

A Revolutionary Patience: The Life of a Writer

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**Prologue: First Light**

*I heard a preacher say recently that hope is a revolutionary patience; let me add that so is being a writer. Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come. You wait and watch and work: you don't give up.*

Anne Lamott

I wrote my first story when I was eight years old. If I remember correctly, it featured winged horses and a cottage in an enchanted forest, and it was written in a purple notebook with a faux-fur cover. My parents read *Black Beauty* and *Aesop's Fables* to me as a child; I was consuming books like the *Berenstain Bears* series on my own by age four; and I happily carried around thick stacks of young adult novels—*Ella Enchanted*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*—in grade school growing up. Saturdays were spent “library-hopping” (and, regrettably, going to the grocery store before heading home and digging into my new finds). Stories have been my most intimate love for nearly 21 years.

With such a childhood, there is nothing I could justify doing with my life besides writing.

People who don't understand writing might think it's easy and fun, but the rest of us know better. Submitting to a life of self-disciplined work is a little like signing up for lifelong penance. It is hard work that depends almost entirely on internal motivation with little external reward. Seeing shelves after shelves of the latest bestseller at Books-a-Million, you might think differently, but it is rare for a writer to be able to live solely on the income from the work he or she publishes. For most, the financial payoff is hardly equal to the time and effort spent. I know this, but I write anyway.

But the craft and I have a tumultuous relationship. I waste hour after hour ignoring the stories floating around in my mind. Solid weeks and sometimes even months pass where I don't write a word. Sometimes I want to be a librarian, a teacher, a professional babysitter—anything but a writer.

I've lost track of the times I have said to myself, consciously or otherwise: "I don't feel like writing today. The inspiration just isn't there." And the more writers I meet, the more aware I become that I'm not alone. Sure, I am an extremely busy undergraduate student. But time isn't always the issue. I have hours and hours of free time during the weeks of summer, for example—but very little to show for it. Why can it be so hard to compel myself to tell the stories I love so much? It shames me to admit that more often than not, they sit stewing and half-forgotten in the back of a brain that would much prefer to focus on binge-watching Netflix and sleeping in on Saturdays.

Often, I feel certain that because I so frequently let these uninspired feelings deter me from working, I will never have what it takes to be a *real* writer. I have never nailed down a steady routine, never sustained a long-term daily word goal, and hardly ever made steady progress on a piece for longer than a few weeks. Only once have I finished a draft of a novel, and I can count the number of finished short stories in my oeuvre on two hands with missing digits. (I have several dozen poems, but as a fiction writer I consider them illegitimate. Chances are, you'd agree.)

Ernest Hemingway would write "every morning as soon after first light as possible" (Currey 52). Henry Miller believed a regular writing routine was crucial to maintaining "a daily creative rhythm" (53), and followed one (also in the morning, perhaps because, according to W.H. Auden, only "the Hitlers of the world" perform their work at night (3).

These and countless others profess to keep a regular routine for most of their creative lives. How can I measure up to that?

On the other hand, Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer Prize-winner and author of more than half a dozen books, said, “I write when something makes a strong claim on me. When I don’t feel like writing, I absolutely don’t feel like writing” (Currey 225). Her success is undeniable (though she wrote admittedly few books in comparison with the authors mentioned above), but she seems to feel the same way I often do. I confess: I don’t know what I should take away from that. Encouragement or fear?

So far, this project has instigated both.

More than eighteen months ago, I first began to formulate ideas for writing a senior honors thesis. The sporadic episodes of depression that began in my middle school years fueled my interest in the psychology behind what makes creative writers do what they do—why people like Edgar Allan Poe and Anne Sexton were so tormented, but so immensely talented. Why it is that writers will put themselves through what I deem one of the hardest tasks in the world daily for their whole lives and even call it a career.

The majority of my reading about the psychology of creativity, while inconclusive in many of its most interesting questions, pointed to a disciplined writing life as a hallmark of prolific and successful writers. Many memoirs and essays of successful writers I’ve read over the years—Anne Lamott, Stephen King, and countless others—contain emphatic advice instructing all writers to enforce and protect a consistent “butt-in-chair” time, regardless of how inspired or productive they feel (or don’t feel).

I have never disbelieved this advice, but I have also never put it into practice. What would my writing life look like if I adhered to a regimen like the one heralded by so many

great writers? If it is true that discipline cultivates creativity rather than hindering it, how does this apply to me, specifically—how does it play out in *my* writing life?

To explore these questions, I decided to submit myself to a writing routine for several set periods of time—thirty days each. One took place when I was less busy during the summer, and the other two when my schedule was pretty packed during the fall semester.

This proposed regimen included spending an hour of butt-in-chair time daily, during which I would work on a particular form or genre at a time (such as memoir, poetry, or short fiction). Periodically I also reflected in writing on how sticking to the regimen was going—the difficulty of keeping to the schedule, how productive the time is, my day-to-day moods, and if my long-term inspiration or motivation increases or decreases throughout the experiment. I kept these reflections in a blog for reference (see Appendix D).

The question of how creativity flourishes (or does not flourish) under strict discipline is crucial for me as a writer who struggles with the ever-persistent temptation to procrastinate, who would rather wait for the mythical inspiration to strike before trying to produce any material. So far in my writing life, excepting rare situations, inspiration doesn't really strike when I am not already in the routine of writing regularly. But I want to better understand and apply the common practices of successful creative writers in the hope that I will be able to draw valuable applications from this experiment to carry forward into my writing life beyond undergraduate studies.

Mental illness plays an important role in the lives of countless writers and other artists, and so it has in mine. There are times when it seems like periods of depression lead to more productive writing, and there are times when it smothers the writing completely.

The link between depression and creativity is another reason for my research into the psychology of creative writers.

Another motive behind the thesis, though not really so distant from the rest, is my faith. I have for pursuing this kind of experiment is my faith. The countless descriptions I have read of authors submitting to writing routines all sound very familiar to me; they ring of similarity to many of Christianity's spiritual disciplines. A daily writing routine, much like early morning prayer and Bible study, involves persistence and strength of will, along with a heavy dose of grace. Anne Lamott frequently says that everything she knows about faith can be applied to writing, and vice versa. I want to progress in both spheres of my life through this project. As I face difficulties in my writing, I hope to gain more perspective on how the process parallels my faith.



**Trial I: Start Small**

*Write a little every day. Often the biggest hurdle for beginning writers is getting the butt in the chair . . . it's better to start small—ten minutes a day—and build from there once you desire more.*

Elizabeth J. Andrew

I started the first trial period of my project a few days after I returned from studying abroad in Oxford in the summer of 2014. I was already in a pretty serious state of depression that summer, and working back in my bedroom with its gray walls and dull wood floors proved to be a big disappointment compared with the magnificent Bodleian Library. Four days into the project, I was already losing energy. I sat in front of my laptop, staring at the “edit post” page of my blog with nothing to say, confused and terrified as to how an entire day could pass without my even *thinking* about writing. Do professional writers forget to write so easily? Does any writer?

Day after day, I came home from working in the drive-through window at McDonald's, showered, ate something, and wasted away hours doing who knows what until I ended up staring at the screen at 9 or 10 at night, nodding off and at a loss for what to write about.

To this day I haven't figured out if it is better to write in the morning or at night, or if I'm a morning or evening person, for that matter. During the summer, due to working early and procrastination after that, I nearly always managed to put off writing until the end of the day. Part of me hated this, even dreaded it. But a few days into the project, I wrote in my blog that “When I sit down, there are thoughts that have been milling around throughout the day that are usually ready to come out, and I can tell already that getting into

the routine is helping that to grow.” Usually, waiting yielded more than did those few mornings I forced myself to get up early.

And as time passed, the writing itself did start to change—not that it was easier, exactly, but the process became slightly more bearable. I started out working on a few different projects in the first week, but I found it was best to work on the same project for at least three or four consecutive days before switching to something different. Sitting down knowing where I’d left off the day before, it was much easier to get back into the voice of my narrator and keep things moving.

Overall, however, this was the worst trial period of my project by far. I won’t say that it was pointless, but the progress I made compared to that which I hoped to make was deeply disappointing. And it got worse. I continued to dread writing to the point of anxiety, and with the exception of the first few days, I made little progress when I did work. Despite putting the task off until evening and nodding off at the computer, however, I did manage to write *something* for 11 days.

Then I stopped.

In mid-August, I posted on the blog: “Two weeks have gone by without an update on my thesis project. To be frank, that’s because I am not positive I want to finish it. Certain circumstances caused me to have to stop for a few days, and then I began to realize I wasn’t finding much fulfillment from it in the first place.”

“Circumstances” included a broken laptop screen, stress at work, and difficult personal issues, like the aftermath of a recent breakup and one of my more intense periods of depression. As I often have to relearn, life doesn’t always go as planned. Had the work been going better in the first 11 days, I may have been able to use writing as a refuge from all

of these things. Instead, it was the tipping point, and I couldn't bring myself to keep going. I wrote little else for the rest of the summer.

Following is a passage from the main piece of fiction I worked on during the summer trial period, in all its unedited glory. The story is a collection of diary entries of a girl who has just graduated from high school and is documenting the events of the summer before she leaves for college. Upon rereading, I naturally found that there are examples of both good and bad writing here. Some sentences show a hint of the voice present in my best writing. Then some sound like I'm trying to write as someone else—they ring of artificiality and reflect the halting, reluctant way I wrote. The opening few entries follow:

*May 26*

Well, thank goodness all that's over. I've never been so happy to be done with something in my life. God bless all those people who peaked in high school. At least I have room to improve.

Starting with tomorrow morning. I found an app that helps you train to run a 5k, and there's one at the end of July that Harper and Jason are already training for. I had to let my tattoo heal first, but I think I'm ready—I don't even need an ice pack to keep the swelling down anymore.

Not sure why all of us decided we needed to get in shape now and not at any sooner point in our young, healthy and vibrant lives. I guess Jason is probably thinking of the sorority girls he'll be wooing by the scads at OSU in the fall, after he walks in and flips the "I'm-a-man-now" switch that must be waiting for him there somewhere. I should call ahead and warn them.

Harper just does what Jason does. Harper's parents forbid her to attend any schools with frats and sororities. But she picked the one closest to Columbus.

Me, I guess I just don't want to let one more summer go down the drain with nothing to show for it.

*May 27*

"Where's Harper this morning?" I asked casually, double knotting my laces as Jason came around ending his first lap. He gulped water and bent over, hands on knees, panting. We spent most of high school scouting out the best places to buy used video games and DVDs.

I knew where Harper was. She called me last night in a frenzy because she had just gotten her period and didn't know how to bear the cramps on the run this morning *with Jason*. When I told her matter-of-factly that she could sit it out till the Midol kicked in and push it back to the evening if she felt better, she asked if Jason would be willing to reschedule too. "Don't you think that's just a little bit obsessive?" I said, forgetting in my Ben and Jerry's-induced brain fog to avoid the o-word. I could feel the steam pouring through my phone.

"It's love, Natalie. Love," she said sternly before she hung up for the night.

But Jason just shrugged. "Said she had a doctor's appointment or something." I started to reply but he'd already taken off for lap two.

I am a teensy bit relieved that soon we would be splitting off to different schools. For almost three years, since Harper moved here and

joined our group, it has been nearly a constant game of "Does he like me yet? Will he ask me to homecoming? Are we really just friends?" Ever-hopeful Harper is always texting me with this thing or that thing Jason said or did; she even developed a pointed eyebrow raise for when the three of us are together. I try not to encourage her too much. But I don't have the courage to tell her that Jason obviously has no clue about her feelings and doesn't care to.

*May 29*

The shin splints are starting to lessen in severity. Stretching is seriously the key. It's actually kind of nice sometimes, collapsing on the grass in the middle of the track and guzzling water until we can breathe again and then counting each other through quad stretches and calf stretches and stretches of all the other muscles I can't pronounce, but Harper can because she's a genius and she's already half-earned the nursing degree she's heading to school for. She talks us through every muscle group, sub group, microgroup, you name it, babbling on and on even as out of breath as Jason and I are. It gets the thing done, anyway.

Mom came home from a business trip today. It's the longest one she's taken in more than a year—three nights, four days. And she only had the neighbors call twice to check on me. She's gotten lax in the last few months. Guess it's because I'm normal again. I told her I managed to conquer three miles in under an hour and she seemed proud. She asked if Dad called, and I said no, at which she reddened and shut the door to her bedroom after turning on the attic fan.

I wrote this passage during the first few days of the project. I was fairly excited about writing at this point—especially because fiction was a nice relief from the scholarly Oxford essays I had just written. The fact that I *had* completed four 2,000-word papers in under two weeks proved beneficial as well because I was still in the “rough draft” mindset. I wrote quickly and steadily and made few changes as I went, unusual for a perfectionist like me.

Despite a few revisions I’ve made in the last few weeks (though not shown here), the material is still rough. But looking through this and the rest of the story, it becomes clear that when I let go of my perfectionism, my writing reflects something unique about me—it has a distinct voice that no one else has. When I worry too much about perfecting each word as I go, I squash that voice. Anne Lamott writes, “[T]he only way I can get anything written at all is to write really, really shitty first drafts. The first draft is the child’s draft, where you let it all pour out and then let it romp all over the place, knowing that no one is going to see it and that you can shape it later” (22). This is the best way to let something real and good come through in one’s work, even if it takes a lot of digging and refining later.

There’s a lot of romping here. I didn’t know the characters very well yet, and I was unsure what was going to happen to them or what they would do about it. I could only see the days I wrote about as I wrote them, but I think sometimes that is the best way to start. It worked for me here; I had just enough of a *who-cares* attitude to let my real voice come out. I reread this passage and am surprised by lines like “God bless all those people who peaked in high school. At least I have room to improve.” and “And she only had the neighbors call twice to check on me . . . Guess it's because I'm normal again.” If I were speaking to a room of strangers, I would not talk like this. This tone is the kind I use with friends, when I am comfortable and relatively uninhibited. It needs a certain amount of freedom and a “hell

with it” mentality to really come out. Brenda Ueland said on writing freely, “Be careless, reckless! Be a lion, be a pirate! Write any old way” (64).

Of course, there is some pretty bad writing here too. Any first draft is bound to produce a lot that ends up being cut later. Near the beginning, the narrator writes, “I had to let my tattoo heal first, but I think I’m ready—I don’t even need an ice pack to keep the swelling down anymore.” In my head, I know that she’s talking about the tattoo she got on her foot to celebrate graduating, but the reader has no idea—for all he knows, it could be a tattoo on the back of her neck and there would be no conceivable reason to let that keep her from running.

I think these parts come from my reluctance to write during this period. This sentence was probably both preceded and followed by a lot of distracted fidgeting and web surfing; when I am so out of focus, the material I produce tends to be disjointed and unclear.

I rarely write poetry. My brain is more story-oriented, and poetry frustrates me. When I do write a poem, it tends to come from a place of distress, a place that makes it difficult to write stories. I think it’s because, while still fictionalized, the speaker of most of my poetry is much closer to me than any of my fictional narrators. The pain is close, and so the poetry can reflect that.

What I’ve realized in the course of this project, and in the course of study at Malone, is that I turn to poetry when I want to give up on fiction, when I’m tired of telling stories, tired of trying to disguise my own pain and stress or distance myself from it to explore the lives of people who aren’t me. Because sometimes I don’t care about people who aren’t me.

On the last day before the self-imposed hiatus, I wrote a poem in three loosely connected parts.

1. Soon-soon  
and very soon  
you'll take me from myself at last  
and into you.  
Soon and sooner than a blink-  
I pray.

You say it will be soon,  
soon,  
the day you'll take me home for good.  
I find I'm begging;  
soon is not soon enough.  
I wonder if I will make it  
that long.

2. I realized the other day  
that now you are just another story.  
I could write you into a book  
and put you on the shelf with all the other stories  
that make up my days,  
and you'd fit right in,  
no more or less monumental



than the rest.

I knew it,

and I cried.

I'm a foolish romantic to think

that anyone gets a storybook ending,

but I could have sworn you were mine.

Words like 'destiny' and 'calling'

didn't seem so trite when I was with you.

There were days I was sure

we could right so much wrong with the world.

God was on our side.

Even with the world against us.

I keep wondering, even now:

did the world win?

3. You said "someday."

You made all of these beautiful, dazzling, stirring oaths to me

and my brain said, "caution,"

but my heart ran

to every one.

And now it wakes me up

in the middle of the night, wondering

where you are and what happened  
to those promises.

It asks, in the silence of the cold air  
and my pounding head,

"Is this what the world is?

Something that lies?"

I'm not proud of this poem—if not for this project, it would probably never be seen by eyes that aren't my own—but there are glimpses (tiny ones) of something real here.

Sometimes I write pages and pages of material that turns out to be useless, except that it leads to just one piece that means something. This is an example of that. I don't think much of the first two parts of the poem, but they produced the third part, and the last half of that in particular hits me as more genuine than all the rest:

It asks in the silence of the cold air  
and my pounding head,

"Is this what the world is?

Something that lies?"

Here is real pain, fear, and doubt, with the emotion coming first to any attempt to make the words sound good. One of Ueland's students was a good writer "because she told everything simply, as it was, and didn't put on airs" (69). This might be a kinder way of saying it, but I think Ueland is talking about the "hell with it" attitude I already mentioned. To write as if I am telling the story to trusted friends—that is a worthy goal.

## Thoughts on Discipline

*The point is: You generally can't wait for inspiration, so just get on with the work.*

*Disciplined, regular effort will elicit inspiration, no matter what the field.*

Michael Dirda

Among Jane Piirto's list of traits common to writers is that of discipline, the sort that channels creative energy into productivity: "One does not become a writer by wishing. One must write" (61). It sounds obvious, but without the structure that comes from discipline, a writer's creative ideas, inspiration, and motivation float around without anything to ground them or give them direction.

