

ABSTRACT

BEAUDOIN, MARIA ELAINE. *Girl Defending Herself Against Love*. (Under the direction of John Kessel.)

Kali Nichols is a young woman struggling to build an art career and a prosperous life for herself in New York City. She moved to the city on an art scholarship from Winston-Salem, North Carolina. While at Hunter College, Kali tries to sell her paintings with no success. But her life changes when she enters an art competition and meets an ambitious art dealer, Bailey Sterne, who offers to represent Kali in his drive to open his own gallery one day.

As Kali struggles to create a new life for herself in New York, all of her work is ruined when her alcoholic mother who comes to visit her. Kali struggles to understand her relationship with her mother and her relationships with her other family members who she believes have abandoned her. As Kali fights harder to distance herself from the past, she finds herself being drawn back into it. In the end, Kali must come to understand her own relationship with her mother to understand herself and to be truly happy.

GIRL DEFENDING HERSELF AGAINST LOVE

by

MARIA ELAINE BEAUDOIN

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

English

Raleigh

2003

APPROVED BY:

Wilton Barnhardt

John Morillo

John Kessel, Chair of Advisory Committee

BIOGRAPHY

Maria Elaine Beaudoin grew up in Orlando, Florida and moved to North Carolina in the fall of 1997. The following fall, she enrolled in Durham Technical Community College, and earned an Associate of Arts degree in the summer of 1999. Maria enrolled in North Carolina Central University in the fall of 1999 on a transfer scholarship. While at NCCU, she served as Chief Contributing Writer for *The Campus Echo*, the student newspaper. Maria also freelanced for local newspapers, including *The Herald-Sun*, *The Independent*, and *The Triangle Tribune*. She also published a personal essay in *The Urban Hiker*. While at NCCU, she earned *The Independent* Steve Schewel Award for Most Promising Journalist, the University Award for Academic Excellence, and a Student Leadership Award. She graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in May 2001. Maria entered North Carolina State University in the fall of 2001 on a teaching assistantship to pursue her degree in English. In her first semester at NCSU, Maria decided to pursue her interests in creative writing, as well as literature studies, and opted to write a second thesis to fulfill the requirements for both concentrations. While working on her graduate degree, Maria taught as a teaching assistant and worked at *The Herald-Sun* covering the crime beat. While at NCSU, Maria also earned the Robbie S. Knott Scholarship. Maria will graduate summa cum laude with a Master of Arts degree in English, with concentrations in American Literature and Creative Writing, in May 2003. She will spend the summer in New York while on an internship for *Newsweek Magazine*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the members of my thesis committee for their tireless readings and suggestions for revision. I would like to thank John Kessel for his detailed suggestions and lengthy discussions of ways to improve the novel, and for his quick and intense reading while life continued to make other demands. I would like to thank Wilton Barnhardt for his constant re-reading of the novel, in workshop and on the committee, over the last year, and for his patient explanations and anecdotes about life in New York, a place that I have painfully tried to recreate from my own imaginings. Finally, I would also like to thank John Morillo for his enthusiasm and his alternative perspective, for challenging the philosophical tenets of the novel.

I would like to thank Doug Reimers for his constant re-reading of the novel, beginning with its inception as a hastily drafted story with false starts and endings. He has been instrumental in helping to shape the story with his constant suggestions for character and plot, and his overall willingness to be a sounding board for ideas or just plain ranting.

Personally, I would like to thank Chris Addeo for his overall support and patience. He has been there to boost my spirits when I would have rather burned the story to a pile of ashes before looking at it again. Finally, I would like to thank Chuck Reisinger who has been a foundation for me for the last six years, before I even cooked up the crazy idea of becoming a “serious” writer. He has listened to complaints and hopes and self-deprecations all with the same unwavering support and encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Prologue: Weeping Woman.....	1
Part One.....	26
Chapter 1: City Activities with Subway.....	26
Chapter 2: Attempting the Impossible.....	47
Chapter 3: The Human Condition.....	67
Chapter 4: Reptiles.....	88
Chapter 5: Spider on the Window, Monster in the Land.....	107
Interlude: In The Grass.....	121
Part Two.....	138
Chapter 6: We Are Not What We Seem.....	138
Chapter 7: Son of Man.....	156
Chapter 8: Angels and Devils.....	179
Chapter 9: Eidos.....	196
Chapter 10: Magic Mirror.....	215
Chapter 11: Cyphers of Identity.....	232
Interlude: The Dance of Life.....	249
Part Three.....	263
Chapter 12: Half-Caste Child.....	263
Chapter 13: The Persistence of Memory.....	283
Chapter 14: Venus of the Rags.....	300

Chapter 15: Death and the Masks.....	314
Chapter 16: Your Body is a Battleground?.....	330
Chapter 17: Song of Love.....	342
Chapter 18: The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living.....	353
Epilogue: Res Ipsa.....	370

Weeping Woman

(Prologue)

Kali walked briskly down the hall, her oversized shirt billowing behind her, flagging bright colored polka dots over a pair of hot pink leggings. She flung open her locker and quickly switched out her books. She checked her appearance in the small mirror on the door, opening her eyes wide and rotating her head. She bared her teeth, checking for lipstick, and rubbed the makeup around her lips and eyes. She smoothed the stray hairs on her eyebrows back into an even line. Satisfied, she turned and walked down the hall.

As she moved down the brightly lit main corridor towards her art class, she spotted Eric Peterson walking towards her. She looked around quickly and saw a friend nearby at her locker.

“Hey Tiffany! What are you up to?”

“Nothing much,” Tiffany said. “I’ve got Spanish. I’m about to be late actually. I couldn’t figure out how to work these new locks. Where are you headed?”

Kali looked over her shoulder at Eric who was passing her in the hall. Time seemed to slow while she watched him. Eric was the kind of boy that every woman can remember from high school—the one that some claimed to come to school for—the one that they wanted, but hung back from reluctantly in intimidation. He had soft, brown hair that fell down over his forehead and even tan skin. He wasn’t one of the popular boys; he was one of the rebels. He was tall and skinny, not athletic. He wore baggy pants that hung loosely around his hips, and he walked with a sure step, exuding confidence. He was the boy that

Kali came to school for, and he was also her boyfriend. He glanced at Kali but made no indication of acknowledgment; he turned his attention back to a friend walking by his side and said something to make him laugh. Kali dropped her head and rubbed her arms. Even though they'd been dating for two months now, Eric and Kali still never talked to one another at school. In fact, they didn't even acknowledge that they knew each other.

“Kali?” Tiffany laughed. “What are you looking at?”

“Oh, nothing. I just spaced out I guess,” Kali said, returning her attention to her friend. “Let's see...where am I going now? Oh yeah, I've art with 'Pig Out.'”

“That's *Mrs.* Pigott to you,” Tiffany returned.

Eric had passed but Kali looked over her shoulder once more to catch a last glimpse of him as he rounded the corner.

Kali went to her final class and sat in the back row in the far right corner by the window overlooking the highway. She listened attentively as her teacher went over concepts of lines of perspective and she opened her sketchbook to a picture of a young woman she had seen in the mall one day.

Wherever she went, Kali subconsciously absorbed her environment. She also had an active imagination and spent hours daydreaming and reminiscing about places she had been or people she had met. She liked to imagine the intimate lives of the people she saw. She took in their appearance and gathered what she could of their lives. At the mall one day, she saw a young girl with brown curly hair and overheard her talking to her friends about her boyfriend who was in a band. She wore brown Doc Marten's, a pair of loose-fitting blue jeans, and a light cream, knit sweater. No makeup covered her features. She wore what

looked like a piece of metal twined into a band on her ring finger. Kali heard her talking again about wedding plans. She knew then that she wore a guitar string twined into a makeshift engagement ring. The girl and her boyfriend were bohemians and didn't care about material things like rings or large weddings. They would probably be married in someone's backyard or a field of daisies somewhere, and her boyfriend's friends would play in the band at the reception. When Kali began to sketch, if she didn't remember the way someone or something looked exactly, she would draw on her memories to produce the image; she would draw on her perceptions. But, though her drawings were technically skillful, her portraits of the human form always lacked the full energy and life found in the model.

Besides her art, Kali had no interest in her schoolwork. When her teachers would yell at her for talking or passing notes in class, she would doodle in her notebook to look like she was taking notes on the lecture. On several occasions, she would be drawing aimlessly, and one of her classmates would turn around in the desk and watch her in awe. Several people had expression admiration for her work and encouraged her to become a professional artist—her fellow classmates, her art teacher, her mother.

Kali passed the rest of her art class by sketching a new portrait of Eric. He was the best-looking boyfriend she had ever had, though she hadn't had many. To add to his appeal, he was a senior and she was only a sophomore. They'd met a year before through a mutual friend. When Kali moved into the house around the block from Eric several months earlier, she started going to his house just to talk or spend the afternoon. After a few weeks, Kali believed herself in a relationship. Kali was surprised that Eric was interested in her at all since she always thought that he'd had a crush on her friend, Sarah. All of the boys liked

Sarah; she was always seen as the prettier of the two friends, and none of the boys paid any attention to Kali. Eric never really said that he wanted to be her boyfriend; it was just understood. Every day after school she came over, and everyday they kissed for two hours until his mom came home and Kali had to leave.

Kali was jolted out of her reverie by the sound of the bell. She quickly gathered up her sketchbook and her other books and walked to her bus. She took a last trip to her locker to dump her books and made one more check on her appearance. As she walked down the ramp to find her bus, she heard some boys she didn't know calling after her and making fun of her outfit. The boys laughed at their own jokes and Kali escaped quickly into her bus. She didn't look back or acknowledge that she heard them. When she sat down, she hung her head and her face burned. Her heart beat faster. She was afraid to look up and see if anyone else on the bus had heard them and was looking at her. She carefully glanced at the seat beside her and then lifted her head slightly. When she was sure that no one was looking at her, she relaxed. Before high school, she had been teased by boys and girls alike. They would call her "Kali-lingus" or would make fun of her for the way she dressed, or the way she looked, or her weight. She wasn't fat; she just wasn't as skinny as the other girls who were just reaching puberty. Kali had grown faster than they had; her breasts were fully developed by the time she was twelve. She had curves and muscle.

Kali sat by herself at the front of the bus. After a few minutes, Eric boarded the bus and walked passed her without even a glance in her direction. Kali looked out the window and remained frozen in that position, afraid to turn her head and meet Eric's gaze if he should turn to look at her. She was always aware that other people were watching her, especially

Eric. Eric walked to the back of the bus and sat in the back with the kids who thought they were too cool for everyone else. Kali never sat with him.

Kali arrived home to an empty house. Her younger brother had moved out a few months earlier and was living with their dad. Kali had thought about doing the same, but knew that she would like living with her dad even less than she did living with her mother. Kali's mother worked two jobs and was almost never at home. Mimi sold vacuums during the day and waited tables at night. Sometimes she would come home in the afternoon to change her clothes and then leave again. But usually she wouldn't be home until late into the night when Kali was already asleep.

After a quick change, Kali went over the Eric's house as usual and spent the afternoon with him. Eric let her in the side door into the family room that they had converted from a garage. He sat on the couch and flipped the channels on the television. Kali watched him expectantly, but when he did not initiate conversation with her, she sat down next to him. Eric lied in Kali's lap and watched television. Kali's breathing slowed and she stared at the television intensely. After almost an hour of tense silence, Eric drew Kali's head toward him and kissed her. They spent the rest of the time making out on his couch until Kali had to leave before his mom came home.

When Kali arrived back at her own house, Mimi was sitting at the desk in the living room. Kali always wondered why they kept a desk in the house since they had no computer, no typewriter, and no phone. The house they rented was one of the nicer houses that they had lived in since the walls were covered with wood paneling and there was carpet in all the rooms. But the paneling was cracked and peeling at the floorboard and the carpet was thick

brown shag. The large living room seemed spare since there was only a faded pink couch and a soiled, gray recliner in front of a small television perched on a short bookcase. A window air-conditioner unit churned over Mimi's head.

"Where were you?" her mother asked over her shoulder as Kali walked inside.

"Just over at Eric's," Kali said, pushing the heavy front door hard to make the latch catch. She had to bolt the lock to make sure the door stayed shut. "When are we going to get this door fixed?" she asked.

"When the landlord fixes it. Why didn't you leave a note?"

"I didn't think you'd be home," Kali said. "I thought you'd be working."

"Well, I wasn't," Mimi said and put the paperwork that she was looking at in a drawer. "You don't leave this house unless I know where you're going."

Kali shrugged. "Whatever."

"Don't fucking 'whatever' me Kali," Mimi said, her voice sharpening. "I'm your mother and you have to answer to me."

Kali was accustomed to these outbursts. She never knew what kind of mood her mother would be in when she saw her. Anything would set off her temper. Mimi could go from happy to sad to angry in a matter of minutes. Kali usually tried to stay quiet until the mood passed. But sometimes she couldn't help trying to defend herself. The older she got, the angrier she became, and the more she talked back.

"What were you doing over there anyway?" Mimi asked her.

"Nothing. We just hang out," Kali said and walked around the couch that had its back facing towards the door. She sank down on the couch and propped her feet on the wobbly

wooden coffee table. She looked at the table with disgust as it was covered with a fine layer of ash and rings of sticky dirt from where drinks had been rested on the surface. A large ashtray spilled over with cigarette butts.

“Is his mother home?” Mimi continued.

“Of course,” Kali lied.

“Yeah right. I’ll bet she is,” Mimi eyed her suspiciously for a moment. “Are you fucking him?”

“What? No!” Kali said, sitting up on the couch.

“You’re only 16 years old, Kali,” Mimi said and stood up with her arms crossed.

“You don’t need to be fooling around with some 18-year-old boy.”

“I’m not doing anything with him, mom.”

“Kali, I don’t want you fooling around with him and wind up pregnant like I did.”

Kali looked at Mimi from the corner of her eye. Mimi was still young, only in her early thirties. Her sandy brown hair was full and wavy. Her skin was smooth and rosey. Mimi could still date younger men because she didn’t show her age.

“I’m not having sex until I get married,” Kali said, lying back on the couch and lowering her voice. “It’s against my beliefs. You know that.”

“I know what you *said*. But I also know how I was at your age,” her voice softened.

“I don’t want you getting pregnant like I did. You need to be careful. You can still have a future.”

How horrible would that be, Kali thought. Mimi had told her countless times to be careful with men and to avoid getting pregnant. She didn’t want Kali to end up where Mimi

was—single and a mother and broke. Mimi’s pregnancy was the beginning of the downward spiral of her life.

Kali stared at her mother and said nothing.

Mimi watched her with her arms crossed. “Go do the dishes. You left them there from last night.”

Mimi walked down the hall to her bedroom and Kali did as she was told, like she always did. While Kali was doing the dishes, Mimi’s boyfriend, John, came home and went to Mimi’s bedroom. Kali looked out the window of the kitchen and watched their German Shepherd, Boss, lying in the dirt yard. His tail swished rhythmically, creating an angel in the sand. Boss’ food dish was empty and Kali looked over at a bag of food next to the refrigerator; it was empty. Ants crawled over Boss’ dish and dead bugs floated on top of his water. Gnats swarmed around his eyelashes and he blinked in annoyance while he tried to sleep.

Kali grabbed an open package of hotdogs from the refrigerator. She walked outside and Boss perked his head up and swished his tail quickly. Kali dumped the hotdogs in his bowl and he walked over to her slowly. She grabbed his water bowl and dumped it out. She ran it under a spigot and filled it with fresh water. Boss chomped down greedily on the fresh meat. Kali rested the water bowl on the ground and patted him on the head. He licked his chops and nudged his nose into her hand. Kali squatted next to him and rubbed his ears.

When Kali walked back inside, she could hear John and Mimi fighting in their room.

“Where else am I supposed to get the money to fix my car, John?” Mimi yelled. “You haven’t been giving me rent and you’ve been out of work for a month. What did you do all day anyway?”

“I helped Dave do some work at his bike shop,” John said. “I’ve been looking for a job and this guy that Pete knows might be able to get me some work laying carpet.”

“And what am I supposed to do in the meantime?”

“I don’t know, Mimi,” John said. “Maybe you should ask your mother for the money. Maybe Gus will loan it to you—give you an advance on your paycheck.”

“I doubt it,” Mimi said as she walked into the kitchen and grabbed her purse from the counter. “Kali, we’re going out to Vic’s. You’ll have to make yourself something for dinner.”

Vic’s was a cheap bar across town that Mimi and John went to a few times a week. They had become friends with the customers and the employees over time.

“But there’s nothing in the house to make,” Kali protested.

“You can fix some of those noodles, or have some cereal. Figure it out,” Mimi said as she turned to walk towards the door.

“Cereal for dinner?”

“You’ve done it before,” Mimi said and waved a hand over her shoulder. “Don’t start with me. I’m leaving. Don’t go anywhere. I love you.”

“Yeah, I love you, too,” Kali forced out. It was easier just to lie than to face the consequences of telling the truth.

Kali retreated to her room and lay on her bed. She opened her sketchbook and sharpened a lead pencil. She knew that this would not be the last lonely night she would face.

Most nights, she passed the hours by sketching or painting. She didn't have many paints, but she had received two small oil sets as Christmas presents the two previous years. That night, she worked on a portrait of a mother and daughter holding hands. The mother wore a long skirt and high boots. She wore her hair in a loose knot on her head and wore no jewelry. The young girl grew only to her waist and wore a matching skirt. She gazed up into her mother's face with a trusting smile. Kali rested her chin on her hand as she worked. Boss trotted across the grass and his metal chain clinked as he walked. The sound of wood slammed against concrete—maybe it was one of her neighbors working in the yard. Boss started barking and Kali sighed deeply. She squinted her eyes and focused on her sketch. She let the sounds around her fade away. She fell asleep with her cheek rested on her open sketchbook.

When Kali woke up the next morning, her mother wasn't there. Kali looked in her mother's room and then the living room and kitchen. When she didn't find her, she looked outside for her car and saw that it was gone. She tried to remember if she heard Mimi come in late or leave early that morning, but she didn't. Kali was somewhat surprised, since Mimi had never spent the whole night out without coming home. She wondered if she should call anyone or be concerned, but she was getting used to Mimi staying out later and later, so she was sure that Mimi's absence was no reason to be worried. Maybe Mimi had decided to push the boundaries of her behavior farther; maybe she had been home and left without Kali hearing her. Kali decided to go to school and was sure that Mimi would be home that night.

But when Kali woke up the day after that and Mimi still wasn't home, she started to worry. She went to school, but wasn't sure how to act or what to say to people. She saw her art teacher and he asked her how things were going. She hesitated and thought to tell him

about her mother. But she didn't want him to know. He was one of the only people that she would have wanted to confide in, but she couldn't bear the thought that he would know about her mother. Instead, she kept it inside her and told no one at school. She didn't joke or talk with her friends. She sat in class and stared out the window, unable to draw or pass notes. Her teachers and classmates gave her funny looks, but didn't say anything. She dreaded going home because she didn't want to return to an empty house. But she also didn't want to return home to find Mimi.

Kali told no one about her mother's disappearance. She thought she should tell the police, but was terrified of the consequences. She did not want to live with her father or be taken to foster care. Besides, what if Mimi came home right after she told the police? She would be furious. But Kali was still worried. Her mother had never left her alone for such a long time before. She could have been in an accident. Kali felt a tinge of guilt. What if her silence added to Mimi's danger?

Kali's grandmother lived about a half an hour from Kali and Mimi. Kali called her one day, and she came over to check on her.

"Well, this is a new low even for your mother," she said. "I guess you better get some clothes and come to my place."

Kali refused. She didn't want to miss any school; it was the only structure she had left. She needed it to build her future. Kali's grandmother told her to call her if Mimi did not come home by the next night or if she needed anything before then. Kali agreed. She knew that her grandmother would not call the police either. Though it was the first time that Mimi

had disappeared, they both knew that it wasn't out of character for her. Unfortunately, they both also knew that Kali could take care of herself in Mimi's absence.

But each night that Mimi did not come home, Kali's fear grew. She was unable to stay in the house alone. Each afternoon, she would go to Eric's house until it was time for his mother to come home. Then she would be forced to go home and scour the cabinets for what food she could find. When Mimi left, there was a half a box of cereal left, enough milk for one bowl, some sliced American cheese, a half a loaf of white bread, two packages of instant noodles, some miscellaneous canned goods, and a refrigerator-door full of condiments. Kali had no money of her own and the food supply in the house was dwindling quickly. She ate less and became more creative in her meal preparations. When she ran out of milk and cheese, she sprinkled cereal and spread some mustard on bread for a sandwich.

After she ate, if she could, she would leave in search of friends to visit. Sometimes, she would get lucky and could spend most of the evening watching T.V. or playing games with friends. Sometimes she even got a meal. But, most of the time, she wasn't allowed to stay because her friends had homework to do or it was just too late. Some nights, Kali simply walked the streets until she was forced to return home by the need for sleep. Kali always fought the return to her dark and empty house. Somehow, she felt safer on the streets than she did in her own house.

On the sixth night, Kali searched the cabinets for dinner and found only a can of corn and six cans of tomato paste. She thought about calling her grandmother again, but didn't want her to insist on taking Kali back to her house. She grabbed the corn and poured the can

into a pot. She looked in the refrigerator and found some soy sauce, which she sprinkled on the corn. Kali's appetite was shrinking and the corn satisfied her hunger.

After she ate, she walked the streets of her neighborhood and passed the houses of friends to look for lights in the front rooms. She stopped on the street in front of Tiffany's house and stared up at the front window. She could see Tiffany and her parents sitting on the couch watching television. Kali looked down the street again and back at the house. She had just been to Tiffany's house the night before. She looked behind her and saw only shadowy woods and a single street lamp shining in the darkness. She walked up to the house and knocked on the front door.

"Kali? Hi, what's up?" Tiffany said as she answered the door.

"Nothing. I just wanted to come over and say hey. What are you doing?"

"I was just watching T.V. I was getting ready to go to bed."

"Oh. Can you hang out?"

Tiffany looked down and kicked her foot against the other. "Umm...I don't know, Kali. It's kind of late."

"Tiffany! Who's there?" Kali heard her parents call from inside.

"It's Kali," Tiffany called back.

"Kali, it's late," Tiffany's father said as he appeared in the doorway. "Tiffany's got to go to bed soon. What are you doing out here anyway?"

"I was just out for a walk," Kali said. Tiffany's father eyed her suspiciously. "I got done with my homework early and didn't realize how late it was. I'm sorry." She turned to walk down the driveway, but hesitated and turned halfway to face Tiffany's father again.

“Is everything OK, Kali?”

“Uh...yeah,” Kali said meekly. “Everything’s fine. Sorry to bother you. Good night.”

Kali turned and walked down the street and heard the door shut behind her. She walked in the direction of her house and hoped that Mimi would be home so that she could go to sleep. She walked down her street and her house and yard were dark. The lot stood out like a black hole on the street, surrounded by homes with lit porches and the glare of the television flashing in the windows. There was no car in the driveway at her house. The oak tree in the center of the yard cast a shadow over the whole house. Corners of the yard were hidden and she could hear Boss barking in the back yard. Kali couldn’t see anything, but could hear Boss running and his chain clanking on the ground. She turned and walked past the house. She walked the streets for the rest of the night until she was too tired to walk anymore. She returned home and retreated to her room where she locked the door and hid deep under her covers.

During Mimi’s absence, Kali turned to her artwork as a source of hope and comfort. When she couldn’t be with friends, and it was still daylight and she could stand to be alone in the house, she spent her long, lonely hours laboring over her sketches. She harbored secret dreams of becoming a famous artist, but never dreamt she could make her art into anything more than it was. She passed the covers of *Art Forum* and *American Artist* in the grocery store and imagined her face there. While she sat on the tattered homemade patchwork quilt on her bed, she imagined herself in the middle of a bright room, surrounded by her paintings and a crowd of people fighting to catch her attention and hear her opinions. Kali could see herself smiling graciously and shaking the hands of excited fans. But then Kali always

returned to reality where a single bulb hung from the ceiling in her dark room where she was completely alone.

Countless people had told Kali that she was a talented artist and that she should pursue drawing and painting after high school. But Kali would never openly commit to the idea of art as a career. She was more practical. As much as she loved art and could fantasize about her future with it, she knew that it was unlikely to provide her the means to live. She wanted something more stable, like business or accounting. She didn't want to end up in the same place as her mother, working two jobs.

After a week of Mimi's absence, Kali came home from school one day and Mimi was there. Kali's heart beat faster as she walked up the path and into the house. Mimi sat in a chair reading a romance novel and John sat on the couch next to her watching T.V. Mimi looked up at Kali indifferently, then looked back at her book.

Kali stood by the door staring at her with wide eyes, unsure of what to say.

"Where were you?" Kali asked finally in as calm a voice as she could muster. Her breathing came faster and her head pounded.

"John and I went to see his brother in Virginia," Mimi said, looking up at her.

"Why didn't you tell me where you were going? Or that you were even leaving?" Kali said, her torso leaned forward and her arms held out at her sides. She held her breath while she waited for Mimi's response.

"What business is it of yours? Since when do I have to answer to you?" Mimi snapped. "I'm the adult in the house. I'll do whatever I want to. When you start paying the rent, then you can ask questions."

“What? I had no food all week,” Kali said, her voice raising. “I had to eat cereal sandwiches. I had no idea where you were. I wasn’t sure if I should have called the police.”

“Oh, give me a break,” Mimi said. “There was no reason to call the police. There was food in this house when I left. Maybe you should have gone to the store and bought some more. You need to start contributing around here anyway.”

Kali was astonished and bewildered. She had come to expect the most irrational behavior from Mimi, but this was more than even she was used to experiencing. Her anger flared and her face burned.

“The dog needs to be fed,” Mimi said, flipping a page in her book. “Why don’t you go do it?”

“How am I supposed to feed him? There’s no food in the house.”

“I got some. Now go do it,” Mimi said and flipped another page in her book.

“I have homework to do,” Kali said firmly. “I’ll do it when I’m finished.”

“First of all, you don’t tell me what you’re going to do,” Mimi said, putting her book down on her lap. “Second, when I tell you to do something, you do it then, not later.”

Kali glared at Mimi and stood motionless.

“Now, go feed the dog and take out the trash, too, while you’re at it.”

Kali sighed and walked towards her bedroom.

“What are you doing?” Mimi asked.

“I’m going to get changed,” Kali said in resignation. “I want to take off my school clothes first.”

Mimi looked at her like she wanted to say something else, but didn't. Kali walked to her room and sat on her bed. She breathed deeply to relax herself as she felt tears rimming her eyes. She balled her fists and held them over her eyes. She took several deep breaths and hit her leg several times with one fist and kept the other over her eye. She winced and turned her fist into her eyes, then wiped the tears from her face. She forced out air and shook her head forcefully, then stood up and changed her clothes.

Kali walked to the kitchen and saw the full bag of dog food sitting next to the refrigerator. She opened the refrigerator door and searched for new groceries. A twelve pack of beer sat on the top shelf next to a new gallon of milk. Kali looked on top of the refrigerator; a box of generic cereal was the only item resting there. Kali slammed the door shut and crossed her arms. She stared at the full bag of dog food incredulously.

When she was finished feeding the dogs, Kali went to her room and closed the door. She looked around her room and began picking up clothes and putting away papers that she found on the floor to distract herself from her anger and frustration. She surveyed the walls and the things in her room and felt like they belonged to someone else. The stuffed animals in the corner were an accumulation of gifts from different people over the years. She picked up a few and looked them over, remembering the occasion for each given and the person who gave it. There was a yarn-haired doll given to her by her great-grandmother who lived in Iowa. Kali hadn't seen her since she was ten, the last time she was healthy enough to travel. Another doll, a crocheted baby attached to a crocheted blanket, was given to her when she was only a baby by another great-grandmother who died soon afterwards. Kali never knew her and had no memories of her. Next, she picked up a large, stuffed Bassett hound given her

by her father. He'd given it to her for Christmas the year she was twelve. Even then it was inappropriate. It was the last gift he gave her. Now he just didn't try. Other stuffed animals were remnants from her childhood toys that Kali had somehow managed to salvage through the years. She had tried to weed out these old toys, but couldn't quite bring herself to get rid of them completely.

Kali looked at her dresser. There were trinkets and remnants from events that had until recently characterized her life. A blue and gold pompom hung over a plastic cup bearing the name of her high school and their mascot: Franklin High School Spartans. They were leftovers from a game and a pep rally she had attended with friends. A long black cord hung down the side of her dresser, which carried a peace-sign pendant filled in by a clay tie-died flower. Eric had given her the necklace. Kali always secretly thought that it was something another girl had given him. On the other side of the mirror hung a sash decorated by several pins and buttons. One wooden heart proclaimed, "He loves me" in hand painted letters, a remnant from her early childhood Sunday school days. Another bore a flaming torch: a reminder to remain virtuous and chaste. Another reminded Kali not to take her friends for granted because they were special gifts from God. All of the answers to Kali's troubles were right there on that sash. She needed to look no further for life's lessons.

There were several pictures taped to the mirror—some from school dances, others from special activities and trips. One picture high in the corner showed Kali with three other girls at a slumber party. They stood in a row with their arms draped around each other's shoulders. They looked like they were ready to kick up their legs and start a chorus line. Kali was wearing shorts that hovered just above her knees. Kali thought that she looked skinnier

then. She couldn't help but think to herself how beautiful her own smile looked that day. She was usually self-conscious about her teeth; but that day she let her smile shine. She looked happy. Kali took the picture down and looked at it carefully. She didn't know what she was looking for in the picture. She only knew that something in her face seemed so happy—seemed so far away.

Kali looked around the room again as she held the picture in her hands. Multi-colored ribbons lined the border of one wall. They were from the numerous art contests that she had entered over the years at school. Some of the pictures she had entered hung on the wall beneath them. A picture of a clown drawn in crayon won her first place in an impromptu contest in her art class in the third grade. Another picture of a bouquet of gardenias done in oil pastels had placed second in a school-wide contest in the eighth grade. On another wall, there were posters of the Beatles and Jim Morrison. She'd cut out pictures from magazines of her favorite bands: Red Hot Chili Peppers, Stone Temple Pilots, Counting Crows. There were also taped expressions from teenage girl magazines like *Sassy* and *Cosmo*. "Live each day to its fullest!" "Be crazy and free!" "Love your body!" They were more of life's lessons. Kali looked back at the picture in her hand. She took a box out of her closet and dropped the picture inside.

Kali picked up another picture of her and her mother together at her last birthday dinner and paused. They had their arms wrapped around each other and their cheeks pressed together. Kali was wearing a paper hat and was rolling her eyes. The picture made them look like a typical mother and daughter. As Kali looked at the picture, she felt her cheeks burn. She tore the picture in half and then ripped it in half again.

That night, Kali went to bed after she ate two bowls of cereal for dinner. She stayed awake late into the night. She heard her mother come back in around midnight. John was with her. Kali could hear them arguing when they came in the house.

“Why were you talking to that woman?” Mimi yelled.

“She was talking to me,” John yelled back. “What are you so fucking worried about?”

“Why’d you keep talking to her then?”

“I was just talking.”

“Bullshit. I don’t trust you.”

“Do you think I’m fucking someone else?”

“Well, are you?” Mimi asked.

“Fuck you, bitch,” he sneered.

“You can leave if you don’t like it,” Mimi yelled. “I don’t need this shit. You barely live here anyway. You don’t help me with rent. You don’t even have a fucking job. You’re a goddamned loser.”

“You’re a fucking cunt. I don’t have to put up with this bullshit.”

“So don’t. Get the fuck out.”

Kali groaned and rolled over in her bed. She threw her arm over the side of her head to drown out what sound she could. These late night fights were nothing new. She’d had to block out many more in the past. Nothing would come of them. They would make up and have another fight in a day. Kali had promised herself never to let her life become like that. She couldn’t understand how you could treat someone you loved like that. But Mimi treated everyone in her life that way.

Kali thought about Eric. She fantasized that he would fall in love with her and they would be married for their whole lives and never get divorced. He would be her soul mate and they would always feel the same about everything. They would never have the kind of relationship that her mother always had. Kali looked up at her wall at the picture of Jesus, opposite her bed. It was one of the only pictures left on her wall. She stared at it though the darkness for a few moments. Artificial light shined on His nose and cheeks and His wide eyes crinkled in the corners. The expression was intended to look compassionate and beatific. Kali thought it looked artificial and contrived. There was no truth to be found beneath the features, no hint at the real man. It was a false promise. The noise in the other room had died down; Kali couldn't hear any more arguing.

Just as Kali felt herself drifting off to sleep, Mimi burst through the door.

"Come on. Get up," Mimi said frantically. "I need you to go with me."

"Where?" Kali said, sitting up in bed.

"I need to go back to Vic's."

Kali knew not to question her mother's motivation; she could smell the alcohol on Mimi's breath. Kali got out of her bed and pulled a pair of pants over her flannel pajama bottoms.

"Hurry up," Mimi said. "We need to go."

"Why do you need me to go?" Kali asked, unable to resist questioning Mimi.

"I need you to go inside and ask for John. Let's just go."

"Wasn't he just here?"

"He went back to the bar."

“How?”

“In his car. He got it out of the shop. Stop asking questions.”

Kali still didn't understand the point, but she didn't want to push the issue any farther.

Mimi sped down the highway in her silver Chevrolet and wove between cars recklessly. Kali sat in the passenger's seat in the front and gripped the arm on her door. Every time they swerved, she pushed her feet against the floorboard.

“What's your problem?” Mimi snapped. “You're fine. You don't need to be hanging on to the car like that. Do you really think I would let us get into an accident?”

Kali just stared straight ahead and let her body ease enough to satisfy her mother. She was too focused on the road to look at her mother or respond to her comments. They passed the grocery store and a gas station and Kali saw a man pumping gas and a woman talking on the pay phone. Her heart raced as Mimi flew through red lights and stop signs and drivers around them slammed on their brakes. A yellow light turned to red and Mimi flew through the intersection as cars in the opposite direction began to move. One car swerved and horns blared as they passed. Mimi did not show any signs that she noticed. Kali silently prayed for her own safety.

Kali felt some relief when Mimi screeched into the parking lot at Vic's Bar.

“You stay here,” Mimi said as she swung open the car door. “I'll go inside. I'll be back in a minute.”

Kali looked at her in astonishment. She wondered even more why she was there. Several nervous minutes passed. Trees lined the dark parking lot on all sides. Kali looked for any signs of people approaching. A brawny man with a long, gray beard stumbled out the

door of the bar and Kali heard the chorus of a rock song waft over the air. The man leered at Kali and walked to his car in the corner of the lot. Kali whispered a prayer to herself.

Mimi ran out of the bar and jumped back in her car. She screeched out of the parking lot and sped out on the highway.

“That motherfucker,” Mimi said, as much to herself as to Kali. “He thinks he can do this to me and get away with it?” Kali glanced at Mimi out of the side of her eyes, so that she could look quickly between her and the road. Mimi’s bottom lip quivered. “How can he do this to me? We were supposed to be a family.”

Mimi veered over the lines of her lane, but jerked the car quickly back into its place whenever she noticed. Mimi’s knuckles stood out white on the steering wheel.

“He can’t leave me,” she continued. “He needs me too much. He said he loved me. He said that he wanted to marry me.”

Kali opened her mouth to say something, but her body was too tense and her mind too focused on the road to say anything. Mimi passed out of the city and into the more residential areas. There weren’t as many lights and the road was dark in front of them. It was after midnight, and there weren’t any other cars on the road around them. Besides the possibility of Mimi running off the road, Kali was also worried that she would hit a deer if one came running out of the woods unexpectedly. At the speed Mimi was driving, hitting a deer head-on could cause as much damage as hitting another car.

