiting for an apology. She'd be waiting a long time.

"What subject are you failing? All of them?" Those green eyes danced. It appeared Echo also enjoyed dishing out shit.

All right, I'd screwed with her this morning for no reason. She deserved to get a couple blows in. "None. Mrs. Collins is calling the shots on this."

Echo opened her backpack and withdrew a notebook. A shadow crossed her face when she slid off the gloves and immediately pulled her long sleeves over her hands. "What subject do you want to start with? We have calculus and physics together, so we could start there. You've got to be a complete moron if you need help with business technology." She paused.

"And weren't you in my Spanish class last term?"

I lowered my head so my hair fell into my eyes. For a girl who didn't know I existed, she sure knew a lot about me. "Yeah." And this term, too. She barely beat the bell walking into class and took the first seat available without giving anyone a second look.

"*Qué tan bien hablas español?*" she asked.

How well could I speak Spanish? Pretty damn decent. I shoved away from the table. "I gotta go."

"What?" Her forehead crinkled in disbelief.

"Unlike you, I don't have parents to pay for everything. I've got a job, Princess, and if I don't leave now, I'll be late. See you around."

Grabbing my books and jacket, I left the table and immediately exited the library. The cold January air smacked me in the face. Ice covered several spots on the pavement.

"Hey!"

I glanced over my shoulder. Echo bounded after me, leather jacket on one arm and pack slung over her back. "Get your damn jacket on. It's cold outside." I didn't stop for her, but I slowed my pace, curious as to why she followed me out.

She caught up quickly and kept step beside me. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I told you, to work. I thought you were smart." I'd never met anyone so fun to mess with.

"Fine. Then when are we going to make this session up?"

I slammed my books on the piece of crap I called a car, causing rust to scatter to the ground. "We're not. I'll make you a deal. You tell Mrs. Collins that we're

to the ground. “We’re not. I’ll make you a deal. You tell Mrs. Collins that we’re meeting as many days after school as you want, collect whatever volunteer hours you need for whatever little club you belong to, and I’ll back you up. I won’t have to see you and you won’t have to look at me. I get to continue with my screwed up life and you get to go home and play dress-up with your friends. Deal?”

Echo winced and backed away as if I’d slapped her. She lost her footing when she hit a patch of ice. My right hand swept out and snatched her wrist before her body could smack the ground.

I kept hold of her while she steadied herself using the trunk of my car. Embarrassment or cold flushed her white cheeks. Either way, I found it funny. But before I had a chance to make

fun of her, her eyes widened and she stared down at the wrist I held.

Her long blue sleeve was hiked past her elbow and I followed her gaze to the exposed skin. She attempted to yank her hand away, but I tightened my grip and swallowed my disgust. In all the horror-show homes I’d lived in, I never once saw mutilation like that. White and pale red, raised scars zigzagged up her arm. “What the fuck is that?”

I tore my eyes away from the scars and searched her face for answers. She sucked in several shallow gasps before yanking a second time and successfully jerking out of my grasp. “Nothing.”

“That ain’t nothing.” And that *something* had to hurt like hell when it happened.

Echo stretched her sleeve past her wrist to her fingertips. She resembled a corpse. The blood rushed out of her cheeks and her body quaked with silent tremors. “Leave me alone.”

She turned away and stumbled back to the library.

Dare You To

BETH

My ass vibrates. I stretch before reaching into my back pocket for my cell.

For a second, I wonder if pretty boy from Taco Bell somehow managed to score my number. I dreamed of him—Taco Bell Boy. He stood close to me, looking all arrogant and gorgeous with his mop of sandy-blond hair and light brown eyes. This time he wasn't trying to play me by getting my number. He was smiling at me like I actually mattered.

As I said—just a dream.

The image fades when I check the time and the caller ID on my cell: 3:00 a.m. and The Last Stop bar. Fuck. Wishing I never sobered up, I accept the call. “Hold on.”

My best friend Isaiah's asleep beside me, his arm haphazardly thrown over my stomach. Gently lifting it, I squeeze out from underneath. Noah's passed out on the couch, with his girlfriend, Echo, pulled tight against him. Shit, when did she get back in town?

Quietly, I climb the stairs, enter the kitchen, and shut the door to the basement. “Yeah.”

“Your mother's causing problems again,” says a pissed-off male voice. Unfortunately, I know this voice: Denny. Bartender/owner of The Last Stop.

“Have you cut her off?”

“I can't stop guys from buying her drinks. Look, kid, you pay me to call you before I call the police or bounce her out to the curb. You've got fifteen minutes to drag her ass out.”

He hangs up. Denny really needs to work on his conversational skills.