Every day during her childhood, Anne Lamott's father "rose at 5:30, went to his study, wrote for a couple of hours, made us all breakfast, read the paper with my mother, and then went back to work for the rest of the morning. Many years passed before I realized that he did this by choice, for a living, and that he was not unemployed or mentally ill" (Lamott xii). On the discipline of writing, he told his daughter, "Do it as you would do scales on the piano. Do it by prearrangement with yourself. Do it as a debt of honor. And make a commitment to finishing things" (xv). Playing scales on the piano is awkward and uncomfortable at first, and again if you return to the keys after being out of practice for some time. But consistent practice makes your hands comfortable on the instrument; they know where to go, and you get a sense for the expression of the notes.

The commitment to finishing things, or to following through, is necessary to achieve any amount of success. It doesn't matter how much innate ability a person might have: if they don't put it to use, it comes to nothing. Piirto writes, "Talent is simply a step 1 requirement, and many possess it who never amount to anything; talent is impossible to

quantify because it only promises but doesn't deliver . . . what delivers . . . is being there, present to do the work" (3).

Without the discipline Lamott's father and Piirto are talking about, it's difficult to channel that elusive feeling of creative energy into something real and productive. Unused, it is left floating somewhere in the stratosphere, and it quickly dissipates. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, "Everyone agrees that necessary as it is to listen to the unconscious, it is not sufficient. The real work begins when the emotion or idea that sprang from the uncharted regions of the psyche is held up to the light of reason, there to be named, classified, puzzled over, and related to other emotions and ideas" (263). Writing is more than waking up in the middle of the night to record a dream you've just had. It's breaking that dream open and figuring out what it's made of. For this, discipline is crucial, and it is often rewarded.

The scholarly research and the creative application seem to agree. The sum of most creative writers' views on the issue is this: discipline yields creativity. According to nearly every successful writer who has spoken on the subject, a consistent writing routine is crucial; regardless of how much is produced in any given hour, it is the consistency and discipline that are most important in yielding output. There is a distinction to be made between good discipline and bad discipline, and I think this is where it lies. It is more important to keep showing up and honoring the time than to force oneself to write a certain number of words or pages no matter how long it takes. That kind of pressure, at least in my case, often leads to nothing but stress and paralysis.

Despite one's best attempts at the right kind of discipline, however, blocks can still occur. The phenomena known as writer's block may not be a medical condition, but nearly

every person who writes has experienced it; it is common enough to have attained an almost mythological status:

The notion of creative blocks has become part of the conventional lore about the travails of writers, composers, and artists. During such dreaded times, these individuals supposedly become plagued with self-doubts and insecurities. Lacking in inspiration and new ideas, they believe their personal muse has left them, perhaps never to return again. (Ludwig 163)

There are countless explanations out there for these blocks: Ludwig's research cites mental illness, family tragedies, relationship issues, and personal insecurities as just a few (165). I think most of these are probably surmountable, with enough willpower and desire, but that doesn't erase the existence of the problem or the fact that millions of writers have faced it.

When I write every day, whether the creative energy is initially there or not, I find that the work and energy tends to build momentum; the source of my writing grows accustomed to being attended to, like a pet conditioned to expect its food at a specific time each day. The key is actually writing *every day*, but I have a really hard time with this discipline. It sounds so much easier and more heroic in theory than it proves to be in practice, sort of like making a New Year's resolution to lose weight or stop buying purses. I don't know where the resistance comes from, but it's there. Elizabeth J. Andrew argues that it can be trained:

Eventually, by writing through your resistance, you can train it to behave.

When you are doing the dishes or commuting to work, your resistance to writing can romp freely. But when you're at the writing desk, resistance needs to heel and roll over. (32)

I have not reached this point yet, and I doubt I will for many years. Even today, my resistance refuses to be quiet; it fights for *my* submission instead of giving me its own.

Training it is a slow process with a lot of setbacks, but the moments when I can write freely, aided by discipline and unhindered by resistance, are worth the miles of uneven road in between.

**Trial II: Climb a Mountain**

*Every year the aspiring photographer brought a stack of his best prints to an old, honored photographer, seeking his judgment. Every year the old man studied the prints and painstakingly ordered them into two piles, bad and good. Every year the old man moved a certain landscape print into the bad stack. At length he turned to the young man: "You submit this same landscape every year, and every year I put it on the bad stack. Why do you like it so much?" The young photographer said, "Because I had to climb a mountain to get it."*

Annie Dillard

I began the second trial period in September, about two weeks into the semester. For the first few days, I worked on something I had begun sometime earlier in the year, a fiction piece temporarily titled "Diner Girl." But I soon settled into spending all of my writing time on a novel-in-the-making, now called *The Comeback Girl*. The novel's protagonist, Amy Rutter, is a teenaged girl who has just relocated to a new town and school after escaping her abusive father. In (the fictional) Carlton, Ohio, Amy deals with new living circumstances, unexpected friends, and a therapist who is challenging her to become comfortable enough with her story to share it.

Perhaps because I was immersed in the demanding routine of college, I found little trouble writing daily for the entire month. In fact, it was the most successful part of my self-examination by far. I have always been happy to return to college after a long break, so the depression which made writing during the summer so hard had lifted significantly on its own. Being part of a really good workshop also helped, as I was constantly receiving critical feedback and generating new ideas to move the story forward. The other writers in the class

could look at my work with fresh eyes, and they couldn't read my mind, so they knew when I was leaving something important out or when something didn't make sense on paper that did in my head. Writing with the knowledge that my peers had similar goals also helped me keep going. Many people think writing is a solitary profession, and in some crucial ways it is, but it is very difficult without social support from fellow writers and friends.

I worked hard on *The Comeback Girl* every day, spending up to three or four hours on it some days, and it took up an unbelievable amount of my energy. But the work was rewarding, and this story, including its less-polished parts, is worth more to me than almost anything I have written since coming to college.

The following examples show both good and bad writing from this month of the project. First is a brief passage from a conversation between Amy and a new friend, Hannah. Amy just witnessed a fight in which her gym partner (and sort-of friend) defends her against the harsh remarks of another student, Jonah. She runs to a bathroom to get away from the commotion, and Hannah comes to check up on her:

“What happened? I was. . .”

“The fight ended really quickly. Principal Landon was nearby. I think Nathan and Jonah are both in his office now.” She pauses. “I’m sorry for what Jonah said, Amy. It—gosh, it didn’t even make sense. No one knows what he was talking about. He’s such an idiot.”

I nod again and rub the back of my head. It smarts a little, but there’s no bump.

“Why did Nathan do that?” I finally say.

Hannah shrugs. “Because he’s a good guy. A little rash, maybe. But he’s always defended his own.”



This scene, which has been heavily edited since but remains untouched here, has a false ring to me. There are a number of things wrong with it: stiff, stumbling dialogue stands out the most. But overall, it just doesn't seem like a believable conversation. As the writer, I failed to take on the feelings and mannerisms of high school students accurately or consistently. Hannah sounds alternately immature and overly sophisticated. I picture this scene, as written, taking place in a bad teen sitcom, something that belongs on post-2008 Disney Channel.

Following the fight, Amy goes home early to find Jared, the husband of her mother's cousin Sophie, waiting for her. He received a call from the principal explaining the situation, and Amy, remembering her father's reaction to events like this, immediately fears the worst:

"It happened too quickly for me to stop him," I say. "I'm sorry."

Jared looks at me steadily. "I'm not blaming you for anything, Amy."

That floats between and around us like a cloud for a few moments.

"I was just going to ask you if everything was okay. If there's anything I can do, anything you need."

The cloud grows too thick and fills up my throat. I manage to shake my head but say nothing. Jared watches me for a long time. I get the impression that Toto, curled up on the floor between us, is less of a foreign species to him than I am. Finally he rubs his hands together, grips his knees, and stands.

"Just wanted to ask."

Something a little more genuine is taking place here. Amy's fear and discomfort is real, if the image of the cloud presenting may be a little trite; so is Jared's resignation when she doesn't respond well to his kindness. Though not further enough into the story for me

to know the characters better, I think I found it easier to understand them in this situation; perhaps this is because I know well the rather universal struggle of offering and accepting help when fear is in the way.

Still later on in the story, Jared and Amy have another serious moment. He has just taken her shopping to get new clothes, having noticed (unlike his wife) that hers were badly worn out, and Amy again has a hard time accepting his kindness. Over dinner in the mall's food court, this conversation follows:

“I don't want you to think that you're an inconvenience or some kind of burden to us.” I look up. He isn't scratching the back of his head; his hands are resting calmly on each side of his plate and he is looking at me steadily—warmly. Something in me revolts against his directness, unable to handle it.

“I know,” it has me say, trying to brush it off.

“I don't think you do.”

“I need to go to the bathroom.” I stand and pick up my plate. Jared's gaze finally falters.

“I'll be here,” he says.

Amy hasn't made a lot of progress here, but I have. This takes place several chapters after the previous scene, and by now I am more accustomed to the two's interactions and to Amy's methods of responding to emotionally-charged situations. I listened to her, and I could see where Jared is coming from in trying to reach out to her, having no daughter of his own. The further I progress into Amy's story, the better I can tell it as she would, and the more genuine the writing becomes.

## Thoughts on Mental Illness and the Creative Process

*The high incidence of depression would seem to be an indication of the intense sensitivity with which creative people apprehend the world. It is as if the senses were tuned louder, stronger, higher, and so the task becomes to communicate the experience of both pain and joy.*

Jane Piirto

I don't remember how it started, but I have been drawn to the psychology of creativity for most of my college years. In particular, I am fascinated with how mental disorders and emotional disturbances work in writers and why there seems to be such a strong connection especially between depression and art. Writers like Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Edgar Allan Poe, and Gerard Manley Hopkins have been influential in the past few years as I've suffered through my own forms of depression and anxiety and tried to figure out how that factors into my writing life.

Jane Piirto, in summarizing the results from a psychological study of various types of artists, writes that "Creative writers were "markedly deviant" from the regular population, and the distinguished writers seemed to have tendencies to be schizoid, depressive, hysterical, or psychopathic" (Piirto 70). In another study, many writers also reported first-degree family members with mental problems at a much higher percentage than the non-writer population.

Arnold M. Ludwig's extensive study on the link between mental illness and creative eminence yields many correlations although, in Ludwig's own words, "the findings are limited and inconclusive" (3). It is safe to say that there *is* a relationship between creativity and mental illness, but the forms that relationship can take are less certain. According to

Ludwig's study, writers are much more likely to experience depression and mania than people in other professions. Further, women writers had additional differences: "they had higher rates of anxiety, panic attacks, drug abuse, eating disorders... This suggested that... almost any type of sustained emotional distress in women writers, providing it was non incapacitating, could be associated with creative activity" (2). This seems to suggest there is a definite and consistent relationship between the illness and the creativity, but that would be speaking too soon; as Ludwig points out, there have been more than a few successful artists who have led sane, healthy, and stable lives. Therefore, "we cannot claim that mental illness is necessary for creative achievement" (3).

My own experience accurately reflects this research: I have had depression and anxiety for many years and at least four of my closest family members have dealt with depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, and other disorders. After giving this topic so much of my attention, I have far more questions than answers, but to know that research is being done and that it is not unusual for writers to deal with these disorders is encouraging.

I first started developing symptoms of depression in seventh or eighth grade. Home life wasn't totally tragic, just not easy: My parents were divorced, and my mother was going through a lot in terms of both personal and work life; my brother was angry (about the divorce and in general), and I was the closest target. At school, I had one great friend, a few okay ones, and the usual thirteen-year-old romantic troubles. I was funny and smart, rather profoundly so, but it didn't earn me any popularity. The braces, frizzy hair, and extra weight got in the way of that.

In addition, some of the circumstances and relationships I experienced growing up led to the development of serious anxiety issues—undiagnosed, but close enough to the clinical definition to warrant consideration. The *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Health* defines the disorder:

“Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterized by excessive worry about a variety of topics. This anxiety occurs every day, over a period of at least six months. The worries tend to be difficult to control and to diminish the person’s quality of life. Signs and symptoms of GAD include restlessness, difficulty concentrating, fatigue, irritability, impatience, being easily distracted, muscle tension, trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, excessive sweating or hot flashes, shortness of breath, diarrhea, headache, stomachache, having trouble swallowing, feeling light-headed, and having to go to the bathroom frequently.

I can identify with all of the mental symptoms listed above and a few of the physical symptoms; this has been fairly consistent for at least three or four years. It is hard to pinpoint when they began because I only recently—since I came to college—learned that it wasn’t normal to feel this way. To make things worse, depression and anxiety complicate each other. Where the former makes me reluctant to leave my bed every day, the latter tortures me with thoughts of all the horrible things that will happen if I don’t get up. This isn’t every day of my life, but it has been quite a few of them.

I don’t know the true cause behind either disorder. Plenty of people go through worse than I did as a child and come out perfectly functional and well adjusted. I am certain genetics play a part. I think my faith has a role in it as well, although that’s something to save for some other project.

Since high school, I have gone through periods of depression at least once a year, varying from a month or two to as many as six (with anxiety nearly always in the background). During these times, I spend a lot of mornings dreading the day to come and a lot of commitments counting down the time until I move on to the next task, during which I will just do the same thing. Most of my daily routine feels frustratingly pointless and drains all of my energy, and there is only relief when I can shut down my brain, either through sleep or meaningless timewasters.

I am often slow to identify what I'm feeling as depression; it is too easy to compare my experience to the stereotype, come up short, and conclude that I must be making it up. But the illness looks different for everyone. William Styron wrote in his memoir *Darkness Visible*, "Depression is a disorder of mood, so mysteriously painful and elusive in the way it becomes known to the self—to the mediating intellect—as to verge close to being beyond description" (7). That is one of the worst things about depression: you tend to think that if you could fully understand what you are feeling, the weight would start to lift, but it is so hard to put to words that it leaves you lost.

I think it's a common misconception that depression leads to great art—at least in terms of more severe depression. On occasions, I do find myself filling the role of tortured artist somewhat accurately. I like to hole up in a small, dimly-lit place and write about my feelings once in a while. But in my case this kind of writing rarely leads to anything of substance; I tend to meander into copying down lyrics to songs or Bible verses. "Pain does not always aid in creativity," I wrote in my blog on one difficult day during the first trial period. "Sometimes it stifles [the creativity] until if you can write at all, you can only write explicitly about what hurts. And even that doesn't say enough."

But on the opposite extreme, when things are going extremely well, when my mood is at its highest and there is nothing to threaten it, I tend to push writing to the end of my to-do list. The best conclusion seems to be something comparable to John Gardner's words on trauma: "A psychological wound is helpful, if it can be kept in partial control, to keep the novelist driven" (62). Depression, though sometimes caused by a psychological wound, is different from the wound in itself. It is long term and debilitating, and it is very hard to control. For me, the depression being paired with anxiety is what keeps it in check, at least in that the anxiety stifles its ability to stop my work altogether.

When I wrote in the fall, I was on medication for both the depression and anxiety and seeing a psychiatrist or counselor semi-regularly. Dealing with it was not easy, but it wasn't paralyzing, either, so I was able to write through it. The summer was different. I had not yet become fully aware that I was depressed again, and even if I was, I always drag my feet when it comes to taking the necessary steps to deal with it. This explains why I stopped writing halfway through the first trial period. When things are under a measure of control—not cured, but managed—I can write and function, whether I want to or not. There are cases of depression and anxiety too severe to allow this kind of functionality, William Styron's being one of them. Thankfully, I was blessed with a more moderate kind of suffering.

**Trial III: Make Messes**

*What people somehow (inadvertently, I'm sure) forgot to mention when we were children was that we need to make messes in order to find out who we are and why we are here—and, by extension, what we're supposed to be writing.*

Anne Lamott

My final trial period began in November, in conjunction with National Novel Writing Month. I didn't initially set out to do either a third trial *or* National Novel Writing Month (or NaNoWriMo, as we veterans like to call it), but I tend to make unwise choices at the midway point of the semester. Some might call it ambition; others, insanity. I'll take a little bit of both.

By this point I was deep into working on *The Comeback Girl*, having quite a few chapters written (though under constant revision) and a good idea of where the story was headed. For the first half of the month, I wrote several hours a day on average, and was frequently frustrated I couldn't do more: I wrote in my blog that "I was overwhelmed for most of the day thinking about how much work my novel needs and how little time I can actually devote to it with my full attention—darn that school thing."

This period fell somewhere between the first and second trials in terms of quality. I didn't quite finish the thirty days, which proved not that I was a failure but that life is messy and that's okay. A lot of the work I did during November was about understanding Amy better and letting the reader see what goes on inside her head. I prefer writing first person to second or third, but finding the balance between internal monologue and external narrative is challenging. I tend to err on the side of objectivity, leaving a lot of Amy's perspective out to prevent overly emotional or trite prose. This is something my workshop



class helped me understand, and much of what I wrote during this period shows my efforts at getting into Amy's head.

Five chapters in, Amy is dealing with a number of stressors, including a confusing overheard conversation between Jared and Sophie, her caretakers, and a confusing separation from Nathan, with whom she was just growing close. In the city park one afternoon, she mulls things over:

The wind is biting, more so as it meets the sweat which has formed at my temples and neck from walking so long. I climb onto the rusty merry-go-round, which creaks a little and spins a few inches when I step off the ground, but settles again once I lie down in the center, looking up, the metal frigid against my back. The clouds are marbly-white against a cold, steely grey sky.

Too many things are fighting for my attention, and they've been doing a bizarre kind of dance in my head since I woke up this morning. I can't stop wondering what Sophie was talking about when she mentioned Italy last night. But I am terrified to ask her. We hardly ever talk, even in passing, and she always looks frustrated or irritated when I'm around. I could talk to Jared, I think; but even then I'd have to admit I was eavesdropping, and he would know I heard everything. I don't want to give him a reason to be angry with me.

Not understanding what Sophie said is enough on its own to keep me stressed, but every time I think about Jonah I feel sick. I have been trying to figure out who he must know to have found out about my dad. My old town is hours away from Carlton—there can't be much overlap. . . .