“That’s OK,” Mimi continued. “Two can play that game. If he wants to be with other women, then I can go have my fun, too. I know I can find someone else. I know I can find someone better.”

As Mimi muttered, the car veered off the road onto the gravelly shoulder. A field rested near the road and the back tires of the car swerved and dug into the grass and the dirt. Mimi jerked the car back onto the road. Kali whimpered and tensed her whole body. They only had another five minutes or so until they were back at the house. “Please, Please, Please” Kali repeated to herself in her mind.

“When he gets home tomorrow, all his shit’s going to be on the front lawn,” Mimi said. “He’s not staying in my house anymore. I don’t give a shit where he goes. He can go stay with one of his little whores for all I care.”

Mimi sped down the road in the darkness as she ranted. She turned a curve in the road and Kali felt her heart drop. The trees came thicker and some of them grew so close to the road that they seemed to grow into the concrete. There were no more streetlights and the road turned unexpectedly. Kali looked ahead and could only see reflectors on the road shining under the glow of the headlights. Mimi turned another curve and the back half of the car swung to the right and the momentum swirled the car around in a circle across the road. “Mom!” Kali screamed. Mimi frantically pressed on the brake and turned the wheel in both directions trying to turn the car straight again. Kali looked around with wide eyes and pressed her body against the back of her seat. Trees swirled around her and she could see glimpses of the moonlight through the branches. The sky was cloudless and the stars were shining brightly. The car careened off the road and dove down a ditch into a forest. Kali held onto the arm of the car door and braced herself for impact. “Please, Please, Please,” she whispered to herself as she looked ahead at the giant oak tree flying towards them. The last thing that Kali

remembered was the sound of glass breaking and metal crunching coupled with the faint smell of iron and gas.

City Activities with Subway

(Chapter 1)

Kali kneeled in the grass and gazed into the vacant glass eyes of the dead bird as if hypnotized. She reached for the sketchbook in her bag mechanically. She didn't know why, but she stretched out her legs on the grass opposite the bird and began sketching.

A light breeze blew across her skin and whipped the hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail across her face. She pulled it behind her ear and stared intently at the bird as she sketched. Kali had never known death in her life; she'd only witnessed the smaller and seemingly less significant deaths of wild animals and pets. She studied the bird as if searching for some answer hidden within its tiny body. The glass eyes, which looked almost living, invited Kali into that mystery, hinting at a revelation, but kept her at a distance so that nothing tangible was ever revealed. She tried to capture that sensation in her sketch, but saw only the transparency in the eyes, and nothing of the complexity in the expression. In art, the recreation of life had always eluded her. She could reproduce inanimate objects expertly, but her attempt at the creation of living people or animals in her art had always lacked that life force and energy found in the real things. Her art always had a two-dimensional quality though it was meant to be three-dimensional; it lacked the complexity of life. Like the corpse before her, her art was a shell of the life it represented.

A group of pigeons scrambled in the grass opposite Kali and gobbled up hunks of bread that a woman on a bench was throwing them. The birds fluttered randomly over each other for the bread, pecking their rivals whenever they came too close. The commotion

stirred Kali from her trance and she looked over at them absently. She looked across the park and saw a group of teenage boys skating on a ramp that they had designed. They all looked the same in their baggy pants and with their spikey hair. Each boy tried to outdo the other with a more daring or creative trick. Kali returned her attention to the dead bird and shook her head in resignation. She snapped her sketchbook closed and shoved it back in her bag.

Kali walked through the park and scanned the perimeter of trees and bushes around her, interrupted by skyscrapers and office buildings, creating a jagged horizon. There was a multitude of diverse people in Manhattan, as there was in Central Park that day. A middle-aged couple relaxed on an iron bench, watching people as they passed. A tall man with leathery, sinewy muscles jogged the pathway that snaked around the border of the park. An elderly woman dressed in a tattered heavy coat, carrying an oversized canvas bag at her side, walked slowly down the path with her head down. Kali observed these people from a distance, but averted her eyes whenever anyone came close enough to make eye contact. Strangers made her uncomfortable, yet curious. She studied people—their habits and appearance—inferring what she could about their lives, but only trusted them at a distance.

Kali heard the distant clanging of bells in a church as she approached the edge of the park. She looked up at the statue of a robed woman holding her hand out in front of her; she seemed to be pushing Kali back from her space. Kali stopped abruptly with the realization that she had lost track of the time. Without waiting for the drawn out final toll of the bells, Kali quickly looked down at her watch and saw that it was already 11:00. She had told Samantha she would meet her at her room for a study session at 11:00. Kali was almost three blocks away from their building on 66th Street.

Kali clutched her bag and ran through the park and out onto the street. She charged through a man wearing a black suit and carrying a briefcase who yelled some obscenity at her as she kept running down the street. She turned quickly as she approached a gray haired woman with wrinkled and a cane. Kali's jacket flew behind her as it grazed the old woman. Kali ran through the crowd with her arms held close to her sides, dodging and weaving between people as they walked down the sidewalks. It was not yet lunch hour, but there were more people on the streets than usual. Kali ran across the street, hesitating before crossing each lane to dodge cars, and was almost hit by a taxi.

"Hey, watch where you're going, you crazy bitch!" a cab driver yelled at her, hanging out his window.

Kali waved a hand over her shoulder to dismiss him and kept running. She pushed past three skinny guys leaving her building. She lived in an old, brick building with high windows with iron frames. She pushed open the thick metal door and ran up three flights of stairs to get to Sam's room. She burst through the door panting and bent over. The room was full of people.

"Uh, hi, Kali. Are you OK?" Samantha greeted her.

Kali held on to her side and waved her other hand in the air.

"I'm OK," she let out. "I...ran...up here. I'm...sorry...I'm...late." She took in a big breath.

"It's no big deal," Samantha laughed. "You didn't need to kill yourself to get up here."

"OK. As long as you're not...mad," Kali gasped.

“Of course not,” Samantha said. “Come in. Everyone’s here already. We were just getting started.”

“Can I get some water?” Kali panted, looking up from her bent position.

Samantha returned with a glass of water and Kali took it gladly and gulped it down. She wiped water from her chin with the back of her hand and smiled apologetically at the other students in the room watching her.

“I think you know everybody from class,” Samantha said, walking back to the group. “Peter, Naomi, Erin, and that’s Rick from the other section.”

Kali waved awkwardly and smiled, then tucked her hands under her elbows and remained standing by the doorway. Sam motioned for her to sit down and one of the girls inched over on the carpet.

The rest of the group used Kali’s interruption as a chance to take a short break. Sam chatted with one of the boys sitting across from Kali while they waited for one of the others to return from the restroom.

“How far did you run?” Erin asked, turning to face Kali. Naomi leaned over her shoulder to listen.

“I was over in Central Park sketching. We have an assignment coming up in my drawing class for a still life. I guess I just lost track of time.”

“Where did you find a still life in the park?” Naomi asked. “What did you see—a dead bum?” she laughed.

“I saw a dead bird.”

“You didn’t touch it did you?” she asked, and both girls instinctively inched away from her.

“Of course not. I just drew it.”

“Why would you draw a dead bird?” Erin asked, her faced screwed in a quizzical expression.

“Because it was beautiful,” Kali said. “There’s just something mysterious about death, don’t you think so?”

Erin shrugged and looked away nervously. She looked down at her textbook and began taking notes in an effort to end the conversation. Naomi turned her attention to Sam and Rick. Kali just shrugged and looked down at her book.

Since she had moved to New York, Kali had made few friends. It was already the end of the first semester and Samantha was the only girl that she talked to outside of class, but she felt like that was more because she lived in the room right next door than for any other reason. She felt different from everyone else, especially the girls. She knew that she could tell them things about her past that would make them recoil from her farther than the revelation of the dead bird in the park. Her experiences were nothing like theirs, and as a result, she had completely different desires and hopes for her life. None of those girls would be able to understand that, Kali thought.

Kali felt the same way about the guys, but didn’t shrink from them as she did the girls. Before she enrolled at Hunter College, she broke up with her boyfriend, Simon. Besides the inner voice that told her that a long distance relationship would never work, she became irritated and disillusioned with him. Every new poem he wrote and every new book he told

her about just made her want to scream. He was obsessed with reading and writing poetry and fiction. When she dated Simon, she had read more books than she ever had in her whole life, but she just couldn't keep up with him. After she moved to New York, she had no plans to seek out a new relationship, but she started to feel lonely after only a month. Most guys, like most people, didn't talk to her. Kali wasn't very open to talking to new people and she couldn't flirt like the other girls in her class. But Samantha had introduced her to Mike shortly after she arrived in New York. They began a relationship almost immediately.

"So, are you going to that party on Friday night?" Naomi asked Kali, venturing a conversation again.

"Huh?" Kali shook her head and looked over at her. "Oh. No, I don't think so. I have to work."

"Kali's a workaholic," Samantha interrupted. "She never gets to have any fun. She never hangs out with us."

"You mean you have a job?" Erin asked. "How do you have time?"

"I don't really," Kali shrugged. "But, I need the money. I have to pay for my room. My scholarship only covers tuition and fees."

"Don't your parents send you money?" Erin asked. "Why don't they pay for your room?"

Kali shifted uncomfortably and pressed her hands under her legs. "My parents just bought a new house," Kali said. "They send me what they can, but I work to help them out. My brother's also in college. He's about to graduate."

Kali loved living in New York but resented not being able to enjoy it like her classmates who had money and the freedom it offered. She hated turning down invitations to clubs and plays because she had to work or just couldn't afford it. And even though she didn't want to admit it, she also missed home. North Carolina was another world compared to New York. The city was faster, more impersonal. Kali could be a nameless face in the crowd and get lost in the city. She didn't have to worry about going to the grocery store and running into someone she knew. She didn't have to worry about making something of herself right after high school so that when she ran into her old classmates in a restaurant or at the mall, she would have to explain what she had been doing since graduation. Kali loved being able to walk down the streets and never worry about seeing someone she knew or learning to recognize stranger's faces from seeing them all the time. Although she valued her independence and anonymity, a small part of her craved that feeling of belonging, the feeling of home. She rejected that feeling because of what it meant for her to "belong" in that place and with the people from whom she came.

Erin had turned disinterestedly away from Kali and was gossiping with Samantha and Naomi about the other girls in their class. They talked about one girl who had gained weight, another who was dating her best friend's ex-boyfriend. The girls gobbled up each new tidbit of information that was tossed into the conversation. Kali listened to their conversation and smiled and nodded her head, trying to think of something to add, but couldn't. She looked down at the notebook in her lap and doodled absently, realizing her attempts at conversation were useless.

When the study group was over, Kali lingered to chat with Samantha.

“What are you doing tonight?” Sam asked.

“Mike and I are going to the Woodward gallery for an opening,” Kali said. “It’s our two month anniversary.”

“Two whole months, huh?”

“Yeah. It was his idea,” Kali said. “It’s kind of sweet. He’s trying to do something that he knows I’ll like. Plus, he’s trying to do something new. We always just go out to dinner or watch a movie at his place.”

“It’s about time you went out and did something fun,” Sam said and slapped her on the knee playfully. “It’ll give you something better to do than sit around your room and study or draw all the time. Well, I have to get ready for my own date,” Sam said, standing up. “I’m going out to meet Rick.”

“Rick? The guy who was just here?” Kali looked up at her quizzically.

“Yes. We’re going to a movie.”

“Why didn’t he just stick around and wait for you?”

“I have to get ready,” Samantha said and looked at Kali incredulously. “I can’t go out in what I’m wearing.”

“Of course,” Kali laughed.

Kali said goodbye to Sam and went to her own room, which was right next-door. Her room was a small, dormitory style room that she rented from an off-campus group. Kali had room enough for a bed, a dresser, a bookcase, and a few small tables. She had to share a bathroom with her floor, and there was a communal kitchen space. The white concrete walls were completely covered with local art that Kali had bought from street vendors and some of

the smaller galleries. There were several charcoal drawings of street life in New York. Kali loved to buy art that achieved what she could not: the representation of the complexity of life. The only art that covered the wall was a poster of a Jackson Pollock print; it was the first thing that she bought when she arrived in New York and had visited the Met. There were no pictures of friends or family on the walls or the mirror over her dresser like in her classmate's rooms. There was only one window on the far wall across from the door. The rent was cheap for New York, but it was double what Kali would have expected to pay in Winston Salem. But it was her first place of her own, even if it was only a glorified dorm room.

Kali sat on small twin bed and leaned her back against the concrete wall. She pulled her sketchbook from her bag to resume her drawing of the bird in the park. She had lost the image of it in her mind, and her attempts at sketching became even more difficult than in the park. After an hour of frustrated attempts to recreate the fading image, she crumpled the paper and threw it on the floor. She rested her head back on the wall and closed her eyes. What was it that she saw staring back at her, she wondered. What was drawing her in to those eyes?

Kali stood up and walked to a table in the corner of the room where she kept her modeling clay. She slowly began beating and kneading the clay with her hands. She molded the clay into a vague outline of the bird's body and then gradually began to add detail and line to the form with her knife. She recalled the prismatic quality of the underside of the bird's wings, the raven-black feathers that shone with iridescent color. Its once sturdy legs were curled stiffly beneath its body. She added fine line and texture to the clay, but couldn't quite capture the beauty and form that she saw. When she was finished molding the clay, it

looked like a bird, just not the one she had seen in the park. Instead, it looked more like an artificial bluebird off a ceramic garden fountain one would see in a cheap department store.

Kali threw her sculpture on the table in disgust and the clay made a dull thud, flattening out the bird's chest against the slick, wooden surface. Sculpture had always been like that dead bird for Kali. She was drawn to it for some unexplained reason, but could never unlock its secrets. Drawing and painting usually came easily for her, despite the problems she had with organic form. But sculpting and molding the clay were near impossible. It was easier to erase an errant line or to paint over a smudge than it was to slowly chisel away a block of stone to discover the form hidden inside. Or likewise to gradually mold a form through the addition and formation of layers and details. The clay, the stone, was like a person. She had to work through the layers to reveal the mystery hidden inside. As with people, Kali had trouble getting past the exterior.

Disgusted and defeated, Kali set up a bowl of apples and oranges on a table and pulled out her sketchbook again.

Later that night, Kali toiled over what she would wear to the opening. Her limited income did not allow her to dress in the height of fashion and she usually felt more comfortable in baggy jeans and a t-shirt. Although she lived right in the heart of the city, and only a few blocks from museum mile on the Upper East Side, this would be her first official Manhattan art opening. She'd been to most of the museums, admiring the works of the dead masters, but she hadn't taken the time to learn about those artists still living. Besides, she never had the time or the money for those kinds of luxuries—all was devoted to school and

work. Kali decided to wear a nice pair of black slacks and a light blue sweater. She liked wearing blue since it complimented her light gray eyes and pale skin.

Kali heard a knock on the door while she was sitting on the bed and putting on her shoes, and hastily tied up the laces before she hopped up to open the door. Mike grinned awkwardly at her and thrust a bouquet of roses in her direction. Kali smiled and buried her face in the bouquet, taking a deep breath. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. Mike was a little overweight, but Kali thought he was cute. He had light, curly brown hair and smooth olive skin. Light brown hair grazed the top of his lip—not quite a mustache, but more than peach fuzz. He wore a dark blue sweater over a pair of tan Dockers. Kali surveyed his appearance with satisfaction.

“Thank you, that was very sweet,” Kali said. “Just let me grab my coat and we can leave.”

Mike smiled and waited in the doorway while he watched Kali. She threw the bouquet on her bed, and grabbed her coat and purse.

“You look good tonight,” he said.

“Thanks. So do you,” Kali said and smiled. “Where are we going to dinner?”

“I figured we would go to Sal’s, the place where it all started,” Mike said, looking proud of his own thoughtfulness. “The place where we had our first date.”

“How sweet,” Kali said. “I love Sal’s.”

Kali and Mike got on the subway to go downtown. They went to dinner at Sal’s, a small restaurant in Little Italy that someone had told them about for their first date. The small dining room was only big enough for about twelve tables and handmade floral arrangements

adorned them all. Plain white butcher paper served as a tablecloth and crayons were provided at every table. Strings of lights drooped down from the ceiling. Huge oil paintings of grapes and gondolas hung on the walls.

“A little preview of what you will be seeing tonight,” Kali said and made a sweeping gesture with her arm at the paintings.

Mike had never been to a museum with Kali and he admittedly knew nothing about art.

“Really?” he said, and looked at her questioningly.

“God no,” Kali laughed. “Give me some credit. I wouldn’t let you take me to look at crummy art. No, you’ll be seeing much better work tonight. Don’t worry.”

“It’s not like I would know anyway,” Mike shrugged.

“You have some intuitive sense of what’s good and bad in art,” Kali said. “Everybody does. You can just look at a painting or a sculpture and it will either move you or it won’t. Anyone can love art.”

“I think I am absolutely unable to tell anything good or bad about art,” Mike said. “I have no clue. I was born without the art gene.”

Kali laughed and looked around the restaurant at the other paintings. The small tables were filled with young couples. All around them, people were laughing and leaning close to one another. The lights hanging from the ceiling danced playfully across the room, making eyes and skin shine brighter. Kali smiled to herself and looked back at Mike.

“So, have you already made your plans for the break?” Mike asked. “Are you going home?”

“I’ve made my plans,” Kali said, shifting in her seat. “What about you? Are you going home?”

“I’ll be going home to see my parents and my sister. I’ll probably see Sam while I’m home.”

“Sam?” Kali asked and looked up in surprise.

“Yeah. Didn’t you know that she lives in my neighborhood back home?”

“No. She never told me that.”

“We grew up together. That’s why I go to school here. I had the biggest crush on her for the longest time.”

“Until when?” Kali asked, her voice rising imperceptibly.

“Until this year, I guess,” Mike said. “She never felt the same way about me though. Who could blame her?”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me that?” Kali asked. She sat back in her chair.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t a big secret. I guess it just never came up.” Mike smiled and took a sip of his water.

Kali fell silent while she mulled over this new information. She picked up a crayon and sketched absently on the butcher paper.

“So, you’re going to see your parents on the break, right?” Mike returned to his previous question.

“Yeah. I’m leaving right after finals,” Kali said.

“Are you flying or driving?”

“I’m flying,” Kali said. She crossed her legs and her knee shook nervously up and down.

“What are your plans? Where are you spending Christmas?”

“We always spend Christmas at my grandmother’s house,” Kali said and tucked her hands under her thighs. “All of my cousins come over and my aunts and uncles. We have a big dinner and open presents. After that, we drink eggnog and sing carols.”

“That sounds like fun,” Mike said.

“It does,” Kali said softly and looked down.

Mike and Kali walked to SoHo after dinner for the opening since the gallery was only a few blocks from the restaurant. Inside the gallery, hardwood floors spanned the open space and the stark white walls contrasted the paintings on display, making their color and life stand out more. There were plain wooden benches without backs bordering the room, but no one sat on them. The exhibit was of a new painter who mostly did portraits of homeless people around the city. Kali looked in awe at the paintings that captured so well what she had seen in the streets almost everyday since she had lived in the city. Everyone in the room seemed to know each other already and everyone addressed each other by name. Kali watched as men in pressed black suits greeted women in black cocktail dresses by taking their hands and kissing them on the cheeks. Small groups of two and three people gathered in corners around the room talking over champagne. Few people seemed to be looking at the paintings on the wall. Kali looked for anyone in the crowd who looked like her or Mike, but found none.

Mike seemed oblivious of the other people in the room, and did not seem conscious that he and Kali were the only people under twenty in the room. Mike focused on the paintings. He stared hard at the images as if the key to understanding them would materialize if he only concentrated long enough. Kali noticed his struggle and attempted to show him the play of color and contrasting light and dark in the photos, and how it enhanced the inner emotions of the people. She pointed out the lines of perspective and expert framing of the scene. Mike nodded and smiled and pretended to understand what she showed him.

Kali watched the scene as if it were a movie; she didn't feel like she was a part of it. She looked at the tiny placards next to the paintings and envisioned her own name embossed on them: Kali Nichols, *Life and Death*. Kali Nichols, *Still Life with Clouds*. Kali Nichols, *Woman of the Streets*. She wanted to be the one standing in the center of the room, smiling and shaking hands with everyone. She wanted to be the one who everyone wanted to meet. She wanted to smile for the cameras. Kali looked away and rubbed her eyes. She would have to start trying to sell her work soon.

At the end of the night, Mike insisted on following Kali back to her room.

"It's midnight and it's New York. I'm not letting you walk back by yourself," he said.

When they got to the steps of the entrance, they stopped to say their goodbyes.

"I'll call you tomorrow when I get home from the diner," Kali said.

Mike leaned forward and kissed her lightly on the mouth. "I'll talk to you tomorrow then," he said.

Kali grabbed him by the neck and pulled him back towards her, kissing him passionately. She liked the feeling of power that it gave her. Mike stepped back and raised his eyebrows, smiling at her.

“Good night,” he said and walked away.

Kali trotted up the stairs to her room. She walked down the beige hallway and stopped in front of her plain brown door. She took out her key but hesitated on her step and looked over at Samantha’s door. She stood in front of it and stared at the pink letters staring back at her announcing that it was Sam’s room. Kali tapped lightly on the door then entered. Samantha was sitting at her small desk, reading a book when Kali came in the room.

“Hey, what’s up?” Sam asked and put down her book. “How was your date with Mike?”

“Pretty good,” Kali said slowly. “I had a good time.”

Sam looked at her expectantly, but Kali said nothing more. “What’s wrong?” Sam asked. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Kali said and shook her head. “Why?” she asked and looked down.

“You’re just...quiet, I guess.”

Kali looked down and seemed to struggle with what she would say next. “Why didn’t you tell me that you and Mike grew up together and that he had a crush on you?” she said, looking up.

“I don’t know,” Sam shrugged and looked at her in confusion. “It’s just never came up I guess. What difference does it make?”

“Well, because you introduced me to him and you’re just trying to pass off some guy on me that you don’t want to bother you anymore,” Kali said, looking firmly at Sam.

“But, you liked him. Why does it matter?”

“It matters because you’re just giving me your rejects,” Kali’s confidence rose as she talked and it was reflected in the rising level of her voice. “Do you think that’s all I’m good for?”

“No. Why are you making a big deal out of this? What’s your problem?”

“My problem is just what I said. You weren’t really interested in helping me out at all. You just wanted to solve your own problem by making it mine instead.”

“Whatever, Kali. Look, I’m going to bed,” Sam stood up and wore an incredulous expression. “This is a ridiculous conversation and I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Sam stood by the bed with her arms crossed and stared at Kali, waiting for her to leave. Kali shook her head and left the room, shutting the door hard behind her. It was so typical of Sam to dismiss her.

Despite her small argument with Sam, Kali felt good when she laid down for bed. She felt a new sense of hope. She thought about the future she could have with Mike and the relationship they could have together. It was the same thing Kali did in the beginning of every relationship. Once she allowed herself feelings for someone, she became emotionally invested in them. She had never been good with casual relationships. How nice it would be not be alone anymore, Kali thought.

In the morning, Kali walked down stairs and brought up her mail. She passed Sam’s door on the way back up, but didn’t pop in to say hello like she usually did on weekend

mornings. She sat down on her bed and flipped through her mail. Most of it was junk, inviting her to apply for credit cards or life insurance. There were coupons and missing person ads sprinkled in with the rest. Kali stopped when she came to another letter at the bottom of the stack.

It was a personal letter and she recognized the handwriting immediately. She opened the envelope slowly and sat down at the table.

“Dear Kali,

How are things in New York? I hope you are doing well in school. I am working a steady job now waiting tables. Me and John have been living with you’re your grandmother, but we will be getting our own place soon. Your brother is doing good. He’s got a steady job painting houses. He’s been seeing the same girl now for a while. Everyone seems to be doing pretty good.

I miss you and I wonder how you are. I don’t know why you won’t write or call me. I’ve never done anything to you to justify this. Maybe I’m not the most perfect mother in the world, but you weren’t the perfect daughter. I wasn’t wrong for what happened, and no one else should have gotten involved. It was an accident. I worked two jobs to raise you and your brother and put a roof over both of your heads and no one else helped me do that. No one else was there to help me raise you kids, and I did the best I could.

I’ve tried to call you, I’ve tried to see you, I’ve tried to talk to you. But, if you don’t want to see me, then so be it. You think I’m such a bad mother, you think

you're so much better than your family? So be it. You don't want to have anything to do with us. So be it.

When you decide you want your mother back...call me. I miss my daughter.
I'm proud of you!

I love you,

Your mother."

Kali panicked momentarily at the thought that Mimi had her address now and knew where she lived. Mimi had called Kali at the beginning of the semester, but she got the number changed to an unlisted one immediately. Now that Mimi knew where she lived, she could show up any time. But as she thought about how little money Mimi actually had and how she had no car, Kali relaxed. Mimi wouldn't be able to come to New York even if she wanted to.

Kali felt hot tears rimming her eyes and her face was burning. She wiped the tears from her face quickly. What right does she have sending me this letter? Kali thought.

Kali clenched her fists and tightened her jaw. She looked around the room. She wanted to find something to throw—to break—anything. She wanted to tear out her hair or bang her head against the wall. She wanted to destroy something. She paced the room muttering.

Kali's memories came to her as quick images flashing through her mind. She wasn't always sure what was said or what really happened. She only remembered how she felt—and she tried to forget. Her mother lying passed out naked in the hallway when she was seven.

Walking through a dark alley at night when she was five because her mother had just left her latest boyfriend. Others were just bits of conversations that she remembered. The time that her mother agreed to go to rehab for a week because her boyfriend threatened to leave her if she didn't. When Mimi told her that she was leaving, Kali didn't look at her; she just heard her mother hiss warnings in her ear to behave and to mind her own business. But most memories had full life and Kali could remember every sound and image and feeling. Those were the hardest to forget. They were also the hardest to forgive.

Kali's tears ran freely as the memories flowed through her.

Why does this fall back on me again? she thought. *I didn't do anything wrong. I was the one who was constantly told that I wasn't good enough. I was the one that always got told that I wasn't worth anything. But now she writes me this letter and tells me she's proud of me and acts like I'm supposed to forget about everything that happened? How about an 'I'm sorry?'*

Kali grabbed the letter and tore it in half and then into smaller and smaller pieces until she could no longer tear it. Then she picked up every flake of paper from the floor and deposited them in the metal wastebasket in the corner of the room. She grabbed a match, lit it, and dropped it in the can. She stood watching the snowy flakes of paper ignite and curl back black at the edges until they were only a pile of ashes. As they burned, she tried to make out the words and letters on the scraps of paper and remember where they fit in the letter before they curled up in smoke. As she watched the pieces of the letter burn, some of her anger dissipated. She felt weak as the strength of her anger subsided.

Kali sank to the floor and cried freely. She let her body fall all the way down and lay flat against the carpet. She let her tears flow. She sobbed convulsively and her chest heaved sporadically. She stared at the pattern on her bedspread and let the forms melt into each other as her thoughts dissipated. It was a scene like many others she remembered from her childhood.

Attempting the Impossible

(Chapter 2)

Kali stared at the blank canvas, willing a form to take shape before her.

Doubt and fear had invaded her since she had received the letter from Mimi the month before. She started to have trouble sleeping again, like when she lived in North Carolina and she spent the nights alone. She lay awake at nights staring at the corners of the room, watching the shadows move and forms slowly materialize as her imagination and concentration willed them into existence. Her eyes widened as she strained to see through the darkness and she wrapped the blanket tightly around her body and under her feet. Whenever anyone walked down the hall outside, Kali could hear the footsteps echo like cannons. Water dripping from a leaking pipe fell like pounding on a drum. Kali wrapped the blankets around her tighter and sunk her head down on the pillow. Kali was sweating beneath the thick blanket and the sweltering heat of the room, but she dared not budge or move a part of her body from beneath the blanket. She tried to relax by reminding herself that there was no way into the room except through the door and she was staring straight at it from the bed. She could see every corner in the room.

During the days, Kali moved through the streets and the campus looking around nervously, always with the fear that Mimi would appear at any moment. Whenever she walked up the steps of her building, she held her breath, half expecting Mimi to be waiting there for her with her arms crossed. In some of her fantasies, Mimi would show up at one of her classes, yelling and drunk, her curly brown hair flying wildly, and Kali would slip out the

emergency exit while her professor tried to calm Mimi down. Or she could see Mimi showing up at the diner to confront her, and her boss would have to call the police; Kali would end up losing her job. Kali had played out a dozen different such scenarios in her mind, and worked out a scheme for how she would escape from each of them.

Looking down at the canvas now, she was frozen with fear and anxiety, and was unable to envision anything tangible or definite. She looked around hopelessly at her classmates who were sketching and painting frantically, intent on a fixed purpose and clear vision in their minds. She was in her painting class and they were studying oils. The professor had given them a new assignment and asked them to paint a scene from their memories. It was only a general prompt as they could paint anything from home or school life, as far back as childhood or as recent as the week before. It only had to be a specific scene in which an event was depicted and other people were involved. They could choose any style that they wanted. Kali looked back down at the canvas and sighed heavily. She dipped her paintbrush in ochre and lifted it to the canvas.

“You OK, Kali?”

Kali looked up and saw her professor, Mr. Rochester, looking down at her curiously.

“Yeah. I guess I’m just having trouble figuring out what I want to work on,” she said.

“It’s a pretty easy assignment, Kali. I would think that this would be a breeze for you. You never seem to have any problems coming up with ideas for assignments.”

“I know,” Kali said and faltered. “I just—I’m having problems concentrating. I’m sorry.”

“Sometimes, you’re your own worst enemy. Just open your mind. Don’t force it. You’ll show me something brilliant when it’s all done; you always do.”

Kali nodded her head meekly and stared at the canvas again.

“Try this,” he said and leaned down behind her, close to her head. “Just close your eyes and try to remember the last time that you were really happy. When was the last pure moment of true happiness that you experienced? How old were you? What were you doing? What were you wearing? Who else was there? Was it sunny? Were you outside? Think about that, then recreate it.”

Kali closed her eyes and furrowed her brow in concentration. She tried to search her memories for the last happy moment that she had. She only saw blackness. The more she concentrated, the tighter she squeezed her eyes. But the only things she saw were rays of light that swirled beneath her eyelids from the force of squeezing her eyes shut. Kali couldn’t remember a happy scene from her life. She couldn’t even remember what it felt like to be truly happy; she didn’t know what it meant.

Kali stirred when she heard her classmates swarming the room and cleaning their brushes. She looked around and saw half-completed canvases and students sealing their palettes and rinsing their brushes with turpentine. She looked back at her own canvas, which was still blank. She hadn’t been able to make a single brushstroke. She picked up a large brush and dipped a healthy portion of red paint and smeared it haphazardly across the canvas. Not quite a masterwork, but at least she had made more progress in that one brushstroke than she had all hour. She could revisit the canvas next time, hopefully with more to add.

Kali gathered up her belongings and walked back to her room disappointed and depressed. She walked to her door, but then walked into Sam's instead. She found her lying on her bed, studying for class.

"Hey. Whacha reading?" Kali asked her as she walked in the room and closed the door.

"Some book for English. It's pretty boring. How was your day?" Sam threw down her book and sat up, making room for Kali to sit down on the bed.

"It was OK, I guess. I just had an art class," Kali said and sat down. "I don't know what my problem is lately. I can't work. I just sit and stare at the canvas. I don't even have any ideas. I'm starting to worry about my grades, and possibly, my scholarship. But really, I just don't care that much. I just don't want to think about."

"Why?" Sam said, picking up her book and flipping through it.

"I don't know. But, it's been going on now for about a month," Kali studied Sam's reactions for some signs of understanding or sympathy. She wanted to tell her the truth; she wanted to tell her about Mimi and the letter.

"Maybe you're homesick," Sam said. "When are you going home?"

"Next week. After exams." Kali rubbed her arm and looked away.

"It'll do you good to be back home with your family," Sam said. "I know I'll be happy to be home. It is our first semester in college."

"I don't know, I guess," Kali said, her gaze fixed steadily on Sam. "Maybe I'm just stressed out."

"That's probably it," Sam shrugged. "Just go out and have some fun."

“Sure. I guess you’re right.” Kali paused and shook her head. “Um...I was going to make dinner for Mike and I this weekend at his apartment. It’ll be his last weekend before he goes home for the break. I was wondering if you wanted to join us. It can be a kind of holiday celebration since I won’t see either of you for Christmas.”

“Sure. What were you thinking about making?”

“I don’t know yet. We were just thinking we’d have a small dinner and then maybe go see the tree in Rockefeller Center. Neither of us really had any specific ideas about what to cook.”

“Don’t forget that I don’t eat meat,” Sam said. “Plus I’m trying to tone down for spring competitions. No one can throw around a fat dancer.” Sam pirouetted and threw her leg behind her. Kali rolled her eyes when Sam wasn’t looking. Sam was always doing some new dance move that she learned. “You can get a tofurkey from this deli over on 23rd if you need to,” Sam continued. “Also, there’s this really cool club in Chelsea that I like to go to a lot with my friends. We could go there after dinner. I could call some people and have them meet us.”

Kali shifted her gaze quickly and fidgeted with a small ceramic frog on Sam’s desk. “I guess,” she muttered. “I’d rather not have other people tag along though. I’d prefer it was just the three of us. We don’t usually get a chance to hang out and, like I said, it’ll be sort of a Christmas celebration thing. You know, we’ll make dinner; we’ll go see the tree, maybe do some ice-skating. But if you really want people to come, you can invite them.”

“No, I guess I won’t,” Sam shrugged.

On the day of the dinner, Kali arrived at Mike's apartment with two armfuls of groceries in brown paper bags. Mike's roommate, Jeff, looked up from the couch when Kali walked inside. Jeff said hello and Kali nodded politely. She kicked the door shut behind her with her foot.

Kali walked into the small kitchen and dropped the bags on the Formica countertop. Mike walked in the kitchen and was drying his hair with a towel. He smiled at Kali and leaned in to kiss her.

"You got a shower?" she asked him. "Are you just getting up?"

"No. I just wanted to freshen up for dinner. What do you think? How do I look?"

Mike puffed out his chest and held his hands up to his shoulders in a pose for Kali's inspection. He wore an Oxford shirt and pressed slacks.

"You look very nice," Kali said and gave him a peck. "Thank you." Kali looked back at Jeff who was flipping through the channels on the television and stopped at a cartoon. "Is he staying?" Kali asked.

"Jeff? No. He's going to meet a friend in a little while."

Kali took the groceries from the bags and sorted out the ingredients she would need first. Tomatoes and potatoes rolled out of their bags across the countertop. Flecks of basil rained down when Kali removed it from the bag.

"So, what are we making?" Mike asked.

"You are not making anything," Kali said and smiled. "I am making everything. You are just going to help me and tell me how good everything tastes at the end."

"OK. So, what gourmet feast are you preparing for us this evening then?"

“Well, we’ve got a tofurkey for Sam, which by the way, was like fifty bucks. Then, I got a small ham for us. I’m going to make some rosemary and olive oil potatoes and asparagus to go with that. Before that, we’ll have some arugula salad with basil vinaigrette. And for desert, a hazelnut torte.”

Kali grinned proudly at Mike when she finished presenting the menu and looked at him expectantly.

“That sounds great,” Mike said. “What about the pumpkin pie?”

“I know it’s supposed to be a Christmas celebration, but I can’t make pie. I don’t know how. Besides, do you want plain old pumpkin pie or fancy, gourmet torte?” Kali held up her hands at her side as if she were presenting an imaginary torte as she spoke.