I walk the two blocks to the strip mall, which boasts all the conveniences white trash can desire: a Laundromat, Dollar Store, liquor store, piss-ass market that accepts WIC and food stamps and sells stale bread and week-old meat, cigarette store, pawn shop, and biker bar. Oh, and a dilapidated lawyer's office in case you get caught shoplifting or holding up any of the above.

The other stores closed hours ago, placing the bars over their windows. Groups of men and women huddle around the scores of motorcycles that fill the

parking lot. The stale stench of cigarettes and the sweet scent of cloves and pot mingle together in the hot summer air.

Denny and I both know he won't call the cops, but I can't risk it. Mom's been arrested twice and is on probation. And even if he doesn't call the cops, he'll kick her out. A burst of male laughter reminds me why that's not a good thing. It's not happy laughter or joyous or even sane. It's mean, has an edge, and craves someone's pain.

Mom thrives on sick men. I don't get it. Don't have to. I just clean up the mess.

The dull bulbs hanging over the pool tables, the running red-neon lights over the bar, and the two televisions hanging on the wall create the bar's only light. The sign on the door states two things: no one under the age of twenty-one and no gang colors. Even in the dimness, I can see neither rule applies. Most of the men wear jackets with their motorcycle gang emblem clearly in sight, and half the girls hanging on those men are underage.

I push between two men to where Denny serves drinks at the bar. "Where is she?"

Denny, in his typical red flannel, nods toward the back. "Where she's always at."

"Thanks."

I draw stares and snickers as I walk past. Most of the laughter belongs to regulars. They know why I'm here. I see the judgment in their eyes. The amusement. The pity. Damn hypocrites.

I walk with my head high, shoulders squared. I'm better than them. No matter the whispers and taunts they throw out. Fuck them. Fuck them all.

Most everyone in the back room hovers over a poker game near the front, leaving the rest of the room empty. The door to the alley hangs wide open. I can see Mom's apartment complex and her front door from here. Convenient.

Mom sits at a small round table in the corner. Two bottles of whiskey and a shot glass sit beside her. She rubs her cheek, then pulls her hand away. Inside of me, anger erupts.

He hit her. Again. Her cheek is red. Blotchy. The skin underneath the eye already swelling.

"Elisabeth." Mom slurs the s and drunkenly waves me over. She picks up a whiskey bottle and tips it over the general area of the shot glass, but nothing comes out.

I go to her, take the bottle, and set it on the table beside us. "It's empty."

"Oh " She blinks her hollow blue eyes. "Be a good girl and go get me

OH. SHE DRINKS HER HOLLOW BLUE EYES. BE A GOOD GIRL AND GO GET ME another.”

“I’m seventeen.”

“Then get you something too.”

“Let’s go, Mom.”

Mom smooths her blond hair with a shaky hand and glances around as if she just woke from a dream. “He hit me.”

“I know.”

“I hit him back.”

Don’t doubt she hit him first. “We’ve gotta go.”

“I don’t blame you.”

That statement hits me in ways a man can’t. I release a long breath and search for a way to ease the sting of her words, but I fail. I pick up the other bottle, grateful for the pitiful amount remaining, pour a shot, and swig it down. Then pour another, pushing it toward her. “Yes, you do.”

Mom stares at the drink before letting her middle-aged fingers trace the rim of the shot glass. Her nails are bitten to the quick. The cuticles grown over. The skin surrounding the nails is dry and cracked. I wonder if my mom was ever pretty.

She throws her head back as she drinks. “You’re right. I do. Your father would never have left if it wasn’t for you.”

“I know.” The burn from the whiskey suppresses the pain of the memory. “Let’s go.”

“He loved me.”

“I know.”

“What you did...it forced him to leave.”

“I know.”

“You ruined my life.”

“I know.”

She begins to cry. It’s the drunk cry. The type where it all comes out—the tears, the snot, the spit, the horrible truth you should never tell another soul. “I hate you.”

I flinch. Swallow. And remind myself to inhale. “I know.”

Mom grabs my hand. I don’t pull away. I don’t grab her in return. I let her do what she must. We’ve been down this road several times.

“I’m sorry, baby.” Mom wipes her nose with the bare skin of her forearm. “I didn’t mean it. I love you. You know I do. Don’t leave me alone. Okay?”

“Okay.” What else can I say? She’s my mom. My mom.

Her fingers draw circles on the back of my hand and she refuses eye contact. “Stay with me tonight?”

This is where Isaiah drew the line. Actually, he drew the line further back, forcing me to promise I’d stay away from her altogether after her boyfriend beat the shit out of me. I’ve kind of kept the promise by moving in with my aunt. But someone has to take care of my mom—make sure she eats, has food, pays her bills. It is, after all, my fault Dad left. “Let’s get you home.”