But however he knows, he knows, and I can't let him tell everyone. He's holding it over me, and it's really low, but he's got control and I don't know what I can do about it but try to stay out of his way and avoid giving him a reason to tell anyone. Especially Nathan. I don't need another reason for him to think. . .whatever he thinks that made him decide our friendship was a dead end.

This scene was challenging for me to write because it required me to almost entirely let go of the outer narrative in favor of Amy's thoughts. And it is true that too much of this style of writing needs to be avoided. But in the context of the chapter, letting Amy reflect on what is going on in front of the reader makes her more believable and sympathetic.

Just a few pages later, Nathan shows up and tries to explain what was going on with Emily, a girl who has caused a divide between the two friends that Amy doesn't understand. Amy hasn't totally adjusted to the friendship yet in the first place; she isn't completely sure how she feels about Nathan, and now she is sure he will give up on her.

“Can we not talk about this anymore?” he says suddenly. “It's not really the point. We talked a few times after the dance and then decided not to date. So Emily's not my girlfriend.” He pauses. “I'm not even sure why it matters to you.”

I don't answer.

“Amy?” I look up. Nathan's brow furrows deeper as he stares at me.

I breathe in, out, smooth my jeans over my knees. “It just seemed like you decided we weren't friends anymore. Like a girlfriend was all you needed.” I shrug. “Or like I did something to make you—“

“No,” he says flatly. His hand twitches on the rusty metal between us and curls into a fist. “We are still friends. You can’t scare me off.”

He grins and winks, obviously joking, so I try to laugh with him. But it’s exactly what I’m afraid of.

In contrast to the reflective scene from a few pages before, this is more of a blend. Amy reveals some of herself in words to Nathan, and still more in her thoughts, but it is a much more subtle and brief revelation. So much of the book consists of interaction between Amy and the people close to her, and so the ability to blend these two kinds of revelation is important.

Another example of this kind of blend takes place a little later on in the story. After school one day, it is pouring rain. Amy is confronted with Nathan’s kindness and, much like the earlier scenes with Jared, she balks at accepting it.

“Are you seriously going to walk in this?” Nathan says, glancing at me skeptically.

“I seriously am.”

“Hannah’s team is running indoors today because it’s so gross. But you’re going to walk two miles to your house.”

I shrug. “It’s a mile and a half. And I’ve done it in worse.”

“Because you won’t accept my offer of a ride.” He nudges me in the side, gently. “I can’t be worse than the bus, can I?”

I glance at the line of buses idling along the sidewalk. The further along in the year I get, the more I hate riding the noisy, overcrowded bus. It’s like a closet to a claustrophobic person. If I can’t get a seat towards the front, I find myself inching towards a panic attack until I can finally get out at my

stop and breathe freely again. I've taken to walking as often as possible, especially in the afternoons when it's loudest.

"It's not that," I say.

"Then what?"

I shrug, looking down. I don't want to tell him how much I hate feeling like I owe him something. On more days than not, he offers to drive me home, especially when it's raining or colder than normal. He even tried to buy me dinner when we ended up studying at the Flapjack Shack hours longer than we expected. It's not that he's trying to show me any special attention—he offered to (and did) pay for Hannah's too. He's just generous by nature—he has the money, and he shares it. It's something I marvel at, but maybe that's just because the primary male in my life growing up habitually stole from my savings for beer.

I'm still not sure what I think of this passage. The internal reflections were hard to write, and I second guess them constantly because I'm afraid they will come across as too mushy or indulgent. But some of this, particularly the final paragraph, rings true.

## Thoughts on Inspiration

*Literally, inspiration is a taking in of breath. In terms of creativity, inspiration provides the motivation to write. When one takes in breath, one fills the lungs with air, with environment, with the stuff of life, and after the intake there must be a release.*

Jane Piirto

Through this project and my 14-plus years of experience as a storyteller, I am forced to conclude that what we think of as inspiration is largely a myth. The word itself is tricky; it conjures up images of lightbulbs hovering above heads, of swishily-dressed angelic figures floating about calling themselves “muses” and dictating phrases and sentences. That is *not* inspiration.

This myth, however, seems to be what most people associate with creative writers. A woman whose name I can’t remember claimed that she sat down every day to write and it was like God dictated the words to her. I have a hard time taking her seriously. During the question and answer portion of nearly every reading I’ve attended, some bright-eyed underclassman asks, practically drooling, “Where do you get your inspiration?” Even I have been asked this. (A better question might be, “Where do you get your *material*?” or “How do you force yourself to write when you’d rather watch Jane Austen movies and eat cheese popcorn and Skittles until you pass out?”)

Inspiration is a rare and momentary feeling. I read a good book, watch a fantastic movie—I feel *inspired*. I feel like my heart expands and, were I to write at that moment, I could channel the glory of the sun into a Word document. But chances are, before I even get access to a notebook or my computer—before I even convince myself to *try*—that feeling is gone already. It’s not powerful or lasting enough to produce real work. It almost never has

been. “I wish I felt that kind of inspiration more often,” Anne Lamott writes. “I almost never do. All I know is that if I sit there long enough, something will happen” (10).

In his brilliant memoir *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, Stephen King criticizes the doctrine of inspiration rampant among his generation of artists: “[T]here was a view among the student writers I knew at the time that good writing came spontaneously, in an uprush of feeling that had to be caught at once; when you were building that all-important stairway to heaven, you couldn’t just stand around with a hammer in your hand” (62). I have a feeling his fellow writers never wrote much of worth; King’s success, on the other hand, speaks for itself.

And yet it is impossible to write anything of substance without *some* feeling. I would never be able to write a word of truth about characters like Amy Rutter without being able to channel what she feels, whether it be joy, stress, or sorrow. When I am at my most apathetic, I don’t want to write; I want to sleep or eat or watch *How I Met Your Mother* until my eyes fall out.

Maybe it’s best to discard the idea of inspiration (and the fleeting feelings that come with it) in favor of something else. Csikszentmihalyi writes:

Without a burning curiosity, a lively interest, we are unlikely to persevere long to make a significant contribution [in our work]. This kind of interest . . . is usually rooted in deep feelings, in memorable experiences that need some sort of resolution—a resolution that can be achieved only by a new artistic expression or a new way of understanding. (87)

The thought of a “burning curiosity” strikes a deeper chord with me than inspiration ever has. After discipline, after whatever happened to get my butt into the chair—when I’ve stopped having to use force—what keeps me writing is something deep, elemental, and

driving. When reflecting on the writing of her memoir, Elizabeth J. Andrew writes that “[T]wo things remain clear in my memory. One is the inexplicable longing that pushed my pen forward. I remember wanting to burst out of my skin, to become as big on the inside as I felt on the outside” (4). It’s this feeling—the kind that digs deep and won’t leave me alone—that provokes writing. That’s because it comes from something much deeper than a temporary spark of emotion.

In spite of all of this, the time always comes, sooner or later, when nothing works. I have spent days staring at a notebook or a document, reading and rereading the 57 words I managed to eke out over an hour. These are the days when the cups of tea I drink outnumber the sentences I write. I can have all the “burning curiosity” in the world, but something else—anxiety, fatigue, who knows—gets in the way.

As far as I can tell, if I am already doing everything else well—showing up, giving it the time and attention—there is nothing to do for a dry spell but wait through it. And living in the block is hard. Society, particularly American society, has conditioned us to be problem solvers to a fault: we are never okay with not being okay. “We’re taught to improve comfortable situations, to change things, alleviate unpleasant feelings. But if you accept the reality that you have been given—that you are not in a productive creative period—you free yourself to begin filling up again” (Lamott 178). Maybe, contrary to what my mind says as it scolds me, it is okay not to produce a certain word or page count each day. I’ve heard it somewhere that to a good writer, nothing is wasted time. Everything I might do, from paying attention in class to walking to dinner to lying in bed, can service my work if I allow it. “If good ideas do not come at once, or for a long time, do not be troubled at all,” Brenda

Ueland writes. “Wait for them . . . But do not feel, any more, guilty about idleness and solitude” (33). And when the block breaks down, I find that I have something new to push me on.

I think what frustrates me most about the inspiration myth is that it contributes to the glorified stereotype attributed to the writer: a slim figure ensconced in a quiet café, bent over a laptop that never seems to need charging, typing faster than a professional card dealer shuffles his deck, with coffee mug at hand and soaring music playing in the background. (I’ve tried to imitate this stereotype before in the unspoken hope that it would help me channel the words of God himself. It didn’t.) Anne Lamott writes:

People tend to think that [writers] sit down at their desks every morning feeling like a million dollars, feeling great about who they are and how much talent they have and what a great story they have to tell; that they take in a few deep breaths, push back their sleeves, roll their necks a few times to get all the cricks out, and dive in, typing fully formed passages as fast as a court reporter. But this is just the fantasy of the uninitiated. (21)

Regarding a piece his wife Tabitha read at a workshop, Stephen King writes, “There was also a work-ethic in the poem that I liked, something that suggested writing poems (or stories, or essays) had as much in common with sweeping the floor as with mythy moments of revelation” (65). I love that phrase—“mythy moments of revelation”—because it sounds as absurd as it is. The truth is that I usually feel a lot more like a janitor or a hard laborer than a “wielder of words” or some other Pinterest-inspired crap. I will be blunt: writing sucks. More often than not, I dislike it more than I dislike the person who takes the last Pop



Tart without throwing out the box or the person who decided it was okay to make *50 Shades of Grey* into a film.

Why do I keep writing, then? Why haven't I switched my major to nursing or business by now? What keeps me on the path to living in a refrigerator box for the rest of my days?

A lot of things: The need to communicate. The deep certainty that if I don't try to string a bunch of well-intended words together, whatever's inside will come gurgling out in a much less palatable way and I will subsequently alienate friends and foes alike. The infatuation with stories that's been cultivated over a lifetime of library visits and foot-long bookstore receipts, of sitting with my dad and hearing tales of people dead long before I was born. The understanding that *I* am part of a story too, one that hasn't ended yet but that someday, I hope, will be told around a fire to wide, believing eyes like mine.

Since I was eighteen years old, I have never doubted that writing is my number one gift and calling. But knowing that doesn't make it easy. On the contrary—I think it only makes it harder. Maybe that's why I am so irritated when normal people (the best term I can think of for non-artists) flippantly say, "Oh, I *love* to write! It's so much *fun!*" Because writing is *not* fun. Most often, it is difficult and stressful. At its worst and hardest, it is miserable. But at its best—fun is far too small a word.

## Epilogue: On Writing and Faith

*The distinction between articulated belief and lived faith is extremely helpful to the spiritual writer. While the content of belief is rich and worth exploring, it is faith...that comes to light in our stories.*

Elizabeth J. Andrew

Being a Christian answers a lot of the “why” about writing for me. There are so many reasons to write beyond the desire for publication and a career, even beyond the reasons I mentioned in the previous section. Elizabeth J. Andrew says that writing “binds the inner world to the outer, satisfying [our] desire to unite with creation” (5). For a multitude of reasons, “the effort of translating experience into story [satisfies] a spiritual need” (5), and most spiritual needs are met through communion with God via spiritual disciplines. Fasting and the reading of scripture are wonderful disciplines, but they are not the limit. I have a friend who paints her prayers, another who spends time with God while running, and many (including myself) who find God in music. For me, though, it is writing that most effectively opens up my heart and mind to the things going on below the surface. The practice of writing as a way of relating with God can lead to closer intimacy with him and a better understanding of oneself and one’s story. I have seen this prove itself true again and again.

For the past five or six years, I have kept journals; I have a small chest full of them in my room at home. I use them for everything from copying out psalms or hymns to taking notes in chapel (mostly so I can keep some measure of focus). Mostly, however, I use them to pray.

In those journals it all comes out: anger, fear, confession, love, hatred. I wouldn’t let another person read them if I was offered any sum of money. Because of that—because the

only audience is God—I am free to just write. I don't revise, I don't rearrange or reword. I can say anything and it is well.

The spiritual rewards of this practice are beyond count, but it has helped me as a writer as well: because I am not censoring myself, it is in the journals that I learn to know my own voice. And when I go to write fiction, even though I know I have a more numerous audience and I am far more thoughtful about what I say, some of that authenticity remains. I hope this will only increase with time.

The writing life is a lot like the spiritual life, and I have never totally been able to separate the two—nor do I think I should. It's hard to see clearly when I'm inside the mess of both. But I think they each have a lot to do with truth. “We write to expose the unexposed” (198), Anne Lamott says, and this is also why we pray, why we question God, why we believe in something not tangible, something eternal.

Publication is not a good enough motive to write; impressing my friends and classmates is not enough either. Neither of these are ultimately satisfying. Neither, even, is the “burning curiosity” that gets me started and keeps me going. As powerful as that can be, there's one motive that transcends the rest. Lamott says, “You are going to have to give and give and give, or there's no reason for you to be writing. You have to give from the deepest part of yourself, and you are going to have to go on giving, and the giving is going to have to be its own reward” (203). Faith is also, in many ways, a giving act. All that we have to give God is ourselves. All we have to give to others, by God's grace, is ourselves. It is the same with writing.

Bret Lott says, “We have become so primed to believe in the self that there is no room for anything else, that it seems preposterous to have characters whose lives are altered by a supernatural God” (22). Why shouldn't our writing, one of the most important things

about us, be shaped by the God who gave it to us? I won't dare to claim that my words are given straight from the Holy Spirit; I am no prophet. But God has given me something—a talent, a need to speak, a story that splits into a million little stories that are all so important. I don't have all of this to lock it up in a box and save it for the later that never arrives. I have it to give. That's what writing teaches me: to persevere in difficulty, to be okay with messiness, but most of all to give without reservation.

And as I learn to think of writing this way—of something that doesn't belong to me, but rather is given to me so that I can give it in turn—I will remind myself of Lott's approach to his work. Before he begins writing each day, he gives the work over to God in prayer so that his “plans will be established” (*English Standard Version*, Prov. 16:3). “And here I am, the writer I have become because of the supernatural intervention in my life of a loving God—the *only* true God” (Lott 32).

May it be so with me.

*“So why does our writing matter, again?” they ask.*

*Because of the spirit, I say. Because of the heart. Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the soul. . We are given a shot at dancing with, or at least clapping along with, the absurdity of life, instead of being squashed by it over and over again. It's like singing on a boat during a terrible storm at sea. You can't stop the raging storm, but singing can change the hearts and spirits of the people who are together on that ship. Anne Lamott*

**Appendix A: Selected Writing from Trial I**

## A Summer of Crows

*May 26*

Well, thank goodness all that's over. I've never been so happy to be done with something in my life. God bless all those people who peaked in high school. At least I have room to improve.

Starting with tomorrow morning. I found an app that helps you train to run a 5k, and there's one at the end of July that Harper and Jason are already training for. I had to let my tattoo heal first, but I think I'm ready--I don't even need an ice pack to keep the swelling down anymore.

Not sure why all of us decided we needed to get in shape now and not at any sooner point in our young, healthy and vibrant lives. I guess Jason is probably thinking of the sorority girls he'll be wooing by the scads at OSU in the fall, after he walks in and flips the "I'm-a-man-now" switch that must be waiting for him there somewhere. I should call ahead and warn them. Harper just does what Jason does. Harper's parents forbid her to attend any schools with frats and sororities. But she picked the one closest to Columbus.

Me, I guess I just don't want to let one more summer go down the drain with nothing to show for it.

*May 27*

I tried the barefoot thing when I met Jason at the track this morning. He told me I was stupid and after 100 yards on the rubbery, grainy surface, I conceded and put my shoes back on.

"Where's Harper this morning?" I asked casually, double knotting the laces as he came around ending his first lap. He gulped water and bent over, hands on knees, panting.

We spent most of high school scouting out the best places to buy used video games and DVDs.

I knew where Harper was. She called me last night in a frenzy because she had just gotten her period and didn't know how to bear the cramps on the run this morning *with Jason*. When I told her matter-of-factly that she could sit it out till the Midol kicked in and push it back to the evening if she felt better, she asked if Jason would be willing to reschedule too. "Don't you think that's just a little bit obsessive?" I said, forgetting in my Ben and Jerry's-induced brain fog to avoid the o-word. I could feel the steam pouring through my phone.

"It's love, Natalie. Love," she said sternly before she hung up for the night.

But Jason just shrugged. "Said she had a doctor's appointment or something." I started to reply but he'd already taken off for lap two.

I am a teensy bit relieved that soon we would be splitting off to different schools. For almost three years, since Harper moved here and joined our group, it has been nearly a constant game of "Does he like me yet? Will he ask me to homecoming? Are we really just friends?" Ever-hopeful Harper is always texting me with this thing or that thing Jason said or did; she even developed a pointed eyebrow raise for when the three of us are together. I try not to encourage her too much. But I don't have the courage to tell her that Jason obviously has no clue about her feelings and doesn't care to.

Anyway, Harper and Jason are only going to be 45 miles apart at school in the fall, but that still won't be close enough if they're just friends. The whole thing has to come to a head soon, or she's not going to stand a chance.

*May 29*

The shin splints are starting to lessen in severity. Stretching is seriously the key. It's actually kind of nice sometimes, collapsing on the grass in the middle of the track and guzzling water until we can breathe again and then counting each other through quad stretches and calf stretches and stretches of all the other muscles I can't pronounce, but Harper can because she's a genius and she's already half-earned the nursing degree she's heading to school for. She talks us through every muscle group, sub group, microgroup, you name it, babbling on and on even as out of breath as Jason and I are. It gets the thing done, anyway.

Mom came home from a business trip today. It's the longest one she's taken in more than a year—three nights, four days. And she only had the neighbors call twice to check on me. She's gotten lax in the last few months. Guess it's because I'm normal again. I told her I managed to conquer three miles in under an hour and she seemed proud. She asked if Dad called, and I said no, at which she reddened and shut the door to her bedroom after turning on the attic fan.