Mike grinned and nodded. “You’re right. I would love the torte.”

Kali sorted her ingredients and set about her task of chopping the garlic and the basil while Mike quartered the potatoes. She laid out the tofurkey and the ham on separate roasting pans and marinated them in orange juice and soy sauce. Once she put them both in the oven, she worked on grounding the almonds for the torte.

Jeff left while Mike and Kali were in the kitchen, leaving them alone to act out their vision of domesticity. Kali mixed the flour and eggs and read the directions for the torte carefully as she progressed. Mike handed her measuring cups or baking powder as she requested, and the two chatted happily as they worked.

Kali couldn’t remember a scene like it from the holidays that she had celebrated. Holidays were always unhappy for Kali. Growing up, she looked forward to Christmas and Thanksgiving with a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. Every year, her mother would

get drunk and start a fight with her, her brother, her latest boyfriend—whoever seemed an easy enough target. But every year, Kali clung to her childish hope that this year would be different. On every single holiday she had celebrated with her family, there had been some sort of argument. One year, it had even escalated into a food fight, and the dinner that her grandmother had worked all day preparing was sprayed on the walls and the floors of the kitchen and living room. Kali wanted a real holiday. She wanted the turkey dinner and the eggnog and the new bike under the tree decorated by handmade ornaments. But she only got instant mashed potatoes and vodka and a plastic doll under a tree on a concrete floor. Kali never knew what to expect. One year, dinner ended up on the walls after a fight. Another, she hid in her room and buried her head under a pillow, trying to drown out the screams coming from the living room. It almost seemed to Kali like she should be relieved to be alone this year, but she wasn't. Even if every holiday were a disaster, at least she was surrounded by people who claimed some sort of ties to her. This year, she would have nothing. She was determined to have a real family dinner on a holiday for once, even if it wasn't with her real family.

When her baked dishes were nearing completion, Kali boiled her potatoes and asparagus and sat down on the couch with Mike.

“Thank you for making this great dinner for us today,” Mike said and wrapped his arm around Kali. “This is going to be a great holiday.”

Kali smiled and looked up at Mike appreciatively. “It is, isn't it?” she said. “I'm so happy. I'm so glad that we could do this. I'm really going to miss you over the holiday.”

“Me, too. I wish I could stay here with you and spend the holiday together,” Mike said. “Maybe next year you can come home with me to New Jersey.”

Kali raised her eyebrows and nodded her head. “I could have come home with you this year. But that’s all up to you.”

Mike nodded and looked away. He stopped his attention on his goldfish and stood up. “It looks like little Mike needs to be fed,” he said. Kali rolled her eyes and stood up to walk back into the kitchen.

When she walked back into the kitchen, smoke was billowing from the crack in the oven door and water was boiling over onto the stovetop. “Oh no!” Kali yelled. “Mike! Come help me!” Kali grabbed a hand towel and pushed the boiling pot quickly off the burner, spilling water on the stove and splashing some on her.

“Ow! Shit! Mike!”

Mike rounded the corner of the kitchen and looked in at Kali with concern. “What’s going on?”

“Everything’s burning! Help me! Do something!” Kali pulled at the oven door and let it slam open. More smoke rushed her face and her eyes burned. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned her head and coughed violently. She waved the towel frantically in the air, trying to dissipate the smoke. Mike waved his hand in front of his face and tried to move towards Kali. A loud piercing beeping noise cut through the air and Kali screamed.

“Oh god! Mike, get the smoke detector! Turn it off!”

Mike ran to the hallway and Kali could hear him hitting the smoke detector, not successful at turning it off. She turned off the oven and both burners quickly and cleared

more of the smoke. The piercing noise stopped and the oven replaced the void with sizzling and popping noises. She turned her head and reached inside the oven to grab a pan. She threw it quickly on the counter and the ham slid to the back of the pan. She reached for the other pan and threw it on the counter next to the ham. The tofurkey hopped up in the pan and fell on the counter; juices ran across the surface, down the cabinets, and onto the floor.

Kali sank to the floor and buried her head in her hands. She heard Mike walk back into the room and felt his hand fall on her shoulder.

“Are you OK?” he asked.

Kali nodded her head but said nothing. “How is it?” Kali asked, not lifting her head.

Kali heard Mike shuffling the pans and removing the tinfoil. She heard a soft squishing noise as Mike put the tofurkey back in the pan. There was a long silence. Kali looked up and Mike was staring back down at her.

“Well?” she asked.

“It’s OK,” he said. “It’s not as bad as you think.”

“I doubt that,” Kali said and stood up. She peered over the counter and lifted the aluminum. The tofurkey was dry and the skin was cracked. There were dark brown spots on the ham.

“Well, I guess the vegetables are OK,” Kali said. “You can’t over boil those, can you?”

Mike smiled and hugged Kali tightly. Kali and Mike wiped down the counter and set the table in the dining room. Kali turned the tofurkey and the ham to hide the signs of their ruin and garnished them both with the potatoes and asparagus to make them look more

colorful and inviting. Kali removed the torte from the pan when it was done cooling and noted with satisfaction that it had turned out the way it was supposed to.

She dipped her spatula in the bowl of hazelnut icing and spread it across the cake. As she spread her spatula, the top layer of cake peeled off like the skin of an orange under a grater. Kali held up the spatula and the top layer of cake fell off on the counter top, splashing icing onto her face. She threw down the spatula and walked out of the kitchen.

Sam strolled through the door around 6:00 and Kali sat on the couch with her arms and legs crossed, staring straight through Sam.

“What’s up?” Sam asked, throwing her purse down on the coffee table. “Where’s Mike?”

“Where have you been? You’re late.”

“Yeah, I know. I was just over at Rick’s. Oh, hey Mike,” Sam said as Mike walked into the room.

Kali made several starts at speech before she said anything. “Sam—uh—dinner has been ready for like a half an hour. I told you what time you needed to meet us last week. We’re starving and all the food is going to be cold by now.”

“I know. Just calm down. It’s not a big deal,” Sam said and walked into the dining room.

“It’s a big deal *to me*,” Kali said, standing up and following Sam. “You do this all the time. This was important to me.”

Kali brushed passed Sam and walked quickly out of the room and into the kitchen. When she walked back out with the salad, Sam and Mike were sitting at the table and chatting.

“What’s that smell?” Sam asked as Kali sat the salad on the table.

Kali stared at her before responding. “I burned something on the stovetop,” Kali said as she sat down. “Don’t eat if you don’t want to.”

“Are you mad at me now?” Sam asked.

“Christ, Sam. Why don’t you take anything seriously?” Kali said, throwing down her arms on the table. “I told you what time to meet me here and I told you about the dinner. Then you just stroll in like nothing’s wrong and we’ve got no plans.”

“What do you want me to do, Kali? I told you I was sorry.”

“No, you didn’t. You acted like there was no reason for me to be upset.”

“Well God, I’m sorry, OK. What’s the big deal? You really need to learn to calm down.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down. I’m not you. I take things like this seriously. You know, this is my only chance to celebrate Christmas this year, and now the only plans I have are ruined.”

“What do you mean this is your only chance to celebrate Christmas?” Sam asked.

“You’re going home, aren’t you?”

Kali faltered. “I am,” she said and looked down. “I’m going home. Of course I am. I’m going home and I’m celebrating Christmas at my grandmother’s like I do every year. My

whole family will be there. What I meant was that this is my only chance to celebrate Christmas with you and Mike.”

“OK. God. I’m sorry.”

Sam grabbed the bowl of salad and scooped some into her bowl. Kali stared at her from across the table, and felt her anger rising.

“Kali, could you pass me the ham?” Mike asked. Mike had a way of speaking that made it sound like he was apologizing in advance for any offense or irritation he might cause. It was as if his speaking alone were the offense.

The three of them sat in silence while they helped themselves to dinner. Sam eyed her tofurkey suspiciously and smelled it briefly before putting it in her mouth. Kali eyed her and waited for her to say anything. Sam chewed her food and made a slight grimace as she swallowed. She saw Kali watching her and smiled.

“So, you’re going home for Christmas then?” Sam asked Mike, turning her attention away from Kali.

“Yeah. I’m going back home to stay with my mom. You?” Mike put a bite of ham in his mouth and paused briefly before he starting chewing. When he was finished, he forcefully swallowed the bite.

“I’m going home, too. When are you going back?” Sam said.

“Friday—a couple more days.” Mike reached for the salt and sprinkled a healthy dose of it on his ham.

“Maybe we can hang out. I’ll be going to see some people from high school. I’ll probably go see Sarah and John and Henry. Maybe we can all get together.”

“That’d be cool.”

“Oh, you know who’s back in town?” Sam asked.

“Who?” Mike asked, tentatively raising another bite of ham to his mouth.

“Ben Bradley. That guy who always used to drive around the neighborhood in his monster truck? My mom saw him working at the Handi Mart last week. Isn’t that hilarious?”

“Really? I haven’t seen him since high school,” Mike said.

Kali leaned forward in her chair and rested her elbows loudly on the table. “So, how close do you two live near each other?” Kali asked, facing Sam.

“About a mile I guess,” Mike said.

“It’s probably closer than that,” Sam said. “We live in the same neighborhood. It’s just big is all.”

“The same neighborhood?” Kali looked at Mike with her eyebrows raised. “You didn’t tell me that before.”

“I told you we grew up together,” Mike shrugged.

“Did you two ever date?” Kali asked.

Sam looked up at Kali, then Mike. “No,” she said.

Mike shifted awkwardly in his seat and smiled at Kali.

“But you had a crush on her?” Kali prodded.

“Yeah,” Mike said meekly. “I used to have a crush on her for a long time. But we never went out.”

“Why? You didn’t want to?” Kali asked Sam.

“Why are we talking about it?” Sam asked. “It was in New Jersey before either of us even met you. Why does it matter?”

“It doesn’t,” Kali said. Kali sat with her arms crossed and said little for the rest of the evening. Sam talked to Mike for most of the night. She laughed and talked as if nothing had happened, as if Kali were not there. Mike talked on so as not to be rude, but kept looking at Kali nervously and smiling meekly at her. Kali’s anger and disappointment for the evening rose. Once or twice during the evening, she could feel tears weighing the lids of her eyes. For most of the evening, it was easy enough for her not to say anything, since she could just concentrate on eating her dinner. By the time the meal was over, things were more awkward.

When they were ready to go to Rockefeller Center, Sam tried to convince Kali and Mike to go to the club in Chelsea that she had mentioned before.

“I don’t think so, Sam,” Kali said. “I don’t really like going to clubs, and I really want to see the tree in Rockefeller Center.”

“Come on. It’ll be fun,” Sam said. “You don’t want to go there anyway. That’s where all the tourists go. Don’t you want to go to the club, Mike?”

Mike looked between the two girls, who both looked at him expecting to hear the answer they wanted. His face drooped and his eyes darted nervously.

“Mike doesn’t like dancing,” Kali said. “Besides, it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to go.”

“Well, I told some friends I’d meet them there,” Sam said.

“You made plans to meet up with other people? Why did you do that when you knew you had plans with us?” Kali asked.

“You said you wanted to hang out after dinner and some of my friends told me they were going out tonight. I just figured we could all go and have a good time.”

Kali shook her head and walked ahead of them a few feet before turning around.

“You go if you want to, Sam. We’re leaving,” Kali said. She paused briefly and then continued. “You know, I invited you out with us so that we could all spend time together before Christmas, and now you’re making plans to go hang out with other people.”

“Kali, it’s not a big deal. We got to hang out. Now, I’m going to a club. I told you that you could come, too.”

“Never mind, Sam. Let’s go, Mike.” Kali turned and walked away without waiting for a response.

Mike walked ahead quickly to catch up with Kali. Mike walked alongside Kali, glancing at her nervously and waiting for her to speak.

The sun was almost set and only a few wisps of light glowed in the sky, casting a neon hue on the land. Soon, only a black and formless sky would be seen above the concrete horizon. The buildings stood out like dominoes in the sky—dark rectangles with dots of light. In North Carolina, the darkness of the night was like a blanket that soothed the citizens into sleep. In the city, the coming of the night was like a rooster call. The city never seemed so alive and awake as at night.

Kali and Mike walked through the entrance of Rockefeller Center. Kali sat down on a bench near the rows of bushes and the flowers that seemed to bloom all year round. She looked over at the park and could see couples ice skating in the rink. Their rosy faces were bright from the sting of the cold and the happiness of the moment. Their expressions were

carefree and energetic. The glowing Christmas tree sparkled on the ice and the top seemed to disappear into the night horizon. The red and green glass bulbs on the tree shone under the neon lights. Hundreds of giant ribbons adorned the limbs. Kali always thought the tree looked so beautiful, so untouchable. It was the model of the elusive Christmas that Kali wanted. But she looked at it now and realized that the tree was artificial and contrived. The bulbs were plastic and the tree went into storage every year.

“Do you just want to go back to your apartment?” Kali asked, turning her attention back to Mike.

“Sure,” Mike said.

Kali and Mike walked back to his apartment in silence. The sun had set and a deeper shade of indigo permeated the city. Rats scuttled behind metal trashcans as Mike and Kali passed the alleys. Empty office buildings made the street look lifeless. Kali’s footsteps echoed loudly as she walked.

“You OK, Kali?” Mike asked.

Kali turned towards him quickly. “Why?”

“You just seem kind of upset. Are you mad about Sam?”

Kali shrugged. “No. I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Don’t let her bother you. She’s always been like that.”

“Well, it does bother me. I really wanted tonight to be special. But now everything’s ruined.”

“Maybe she just doesn’t realize that, you know? Maybe she just doesn’t know.”

Kali and Mike both walked in silence for a moment.

“Why are you going to hang out with her when you’re back at home?” Kali asked.

Mike shrugged. “Just to get together with some old friends I guess.”

Kali let Mike’s hand drop and her eyes fell. She turned and walked ahead of him with her hands in her pockets. When they got to Fifth Avenue, Kali turned right and walked towards her room.

“Where are you going?” Mike called out after her.

“Back to my room,” Kali said and turned around.

“Why?”

“I’m tired.”

“Do you want me to come up?”

“No, not tonight.” Kali walked back and pecked Mike quickly on the cheek. “I’ll see you later. I’ll come by your apartment when you’re leaving. Just give me a call.”

A couple days later, Kali walked around the corner to Mike’s building and caught a glimpse of him running up the stairs after he had thrown some bags into a caramel sedan. She thought she saw a woman in the driver’s side, but didn’t know who she was.

As Kali approached the double glass doors at the entrance of the building, Mike came running down with another large duffel bag.

“Hey. I’m just about to leave,” Mike said.

“I see that. Were you going to wait for me?”

“I wasn’t sure if you were still coming.”

“Of course I was. I told you I was. How much more do you have to load up?”

“Oh, just—“

“Michael!” the lady from the car interrupted. “Let’s go. I don’t want to hit traffic. We’ve got to get moving so we can make it back in time for me to cook dinner.”

Kali looked at the woman and then back at Mike.

“Is that your mom?”

“Yeah. She’s in a hurry.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. Mom!” Mike yelled to his mother to get her attention. She stuck her head out of the car window and looked at him in irritation.

“What is it?”

“I want you to meet somebody.”

Mike’s mother pulled her head back inside the car and undid her seatbelt. She got out of the car and walked towards Kali with a tight-lipped smile. She had curly black hair pulled back on her head. She wore khaki pants and a thick, beige sweater.

“Mom, this is Kali, my girlfriend. Kali, this is my mother, Sharon.”

“Nice to meet you,” Sharon said quickly and smiled. “Michael, can we hurry up now? I don’t want to be late.”

“Nice to meet you,” Kali muttered.

Mike ran back up the stairs to grab the last of his things and left Kali standing on the stairs with his mother.

“So, how long is the drive back?” Kali asked.

“About four hours.”

“Oh. You must be tired.”

“I am. Which is why I want to leave now,” she said, raising her voice towards the end of her sentence so Mike could hear her as he came down the stairs.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” he said.

Sharon looked at Kali and gave her another tight-lipped smile. “Nice to meet you,” she said and got back in the car.

Mike threw the last of his things in the car and walked around to say goodbye to Kali. “I gotta go. I’ll call you.” He pecked her quickly on the cheek and gave her a quick hug.

Kali remained with her head leaning forward and her arms open as Mike walked away from her and jumped in the car.

“Bye! Have a good drive! Call me!” she called out after them as the car pulled down the drive.

Kali went back to her own room where she would be completely alone.

The Human Condition

(Chapter 3)

“Mike, get up! I can’t believe you’re still asleep,” Kali said and lightly kicked Mike’s leg.

She stood at the foot of Mike’s bed with her arms crossed. Mike rolled over beneath the covers and a groan emanated from beneath the homemade quilt.

“Huh? What time is it?” Mike asked, poking his head out from beneath the covers.

“It’s already 11:00. You are so lazy sometimes.”

Mike looked around in confusion. He rubbed his temples and his short curly hair and propped himself up on his elbows.

“Don’t you have class today?” Kali asked. She towered over his bed, unswayed by his sleepy incoherence.

“Yeah,” Mike said quietly.

“What time?”

“Um... 1:00.”

“Well, what time were you planning on getting up if I didn’t come over here?”

“I was getting up. I was.”

“Yeah, right.” Kali raised an eyebrow at him and tapped her foot.

Mike got up slowly and rubbed his eyes. He swung his legs out on the side of the bed and put on his glasses. He grabbed a towel and walked to the bathroom. Kali watched him and noted his belly sagging over his boxer shorts. She turned her head away in disgust.

Kali grabbed a pile of dirty clothes from a leather chair at the foot of the bed and threw them on the floor. She kicked a tie-died beanbag from the foot of the bed to the door. She sank down sat in the chair and flipped through a magazine while Mike showered and dressed.

“So where are we going tonight?” Kali asked him when he returned.

“I don’t know. Um...”

“You don’t know? You mean to tell me that you didn’t already have a plan in mind and made a reservation?”

“Well, no. I—“

“Is our anniversary that unimportant to you?” Kali raised her eyebrows at Mike and looked at him in expectation. He opened his mouth to respond but hesitated. “Well? Are you going to answer me?” she asked.

“I thought we could go to Sal’s,” Mike said. “They’re usually not too busy on a Friday night. And if we go early, we should be all right.”

“We also go to Sal’s *all the time*. I thought we would go somewhere special, since it is our anniversary.”

“We can go wherever you want, Kali.”

“We’ll go to Sal’s. You didn’t plan ahead of time and make reservations.”

“I can make reservations and we can go out tomorrow night,” Mike said.

“Tomorrow night’s not our anniversary. Tonight is.” Kali stared at Mike and bounced her leg on her knee.

“Do you just want to meet me here tonight?” he asked.

“I guess so,” Kali said. “Do you plan on wearing something nice?”

“Of course.”

“OK,” Kali said and pecked him quickly on the mouth. “I’ll see you tonight then.”

Kali met Samantha in front of Central Park after her biology class. They stopped at a street vendor to buy soft pretzels. They walked down the street and talked while they ate their lunch.

“So, what are you and Mike doing tonight?” Sam asked, wiping mustard from her mouth.

“We’re going to dinner at Sal’s, the place we go every time we go out.”

“That’s a nice place,” Samantha shrugged. “What else are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know,” Kali said. “That’s probably about it.”

“You should go out dancing. That’s really romantic.”

“Well, Mike’s no dancer and he sure isn’t romantic,” Kali said and sighed. “I wish I had a boyfriend who would take me dancing. I wish I had a boyfriend who would do anything romantic with me.” Kali threw her pretzel wrapper in the trash and wiped her hands on her pants. “You know Sam, I’ve been dating Mike for a year now, and I really do love him. I want us to move in together and get married and everything else, but I feel like he’s still holding back. He says that he wants the same things, but I feel like he’s just saying it

because he can't tell me how he really feels."

"Why do you think he's holding back?"

"Because he never tells me how he feels. Whenever we get into arguments, he just nods his head and agrees with everything I say. I feel like some dictator."

"You do seem to wear the pants in the relationship," Samantha laughed.

"That's what everyone says, you know," Kali said and nodded without laughing.

"Everyone's always making these jokes about how I'm this controlling bitch in the relationship and Mike is just some pussy-whipped mama's boy—which, let's face it, he is. But that's not what I want. I want to be with someone who will talk back to me and tell me what they think. I want someone to love me and be passionate about me. I just don't see very many of those qualities in Mike. I used to think that they were there but just hidden, and I could see some signs of them waiting to come out. But I'm beginning to think that maybe they're not there. Maybe I just want them to be. Maybe they never will be there."

"Mike's always been like that though," Samantha said. "But he's still a nice guy."

"I know. He's a great guy," Kali admitted. "I guess I'm just getting sick of waiting. I'm coming to the point that I don't want to wait and see if Mike grows into the person that I need. I can't be content with the way things have been going."

"So what are you going to do? Do you want to break up with him?"

"No. I don't think so anyway. I don't know. I still love him. I guess I still hope he can be those things. People change. He can grow up."

The two girls walked down the street and a dirty man wearing an overcoat and torn gloves approached them holding out a soiled paper cup.

“Do you have a dollar?” he asked.

“Sorry, we’re college students,” Kali shrugged. “We don’t have any money either.”

“Ah, what do you know about not having any money?” the man asked. “You’re nothing but a couple of yuppie college punks.”

The man waved his hand at them in disgust and moved on. Kali and Samantha continued walking. “That’s why you don’t talk to the people begging for money in the street,” Sam said. The girls stopped again when they saw a young, chubby girl hunched over a fire in an alley.

“What is she doing?” Samantha whispered, squinting at the girl from the street.

“I don’t know. It looks like she’s burning something,” Kali said.

The two girls walked up closer to her and saw that the girl’s face and arms were covered in dirt and that she was roasting a Barbie doll rotisserie style over a fire in a tin trash can. Sam and Kali looked at each other quizzically.

“Uh, what are you doing?” Kali asked the girl.

The girl looked up at her and scowled, then returned her concentration to the melting plastic doll.

Kali studied the girl in silence and wrapped her arms around her waist self-consciously. Sam looked at Kali and snickered.

“Let’s go,” Sam said. “Let’s move on before she notices we’re here and decides we’re Barbies, too.”

Kali walked behind Sam, but kept her eyes on the young girl for another moment.

“Well, I’ve got to go,” Sam said. “I told Darren I’d meet him after lunch. We’ll probably go out tonight. Maybe take in a show.”

“Aren’t you in training? Don’t you need to go to the gym or practice?”

“No. We’re still in the early phases of training for the spring competitions. I’m not in the winter show this year. Anyway, I’m going to get a cab. I’ve got to go downtown and do some shopping for tonight.”

“All right. Have fun tonight.”

Kali walked uptown towards her building in resignation. When she got back to her room, she felt struck with inspiration. She pulled out a canvas and prepared her oil paints. She applied the base layers to the canvas and then began work on the details.

Kali laughed silently to herself as the picture began to take shape before her. She had encountered the most absurd scenes on the streets of New York since she had moved there two years earlier. She would have never witnessed something like that girl and the Barbie on the streets of Winston Salem. The oddest thing she ever saw there was a homeless man sleeping against a tree outside her house. In New York, she saw homeless people everywhere. She saw men in their underwear, playing guitar on the street corners. She saw women wearing purple clown wigs dressed up like pin up girls. She saw people wearing all kinds of costumes—chickens, Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz, giant sandwiches—in the daylight hours like they were regular clothes. Kali let the memory of the squalid girl take over her thoughts and she became completely absorbed in the picture. Her brush moved fluidly over the canvas and the painting slowly took shape. She was startled when she looked at her watch and noticed that it was almost time for Mike to meet her for dinner.

Kali hastily sealed her paints and cleaned her brushes. She ran to her closet and quickly changed into a silk black dress. She had discovered the basic, black cocktail dress and wore it on the few occasions that she had to wear something nice. Kali never wore dresses, but she did that night because it was a special occasion. Even if Mike wasn't the perfect man, she had never dated anyone long enough to have an anniversary before. Most of the boyfriends that she had broke up with her within a few months. They all thought she was too intense or too moody or too much of something else. She was always too much work.

Kali felt somewhat cheated at the thought of having to wear the dress that she had spent months saving for to a restaurant they had frequented countless times in the past. She curled her long, chestnut hair and put on some of the sample perfume she'd stolen from a counter in Macy's. She wasn't used to wearing makeup, but she wore it now. She'd gotten better at applying it over the years, but still looked awkward when she wore it. She never felt like she had the magic makeup gene that other girls seemed to be born with.

Mike arrived just as she was putting on the finishing touches and Kali looked him over in disappointment. He wore a pair of dark blue jeans and a black collarless button-up shirt.

"I thought you were going to dress nice," Kali said and grabbed the small black purse that she'd bought to match the dress.

"I am. This is my nice shirt," Mike smiled with pride at his appearance.

"Let's just go," Kali said, shaking her head.

As they looked over the menu at the restaurant, Kali glanced up at Mike and shook her head in disgust. She sighed loudly and put her menu down. Mike glanced over at her and

then back at his menu. After the waiter took their orders, Kali stared at Mike and tapped her fingers on the table.

“So,” she began. “What are we going to do after this?”

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?”

“You don’t know? That figures.” Kali crossed her arms and sat back in her chair.

Mike looked down at the table and tucked in his bottom lip. Kali looked around the restaurant and saw young couples absorbed in conversation. Most were leaned across the tables and clasping hands. While the waiters and busboys hustled by, these people were enveloped in their own created space in which no one else seemed to exist. Some smiled and stared at one another without speaking. Some sat on the same side of the table with their arms entwined and huddled close together. Kali looked at them longingly and realized how much she wanted to have that same kind of closeness with someone.

Kali had hoped she could have that with someone. Mike was nice, just not romantic. He never seemed to want to step out of line, and so he never took any chances, never did anything passionate or spontaneous, like show up unannounced with flowers in hand or dance when there was no music playing. He was more of a companion than a lover. He seemed to need permission just to speak his own opinions. Kali couldn’t remember them ever huddling close together in a restaurant or a public place.

She looked back at Mike and smiled. “We can go to Central Park and walk around,” Kali suggested and leaned forward to take his hands in hers. “That could be really romantic. Or Rockefeller Center.”

“That would be nice,” Mike said and smiled, relieved that the problem had been solved for him.

“You know, this is kind of nice,” Kali said. “This is the place we came to for our first date. This is the place we first met.”

Mike nodded. He squeezed Kali’s hand in his and they sat in silence for several minutes. Kali smiled up at Mike contentedly. Mike smiled awkwardly, and then let his attention wander to the rest of the people in the restaurant.

“So, I guess you’re still going home for the break then?” Kali asked.

Mike looked back at her and his smile dropped. “My family is expecting me.”

“I thought you were going to stay here and I was going to stay with you in your apartment?” Kali said. “I thought that’s what we agreed.”

“You can still stay in my apartment. I just have to go home for the summer. My mom would have a shit fit if I didn’t. Besides, I still don’t understand why you’re not going home.”

“Because I want to stay here and work on my art and see if I can find a dealer,” Kali said. “Besides, my dad’s working on this business deal and he’s going to be flying a lot. He won’t be home and my mom will be busy with all the committees that’s she working with. It’s just better for everyone if I stay here.”

“Well, I can’t not go home, Kali. You know how my mom is. I have to go.”

“What’s going on here, Mike?” Kali said and leaned forward over the table. “You’re 21 years old. You’ll be finished with school next May. What are you going to do then—move back home to live with mommy? When are you going to start living your own life?”

“I am living my own life. I just don’t want to make her angry. You don’t know how she can get. She doesn’t even talk to my aunt anymore because of some argument they had years ago.”

“Do you really think your mom’s going to stop talking to you if you don’t go home for the summer, or if you move out on your own?” Kali asked.

“I don’t know what to expect, Kali,” Mike said. His voice remained even. “I just don’t want to make her angry. I wish you could be more understanding. I love you. I don’t want to have to be put between you and my mom.”

“You’re the one who’s making it that way. I just want you to stand up for yourself and to start making your own decisions.”

Mike sighed and said nothing.

“What are you going to do when it’s time for us to move in together?” Kali persisted.

“I’ll tell her,” Mike said. “I’ll handle it when it happens. I don’t want to think about it right now. Could we please just not talk about it?”

The waiter came with their food and they ate in silence throughout the rest of the meal. By the time they were finished with dinner, they both seemed to be in better spirits.

Kali and Mike walked down the street after dinner and Kali absorbed all the sights on the streets around her. The night was falling and the city was undergoing a transformation. Newsstands closed their iron gates, revealing graffiti sprayed on the bars. Street vendors locked up their stands, and businessmen stood along the street with one arm raised to hail a cab and another clutching a briefcase by their sides. A man with a crew cut and khaki shorts

ped by on a bicycle, swerving to miss a young child and her mother. Smoke billowed from a manhole surrounded by construction horses.

“Do you want to go to Times Square?” Mike asked. “It’s just up ahead? We haven’t been there in awhile.”

“That’s also where all the tourists are,” Kali said.

“It could be fun though,” Mike said. “We could just walk around and see what’s new.”

Kali acquiesced and they walked up Broadway in silence. As they approached the infamous intersection of Broadway and Seventh, the black night seemed to fade into daylight. It was as if Kali were watching the sun rising. The lights of Times Square illuminated the sky like the sun. When they walked into the alcove of advertisements and neon signs, it was as if they were entering another city. A giant cup of noodles towered over the street atop a totem pole of ads for beer and a new blue soft drink. Two giant phones on the side of one building sent text messages to one another on their displays. A line of text ran on the border of the roof of one building, announcing the day’s news. Giant faces flashed sparkling white smiles, advertising clothes or hygiene products or perfume with their beauty. It wasn’t always obvious what was being sold; the only thing that was important was that someone beautiful was selling it.

Nothing else compared to the streets of New York at night, especially in Times Square.

When night fell, the city seemed to turn on. Taxis flooded the streets and people milled out onto the sidewalks. All the businesses were closed, but the streets came alive with people and the bright lights of the city. Kali watched the awe on the faces of those that were

experiencing the scene for the first time and smiled to herself. She could still remember when she first saw the same things and had the same reaction. She may have been born in the small towns of the south, but Kali felt more alive on the streets of New York. The city had a life of its own that seemed to awaken another life inside of her. She became intoxicated by the night and the city.

“Mike, what do you see for your life?” Kali asked abruptly as she sat on a metal bench. “What do you really want to do? What is going to make you really happy?”

Mike smiled and shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess I’d like to work with planes, stuff like that.”

“I want to produce great art,” Kali said, before Mike could ask her. “I want to produce something really great that people will remember for a long time—like this place. You come here and you are immediately filled with sensations and excitement. I want to make art that can do the same thing. I want people to know me. I want what I do to make a difference to someone else besides myself.”

“What you do makes a difference to me,” Mike said and took her hand. “I really liked that picture you did of me. It really meant a lot to me.”

“Oh, that was nothing. That’s not what I meant,” Kali said. “I mean, I want really important people who know a lot about art to appreciate what I do and tell other people about me. I want to be like Warhol and Basquiat and Dali. I want my name to be written in the textbooks. I want to be remembered for something.”

“Then I’m sure you will be,” Mike muttered.

“No, I don’t think so,” Kali said, talking faster. “I don’t take myself seriously enough. I don’t have enough confidence or ambition. I’m a good artist, but I don’t have anything to say. I don’t know myself well enough to have anything to say. Right now, I’m just sort of having fun and expressing myself.”

“That’s OK, isn’t it? I mean, don’t all people want to do something that they enjoy—that they really have fun doing?”

“I guess so,” Kali shrugged. “But it’s not the same. Art is different. You can’t just have fun and doodle out something on a page and expect to call it art. Well, unless you’re an animator or a cartoonist anyway. But I want to create a higher form of art. I want to create something that really means something. I want to create something that will last.”

“I think you can do it,” Mike said. “I believe in you.”

“I know you do, Mike,” she said. “But I need a lot more people to believe in me to make a difference. I don’t want to be ordinary. I *can’t* be ordinary. If I’m not successful, if I’m not famous, then what will I be? I’ll be some waitress in a diner in Brooklyn. I don’t want to end up like my mother, raising kids that I don’t want with a husband I don’t want to be with.”

“You don’t have to do that if you don’t want to,” Mike said.

Kali looked away from him. “Yeah, I know. The future is what you make of it,” she said, looking off into the distance. “Mike, do you think we’ll get married?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged.

“Well, don’t you want to?”

“Yeah.”

“Then why are you always hedging when I bring it up? I feel like you don’t want to be with me but you just can’t bring yourself to say so.”

“That’s not true,” Mike said quietly. “I do want to get married. I just don’t know when. I don’t think we should think about it right now. We both still have to finish school. We need to find jobs.”

“You don’t want to marry me and you don’t want to say so. Just like you don’t want to move in with me because you don’t want to face your mom about it.”

“Kali, I love you,” Mike said. “I just want to have money and security for us before we get married.” Mike hugged Kali tightly and she felt tears welling up in her eyes.

“I just...I just want to get married now,” Kali said. “I want to know where my life is going. I don’t want to have to keep wondering about my future.”

“Well, you don’t have to. You know you’ll be with me.”

Later that night, Kali and Mike made love. Kali remained distant in her thoughts. She had always been willing to give her body, but never felt a deeper emotional connection through lovemaking. She had always thought of sex as an expression of love. But in her limited sexual experience, she never felt a genuine expression of emotion in the act. Her thoughts and her feelings always remained under the surface. She was never able to abandon her conscious, rational thoughts to her real feelings. In truth, she didn’t know what her real feelings were. To survive, she had always relied on her intellect and the rational discernment of how to behave. Growing up without a mother to tell her what was right and wrong, she looked for it in other people. Her rational mind had conquered her emotions. She didn’t trust herself. So it had always been with her physical connections as well as her emotional ones.

The next day back at her apartment, Kali took out the painting of the burning Barbie and prepared her paints to finish it. She laughed to herself when it was finished. She thought it was one of the most absurd pieces of art that she had ever created.

Kali looked at her finished product with satisfaction. There was a perverse quality to the work, which pleased her. To avoid her problem with human form, she chose to paint the picture from a perspective over the girl's shoulder, not featuring her face. The girl's form was suggested by a play of shadow and light, rather than a precise rendering of her body. A rough form was discernible, but not any detailed features. There was enough suggestion of the girl's body for an onlooker to discern it, but not enough detail and realism to pass for the real thing. The result was better than anything Kali had created before. She had always tried to create a kind of photo-realism in her paintings, and the result was always flat and distorted. This was her first attempt at creating something more impressionistic. She felt a quiet satisfaction with the result.

The next day she took the painting to her class. Her professor had asked them to do a work that had some social significance. Each time a work was due, professor Caldwell asked each student to explain the significance of their work or their feelings that went into producing it.

"Well, Kali, do you want to explain this very...interesting piece that you've submitted?" he asked her when it was her turn.

"Um...well...it was inspired by a scene I witnessed on the street near Central Park. This girl just struck me and I felt inspired to capture it in this work."

“Can you elaborate? What is the message you’re trying to express here? What did you think the social significance was?”

Kali paused. She hadn’t really thought of her message. She had no idea really. She just felt a reaction to the scene and a need to portray it.

“Well...I guess I thought it said something about the traditional image of female beauty. Uh...the little girl is overweight and she is burning this image of perfect, desirable femininity that most women can’t fulfill.”

Her professor beamed back at her with satisfaction.

“Kali, I think it’s quite an achievement. I think that you’re finally tapping into the potential of your talent.”

Kali smiled and blushed modestly. She loved the praise of her professor and classmates but did not want to seem arrogant. She never knew how to accept praise appropriately, not having received it often.