Mom smiles, not noticing I haven’t answered. Sometimes, at night, I dream of her smiling. She was happy when Dad lived with us. Then I ruined her happiness.

Her knees wobble when she stands, but Mom can walk. It’s a good night.

“Where are you going?” I ask when she steps in the direction of the bar.

“To pay my tab.”

Impressive. She has money. “I’ll do it. Stay right here and I’ll walk you home.”

Instead of handing me cash, Mom leans against the back door. Great. Now I’m left with the tab. I push people in my quest to reach the bar, and Denny grimaces when he spots me. “Get her out, kid.”

“She’s out. What’s her tab?”

“Already paid.”

Ice runs in my veins. “When?”

“Just now.”

No. “By who?”

He won’t meet my eyes. “Who do you think?”

Shit. I’m falling over myself, stumbling over people, yanking them out of my way. He hit her once. He’ll do it again. I run full force out the back door into the alley and see nothing. Nothing in the dark shadows. Nothing in the streetlights. Crickets chirp in surround sound. “Mom?”

Glass breaks. Glass breaks again. Horrible shrieks echo from the front of Mom’s apartment complex. God, he’s killing her. I know it.

My heart pounds against my rib cage, making it difficult to breathe. Everything shakes—my hands, my legs. The vision of what I’ll see when I reach the parking lot eats at my soul: Mom in a bloody pulp and her asshole boyfriend standing over her. Tears burn my eyes and I trip as I round the corner of the building, scraping my palms on the blacktop. I don’t care. I need to find her. My mom...

My mom swings a baseball bat and shatters the back window of a shitty El Camino

Canine.

“What...what are you doing?” And where did she score a baseball bat?

“He.” She swings the bat and breaks more glass. “Cheated.”

I blink, unsure if I want to hug her or kill her. “Then break up with him.”

“You crazy ass bitch!” From the gap between the two apartment buildings, Mom’s boyfriend flies toward her and smacks her face with an open palm. The slap of his hand across her cheek vibrates against my skin. The baseball bat falls from her hands and bounces three times, tip to bottom, against the blacktop. Each hollow crack of the wood heightens my senses. It settles on the ground and rolls toward my feet.

He yells at her. All curses, but his words blend into a buzzing noise in my head. He hit me last year. He hits Mom. He won’t hit either one of us again.

He raises his hand. Mom throws out her arms to protect her face as she kneels in front of him. I grab the bat. Take two steps. Swing it behind my shoulder and...

“Police! Drop the bat! Get on the ground!” Three uniformed officers surround us. Damn. My heart pounds hard against my chest. I should have thought of this, but I didn’t, and the mistake will cost me. The cops patrol the complex regularly.

The asshole points at me. “She did it. That crazy ass girl took out my car. Her mom and I, we tried to stop it, but then she went nuts!”

“Drop the bat! Hands on your head.”

Dazed from his blatant lie, I forgot I still held it. The wooden grip feels rough against my hands. I drop it and listen to the same hollow thumping as it once again bounces on the ground. Placing my hands behind my head, I stare down at my mom. Waiting. Waiting for her to explain. Waiting for her to defend us.

Mom stays on her knees in front of the asshole. She subtly shakes her head and mouths the word *please* to me.

Please? Please what? I widen my eyes, begging for her to explain.

She mouths one more word: *probation*.

An officer kicks the bat from us and pats me down. “What happened?”

“I did it,” I tell him. “I destroyed the car.”

Acknowledgments

To God: Psalm 62:6

For A, N, and P: Someday you'll have to face leaving home and I hope by then your father and I will have shown you enough about life and love that you'll see the leap as the beginning of a grand adventure. I love you. Always.

Thank you to...

Dave—For being the guy that catches me when I fall.

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Playlist for *Crossing the Line*

The song that inspired me to write Lincoln to drive ten hours to see Lila:

“Wagon Wheel” by Jeremy McComb

My inspiration to write Lila and Lincoln’s relationship:

“Time After Time (The S.F.E. Version)” featuring Tara Morice on Baz Luhrmann’s *Something for Everybody*



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About the Author

Katie McGarry was a teenager during the age of grunge and boy bands and remembers those years as the best and worst of her life. She is a lover of music, happy endings and reality television, and is a secret University of Kentucky basketball fan. She is the author of the novels *Pushing the Limits* and *Dare You To*. *Crossing the Line* is her first novella.

Katie would love to hear from her readers. Contact her via her website, katiemcgarry.com, follow her on Twitter [@KatieMcGarry](https://twitter.com/KatieMcGarry), or become a fan on Facebook and Goodreads.

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CROSSING THE LINE

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