She doesn't seem to grasp the fact that he's never going to do what she asks of him, including pay child support on time or pick up my car when it needs an oil change. When he does have me over on weekends, he leaves me at the apartment with a stack of movie rentals and money for pizza, and I usually call Harper and Jason. He gets in sometimes during the wee hours and is asleep when I leave.

Thing is, he's supposed to help with the first payment to OU. My partial scholarship halves the tuition, thank God, and we got some loans—the single mom thing helps with that—but there's a chunk of room and board left over, and all that I put away and mom put away would just cover it if not for all the stupid stuff we have to buy. It's like you need a

whole new life in *stuff*. Dad promised to pay 40 percent. We'll see. I might be sleeping without sheets for the first semester. I hope my roommate likes me.

*May 31*

For God's sake.

First day back on the job and I get a stupid Jesus pamphlet.

I work at a used bookstore during summers and holidays, when business picks up and the owners need extra help. I love the job--the smell of old books is both comforting and intriguing--but once in a while I get these people who think they need to come in and save me. Maybe because the owners, Bo and Janet, look like druggies (they're not) and they're too far gone but I've still got a fighting chance. So they give me little New Testaments and pamphlets with varying degrees of hellfire printed on the covers. Three summers and I've got a stash that fills up a shoebox. Not sure why I haven't thrown them out. It makes a good story. I always tell myself I'm going to bring them with me and pull out the box next time some Bible-thumper comes in trying to reach the unreached. Jason just laughs when I tell him about it.

But this pamphlet seriously makes me mad. There's a big cartoon frowny face on the front--so sad it could be dying. Oh wait, *it is*--just like my un-redeemed soul. It makes me sick. Like I want a relationship with some guy who is just waiting to zap me off the planet as soon as I die. Cause living with that will definitely make matters better.

I'm just staring at it, sitting at the top of the shoebox on a green, fashionably-designed Gideon, the last from Christmas season. There are tears leaking from the frowny-face's squinted-shut eyes. It's so comical it's obscene. What is Jesus going to do--turn his frown *upside down*?

*June 3*



Mrs. Robinson across the street had knee surgery and hired me to walk her Labrador, Radar (clever I know), for the next two weeks. Today I had the brilliant idea to take him with me on my run to save time.

Never again. There is no control when you let a dog run; it controls you. And that thing is so big it would only stop out of courtesy when I was practically falling onto the ground in exhaustion. The silver lining, Jason said while trying not to laugh, is that if I keep it up I'll be running 5ks faster and better than anyone. But there's no way. I'll settle for pushing myself through the run on my own and walking later for extra calorie burning. Helpful, since Bo has taken to bringing Janet and me iced mochas every morning at work, whipped cream and drizzle included. He was so endearing with his hopeful smile as he handed me one on the first day that I can't tell him to stop. It would break his heart.

The wave of open houses is coming. Due to money, my mom has insisted on my only going to the most essential ones, which thankfully limits them to less than half a dozen--she really can be cool sometimes. Harper's is first, next weekend, and her mother has allowed her to buy a new dress just for the occasion. Not that this is a special treat, because Harper's parents allow her use of their credit card more often than I am allowed to stay home alone anymore. But she's taking me with her tomorrow so I can help her find something to suit her new 'figure'--as she has lost six pounds already. Big difference when you're already smaller than most. She's bribing me with a new pair of shoes for my own open house, apparently unaware that I'd go with her anyway, even if it means two to four hours of hearing "Do you think Jason will like this?" over and over. I'm a friend and I need a friend, as my mom often tells me. I know she's right or I would have a much harder time reigning in my impatience with Harper.

*June 4*

Last night wasn't as bad as I thought. Something had Harper much quieter than usual, and she settled on the third dress she tried on, so I said forget the shoes and we were done in an hour and a half. After she dropped me off I wondered if I should have asked if something was wrong--I think I was so grateful for the quiet I didn't think to disturb it.

This morning Jason and I showed up at the track, but no Harper. I got a text on my break at work; Harper said that allergies were bothering her when she ran outside, and so her parents had gotten her a gym membership. Maybe that's what she was bummed about, I thought--not seeing Jason in the mornings anymore. I wonder how much harder it will be for her to wake up early without that to look forward to.

Jason wants to go to the drive in on Friday night. He asked this morning—said it's one of those "summer night things" we have to do before college. It's true that I have never been to the drive in before. Probably because the only boyfriend I ever had was when both of us couldn't drive. I asked if he'd told Harper yet, and he said she would be setting up for her open house and couldn't come. He was kind of hurried in answering, now that I think about it.

We don't talk about it—we can talk about almost everything, but being best friends with both Harper and Jason means I can't share one's secrets with the other. So I have no idea if Jason really does know about Harper's crush. But his reaction this morning makes me think maybe he's starting to feel the vibe at last. And I guess he really doesn't like it. Poor Harper.

*June 5*

Today was a fiasco. It was a rest day from running, so I took Radar for his walk before work instead so I'd be able to relax (i.e. veg) later. Again a bad idea, because today was the day that Radar chose to break his leash and attempt an escape. A pretty successful

attempt, I might add, because it took over an hour to catch him. I was running all over the neighborhood, through yards, setting off at least two alarms, and in tears by the time Jason got my text and showed up to help. He ended up cutting Radar off with his car, slowing him enough for me to leap onto him, catching him by the collar. He might be disobedient, but at least Radar is the sweetest dog I know—I didn't realize he could have used teeth until I was already on top of him. He just panted and twisted around to lick my face.

"You jerk," I said, sniffing and wheezing at the same time.

Jason hopped out of the car and asked if I was alright.

"Well, I skipped my rest day," I said. "Never thought that would happen."

He reached a hand toward my face. "You're crying," he said.

"I'm tired and late for work," I said.

"Can I give you a ride?"

I shook my head. "I've got to shower now. I called Janet while I was running after Radar and she said not to worry about coming in late. Except that she'd drink my latte." With that thought, inexplicably, a fresh onslaught of tears came. Jason looked concerned, amused, and scared all at once.

"I can get Radar back to Mrs. Robinson's if you want."

I shrugged. "Sure. Good luck." I relinquished my hold on Radar's collar and headed back to the house.

*June 7*

I can't believe how much fun running is getting to be. Once Jason and I figured out our own slightly-less-specific stretch routine without Harper, the soreness went away again, and I actually wake up on time feeling like I couldn't sleep in if I wanted to, and I actually

don't want to--like my body is craving the movement. It's weird. Jason agrees. He says he's still setting four alarms at various points around his room that force him to get up.

I haven't seen Harper in a few days, and have hardly heard from her. I texted her yesterday when I passed a new milestone (6 laps without walking!) and asked how she was doing, but she just said 'fine,' which is Harper code for 'not fine.' I called later but no answer. And Jason said he hasn't seen her either. I don't know. I think she's really into the new gym thing, and getting ready for her open house. At least we'll see her then.

**Appendix B: Selected Writing from Trial II***The Comeback Girl* Chapter 2

The last Monday in September starts with another perfect autumn morning. I remember to pack my gym clothes, find a forgotten ten-dollar bill in the bottom of my backpack, and ace a pop quiz in geometry all before nine o'clock. So I'm in a fairly good mood when I get to gym—so much so that I smile and wave to Nathan before we're close enough for conversation. He grins.

“Miss me, New Girl?”

I roll my eyes and retort with an “in your dreams,” but something has fortified my good mood too well for it to be deflated by his teasing. If anything, it only elevates it further.

Amidst the noise of two dozen students' voices reverberating off the walls, Nathan inches closer to me and leans down. “I wanted to ask you—“

But Coach Grant blows his whistle with a loud shriek, and everyone quiets as they block their ears and grimace at the sound. He's holding a fairly recognizable red rubber ball the size of a basketball.

“Don't think I've forgotten about your partner assignments, but we're taking a little break today. Everyone from the beginning of the alphabet to Milton and Nasser, you're on the far side of the gym. Everyone else, this side.” He grins the most evil grin I've seen on a real person. “It's dodgeball day.”

Nathan groans. “Please say you're joking,” he says under his breath.

“What? *You*, dreading a sport?”

He glances sideways at me. “Have you ever played dodgeball?”

“Yeah.” And even though the feeling of foreboding is similar to the one I get during Stephen King movies, I can’t stop grinning. “But this is kind of making my day, if you want to know.”

“It’s a good thing for you we’re on the same team, New Girl. Or you’d be going down.”

From our vantage point, it looks as if the strongest, most agile guys in the class—the ones that make Nathan look gangly and twelve—are on the opposite side. They stand side by side like a juvenile prison lineup, with the less athletic (there aren’t many) standing behind them and looking all too relieved.

“You guys ready?” says a girl beside me. She’s a compact 5’2” or so based on the way her hairline is just under my eye level, but I’ve seen her sink baskets from halfway across the gym and kick a soccer ball into the ceiling beams more than once. She grins at me. “I’ve been in gym with those guys since first grade. They get cocky. I’m Hannah, by the way. What’s your. . .”

“Amy,” Nathan says, leaning over. I look at him, surprised. He just grins.

Standing between him and Hannah, I suddenly feel empowered. Like we have a chance at this.

We get destroyed.

I think the first round took less than five minutes, and it only got worse from there. Enthusiasm can only do so much. But walking out to the locker rooms at the end, despite being sore all over, I feel pretty good.

I’m surprised to find Nathan waiting for me in the hallway after I shower. “We should celebrate and do lunch together,” he says.

“Celebrate?” I roll my eyes. “We lost every time.”

“But we made a pretty good team, don’t you think?”

He isn’t totally wrong. We had some kind of synergy going on in there, calling out warnings and coordinating plans of attack. I’ve never felt so in sync with someone when it comes to a sport.

He must see something in my face, because he nudges my arm and throws a fist into the air. “You admit it!”

“I didn’t even.” The last bell for lunch rings and we start heading for the commons.

“I saw it.”

I sigh. “Fine, I’ll go.”

He stops walking. “Huh?”

“I’ll go to lunch with you.”

“So you’ll stand in line with me? Sit at the same table? Maybe. . .exchange words?”

“I said I’d go, so you’d better shut up before I take it back.”

He shrugs and we keep walking. As we turn into the main hallway and join the herd heading towards the cafeteria, I realize this is the first time I’ve walked anywhere in Baker High *with* someone. A kind of thrill goes through me. I realize I’m thankful, even if it *is* Nathan.

“Hey, Ross! New Girl!” comes a shout from behind us. Jonah Decker, of the bigger guys from gym class, pushes his way past a group of girls to get to us.

“Good game, dude,” Nathan says, clapping him on the shoulder. “We’ll get you back next time, though, just wait.”

“Sure.” Jonah’s staring at me though. “What about you, New Girl? Bet you feel right at home getting beat up, huh? Were you starting to miss the bruises?”

After that I'm not sure what happens or in what order. At some point I trip over something trying to get away from everyone who heard his remark and is staring at me. I stumble and fall back into a wall of lockers and there's nowhere to go. Either before this or after, Nathan drops his backpack and throws himself at Jonah, pushing him back easily despite the difference in size. It was silent for a moment, I think, but as soon as they hit the wall the air fills with yelling and cheering and gasping and all I can do is try to get out.

Eventually I end up in a bathroom, where I shut myself into a stall and stand there leaning against the wall for stability because I'm not sure I will be able to stay conscious. My head hurts—I think I hit it—and I don't know what happened. I don't know what happened.

“Amy?”

I can't tell how long it's been. I left my watch in my backpack when I took it off to shower. And I must have dropped my backpack.

“It's Hannah. Are you in here?”

I unlock the door and let it swing open. Hannah is carrying my backpack in one hand and her shoulder bag in the other. Her hair, still darkened from the shower, is hanging straight down on either side of her face. She looks at me, eyebrows scrunched together.

“Are you okay?”

I nod. She holds the backpack out to me.

“What happened? I was. . .”

“The fight ended really quickly. Principal Landon was nearby. I think Nathan and Jonah are both in his office now.” She pauses. “I'm sorry for what Jonah said, Amy. It—



gosh, it didn't even make sense. No one knows what he was talking about. He's such an idiot."

I nod again and rub the back of my head. It smarts a little, but there's no bump.

"Why did Nathan do that?" I finally say.

Hannah shrugs. "Because he's a good guy. A little rash, maybe. But he's always defended his own."

I wonder what it means for me to be one of "his own."

"Is he going to get in a lot of trouble?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. Landon knows Jonah well enough to know he provoked it. But it might help if you tell him yourself what Jonah said to you."

The thought of doing that plants an annoying seed of dread in my stomach. Not because talking to the principal is scary; it's kind of like talking to Heather or Mr. Benson. It's the rest of the school hearing about it that makes me hesitate. Nothing like being labeled a tattletale to cement my reputation.

But then I guess it doesn't matter that much. News of the fight is going to spread—probably already has—no matter what I do.

And for whatever reason, Nathan defended me. I need to do the same.

It's late enough in the day by the time everything is done that I readily accept Principal Landon's offer to send me home early. I walk quickly until I'm off the school grounds and then slow down, letting out the first deep breath I've taken since Jonah spoke to me. I feel myself start to expand again, from the little-girl-like self I'd reverted to—worthless daughter Amy, ready-to-hide Amy—back to my normal self. Or the self I am when I'm alone, when I can really breathe and don't have to be afraid of anyone.

Jared is getting ready for work when I get home; I'm almost an hour early, but he doesn't seem surprised to see me. He asks if we can sit down together for a while. I follow him into the living room and tuck my feet under me in the big brown armchair, the leather faded from Toto's incessant licking. Jared sits on the end of the sofa nearest to me. The clear discomfort on both ends reminds me that we have never really done more than exchange small talk since I got here.

"Your principal called," he says. "He said there was some kind of fight today."

I got in trouble at my old school once. I skipped class because a cute boy wanted my help with an English essay. I was caught—of course—and I had to sit in the principal's office while he called my father. For the rest of the day, a tangled knot of terror and dread grew in my stomach as I imagined what was waiting for me when he got home from work. The scar on my shoulder came from that night.

The same feeling hits me now and I jump into defense mode. "I'm sorry," I say quickly. "I didn't mean to cause any trouble, this guy just—and my gym partner got mad and—"

"Hang on, hang on."

"It happened too quickly for me to stop him," I say. "I'm sorry."

Jared looks at me steadily. "I'm not blaming you for anything, Amy."

That floats between and around us like a cloud for a few moments.

"I was just going to ask you if everything was okay. If there's anything I can do, anything you need."

The cloud grows too thick and fills up my throat. I manage to shake my head but say nothing. Jared watches me for a long time. I get the impression that Toto, curled up on the

floor between us, is less of a foreign species to him than I am. Finally he rubs his hands together, grips his knees, and stands.

"Just wanted to ask." He smiles and scratches the back of his head. "I'm off then. Sophie should be home around six." He shrugs into the jacket that was folded over the back of the sofa and walks out. The cloud grows and fills the space he left behind.

There is no real reason to stay home from school the next day. I would have done it in a heartbeat two weeks ago, and even now something is tempting me to put off facing the aftermath of the fight for one more day. But I can just hear Heather, Rafiki, and everyone else who has advised me on dealing with the past versus running from it. I go mostly to shut them up.

In the first couple of hours of the day, I get the impression that no one has anything against me after what happened. From what I gather, Jonah has always been sort of a jerk, and people disregard him more than anything. He was given two days of after-school detention but didn't show up for classes today, which is kind of a relief.

Nathan was given detention as well, but it's clear pretty much everyone is on our side—or his side, anyway. I don't think it's so much that anyone cares about me as that he's a favorite and his actions have made him a bit of a hero. But more than one student comes up to me to apologize on Jonah's behalf. No one seems to know exactly what he did; the overall impression is that he said *something* harsh enough to prompt Nathan's reaction, but not loud enough for anyone to hear. The lines I hear are almost laughable, they're so far off from the truth. But I'm relieved. It means no one has figured out the truth just yet.

Coach Grant walks into the gym fourth period like someone broke his clipboard. "Gather up, folks, I'm tired of trying to talk over you," he yells.

Thinking that if Jonah has allies anywhere, it's here, I have purposefully avoided eye contact with pretty much everyone since leaving the girls' locker room. But as everyone forms a sort of circle around Grant, I feel a strong presence right beside me. A shiny black bruise covers Nathan's left cheekbone and his bottom lip looks swollen and tight. But he smiles at me, and it's not really like the smirk from a few weeks ago or even the joking grin from yesterday before dodgeball. This smile is so real it warms me from my toes up to my hairline in a moment.

"Good to see you, New Girl," he whispers.

### *The Comeback Girl* Chapter 3

Homecoming is one of those things you can't fully escape in high school, no matter how selectively social you are.

At Baker, the football game isn't really the big focus, although some people (like the football team) try to make it so. The dance is what everyone cares about. Arduous fundraising and the help of some anonymous benefactor means it is held in a high-end venue with high-end food and music. At least, this is what Nathan tells me at lunch the week before the dance as we watch the junior class officers hang a gigantic paper banner on one wall of the commons. *HOMCOMING DANCE, OCTOBER 18, 7:30 PN*, it reads in confident black letters.

"We're not known for our test scores," Nathan says, peeling a banana.

"Sounds like the most annoying event of the year," I say.

He snorts. "Wait till prom season."

"At least sophomores can't go to prom. That takes the pressure off."

"Not for girls," he says. "Not at Baker."

“Huh?”

“Did your old school allow upperclassmen to take sophomores?”

I nod. “But it almost never happened.”

“Well, here it’s some kind of informal contest. I remember last year I had no idea, but then I started seeing these sophomore girls everywhere, carrying books for guys, bringing them stuff from the vending machines, all kinds of stuff. It was like some bizarre servant-master thing. They were all hoping to get asked to prom.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I know.” He pauses, appearing thoughtful. “Kind of sounds nice from the receiving end, though.”

“Then *you’re* ridiculous.” He laughs as I throw my crumpled-up napkin at him. He catches it and tosses it to the side, and I just shake my head. The newness of this sense of ease I feel around Nathan hasn’t worn off yet.