At the end of class, one of her classmates approached Kali timidly.

“Kali? I just wanted to say that I really liked your painting.”

Kali looked up from her backpack as she was putting away her notebook and saw a plain girl with long, straight brown hair parted in the middle and pulled behind her ears. She wore baggy, faded jeans that were frayed slightly at the bottom, brown Birkenstocks and a black t-shirt with a picture of a young Jim Morrison.

“Oh. Uh, thanks,” Kali said and pushed her hair behind her ears.

“Yeah, I just think it’s really funny. It’s just so absurd. All those fluorescent colors and that depraved diabolical look on the face of the melting Barbie...it’s just hilarious.”

“Thanks,” Kali said and smiled, her shoulders relaxing. “I thought the same thing. You’re actually the first person who said so, though.”

“You know, you kind of have the same hair as the girl,” she said. “I mean, the same color and length.”

Kali shrugged and said nothing. Both girls stared at each other awkwardly, unsure of what to say next.

“I’m Melinda,” she said and held out her hand. Kali shook her hand and introduced herself.

“Um...do you have a class after this?” Melinda asked.

“No, I was just going to head back to my room and do some work.”

“Do you want to come by my dorm and look at some of my art?”

“I didn’t know you were an art major.”

“I’m not really,” Melinda explained. “I’m not sure what I’ll major in yet. I just kind of dabble in art and music because I like it. I’m just taking this art class as an elective.”

“Where’s your dorm?” Kali asked.

“It’s over in Brockdale hall.”

“All right. Well, let’s go.”

Kali and Melinda walked across campus towards Melinda’s dorm and maintained an awkward silence for much of the walk. As they approached her dorm, Melinda spoke.

“So, you’re majoring in art?” she asked Kali.

“Yeah, I think so. Well, I know so. I just don’t know what my concentration will be. I was thinking about doing something with graphic design.”

“But why? You’re such a good painter.”

“Well, not that many people make it in painting. It’s not easy to make a living on that alone. Actually, I’d really like to sculpt, but I need to have something more reliable to depend on when I graduate.”

“I can understand that. I play the guitar in a band with some friends. We have a great time playing, but we aren’t going to get rich, that’s for sure.”

“You play the guitar?” Kali asked, her face brightening. “That’s awesome. I always wished I could play an instrument. Plus the guitar’s so cool. I tried to teach myself how to play once, but it was too hard. Do you write your own music?”

“Naw,” Melinda said and looked away shyly. “I just mess around on my own time. One of the guys from the band writes the music we play.”

“What kind of music do you guys play?”

“I guess it’s kind of like a mix between rock and bluegrass. Kind of like Phish or the Grateful Dead. Sometimes we do some harder stuff.”

The girls arrived at the dorm and Melinda led her up to her dorm. She pulled out a sketchbook and handed it to Kali. She flipped through the pages slowly.

“When did you do these?” Kali asked.

“Oh, just in my free time. I did some of them last year. Some are from high school.” Melinda sat on the edge of her bed with her arms propped straight by her sides.

“These are really good,” Kali said.

The pictures were cartoonish and absurd. They looked like they were taken from the cover of a Pink Floyd album or the walls of a tattoo parlor. Yet they were skillfully drawn

and technically competent. They were obviously the products of personal indulgence rather than the goals of artistic achievement, without any concern for discipline or focus.

“Here are a few paintings I did this year,” Melinda said, pulling two small canvases out of a large box in the corner. “This one’s a portrait of my brother, Manny. This other one is just like a reflective piece. It’s kind of like how I was feeling that day.”

“Wow, your brother looks just like you. Does he still wear his hair long like this?”

“Yeah. We get that a lot. People are always asking us if we’re twins.”

Kali sat down on the bed and Melinda returned the sketches to the box. Kali looked around the room curiously, taking in the details to gather what she could about Melinda’s life. There were velvet black light posters on the wall and a strobe light in the corner. A pair of cardboard pig’s ears were resting on a speaker. Stacks of CDs spilled onto the floor.

“So you’re a big music fan, huh?” Kali asked.

“Yeah. I really like going to live shows. There are a lot in the city. Some are local bands. I like those the best. A lot of times I can get in free if I know someone who works there or who knows the band. Let’s face it, New York isn’t cheap so I need all the help I can get.”

“Where are you from?”

“Virginia. My whole family lives there. I lived there my whole life until I went to college.”

“Are you going to move back when you graduate?”

“I don’t know. I’m kind of sick of living in Virginia. I want to get out on my own and make my own life. I mean, I miss my family and my mom is great, but I need to be on my own, you know?” Melinda became more animated as she talked, bobbing her head and smiling, yet she maintained a soft and even tone in her speech.

Kali nodded. “So you’re brother moved here with you?”

“Yeah. We’re pretty close. We might get an apartment together next year if we can get the money together and find a place we can afford. Maybe we can get lucky and find something rent controlled. What about you? Are you going to get your own place next year or stay on at the university?”

“Me and my boyfriend are talking about moving in together next year.”

“How long have you two been dating?” Melinda asked.

“A year,” Kali said.

Melinda looked at the floor then looked up very quickly with a bright smile on her face. “Hey, do you want to come and see me play next weekend? I can get you in.”

“Sure,” Kali said slowly. “Where’s it gonna be?”

“I can’t remember. Let me find the flier.” Melinda rifled through a stack of papers on the desk and found a fluorescent pink piece of paper. “Here it is. It’s at the Wormhole...in Tribeca. It’ll be Saturday at 10:00. There’s a cover, but if you come by here before the show, you can go with me and get in for free. You can bring your boyfriend.”

“Maybe. I’ll come anyway. I just might leave him at home.” Kali giggled awkwardly and pushed her hair behind her ears.

“Just meet me here. You can meet my brother, too.”

Kali agreed and said goodbye. She edged out of the door slowly and waved a weak goodbye as she shut the door. She was happy that Melinda approached her in class. She seemed like someone she could relate to. Kali had a hard time making friends because she did not approach other people. In fact, she tried to avoid people most of the time, avoiding eye contact and contributing as little to conversation as possible. She wasn't good with small talk—the subtle art of bullshit as she called it.

Reptiles

(Chapter 4)

Kali stood in front of the mirror in the shared floor bathroom and brushed a few wisps of hair across her forehead. She sprayed a cloud of hairspray around her head and coughed violently, frantically waving her hands to dissipate the smog she had created. She bared her teeth and leaned in close to the foggy mirror looking for any lipstick smudges. Kali heard footsteps clicking across the tile floor and turned around; Sam stood before her, giggling.

“What are you doing?” Sam asked her. “It smells like a perfume factory in here. Do you have some fancy date or something?”

“What are you talking about? You know I’m dating Mike,” Kali said and brushed mascara on her eyelids.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to a club in Tribeca to listen to a friend play in her band.”

“Who? I don’t know anyone that plays in a band.”

“I do have friends that you don’t know.”

“Since when?” Sam asked and arched an eyebrow. “Anyway, where is it? What’s the name of the band?”

“It’s at a place called the Wormhole. I don’t know the name of the band.” Kali brushed passed her and grabbed her purse from the shelf. “I have to go. I’m going to be late.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Sam asked and looked at her quizzically.

“Nothing. I’m just running late.” Kali waved a hasty goodbye as she flew out the door.

Kali ran up the steps to Melinda’s dorm and rapped quickly on her door. Melinda opened the door and greeted her warmly.

“Hey, I’m glad you could make it,” she said. “Come in. I’m just about ready.”

“You’re not ready yet?” Kali asked. “I thought I was going to be late.”

“Nah, it’ll be all right,” Melinda said. “We’ll make it on time. Besides, the band has to set up and everything else. Come in; I want you to meet my brother.”

Kali followed Melinda inside and was greeted by someone who looked like Melinda, but with a goatee. He wore baggy jeans that were ripped at the knee and looked like they had never been washed. He wore a tie-died t-shirt and a pair of brown Birkenstock sandals.

Melinda introduced Kali to Manny and returned to the bathroom to finish getting ready. Manny smiled warmly and shook Kali’s hand weakly. He pulled the hair behind his ears.

Manny sat down in a beanbag and propped his elbows on his knees. He clasped his hands together and let them hang between his legs. Kali sat plopped down on the bed, and felt something hard beneath the blankets; she pulled a day planner from beneath her. There were clothes piled on the floor at Kali’s feet and thrown over a chair in the corner of the room. A stack of books had spilled over on the floor and several pieces of notebook paper with footprints imprinted on them lay on the carpet. Kali sat stiffly on the edge of the bed and

watched Melinda in the bathroom, who was fighting the tangles in her long hair with a wooden brush.

Kali looked back at Manny and smiled awkwardly. “So, what instrument do you play?” she asked.

“I play a lot of instruments, but I play the electric guitar for the band,” he said. His eyes drooped and his voice sounded like he had just woken up. “Melinda plays the bass.”

“So, what kind of a place is this that we’re going to?” Kali asked, picking lint off the bedspread and watching it fall to the floor.

“It’s pretty cool,” Manny shrugged. “My band plays there all the time. There’re a lot of really nice people. Everyone’s really laid back. There’s a good crowd.”

Kali nodded. She looked back at her own outfit and picked a stray hair off of her black pants.

“Ready?” Melinda asked, emerging from the bathroom. She wore the same faded jeans she was wearing when Kali met her and another t-shirt, this time with a picture of John Lennon. She carried a black guitar case at her side.

Kali, Melinda, and Manny rode the subway downtown to Tribeca, and the ride resembled the walk to Melinda’s dorm earlier in the week. Both girls were naturally reticent and had little to say to each other, and Manny’s temperament matched Melinda’s. They smiled awkwardly and stared at the other people on the train for much of the ride, saying little to one another. An old man with drooping cheeks and puckered lips studied Melinda and Kali curiously. He wore tattered, fingerless gloves on his hands and scratched the wiry gray hairs on his head at regular intervals. He stared at the girls and made several jerky

movements as if he were going to say something or move closer to them. The door at the back of the car opened and the transit cop walked down the center aisle. The man sat back in his seat and stared straight ahead, and did not look at the girls again. Kali was relieved when they finally came to their stop.

When the three of them walked up to the Wormhole, Kali looked around in confusion.

“Is this it?” Kali asked.

Melinda nodded.

There was no sign over the entrance and the bar looked like an apartment or warehouse of some kind from the outside. The high iron windows were covered with ancient dirt and were boarded over from the inside, allowing no light to seep in or out. The thick wooden door stood at a recess from the street. Kali wondered how anyone knew about the club or how to find it.

A bald man with a broad chest and thick biceps stood by the door with his arms crossed. He wore a tight black shirt and black slacks. He nodded to Melinda and Manny as they walked up to the door. Manny pointed a thumb over his shoulder at Kali and told the man that she was with them. He nodded to her and his expression remained stoic.

Kali followed Melinda and Manny into the club and her eyes darted nervously. She was not used to going to bars or clubs, and felt unnatural in them as she had developed an aversion to drinking. She clung close to Melinda’s side as they walked toward the stage.

“Why don’t you go get a drink and sit down while I set up with Manny and the band?” Melinda asked her.

“I’m good,” Kali said. “I can just stand here and watch.”

Melinda laid her guitar case on the edge of the stage and opened it. A woman with short, blond hair banded into small tufts in a sphere around her scalp walked over to Melinda, and kissed her on the mouth. Kali let her own mouth fall open.

Melinda smiled at the woman and pressed her forehead to hers, letting her eyes close. Kali stared at them in silence. Melinda turned her head abruptly and stood up straight.

“I’m sorry. Kali, this is Trinity.”

Trinity smiled warmly at Kali and shook her hand. Her porcelain skin shone under the fluorescent house lights and her dark eyes stood out dramatically. Kali only shook her hand in silence and watched her with wide eyes.

Several members of the band reached around Kali in annoyance to grab cables, and one bumped into her with his guitar case. She stumbled toward the stage and regained her balance.

“You should really sit down,” Melinda said. “These guys will just end up pushing you around if you’re anywhere near the stage. Why don’t you take that table there in the front row? You’ll get a nice view from there.”

Kali sat down awkwardly at a table. She watched Trinity kiss Melinda one more time then walk over to another table where a group of people was waiting. Kali turned her attention to the people nearby. A man with a gnarly beard sectioned off into two ponytails and with a black bandana wrapped around his long, brown hair leaned forward in his chair leering at her. She looked away quickly and stared straight ahead, conscious that the man continued to stare. She tapped her fingers on the table and rested her chin in her hand. When

she glanced at the man out of the corner of her eye, she saw that he was looking the other direction. He wore frayed blue jeans and a black t-shirt. Both his arms were covered in tattoos. Kali tried to make out the forms from the faded blue ink. Beside a flaming skull, she saw a heart with a name in it. As she tried to make out the writing, she heard the man say to her, "Hey, what's yer name? You here with anybody?" Kali looked up at the man's face, startled, and then turned her back to him.

The music blared as the band started the sound check. Melinda smiled at Kali and tuned her bass. To her left, a young couple leaned back easily in their chairs and chatted over their drinks. The woman had long, dreadlocked blond hair and a pierced nose. The man wore blue spikey hair and a dog collar around his neck. Kali looked down at her own plain blouse and slacks and smoothed her hand over her manicured hair. For the first time in her life, she felt suburban.

She stood up and walked to the bar. In her soft voice, she tried to get the attention of the bartender.

"You have to signal to them," said a man who slid up next to Kali's side. "Or you just have to be really loud."

Kali turned and the man smiled down into her face. He wore black slacks and a pressed black Oxford shirt. His dark hair was smoothed back and his face was clean-shaven. Kali wondered what such a man would be doing in a place like the Wormhole. But she said nothing and looked away. The man nodded to the bartender and he came.

"Yes, I'll have a scotch on the rocks, and she'll have..." The man looked down at her expectantly.

“Uh...I’ll just have a coke,” Kali faltered.

The bartender nodded and started making their drinks. The man looked back at Kali and smiled.

“Just a coke, huh?” the man said and grinned. “Not much of a partier, are you? I’m Aidan,” he said and offered her his hand.

Kali took his hand weakly.

“Are you here with anyone?” Aidan asked her.

“My friend. She’s playing in the band.”

The bartender handed them their drinks and Aidan paid. Kali opened her mouth to protest.

“Don’t worry about it. A pretty girl like you should never have to pay for a drink.”

A woman walked over to them and wrapped her arm around Aidan’s waist. She smiled at Kali curiously. “Did you get my drink?” she asked him.

“I forgot. I’m sorry,” he said and winked at Kali.

Kali smiled weakly and walked back to her table. She slumped down in her chair and stared straight ahead at the stage as the band began to play in earnest. She listened attentively to the music, but was not moved by it. The guitars wailed in harmony and the drums beat loudly. Every drum measure was punctuated by the loud crash of the cymbals, causing Kali to blink instinctively. She shifted uncomfortably and tried to make out the lyrics. The lead singer’s face was contorted as he belted out the song, but Kali could hear none of it. She could vaguely discern the sound of his voice over the instruments, but could not hear the words. Instead, she focused on the movements of the players. Melinda’s hands

moved skillfully and rhythmically over her guitar and the drummer moved his whole body in beat with the music, as if his limbs were extensions of his drumsticks. The music slowly became background noise to her study.

The house lights beat down rays of heat on the stage and Kali could feel them from her proximity in the front row. Beads of moisture formed at the line of her scalp, reactivating the hairspray and casting an aromatic cloud. Kali wiped her forehead with her hand and makeup smeared on her palm. She turned around to survey the crowd. Most people nodded their heads in time with the music. No one else seemed to notice the heat. Kali scanned the faces to find Aidan, but couldn't. She imagined that he left with the woman she saw at the bar. She looked for Trinity, but couldn't find her either. All of the faces in the crowd seemed to blend together. Besides the stage, the rest of the bar was covered in a cloud of darkness.

As the night wore on, Kali lost interest in her observations and the novelty of the scene wore off. She grew tired and studied her watch impatiently. When Melinda was done playing, she walked over to Kali.

“So, what'd'ya think?” she asked, breathing hard.

“It was good. I liked it.”

“You sure?” Melinda asked.

“Yes. You were really good. I liked the music,” Kali said unconvincingly.

“OK. Well, are you ready to go soon? I just have to say goodbye to some people.”

Kali nodded and sat back in her chair as Melinda said her goodbyes. Trinity appeared from the crowd and the two talked intimately for a moment. Melinda touched Trinity's hair lightly and laughed. Then she let her hand drop to her face and she cradled her

cheek in her hand. Melinda hugged Trinity and grabbed her guitar case. She turned and walked toward Kali. The two girls walked together back to the subway.

“I’m sorry you didn’t have a good time,” Melinda said.

“No, I did,” Kali protested. “I guess it’s just not my scene.”

“That’s OK. As long as the music wasn’t too horrible,” Melinda joked.

“No, you really were great,” Kali said. “I just don’t really hang out in bars that often. I usually just like to sit at home and hear my music where I can be comfortable and I don’t have to dress nice.”

Melinda and Kali got off the subway on the 68th street stop under the college. They stood on the platform and stared at each other awkwardly.

“Kali...I, um, I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about Trinity, and about me being...”

“Oh, it’s OK,” Kali said and waved her hand and shook her head quickly.

“Are you sure?” Melinda asked. “Because some people...”

“Don’t worry about it. I mean, it was a little surprising, but it’s no big deal.”

Melinda smiled and nodded. They said goodbye and Kali promised to call Melinda later. She walked back to her dorm by herself.

Kali spent more time with Melinda over the next several weeks and found that they had much in common. They went to museums and gallery openings. Melinda invited Kali to the Wormhole again, and Kali went in an effort to learn more about Melinda’s music.

One night, Kali and Melinda decided to return to Kali’s apartment after a party at a classmate’s apartment on the Upper East Side. Kali intended to show Melinda some of her recent work. They walked across campus talking and laughing.

“Can you believe that guy who showed up dressed like a chicken?” Kali asked.

“That’s no surprise,” Melinda said. “I see crazy stuff like that on the street everyday. Last week, I saw someone dressed like a pop tart.”

“Still, it was pretty funny. And then there was that girl who got drunk and started taking off her clothes.”

“That’s Sherri. I know her. She’s in my math class. She’s got a reputation for doing stuff like that.”

“Really?” Kali asked. “I just don’t understand how some people…” Kali’s voice trailed off slowly as she walked up to the entrance of her building. Melinda looked at her and towards the building quickly. Kali stood still and stared at Mimi, who was sitting on the concrete steps.

“Hello, Kali,” said Mimi, standing up. Kali noticed that she looked shorter than she remembered. Mimi was always a small woman, but she had somehow seemed bigger, more powerful to Kali before.

Kali said nothing and stood to the same spot as if transfixed.

“How are you?” Mimi continued. She cleared her throat and held her wrists at her waists awkwardly.

“What are you doing here?” Kali said, finding her voice. “How did you find me?”

“I came to see you,” Mimi said. Deep lines had grown at the corners of her eyes. Her once full, chestnut hair was thinning and losing its color. “I wanted to talk to you. You look good. Your hair’s grown. It looks darker. Did you color it?”

“No. What do you want?” Kali said, not allowing Mimi to deter the conversation. Her voice quavered as she spoke.

“I want to talk to you,” Mimi said. Her face looked tired; there were dark circles under her eyes and her complexion was faded. Her cheekbones stood out prominently. “I haven’t seen you in almost five years. I want to know how you’ve been—what you’ve been doing with your life. I want to know about you.”

“Mimi, you’re not allowed to be here,” Kali said. “There’s a restraining order from the last time you tried to ‘talk’ to me at Angela’s house.”

Mimi winced. “Do you think that the courts have any right to tell me whether or not I can see my own daughter?” she said. “Besides, things are different now. I haven’t been drinking. I’ve been sober for two months now.”

“You’ve said that before. You even went to rehab that one time. But you didn’t do it for us.”

“Kali, maybe I should leave,” Melinda said quietly.

“No, you shouldn’t,” Kali said quickly. “She isn’t supposed to be here. Don’t leave.”

Melinda wrapped her arm around her elbow and stood quietly, staring at the ground. After a moment, she walked a short distance to the curb and sat down.

“Look, Kali, I only want to know my own daughter. Can’t you understand that?” Mimi implored.

Kali felt a lump rising in her throat and she swallowed hard and shook her head quickly. She crossed her arms and looked to the street for several moments before answering.

An elderly couple dressed in matching black wool overcoats walked past and looked at Kali curiously. Kali pinched the skin between her eyebrows and breathed deeply before she responded.

“You never knew me,” she said quietly. “You never even tried. What makes you think that you can do it now? After everything else that’s happened?”

“Of course I knew you,” Mimi said, standing up. Kali took a step back and her eyes widened. “I’m your mother. I know you better than anyone.”

“Really? Name just one of my friends from high school. Name just one of the after school activities that I was involved in. Tell me anything about my life after I reached puberty.”

“You were friends with Jessica and you were in the...the...the French club,” Mimi said and looked at Kali with confidence.

“No, I wasn’t,” Kali said and shook her head. “Jessica was my friend in the sixth grade. I took Spanish for five years in high school; I took French one summer in elementary school. I was in drama and the academic team in high school.”

Mimi stared at Kali in silence. She wiped a tear away from her cheek and Kali’s face hardened in anger.

“You need to leave,” Kali said firmly. “You’re not allowed to be here. I don’t want you here.”

“Kali, I came here to talk to you,” Mimi said, still standing on the stairs. “I drove all the way from Winston Salem.”

“What could you possibly have to say to me?” Kali demanded. “Maybe that you ruined my life? That you were a horrible mother?”

“I was not a terrible mother,” Mimi said, her tone hardening. Kali saw the lines in her face deepen—lines from anger, sadness, and age. She noticed that skin on Mimi’s knuckles was also thick and wrinkled. “I did the best I could for you and your brother,” Mimi continued. “There wasn’t anyone around telling me what to do.”

“Funny, there’s never anyone around to tell people how to be parents, but somehow most people still manage to do a pretty decent job,” Kali said, beginning to yell.

“I didn’t ruin your life, Kali. I made mistakes, but I’m human. Things weren’t easy for me, either.”

“Oh, things weren’t easy for you? How comforting to know that treating me and George like shit wasn’t easy for you either. You call them mistakes? A mistake is making an unfair assumption or not being there for people when you told them you would. It isn’t abusing your kids or leaving them to raise themselves while you were spending all the money that you should have been spending on clothes and school supplies on getting drunk.”

Mimi started to walk down the stairs toward Kali, and she leapt back.

“Don’t you come near me,” Kali warned. “You stay away from me.” Though Mimi had never actually hit her, Kali always quavered in Mimi’s presence, feeling vulnerable and threatened.

“Who do you think you are?” Mimi growled. “How dare you try to judge me? You have no idea how hard it is to raise two kids with no help from anyone. Your father left me when you were little kids, and I had no one. I had to work all the time to support you two.”

“That’s what mothers are supposed to do,” Kali snapped back. “Do you expect me to pity you for having to fulfill your job as a mother? Maybe you shouldn’t have gotten knocked up when you were only nineteen, then you wouldn’t have to lament your life and make your kids completely miserable in the process.” Kali’s hands were shaking as she spoke and her pale skin wore an even shade of red.

Mimi took a step toward Kali with her finger pointed at her, then stepped back. She looked at the ground and shook her head.

The thick metal door behind Mimi clanged open, and Sam trotted down the steps and almost ran into Mimi. Kali looked up quickly and her eyes grew wide; Mimi turned and shot a curious glance at Sam when she saw the look on Kali’s face. Sam walked slowly down the last couple of stairs and stopped. She looked slowly from Kali to Mimi who were both staring at each other.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Kali said, maintaining eye contact with her mother.

Melinda stood up from the curb and walked closer to the group.

“Who’s this?” Sam asked, pointing at Mimi.

“I’m her mother. Who are you?” Mimi barked, and turned to face Sam quickly.

Then she returned her stare to Kali.

Sam flinched and jerked her head back slightly. She looked at Kali again.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Were you in the middle of something?” Sam asked.

Kali opened her mouth to respond, but Mimi spoke before she could.

“Why do you hate me so much?” Mimi asked, not letting Sam’s appearance interrupt the flow of their discussion. “Just what did I do that was so horrible to you, Kali? Tell me, why do you think I’m such a horrible person? Because you didn’t have a Nintendo or I didn’t take you shopping at the mall?”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Kali said, still fueled by the momentum of the situation. “It was never about the money. I would have gladly been poor if it meant having a mother who cared about us and who put us first. We were never first. Everything was always about you. You didn’t care about how life was for me or George. Or how it felt to watch our mother drink away the time she could have been spending with us or the money that could have been used to take us to the doctor or buy us new clothes or food.”

Kali looked nervously at Sam who was standing with her mouth open and a puzzled expression on her face. Melinda guided her gently from the scene to the curb. Kali watched Melinda lean close to Sam and whisper into her ear. Sam looked at Kali and Mimi quickly several times.

“What do you want from—“

“No! I’m not finished,” Kali interrupted Mimi, whipping her head back around to face her. She shook Sam’s image from her mind and focused on Mimi’s. “For once, you are going to listen. You never listened before. Well, now you’re here and you want to talk. So, listen to me talk. Or are you afraid to hear what I have to say?”

“Go ahead, Kali. What do you have to say to me?”

“It was never about being poor. It was always about you and the way you treated us. The only time you ever tried to change was when you were with Jack. He told you that if

you didn't get cleaned up, he would leave you. You were so scared to lose him that you finally agreed to go to rehab. Then you went for a week! A week! But did you ever think to say anything to me or George about it? Of course not. The only thing you told me was to behave for grandma and you threatened me if I didn't. When you came back, no one ever said a word about it. But it didn't matter. You went right back to drinking the minute everything went back to normal with Jack. It's just one example out of a hundred. You were never there for George and me. You never acted like a mother to us. You always acted for yourself."

"I had problems," Mimi said. "I don't expect you to understand that. I'm sorry I wasn't the perfect mother. But you know, you can't blame it all on me. You kids didn't make my life any easier. You weren't perfect either."

"Don't you dare try to blame us for your bullshit!" Kali hissed. "Don't you even try! We were kids. We acted like kids—normal kids. And your fucked up friend tried to tell me when I was only thirteen about how you wanted to commit suicide because George and I were making life so hard on you. And then she tried to convince me to be a better daughter and not to talk back so much. What kind of sick person tells someone that? And what kind of mother were you for letting it happen?"

Mimi looked down and said nothing. Kali stood defiantly and glared at Mimi, anger and bitterness in her eyes. She looked back at Sam and Melinda standing on the curb and saw Sam's eyes drop. She leaned in to say something to Melinda then turned away without looking back at Kali. She walked down the street with her head hung down.

Kali looked back at Mimi who had tears in her eyes.

“Don’t. Don’t do it,” Kali said and pointed at her. “I will not feel sorry for you. How many times did I cry myself to sleep at night because you were out all night or because you told me constantly what a bitch I was or how worthless I was? You even told me that I was a waste of white skin once.”

“I never—“

“Oh, yes you did! I remember everything you ever said to me. And right after you would humiliate and degrade me, you would always try to tell me how much you loved me. What bullshit! What did you expect? That you would come here and we would talk and everything would be better, after all you did? That I would say, all is forgiven and I love you so, Mommie Dearest?”

Mimi looked up at Kali quickly and her eyes widened, the tears gone. Her mouth hardened and she took a quick step towards Kali and smacked her hard across the cheek. Kali turned and looked back at Mimi.

“And for all that’s happened, you’re still not sorry,” Kali said slowly and evenly. “You’re only sorry for yourself.”

Kali walked past Mimi and up the stairs. As she reached the entrance, she called back over her shoulder, “Don’t you ever lay your hands on me again. I don’t ever want to see you here again or I’ll have you arrested.”

Kali walked inside and let the door slam behind her. She did not look back and she did not hear the door open or Mimi try to follow her up the stairs. Kali walked up to her room and laid down on her bed. She rolled over and looked at the ceiling, still strangely calm from the rush of anger. She stared ahead and could not grasp a clear thought. A flood of emotions

flowed through her. After several moments, her anger dissipated and tears pricked her eyes. She began to sob uncontrollably. Kali was absorbed in her tears when Melinda walked into the room.

“Kali? Are you all right? I wasn’t sure whether or not I should come up. I just wanted to make sure that you were all right.”

Melinda sat down on the edge of the bed and waited. Kali sat up slowly and wiped her eyes after her tears had subsided.

“I’m sorry you had to be there for that,” Kali said and sniffed.

“It’s OK,” Melinda shrugged. “It’s not your fault. Besides, I’m kind of glad that I was here. Otherwise, you would have been by yourself right now. You need somebody to be with you.”

Kali nodded meekly and wiped her eyes again. “I guess Sam got freaked out and ran off, huh?” she laughed.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Melinda asked.

“I don’t want to bother you with it anymore than I already have,” Kali said.

“It’s not a bother, Kali. We can talk about it if you need to.”

“I guess not. I don’t know what there is to say about it anymore really. I just don’t understand why she can’t ever understand what she’s doing. Why do I always end up feeling like I’m wrong, no matter what the situation is with her? If she’s telling me that I’m good for nothing, I feel like I did something wrong to provoke her. If I’m telling her that what she did really screwed up my life, I feel like I’m wrong for telling her. I just don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Well, Kali, sometimes people just don’t see things for what they really are,”

Melinda said quietly. “Your mother probably needs professional help. That’s not your fault.

The only thing you can control is how you let it affect you.”

Kali furrowed her brow and wiped her eyes. “I’m just tired of this always happening,” Kali said. “I don’t want to have to deal with this anymore. I want to be happy. I want to have a normal life. I don’t want to have the kind of life I had in the past. I need to put that behind me—I need to put her behind me. I can’t be happy with her in my life. She’ll always be who she is and I’ll always be apologizing for being who I am.”

“What if she did change, Kali? Would that make things different?”

Kali looked at Melinda for a moment and knitted her brows in thought.

“No,” she said slowly. “No, it wouldn’t. Too much damage has already been done. There’s no going back. Every time I see her, I’ll only remember all of the horrible things she said and did. I just have to cut her out of my life for good.”

“If you think that’s what will make you happy, then that’s what you should do,”

Melinda said. “Just as long as you’re sure that’s what you want.”

“I am,” Kali said.

Spider on the Window, Monster in the Land

(Chapter 5)

Kali woke up the following morning with tears dried on her face. She wore the same clothes from the day before and lay on top of her blankets. Only her shoes lay on the floor next to the bed; she had kicked them off in her sleep in the night.

Kali sat up slowly and rubbed her hands through her hair. She felt a dull pounding in her head. After Melinda left her, she had cried many long hours. She cried until her eyes and her head hurt and she felt like she couldn't breathe. Her descent into sleep felt nothing like the calm welcome into dreaming, but more like a sudden loss of consciousness—a fall.

Kali dreamt. She was with her brother on a lake that they had visited often. The sun was high and the sky was cloudless. A gentle breeze blew across her skin. The silver lake was still, but for the children swimming near the shore. A perimeter of trees hung over the lake, forming an alcove. Kali and George caught minnows in the long grass in the water near the shore, like they had done when they were children. They never did anything with the minnows; they caught them only for the thrill of the capture. They competed with one another, showing off their buckets full of murky water and algae—the minnows wriggling frantically around the sides in an attempt to escape their prison.

“Those aren't minnows,” George told her, leaning over her bucket.

“Yes they are. What are you talking about?” Kali asked indignantly.

“Yours are small and fat. They barely have any tails.”

Kali peered down in her bucket. Her minnows looked like flat, black polka dots with a single hair curled up behind them like pigs' tails. She grabbed the edge of George's bucket and looked inside. His minnows were long and thin with full round bellies. Their bodies looked like one long tail; they were like tiny amphibious missiles with eyes.

"Mine are just babies," Kali said.

"No, they're not. They're just some kind of bug."

"They are not! They're just different. They're some kind of baby frogs or tadpoles or something. Besides, I have more than you anyway."

"Do not."

"Do to. And—"

"Kali! George! Come eat!" Their mother called to them. She had been grilling hotdogs and hamburgers while George and Kali swam and caught minnows.

Kali looked up and saw her mother standing on the grassy hill. She wore a light blue bathing suit and a cotton wrap around her waist. The sun shone behind her, highlighting her sandy brown hair and creating a golden hue. The wind blew wisps of hair around her face and her eyes shone. It was the last time that Kali remembered her mother as beautiful. It was the way she looked the last time that Kali felt proud to be told that she looked like her mother.

Then the dream changed. Kali found herself in a bedroom in a house, older and changed. Darkness was all around her and she had a sense that she was hiding. She crouched down in the corner of what looked like a closet and knew that someone something was chasing her, that it was trying to kill her. She felt that something was closing in on her and that she had to move, but knew not where. She panicked at the thought that she was in a

closet and the only place to go was out to where her pursuer awaited her. Then the landscape changed and Kali found a secret door inside the closet. A giant creature shaped like a lizard with scaly limbs and a human face broke through the door, showering splinters of wood on her head. Kali looked up and stared at the face quizzically. Suddenly, she was jolted with the recognition that she looked into her own eyes. Kali scrambled backwards as the creature roared over her. She crawled through the door and through the darkness and then she ran, always aware that the creature ran close behind her. She ran through the corridors of a strange building and then through trees and then the night. At times, the creature was close enough to touch her; at others, she felt free from danger. Kali was still running when she awoke.

Kali sat up slowly on the bed and leaned her elbows on her knees. She rubbed her temples with her fingers and wiped the crust from her eyes. Kali hung her head in her hands and blinked at the floor, orienting herself. She heard a light tapping on the door and looked up.

Kali stared at the door suspiciously and her heart beat loudly. She caught her breath in her throat and looked around the room quickly. The tapping became louder and Kali stood up. She walked slowly to the window and looked down at the street below. She only saw an orange short-haired cat run across the road.

“Kali? It’s Sam. Are you in there?”

Kali let out her breath and let her shoulders slump. Then her posture stiffened again. She sighed heavily and walked to the door.

Kali opened the door slowly, as if Sam would leap through it and attack her once she opened it. When the door was opened, Kali stared at Sam standing in the hallway.

“Can I come in?” Sam asked.

Kali stood aside and let Sam walk past her into the room. Sam sat down on the bed and watched Kali walked over and sit down in a chair next to her. She rubbed her eyes and sniffed.

“So, what happened last night?” Sam asked slowly. “Was that really your mom?”

Kali darted her eyes nervously and tried to think of something she could say to cover up the events of the previous night. She slumped her shoulders and dropped her hands in her lap and looked at Sam.

“Yes. That was my mother,” Kali said.

“I don’t understand,” Sam said. “You never told me that you didn’t get along with your mom.”

“I didn’t tell you a lot of things about my mother,” Kali said.

“What do you mean? Why not?”

“Because I didn’t think you’d understand.” Kali looked at Sam directly and waited for her reaction. She measured her words carefully when she spoke.

“What wouldn’t I understand?”

“For one thing, my mom and dad do not live together. They have been divorced since I was about three years old.”

Sam shrugged and shook her head in confusion.

“My mom isn’t on any committees. My parents don’t have money.” Kali sighed and rubbed her hands on her knees. “My mother is an alcoholic. I haven’t talked to her in a little over three years since I was taken to foster care.”

“You were taken to foster care? For what?” Sam asked and leaned forward.

“Because my mom was driving drunk one night with me in the car and she crashed.” Kali winced as the memories of the shattered glass and the smell of blood flashed through her mind. “I was in the hospital for a week and I was taken to live with a foster family.”

Sam stared at Kali with wide eyes. “Why wouldn’t you tell me that, Kali? Why did you lie?”