“Hey, Ross,” someone shouts: Chris Schrodes, an upperclassman on the basketball team. He’s tall and lanky like a basketball player should be, with dark cedar-colored skin that glistens stretching over his biceps.

“This your project?” he says with a huge, mocking grin, jerking his head at me. Then he turns to me and says with a tone of ardent formality, “He’s a good-un, ma’am.”

Nathan’s face reddens as Chris claps him on the back. “See you at practice, you gentleman, you.” He walks away, and I raise my eyebrows at Nathan, who immediately crams the rest of the banana into his mouth.

“Want to enlighten me?” I ask, but the bell rings in just a few seconds, so Nathan, coughing as he tries to swallow the banana and say goodbye at the same time, scrambles to collect his things and basically disappears in the time it takes me to stand.

Leonardo is waiting for me when the receptionist shows me into Heather's office that afternoon, but Heather isn't. "She'll be right with you," the pretty receptionist assures me with an Orbit smile before she disappears.

I pick out a fur brush from the basket on the end table and click with my tongue till Leonardo jumps up onto the sofa. I start to brush his back, but he suddenly stiffens and darts away into a corner, where he stares at me resentfully.

"What got your whiskers in a knot?" I asked him.

"He's probably smelling Toto on you," Heather says from behind me, closing the door behind her.

"That's what I get for not washing this jacket, I guess." I set the brush aside.

"How's it going, Amy?" Heather pulls out a thick but neat file and takes her seat across from me. A pen is tucked behind her ear, held in place by loose auburn curls. She's pretty in a soft way, not like you would expect of a therapist, and not like Sophie, who has sharp, bold features and short, pin-straight black hair. I'm not really pretty in either way. If there *is* a kind of pretty that describes me, Webster hasn't made it official yet. Since the definition would have to encompass things like off-white teeth and pudgy thighs, I'm not expecting that one to make the books any time soon.

"Next week is homecoming," I say.

"That sounds lovely!"

I try to communicate to her without words that homecoming sounds lovely to me the way haggis sounds lovely. She gets the hint.

“Well, perhaps it isn’t your ‘thing,’” she says. “But you’re still in the transitional phase, making friends and getting adjusted. Don’t you think maybe it would help things along if you went and spent some time with your classmates outside of school?”

“Do you want the straightforward answer?”

“Always, Amy.” She smiles a placating smile.

“Dances are stupid. There’s too much hype and too much money involved, and the kind of people that care about that aren’t exactly the kind of people I want to spend time with. Besides, I’ve made friends.”

“Hannah and Nathan?”

I nod, and she jots something down on her clipboard. What she could possibly be writing, I can only speculate. *To do: Verify authenticity of so-called ‘friends.’*

“You could all go together? Groups are sometimes the most fun.”

“Hannah is going to be busy. Her sister’s wedding.”

“Then have you considered going with Nathan?” she asks, raising one finely-shaped eyebrow.

“No. That’s crazy.”

“I’m not suggesting it has to be anything serious. But you might have fun together. As friends.”

I shrug. “I don’t think so. Homecoming is a date kind of thing. And—no.”

“It’s your choice.” The same placating smile. I briefly wish I could sic Leonardo on her. But he won’t even pounce at bugs—just whines at them until Heather opens a window and lets them out.

Saturdays were probably the most bearable days at my father's house. He would drink so much the night before that whether he lost it on me or not, he'd be in bed late into the day with a terrible headache. Being sober made him crabby; drinking made him violent; but hangovers silenced the inebriated roar to a dull murmur requesting that the blinds be kept shut and the lights low. I would make him breakfast and take it into his room along with a double dose of aspirin and a tumbler of cold water. Then I'd make myself scarce until the afternoon.

Later, when he felt better, he'd shower and join me in the living room where I worked on homework. Sometimes he would watch the news or football; sometimes we'd watch a movie. Rarely but most memorably, we'd talk about my mother, the one subject that seemed to soothe him. Talking about her was, for him, like revisiting a fairy tale; she was perfect, a princess worthy of a tower and a dragon, and I was the ugly daughter who took her away from him by the sin of being born. But somehow as long as I kept asking the right questions, we stayed out of that part. It was the most peaceful time we ever spent together after Grandma died. Then he'd go off to the bar again, and I prayed he would leave me alone when he returned.

Most weekends at Sophie and Jared's are similarly quiet, but without the lingering fear and anticipation and a sense of solitary confinement instead. Not that I can't go somewhere if I want to, but there are two problems with that: I have nowhere to go and no way to get there. Sophie spends the day painting, and it's her only full day free for that, so I never ask her. Jared tends to do the grocery shopping, so I sometimes go with him just to get out for a bit, but I'm afraid to ask him to take me anywhere; he'd have to pick me up later, and with his hours I know he is usually exhausted. Aside from the occasional walk around the neighborhood, I have little else to do besides homework.



Until Hannah Weaver shows up at the door the afternoon of the homecoming dance in tears. “Can I talk to you?” she says in a thick, hoarse voice.

I step aside to let her in. Her hair is done up in curls and braids, and she is wearing a strapless, knee-length lavender dress with a silver sash cinching the waist. But the dress is wrinkled and strands of hair are falling out in places and sticking up where they shouldn’t. Running mascara has formed blotchy half-moons beneath her eyes.

“My room’s upstairs on the right,” I say, and she nods. “I’ll be right there.”

I knock on the door to Sophie’s studio. “Come in.”

She looks up from an easel, the concentration in her face making her features look even sharper than normal. “I... a friend from school needs to talk. Is it okay if she’s here?”

“Just don’t make a lot of noise,” she says.

“Okay. Sure.” I nod slowly and start to back away, afraid that if I move too suddenly, she’ll change her mind.

She softens just slightly and adds, “She can stay for dinner if she wants to.”

I nod. “Thanks.”

On a whim, I grab a sleeve of off-brand Thin Mints and two bottles of water from the kitchen before going upstairs.

Hannah is sitting on the corner of my bed, trying to wipe the snot from her face without losing her dignity. I hand her a box of tissues from my desk. “Thanks,” she says in a cracked voice. I dump the water and cookies on the comforter and sit facing her, folding my legs.

“What happened?” I say after she cleans up her face a little and her breathing has regulated. “I thought you were at your sister’s wedding all day.”

“The wedding is off,” she says flatly. “They broke up right before the ceremony. He was cheating.”

I can see her trying to distance herself from the words, like reporting it to me in the tone of a news release will help her maintain the emotional distance of a journalist. But her knuckles are pale as she clutches crumpled-up tissues.

I find myself saying the words that never really help, even when they are sincere, like now. “I’m so sorry.”

She nods, sniffs a little, and starts tearing one of the tissues to pieces.

“It was awful. She found out and tried to end things quietly, but he started screaming at her. He pushed her against a wall and I swear he would have hit her if my dad hadn’t stopped him. I think—“ Hannah pauses, and here her voice starts to weaken. “I don’t think it was the first time he’s done it. I think he’s been doing it for a long time, and she kept it from everyone.”

I look at the pile of tissue scraps growing in her lap. “So that’s why you came here.”

“Huh?”

I stare at her, frustrated by the confused look she’s putting on. “You can’t tell me you didn’t see the scars that day in gym. And with what Jonah said? And you went and lied about not knowing what he meant.”

Hannah shakes her head slowly. “I told you, Jonah’s stupid. Not many people even heard what he said, and no one thought it meant anything.” Grief has a disarming effect on people; it’s painfully clear she’s telling the truth.

Great.

Her eyes widen. “Are you saying...?”

I sigh and nod. Too late now. “My dad.”

She gasps and covers her mouth with her hands, tissues forgotten. “Oh my God, I didn’t...”

“I know.”

She apologizes again and again, forgetting for the moment about her own tragedy. I explain that she is fine, that I believe her and I’m not hurt.

“I came to you because all my other friends blew me off,” she finally says. “I texted them and they’re all too busy getting ready for the dance.”

“Woah,” I say. “I totally forgot about the dance.”

“I know. Stuff like that is starting to feel pretty meaningless now.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, handing her the bottle of water. “About your sister.”

She nods. We drink and split the cookies, talking until dinner.

Between Hannah’s visit and a mundane Sunday full of little else besides homework, I file away any thoughts of the homecoming dance until I get to school on Monday. There, the general buzz of story-swapping fills the air between classes and in study hall. When I hear the stories, which all sound like something out of a feel-good teen movie, I feel a small pang of regret that I didn’t go and had no one to go with. Then I remember two things: that I was there for Hannah when no one else was, and that the stories I’m *not* hearing are the ones involving getting drunk and making stupid choices. And I feel better.

It’s an unusually warm day for so late in October, so Coach Grant sends us out to the track to walk, jog, and run at our discretion. It’s a free-for-all kind of day, so I stick to walking on the outer edge with the intention of running a lap or two towards the end.

Hannah waves as she jogs past. I watch her go as she passes Nathan, who has finally slowed to a walk from running so many laps I’ve lost count. I grin, seeing his shoulders

heave with exhaustion. *Show-off*. He ran too hard. I start to pick up my pace, intending to tease him big time when I catch up.

But then a tiny girl speeds by me with an almost-comical *wboosh*. She slows down just as she gets to Nathan, who is still a dozen or so yards ahead of me. It's the redheaded girl, the freshman, I think. He turns and smiles at her, speaking, though it's too far away to hear more than a vague sound.

She grins up at him and runs a hand over her ponytail. She doesn't look the slightest bit disgusting, considering how fast she was and that she had probably been running for quite a while. Her hair is bouncy and shiny, glinting golden in the sunlight. Nathan's face looks red, and I can't tell if it's from exertion or—

Nerves?

He rubs the back of his neck and tugs at the sweaty collar of his t-shirt. She laughs, presumably at something he's said, and weaves her fingers into his.

Oh.

Feeling a burst of adrenaline, I set off running before I know what I'm doing and don't stop until I'm halfway around the track.

*Oh.*

#### *The Comeback Girl* Chapter 4

"Mind if I join you?" I ask Jennifer at lunch half an hour later. She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. I leave two seats between us and sit down.

"No homework today, huh?"

She holds up a pile of notecards that were hidden by her tray.

"Sorry."

I sit idly pushing my green beans around their compartment. After three weeks, I'm not used to the silence.

"Amy, come sit with us!" Hannah calls from a few tables over, waving at me. I glance sideways at Jennifer, who doesn't even blink as she stares at her notecards, mouthing words to herself.

"Thanks," I say, sliding into the empty seat beside Hannah with a mixture of relief and apprehension. Three other girls are there too, but I don't recognize any but the one with curly brown hair sitting directly opposite me.

"We have bio together, right?" she says, smiling. "I'm Cara."

The other two, a scary-beautiful blonde and a darker-skinned girl with wide, almond-shaped eyes, introduce themselves as Lindsey and Aspen.

"Haven't you been sitting with Nathan Ross lately?" asks Lindsey, leaning forward. I'm afraid the ends of her hair are going to fall into her potatoes.

"Um, yeah, sometimes. We're friends," I say, stabbing a soggy green bean with my plastic fork.

"What *happened*?"

"Uh, nothing, really."

"I saw him and—"

"Hey Aspen, I think Amy would really like your homecoming dress," Hannah says brightly. She turns to me. "She was just showing me pictures. Wanna see?"

I nod, and Aspen's already got her iPhone out. Lindsey leans back and takes a sip of dark red Vitamin Water. Her expression suggests someone put salt in the bottle.

I glance at Hannah and mouth *thank you*. She shakes her head in response and almost imperceptibly glances toward the other side of the room. I follow her line of sight to the

long table parallel to the wall, where, at the end, Nathan is sitting with the redheaded girl. He looks up and sees me staring, and he opens his mouth as if to speak directly to me.

Hannah nudges me and points to Aspen's phone screen. "Look, isn't that a great color on her?"

The dress is fiery red and orange, the two colors merging seamlessly into each other across the material.

"Yeah," I say, feeling a little bit sick. "It's beautiful."

"How was school today?" Jared says as I walk in through the kitchen, causing me to jump and drop my keys. He's sitting at the breakfast bar, the coupon section of a newspaper lying open beside a pair of scissors and a pile of clippings.

I'm startled into honesty. "It was. . .long." I grab a glass from the cupboard and fill it under the faucet. "I didn't know you'd be home."

"Me neither." He smiles brightly. "Want to join me?"

"Sure." I drop my backpack into the third stool and sit beside him, trying not to let him see how weirded out I am.

"You'd be surprised how much we save on groceries doing this," he says, gesturing with the scissors. "Sophie and I have kind of made a game out of it."

I nod. "That's. . .interesting."

He grins and resumes scanning the page of coupons without another word, so I start my geometry homework.

The house is so quiet that every mark I make with my pencil seems conspicuously loud, and the occasional snip of Jared's scissors is even worse.

I haven't yet finished the first section of math problems when Jared sets down the paper and scissors and turns in his seat to face me. "Amy, can I ask you something?"

I nod and put my pencil down.

"Well, I was wondering—I mean, I wanted to take you shopping for some things. Just whatever you might need—clothes, things for school. Sophie will be out until late, so I thought we could make a night out of it. If you don't have too much homework, I mean." He smiles tentatively and scratches the back of his head, a habit I've noticed. It makes him look more like a nervous college guy than someone in his mid-thirties.

"Okay," I say.

His smile widens. "Great," he says and checks his watch. "Let's go at four thirty. Maybe you could go make a list of what you need."

"Okay."

"See you in a bit," he says, picking up his scissors.

Up in my room I sit with a scrap piece of paper and pencil, staring into my open dresser drawers for a good ten minutes. The display on my watch creeps toward four o'clock and then past it, and the paper remains blank. I am lost on what to put down.

I need pretty much everything.

So far the issue of money hasn't come up much since I moved in with Sophie and Jared. Food is the only thing that can't be ignored, and that isn't complicated; I am welcome to anything in the kitchen, join in when Sophie cooks, and am given enough money every week to cover lunch at school. Besides that, I have managed to go without needing anything besides what I already have. I have a little bit of savings, but I haven't touched it.

The problem with only having a suitcase full of belongings is that everything wears out a little bit faster because you have to use it all over and over again. The soles of my

tennis shoes are worn paper-thin in places and are peeling off the shoe in others, and the hems of my jeans have frayed badly where they drag on the ground in the back. Even with me being careful, most of my shirts have some small stain or tear somewhere on them. Nothing's quite unwearable—besides maybe the shoes—but it's getting there.

In general, there are things I need, things I have managed to do without for a while. But a while can only stretch so far before you start looking like you live under a bridge.

I trace the lines on the paper idly with my pencil, worrying and hesitating until four thirty comes around.

The Carlton City Mall is about as basic as it gets—a lot like the town itself. There are a couple of department stores and clothing shops, an electronics store, some specialty places, and a food court that serves tacos, pizza, and some kind of Asian food. Coming from another, bigger town, I don't understand its appeal, but even on a Monday night there are a bunch of students hanging out like it's the place to be. Of course, none of their parents are around; I try to keep my head low as I walk from place to place with Jared. But I can't exactly say no when he offers to buy dinner at the food court.

We both choose gigantic fair-style slices of pizza and park at a small table. The shopping bags we've collected take up a seat of their own. Jared has bought me a pair of tennis shoes, several shirts and pairs of jeans, even pajamas, socks, and a new coat for winter. It's probably more than I needed. No one has ever spent this much money on me at any one time in my life, as far as I can remember. Dad's money went to alcohol more often than anything else, and my grandma just didn't have the money to spend. It gives me a strange feeling—like something is persistently tugging at my sleeve.

It takes me at least five minutes to come up with a muttered *thank you*.



Jared just smiles at me. “You’re welcome,” he says.

I stare at the grease stains on my paper plate. The feeling doesn’t go away.

“I don’t want you to think that you’re an inconvenience or some kind of burden to us.” I look up. He isn’t scratching the back of his head; his hands are resting calmly on each side of his plate and he is looking at me steadily—warmly. Something in me revolts against his directness, unable to handle it.

“I know,” it has me say, trying to brush it off.

“I don’t think you do.”

“I need to go to the bathroom.” I stand and pick up my plate. Jared’s gaze finally falters.

“I’ll be here,” he says.

The nearest trash can veers to the right from the path to the bathroom. Approaching it, I see a group of guys from school hanging out at a table ten yards or so away. I look away before I recognize any of them or make eye contact.

“Hey look, New Girl does get out!” a voice calls, just loud enough for me to hear. I shove the plate into the overflowing trash can and turn to face the source of the voice: Jonah Decker.

All five of them have twisted in their seats to face me. The ones I don’t recognize look curious but dismissive, while Jonah and the other guy from gym class—Eric or something—have wicked grins on their faces.

“Nah, she’s just with her daddy over there,” Eric says. Jonah laughs.

“He’s not my dad.” I start to walk towards the bathroom, but Jonah jumps out of his chair and catches up to me, pulling me around by the shoulder.

“No, he’s not, is he?” he says in a low voice, sneering at me. “Where *is* your dad, anyway? Prison? All because you couldn’t stand up to him yourself?”

*Oh God, he really knows.*

*Of course he knows. Did you think everyone was going to fall for your sympathy story? He knows who’s really to blame.*

“Leave me alone,” I say, both to Jonah and my dad; this time my voice starts to give. I start walking again but Jonah ducks around me and stands in my path.

“Doesn’t anyone else know yet?” he says. “Ross does, doesn’t he? Don’t know why he took that Emily chick to the dance. You’re the better fit for him, if you want my opinion.”

“I don’t,” I say shortly, though I can’t understand what he’s saying. He stares at my face for a moment and then something dawns on his.

“He *doesn’t* know, does he?”

“Stop it.”

“It’s only a matter of time before everyone does.”

I feel the heat drain out of me, and suddenly I’m shaking. “Jonah, don’t. I don’t know how you know, but—please.”

He smirks. “We’ll see.”

“Everything all right?”

I whirl around. Jared is standing there, carrying all the shopping bags.

“Oh, yes sir,” says Jonah, reaching past me to shake Jared’s hand (with some struggle on Jared’s part). “Just saying hello to Amy here. We have class together. I’m Jonah.”

“That’s nice of you, Jonah. But we need to be heading home. Right, Amy?”

I nod. Jonah contorts his face into a sickly polite smile. “Well, you both have a *lovely* evening.”

We are both silent until we are in the car on the way home. My shoulder smart where Jonah grabbed me. Jared heaves a long sigh and says, “What a royal jerk.”

I stare at him, shocked. He laughs. “You think I can’t spot it when I see one? Everything that kid said to me was full of it. Forget about him, Amy. Whatever he told you.”

Jared smiles at me, and I feel a little better. But I can’t stop hearing the threat in Jonah’s voice.

I’ve discovered something about Jared and Sophie’s house I don’t think they know. My bedroom is directly above the kitchen, and the two are connected through the ventilation system, so sound travels between the two extremely well. I can hear the sizzle of butter in a frying pan from my room with the door closed. And I can hear conversations almost perfectly.

Tuesday night, I shut myself in my room to read Acts I and II of *Julius Caesar* for a quiz tomorrow. I stretch out on my bed in a new pair of flannel pajamas, soft and warm, and open the Sparknotes version on my laptop for reference.

Barely two pages in, I hear the front door slam, then open and close again more gently. A moment later, a kitchen cupboard opens and shuts and I hear a glass slam down onto the counter so hard I’m surprised it doesn’t shatter.

“Soph, talk to me.”

“I’d rather not.” Sophie’s voice is crystal clear, it’s so loud and sharp. Jared’s, in comparison, is slightly muffled.

“I don’t understand what’s wrong. You’ve barely talked since we left the restaurant.”

A moment of dangerous silence. I hear the fridge open and shut and the sound of pouring liquid. “Why didn’t you ask me before you took Amy shopping?”

“I didn’t think to mention it the night before. I got in late, and you were gone early in the morning.”

“You didn’t *think* to mention it? That’s your excuse for doing something behind my back?”

“Helping her is what we’re supposed to be doing. Is that betrayal to you?” A heavy sigh. “It came out of my account, Soph. There’s nothing to be angry about.”

I slip out of bed and tiptoe over to the vent, crouching down next to it. My breath doesn’t want to come. This is the first time I’ve heard the two of them fight, and it’s my fault.

*Of course it’s your fault.*

“You used the money we both agreed you would save! I haven’t *touched* mine. That’s the point of a savings account, Jared.”

“Have you seen her, Soph? Did you see the *one* suitcase she had when she got here? She’s worn the same five or six things over and over, shoes that were falling apart, and she hasn’t said a word.” A pause. “Or do you even take time to notice her?”

“*What* is that supposed to mean?”

Jared exhales audibly through his nose. “That you don’t like painful reminders.”

I lean closer to the vent, wondering if I heard him right. They could be talking in Shakespearean English, for the amount that makes sense to me.

“I am warning you to drop that right now. That is not what we’re talking about.”

“Fine, Soph. It’s late. I’m tired too.”

“I don’t understand why you want to let go of *our* dreams to buy her all this stuff. We could just let her have her grandma’s money.”

*What?*

“That’s for college, things like that. For her future.”

“And what about ours?”

Silence.

Sophie goes on. “We’re never going to make Italy if we don’t keep working. Keep saving. Keep *communicating*.”

I shake my head slowly. Italy? None of this makes sense, and none of it sounds very good.

All is quiet for a while. I can see Jared reaching for Sophie’s hand, or maybe resting his on her shoulder.

I tiptoe into the guest bathroom, turn on the fan, and sit on the floor, crying until the past two days and everything in them grows distant and my sore eyes and aching head dull the shock of everything else for a while.

**Appendix C: Selected Writing from Trial III***The Comeback Girl* Chapter 5

“Is Heather there?” I ask the office receptionist the next day after school. It’s only Wednesday, and after one more day of avoiding Nathan as much as possible—difficult when he’s your gym partner—and enduring another lunch with Hannah’s friends, I know I’m not going to make it through the week if I don’t talk all this stuff out with someone. I sit in the shade of a tree right off school grounds, waiting while the receptionist forwards the call.

“Amy, hi. How are you?”

Her routine formality, thinly veiled by a layer of warmth in her tone, makes me want to puke.

“Everything sucks and I—I n-need to talk to someone or I’m going to lose it.” The harsh, disjointed way it comes out seems to suggest I’ve already lost it. Now I feel guilty on top of everything else. “Sorry.”

“That’s all right. Are you experiencing anxiety symptoms?”

“Not really.” I pause, listening in case my heart rate has spiked since I last checked. “But I’m afraid I will.”

“Let me look.” I can hear the tapping of her keyboard through the phone. The click of a mouse. Two clicks. “My last appointment ends at five fifteen. Can you come after that?”

“Won’t you be going home?”

“I can stay late today,” she says gently.

I exhale through my nose. “Thank you.”

I text Sophie and Jared, letting them know I’ll be out later, and wander around for a while, trying to find a place in town where I can pass the time in some kind of privacy.

Eventually I get to the city park, a large chunk of land only half a mile or so from Heather’s

office. The requisite playground is right by the entrance, the land surrounding it spreading out into a wooded area to the north and open grass on either side. Steel benches, cold to the touch, rest at intervals along the trail which winds around the playground, through the grass, and into the woods.

The younger grades haven't been released from school yet, and I guess the park's not the most popular hangout for teenagers this time of year, if ever. The wind is biting, more so as it meets the sweat which has formed at my temples and neck from walking so long. I climb onto the rusty merry-go-round, which creaks a little and spins a few inches when I step off the ground, but settles again once I lie down in the center, looking up, the metal frigid against my back. The clouds are marbly-white against a cold, steely grey sky.

Too many things are fighting for my attention, and they've been doing a bizarre kind of dance in my head since I woke up this morning. I can't stop wondering what Sophie was talking about when she mentioned Italy last night. But I am terrified to ask her. We hardly ever talk, even in passing, and she always looks frustrated or irritated when I'm around. I could talk to Jared, I think; but even then I'd have to admit I was eavesdropping, and he would know I heard everything. I don't want to give him a reason to be angry with me.

Not understanding what Sophie said is enough on its own to keep me stressed, but every time I think about Jonah I feel sick. I have been trying to figure out who he must know to have found out about my dad. My old town is hours away from Carlton—there can't be much overlap. The high school there doesn't play Baker in sports or anything. It might be an online thing, but once the truth came out about my father, I deleted my Facebook account to avoid dealing with that part of the aftermath. I picture a vast network of mutual friends stretching from me to Jonah somehow, but I can't imagine where it would connect.

But however he knows, he knows, and I can't let him tell everyone. He's holding it over me, and it's really low, but he's got control and I don't know what I can do about it but try to stay out of his way and avoid giving him a reason to tell anyone. Especially Nathan. I don't need another reason for him to think. . .whatever he thinks that made him decide our friendship was a dead end.

*Well, come on—have you seen that girl? She's beautiful. Who would look at you after that?*

*It's not that, I try to insist. We're friends, or we were. I thought—*

*That you were good enough for that? Did Becky and Raina teach you nothing about what you're worth as a friend?*

My vision has turned inward along with my thoughts, but suddenly I'm brought back as I notice the sky start to spin above my head. Well, the sky isn't spinning—I am. I gasp and jump up, stumbling and catching myself on one of the rails attached to the merry-go-round. Nathan grabs the same one and pulls me to a stop with a jolt, laughing at my startled expression and clumsiness. I find my balance and stand up straight.

“What the *hell* was that for?!”

Nathan starts back a little, laughter stopping short.

“I just saw you zoned out and thought—“

“—that you'd be an asshole?” I jump off, only stumbling slightly in the mulch, and walk past him.

“Amy—“ He puts a hand on my shoulder and turns me around. My body remembers Monday night at the mall, and for a moment I see Jonah's face instead of Nathan's. I cry out and jerk out of his grip.

“Get *away* from me!”

I want to run but my brain won't tell my feet to move.



Nathan tries to reach out again and lets his hand fall when I flinch. “I’m sorry,” he says like he has no idea what to be sorry for. “Are you okay?”

“No,” I say flatly. “Please just—“

“Can we talk?”

“Why should I talk to you?” I say, rubbing my shoulder.

“Because. We’re friends.” He watches me roll my eyes and exhales loudly through his nose. “I suck to you right now. That’s pretty obvious. But can you stand to be around me for at least a few minutes?”

I check my watch. I still have over an hour until Heather is free, so there’s really no point in refusing him. Aside from that, my legs still don’t want to carry me very far. I sit on the edge of the merry-go-round.

“How did you know I was here anyway?”

“I live over there,” he says, nodding towards the neighborhood bordering one side of the park. He sits down beside me. “I’m out here a lot.”

“Great place to take your new girlfriend,” I say before I can stop myself.

“Girlfriend? Who—Emily? Oh,” he says, laughing. “No way. She’s not my girlfriend.”

“*Right*,” I say, as my heart slams into my lungs. I try to play off my comment casually.

“I mean, you hold hands with all the girls you know.”

Because bringing up a detail like that is casual. What is my mouth doing? I dig the toe of my shoe into the mulch and don’t look at Nathan. “You were right in front of me on the track,” I say, shrugging, trying to make it sound like I don’t care that much. Because I don’t, I tell myself.

“That *was* a little weird,” he says.

“You went to the dance with her, right?” I say, looking sideways at him. “I mean, that’s what I heard.”

Just keep digging.

“Yeah. I didn’t really want to ask her. It’s this stupid basketball team thing. New varsity members are supposed to bring a date to the dance.” He reddens. “It’s an initiation thing.”

“What kind of initiation thing?”

He rolls his eyes. “There’s a check list of things we’re supposed do before the night is over. Dares, sort of. Like calling your date a sappy nickname in front of her friends, or requesting a love song from the DJ, or getting her to—do other things. Not *that*,” he says quickly when he sees my expression. “Just, like, kissing and stuff.”

I’m half disgusted at the whole idea of the check list and half amused at how obviously uncomfortable Nathan is at having to explain this to me. He is kicking the mulch around too, revealing dark soil underneath.

“I didn’t do it,” he adds. “I mean, the stuff that didn’t matter as much, yeah, but that was mostly about self-humiliation. The seniors get all kinds of fun out of watching us squirm.” He rolls his eyes. “But I wasn’t just going to lead some girl off into a corner and make her kiss me for a dare. She was nice.”

“So what, do you get kicked off the team if you don’t do it?”

“Can we not talk about this anymore?” he says suddenly. “It’s not really the point. We talked a few times after the dance and then decided not to date. So Emily’s not my girlfriend.” He pauses. “I’m not even sure why it matters to you.”

I don’t answer.

“Amy?” I look up. Nathan’s brow furrows deeper as he stares at me.

I breathe in, out, smooth my jeans over my knees. “It just seemed like you decided we weren’t friends anymore. Like a girlfriend was all you needed.” I shrug. “Or like I did something to make you—“

“No,” he says flatly. His hand twitches on the rusty metal between us and curls into a fist. “We are still friends. You can’t scare me off.”

He grins and winks, obviously joking, so I try to laugh with him. But it’s exactly what I’m afraid of. I glance at my watch.

“I have to go,” I say, jumping up.

“Do you need a ride anywhere?”

I shake my head. “Nah, I’m just going to—I’m good.”

“See you later, New Girl,” he calls after me as I jog towards Heather’s office.

By the time I get home around six thirty, the air has gotten considerably colder and the sky is beginning to darken. Warm yellow light shines through the living room window, an unusual sight—no one but me uses that room most evenings. Maybe Sophie is home and out of her studio for once, meaning I have the perfect opportunity to do what I promised Heather and confront her about Italy.

It was the last thing I would have planned, but when I recounted everything to Heather—including the stuff about Jonah, Nathan, Hannah, and Emily—it was the first thing she said to me.

“You really need to,” she said. “Your relationship with Jared is growing, which is wonderful, but you and Sophie won’t get anywhere if the most significant thing between you is misunderstanding.”

“Try deception,” I said bitterly. The anger and irritation I’d previously had towards Nathan redirected itself in the time it took to reach Heather’s office from the park. “So far she hasn’t tried getting to know me at all. And she’s keeping things from me. What’s the point? She doesn’t even want me around.”

“Maybe if you do the brave thing and ask her about what you heard, she’d see why you’re worth getting to know.”

That, paired with the simple need to know what Sophie was talking about in terms of Italy and my future under her and Jared’s care, spurs me on towards the door.

Sophie is reading in the living room, stretched out on the sofa with her bare feet up on a throw pillow. “Oh, good, you’re home,” she says, looking up with a smile and closing her book. “I want to talk to you.”

Maybe this will be easier than I thought. I sit upright in the big leather armchair, feet flat on the floor and hands in my lap. It’s the way Heather sits, and she always conveys authority, even if it’s annoying authority.

Sophie lays her book aside and pulls her knees to her chest, looking much more like a teenager than I do. But then she speaks.

“I know you came from an awful situation, and I am sympathetic to that in every way,” she says in a flat tone that suggests anything but sincerity. “I can’t imagine what you went through. And I am happy to be able to offer you a place to stay for the time being, until something better comes up.”

Something better? Like another cousin of my mother’s is just going to pop up out of nowhere? I know Sophie and Jared were the only ones willing to take me in. According to Mr. Benson, my mother did a lot for Sophie when she was around my age. So I guess she feels obligated more than willing.

“But I want to make this clear,” she continues. “This isn’t permanent. We are not going to adopt you.”

“I didn’t think you would,” I say, startled. I don’t know what I *did* think, but that never occurred to me before.

“We are not in the right kind of situation for that. We’re in the middle of planning for the future, and—“ she pauses. “That just wouldn’t be practical.”

Opportunity! Opportunity! This is the perfect chance to ask just *what* she’s planning.

But I barely think of that. Instead I see my dad towering over me. I am on the floor in the corner of my old bedroom, trying to make myself as small as possible to reduce the surface area available as a target. He laughs at my fear, having grown tired of his punching bag.

*No one wants you*, he says, sneering. He turns and walks towards the door. *No one ever will*.

The next week in gym, Coach Grant announces that our current partnerships have come to an end and we’ll be switching to new partners for November and December.

Nathan and I glance at each other. “I guess our reign is at an end,” he says, sighing and winking at me.

“It’s funny,” I say. “I really didn’t want to be your partner back when this started.”

“Oh, I know.” Nathan laughs. “I knew my charm would win you over in the end.”

I just roll my eyes to cover the fact that I actually am a little sad. We’re still friends, after all. New partners won’t hurt that.

But sadness turns to a muted form of panic when I get my new partner. Because Coach Grant, in keeping with his lack of originality, simply paired the last person on the class list with the first, pushing everything back by one name.

Meaning that Emily Sanders is my new partner.

From a few yards away where he and his new partner stand, Nathan glances at me with wide eyes. The redheaded girl and I make eye contact, and I feel myself swallow the anxiety rising in my throat.

“Emily,” she says when we meet, tossing her perfect ponytail to the side.

“I’m Amy.”

She looks like she wouldn’t care if my name was Elvis. “Let’s get this straight,” she says flatly. “Nathan likes *me*.”

### *The Comeback Girl* Chapter 6

For some reason that only a faculty-wide conspiracy could account for, the first week in November is stressful for pretty much everyone I know at school. We’re weeks past midterms—which weren’t really that bad—and it’s way too soon for finals, but there’s at least one major stressor every day this week in the form of tests, essays, and presentations. And that’s all on top of the everyday stressor that is Emily Sanders, my new gym partner.

Emily has decided to hate me because Nathan and I are friends. She quickly realized that the end of our gym partnership didn’t mean the end of our friendship, which has just made her angrier. So she spends most of gym class finding subtle ways to put me down and make more out of her nonexistent relationship with Nathan than a caricature artist could. In two months, since school started gym class has gone from a slightly irksome requirement to the high point in my day to the worst thing about Baker High School, period.

What I can't figure out is where Emily is getting this certainty that Nathan likes her, despite their decision not to date. I've been watching Nathan closely since we switched partners last week, not wanting to mention it without reason, but he doesn't talk to her, mention her, or even look at her unless she approaches him first. Which, unsurprisingly, she has done on multiple occasions, making for some very uncomfortable lunch periods.

I finally decide to ask Nathan about it on Wednesday afternoon, sitting across from him at the Flapjack Shack. When he, Hannah and I realized we all have a geometry test on Friday—same teacher, different period—we decided on an after-school study session. Carlton isn't up-and-coming enough for coffee shops like those in Richton—places like Java Joe's and Jittermugs, where Becky and Raina and I nearly always spent our afternoons "studying" over lattes and muffins the size of softballs. Instead, there is the slightly disgusting Flapjack Shack, where the coffee is cheaper but awful and the food isn't really appetizing at all. Fine for me; I didn't order any. I've been trying to save the money I get each week as often as possible since I overheard Jared and Sophie fighting.

"Remember how you said that you and Emily *both* decided not to date after homecoming?" I ask when we come to the end of a problem set. The table is crowded with textbooks, review sheets, notebooks, and plates of food, most of the latter congregated in front of Nathan.

"Yeah," he says, drizzling syrup over his pancakes for the third time. "I told you. We hung out at lunch for a couple of days and that was it."

"Exactly how mutual *was* that decision?"

Hannah shakes her head as she grabs the syrup away from him and places it on the far edge of the table, out of his reach. "Diabetes," she says by way of explanation.

Nathan rolls his eyes at her and shrugs. “It was mutual,” he says to me uncertainly. “I think.”

“You think.”

He stares at me, blank-faced.

“Oh, God,” Hannah says. “Nathan, what did you actually say?”

Nathan’s thinking face is hard to take seriously when he’s chewing a golf-ball sized bite of pancakes while making it. “I said. . .that I had fun at the dance but wasn’t really wanting anything else right now.”