“Because I didn’t want you to know,” Kali said. “I didn’t want to know. I just wanted to put it behind me and pretend like it didn’t happen. I didn’t want to keep being different.”

“Wow,” Sam said and let out a deep sigh. Both girls looked at each other in silence. Kali looked around the room nervously and rubbed her arms above the elbow.

“So, what did she want last night?” Sam asked.

“She said that she wanted to talk to me. You heard most of it.”

“What did she say?” Sam prodded.

“She tried to tell me that she did the best she could do and that it wasn’t her fault. But then I told her that I just didn’t want to see her anymore.” Kali became more animated as she talked and the memories of the night before became more vivid.

Kali looked to Sam for some reaction of surprise or sympathy, but found none. Sam looked confused, but not concerned.

“I guess I just don’t understand,” Sam said. “It seems like she was trying to tell you that she was sorry and that she wanted to make up for what happened. What was so horrible about that?”

Kali turned quickly to Sam. “What do you mean?” she asked. “She wasn’t sorry. She just wanted to come here and hear me say that she was right. That there was nothing to be sorry for, that she did nothing wrong. That’s bullshit. She put me and my brother through hell growing up.”

“Kali, she is your mother,” Sam pressed. “Doesn’t that mean something to you?”

“Why? Is it OK for her to do the things she has because she’s my mother?” Kali asked.

Sam looked at Kali in surprise. “Kali, I’m not the one you should be getting mad at. I’m just telling you what I think. All I’m saying is that maybe you should think about what the long-term consequences are going to be if you cut your mother out of your life. Don’t you think that you’ll regret it?”

“No, I don’t. Don’t you think I’ve thought of all that already?” Kali stood up next to her chair. She moved her arms emphatically as she talked. “She will never change. She will always be the same person and she will always be destructive. I cannot have a relationship with her and be happy.”

Sam looked at Kali and said nothing. She raised her eyebrows slightly and shrugged.

“You’re supposed to be my friend,” Kali continued. “I don’t understand why you’re taking this attitude with me. You should be trying to support me, not telling me that I’m

wrong for my decision. You're not me. You don't know what it's like to have to go through the things that I have. You had a normal life. You had parents who cared about you."

"Kali, I am your friend, and that's why I'm saying the things I am," Sam said, her voice raising to meet Kali's. "I don't have to always agree with you to be your friend or to be supportive. I'm just trying to get you to think about it from another viewpoint. I'm sure that your mother cared about you. She's your mother."

"What do you know? I shouldn't have expected you to understand," Kali said.

Sam threw up her hands and shook her head. "Maybe I should just go," she said and walked out the door.

Kali paced the room and ran her fingers through her hair. She stopped and stood in the middle of her room with her arms crossed. She walked over to her window and looked at the ground below. She was only on the third floor and had a clear view. Her room faced the front of her building and she could crane her neck far enough to the right to see the entrance. Kali did not see Mimi on the step. She looked at the building across the street and scanned the entrance and the alleys. She scrutinized every corner of the scene available from her window and did not see Mimi. Kali grabbed her purse and left the room.

When she walked outside, she paused on the step and looked to both sides. She leaned forward and craned her head around the side of the building to peer down the alley. The sound of metal scraping the concrete coupled with breaking glass jolted Kali and she whipped around and clutched her hand to her chest. A trash can had fallen over on the street and two black dogs nosed through the rummage. She took a deep breath and clutched her bag

closer to her chest. She shot a quick glance over her shoulder and walked quickly down the sidewalk to Mike's apartment.

Mike greeted Kali with a kiss when he opened the door. He paused when he saw the expression on her face.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Did something happen?"

Kali nodded and walked in to the living room. She sat down on the couch and faced Mike, who sat down next to her. "My mother showed up last night."

Mike said nothing and waited for Kali to provide further explanation. Kali told Mike the story of the night before and he listened in silence. Mike nodded while Kali talked and had a look of expectation on his face. When he learned that Kali had lied to him about her parents, he wore a confused expression then an angry one. Sympathy and concern flashed across his face when he listened to Kali talk about the things her mother had done. When Kali was finished telling her story, he looked confused.

"So, isn't that a good thing?" Mike asked after a pause. "I mean, it sounds like she wanted to tell you that she was sorry."

"But she didn't," Kali said firmly. "She didn't say she was sorry and she never will."

"Did you at least give her a chance?" Mike asked. "She is your mother, Kali. Are you sure you don't want to repair things while you still can?"

"What is it with everyone?" Kali asked in exasperation. "I know that she's my mother. Haven't you been listening to what I told you? Am I just supposed to keep putting up with the things she does because she's my mother? Would I do the same thing if my husband treated me that way? Or my friend?"

“It’s a little different, Kali.”

“Is it? Doesn’t she have the same responsibilities towards me as a person, regardless of our relationship?”

“Of course,” Mike said. “But you still have to respect her. You have to be the bigger person if she can’t be.”

“Forget it,” Kali said, grabbing her purse. “You don’t understand either. I don’t know why I thought you would. You won’t say anything contrary to your own mother.” Kali threw the door open and slammed it behind her.

When Kali left Mike, she was still too anxious to return to her own apartment. She walked out onto the street and looked around nervously. She hadn’t shelved her suspicions that Mimi was still lingering in New York and she thought that she might have followed her to Mike’s. A muscular bald man with a goatee and a tight black shirt brushed past Kali and pushed her off balance. He mumbled something over his shoulder and Kali shot him an angry look. A young woman wearing a floral skirt and carrying a blue shopping bag brushed by Kali on the other side and hailed a cab. Kali focused and walked to Melinda’s dorm.

Melinda opened the door and smiled when she saw Kali. “Hey, Kali. You feel OK today?” she asked.

“I could be better,” Kali said as she walked into the room and sat down in a chair.

“So, how are you doing? You feeling OK since last night?”

“I’m better,” Kali said simply. “I’m pretty used to things like last night happening. I just thought that it was all behind me. But hopefully I won’t have to deal with it anymore now.”

Melinda nodded and remained silent.

“I’m just really paranoid right now, I guess,” Kali said. “I just about jumped out of my skin when some dogs knocked a trashcan over.” Kali paused. “I’m really pissed at Sam. I told her about what happened last night and she told me all this stuff about how I should forgive Mimi because she is my mother.”

“And you don’t think you should do that?” Melinda asked.

“No. Do you?” Kali looked at Melinda suspiciously.

“I think you should do whatever’s best for you,” Melinda said. “I’m not you. I can’t make that decision.”

Kali relaxed and her tone softened. “Well, Sam thinks that Mimi showing up last night was her attempt to say that she was sorry and to try to make things better.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No. She would never admit that she was wrong.”

“If that’s true, then maybe you’ve made the best decision,” Melinda said.

Both girls sat quietly and looked at each other, waiting for the other to speak. Melinda pursed her lips then said gingerly, “You know, Kali, I think that you should try to think about the good things that have happened.”

“What do you mean?” Kali tensed again and eyed Melinda cautiously.

“Well, even though things were pretty bad, there are always the happy times. There has to be something that you remember from living with your mother that made you happy.”

Kali looked at Melinda with an expression of confusion and anger. “No, there isn’t,” she said and shook her head. “There’s nothing.”

“Not even when you were younger?” Melinda pressed. “Didn’t you ever do something as a family that was a good time? Don’t you remember anything that made you laugh? Even if it was something small, it’s still worth holding on to.”

“There’s nothing,” Kali said firmly. “All of the good things that she ever did were followed by a demand or an expectation to be returned. She never did anything good for us just to do it. She tried to help me get my car fixed once and then made me promise that I would do a favor for her. If I ever opened up to her to confide in her, she always found a way to turn it against me. Once, after I told her that I was thinking about having sex for the first time with my boyfriend, she tried to talk to me about it and give me advice. Then, a few weeks later, she was upset because she was fighting with her boyfriend and told me I was a whore and that my boyfriend only wanted to get me in bed.”

“I’m sorry, Kali,” Melinda said. “I wish things could have been different for you.”

“Me, too,” Kali said and hung her head.

Kali returned to her own apartment after her talk with Melinda. She felt anxious as she approached the entrance of her building, almost expecting to see Mimi there once more. She climbed the steps of the entrance quickly and looked all around her as she walked inside. Kali was scheduled to work at the diner that day, but called in sick. She couldn’t bear the thought of smiling falsely into the faces of strangers. She didn’t feel strong enough to pretend to be someone else. She needed to be free to do what she felt and to say what she felt.

Kali sank down on her bed and stared at the ceiling. She became lost in her thoughts and she ran through the events of the previous night and earlier in the day. She felt angry and sad and desparate as she thought about Mimi’s unexpected arrival and then Sam and Mike’s

reactions. She wanted to scream and yell and jump around and tear things apart and break things. But it was a relief to finally be free of the truth. She wouldn't have to pretend anymore. She remained on the bed calmly staring at the ceiling, at times swallowing hard and blinking back tears or shaking her head fiercely. She didn't think it was fair that she had been through the childhood that she had and still had to face the judgment of her friends. She felt like no matter what she did, it wasn't right, it wasn't good enough. She felt like she was paying double for something that was never her fault, for something that she never caused or wanted to happen.

Feeling restless, Kali sat up and walked to the corner of her room and set up a canvas. Rather than sketching out a picture before she began to paint, she simply started setting up her paints to begin work on the canvas directly. She felt a need, a strong desire, to translate what she was feeling onto the canvas—to somehow transfer it from her mind and her body to the canvas. She felt that somehow, if she were able to do this, she would no longer feel what she felt; she would rid herself of it somehow.

Kali mixed several shades of blue oils together—periwinkle, cerulean, royal. She added dark and light greys to the mixture, feeling somewhat satisfied with the result. She dipped her brush and raised it to the canvas tentatively. She hesitated and was unsure of what she would do next. Touching the tip of her brush to the canvas lightly, she moved it slowly in a line down the middle of the canvas, dividing it in two. Kali looked at the canvas and let her brush drop. She raised her arm again and dabbed the paint against the white canvas, letting the brush fall at random spots around the border.

As she worked, she added layers of color one on top of the other, creating a swirl of shadows and light. Whites and greys contrasted one another against the darkness and the blue background. Kali became lost in the color and worked mechanically, unconscious of intent or direction. She worked rhythmically and in response to the color, attempting no form, no order. When fatigue and hunger overcame her, she let her brush fall and took a rest.

After she had eaten and spent several hours attempting to distract herself with television and books, Kali returned to the painting. She looked at it with fresh eyes and felt more confident in her attempt. She prepared for her work anew with fresh interest and desire.

As the painting neared completion, a chasm formed between the two sides of the canvas. Lightness and darkness formed opposing sides in the painting. Two forms slowly emerged in the midst of the contrasting sides: a smaller figure appeared in the light and a taller figure appeared in the dark. The figures were forms only; they were human bodies but had no definite distinction or detail. The taller figure curved somewhat over the smaller one, creating the illusion of a kind of yin yang. Swirls of color intersected and outlined the forms—reds, yellows, deep purples.

Kali sat back and studied the painting for a long time after she finished it. She felt satisfied with the finished product. It was nothing like the other work she had produced so far. It felt more intimate, more emotional. She felt more of herself in the work. She cleaned her brushes and let the canvas stand on the easel. She took one last look at the finished work and went to bed.

Kali woke up the next day and looked directly at the painting. She got out of bed and sat before the easel once more. She felt at peace with the result. She decided that she would submit the painting to the Visions Art contest to be held the following spring.

The Visions Art Competition was held every year in the spring semester in Central Park. The reason that everyone got so excited about it was that agents and dealers from around New York attended the show to look for new artists. Sometimes a senior or two would get a showing out of the exposure, but few ever went farther than that. Kali didn't expect to win; she just wanted to enter.

Kali stared at the painting and thought about her art and her future. She never thought that she would study art in college; she didn't have enough confidence. But she looked at her creation with satisfaction. It didn't matter if other people recognized any merit in it; she was satisfied with the vision that she had brought to fruition on the canvas.

When she lived with her mother, Kali received a mixture of compliments and criticism for her work. Her feelings about her art vacillated with every comment that her mother made. It wasn't until she lived with her first foster family that Kali achieved a sustained confidence about her abilities. When she was forced to leave them, all of that confidence was lost until she got her scholarship and came to New York.

In the Grass

(Interlude)

Kali had been living with Angela and her husband for about three months, and was beginning to believe that she would finally have a real home and would know what it was like to live a normal life. They lived in a typical suburban neighborhood, which consisted of grids and rows of houses built from one of four plans and ranging in colors from tan to beige. Each of the houses had a smooth white, paved driveway and a plush lawn that looked like an even layer of shag green carpeting. Kids rode on their new bikes in the streets, not second hand bikes bought at yard sales and spray painted to look new. Though the house and the family that inhabited it were only average, to Kali, they represented everything that she had always wanted and never had: money, security, love.

When Kali first arrived, she moved timidly and rarely spoke to anyone without first being spoken to. She floated through the house, checking her surroundings as if nothing were real. The house and the furniture were like the pages of a catalogue. The furniture still looked and felt new. The upholstery was clean, not torn. The wood was not scratched or chipped. The walls were white and clean, like those of a hospital. And there was carpet. Clean carpet. In all of the places that Kali could ever remember living with her mother, or the rest of her family, she never had carpet in the house. If she did, then it was threadbare and saturated with sand and stains. The most unbearable aspect of their poverty had always been the squalor of it, and the lack of clean carpeting.

It took Kali more than a month to acclimate herself to the idea that the room she inhabited was her room. It seemed more like a hotel, or just some place she was spending the night. She always felt like she would wake up in the morning and Mimi would be waiting for her. She would pack her bags and go back home to what she had always known. She spent hours just sitting on the edge of the bed with her knees closed tightly together, her hands clasped over her legs. At night, she would sink far beneath the blankets, inhaling the fresh scent of the sheets, like the laundry she smelled right after she pulled it off the clothes line at home. The smell pervaded the whole room and Kali could smell it just sitting on the edge of the bed. The scent was almost tangible and seemed to embody the character of the whole room.

After several months, Kali had finally accepted the idea that she was not going home. Although she had never understood the concept of a real home where she could feel safe and happy, the place she had called home told her where she came from; it told her where she belonged, what she was. In this new place, she felt happier and safer, like she was nearing what she had always wanted in life—a normal home and a family—but she no longer knew where it was that she belonged.

Angela and David had tried to make Kali feel at home—taking her shopping for new clothes, encouraging her to decorate her room, and taking her on family outings with their son, Lucas.

“Kali, I was thinking it would be nice if you and I went shopping together this weekend,” Angela said as she poked her head in through the door of Kali’s room. “We could

take care of the Christmas shopping. When we get home, we could put up the tree with David and Lucas and make some cookies. How does that sound to you?"

Kali hesitated. She had never been Christmas shopping before and wasn't used to engaging in any kind of mother daughter activities like shopping or making cookies. The whole idea seemed more like something she would see in a movie, not something that she would ever expect to be a part of her life.

"Um...sure. Whatever you want," Kali said.

"Have you ever been to Old Salem at Christmas time?" Angela asked as she walked into the room and sat on the bed next to Kali.

"Yeah, once I think. When I was little. I don't remember much about it."

"Oh, Kali, it's so beautiful," Angela said, her face lighting up in excitement. "The town is so peaceful and relaxed. The area also has a lot of history, so there's a lot of old houses and shops there. The bakeries all make special cakes and cookies and they smell so good in the air while you're walking around. It's fantastic."

Kali looked at Angela smiling into her face expectantly and struggled to figure out what to say. "That sounds fun, Angela," she said and looked down, uncomfortable with the intensity and closeness of Angela's smile.

Angela put her arm around Kali's shoulder and squeezed. Kali continued to look down at the floor.

"You OK?" Angela asked.

"Sure," Kali shrugged. "Why?"

“Maybe there’s something on your mind?”

“No.”

Angela paused before she spoke next. “Kali, I want you to know that we’re really happy to have you here. I know that you’ve had a hard time in the past, but we only want to make you feel comfortable. We want you to feel like this is your home.”

Kali looked up at Angela quickly. She didn’t know what to say. “Thanks, Angela.”

Angela smiled and squeezed her shoulders one more time before she got up and left the room. Kali sat on the bed feeling bewildered.

When Kali left to go shopping that weekend, she started to feel more optimistic about the security of her future, and looked forward to the time she would be spending with Angela.

On the drive to Old Salem, Kali gazed out the window at the cities they passed. She imagined the lives of the families that lived in the houses and what kind of people they were. She wondered if there was anyone like her. Lucas grabbed her arm, shaking her out of her reverie.

“Kali, look. There’s some horses!” Lucas sat up on his knees in the backseat and pointed out the window towards a farm on the other side of the road.

“Cool, Lucas,” Kali said noncommittally.

“There’s a baby with its mom.” Lucas looked at the animals standing still in the fields. “I wonder where the dad is.” He turned quickly towards his mother in the front seat.

“Mom, where is the horsie’s daddy? Doesn’t he have one?”

“I don’t know, honey,” Angela called back from the front seat. “He’s probably running around in the woods somewhere.”

Kali watched the animals out the window as they passed. Angela drove slowly to pacify Lucas. They were on a country road, and no one else was behind them. The mare stood rigidly beside her young colt, her muscles taut and her soft eyes steady. The colt stumbled awkwardly by her side as he tried to stand steadily. Kali watched the mare stand guard by her young colt with longing. Even in nature, she saw the governing order of things. Mothers protected their children. She wanted to know what it felt like to be that safe, to know that she was protected by the strength of someone else’s love.

When they arrived in Old Salem, Lucas insisted on going to the bakery directly. They barely had time to park the car before he was unbuckling his seatbelt and leaping out of the car.

“Come on!” he yelled as he ran across the parking lot.

“Lucas! Wait for us,” Angela called after him. “Well, I guess we better hurry up before we get left behind,” Angela said to Kali, laughing.

“Yeah,” she said and smiled meekly. Kali grabbed her backpack and followed Angela who was calling after Lucas.

Inside the bakery, Kali reveled in the mixture of smells that flowed through her senses like an aromatic melody. Lucas pointed at each of the pastries in excitement and ecstasy, unable to choose just one.

“OK, Lucas, maybe two,” Angela conceded and laughed. “Do you want anything, Kali?”

Kali looked at her surprised and walked forward slowly to survey her choices. She remembered a time that she went with her father to the store when she was a little girl. Her half sister was also there, and she had asked for a cookie. She was granted the treat, and Kali was left with nothing. Almost ten years later, Kali felt some validation now in her choice of a gingerbread cookie.

All day, Kali and Angela and Lucas walked from store to store, taking in the history of the area as depicted in the quaint old cottages and the restored mansions, and shopping for trinkets and hand-stitched items. After several hours of shopping and touring, Lucas became fidgety and tired.

“Kali, can you sit with him here for awhile while I go across the street to that store? I want to get something for my sister,” Angela said.

“Sure, no problem,” Kali said. She sat down on a bench and Lucas laid down next to her. Kali opened her backpack and pulled out her sketchbook. She sharpened her pencil and thought back to the horses on the side of the road as they traveled. She began to slowly shade their forms using the edge of her pencil.

“What’re you doing?” Lucas asked and looked up at her.

“Just drawing,” Kali said.

“Drawing what?”

“Some horses.”

“Oh, you mean like those horsies we saw in the grass in the car?” he asked, his face brightening.

“Uh-huh.”

Kali immersed herself in her sketch and the vision of the stately animals. They were so strong, so free. Kali longed for that freedom and strength in her own life, in herself. Everyone else seemed to be content and secure. They seemed to know the answers to all the questions—the simple rules that were reflected even in nature.

Kali stirred from her sketch as she heard Angela walk up beside her and throw down some shopping bags next to the bench.

“Thanks for watching Lucas, Kali,” Angela said. “What’s that you’re working on?”

“Just a sketch.” Kali looked up and shaded her forehead with her palm. The sun shone behind Angela, lighting the edge of her honey blond hair.

“Can I see?”

Kali pushed her sketchbook forward. Angela knelt down to look at the drawing and traced the outline of the horses with her index finger.

“This is really good, Kali. Have you had any training?”

“No. I’ve just always been good at it,” she shrugged.

“You should study art in college.”

Kali looked up at her and felt her cheeks flush. “I don’t know if I’d go to college,” she said.

“Why not? You’re very talented.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know if I could. I mean, I can’t afford it.”

“You could get a scholarship.”

“Besides, if I did go to college, I’d want to study something more practical,” Kali said. “I’d want to be able to get a job where I could make some real money. It would be hard to support myself as an artist.”

“Don’t be so pessimistic,” Angela said. “I think you could do anything that you set your mind to doing. You’re a very smart girl.”

Kali smiled. She knew she was a good student. Her mother used to brag to her friends about how she was on the honor roll and she was going to go to college one day. Her mother’s praise had never affected Kali as Angela’s did now. Her mother’s praise wasn’t for Kali, it was for herself, a reflection of the kind of mother she thought herself to be. Angela offered her praise without condition, without any sort of ulterior motive.

“Sure. I always thought I’d go to college anyway,” Kali said. “Things just changed after...well, you know. It’s hard to see how those plans would work out now.”

Angela looked at her soberly. “Ah, I see,” she said quietly. “Kali, you are a very bright and talented girl. Don’t limit yourself to your past. You will have people in your life who care about you—people like me and David and Lucas. You still have a future ahead of you. I’ll always help you in whatever way I can.”

Kali felt her cheeks burn. The corners of her eyes itched and the rims of her eyes felt heavy as they filled with water. She nodded and smiled. “Thanks Angela.”

Angela nodded. “You ready to go? I think Lucas is about ready to pass out over there. Come on, Lucas. You still want to make cookies and decorate the tree, don’t you?”

“Yeah!” Lucas cheered and leapt onto his feet.

Kali smiled and stood up. She put her sketch back in her bag and followed Angela and Lucas to the car.

Over the next few months, Kali opened herself up. She began to feel like she was a part of the family, not just a guest that they were entertaining. The knowledge that she would eventually have to leave and would be moved on to the next house loomed in the back of her mind, but she chose to ignore it, refusing to believe that Angela would ever let her go. She had become a part of their lives, and they hers. She knew that they cared about her and wouldn't want her to leave. When the social worker would come to take her on to the next house, they would insist that she be allowed to stay and maybe even ask to adopt her. She was already seventeen, but she knew that it didn't matter to them that she was older; they loved her and wanted her to be a continuing part of their lives.

Kali acclimated herself to the role of big sister and elder daughter in the house. She came home from school in the afternoons and told Angela about her day and started her homework. As she worked, she would talk to Angela about the kids at school, her teachers, and the topics they discussed in class that day. Sometimes, Kali would help Angela around the house if there were still chores to do. Kali gladly volunteered to help with the housework. It was a change from the threatening demands her mother always made to her to do chores, which really only amounted to free housekeeping, since her mother never cleaned the house on her own.

When Lucas came home in the afternoons, Kali would help him with his homework while Angela cleaned or made dinner. Sometimes, they would listen to music and Angela would swing her hips around the kitchen as she cooked. Kali watched Angela with

satisfaction. She thought she was a beautiful woman, the same way she had felt about her own mother when she was younger. She had long, blond hair that curled lightly to the middle of her back. She often pulled it back at her temples, revealing her large brown eyes, and thick lashes. When Angela smiled, her whole face seemed to work together to produce the effect: her eyes crinkled, her cheeks widened, and her teeth shined.

At the end of the day, David would come home and they would all gather at the dinner table, where they would repeat the main events of their day and talk about their various plans for the future. Kali had never felt happier in her life. The life that they had offered her was everything that she had always hoped for as a child, but thought that she would never have. She was beginning to feel like her childish fantasies were not as naïve and hopeless as she once believed.

One morning, when Kali had finally allowed herself to believe the past really behind her, she woke up to a loud crash in the front yard, immediately followed by the sounds of screams and running on the stairs. She bolted upright in bed and ran to her window. What she saw in the yard below her fulfilled every fear she had indulged since she came to live with Angela. For a moment, Kali stood frozen by the window, staring at the commotion unfolding before her.

“Kali! Get your ass out here! I know you’re in there!”

Kali started at the sound of her mother’s voice. She had convinced herself so thoroughly that her past life was behind her that she could not believe that what was happening now was real.

“Kali! You little bitch! If you don’t come out here, I’ll fucking come in there and drag your ass out!”

Kali ran out of her bedroom and down the stairs. Her heart beat faster and her hands began to shake uncontrollably. She paused behind the front door and peeked out the side window. A brown Camaro was crunched around a large maple tree in the center of the yard. The windshield was intact, but the hood was buckled and the grill was bent into a permanent arch. Tire tracks gouged tiny ditches in the grass trailing the car. Lucas was sitting on the grass nearby, crying and rubbing his head, but Kali saw no signs of blood or loss of mobility. David and Angela kneeled next to him and inspected him for any signs of harm. Kali slowly opened the door and stood on the front step, unable and unwilling to go any farther.

“Kali! Get your shit together and let’s go,” Mimi yelled at her. She wore torn blue jeans and a faded black t-shirt. Her eyes were wild and her hair was pulled back high on her head.

Kali stared at her as if transfixed and slowly shook her head. She moved as a small animal in sight of a predator.

“Did you hear me? I said get your shit. You’re my daughter and you’re going with me.”

“What do you think you’re doing?” Angela screamed at her as she leapt in front of her. She pushed her small body close to Mimi and gestured emphatically as she spoke. “You almost killed my son, and now you want to rip this girl out of the only real home she’s ever known?”

“This isn’t her home,” Mimi sneered. “She isn’t your daughter. Her home is with me.”

“You couldn’t give her a real home. That’s why she’s here,” Angela said.

“And you can? You don’t care about her. She’s not your daughter. Don’t you tell me about a real home. The only real home she has is with me.”

“You’re no mother!” David yelled, looking up from Lucas. “Look at that girl. She’s too terrified to even come near you.” David rose and walked over to Mimi, putting his face right into hers as he spoke. “Look at my son. You nearly killed him when you came tearing into our yard. You’re a drunk!”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Mimi said. “You have no right to judge me. I had to raise my kids with no help. I did the best I could.”

“This is the best you can manage?” David said and gestured to the car in the yard. “Do you think you deserve the mother of the year award because you managed to see your children through adolescence? You’re no parent. You’re pathetic.”

As David spoke, his voice rose and his face deepened in color. Police cruisers and ambulances pulled into the yard, sirens blazing. David stood firm at an inch from Mimi’s face. Mimi stared back at him defiantly in her drunken stupor, then her expression changed and her lips began to tremble.

“You don’t know how hard it was for me,” Mimi began to wail. “I didn’t have any help. I made mistakes sure. But I’m human. What was I supposed to do?”

David's expression didn't change; he maintained his disdainful scorn and his fists were clenched at his sides. Several police officers approached the pair and grabbed them firmly by the arms to move them apart from each other.

Kali watched the scene as if in a dream. She felt waves of nausea wash over her and fought to maintain her balance, bouncing her shoulders off the wooden doorframe. A young female officer with sandy hair pulled back in a knot approached Kali slowly.

"Are you OK?" the officer asked her.

Kali nodded slowly.

"Were you hit? Are you hurt?"

Kali shook her head.

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

"Is that your mother?"

Kali nodded her head in affirmation and began to cry. She pressed her hands against her face and squeezed her eyes tight as the tears quickly rose. She leaned her body against the doorframe and slowly slid down to the ground. The female officer made a feeble attempt to comfort her by patting her softly on the head and shoulders. Kali did not look at her and her tears drowned out the sounds around her.

Kali remained as unaware of the people around her as they were of her. She only heard scattered words and sounds to indicate the status of the scene unfolding around her. Fuck. Mother. Go. Son. Kill. Right. Her face contracted and expanded in contortions as she sobbed. Her head felt like it would split.

Kali sat on the step for she knew not how long when she felt a hand fall on her shoulder. She looked up, startled.

“Kali, are you OK?” Angela asked her.

Kali looked around her, confused. She saw David hovering near Lucas protectively in the grass. He shifted his eyes when she met his gaze.

“Kali?”

“Huh? Yeah. I’m OK.”

Angela looked down at Kali uncertainly.

“Do you want to come inside now?”

Kali looked out into the yard, still expecting to see the police and her mother, unaware that any resolution had been reached.

“Where is everyone? Where’s my mother?” Kali leapt onto her feet instinctively, and stood rigidly before Angela, staring about her wildly.

“She’s gone. The police took her away,” Angela said quietly. “Don’t worry. Everything’s fine. Let’s go inside.”

A fresh wave of tears crashed over Kali and she fell back against the doorframe to support her weight.

“Oh God, I’m so sorry, Angela. If it weren’t for me, none of this would have happened.”

“Don’t worry, Kali. It’s not your fault. We know it’s not your fault.”

Angela looked back over her shoulder at David while she rubbed Kali's shoulder in an attempt to soothe her. David wrapped his arm around Lucas and guided him past the two women into the house.

"Come on, Kali. Let's go in." Angela turned Kali slowly and guided her inside.

Kali sat down on the couch and wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. "Are you OK, Lucas? What happened?"

"I was in the yard catching bugs and I heard this loud crash and I saw this big brown car coming right at me. Man, I was scared," Lucas said, his eyes wide and his arms flailing wildly by his sides for emphasis.

"Lucas, that's enough. We don't need to talk about it right now," David interrupted. "Everyone's fine. I think we all need to just calm down for right now and just be happy that no one got hurt. Angela and I will talk to the police later and we'll take care of everything."

Kali looked up at David expectantly, hoping for some reassuring sign, but received none. She looked to Angela instead, who smiled feebly, then averted her eyes. Kali knew what would happen next.

For the duration of her short life, Kali had been apologizing for her own existence. She apologized to her mother for not being good enough, to her father in his absence, to her friends for not being quite normal enough. Kali was apologizing now to these people who had made her know how it felt to be part of a real family. But her deepest apologies they could not hear, for she could not find the words to express them.

"I'm so sorry," Kali began. "I—

“Kali, let’s not talk about it right now, OK?” Angela interrupted her. “Why don’t you go upstairs to your room and just rest for awhile? I’ll be up to check on you after awhile.”

“OK, but—“

“It’s OK, Kali. Just go ahead now.”

Kali sighed deeply and stood up to leave the room. She turned back towards Angela and opened her mouth to say something, but stopped herself. She drooped her shoulders in defeat and turned back towards the stairs. Kali didn’t need to hear the conversation that would come next to know what would happen.

A week later, the decision was made. Kali would have to pack her bags again. Mrs. Phillips from child services would come to pick her up and take her to a new family.

“But I don’t understand,” Kali whined when Angela told her the news.

“I’m sorry, Kali, but this was always a temporary situation,” Angela explained. “We all knew that going into this.”

“But I thought I would be able to stay. That you could adopt me.”

“Kali, we can’t do that.”

“Why not? What about all that stuff you said about wanting me to think of this as my family and feel at home? Or all those times you told me that you would be there for me or help me as much as you could?”

“Kali, I still mean that. Of course, we look at you like family, and we’ll always be there for you in the future. We’ll want you to write and let us know how you’re doing.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“I know. But we have to be practical, Kali. You’re nearly an adult. You’ll be 18 next year. You’ll be going away to college. We can’t adopt you now.”

“This is because of Mimi isn’t it? I’m too much of a risk for you, aren’t I?” Kali demanded suddenly.

“That’s unfair, Kali. We would never blame you for what happened.”

“But it’s still the reason, isn’t it? You can’t take a chance for me if it means that Lucas might get hurt.”

Angela looked away and said nothing. “I’m sorry, Kali,” she said after a moment. “I can’t do anything about it now. I hope you believe what I said that we want you to keep in touch and let us know how you’re doing. We really do care about you.”

Angela turned and left the room, leaving Kali angry and incredulous.

Kali had always known that she was different because of her past. Even growing up, she always knew that she would never live a life like other people. She lied, she apologized, she pretended she was someone else. After she was taken away from Mimi, she slowly allowed herself to believe that things could be different, that she could be like other people. Like every other dream that Kali entertained, Mimi found a way to ruin that for her, too. At that moment, Kali’s hatred flared up anew for her mother. Her last chance of happiness had been stolen from her.

We are Not What we Seem

(Chapter 6)

Kali walked around the park leisurely browsing the other pieces of art on display. There were some mediocre watercolors of floral arrangements and landscapes scattered among various oil portraits that were only a level of quality above the watercolors. Kali looked them over with some amusement. Even if she wasn't yet a master artist, she knew she could recognize mediocrity when she saw it.

She wandered aimlessly through the aisles and paused briefly before each piece in which she noted some merit. One exhibit showed black and white photographs of various textures and shapes in different environments: grass, Formica, rock. Another consisted of paintings of abstract forms that conveyed motions like dancing and acrobatics. Kali studied them for the differences that they showed from her own work, judging whether they were better than her own. On most, she decided that they were not.

Kali stopped in front of an exhibit of representational clay sculptures and looked at them longingly. She could trace the line of muscle beneath the smooth skin. The limbs of each figure flowed gracefully from the torso. The movements of the figures seemed so natural. Kali wanted to be able to produce that kind of art. It was so much more intimate than her medium. Each form was sculpted by hand, molded directly by the touch of the artist. There was no distance. It reflected a kind of intimacy achieved by leaving a personal fingerprint on the art, a part of the artist. Kali didn't have that. She longed to express herself through her art, but still couldn't make enough sense of her emotions to know how to express

them or even to know what she had to express. After Mimi's visit, she only had a sense of a subdued rage and a longing deep inside her to quell it, to find a sense of peace and belonging. Everything else was confusion.

Kali became aware of somebody else standing next to her and looked up at him. A tall, dark-haired man looked down at her and smiled. Kali smiled shyly and looked down.

"Are you an artist?" he asked her. "Or just an onlooker?"

"Both, I guess. I entered a piece in this contest."

"Really? Which one?" he asked her.

"Oh, it's a painting. It's on the other side."

"What's your name?"

"Kali. Uh, Kali Nichols."

"Hi, Kali. I'm Bailey Sterne. I'm a gallery assistant for the Susan Sloane gallery."

Bailey held his hand out to her confidently and Kali looked down at his hand before taking it in her own. Kali shook his hand awkwardly and her mind raced with thoughts of the gallery. She had gathered enough courage to show her art to one gallery, but was rejected because her style didn't match that of the gallery. Still, she couldn't help but feel that the rejection was because of her and a lack of talent, and so she hadn't taken her work to another gallery since.

"I come to these showings to look for new talent," Bailey continued.

"Are you finding any?" Kali asked. She held her breath and her heart beat faster.

"Not really. I usually don't. Sometimes I get lucky."

Bailey looked down at her meaningfully. Kali fidgeted. He was dressed in a pressed black suit and had broad shoulders. His build looked muscular beneath his suit. Kali glanced

up at him and saw how his dark brown eyes shined underneath his thick lashes. She looked away quickly. Kali was always nervous around men that she found exceedingly attractive; she felt like they were beyond her reach.

“So Kali, what are you doing after the show? Would you like to get a cup of coffee with me?”

“Oh, thanks. But, I don’t like coffee. I never drink it.”

“Well then, how about a glass of water? A coke? A slice of pie?” He flashed her a smile. Kali realized that he was only trying to ask her out, and moved back from him instinctively and shook her head.

“Thanks. I have a boyfriend,” she muttered.

“I’m just asking you for a slice of pie. Where’s the harm in that? Maybe we can even talk about your art.”

Kali started to speak, but hesitated. “No, thanks. I really have to go,” she said.

Kali turned to walk away and held up her hand as a half wave to say goodbye.

“It was nice meeting you. Maybe we’ll...meet...again.”