“Well, that was stupid,” Hannah says.

“It was?” Nathan and I say at the same time. I thought it sounded straightforward enough. Then again, I’m probably the least experienced person at the table when it comes to this stuff. Guys aren’t generally drawn to girls with insecurity complexes. That much I have gathered.

“You would have been fine if you’d left off the ‘right now.’ That gave her something to hang onto.” Hannah swats Nathan’s hand away as he reaches across the table for the syrup.

“I didn’t know she was looking for something to hang onto.” He frowns at his pancakes swimming in a maple sea. “That’s not good, is it?”

“Do you have any idea how girls work? You sound like you’ve never had a girlfriend.”

She doesn’t say it with any kind of malice. But Nathan glances up and then quickly back down, focusing on his pancakes. “I haven’t,” he says.

So maybe *not* the least experienced.

“Oh,” Hannah says, surprised.



We all sit there, not knowing what to say, as the waitress comes by with a coffee pot and water pitcher.

He shrugs. “Anyway.” He looks at me, slightly pink-faced. “Is she really bothering you that much? She seemed nice when I talked to her.”

*That* I can understand. “There’s this phenomenon with a lot of girls our age,” I say, stirring more sugar into my freshly refilled coffee cup. Not that it will do any good. “They have a face that they show to people that have something to offer them, people they are supposed to respect, and—sometimes—people they care about. That’s the good girl face.”

Nathan nods, almost looking like he understands.

“Then there’s the face the lesser folk get to see. You know, people beneath them, or people they consider enemies. That’s the mean girl face.”

“Some would argue the true face,” Hannah says under her breath.

“Why did I get the good girl face?”

“Because she likes you, Nathan,” Hannah says, voice laden with exasperation. “She wants you to like her back. Of course she’s going to be nice to you.”

“She seems to think it’s only a matter of time before you two get together,” I say. “And therefore, any female who interacts with you regularly is a threat. Which explains the mean girl face.”

“Exactly,” Hannah says. “Which is why I’ve avoided talking to you in gym class. Nothing personal.”

When she and I both come to a conclusion, Nathan stares at us like it’s the first day of French class. “I’m just gonna eat my pancakes,” he finally says, shaking his head.

Friday afternoon comes like a miracle; with the endless stream of tests, papers, and projects, the week feels like two. When the last bell rings, it almost feels like the first day of summer break, except that instead of sunny, warm weather, Nathan and I walk outside to gunmetal skies and spitting rain.

“How lovely,” I say lightly, zipping my jacket—wishing I’d worn an extra layer or two—and flipping my hood up over my hair.

“Are you seriously going to walk in this?” Nathan says, glancing at me skeptically.

“I seriously am.”

“Hannah’s team is running indoors today because it’s so gross. But you’re going to walk two miles to your house.”

I shrug. “It’s just a mile and a half. And I’ve done it in worse.”

“Because you won’t accept my offer of a ride.” He nudges me in the side, gently. “I can’t be worse than the bus, can I?”

I glance at the line of buses idling along the sidewalk. The further along in the year I get, the more I hate riding the noisy, overcrowded bus. It’s like a closet to a claustrophobic person. If I can’t get a seat towards the front, I find myself inching towards a panic attack until I can finally get out at my stop and breathe freely again. I’ve taken to walking as often as possible, especially in the afternoons when it’s loudest.

“It’s not that,” I say.

“Then what?”

I shrug, looking down. I don’t want to tell him how much I hate feeling like I owe him something. On more days than not, he offers to drive me home, especially when it’s raining or colder than normal. He even tried to buy me dinner when we ended up studying at the Flapjack Shack hours longer than we expected. It’s not that he’s trying to show me any

special attention—he offered to (and did) pay for Hannah’s too. He’s just generous by nature—he has the money, and he shares it. It’s something I marvel at, but maybe that’s just because the primary male in my life growing up habitually stole from my savings for beer.

I glance up suddenly, remembering something. “Hang on. Aren’t tryouts this afternoon?” Though last year’s basketball team has been conditioning for weeks, along with the potential new guys, official tryouts for the season lineup haven’t happened yet. Nathan tries to spare me from hearing about it too much, except for when a few of the other sophomores and freshmen who are trying out join us at lunch.

“They don’t start until four. There’s plenty of time, and I have to run home anyway,” he says, nudging me again. “You act like it’s an inconvenience for me or something.”

I almost physically wince, he’s so accurate. Still, something about the look on his face has me finally giving in. “Okay,” I say. “This time.”

He gives me that smile that’s starting to become familiar—the one that makes me forget about the cold and the rain. “Let’s go,” he says.

Jared is inside grooming Toto when Nathan drops me off at home. “Hey, kiddo,” he says in a loud and friendly voice. Toto, standing obediently on a towel in the kitchen, wags his tail and whines a little, as if to punctuate the out-of-place greeting. *Kiddo?* Jared and I have gradually gotten more comfortable around each other, but his words suddenly seem forced and awkward, like I just got here yesterday.

I don’t know how to respond, so I just say *hi* and grab a bottle of water from the fridge.

“Have a lot going on this weekend?” he asks, clearly trying to be casual. Still squatting beside Toto, he leans back on his heels, looking up.

“Not really. It’s been a really long week, I don’t think I’ll be up for much.”

“Oh.” His face falls a little; maybe he was trying to make plans. Before I can decide whether or not to ask, he says, “No appointment with Heather today?”

“She canceled. I think she has the flu.”

“It must be going around,” he says, scratching the back of his head.

“Must be.”

At a total loss for something else to do or say, I excuse myself and go upstairs.

The week took such a toll on me that I both go to bed early Friday night and sleep in late Saturday morning, unusual because voices from the kitchen usually wake me up early. This is still what I wake up to at 11:04, as well as to Toto licking my face because apparently I didn’t close the door before I fell asleep. Sophie and Jared are cooking—bacon and omelets, by the smell of it. I’ve gotten surprisingly good at picking apart the various scents wafting through the air ducts to my room.

“Will you even consider it?” I hear Jared ask, a pleading note in his voice. “What makes it so repulsive to you?”

I shoo Toto out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

“You might get along with her, Jared, but she and I hardly talk,” Sophie is saying as I sit on the floor and lean against my bed, hugging my knees. “There’s nothing to talk *about*. A full day, alone together? You’ve lost your mind.”

I think Sophie might be right.

“Why don’t you want to get to know her?” Jared says.

“You know why.”

A long moment of silence, interrupted only by the sizzling and popping of bacon grease.

“I think that’s unfair,” Jared finally says. “And that you’re being stubborn. This is something I’m asking you to do. If not for her, can you try it for me?”

Another pause. Then a sigh, so audible it’s clear even from my room. “Maybe next weekend,” Sophie says.

“Thank you.” Neither of them speak again for the next few minutes while I sit there, wondering if Sophie meant what she said about next weekend. I haven’t spent more than twenty or thirty minutes alone with her. I think it’s been a mutual effort. I think I see what Jared’s trying to do—and his weirdness yesterday makes more sense now—but the thought of any kind of ‘girl day’ with Sophie makes me a little bit queasy with nerves. I get up to take a quick shower before going downstairs, trying not to think too hard about it.

The morning announcement during my first period study hall includes the big reveal of the basketball lineup. I usually tend to tune out most of the announcements, since they’re most often about football and other things I don’t care about. But I put my pencil down for a minute, waiting to hear Nathan’s name. It comes toward the end of the varsity list, but not last—in fact, I’m pretty sure a few of the juniors on the team come after. I go back to work, grinning to myself.

I don’t get the chance to congratulate him properly until lunch. When I pay for my tray and see him with a few more guys than normal, I start to look for Hannah’s table. But Nathan catches my eye and waves me over. His backpack is sitting on the chair next to his at the circular table; when I approach, he pulls it off and drops it beside his own. He winks at me as I sit down, a little anxious.

I know two of the guys a little bit—Tom Kipler, a freshman, and Andy Henderson, a sophomore who, as I understand it, moved to Carlton this summer like me. Nathan has

befriended both of them in the past couple of weeks; they are part of the semi-regular ‘lunch group’ I seem to have fallen into. Both of them are on the JV team. Another guy I don’t recognize, a sophomore named Bryan Williams (so Nathan explains), greets me with a nod. I remember his name coming right before Nathan’s in the morning announcements.

“Congratulations,” I manage to say, sort of directed at everyone. Nathan grins.

“Not much to be excited about,” Andy says, rolling his eyes.

“It was purely a numbers issue,” Nathan says. “I promise. You’re more than good enough for varsity. Both of you are.”

Tom shrugs. “I’ll take anything. I didn’t expect to be playing again this year.”

“What happened?” I ask, since he’s looking at me.

“Sprained my ACL last year.”

“In junior high?” Andy raises an eyebrow.

“Tom plays hard,” Bryan says through a mouthful of French fries, punching him not too lightly on the arm. I laugh, starting to feel better, and pick up my carton of milk.

Suddenly I feel my chair jolt a few inches to the side. The carton slips out of my hand and chocolate milk goes everywhere—all over my tray, jeans, and the floor.

“You asshole,” Nathan says, jumping to his feet. Jonah is standing there, towering over my chair; it looks like he would have passed by without stopping, except Nathan’s blocking his way.

“Sorry, Amy,” Jonah says, turning to me, wide-eyed and completely full of it. “I am *so* sorry. That was an accident.”

“Bull shit it was.” Nathan’s face is red and his fists are clenched at his sides. The general area around the table quiets. My pulse is rising and I can feel my breathing start to

block up. I'm standing too, although I don't remember getting up; vaguely, I feel the cold, sticky milk, soaked through to my thighs.

Something awful is going to happen if I don't act. Nathan just made it onto the team. If he fights Jonah again, he'll face suspension, not just from school but from the sport. And I'll have to face Jonah.

"It's okay," I say loudly, to both Jonah and Nathan. "I'm kind of a klutz."

Nathan looks at me, mouthing "*Seriously?*" I stare steadily at him, trying to say what I can't actually say in front of everybody. I don't know what expression forms on my face, but after watching me for a long moment, Nathan's expression turns from anger to a cold kind of detachment.

"Get out of here, Decker," he says, stalking off towards the condiment station, where he starts yanking napkins out of the dispensers. I look down at the front of my legs.

"I hope that comes out," Jonah says, sickly-sweet politeness saturating his voice and face. Before he walks away, he leans just close enough for me to hear what he whispers next.

"I'm glad we're on the same page, New Girl."

### Waking Up

There was little to do now but count the minutes and try not to panic.

Kara Hooper sat in a corner of the quirky little sandwich shop she'd looked up on the internet, half an hour early for the hardest thing she had ever done. More precisely, she was five or ten minutes early, but Liam had texted her moments after she arrived saying he was stuck in traffic and would be late to their meeting.

She shuddered at the word 'meeting'; it gave her the impression she should be wearing a grey pinstriped blazer and pencil skirt, sitting with a clipboard poised on her knee

ready to take notes from a Powerpoint presentation. A meeting sounded far too impersonal considering Kara and Liam's past. It made the room feel colder. She was craving Sprite but ordered hot tea instead when the waitress stopped by.

"Do you want honey and lemon with that, sweetie?"

"Milk, please." The woman looked at her like she was crazy, but it was her job to accommodate, so she walked away without comment.

Kara wished she'd brought a journal or something. The last few days were the first time she'd found herself *wanting* to write in months. Writing is hard when you're trying to escape the whole feeling thing. To quote the rejection letter she'd received a few weeks ago, writing "kind of demands you go there." The editor called her poem inhuman. He'd also said it was mechanically perfect. Like a robot.

Her tea arrived with a little ceramic pitcher of milk. It was the same shape as one you'd imagine held lemonade but about two inches tall. The blue china was pretty next to the daisy-yellow cup and saucer. The dishes on nearby tables all looked delicate and pretty, which was strange against the rough backdrop of the shop: mismatched, grainy wooden furniture and a creaky, uneven floor. Kara imagined two managers with differing tastes, probably a man and woman, probably a quarreling husband and wife. But the contrast brought balance instead of tension. And the heavy alternative music playing at a low volume in the background added a whole other level of interest.

Enough to keep her from reaching an unmanageable level of anxiety as she waited for Liam.

Liam Wallace, not a descendant of the guy in *Braveheart* though he looked the part, had asked Kara to marry him six months ago in the little chapel on the edge of the campus grounds where they both took grad classes. She had hated him for doing that, because it was



one of her most favorite places to sit or write or pray, and she hadn't been able to go back since out of the sheer clarity of that memory.

She'd told him no. She said she knew she wasn't capable yet of all the things marriage would ask of her. She said she didn't want to go into that unprepared, unready. And she wasn't ready. Although he didn't try to argue, she worked so hard to defend her answer that in the end she used all of the clichéd phrases you think of when you imagine that kind of situation or see one in a movie, and she watched his face turn frighteningly cold and hard as he stood up from kneeling on one knee and walked away.

But the ring he left on the floor, shut in a palm-sized scarlet box. Kara didn't think to run after him and return it until he was long gone.

Now she watched the second hand on the gigantic clock hanging on the opposite wall. The piece matched neither the delicate dishware or the rugged walls and floors: all stainless steel parts and straight, clean lines. The second hand's ticking was so loud Kara could pick it out from across the shop despite all the noise in between. She wondered if the clock was a badly chosen gift.

Liam graduated a week later and then summer began, and Kara let fear keep her from contacting him in all that time since. She got the usual advice from friends and her mother—that time would heal—but if they meant it would help her stop caring about him, it didn't. It acted sort of as a numbing agent, but did little else. Many things could still rip that gash wide open again with ease. It got harder to ignore every time she passed a place on campus where they liked to study together, or was forced to sit alone at 'their' table in the dining hall because the rest were occupied.

Things got marginally easier as the months went by, and life refused to stop, however she felt. But by the time his birthday came in mid-October, Kara knew she wasn't

moving on and didn't actually want to keep trying. She called Bailey, her undergrad roommate, and told her what she wanted to do.

"Kara, enough time has passed for me to be blunt with you," Bailey said. "I think you're acting a bit crazy."

"And why's that?"

"You're feeling emotional, missing having someone, jealous of people who do. It's natural, but you can't let it rule you."

"It isn't ruling me," Kara said, and it was true. "That's the way people feel for a few weeks, a month or two. It's been six months. If I was meant to move on I would know it."

"Oh, right. I should have asked. What's *God* telling you?"

Kara hung up. Because she thought she did know what God was telling her, but she knew Bailey didn't really care to hear.

She sat in silence for a long time before she called Liam and asked to meet, forcing herself not to dissect his every word and inflection for hidden meanings. He said yes, and that was enough for her.

That was a week ago. It was a lesson in endurance to make it through seven days without changing her mind. She willed herself to put away her computer, Kindle, and cell phone and do nothing but read, write, pray, or walk when she wasn't at work or class. She knew it was the best (and for her the only) way to slow her mind and focus on what was going on with herself, her heart. For the first few days, she felt intensely uncomfortable without the usual methods of escape. But after a while she felt as if she was continually waking up, like opening the window to a cool and clear summer morning that hadn't yet absorbed the heat of the day. She felt like she could breathe freely, where before she hadn't realized she was struggling for air.

She knew what she wanted, more or less, and she actually felt good about it.

In fact, she hadn't even begun to feel anxious about seeing Liam again until she woke up at about five thirty that morning. When it did come, it was sudden and piercing. She tried walking, praying, taking a hot bath. No matter what she did, the familiar old symptoms of panic would not leave her alone. She felt herself grasping for anything to cover them up, push them down. She could call the guy from work who had recently asked her out; she knew from the way he greeted her every day since that he hadn't given up, though she'd said no. But that wasn't what she wanted. She could go back to internet surfing and pass the in-between hours mindlessly, numbing the nerves. But she didn't want to let go of this newness that was still so young.

So she put everything away and listened to the possibly insane voice that was telling her to let the anxiety run its course, not to ignore it. To go back to the chapel.

So she did. And if she was feeling it before, it was nothing compared to the attack that hit her there.

Now, just thinking about it, Kara felt her heartbeat start to break out of its rhythm and her hands go clammy. Because on her way to the chapel she had been picturing herself kneeling in one of the pews and being overwhelmed by a sense of peace. She thought that sounded like something God would do. But what she found instead was Liam.

From the back, she could make him out only vaguely in the shadows cast by candlelight, but she heard him speaking out loud. He didn't stop when she opened the door, and she realized he was so focused he hadn't heard her come in. She should have left, but instead she hid, crouching down between the pews at the back, listening.

"...don't know what it is you want me to do about all this," Liam was saying. His tone was so blunt and straightforward she thought that, instead of praying, he must have been

talking to someone else up there with him—the chaplain, maybe. Someone she hadn't seen in the dim light. But no one responded.

Liam kept talking. "It feels like I barely know her, but I can't get her out of my head. I've tried. You know I have. But this—this is serious, isn't it? Isn't that what you're trying to make me see? Because I do see that. I don't know what you want from me but I. . . I just want her."

He fell silent, but Kara felt blood rushing to her face and could hear it in her ears like waves crashing on the sea. It was deafening. She waited, silent and still, until she saw a flash of light coming from the door as it opened and shut. And then she let the tears come.

She was stupid. Or delusional. Maybe Bailey was right. Because she had been almost certain that the story of their relationship had not yet reached its ending—that there was an act two to all this—but six months' intermission had passed, and not only had Liam moved on; he was in love with someone else.

Kara knelt there in the last pew, holding the little scarlet box in both hands. She had at least been certain of *her* next step in all this. How could she go through with the meeting knowing what she now knew?

She cycled through half a dozen possibilities. She could cancel, though her mind refused to come up with a reasonable excuse. She could just not show up. She could come up with something else to say, some supremely convincing speech about how her life was better for having rejected him and how she would go on from here with peace about their breakup. Show him she was fine. Prove whatever it was she had to prove.

And she supposed some of it was true. As she calmed down, she realized she wouldn't have changed saying no to him when he proposed, even if she could. She wouldn't be where she was now, knowing both that she wanted him and that she didn't *need* him, if

she had said yes six months ago. It hurt hearing that he was in love with someone else when she still loved him and still thought they had a future. But it wouldn't kill her, and part of her knew that. A tiny part, smothered by the shock of hearing Liam talk about wanting someone else.

And now she sat, sipping her tea but mostly just holding it tightly between her hands, even though the porcelain nearly scalded her. The ring box was tucked into her jacket pocket, resting at her belt line. It made her skin tingle

“Hey, sorry I'm late.”

She looked up. Liam was standing beside the opposite chair, shoulders tucked up around his ears and hands stuffed in his pockets. His already-ruddy complexion was enhanced by the windy weather. He offered a tentative smile.

“You can sit,” she said, overtaken by a polite air that seemed to be functioning on autopilot, although all she could think upon hearing his voice was the last thing she'd heard him say, just hours before: *I just want her.*

He unzipped his jacket but left it on, like she had. “Cold out there.”

“I know.” *Cold in here too*, she thought.

The waitress appeared almost immediately, leaving only a moment for discomfort to set in. Liam ordered coffee and a blueberry scone.

They talked for a little while about the expected things—what they'd been doing since May, family developments (his sister had her baby in August)—and it was surprisingly comfortable. Liam was kind and seemed sincere, if a little nervous; Kara assumed he didn't know why she'd asked to meet and was (rightly) anticipating a more serious turn in the conversation.

And she had to get to it eventually. She had strength for a moment's wordless prayer and then slipped her hand into her pocket, managing a deep breath.

"So I know it's been—a long time since we've talked, and—well, I have a lot to say, if you're willing to listen."

No change in his expression; he was still looking at her steadily. "Of course," he said.

"First, I'm sorry," she said. "For hurting you—for the fact that I had to say no. And for the way I tried to justify it. It was all the stuff no one wants to hear when they're hurting, and I still hate that I let myself say it."

He nodded slowly, staying silent.

She went on, only knowing what she was supposed to say as she formed the words to say it. "Anyway, a lot has changed for me. I was really naïve, and I know now that being ready isn't everything. I doubt I'll ever be completely ready, but that's not going to keep me from saying yes if—I don't know. If the timing is right." She shook her head, scolding herself for dissolving into clichés again.

"Okay," was all he said.

"Anyway." She pulled her hand out of the jacket pocket, holding the ring box out to him. "This is yours."

Liam stared at it blankly.

"I know you've probably moved on with your life," she said. "You should save it. For the right person."

His eyes crept up from the box to her face. It took a long time for him to speak—long enough for Kara to wonder if anything she'd said made sense. When he did, his hand wandered to the handle of his coffee cup, away from the box.

"You really said no because you thought you weren't ready?"

“Yeah. That’s what I tried to explain.”

“I thought. . .” Liam shook his head. “I don’t know. I thought it was mostly a cover.”

“A cover?”

“Like when people say ‘It’s not you, it’s me,’ when they really mean it’s you.” He shrugged, staring at his coffee mug. “I mean, not that it was a total lie. I just. . .I figured you didn’t love me and didn’t want to say it.”

Kara shook her head slowly, back and forth. “How could you think that?” she whispered. Reached up on an impulse to rub the stinging out of her eyes, then let her hand fall back, knowing it was no use. She’d cried in front of him before.

“I don’t know. Kara, you. . .you confuse me sometimes. It’s like there are days I barely know you.”

Liam’s words had a familiar ring to them, but Kara wasn’t sure why.

“Well, you’re wrong,” she said, her voice thick and wet. “It wasn’t a cover. I love you. Loved you.” Her face flushed.

He was smiling at her. Something like hope lit up his eyes. Why was he smiling at her if he was in love with some other woman?

Unless.

“Kara.”

“What?” she snapped, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. She pushed the ring box across the table. “I told you, take it. It’s the only reason we met today, so you can go now.”

“The only reason?”

“Yes,” she whispered. But there was no backbone in it.

Liam's gentle smile sent a warm buzz through her. He nudged the box aside and took her hand.

"Liar," he said.



## Appendix D: Blog Posts

Throughout the trial periods of my experiment, I kept track of each day's writing through a blog. The reflections follow.

*15 July*

Project: Started an open letter to a real person (who shall not be named).

Notes: Didn't remember to start until 11:25 p.m. Fell asleep halfway in, thereby failing to complete the hour for the first day. Off to a lovely start.

This was a therapeutic kind of writing if there ever was. Open letters can work that way, I think. It was easy to write (so easy it felt like cheating), mostly because it was unpolished rant. Anyone can do that. But it helped to get the words flowing again.

Goals: Stay awake next time. Write something that takes effort.

*16 July*

Project: Fiction in the form of a diary. High school graduate sets out to conquer 5-k training program with her two equally-out-of-shape best friends while trying to ignore the unrequited love problem and the murder of crows haunting her neighborhood.

Notes: Lots of fun. Still having trouble with distractions (tumblr is only a click away!), but I wrote the entire hour, give or take a few.

Goals: Stare at work even when I'm not sure what to say next instead of going off to internet surfing. Continue the story—I like where it's going.

*17 July*

Project: Same as day 2.

Notes: Way harder time focusing today, probably because I have roughly 200 things to accomplish by the end of the summer (and most of them this week). I made some story

developments though, and they came to me almost automatically. I love when a story does that.

Goals: Same as day 2.

*18 July*

Project: Continuing from days 2 & 3.

Notes: Ugh.

Goal: Do better.

*19 July*

Project: Same...

Notes: I am finding that I keep pushing writing off till the end of the day. There's work in the morning, yes, but after that I could write except that I want to 'unwind' and do all sorts of other little things that add up to hours until it's late evening. But when I sit down, there are thoughts that have been milling around throughout the day that are usually ready to come out, and I can tell already that getting into the routine is helping that to grow.

Today, however, I feel pretty blocked. Possibly from sheer exhaustion.

Goal: Write with internet off. Work through the block.

*20 July*

Project: Trying something different today.

Notes: Pain does not always aid in creativity. Sometimes it stifles it until if you can write at all, you can only write explicitly about what hurts. And even that doesn't say enough.

Goal: Stick with fiction whenever possible.

*21 July*

Project: Back to the story from previous days. It needs a working title...

Notes: Things got intense. I kind of forgot I was writing, instead of just seeing the story being written. That was pretty awesome. But it needs heavy revision.

Goal: More days like this!

*22 July*

Project: Continued from day 7...

Notes: Still really hard to focus. This late in the day (it's 10:30 p.m. now), I am tired and still processing everything that has happened since I woke up.

Also having difficulties with character development and continuity, but I guess that's what revision is for, and this month isn't about revision.

Goal: Write earlier in the day whenever possible.

*23 July*

Project: Bit of creative nonfiction brainstorming.

Notes: Not good. I feel so unmotivated it's pathetic.

Goal: Figure out why?

*24 July*

Project: Continuing the story from previous days

Notes: Let me just say, the writing thing sucks when you've got a monster headache worsened by the light from a computer screen, and you have to work at six in the morning.

Goal: Keep this up. Getting really worn out.

*25 July*

Project: Decided to write some poetry for the first time since spring semester.

Notes: Poetry is a lot different from fiction and takes a whole different part of the brain. It's not easy, but it feels easy, until you realize what you're writing is crap. That's what it's like for me, anyway. Still, it gives me some raw material to work with.

Goal: Spend at least one more day writing poetry in the next week.

*12 August*

Some of you might have noticed that two weeks have gone by without an update on my thesis project. To be frank, that's because I am not positive I want to finish it. Certain circumstances caused me to have to stop for a few days, and then I began to realize I wasn't finding much fulfillment from it in the first place.

Nothing is decided for sure yet, but for now I won't be posting updates.

*1 September*

Project: An ongoing fiction thing we'll call Diner Girl.

Notes: I've been writing here and there daily for the past week, so it has been getting easier to focus for longer periods of time. Still some difficulty checking email and so on every now and then, but on the whole I spend almost the entire hour writing or staring at what I'd just written.

Goal: Keep it up! Continue eliminating distractions. Aim to actually finish something, even if it's a badly-written first draft of something.

*2 September*

Project: A letter and Diner Girl.

Notes: Really productive. I only clicked on Facebook twice and both times I closed it before it loaded. Progress!

*3 September*

Project: Diner Girl.

Notes: Had to split my hour into two segments due to an insane schedule. However, the time I did spend (a 20-minute period and a 45-minute one later) were both productive.

Much easier to focus today. It's great when it starts to feel like the story is coming through you, not from you.

*4 September*

Project: Diner Girl and an as-yet untitled short story.

Notes: Wrote for even longer than required. I was in the groove for some reason, with the short story, anyway. Diner Girl is getting to that inevitable (for me) point where I feel like it's going nowhere and I'm just rambling hoping to get to the stuff I want to write. Treating any part of the book like that is pointless, though, because as they say (they=Robert Frost), "No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader." If nothing is coming out of the writing, it's probably better to change things up.

*5 September*

Project: The short story from September 4.

Notes: Hard to focus today, although still fairly productive. Distractions kept creeping in. It's easy to let that happen with so much going on. I think the writing is less connected when I write distracted. However, I'm leaving a lot for revisions, as is the point of first drafts.

*6 September*

Project: Short story.

Notes: Severe schedule limitations meant I could only write for half an hour today. Fairly productive for the time allowed. It has a direction, although I don't know what the outcome is going to be. Hopefully the characters will let me know soon.

Goal: Write a full hour, no breaks, on the 7th.

*8 September*

Project: Revising and expanding "The Game" (a WIP of undetermined form).

Notes: Multitasking is a myth, but a tempting, tempting myth. It's so easy to start one task and then start another, and then another, thinking it's somehow more productive to make progress on many small things at once than to complete one significant thing. It's a lie, in case you didn't know. I am still trying to break this habit.

*9 September*

Project: "The Game" and the short story from last week.

Notes: It's a challenge to work in a public place with people I know. It's also a challenge to work when you spill a few ounces of water on your keyboard and have to go into disaster management mode for 20 minutes. Still, I wrote a lot today. I'd say I dealt well with pressure.

*10 September*

Project: Short story and "The Game."

Notes: Spent a lot of time staring at pages today, which is a little better than flipping over to email and Facebook when I can't figure out what to write next, anyway, so I'll take it. I also lost focus on the short story, which is why I switched to the other project. I think it would be more beneficial to work on one project a day.

*11 September*

Project: "The Game."

Notes: More time staring, and a lot of time trying to tune out voices from the room around me. It's not always possible to write in a solitary place, but it is definitely ideal. The less distractions, both visual and auditory, the better.

I only got about a page and a half written during the hour, but my mind was going much more quickly than that. A lot of ideas for the story developed, and I like where it's

going even though I've got a lot of writing to do before I can implement some of the ideas I want to use. I've been having so much fun writing this!

*12 September*

Project: "The Game."

Notes: Talk about intense. Today was one of those rare days when I could feel the story coming faster than I could type. So much growth and development, and all I did was finish the second chapter (which I suppose means I should italicize the title now, since it's looking like a novel-to-be). I like the pace, I like the characters, I like where things seem to be going. I know it's a first draft, but I think it's a very workable first draft. And I love this process--how the more I write, the more I want to write. There is definitely truth to the theory that inspiration comes with discipline and commitment. To write when I don't feel like it is hard, but doing that is what makes the good days so good.

*13 September*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: Not the best hour of writing I've had this week, that's for sure.

*15 September*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: Not the best, but certainly not the worst! An important scene came up today, one of those ones where it kind of felt like the characters were telling me themselves what to write. (I'm not crazy.) (Maybe a little.)

*17 September*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: Today was unbelievably hectic, and I fit in half an hour of character sketching, but that's about it. However, there's something to be said for sitting cramped in a

car with a tiny notebook to talk about your character's sad but redeemable history.

*19 September*

Project: *The Game*. (Did I mention that's a working title?)

Notes: This week has been really tough, and my work today showed it. It was more difficult to keep writing than last week, less came of it, and I was much more eager to be done than I would normally be. It's clear that the more I write, the more I want to write, and likewise, the less I write, the less I want to write.

*20 September*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: Much better today, I sometimes get the sense that I'm trying to walk through a foot of snow as I'm writing this, but even then it seems to be taking me in directions I wasn't expecting. I am up to the fourth chapter, which is kind of amazing to me when I think about where the story was two weeks ago. I still have a lot of research to do to work out some logistics and factual issues, but for now I'm loving the writing itself.

*21 September*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: Quite hard to focus today; I couldn't do much more than edit what I've already written and add a few sentences. I think I'm not sure exactly where the story needs to go next. Outlining might be a good idea before I write tomorrow. Also, note to self: don't consume sugar in significant amounts before writing.

*22 September*

Project: *The Game*. (Someday I'll come up with a real title.)

Notes: Today went much better. Some writer somewhere said he always stops while he still knows what's coming next; it makes picking up again go more smoothly. I'm taking



his advice today, though I wish I could have just kept going.

*23 September*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: Rough. Couldn't get more than half an hour of writing in. And it wasn't good.

I'm wondering if I need to outline to get any further in this story.

*24 September*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: Slow going and hard to focus, but I don't want to give up on this story. It's moving a little, and baby steps are better than no steps.

*25 September*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: A lot better this time. I had the self-control to stay on the Word screen the entire time, even though I didn't write much. I think even just staring at the words does some good. I think the story is picking up, so we'll see where it goes.

*26 September*

Project: What else?

Notes: Not bad today. I see a little more of where the story is going, and an important relationship is starting to develop. I somehow ended up on Facebook for five minutes or so... strange how that happens.

*27 September*

Project: Same.

Notes: Whoops. Forgot to take notes.

*29 September*

Project: Again, same.

Notes: Writing after coffee is quite helpful. So is writing right after a workshop that discussed an earlier chapter of the piece you're working on. Keeps me in the voice of that character, and helps me think about the criticism from the workshop while moving forward.

*30 September*

Project: Same...

Notes: The scene I just wrote (in a very rough form) was probably the most emotionally charged scene so far in the book, and hence it was extremely draining to write. It was also the scene that has most consistently held my focus while writing. Generally, the more crucial the scene, the more intense the writing experience is. Unfortunately the scene is one that takes place much later in the book, so I have no excuse to keep working on it now.

Back to chapter 5!

*4 October*

Project: Same.

Notes: Hard to focus, which makes sense, as I wrote only sporadically since September 30. To say this week was from a lake of fire would only be exaggerating a little.

*5 October*

Project: Guess.

Notes: Not even worth talking about.

*6 October*

Project: *The Game*.

Notes: I feel like I'm getting stuck, so I spent most of this hour rereading sentences from the last couple of pages and hoping what I was adding made sense. Focusing was fantastic (read; not fantastic).

*7 October*

Project: ...

Notes: Not bad today. Easier to focus than the last couple of days, but I might just be riding on momentum, since I've also been working on an 8-page paper in all of my spare time.

*1 November*

I wrote for several hours today—and by several, I mean somewhere in the realm of five or six. It felt good. I don't want to do anything else with my time right now, but sadly I have other responsibilities to attend to. I have been focused on thoroughly revising my story, rounding out characters and correcting discrepancies and plot holes. But I've also written a good chunk of totally new material.

*2 November*

Today, I spent several hours writing, but it was extremely hard to produce. I am so overwhelmed with different parts of my story that I felt a bit paralyzed, not sure where to go next or how to get there. It was slow going, overall. I think this is where further discipline is needed to get myself actually making words happen.

*3 November*

Many hours of writing today, along with much rearrangement of scenes. It's been pretty taxing, and I would be much more focused if I didn't have that silly school thing to worry about. Still, I think it's going pretty well, in that the story is moving and developing and that page count just keeps getting bigger.

*4 November*

After yesterday, I think I actually wore myself out on writing. I've spent some time staring at the word document and scrolling through chapters, but not much has come of it.

*5 November*

Writing went better today. Starting to get a better feel for the next few chapters after a really hard time sorting out that darn chapter 6.

*6 November*

Wrote in a slow but linear fashion today. It went fairly well—I tried to focus on writing straight through a scene instead of letting myself get caught up in the idiosyncrasies of each sentence. Trying to save that for revision. That's what November's all about.

*8 November*

I wrote a lot today, but also came to the conclusion that this book is going to end up losing steam if I don't do some serious planning. Now that I know the characters fairly well and have an idea in mind of where they're headed, I could benefit from some serious chapter-by-chapter outlining. Otherwise I'll somehow end up with a 120-page 'novel' when I wanted twice that.

However, this thesis is mainly about the writing. So I will say that I continue to learn and understand more about the characters the more I spend time writing about them, and that is true of today as usual.

*10 November*

Writing had to be condensed today. Had to. There are times, believe it or not, when health needs to come first. But I wrote for half an hour or so, finding it a bit hard because I haven't done the aforementioned planning yet. Still, the story must go on.

*11 November*

Wow, did I write. Nothing like pressure to get you moving. I wrote without stopping, and it might not have been fantastic, or fantastically polished, but the story moved forward and I discovered something I didn't expect. So today I would answer the question "Does discipline yield inspiration?" with a resounding *yes*.

*12 November*

What a day! I was overwhelmed for most of the day thinking about how much work my novel needs and how little time I can actually devote to it with my full attention--darn that school thing. So I took a trip to Muggswigz and started by posting my main dilemma on the NaNoWriMo forums in hopes of some help with my main character, Amy. I didn't expect such a quick or helpful response, but I now have a direction to take that will round her out more and give the story a lot more depth. So I've been writing quite prolifically for the past couple of hours. Oh, for more time!

*15 November*

Today, I decided to break from the novel for a bit and work on a short story I started at the beginning of the semester, before my whole life was about Amy Rutter. A fresh look at it really helped me move forward and see the story from a distance so I could understand it more clearly.

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*Note: There are several books that overlap two or even all of these categories. The divisions are by no means concrete; they should, however, help to clarify which works most influenced the respective parts of my paper.*

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