Kali wandered among the crowd looking for Mike. He had promised to meet her near the entrance of the park at 1:00, but still hadn’t shown. She thought she might have missed him and he was walking around looking for her. She walked among the aisles and passed her own painting—the same one that she completed after Mimi’s arrival in New York. A group of people was standing in front of it and she paused to listen in on their comments.

“This piece is so beautiful,” said a man in his twenties, wearing a clip-on tie over a t-shirt with a pair of faded jeans.

“There’s a lot of raw emotional power in this piece,” said the woman standing next to him, wearing a black knit skirt that fell down to her ankles like a curtain over her black Doc Marten’s.

“I really like the play of light and dark,” the man said. “The contrast of the two figures is really nice.”

The man was wearing thick, black glasses. Kali thought that he looked like Buddy Holly, and the two of them looked members of a rock band. More than likely, they were art students at one of the other colleges nearby, Kali thought.

Kali shook her head and walked away. She stopped when she felt a hand on her arm; she looked back and saw Mike. Kali gave him a tight-lipped kiss on the mouth.

“How’s it going?” Mike asked. “Have they picked the winners yet?”

“No. I think they do that around 1:30.” Kali stepped back from Mike and wrapped her arms around her waist.

“What time is it now?”

“Um...1:18,” Kali said, looking at her watch. “Why are you late?”

“I missed the subway I wanted. Then I couldn’t find you right away.”

Kali nodded and looked down. She kicked the dirt with the tip of her shoe.

Kali turned her attention to a crowd of people forming around an exhibit. She walked over to where the judges were gathering and Mike followed after her.

The judges walked to each painting and paused briefly, discussing its merits. At times, the judges exchanged excited glances and furrowed brows. As they stopped at each painting, the crowd seemed to hold its breath. When they moved on, a stifled gasp escaped from the artist. Some would simply droop their heads and turn away in resignation. After the judges had speculated on all the entries in the category, they placed ribbons on the winning pieces. When they finished looking over the painting exhibition, they walked to one oil landscape painting and placed a ribbon on it. Kali held her breath and held her lip between her thumb and forefinger. They walked to another painting—an acrylic, showing a scene of the city—and placed the second ribbon. Kali gulped and pinched her lip. Mike smiled and rubbed her back reassuringly. Kali threw her arm by her side and turned away. She knew she would never win—she wasn't going to place. She turned around and glanced back at her painting once more and gasped when she saw the first place ribbon attached to her entry. Mike turned and hugged her.

“Congratulations, Kali. That’s awesome,” he said and kissed her on the cheek. His whole face lit up in a smile.

“Oh my god. I can’t believe I actually won. I never win anything. This is amazing,” Kali gushed.

“What do you win?”

“\$2,500. That’s really going to help me out, too.”

“That’s great,” Mike said. “Now you’ll have some extra money for the summer. Maybe you can come visit me in Jersey.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Kali said absently as she turned and saw Bailey approaching her from across the aisle.

“Hello, Miss Nichols. I’m Bailey Sterne,” he said and handed her his card. “I’m a gallery director assistant. I had a chance to take a look at your winning piece. Very nice work.”

“Thanks. Um...this is my boyfriend, Mike,” Kali said and motioned her hand towards Mike.

“Hi. How are you?” Mike said.

Bailey smiled and nodded at him, then quickly returned his attention to Kali.

“Well, Miss Nichols, I think your work shows real potential and I’d like to see more of it. Can we set up a meeting?”

“I, uh, don’t have a studio or anything. Maybe I could bring some work by your office?”

“Yes. You can bring some by the gallery. Just call me and we can make an appointment. By the way, when will you be finished with school?”

“Not for another two years. I’m just finishing my sophomore year.”

Bailey raised his eyebrows. “That’s amazing. Well, Kali, you have a lot of talent and I’d say a lot of potential. I’ll definitely look forward to hearing from you.” Bailey flashed her a sly smile then nodded again to Mike and walked away. Mike beamed and hugged Kali again.

“That’s awesome, Kali. Your art is starting to get noticed by other people This is great.”

Kali tried not to let herself get too carried away by the situation, but felt a silly giddiness and smiled in spite of herself.

“It is pretty nice. Winning that money is good. I don’t really know about that guy though. I mean, he’s only seen one piece of my work and he seems so interested.”

“Isn’t that what you would want, though?” Mike asked.

“There’s just something about him that I don’t trust.”

“You just need to have more confidence in your art. Obviously, he only needed to see one picture. He’s interested in you, right? This is great news.”

“He’s interested in me all right,” Kali mumbled. “Look, I don’t want to get my hopes up. All he really offered was to look at my work. He could look at it and say it’s all a pile of crap. I don’t want to let myself get disappointed.”

“I still think we should celebrate. Let’s go out tonight—anywhere you want to go.” Mike turned and grabbed her shoulders and smiled.

“I don’t know, Mike,” Kali said and lightly shrugged his hands off her shoulders. “I have to study for two exams on Monday and I still have a final project due for my drawing class. Not to mention that I have to work on Sunday morning. Plus you still have to study for your exams.”

“So, go home and study for awhile and then I’ll pick you up and take you out for a nice dinner,” Mike said, undeterred. “Then we’ll come back early so you can get up in time for work tomorrow.”

“Sure. I guess. But I really do have to be back early. Come by my place at five o’clock?”

“At five o’clock then. I’ll call and make reservations somewhere,” Mike said and smiled broadly. He hugged her tightly and kissed her on the cheek.

Kali went back to her room in a dream state. It was hard for her to accept that good things could happen to her. She was so used to fighting for everything she had and just trying to survive that she didn’t know what to do when things worked out without a struggle. She was too used to fighting for something and only being disappointed when it didn’t work out. She was used to losing—to being second best or worst. She didn’t trust what was happening to her now. She thought that Bailey was a phony and only wanted to sleep with her. She thought the contest would tax half her money or that there had been a mix up in the judging. Whatever would happen, she didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel like her life.

Instead of studying like she said she would, Kali pulled out her portfolio from underneath her bed. She flipped through the photographs of her paintings, looking for pieces that she wanted to show to Bailey. She avoided any pieces that she had attempted that had a human face in them. They all ended up looking distorted or two-dimensional. They lacked the life that they were meant to represent. Instead, she chose those that hid the face through a different view or perspective, as with the painting of the girl in the street.

Kali chose a few oil paintings and acrylics, and several drawings. She looked at the two sculptures she had attempted in the corner—a figure dancing and another posed in thought—and thought about whether to include them. She hesitated a moment, but decided against it. She dumped all the other photographs of her work out of her portfolio. Then she rifled through her box of slides to find those for the works that she has chosen to show. She

knew that dealers preferred to see the work on slides, but she decided to take her portfolio of pictures along as well.

Kali mulled over whether or not to call Bailey for several weeks. She burned to take advantage of the opportunity to show her work to someone who had shown even a small amount of interest in her work. But she had too many doubts. She hadn't even been able to take her work to any of the galleries since the last time she did for the fear of rejection, or worse, criticism. With Bailey, she had the added suspicion that he was more interested in sex than her art, or that he wasn't who he said he was.

After several weeks, Kali finally got up the courage to call Bailey.

"Hello, Mr. Sterne? This is Kali Nichols. You asked me to call you about setting up an appointment to look at my work." Kali said nervously.

"Your work? What do you do?"

"I—I'm a painter," Kali faltered, confused.

"What did you say your name was again?"

"Kali. Kali Nichols. I spoke to you a few weeks ago at the Visions Art Competition. I placed first in the student division of painting."

"Oh right. Kali. I didn't think you were going to call. I thought maybe you thought I...had other intentions besides representing you."

"No, I didn't think that," she said.

"Good. I really would like to have you come by the gallery so I can see some more of your work."

"OK. I have my portfolio ready."

Bailey chuckled lightly. “That’s good. You’ll need that. Why don’t you come by the gallery on Sunday around one? It shouldn’t be too crazy then. We should have some time to talk without too many interruptions. You know where it is? On 79th street.”

“Yes, I know where it is. Sunday at one sounds good. I’ll meet you then.”

“Looking forward to it,” Bailey said.

Kali hung up the phone and smiled.

On Sunday, Kali woke up feeling anxious. She sorted through her meager wardrobe looking for something to wear that was both casual and attractive. She selected a pair of black slacks and a green sweater. She looked at herself in the mirror and frowned. She hadn’t worn makeup in months and the only styling that she attempted on her hair was brushing. She pulled out her makeup and did the best that she could with her rusty skills.

Kali arrived at the gallery and waited for Bailey nervously. The gallery looked so empty without a crowd of people to fill it. The expansive hardwood floors seemed to stretch for miles and the stark white walls stood out in the gulf between the pictures. She gazed up at the exhibit the gallery currently featured: a collection of watercolors. Many of the paintings had hazy backgrounds of two contrasting colors with a bold, solid line of color cast through the center in various shapes and designs. Kali indulged a fantasy that her paintings were the ones on the walls and that her name was the one on the tiny placards. She envisioned a crowd of elegantly dressed, sophisticated people swarming over her work and showering it with the highest praise. She envisioned smiling for the photographers that would take her picture for Art Forum or Art News. A smile slowly crept over her face. Bailey burst into the room with an explosion of energy and startled Kali from her reverie.

“So you made it,” Bailey called out energetically. “I wasn’t sure if you would.”

Bailey looked at her curiously. “Are you OK? Did I startle you? You have a funny look on your face.”

Kali smiled and blushed. “No. No.”

Bailey looked up at the paintings on the walls then back at Kali who looked at the floor.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “One day that’ll be your name up there on the wall.”

Kali smiled. “I have my portfolio right here,” she said, reaching down to pick it up.

“No, no. I was thinking I could take you out to lunch,” Bailey said. “It’s less formal that way and we can get to know each other a little better.”

“I thought you wanted to look at my work,” Kali faltered.

“I do. I just thought we could go have some lunch, break the ice, and then we could come back here and you could show me your stuff.”

Kali stood in silence.

“Don’t worry, Kali,” Bailey said. “This is all legit. I saw your work at the contest and I thought you had some talent. Now, I just want to take you out to lunch so we can relax and have a conversation. I have only the best intentions.”

“Only the best intentions, huh?” Kali smiled.

“Of course,” Bailey smiled in return. “I only want to treat you to a professional lunch to start off our relationship properly. You have to trust me.”

Kali picked up her portfolio. “I guess one lunch won’t hurt.”

Bailey took Kali to Manhattan for lunch—an upscale restaurant named Felicity. Kali was impressed.

“I can’t believe this place,” Kali said. “I’ve never been anywhere that actually had an employee called the Maitre d’. All the places I go to have about a foot between each table and cheesy centerpieces.”

Bailey looked at her in surprise. “Why would you ever eat at such a place?”

“You know, this is why I love this city,” Kali continued. “I don’t think we even have these kinds of places in North Carolina. Unless you think Joe Bob’s Barbecue on family night is fancy.”

Bailey smiled and Kali noticed the way his eyes twinkled under the lights. She felt more relaxed and at ease in his presence than she had at the contest.

“What part of North Carolina are you from?” he asked.

“Winston Salem.”

“So, you left home to come all the way to the big bad city?”

“More like ran away from home to a city as far away as possible.” Kali looked up, surprised at her own candidness. Bailey showed no signs of shock or discomfort.

“Ah, so you’re an artist suffering from a tortured past? You’re quite an individual then,” he said and smiled.

“Something like that,” Kali said dryly.

Bailey waited for Kali to say something else. “They say you can’t go home again,” he said after a pause, his tone more serious.

“I guess they were right,” Kali said. “For me, home was never really ‘home.’ It was more like prison—a situation I had no control over.”

Bailey nodded slowly and looked at her soberly. “I know how you feel,” he said. “I think I would have to place myself in that same category.”

“Oh, so you’re a tortured artist as well?” Kali said, attempting to lighten the tone of the conversation.

“Well, at least a tortured art dealer anyway.”

“You never wanted to be an artist?” she asked, taking a sip of her water.

“No, I did. I used to paint also,” Bailey said. “I just don’t really have much luck selling my own work. I can spot genius at a mile away, but I just can’t seem to reproduce it. I’m the Roger Ebert of the art world.”

“I know what you mean,” Kali nodded and set down her glass.

“I haven’t thought about that in awhile,” Bailey mused. He smiled and leaned back in his chair. He folded his hands and rested them on the edge of the table.

“What am I doing telling you all my secrets anyway,” he laughed. “This is a professional lunch, right? Let’s talk about your work.”

“OK.” Kali smiled.

“Tell me what you want to do. Are you a painter, principally?”

“Yes. I guess I am.”

“You guess?” Bailey asked and raised his eyebrows.

“Well, my real goal is to become a sculptor.”

“Did you bring any with you?”

“No. I only have two pieces and I don’t think they’re really that great,” Kali confessed.

“So you’re a sculptor who doesn’t sculpt?” Bailey asked.

“I know. It’s stupid. I just can’t seem to produce the kind of art I want to. I guess I just hold myself back.” Kali felt more comfortable with Bailey the more she talked to him.

Bailey nodded. “I know what you mean. I’m a painter who sells art that’s not his own. Well, how long have you been painting?”

“Since high school,” Kali said.

“And you enjoy it?”

“I guess so. I like it. I have fun with it.”

“But?” he prodded.

“I guess I just don’t feel like I’m producing what I really want. I have great notions, but I can’t seem to fulfill any of them.”

“Ah, so you really are a tortured artist then,” Bailey teased.

“I guess so,” Kali laughed.

“Well, Kali, I don’t think you have anything to worry about. I don’t think there are too many artists who don’t suffer from the same kind of problem. Van Gogh said that all the bitter disappointments of his life kept him from developing fully in his artistic career.”

“I guess that’s somewhat reassuring,” Kali said.

“Don’t worry. After we have lunch, we’ll go back to the gallery and I’ll look at your work. I’ll tell you if you have no hope.”

Bailey and Kali laughed. Kali felt more at ease than she had before. She allowed herself to feel some hope for herself and her possible future with her art.

When they were finished with lunch, Bailey and Kali took a cab back to the gallery so Bailey could look at her work like he said he would.

“All right,” Bailey said and clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Show me what you got.”

Kali felt her nervousness return instantly. She opened her portfolio and showed him the photograph of the first piece. It was an oil painting of a black bird flying from the remnants of a broken shell. Only the back of the wings of the bird could be seen against a gray sky.

“Very good. Very nice,” Bailey said, nodding his head in approval. “Tell me about this one.”

“Uh...um...,” Kali faltered. “I don’t really like to explain my work. I just make it and other people make of it what they will.”

“Oh no. No, no, no, no. That will not do at all. The first thing you have to learn in the art world is how to produce the even finer art of bullshit.”

“What?”

“Look, when people ask you what is the implicit message or meaning in your work—which they will—you have to have an answer. Because people are going to read what they want into your work anyway, but they still want to hear you say what you think of your own work. That crazy ‘Oh I’m an artist and I just express myself and create whatever art

inspires me' attitude is a bunch of new age hippie bullshit. Art today has a purpose. It has a message. If you don't have one, make one up. That's what everyone else does."

Bailey reminded Kali of some TV salesman the way he spoke so energetically and emphatically, accentuating his words by jabbing his hands in the air. He was the embodiment of what Kali had envisioned of New York. Fast. Smooth. Exciting.

"Look, Bailey, I am not good at bullshit. I'm not even that good at sincerity. I'm not good at social interaction at all."

Bailey smiled at her in appreciation. "I like your honesty," he said. "But, it's something we can work on. It's a long way off to worry about right now anyway. All right, show me the rest."

Kali showed Bailey the rest of the pieces that she brought with her and he showed varying degrees of enthusiasm for each. When she was finished, he stood quietly for a moment with his arms crossed. Kali was too nervous to say anything. She waited quietly.

"OK Kali. I'll give it to you straight. I think you have talent, like I said before. You have a lot of potential in your work. But there's still something missing that I can't quite put my finger on. I think it goes back to our conversation at lunch. It seems like you're still finding yourself in your art. There's still an uncertainty there."

Kali felt her cheeks burning as he talked. Somehow she had expected more.

"I still want to work with you though," Bailey went on. "I want you to keep showing me your work. Look for the art in everything. I want you to be working your ass off for me this summer. Keep working and keep showing me your stuff, and who knows? You might be selling a painting or two at your own show in the future."

Kali nodded. “Thanks. I’ll try. I have to work a lot this summer, but I’ll try to get as much done as I can.”

“Good. I’m glad we had this meeting. I know we’ll be in touch. Now, where do you live? Do you need a ride home?”

“Oh, no thanks. I live in some student housing behind Hunter College. I’ll just take the subway.”

“You mean university housing? God, that’s awful. When I was in college, I hated my dorm. How can you stand it?”

“I can’t. But, I haven’t got much choice.”

Bailey smiled and shook Kali’s hand.

“Goodbye, Kali. I meant what I said. You make sure to call me and bring me work. I hope I see you again.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Kali left her contact information with Bailey and walked towards the subway. She floated back to her room thinking of Bailey. He was attractive and exciting and intelligent. He didn’t seem to have dreams of doing more with his life that he never carried through on; he had already made something of himself and was successful. And he had hopes for more. He was a painter, like Kali. He didn’t depend on other people to make his life. He did everything for himself. But, Kali didn’t think he would ever want to get involved with her past their art dealings, despite her previous suspicions. Why would he? She had nothing to offer him. She was too young and still in college and had done nothing with her life. She had a troubled past and no family worth speaking of. What she did have to offer was nothing that

anyone would want. Then there was Mike. But, what did she care anymore? He was never going to stand up to his mother. He was never going to want to marry her. He just needed her like she needed him to feel better about herself. Neither one of them wanted to be alone. Neither of them thought that anyone would ever want to be with them and so jumped at the chance to be together. Now things were changed. Kali had met someone new and exciting and she suddenly felt different.

When Kali got back to her dorm, she threw her portfolio on the bed and sat at the small table that she had set up for her sculpture. She opened her clay and stared at it with determination. After a few minutes, she slowly began kneading the clay.

Son of Man

(Chapter 7)

For the next several weeks, Kali became obsessed with her painting. She looked for the art in everything she saw. Horizons across the water in the park, meeting the sky. Lines of perspective through a grocery cart turned over in an alley. The play of colors through the fog. She made sketches of everything, discarding them almost immediately. She sketched items of trash she passed on the streets, skyscrapers, advertisements. But, she quickly realized that she was only making drawings, not real art. She still couldn't find what she wanted to express in her art and so attempted to reproduce everything. Occasionally, she lucked into a promising subject that actually made its way onto the canvas.

About a month after Kali's meeting with Bailey, she got a call from him.

"Kali? It's Bailey. The creepy art dealer guy that you had lunch with. How are you?"

"Oh, hi. I'm good," Kali said, and ran her hand over her head, smoothing her hair. She dropped her hand by her side when she realized how ridiculous the action was. "I, uh, don't really have anything to show you just yet. I mean I've been working really hard and doing what you said, to look for the art in everything, but..."

"No, no. That's OK. That's not why I called."

"It's not?" Kali glanced at her appearance in the mirror near the phone. She thought she was too pale and her cheeks were too fat. She licked her finger and smoothed an eyebrow.

“No. I just wanted to call and talk to you,” Bailey said. “I had such a good time with you when we went to lunch. I was so relaxed with you. I thought—“

“Me, too,” Kali interrupted. “I had a really good time, too.”

“I didn’t want to call you before because I didn’t want you to think I was unprofessional or that I was just using my position to get to know you,” Bailey explained.

“No, I don’t think that. I’m glad you called.”

“I’d like to get together,” Bailey said. “Do you want to meet me for dinner?”

“Dinner would be nice.”

“How about on Saturday? I can pick you up at six o’clock?”

“That sounds good.”

“Where do you live?”

Kali told Bailey the location of her room, but felt slightly embarrassed. She didn’t really want him to see where she was staying. But, she decided that meeting him at the restaurant would be just as embarrassing and so she gave him the directions.

“Great,” Bailey said when she was finished. “Wear something nice, OK? I want to take you some place special.”

“That sounds good,” Kali said. Her smile stretched across her whole face. “So, I’ll see you on Saturday then.”

Kali hung up the phone and felt like dancing around the room. She couldn’t believe that Bailey was actually interested in her. She ran to her closet and started searching for something to wear immediately. She stopped when the phone rang again. She ran back to the phone, thinking it was Bailey calling to tell her something else.

“Hello?” she said, breathing hard.

“Hey, Kali. What are you doing?”

“Oh, hey Mike,” she said, her voice dropping. “I was just working on a new painting.”

“What’s this one about?” he asked with interest.

“It’s just a scene from the park. I saw some homeless guy sleeping next to a tree. So, I guess you settled down in Jersey OK, then?”

“I’m getting a chance to hang out with all my old friends again. I’m having a really good time.”

“Sam, too?” Kali asked.

“She’s here, too. I see her every now and then.”

“That must be nice for you.” Kali said with a touch of sarcasm.

“I guess so. We don’t really talk that much,” Mike said. “So do you miss me yet?”

“Sure.”

“I miss you a lot. I can’t wait to see you again.”

“What? Are you coming to visit?” Kali asked, her voice rising slightly in surprise.

“I’m going to try. I want to.”

“I guess it’s no big deal if you can’t.”

“Are you lonely?” Mike asked.

“I guess I was a little bit,” Kali said. “But I’m not really anymore. I mean I have Melinda to hang out with and all.”

“That’s good. At least you have a friend there to keep you company. Did she end up moving into her apartment?”

“Yeah, her and one of her friends. I was thinking about going by there later.”

“I think that’s a good idea. That way you won’t get so bored,” Mike said and paused. “You know, Kali, I was thinking it would be nice if you could come visit me in Jersey. I’d really like you to see where I live and to meet the rest of my family. What do you think?”

Kali paused. “I don’t know, Mike. I don’t know if I’d be able to make it. I don’t know if I can afford it, or if I can get the time off of work.”

“I could help you,” Mike said. “I could send you some money. It would just be for a weekend.”

“When did you want to do it?” Kali asked.

“Next month? Does that sound good?”

“What about your mom? Is she going to let me stay with you?”

“Well, you’ll have to stay in the other room. But, other than that, it’ll be fine.”

“She’s OK with that? She didn’t seem too friendly before,” Kali said.

“She’ll be fine. I’ll take care of her. You just let me worry about it,” Mike said.

Kali couldn’t believe it. After all the arguments they’d had about Mike going home and not standing up to his mother, he finally took the initiative to invite Kali home with him.

“I’ll see what I can do at work,” Kali said. “I think I’m gonna go now. I think I’ll go over to Melinda’s. I haven’t talked to her in a few days.”

“OK. I’ll call you later then. Make sure to find out about work. I really want you to come.”

“I will. But I’m also really busy with my work right now.”

“Did you ever talk to that dealer again?”

Kali paused and swallowed hard. “Uh, no, I haven’t. I guess I’ll call him when I have more work to show him.”

“You should call him soon—before he forgets about meeting you,” Mike said. “I guess I better let you go. Tell Melinda I said hi.”

Kali hung up quickly and sighed deeply. She felt guilty for a second, but then the thought of Bailey and what he said cast those feelings aside. She grabbed her purse and left to go to Melinda’s. When she got to there, she sank down in a chair and beamed up at her friend.

“What are you so happy about?” Melinda asked. She was sitting on her floor with her legs crossed playing her acoustic guitar. She rested the instrument on her lap when Kali walked in.

“I got a call from Bailey.”

“The art dealer?”

Kali nodded energetically and folded her legs underneath her.

“About what? I thought you said you didn’t have enough work to show him yet?”

“I don’t. He called me to ask me out.”

“What?” Melinda’s eyes widened and she stood up to sit down in a chair opposite Kali.

“Yeah, he called to tell me that he had a good time when we went out to lunch and that he wanted to see me again. He asked me out to dinner on Saturday.”

“Really? I thought you said it was just a business lunch.”

“It was. But I guess there was a little more to it than that,” Kali said and raised her eyebrows.

“What did you say?”

“I said yes.” Kali smiled and looked to Melinda in expectation.

“But what about Mike?” Melinda asked, confused.

“What about him?” Kali asked.

“Well, how are you gonna go out with another guy when you have a boyfriend?”

“I’m not dating the guy. I just said that I would go have dinner with him,” Kali said and crossed her arms. She leaned back against the couch. “Besides, I haven’t been happy with Mike for a long time. We’ve been friends more than anything else. I don’t really look forward to seeing him anymore. He’s just someone to spend time with on the weekend.”

“I’m not trying to judge you, Kali,” Melinda said. “I just want to make sure that you know what you’re doing. I mean, you have been dating him for almost two years now. Don’t you love him anymore?”

“Yes, I do,” Kali said and sighed. She stood up and started pacing around the room. “But, it’s not the kind of love I want. It’s not passionate and consuming. It’s friendly; it’s stable. What if he’s not really my soul mate? What if he’s not the right person for me? Should I chain myself down to someone who’s not going to make me as happy as I can be? Shouldn’t I do what’s going to make me happy?”

“Yes, you should,” Melinda said and nodded slowly. “As long as that’s really what you’re doing. I just think that you should be careful. Don’t get caught up in the excitement of meeting someone new. You don’t know anything about this guy. I don’t want to see you throwing away something real for the promise of something else that will never be fulfilled. Just be careful is all I’m saying.”

“I will. Of course, I will,” Kali said. “It’s not like I’m going to marry the guy. I’m just going to have dinner with him. I like him a lot. There’s just something about him—I feel a real connection with him. Besides, Mike and I haven’t felt like a real couple for a long time. We’re just kind of together. And we don’t really want to be together anymore—or at least I don’t. I’m just so sick of waiting for him to make his own decisions—to lead his own life.”

“I think you should do whatever’s going to make you happy. Just make sure you’re doing what you want and you’re not being swept away in the moment. You should also remember that this is the first art dealer that’s shown any interest in your work. You don’t want to throw away that opportunity by confusing it with a romantic relationship.”

“I’m going to be careful. Of course my art is going to come first,” Kali said and rolled her eyes. She smiled back at Melinda. “So, how’s the roommate situation going?”

“Oh, God,” Melinda said and threw up her hands. “It’s horrible. She hasn’t paid rent for the past two months. She borrows my things without asking and doesn’t return them. Then her boyfriend stays over most nights and I can hear them having sex!”

“Hey, don’t be a heterophobe,” Kali said. “That’s so disgusting. How can you stand it?”

“I can’t. I told her she has to find a new place to live. The only problem is that if I don’t find a new roommate, I’ll have to find a new place to live, too. Or worse, I’ll have to live on campus again.”

“Whatever happened to your brother getting a place with you?” Kali asked.

“He’s been staying with a friend of his on the couch. I think he might be moving in with his girlfriend soon.”

“What about you moving in with your girlfriend?” Kali asked. “You’ve been seeing Trinity for awhile now.”

“I think we’re going to break up soon,” Melinda said. “We never have time to see each other anymore. I think she might be moving to California next year to work on her writing.”

“I’m sorry,” Kali said softly. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I’m gonna have to find a new roommate and fast.” Melinda paused and looked at Kali. “Why don’t you move in with me?”

“Me? No. I can’t,” Kali said and shook her head.

“Why not? You don’t want to live with me? You’re over here all the time anyway. You might as well pay rent.”

“That’s just it. I can’t afford to pay rent.”

“What are you talking about? Your half of the rent, utilities and groceries here wouldn’t be much more than what you’re paying now. And you’ll have the added pleasure of seeing me everyday.” Melinda smiled and batted her eyes playfully at Kali.

“That is tempting,” Kali said and laughed. “But I really don’t know if I can afford it. Besides, what am I going to do if you decide to move or get a new roommate? Or if you meet some new young hottie and move out with her?”

“I wouldn’t do that to you. Like I said, it wouldn’t cost you much more than what you already pay for room and board at school. You can afford it.”

“I don’t know,” Kali said. “I’ll have to think about it.”

The idea of moving in with Melinda and having real independence in a place of her own appealed to Kali. At the same time, it was more independence than she had ever had and it scared her. However shaky, she had always had some kind of structure to rely on. She always had an external structure to fall back on, be it her foster home or school. Moving out on her own invited too many possibilities and unknowns.

Kali anticipated her date with Bailey by fantasizing about how the night would go and the relationship that would evolve from it. She thought of the things she would say and how she would charm him and make him think she was the smartest and funniest woman that he’d ever met. They would fall in love and he would adore her. They would spend romantic weekends in bed and eat at fancy restaurants. They would be culturally savvy and witty. He would manage her art and she would be a famous sculptor. She would even inspire him to start painting again, maybe teach him how to improve. They would be perfect for each other. He would be everything that she had wanted.

Bailey picked Kali up at her room and looked around curiously.

“Yep. This looks like what I remember from college,” he said and smiled. “I forgot how horrible college life was.”

Kali laughed. “What are you, like 80?” Kali asked. “Did you go to the college in the ‘50s? Is it that hard for you to remember?”

Bailey raised his eyebrows and smiled. “A boy never tells,” he said and wagged his finger. “You look beautiful.”

Kali blushed. No one had ever called her beautiful before, not even Mike. She grabbed her jacket.

“Are you ready to go?” she asked.

“Lead the way m’lady,” he said and crooked his arm, offering it to her.

Bailey took Kali to a restaurant in midtown. It was nice to ride in a car and not the subway. Bailey drove a sleek black sedan with leather interior. It matched the sleek black clothes that seemed to comprise his entire wardrobe. Bailey took her to an upscale Italian restaurant named Paradiso. There was a crowd of people huddled near the door when they arrived. The crowd seemed to open naturally for Bailey and fall back to crush Kali who had to push her way through. Bailey directly up to the Maitre d’ who recognized him and called him by name. The Maitre d’ smiled at him and grabbed two menus. Several people stared at Bailey in indignation and let out small gasps.

Kali looked on in awe and followed behind Bailey at a distance. Not only had he made reservations at a nice restaurant, but he also got them into a very exclusive place ahead of a lot of other people. They sat down at a large round table with a deep red tablecloth and a floral centerpiece; Bailey looked her over and smiled again.

“Mm, you do look good in that dress,” he said. Kali wore her little black cocktail dress. The dress had thin straps and a low neckline. The fabric hugged her form and the skirt flared out playfully at the knees.

Kali smiled and looked away. “So, I’ve been working on some pieces. I might have something to show you soon,” she said as she picked up her menu. Her eyes widened as she noticed the prices.

“No, no,” Bailey said, holding up his hands. “Don’t talk about business related stuff tonight; I don’t want you to see me just as someone who can help advance your career. I want you to see me as a guy. Let’s just talk about me and you tonight.”

“OK,” Kali said and smiled. She looked back at her menu awkwardly then back at Bailey. “So, where are you from? We talked a lot about me at lunch, but we didn’t talk much about you.”

“Oh, I’m from right here in the city. I grew up on the Upper East Side and never left. The city is me. I am the city.”

Kali laughed. “Where did you go to college?”

“NYU. I was an art history major,” Bailey said and leaned forward over the table. “We already talked about my frustrated ambitions to be a painter, right? Well, I took the practical route. I decided I didn’t want to be like all the other broke artists on the street corners sketching out caricatures. So, I decided to make money. I got my degree and started working at a gallery. One of these days, I’ll raise enough money to open my own gallery.”

“I’m going to be one of those broke artists,” Kali said.

“You? No. You’re going to be world famous one day. Just stick with me, you’ll see.”

Bailey paused while the waiter presented the special and asked to take their orders. The waiter kept his eyes focused on Bailey and never looked at Kali or addressed her.

“Yes. We’ll start with the braised baby artichokes offset with slivers of toasted almonds and parmigiano,” Bailey said. “Then we’ll have the veal medallions with fontina and mushrooms in marsala. To drink, we’d like a bottle of Gaja Barbaresco.”

The waiter left and Bailey turned his attention back to Kali. She smiled broadly. No one had ever ordered for her. He was so smooth, so controlled, so sophisticated. Kali was awed and intimidated by him.

“So, what did you want to be when you grew up?” Bailey asked.

“What do you mean? When I was a kid?” Kali giggled nervously.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. Free,” Kali laughed nervously. “I never really thought about what I wanted to do. I just thought about what would make me money and make me safe. I only just decided to follow my art because I got a scholarship.”

“And now?”

“Now what?”

“Now what do you want to be when you grow up?”

Kali drew in a deep breath and sighed heavily. “That is the question,” she said. “I guess I still don’t really know the answer. All I do know is that I want to produce great art. I

want to create something that will have lasting meaning for other people. Whether I'll make a living at that is yet to be seen. I'll probably be the exact person that you avoided becoming."

"What's stopping you?" Bailey asked. "Why can't you produce that kind of art now? I think you have the potential to do that."

"I don't know. I guess I just don't have any focus. I don't have anything else driving me besides...survival...curiosity."

Bailey shook his head sympathetically and the waiter returned with the wine.

"That's enough," Bailey said to the waiter. "This is fine. Just leave the cork on the table. Thank you."

"I...don't really drink wine," Kali said. "Actually, I won't even be old enough to drink for another month."

"Nonsense. You're with me. No one's going to question you. Besides, this is absolutely the best wine—very expensive. Drink up."

"OK." Kali reluctantly raised her glass. She never drank before. She almost expected to take a drink and completely lose her senses. She hesitated momentarily and then sipped her wine. She jerked the glass back immediately and Bailey gave her a disapproving look.

"It's a little strong," she said and smiled nervously. "Bitter."

"It's bold and full-bodied," Bailey said. He stared back at her and she shifted nervously in her seat. Bailey smiled at her and she relaxed.

"You said that you want to open your own gallery?" Kali asked.

“That is the plan,” Bailey said. “I just have to raise the money. Well, I could get the money from my parents, but I want to do it on my own. I want this to be my achievement. So, I just have to find the next best thing—a hot new artist. Once I do that, I can start making money and open up my own gallery. Then I can start bringing other people on board.”

Kali rubbed her arm and looked down at the table. She wondered if she were the next best thing—or if Bailey thought she was.

“But getting back to what we were talking about with your predicament,” Bailey said. “I think that you’re going through what all artists have to go through. That is, of course, unless they’re born geniuses. You just have to remember to keep your focus and keep working to find yourself.”

Kali loved how easy it was to talk to Bailey and be with him. He was intelligent and funny, quick and interesting. She wasn’t ever bored when she was around him. Kali lost track of the time and her surroundings. All the other circumstances of her life seemed to fade away. She thought of nothing more than the moment she was in and the vague promise of a future.

After dinner, Bailey took her to a jazz club across town for more drinks and dancing. She couldn’t believe he was actually taking her dancing. She stumbled awkwardly across the dance floor while she tried to look natural and graceful.

“Are you OK?” Bailey asked her and laughed. He steadied her by bracing her shoulders.

“Uh-huh,” she said and nodded emphatically.

“Come on. I think we’d better get you home. I’ll take you back to my place.”

Kali sobered slightly at the suggestion. She wasn't sure if she wanted to go back to his place for whatever that might mean. But she also didn't want to pass up the opportunity.

Bailey had a beautiful, spacious loft. The endless walls were covered by stunning works of art. Paintings and photographs from artists like Willem de Kooning and Robert Mapplethorpe stared back at her. Besides the alcohol she had consumed, Kali was intoxicated by the night and the amazing dinner and dancing. She wasn't drunk, but she was tipsy enough to be stumbling. Bailey helped her inside and walked her to the couch where she plopped down heavily.

"Whoa, be careful," Bailey said and laughed. "You're quite a party animal, aren't you?"

"Sorry, I don't usually drink very much," Kali said. "I, uh, never really drank before. My mom used to drink a lot, you know. So, I always stayed away from it. I wasn't very popular in high school." Kali laughed and looked back at Bailey.

"Yeah, my dad used to drink, too," Bailey said, and leaned his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands. "He was a mean drunk."

Kali looked up at him and nodded. Bailey stared back at her for a moment without saying anything.

"He used to get drunk and knock my mom around," Bailey explained. "Me and my brother would try to stop him sometimes, but he would just hit us instead."

Kali reached down and grabbed Bailey's hand. "I know how you feel," she said. "My mom used to be the same way. She didn't hit us, but she did about the same damage." Kali looked at Bailey while she held his hand in hers. "She never got hit by one of her

boyfriends. Sometimes she hit them though,” she said. “She controlled everyone in her life. Me. My brother. Her boyfriends. Our family. Everything was always about her. She never considered how other people felt.”

“My dad was the same way,” Bailey said. “We always had to tiptoe around him.”

“At least we know how not to be,” Kali said, and rubbed his hand with her thumb.

“I guess so. I think sometimes that I can’t escape him. I am where I come from. I’m a part of him and he’s a part of me. I don’t know if I can escape that.”

Kali nodded. She felt the same way about her mother. She reacted to the hurt that was caused by her mother and that was making Kali become more like her. Everything inside Kali rebelled against it.

“Bailey, you know that we have choices,” Kali said, and looked at him soberly.

“You are not defined by where you come from. You can choose to be the person you want to be. You have even more power to choose because you’ve been shown first hand the destruction that kind of behavior can bring. You know what not to do, how not to act.”

Bailey smiled and squeezed her hand. “You’re sweet,” he said.

“Well, that’s the first time that anybody’s called me sweet,” Kali said. “I don’t think too many people would agree with you.”

Bailey leaned close to her and kissed her softly on the mouth. A shiver ran up Kali’s spine and she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. After a long kiss, Bailey pulled away abruptly.

“Kali, I really like you,” he started slowly. “But you’ve been drinking, and I don’t want us to do anything that you’ll regret. I want to see you again, and I think that if we go any farther right now, that will be ruined.”

Kali smiled and pulled her hair behind her ear. She looked away and tucked in her bottom lip. She didn’t think she was drunk, but didn’t know, not ever having been drunk before. But Bailey didn’t seem annoyed with her. In fact, he was being very considerate. She liked him all the more for his sensitivity.

Kali discovered that drinking made her very talkative. She talked on and on about her life and her plans for the future. She told him about high school and foster care. She told him about Mike and Simon and losing her virginity. She told him about all her hopes and her disappointments and how her life had never quite measured up to the plans she had made for it. She told him about how the people she had known had never really measured up to her expectations.

“What was your dad like? I know you said your mom was drunk,” Bailey said. Kali lay in his lap and he stroked her hair softly.

Kali sat up and her posture stiffened. She stared straight ahead and focused on a photograph of a nude woman and man hanging opposite the couch. Bailey looked at her quizzically and she shook her head.

“Um...I don’t know really,” she said. “I used to think that I hated him because I would listen to my mom talk about what a bad person he was for leaving us.”

“But now?” Bailey asked and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“I don’t know,” Kali said as if realizing it for the first time.

“What about your mom? Do you still talk to her?”

“No,” Kali said simply. “I haven’t talked to her since I was taken to foster care.”

Bailey arched his eyebrows. “What? Why were you in foster care?”

“My mom got into an accident with me in the car once while she was driving drunk,” Kali said.

“What was that like?”

“It was the best that it could have been,” Kali said and shrugged. “My mom always used to threaten to take me when I told her something that I didn’t like about her. I was always so terrified that it would happen one day.”

“I would think you would almost want to go.”

“Me, too,” Kali said absently. “But I didn’t want to make that change on my own. It’s kind of screwed up, but I didn’t want to start over somewhere new, you know? After I was taken away, it made it easier though. I was able to come here.” Kali rubbed her arm and looked at Bailey.

“I almost wish I could have gone to foster care,” Bailey said. “But we were far too respectable for something like that to happen.”

“What do you mean?” Kali asked and smiled strangely.

“I grew up on the Upper East Side,” Bailey said. “Something like that would have never happened. People couldn’t even admit that my dad was an abusive drunk. My mom would show up to music benefits with black eyes and tell everyone that she fell down the stairs or had some sort of accident. It got so bad that she told someone that she was mugged once.”

“But you still talk to them, don’t you?”

Bailey sighed and smiled grimly. “Yes, I do,” he said. “I may not like my father, but he’s my father. I don’t have to call him every week and like the things that he says or does, but I respect him.”

“Does he still hit your mom?” Kali asked.

“No,” Bailey said and shook his head. “He got some help awhile back. I don’t know why my mom stuck it out with him.”

Kali watched Bailey in silence. For the first time, she saw vulnerability in his features. He stared at the ground and his eyes glazed over.

“You know that I haven’t ever been able to have a long term relationship with a woman?” he asked abruptly.

Kali shifted uncomfortably.

“I don’t know. I just never could be completely happy with any of the women I dated. I tried. I just...don’t know. I could never fully commit myself to them. I think that maybe I was protecting them.”

Kali put her hand on Bailey’s cheek and looked him in the eyes. She leaned in slowly and kissed him lightly on the mouth. He smiled back at her.

Bailey and Kali talked on until it was nearly dawn. It was the kind of marathon talking session that only happens when two people first meet and are excited at getting to know each other because they feel like they are meeting someone who finally understands them. A new person always seems to offer the hope of understanding in a way that no one else has or can. They were the break in the loneliness—a chance to express all the thoughts

and feelings that festered away inside their heads unspoken and uncared for until then.

Inevitably for Kali, these sessions had always meant the promise of a new relationship, a new life made complete by the understanding and appreciation of another person.

Just before dawn, Kali passed out exhausted on the couch. The excitement of the evening had kept her going, but fatigue finally overcame her.

Kali did not wake up until late in the afternoon. She looked around quickly and blinked her eyes, unsure of where she was at first. She sat up quickly and then saw Bailey sitting at the table in the kitchen reading the paper.

Kali looked away quickly and put her hand on her forehead. Her head was throbbing lightly and her mouth was dry and sticky. She wiped her eyes and ran her fingers through her hair, attempting to straighten it.

“I see you are awake, Sleeping Beauty,” Bailey said, walking into the living room. “I thought I was going to have to wake you with a kiss. Oh, what the hell, I think I will anyway.”

Bailey leaned down to kiss her, and Kali turned her head and put up her hand over her mouth. “I don’t think you want to do that. I haven’t been able to clean up or brush my teeth. I smell and I have dragon breath.”

Bailey stood back again and laughed. “How do you feel? Did you sleep well enough on the couch? I didn’t want to wake you or move you.”

“I slept OK, I guess. I’m a bit stiff and I have a slight headache, but I’ll be fine.”

“Do you remember last night? You weren’t too drunk, were you?”

“No, I don’t think I was drunk at all. I remember most of everything, I think. I’m sorry I talked so much. I probably shouldn’t have burdened you with all that personal information about myself. I tend to get drunk with talking even if I’m not actually drinking. I’m afraid last night was a lethal combination.”

“Are you kidding? I had a great time. I loved hearing you talk. I thought the things you told me were fascinating. You’re so honest and real. There doesn’t seem to be anything superficial or contrived about you. I always feel like I’m getting the real you. Besides, now I know a lot more about you and that’s a good thing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course,” Bailey said. “Now go take a shower and clean up and feel better. I’m taking you out to lunch.”

“I don’t have any clothes,” Kali said. “I don’t even have a toothbrush.”

“I’ll lend you some of my clothes and you can use my toothbrush. You don’t have cooties, do you?”

Kali shook her head and smiled.

“Then go get cleaned up and we’ll go out.”

Kali reluctantly agreed. She took a shower and found a pair of khakis and a light blue button-up shirt waiting for her on the bed. They were baggy on her, but were soft and comfortable. She grabbed at the front of the shirt and buried her nose in the material. She drew in a deep breath. It smelled like Bailey. It was like fresh laundry drying in the sun on a spring day—clean and wild and natural. Bailey knocked on the door and Kali quickly dropped her hands to her sides.

“Are you decent?” Bailey called from the other side of the door. “Too bad,” he said as he walked in. He stopped and looked her over approvingly. “Wow, my clothes have never looked better. You look really sexy.”

Kali blushed. “No, I don’t. I look like a slob.”

“Slobs are hot, then,” Bailey said, walking towards her. “Do I have permission to kiss you now?”

Kali smiled and lifted her head up to kiss him. It was a sweet and tender kiss that made the skin on the back of her neck prick up.

Kali gathered up her clothes from the night before and left with Bailey. They had lunch at a nice restaurant near Bailey’s apartment and talked about each other, carrying on their conversation from the night before. There was no awkwardness or silence.

At Kali’s insistence, Bailey took her back to her room after lunch. He wanted to spend the rest of the day with her, taking her to places around the city that she had never been before because she lacked the time or the money. Kali told him that she had to get home to work on her painting. In reality, she was having such a good time that she didn’t want it to be ruined by any lags in the conversation. She didn’t want to ruin the day by saying or doing anything stupid. She wanted to go home while he was still having a good time and thought well of her.

When they got back to Kali’s place, Bailey got out of the car and walked her up to the main entrance.

“Kali, I want you to know that I had a really great time last night,” Bailey said. “In fact, I had one of the best times on a date that I’ve ever had. I really want to be able to continue seeing you.”

“Me too,” Kali said. “I mean, I had a really good time, too, and I really want to see you again.”

“Great,” he said and smiled. “I’ll call you then.”

Bailey kissed her on the mouth again and then on the cheek. Kali still had her eyes closed when he walked away.

Kali was in a happy mood for the rest of the day. She recounted every bit of their conversation that she could remember. She went over every joke, every smile, every meaningful glance. She remembered every touch, every brush of the skin, every kiss. She laid on her bed, running her hand over her clothes and breathing in Bailey’s smell still lingering on them.

Angels and Devils

(Chapter 8)

Bailey took Kali by the arm and guided her down the aisle through the crowds of people, directing her to the works that he wanted her to see.

“Now, this is a great piece,” Bailey said. “See how the ball sitting on the water reflects the light as if it were the moon in the sky? The ripples in the water look like the clouds. It suggests the way we take for granted the difference between illusion and reality. It challenges our notions of what is real.”

Kali nodded appreciatively and smiled. She looked at Bailey for some sign that she had reacted appropriately.

“I know the person who represents this artist,” Bailey continued. “He’s very hot right now. I wish I had found him first. Everybody wants to show him.”

“I really like it,” Kali said and nodded again. She looked around her, away from the paintings, to appreciate her surroundings. Hardwood floors and open space stretched before her and spiraled upwards into what seemed like several levels, but was actually only one. She looked across the room and saw people on the other side staring at paintings that she had just looked at. The sterile quality of the atmosphere made the museum seem more like a hospital. The only sense of connection in the place came through the art.

Bailey pulled Kali’s arm and guided her ahead. “Did you say that you’ve been here before?” he asked her.

“I came last year. But this place is so big that I feel like I hardly had a chance to see anything. There’s so much here...so much to see.”

“Yes. Yes there is. I like to come here as often as I can, along with the Met and the Whitney. I like to stay connected to the history of the art and to see the forward movement of it. Did you know that the Met is the largest museum in the western hemisphere?”

Kali moved beside Bailey quickly and self-consciously. She walked with her legs close together and her hands stiffly by her sides. Bailey tapped her chin with his finger and she raised her head higher. He pulled a hair from her blouse with his thumb and forefinger and brush it on the floor.

“Oh, here we are,” Bailey sighed with appreciation as they walked up to another group of paintings. “I just love expressionism.”

Kali looked around appreciatively. The spray of colors seemed incomprehensible to her at first, but she felt a subtle sense of sadness and melancholy as she stared at one painting. An order appeared in the chaos. Kali studied the juxtaposition of the color and the fine detail within the chaos and felt herself moving deeper into the canvas.

“Look at the lines on this one,” Bailey said, pointing to another painting a few feet down the aisle. “Do you see how the figures fit into carefully planned grids on the canvas? Notice the expert use of color and light in the work. There is so much emotion and honesty in this work.”

Kali glanced at the painting and nodded. She looked again at the painting before her and the ones hanging next to it and told herself that she would never be able to create

something so beautiful. She felt like she would always reach the point just below success—just below greatness.

“What’s the matter?” Bailey asked her and rubbed her shoulders. “Aren’t you enjoying yourself? You seem so distracted.”

“No, I’m having a great time,” Kali said quickly and blinked. “I was just absorbed in the painting, I guess.”

“Kali, you don’t seem to be very impassioned about art. Don’t you think that this is a masterwork? How could you look at it and not be moved? How could you be in this museum and not be moved? The building itself is a work of art.”

“I am. I’m sorry. I guess I just don’t get visually excited.”

Bailey looked at her uncertainly for a moment.

“Honestly, I was just thinking about how much greater that painting is than anything that I could ever produce,” Kali admitted.

“You can’t think that way,” Bailey said. “You can be as great as you want to be. You have that in you. I think most people do.”

“What about you? You wanted to be a painter, but here you are. You’re a dealer.”

“Right. My greatness isn’t in painting,” Bailey said, raising an eyebrow. “I’m great as spotting greatness. I said everyone has some greatness in them—you just have to figure out where it is. I think you’ve got what it takes to be a great artist.”

Kali took Bailey’s hand in hers and squeezed it.

“I am taking you out tonight,” Bailey said.

Kali’s face brightened. “Where?”

“I am taking you to see the Phantom of the Opera tonight. I have tickets for 8:00.”

Kali’s eyebrows shot skyward and she put her hand over her mouth. “What? I can’t believe it,” she said. “I’ve never been to a Broadway show. This is great.” Kali threw her arms around Bailey’s neck and squeezed him tight. He chuckled and removed her arms from his neck gently.

“I’m glad you’re so pleased,” he said. “You’re really going to love it.”

“Wait. I don’t have anything to wear,” Kali said and a worried expression stole across her face. She raised her forefinger to her lip and tucked her other arm under her elbow.

“Then we’ll just have to go shopping,” Bailey said.

“No, no, I couldn’t,” Kali said, shaking her head quickly. “I can’t let you buy me clothes.”

“Why not? You need a dress. You can’t afford it; I can. Just think of it as an investment. I want to take you to the show and this is the only way I can make sure that’s possible.”

Kali rested her hand on her chin and looked down as she thought. “Well, OK, but I’ll pay you back,” she said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Bailey said and smirked. “I don’t need you to pay me back. It’s my treat. Now don’t argue. Let me buy you a dress.”

Kali began to protest again, but Bailey took her arm again firmly and guided her down the spiral to show her more paintings.

Bailey took Kali to a small boutique on the Upper East Side to look for a suitable dress. Plush burgundy couches formed a circle in the middle of the room and pressed suits

and dresses hung on small racks on the walls. The maple-paneled walls darkened the light in the room and created an intimate atmosphere. Bailey walked through the French door and walked directly to the sales woman.

“Hello Candace. How are you?” he asked the woman. “I am here to buy a dress for this lovely young woman for a show tonight. We need something elegant and classy. We’re going to see ‘Phantom.’”

“Oh, how wonderful,” the woman cooed. “I’m so jealous.”

The woman flashed Kali a smile and winked as she walked over to a rack of dresses on the wall. She pulled down two full-length satin dresses and held them up for Kali’s approval. She studied them for a moment and looked at Bailey expectantly.

“Try on the black first,” Bailey directed Kali. “It’s more sophisticated.”

Kali said nothing. She only nodded and obeyed. She tried on the dress in the small changing room like smelled like jasmine and looked herself over in awe. The dress flowed down to her ankles and was adorned with black crystals and sequins. The smooth, cool fabric washed over her skin and seemed to cleanse her. The high neckline was contrasted by a plunging back. She looked like a different person. Her whole frame seemed longer and slimmer, more elegant. She looked like someone with money and a purpose. She looked like she belonged.

Kali walked out of the dressing room slowly and stood before Bailey. She fidgeted with her hands and turned one leg behind her, resting her foot on her toes.

“That’s very nice,” he said and nodded his head in approval. “Why don’t you try on the blue though, just to make sure?”

Kali returned to the dressing room and did as she was told. She tried on a pale blue dress that cascaded in a train of ruffled chiffon at the side. A slit up the side drew up another line of ruffled chiffon. The gown was strapless and accentuated her bust. She reemerged the second time and Bailey turned up his face in distaste.

“That dress does not suit you at all,” he said. “It brings out the blue coloring in your skin; it makes you look even more pale.”

Kali looked down at herself awkwardly and rubbed her arms self-consciously.

“I completely agree,” Candace interjected. “The black makes you look more elegant. It complements your skin tone nicely.”

“Go ahead and wrap it up,” Bailey said to Candace. He then turned his direction back towards Kali. “After you get changed, I’ll take you back to your place so that you have plenty of time to get ready.”

Kali turned back to the changing room and switched back to her normal clothes. She looked down at her khakis and noticed that they were frayed at the hems and the color was faded. Her white blouse had colored slightly and she noticed a small hole near the edge. She wrapped her arms around her waist and exited with her head pointed to the ground.

Bailey drove Kali home when they left the boutique. He deposited Kali on her doorstep with instructions on when to be ready and left. Kali walked inside and took a shower first then walked down the hall to see if Sam was in her room, since she had stayed in the city for the summer. Kali opened the door hesitantly and found Sam reading on her bed.

“Um, hey,” Kali said. “I was wondering...well I don’t have one, so I was wondering if I could use your hairdryer?”

Sam pointed to her dresser and did not look up from her book.

Kali walked over to the dresser and picked up the hairdryer and did not say anything else to Sam. Ever since Mimi had come to New York, Kali and Sam had spoken little to one another. Both girls always found ways to avoid each other by staying out late or staying in their rooms to study. When they did talk, it was awkward and forced.

Kali returned to her room without looking at Sam or talking to her again. She dried her hair and then carefully slipped her new dress out of its bag. She held it up and admired the way the light shined on the fabric's surface. Then she laid it on the bed first and ran her hands over the silky fabric. When she slid the dress over her head, she felt like she was sliding on a new identity. She felt as new as the garment—like a newly wrapped present.

Kali looked in the mirror and saw new potential in her features. It was as if her vision was cleared, like the way chess players can see the board without the pieces and know the next move to make. All of her flaws were stripped away. She raised her makeup brush to her cheek, as if she would hold the brush to a canvas. Her movements were slow and deliberate. She highlighted her high cheekbones and shaded her eyes to a smoky hue. After she was done painting on her features, she began to sculpt her hair. She pinned it back on her head securely, and ran a comb through the sides of her hair to smooth back any stray hairs. She applied gel and hairspray to the coiffure, massaging it into the form she desired.

As Kali made the finishing touches to her appearance, she was interrupted by the phone. She ran to it in irritation.

“Yeah. Hello,” she said.

“Hey, Kali. Whatcha doing?” Mike asked.

“Oh, nothing. I was just getting ready to go out,” Kali said.

“Where to?”

“I’m just going over to Melinda’s to hang out.”

“Doing anything special?” Mike asked.

“No. No. Just the usual.”

“Well, I was calling to find out if you were going to be able to come see me and spend a few days. I’d really like you to come. I want my mom to get to know you and vice versa.”

Kali paused momentarily. There was a tinge of desperation in Mike’s voice—an eagerness to please. She squeezed her eyes shut and drew in a deep breath. “No. I don’t think I’m going to be able to come,” she said finally. “I couldn’t get the time off work.”

“Can’t you get someone to cover you?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know. I’m going to try,” Kali said. She rubbed her forehead and opened her eyes to a squint. “I might not be able to find anyone though. A lot of people are away for the break.”

“I just really want you to come. You could just come for the day and stay over one night. You would only miss one day then,” Mike suggested.

“I don’t know, Mike. It’s really busy at work right now. I’ll try.”

There was a long pause on the phone before either of them spoke.

“Is there something wrong, Kali?” Mike asked at last.

“Why?”

“You just seem...different. You seem like you have something on your mind—like something’s bothering you.”

Kali paused momentarily. She wasn’t sure what she should tell him—if anything. She opened her mouth several times before speaking. “I’m fine,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong.”

After Kali hung up the phone, she sat on her bed, thinking. She still wasn’t sure what to tell Mike. She was almost sure that she didn’t want to be with him anymore, but she wasn’t yet sure if she did want to be with Bailey. Really, she wasn’t sure if Bailey wanted to be with her. Everything still felt too good to be true. She didn’t think he would have any reason to want her.

Bailey knocked on Kali’s door at seven o’clock. She sat on the edge of her bed and looked at the door uncertainly. She looked back at her own dress and let out a deep sigh before she answered the door. Kali opened the door slowly and stood before Bailey expectantly while he looked her over.

“You look so beautiful,” he said and smiled.

Kali let out a breath of relief. “Thank you,” she said.

When they arrived at the opera house, Bailey hopped out of the car and threw his keys to the valet. Bailey offered Kali his arm and led her up the stairs. Once they were inside, he looked her over again under the bright fluorescent lights. Bailey peered closely at Kali’s face and she retreated awkwardly. He held his hand up to her face and she flinched instinctively. He brushed off some of her makeup with the back of his hand.

“You’re wearing too much makeup,” he said. “Here. Give me your coat. Don’t fidget. We might run into someone I know. I want you to look professional.”

Kali felt her face burn and she crossed her arms by her waist then let them fall by her side. She looked around awkwardly then followed behind Bailey into the auditorium. The music had already started and it seemed to fill the air. Bailey led her to a balcony box and handed her a small pair of gold binoculars. Kali held them up to her eyes and couldn’t see. She swung them around several times trying to figure out how to use them. After several moments of fidgeting, Bailey adjusted them for her. He shot her an irritated glance and held his index finger to his lips. She turned her head to face the stage, but could not see anything. She was too conscious of Bailey’s scrutiny. She sat stiffly and pretended to watch the opera.

After her posture relaxed and Kali let thoughts of Bailey fall from her mind, she watched the musical intensely. She studied and scrutinized every moment and facial expression of the actors. She was fascinated by the costumes and followed the line of the garments and studied them for the detail. She noticed the elaborate beadwork and the sophisticated tailoring. She turned over the design of the costumes, reconstructing them in her mind. As the music continued and she had come to an understanding of the costumes, she found herself getting bored. But continued to redirect her attention towards the stage in an attempt to understand the story. She did not want to admit to herself that she did not like it because she thought it would reflect her poor and uneducated background. In the life that she wanted to create for herself, people liked Broadway shows. They also liked the ballet and the symphony, going to jazz clubs, and going to gallery openings. She liked one of those activities already, at least. She felt like she should like what she was doing more than she

actually did. But she was taken with the novelty of the activity to the point that it made it difficult for her to criticize.

Bailey nudged Kali several times during the performance and motioned for her to sit up straight or to pay attention when her senses dulled. He shot her several more irritated glances.

When the performance was over, Bailey escorted Kali to the car without saying anything. He tipped the valet and they drove away in silence. Kali looked at Bailey several times, but he stared straight ahead at the road. She looked out the window and rested her chin on her hand. She tried to absorb her thoughts in the passing buildings, but the weight of the silence grew heavier. She started to feel like the weight would suffocate her.

“What did you think of the show?” she asked quickly and energetically.

“I thought it was great,” Bailey said dryly. He kept his focus straight in front of him. “I see it every year. I should be asking you what you thought of it.”

“I liked it a lot,” Kali said. “Thank you for taking me.”

“You didn’t seem like you liked it. You kept looking around and yawning. You were constantly fidgeting.”

“I’m sorry,” Kali said. “It was my first Broadway show. I guess it’ll take some getting used to.”

“Kali, if you didn’t want to go, you should’ve just said so,” Bailey said and looked at her quickly. His eyes were wide when he spoke. “I thought you would like it. That’s why I took you.”

Kali caught her breath in her throat and turned towards Bailey. She put her hands on his chest as she spoke.

“Bailey, I had a great time,” she said. “I’m really glad you took me. I’m sorry if I didn’t seem like I had a good time. I’m just not used to doing things like this.”

Kali offered a smile and the furrow on Bailey’s brow relaxed and his cheeks fell. Bailey stopped at a red light and Kali slipped her hands behind his neck and slowly guided his head down to kiss her. When the kiss was over, Bailey smiled broadly and touched his forehead to hers. He took her hand in his and kissed it.

Bailey took Kali back to his loft and she kicked off her shoes and sat on the oversized soft leather couch. She tucked her feet under her and the leather offered a cool embrace against her nylons. Bailey offered her a glass of Chianti in a crystal goblet and they talked about the show. After a couple of glasses, Bailey confessed to an ambivalent relationship with the opera and told Kali that he often went because it was expected of him in his social circle.

“Kali, I want to apologize for being so overbearing earlier tonight,” Bailey said.

“It’s OK. I didn’t think you were overbearing,” Kali said.

“I was and I’m sorry,” he said and rested his cheek on his hand. “I’m not used to being with someone like you. Most of the women I date are from the city and they’re upper class.” Kali looked down and rang her hands together as he spoke. Bailey noticed her expression and took her hand in his. “What I’m saying is that I’m glad you’re not like that,” Bailey continued. “I’m tired of those kind of woman. Everything is a game with them. Everything is about who you know and where you spend Friday night. It’s a nice change to

be with you. I feel like I can let down my guard and be myself. I don't feel like I have to play games or pretend with you."

"I feel the same way," Kali said, turning towards him and leaning in closer. "I feel really comfortable around you. I feel like I can just be myself."

"I want things to be different for you and I," Bailey said. "I want to be honest with you and I want to make a real effort with you. I feel like I can really be open with you and I feel like I could have something real with you."

Kali leaned in closer to Bailey and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight. Kali had never felt closer to anyone or more protected. Bailey stood up and offered his hand to Kali. She stood up and he drew her in closer to him and kissed her. He then led her by the hand into the bedroom.

The next day, Kali had breakfast with Bailey and he took her back to her room. Bailey walked her up to her door to say goodbye. Bailey leaned in and kissed Kali goodbye, and Sam opened the door as they were parting.

"Oh. I'm sorry," Sam said and looked between Kali and Bailey quickly. She looked at Kali with her mouth open then her features hardened. "Excuse me." Sam brushed passed them and trotted down the stairs. She turned the corner and walked quickly down the street.

Kali looked after her for a moment while Bailey hugged her. She said goodbye to Bailey and walked inside.

Kali sat on her bed and squeezed her hands together. Sam saw her with Bailey and now she would have to say something to her. She wasn't sure what to do. She twined her fingers and twiddled her thumbs.

While Kali thought on her bed, she heard a light rap on her door. She looked quickly at the door and stared at it for a moment before she stood up. When she opened the door, Sam stood before her with her arms crossed.

“What’s going on?” Sam demanded. “Now you’re cheating on Mike?”

“It’s not like that Sam,” Kali said and swallowed hard. “I was actually going to call Mike and talk it over with him. I was going to break up with him.”

“Yeah, after you got caught,” Sam said and smirked. She looked away and shook her head.

“No. It was my plan all along,” Kali furrowed her brow and shifted her weight to put her hand on her hip. “I don’t know why you care anyway. You never even liked Mike. You just wanted to dump him off on me so he’d stop bothering you.”

“That’s not true,” Sam said, whipping her head back to face Kali and her voice rising. “Mike has been my friend for a lot longer than you’ve even known him.”

“He was never really you’re friend,” Kali sneered. “You don’t really care about him at all. I was a better friend to him than you ever were.”

“Look, I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to be friends,” Sam said and stared at Kali defiantly.

“We haven’t really been friends for a long time, Sam” Kali said. “I don’t know how good of a friend you ever were to me.”

“Who are you to talk?” Sam demanded. “You’re a needy, controlling bitch! How can anyone be your friend?”

Kali felt her eyes prick and she pursed her lips together. “Fine. That’s fine,” she said softly. “Don’t worry. I’m going to move in with Melinda, so you won’t see me around here anymore. You won’t have to put up with me anymore.”

Sam turned around abruptly and walked to her own room. Kali slammed the door and heard Sam’s door slam right after that. Kali sat on the edge of her bed and let her breathing return to normal. After she had enough time to calm down, she picked up the phone and called Mike.

“Kali? Hey. How are you? I was just thinking about you. I was going to call you.”

“I’m good. How’s everything there?” Kali’s voice was soft and even. She twirled the phone cord around her finger and stared at the dust forming on the ledge in the corner of her room.

“It’s good. I’m working long hours at the video store. Did you find out something about work?”

“No, I didn’t,” Kali said. “Listen, Mike. I need to talk to you.”

“About what?”

“About us.”

Mike was silent for a moment. “What about us?” he said, his voice tinged with worry.

“I...I think I want to spend time apart—take a break,” she said and squeezed her eyes shut.

“What do you mean? Why?” Mike asked, his voice rising. “Is this about me asking you to come visit?”

“No. I wanted to come,” Kali said. “I mean I did want to come. I just have a lot going on with school and with all this art work I’m doing. I’m under a lot of stress.”

“I don’t understand,” Mike said. “How does this affect us?”

“It’s just...I’m really confused right now,” Kali faltered. “I don’t really know if we should be together because I don’t know if we’re right for each other. We’re really very different.”

“No, we’re not. How are we different?” Mike implored.

“Well, we want very different things in our lives,” Kali said. “I’m an artist; you’re an engineer. I’m not close to my family. Hell, I don’t even have what I can really call a family, and you’re very close to yours. You can’t even make a decision for your own life without thinking about how it’s going to affect your mom. You want to have kids. I don’t want to have any kids ever. I don’t even like kids.”

“Why didn’t you tell me these things before?” Mike’s voice cracked as he spoke.

“I did. I’ve told you all those things at one time or another,” Kali said softly.

“Besides, it’s not like those are the only reasons. We’re different in a lot more ways than those. It just all comes down to the fact that I don’t think we’re right for each other.”

Mike was silent again.

“I’m sorry,” Kali said and rested her forehead on her hand. “I just have to do what’s right for myself. You don’t want to end up with me if we’re not really right for each other. Then we’ll both end up miserable.”

“Can we still be friends?” he asked quietly.

“Of course,” Kali said. “We’ve been together for a long time. You’re still important to me. You’ve become a part of my life.”

“Do you still want me to come visit you?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know,” Kali hesitated. “Why don’t we just see how things go? Maybe spending the summer apart will be good for us.”

“Can I still call you?”

“Of course. I don’t want to stop talking to you. I still want to be friends. When you get back, we’ll still hang out and talk. We just won’t be dating.”

“I’ll call you soon.”

“Mike? I really am sorry.”

Eidos
(Chapter 9)

Kali heard a light rapping on her door and she jumped off her bed and flung it open in excitement. Bailey stood before her with a single daisy and a grin.

“I thought that roses seemed so cliché,” he said and handed her the flower.

Kali held the daisy to her nose and took a deep breath. She threw her arms around Bailey and bent her legs up behind her.

“Thank you,” she said and gave him a deep kiss.

“You’re easy to please,” he said and laughed. “Are you ready for me to take you out?”

“Actually, I wanted to take you out today,” Kali said. “You’ve shown me your world, and now I want to show you mine.”

Bailey raised an eyebrow. “Your world, huh? What did you have in mind?”

“It’s my surprise,” Kali said, attempting to look mysterious. “Just follow me. I hope to show you a side of the city that you haven’t seen before.”

Kali grabbed Bailey’s hand and pulled him down the hall and outside. They walked down the street walking hands and Bailey glanced at Kali with a curious grin. When they approached Hunter College, Bailey paused on the sidewalk.

“Are you taking me to Rockefeller Center?” Bailey asked. “Kali, no offense, but—“

“Of course I’m not taking you to Rockefeller Center,” Kali said. “We’re going to Grand Central Station to catch the seven line.”

“The subway? Oh come on, Kali, can’t we just take a cab?”

“No, we cannot. Live a little. You need to get your manicured hands dirty a little—come down and interact with the common folk.”

Kali grabbed Bailey’s hand and pulled him toward the subway. He followed her reluctantly.

Kali dropped a token in the turnstyle and led Bailey to the platform. They waited for the train and Bailey surveyed his surroundings with obvious distaste. A man with a full-manchu mustache, a black bandana, and a gapped smile stood on the other side of a column and watched them curiously. Bailey sneered at him and turned away. He brushed against the column and moved away, looked at the column distastefully and brushed the sleeves of his Armani suit.

“I forgot how awful the subway smells,” he said. “Why is it that there’s a constant smell of urine?”

Kali rolled her eyes. “It’s not that bad. You get used to it.”

“God forbid,” Bailey said.

The subway rushed to a stop and a gust of wind announced its arrival. Kali stepped on board and sat down; Bailey looked at his seat tentatively before he sat down next to her. Bailey sat in silence and watched the other people on the train. Kali watched the mixture of shock and disdain steal across his face with amusement.

“You know, this isn’t that bad,” Bailey said after awhile. “It’s kind of quaint. It gives you a taste for local color—everyday life. It’s kind of bohemian really.”

“The subway is bohemian? I don’t think so,” Kali said. “How long have you been living on planet Bailey?”

“Hey, I’ll have you know that I used to ride the subway all the time as a boy,” Bailey said in mock defense.

“When? When your driver wasn’t available because he had to take your parents somewhere more important?”

Bailey eyed Kali in mock suspicion and laughed. “Where are you taking us?” he asked.

“You’ll find out...right about...now.” The subway came to a halt and Kali led Bailey outside.

When they emerged on the street, Bailey held his hand up to his eyes and looked around like a person lost.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“Queens,” Kali said. “Come on.”

“Queens? Oh God. What have you talked me in to?” Bailey reluctantly followed Kali who walked quickly down the street ahead of him. The street was relatively empty and only a couple of teenagers walked down the sidewalk opposite them. Graffiti covered the wire trash bins on telephone poles and fluorescent flyers announced band appearances and CD release parties.

“Here we are,” Kali said as she stood at the entrance of Pulaski Bridge.

“You brought me to see a bridge?” Bailey asked.

“No. This bridge takes us to where I want to go. It also gives us this.” Kali made a sweeping gesture with her arm across the bay. Bailey turned his head and stared in silence. The east Manhattan skyline leapt up from the shore, and buildings like concrete giants towered over Kali and Bailey. The massive skyscrapers seemed to bend over them like disapproving parents with intimidating stares. Yachts that could host elaborate promotional parties dotted the water like fauna against the backdrop of the city. The expansive concrete buildings seemed to meld into one large building; a few spires and tall roofs punctuated the horizon. The Empire State Building sat in the middle of the scene and seemed to stand apart from the buildings around it. The sun glared behind the city, creating a neon outline against the buildings. It seemed unreal to Kali, like a model, not a real city.

“Thank you, Kali,” Bailey said. “It’s easy to take this for granted sometimes.”

Bailey and Kali walked down the bridge in silence. They stared at the city skyline while they walked, and only looked forward at intervals to insure their correct path. When they got to the end of the bridge, they could hear the sound of fiddles wafting through the air.

“What’s this?” Bailey asked and looked at Kali curiously.

“This is Greenpoint,” Kali said. “It’s an old Polish neighborhood. It’s a kind of haven for bohemian artists.”

Kali led Bailey down the street and through an alcove of street stands with amateur art—paintings, sculpture, blankets, jewelry. Young men smoking cigarettes and wearing long blond hair and beards milled in and out of the street. Women with high cheekbones and porcelain skin flirted with the men or talked to passerbys about the art. Paintings were propped against card tables and jewelry was spread out on top of homemade quilts. The smell

of frying sausage wafted out onto the street as they passed a restaurant with high iron windows named Mama's House of Sausage. A street vendor called to buy some homemade fried pierogies.

"I've never heard of this place before," Bailey said. "This is amazing."

"Well, you're not as cultured as you think you are," Kali teased. "You don't know everything there is to know about this city."

"Really?" he asked and arched an eyebrow. "Did you know that the Brooklyn Bridge was the longest suspension bridge for almost 20 years?"

"Yes, and it was designed by John Roebling," Kali returned.

"I smell a challenge," Bailey said and wagged his finger.

Bailey gravitated to a display of oil paintings and surveyed them with some amusement. One painting showed a cactus against a pastel sky. Another showed a tall fir towering over a clear brook against the backdrop of night.

"How Bob Ross," Bailey said. "Well, at least they've got character. But I wouldn't bank on any of these showing up in the Met."

"I don't come here for the art," Kali said with a wistful tone in her voice. "Well, part of me comes here for the art. But mostly, I come here for the feeling that I get from this place. Everyone is so free. The artists here are so dedicated and impassioned about their art. They don't care about whether or not they'll hang their work in a gallery; they only care about the creation. It's purely art for art's sake."

Bailey smiled at Kali. “I used to think just like you,” he said. “But you start to realize that the ‘art for art’s sake’ sentiment won’t pay the rent. It’s great to be a free, bohemian artist, but what will you do with your life? How will you live?”

“Oh, and I thought you were the wistful romantic, taking me to the museum and talking so impassioned about art,” Kali said. “Then you show up on my door with a daisy.”

“That’s just the dreamer, Bailey,” he said and laughed. “I only take him out for special occasions—like when I’m trying to impress a lady.”

“Well, it’s working,” Kali said and kissed him.

Kali and Bailey walked back across the bridge as the sun fell. There was hardly any light left in the sky and only a pale neon hue lingered on the surface of the water. They looked to the horizon again and saw the lights of the city twinkling against the dark sky like stars. It was the closest they could come to seeing stars in the city. The Empire State Building loomed on the horizon and the spire lit up in three colors of red, white and blue. Kali held Bailey’s hand as they walked, and grabbed his arm with her other hand, leaning in closer to him as they walked.

A week later, Kali trudged up the stairs of Melinda’s building dragging a heavy duffel bag behind her in one hand and carrying a box of books in the other. A man in his twenties with sandy hair trotted down the stairs and revealed a set of shiny white teeth as he passed. Kali looked at him incredulously as he passed.

When she got to Melinda’s apartment at the top of the stairs, sweat was pouring down her sides underneath her dirty shirt. She slammed open the door and dropped her bags

in the doorway, nearly falling over them and into the living room. Melinda looked at her from over the edge of a book and laughed.

“A little help maybe?” Kali asked.

Melinda stood up from her Indian-style position in a brown beanbag and walked over to Kali. She picked up the duffel bag and tossed it into Kali’s new bedroom.

“Don’t be such a baby,” Melinda said. “It’s only five flights. You should be able to handle that.”

“Only,” Kali panted. “What’s my problem?”

“Come on,” Melinda said. “I’ll help you get the rest.”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” Kali said as they walked down the stairs. “If I end up flat broke and homeless, it’s all your fault.”

“Oh, that’s not gonna happen,” Melinda said. “I wouldn’t let it. I’d make you my personal housekeeper and slave first.”

Melinda and Kali walked to the cab and unloaded the rest of the bags. Kali didn’t have much, so moving wasn’t as bad as it could have been. She just had her clothes, her books, her art, and art supplies. There weren’t a lot of personal mementos like photographs or souvenirs. She had left all those things behind when she left North Carolina. The things she carried from her past weren’t tangible.

When they went back inside the apartment, Kali dumped all her bags and boxes in the room, which was completely empty except for a closet door and a single iron-framed window on the opposite wall. She walked back to the living room and fell down on the couch. Melinda sat in a lime green chair opposite her. Besides the couch and the chair, the

only furniture in the room was the beanbag, a bookcase created from concrete blocks and wood plans, and a small television propped on a small metal stand.

“Didn’t you say that Bailey was coming over here later today?” Melinda asked.

“Yeah. I finally have some work to show him. But I want to take a shower before he gets here. He’s got a thing about me being dirty and sweaty.”

“A thing?” Melinda arched her eyebrows.

“He just likes everything to be clean and to smell nice,” Kali said and shrugged. “He’s kind of prissy that way. Anyway, you’ll finally get to meet him. You’ll really like him.”

“How is that going, by the way?” Melinda asked. “Are things weird since you’re dating him and he’s trying to represent you?”

“No,” Kali shrugged. “I mean, I’ve only been seeing him for a little over a month. He hasn’t even really started representing me. I haven’t produced anything until now. If anything, it’ll make things easier since he’ll be more invested in me doing well.”

“If you say so,” Melinda said.

“Don’t worry,” Kali said firmly. “You’re always so suspicious. You worry too much.”

Kali took a shower and shaved her legs. She brushed and blow dried her hair and put on some perfume that Bailey had bought for her. It smelled like vanilla and jasmine. Kali sprayed some lightly on her neck and then sprayed some in the air, ducking her head into the mist and inhaling the scent. After she finished the ritual of preparing herself, she began the ritual of preparing her art. She pulled out each of her canvases and lined them up against the

plaid twill couch carefully, taking a moment to analyze each one, allowing each image to agree with her before she moved on to the next. Melinda stood next to Kali and looked on her work approvingly.

“These are really good, Kali,” Melinda said. “You seem to be doing a lot better with you art.”

“Thanks,” Kali said. “I think it’s just that I’ve been working so hard. I work on this almost every day. I’ve just become immersed in it. I’m starting to see things in my work very differently.”

“I really like this one here,” Melinda said, pointing to an acrylic portrait of a woman against a gray backdrop. The outline of the woman’s face was crudely drawn and her features were divided into contorted shapes and images. She had a lemon for an eye and a star for a nose. Her features fell at random on her face. From her one real eye, a tear flowed and a look of despair emanated. “There is so much sadness expressed here,” Melinda said.

A knock on the door startled both of them. Kali looked over at Melinda quickly and smiled. She turned and leapt towards the door. She swung open the door, threw her arms around Bailey, and kissed him on the neck. He looked down at her and chuckled. “I’m glad to see you, too,” he said.

“Come on, come in,” Kali said. “I want you to meet my friend.”

Kali introduced Bailey, and Melinda shook his hand. Bailey nodded and smiled weakly, leaving the two of them in an awkward silence. Kali cut in and grabbed Bailey’s arm and pulled him toward the couch.

“What do you think?” she asked him and made a gesture towards the paintings. “I did what you said. I’ve been working non-stop.”

Bailey stood before the paintings and gazed at them silently. He walked to each painting and stopped. He moved quickly passed an oil of a giant, composed of blocks, bending over a reflection of himself and weeping. Bailey lingered by the oil portrait that Melinda had complimented only a few minutes before and stared quizzically. Kali looked from Bailey to the paintings nervously and her smile faded. She looked over her work and mentally scrutinized it. She could pick out the flaws that weren’t as obvious to her before. She saw an excess of paint, an errant line, a disharmony of color, the separation of paint. Her enthusiasm for the work diminished the longer he lingered over the paintings without speaking. Kali looked at Melinda and smiled nervously. Melinda smiled back at her reassuringly and shrugged.

“I really like these pieces here,” Bailey said at last, pointing to a group of four paintings that Kali had finished after she saw her mother. “They’re so dark. They show real emotion. They seem to express nothing but sheer rage, blind fury—and a bit of sadness. There’s no form—only a chaotic blur of color and the suggestion of shape. The colors are handled so skillfully.” Bailey squatted in front of one painting and held out his hand in front of it. It was an oil, entitled “The Long Journey Home,” and the shape of mountains was suggested by the contrast of shadows and different hues of gray and blue. Dividing lines cut through the painting like roads. “You blend bright colors here so effortlessly, so seamlessly, with this center of darkness here,” Bailey continued. “I can see a real connection, an investment by you, in these pieces.”

Kali wasn't sure what to say. She hadn't really thought much of those paintings. She had produced them quickly in a spurt of productivity. She hadn't really intended to show them to Bailey, but there was something in them that affected her nonetheless. They seemed to express something in her that she couldn't yet recognize. Maybe Bailey was right. Maybe it was just raw emotion. Whatever it was, she did have a greater connection to those pieces. They actually expressed something inside her.

"These other pieces are OK," Bailey said, making a sweeping motion with his arm and standing up. "They're very interesting. You're still progressing with the human form. But you handle light and perspective very well. You are good at conveying emotion in the work—especially when there are no figures."

Bailey walked back to the end of the couch to look over the four paintings again. He folded his arms and put his hand on his chin. He turned his head and sighed heavily.

"These are really good, Kali. I'd like to take them with me."

"What?" Kali said and a huge grin stretched across her face.

"I think I may be able to use them."

"Really? How? For what?"

"Well, don't get too excited just yet," he said, putting out his hands in front of him.

"But I have a show coming up and I think I may be able to place these with it. The show is for a variety of new artists. I want to show these to the gallery."

"That's great!" Kali said and threw her arms around him.

"Now, I don't want you to get too excited," Bailey warned. "I don't want you to be upset if they don't take you."

“You think they’re good,” Kali said and shrugged, with a huge grin stretched across her face. “That’s all that matters right now. When’s the show?”

“In two weeks.”

Kali kissed him on the cheek and clapped her hands. “This is great! Let’s go out somewhere.”

“I can’t,” Bailey said. “I’m sorry. I’ve got to go. I’ve got to take these paintings by the gallery now and then I’ve got to meet with another artist back in the city.”

“I was hoping we could spend the day...and then the night together.” Kali smiled and wagged her eyebrows at him.

“There’s nothing I’d like more, believe me,” he said and smiled. “I just have a lot of work to do right now. I’m really busy.”

“When will you know for sure about the show?”

“Within the week. The show’s only in two weeks, so I have to move fast. I don’t even know if there’ll still be room. But I’ll call you as soon as I know.”

“Make sure you call me before then.” Kali kissed him and walked him to the door to say goodbye. She walked back in and twirled her arms around her sides, spinning herself in a circle.

“Isn’t that great?” she asked Melinda. “I can’t believe I actually might be in a show.”

“Congratulations, Kali. That’s really great.”

“I can’t believe how good things are going for me,” Kali said. “I have a great new boyfriend. I just moved into my very first apartment ever. Now, I might be putting my art in

a real gallery show. Things never go this good for me, you know. Things never work out the way I want them to. It just doesn't seem real."

"Good things happen to you, Kali," Melinda said reassuringly. "You just come from a bad place. You expect everything else in life to be bad. You came here, didn't you? That was the first good thing in a chain of good things."

"I guess," Kali said noncommittally. "So, what'd you think of Bailey? I think he's gorgeous."

"He seemed nice, I guess," Melinda said. "How old is he?"

"Thirty."

"Thirty? Isn't that a little old for you?"

Kali shrugged. "Not really. I just turned 21 last week. That makes him a little over nine years older than me. It's better, I think."

"Than what?" Melinda asked incredulously.

"Than the alternative," Kali said. "Do you know how many real boyfriends I've had ever? Three. Even the guys I did date all had some sort of major problem. They were all lacking in some very important way. At least Bailey knows who he is. He has a life that he created for himself. He's not still stumbling around trying to figure things out for himself. He knows who he is and what he wants. He doesn't depend on anyone else for that—not even me."

"I'm glad you're happy, but are you sure that this isn't about something else?"

"What else would it be about?" Kali asked.

"Nothing. Never mind."

Kali went to her room and began to put her clothes away in the closet. She had planned to put the rest of her things in order, but her encounter with Bailey lingered in her mind. She got out her latest painting and looked it over in contempt. She pulled out a large, flat paintbrush and began painting over the canvas in a very dark, gray paint. While she stared at the canvas, she thought about what Bailey had said. Those paintings had been done right after her mother showed up in New York, when she was still controlled by her lingering anger. But she didn't think about how she felt when she was working on the paintings. She had only thought about what happened. She wasn't conscious of actually creating anything. She only moved mechanically, putting paint on the canvas, unconscious of any effort or willful direction. When she had finished, she was surprised at the product before her, like when people drive to familiar places and can't remember any of the drive over, but suddenly arrive without knowing how they got there.

Kali thought back to that time. Mimi had looked so sad when Kali told her how she felt. But what did she expect? Could she really have thought that she would just show up there and reclaim some sort of rights to a relationship with her? She felt her anger growing.

Kali struck the canvas with her brush, splashing an arc of red paint across the dark gray background. Visions of her own rage and the fights with her mother flashed through her mind. She was never alone in those situations—physically. Other people had witnessed the abuse she suffered. But no one ever did anything about it. The closest anyone ever came was when her great grandmother came to visit and suggested to her mother that reasoning with her children and talking things out with them would have been better than screaming at them.

Mimi told her that the only thing her kids knew how to respond to was yelling and threatening. She was at least half right, thought Kali.

When she thought back to those times, she couldn't determine whether or not she was more angry at her mother for what she did to her or to the people who knew what was happening and did nothing to stop it. Until she was taken to foster care, she could never truly tell herself that it was abuse. She almost started to believe that maybe it was because she just wasn't a good daughter. Or maybe it was just discipline—something that all parents did. How many times had she heard other parents say some of the same things to their children? People who were considered good parents and good people.

Even worse was the fact that Kali could never express what she felt, could never change her situation. She felt trapped in her own body. When she was nine, Kali ran away from home. It was the first time she felt brave enough to turn her feelings into actions. She left with a friend and her brother. They had planned to go to Ohio by hitchhiking and walking and would live with her friend's father. By the end of the day, they were picked up by the police. In the back of the police car, they had cried and pleaded with the officer, telling him about their parents' abuse. When they pulled into the driveway, the officer left them in the backseat while he talked to their parents. Feeling terrified of the consequences, the three of them walked inside only to find that their parents were calm and unusually understanding. The officer had told the parents what they said. Kali was grounded for a month, but never heard an unkind word. Life was almost normal for a time.

But Kali's life inevitably returned to the way it was before—to what was normal for her. To alleviate some of her frustration, Kali tried to write her feelings in a diary. Though

she suspected it, Kali didn't know until later that Mimi had been reading her diary for months. One day, when Kali attempted to tell Mimi that she shouldn't say the things she did and shouldn't treat her and George the way she did, Mimi let out her secret and told Kali that she knew what she had been writing in her diary. Mimi flew into a rage and tore Kali's room apart looking for the diary. Having suspected that Mimi had been reading the diary, Kali moved it and hid it behind the ledge of a large picture hanging on her wall. Mimi never found the diary. She blamed Kali for the things she wrote and acknowledged no guilt of her own. She said that she read the diary because she could never trust Kali after she ran away—almost four years earlier. As Mimi yelled at her about what she had written and told her that her alcoholism and the abuse she suffered by her boyfriends was none of Kali's business, Kali realized that nothing she did would ever change Mimi. Kali had always fantasized that if she could only talk to Mimi and articulate her feelings and tell her what she had been doing and why it was so harmful, that Mimi would understand and apologize. That she would change. But as Mimi spewed out threats and criticisms, Kali realized that would never happen. She vowed to herself then that she would never forget what had happened—that she would never let go of how she felt—that she would always remember.

Kali felt tears falling down her cheeks and landing on her forearms. She looked down at her hand curiously, then up at the canvas. She dipped her brush again and struck at the canvas blindly. Paint splattered across the canvas, on her clothes, and on the floor. The canvas blurred before her as her eyes brimmed over with tears forming faster than she could wipe them away. Finally, she threw down her brush and lay down on her blanket on the floor. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling, letting her thoughts dissipate.

Melinda called to Kali from the living room, but she ignored her. Melinda walked into the room and found her lying on the floor with red, puffy eyes.

“Kali? Are you OK?”

Kali looked at her from the corner of her eye and did not move her head. She sniffed and sighed deeply. “No, I’m not,” she said after a moment.

Melinda walked over to her and sat down on the floor. “What’s the matter?”

“I don’t know. Well, I guess I do know,” she said and wiped the tears with the back of her hand. “I just don’t know why I’m thinking about it now. I guess it had to do with what Bailey said about those paintings earlier—about how they were so raw. I did those paintings right after my mom showed up here.”

Melinda put her hand on Kali’s forehead and ran her fingers lightly through her hair.

“I just started thinking about why she came and everything she did. It just makes me so angry.” Kali’s voice cracked as she spoke and her face burned as tears began to form in her eyes again. “I don’t understand why that had to happen to me. I mean, why didn’t I matter enough? Why wasn’t I enough to love? She was my mother. My father was never there—I wasn’t enough for him to even know. And the rest of my family didn’t care enough to save me from that—to help me. What does that say about me? What does it say about me that my own parents couldn’t love me? Or the rest of my family?”

“Kali, it’s not you,” Melinda said, sighing deeply and taking her hand in hers.

“What happened to you was wrong. And it happened because the people who did it are sick and they need help. You are not the problem. They are.”

“If that’s true, then what does it say about me that that’s where I come from?”

“Nothing,” Melinda said firmly. “You’re a good person. You have people who care about you. I care about you. I’m your friend and I care about you. I’ll be your family. You can make a new family with the people who really care about you.”

“Like who? Who really cares about me?” Kali asked through her tears.

“Well, Mike does. And Bailey. And me.”

“Oh, Mike just cares about me because I’m the only girl he’s ever had sex with. Besides, he’s too wrapped up in what his mom’s going to think. And I just started dating Bailey.”

“He cares about you,” Melinda said. “Look at all the work he’s doing to help you with your art. He’s always calling you and taking you out. You said you guys have a great time together.”

“Melinda, I don’t know if anyone’s ever really loved me,” Kali said.

“I love you, Kali,” Melinda said softly. “You’re my friend and I care about you. I’ll be there for you.”

Kali wrapped her arms around Melinda’s waist and squeezed her tightly as she cried into her body. Melinda stroked Kali’s hair quietly as she sobbed convulsively. After awhile, Kali’s sobs subsided and she became quiet. Her tears slowed to a trickle and she let out tiny whimpers periodically. She looked up at Melinda and smiled and wiped her eyes.

“I’m really exhausted,” she said.

“Why don’t you go sleep on the couch?” Melinda said. “It’ll be more comfortable there. Or you can sleep in my bed and I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“No, that’s OK,” Kali said. “I’m just going to sleep in here. We can go tomorrow and look for a mattress if you want.”

“Are you going to be OK?” Melinda asked.

“I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll let you get some sleep then.”

Melinda gently removed Kali’s head from her lap and stood up. Kali laid back on her blanket and pillows and Melinda started to walk out of the room.

“Melinda?” Kali called out as Melinda reached the door.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. I mean it. You’re a good friend. Sometimes I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

Melinda smiled and nodded her head. “Good night, Kali.”

Kali lay awake for some time staring out into the darkness before she fell into a heavy sleep.

Magic Mirror

(Chapter 10)

Several days after Bailey's visit to the apartment, he called.

"What's up hot stuff?" Kali greeted him.

"Got some good news for you," Bailey said.

"You're taking me to France on a whirlwind getaway vacation?"

"OK, maybe not that good," he laughed. "I talked to Susan Sloane, director at the gallery, and she wants to include your paintings in the show next week."

Kali's mouth dropped open and she covered it with her hand to stifle any noise that might escape. She bounced up and down, keeping her hand on her mouth. She slowly drew in a deep breath and dropped her hand. "That's great news," Kali said casually. "Did they take all four?"

"Yes. You'll have an opportunity to sell them also. I'll be there trying to talk them up to people and see if I can't move some or all of them. You'll need to decide how much you want to get for them."

Kali's eyes widened and she bent forward. "Oh...I don't really know anything about all that," she said. "You can handle costs and all that stuff. I wouldn't have the first idea how to go about putting a price on any of it."

"I'll take care of it," Bailey said. "Don't you worry. You stick with me and you'll go far."

Kali giggled softly and sighed. “My hero,” she said in a high-pitched, breathy voice. “You’re so dreamy. You’re my Romeo.”

Kali hung up the phone and swirled around the room. She grabbed the mop from the side of the refrigerator and danced across the linoleum until she was dizzy and she fell down on the couch.

For the next week, Kali told everyone she saw about the show. She was happy about her own small success but had difficulty graciously accepting other people’s congratulations. Thinking that she had only experienced a stroke of luck, she couldn’t quite accept the praise that other people gave her as deserved.

On the night of the show, Kali began selecting her wardrobe and washing her hair exactly eight hours before it was to begin. After she meticulously pieced together her appearance, she had six more hours to wait. She moved from room to room around the apartment in search of things to clean or organize. She alphabetized the books on her shelf, wiped down the kitchen cabinets, and refolded all the towels in the linen cabinet. As she worked, she noticed more things about her appearance that needed attending. She shaved her legs then washed her laundry. She plucked her eyebrows then vacuumed the floors. By an hour before the show, she was completely manicured and ready and was waiting on the couch. The apartment was spotless.

Melinda burst through the door with bags in her hand and threw her keys and purse down on the table.

“I know I’m running late,” she said, holding out her hands in front of her. “I still have about a half an hour. I can hurry and still be ready in time.” Melinda stopped abruptly

on her way to her room and turned to face Kali. “Wait, what time is it? Am I that late? This apartment looks great. Have you been cleaning?”

“I got ready early,” Kali said and drummed her fingers on the edge of the couch. “I was anxious. I cleaned up while I was waiting for you. You’re not late.”

“You look really nice,” Melinda said on her way into her room. “I like that dress.”

“Thanks,” Kali said impatiently. “Can you please just hurry up and get ready? I really just want to go.”

“I’m hurrying. I’m going right now. I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes.”

Kali flipped through a fashion magazine that she had bought the week before and read already. She looked at her watch and bounced her leg on her knee. Melinda ran out of her room and stopped abruptly in front of Kali.

“Let’s go.”

Kali and Melinda took a cab to the gallery for the sake of time. Kali had only taken a cab about three times in the entire time that she lived in New York; it was too expensive. But tonight she would splurge on the luxury. Kali walked up the sidewalk to the gallery, which seemed to stand out like a shrine on the street. Light shone from the entrance onto the dark street and the building’s façade sprang up above the others beside it. Kali stood on the sidewalk, staring up at the frescoes above the door, and Melinda hurried past her, only to stop and turn around when she realized Kali wasn’t beside her.

“Come on.”

“Wait. I just want to take a minute.”

Kali walked up to the frosted glass doors and peered through the glass lettering. There were crowds of people in expensive black suits and gowns, with the occasional purple-haired twenty something in a kilt or a shirt with a British flag on it. They were drinking champagne and laughing. Few seemed to be actually looking at the art on the walls. Most were too busy with their drinks and conversation. Kali searched for Bailey, but didn't see him.

“Kali? What's wrong?” Melinda asked impatiently. “Let's go in. What are we doing out here?”

Kali shook her head and blinked repeatedly. She smiled reassuringly at Melinda and adjusted the straps on her dress.

Kali opened the door and the sounds of people talking and music playing in the background flooded over her. She felt like a spotlight had been shined on her, and everywhere she looked people seemed to be staring at her. She hung her head and walked through the crowd. Once she came to a place where she felt like she blended in with the other people, she scanned the walls to find her work.

“You know, I might actually be able to meet someone here,” Melinda said, looking around the room. She grinned mischievously at Kali. “There're a lot of attractive women here.”

“Yeah, but they're all upper class debutantes,” Kali said absently and craned her neck. When she couldn't find her work, she searched the crowd for Bailey. It was like finding Waldo. All of the people in the room looked alike. Everyone wore black. She looked down at her own green dress and felt out of place. Finally, Bailey turned in her direction and

she saw his smile shine in the crowd. He was standing in a corner talking to another woman.

Kali walked over to him and Melinda followed her.

“Hi,” she said, interrupting their conversation.

“Hi, Kali. This is Sophia Richardson. Her husband is a lawyer in the city and she’s one of the gallery’s patrons. Sophia, this is Kali Nichols. She’s one of the artists in the show tonight.”

Kali smiled and nodded her head slightly. Melinda cleared her throat and raised her eyebrows. “Oh, I’m sorry,” Bailey said. “This is Kali’s friend, Melinda.”

“Melinda Darden actually. Nice to meet you,” she said and shook her hand.

The woman smiled insincerely and turned her attention back to Bailey. “Call me later in the week and we can continue this discussion then,” she said to Bailey. She walked away and said nothing else to Kali or Melinda.

Bailey flashed Kali a smile and kissed her on the cheek. “This turnout is great,” he said, looking around. “You’re going to get some great exposure tonight.”

Kali nodded, but said nothing. Melinda raised her eyebrows. “I think I’m going to mingle,” she said and walked to the other side of the room.

“You look great,” Bailey said, looking Kali over. “I love this color on you.”

Kali wore a dress that Bailey had bought her for the occasion. It hugged her figure down to the hem around her knees and had thick straps. “Where are my paintings?” Kali asked and looked around.

“There in the east wing,” Bailey said and pointed to an alcove on the other side of the room. A waiter walked by and Bailey grabbed two glasses of champagne off the tray. “Here, have a drink,” he said, offering one of the glasses to Kali.

Kali looked at Bailey smiling into her face and then looked at the champagne. It sparkled under the light and looked inviting. Kali shook her head.

“No. I don’t want anything to drink,” she said.

“Is everything OK?” Bailey asked and set the glass on a ledge. “I would think you would be more excited.”

“I am,” Kali said. She smiled at him apologetically. “I’m just nervous, I guess.”

“Don’t be. Why don’t you go take a look at your exhibit and talk to some people? I’ll be around after awhile.”

Kali opened her mouth to protest, but Bailey pushed her along gently.

Kali walked slowly across the room to her work. She moved slowly, as if in a dream. She stopped and looked over her shoulder at Bailey. He tipped back his glass of champagne and emptied it. Kali watched as he closed his eyes while he drank as if he were in slow motion. She shuddered slightly as she heard the sound of ice clinking against glass in her mind. She shook her head to dispel the image and turned around. As she moved across the room, she scanned for Melinda. She spotted her talking to an older woman with blond hair and a big smile in the corner. Melinda smiled and talked enthusiastically. She watched as Melinda inched closer to the woman and laughed. Kali smiled and walked toward her painting, where she saw a crowd of people standing.

As she approached the crowd, she overheard several people talking. Her spine stiffened and she felt a lump in her throat when she heard them laughing. Once she could hear their conversation, she relaxed.

“This is a beautiful piece. There is such raw power and emotion here,” said a balding man in a black suit.

“The handling of light is expertly done. Look at the shadows here juxtaposed against the bright center of light on this side,” said another woman wearing a black dress that clung to her hips and fell off her shoulders.

“The colors are chaotic, yet create a sense of order and control within the mass. It’s a bit like some of Jackson Pollock’s work,” said another man with long, brown hair pulled into a ponytail and a bushy mustache.

“I don’t know. There is still something that’s lacking,” said the balding man. “Something doesn’t quite come together. How old is the artist?”

“She just turned 21,” said Bailey as he cut in on the conversation. He shot a glance at the surprised Kali. “And she’s a genius. This is the first show that’s made her work available. She’s going to be one of the hottest new names in the art world in the next year.”

“What makes you think that?” the man asked.

“Just look at the painting,” he said confidently. “There is raw talent there. As you said, she is somewhat underdeveloped, but her work is already great. In a very short time, she will reach her full potential and her work will be famous.”

The man looked at Bailey skeptically and then back at the painting. He looked it over thoughtfully in silence for several minutes. He turned to Bailey again.

“How much?”

“Twenty five.”

“I’ll take it.”

“Damn right,” Bailey laughed and slapped him on the back.

Kali gasped and raised her hand to her mouth instinctively. She fumbled with her mouth to assume the appropriate expression.

“Mr. Rowlands, I’d like you to meet the artist,” Bailey said, directing the man towards Kali. She shook her head at Bailey emphatically and held out her hands, but let them drop and smiled quickly at the man as he turned his eyes on her.

“This is Kali Nichols.”

“How are you?” Kali said and shook his hand. It was thick and clammy in hers and his shake was surprisingly limp since he was such a big man.

“Kali, this is Mr. Rowlands,” Bailey said. “He has just purchased one of your paintings.”

Kali gushed in feigned surprised. “Thank you very much, Mr. Rowlands.”

“I should be thanking you,” he returned. “You’re a very talented artist. I suspect I have just made a very wise investment. Good luck with the rest of the show. I’m sure it will be a success for you.”

“Thank you very much.”

Mr. Rowlands walked away and Bailey winked at Kali. She beamed a huge smile at him. Bailey gave her a thumbs-up and crossed the room to talk to a crowd that had gathered in front of another exhibit.

By the end of the night, all four of Kali's paintings were sold. And she didn't have to talk to anyone about what any of them meant. In fact, she had to do very little talking at all. Most people were happy to talk on and on about her talent, or lack thereof, and what they thought the work meant. After the show, Bailey, Melinda, and Kali went to dinner to celebrate the success of the show.

"Aren't you so excited?" Melinda asked her when they were seated at the table.

"Your first show and you sold everything. And now you have some money!"

"It is pretty great," Kali said and nodded. "I never expected it to happen."

"Now your name's out there," Bailey said. "The next show you have, you won't be an unknown new artist. You'll be Kali Nichols: painter. You'll have already sold your work. People will be talking about you now."

"Ah, but what will they really be saying?" Kali said and laughed.

"Just think," said Bailey. "Four people now have paintings with your name on them hanging on their walls. Their guests at dinner and Christmas and New Year's will all look up at them in awe and say, 'Who did this?'"

Kali conjured a visual image of what Bailey was saying. The image of her painting hanging in someone else's home was unreal, but strangely satisfying. Kali giggled. "It is kind of cool. Like Melinda said, at least I'll have some extra money."

"Oh, the money's the least of it," Bailey said and waved his hand. "Think of the respect and the acknowledgement. Think of all the new people who saw your work tonight and were affected by it. That's always worth more than the money."

Bailey and Melinda looked at Kali and waited for her response. She smiled at them nervously. “Thanks a lot, you guys,” she said finally. “I really do appreciate everything that you both have done for me. You’ve made me feel really good tonight.. I’m sorry if I don’t seem as excited as I should be. I really am. It’s just that I’m not used to these kinds of things happening for me, you know? I’m not really sure how to react.”

“Be happy, Kali,” Bailey said. “You got a lot of attention tonight and you sold your work. This doesn’t mean that you’re going to be Andy Warhol by next week, but it’s a start. You’ve got your name and your work noticed.”

Kali reached across the table and grabbed his hand.

“I think you should kick off your shoes and get crazy,” Melinda cut in. “This is reason to celebrate. This is reason to let it all out and have a good time.”

Kali laughed and a weight was lifted.

A tall woman with long, blond hair and full lips walked by the table and hesitated a moment in the aisle. She looked at Bailey and faltered before saying anything.

“Bailey? I thought that was you,” the woman said. “I was just here with some friends and I saw you. I thought I’d come over and say hello.”

“Hello, Elizabeth,” Bailey said, standing up to greet her. He took her hand and kissed her on the cheek. “It’s good to see you. How have you been doing?”

Melinda cleared her throat loudly and Bailey looked back down at the table. Melinda smiled up at him and batted her eyelashes.

“I’m sorry. I’m being rude,” Bailey said. “Elizabeth, I’d like you to meet Kali Nichols. She’s a new painter that I’m representing. She just had a show tonight and sold all

of her work. And this is her friend, Melinda Darden. Ladies, this is Elizabeth Anderson. She's friend of mine in the art world."

Kali and Melinda both greeted her politely. The four of them stared at each other awkwardly in silence. Kali studied the woman's frame. She wore a form fitting white dress that fell down to her ankles. Kali could see the shape of her hipbone beneath the dress and the smooth surface of her stomach. The woman's skin was a deep bronze against the stark white dress. Her breasts rested high and the skin on her arms was taut over her muscles. Kali looked back down at her own appearance and her smile fell.

"Well, um, I just wanted to say hello," Elizabeth said. "I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner. I'll just get back to my party. It was nice seeing you."

"Give me a call at the gallery sometime," Bailey said.

"I will. It was nice meeting you," Elizabeth said to Kali and Melinda. She turned and walked away.

Bailey watched her walk away then sat down and returned to his dinner, but did not say anything. Kali watched him for several moments, waiting for him to speak.

"Who was that?" Kali asked finally.

"Just a friend, like I said," Bailey said, not looking up from his plate.

"Why didn't you introduce me to her as your girlfriend?" Kali asked.

Bailey looked up at her in surprise then rested his elbows on the table. "Because you're a new artist trying to get some recognition," Bailey said and sighed. "She's an art critic. Would you rather she know that you have art work to sell or that I'm sleeping with you?"

Kali's cheeks flushed and she felt her face burning. "What? Is that all you're doing then? Are you just sleeping with me?" she spit the words out bitterly and her voice rose.

"Keep your voice down," Bailey said lowly. "We don't need to have this conversation here. We're trying to have a nice dinner and your friend is here. You need to get a hold of yourself and stop acting like a jealous schoolgirl. We can talk about this later."

Kali clamped her mouth shut angrily and folded her arms. Bailey returned his attention to his meal and Kali glared at him in silence. Melinda sat quietly and focused on her meal, as well. The three of them said very little to each other for the rest of the evening.

At the end of the night, Bailey drove Melinda back to her apartment. Then he and Kali drove back to his apartment in silence. By the time they got back to the apartment, some of the tension was lifted and Bailey began talking to Kali again.

When they got inside, Bailey grabbed Kali by the waist and danced playfully around the room. Kali laughed despite herself, but pushed him away. She fell down on the couch and crossed her arms.

"What's the matter?" Bailey asked, holding up his arms in the air next to his sides.

"Why did you say that to me earlier tonight after that woman came up to us at the restaurant?" Kali asked. "Do you really think I'm just the girl that you're sleeping with?"

"Oh Christ, Kali." Bailey sat in the chair opposite her and buried his head in his hands. "Do we really have to go over this again?"

"I'm sorry to have to inconvenience you. But you hid the fact that I'm your girlfriend, and then you call me the girl that you're just sleeping with."

“Is that what you think?” Bailey looked up at her. “First, I was not hiding anything from her. I am an art dealer. It is my job, when I am talking to people, especially those people in the art world, to tell them about your art. I already told you why I didn’t introduce you as my girlfriend. I didn’t hide anything. You need to decide if you’re really serious about this thing, and you need to grow up. If you really are serious about your art, you need to wake up to what it means to be an artist in the world today—one who actually sells her paintings. You can’t go around throwing temper tantrums whenever you see me talking to another woman or when I don’t air my personal life to everyone in the room.”

Kali let her eyes drop. “I—“

“You know, you’ve been acting like a spoiled child all evening,” Bailey interrupted her. “It’s not everyone who would be where you are at your age. You would think you’d have a little more gratitude for all the help I’ve given you.”

“I do,” Kali said. “I’m sorry I’m not the confident, savvy woman that you want me to be. I’m sorry. Maybe then I would be good enough for you to introduce to people as your girlfriend. Maybe then you wouldn’t be so ashamed of me or irritated by my immaturity and ingratitude.” Kali’s voice cracked as she spoke and she wiped away a tear as it fled down her cheek.

“Ah Christ, Kali,” Bailey’s voice softened and he looked down at her with sympathetic eyes. “Is that really what you think?”

Kali sobbed quietly on the couch and Bailey kneeled down before her and took her hands in his. “Kali, listen to me. I’m sorry that I was so harsh. I don’t want you to think that you’re not good enough for me. I’m sorry I said those things like that.” Bailey looked down

and shook his head. “It’s just that you have to understand the way my job works. Most of my job is about image and projecting a certain kind of personality.” Bailey put his hand on Kali’s cheek and she turned her head away. “Kali, you are more to me than just some girl I’m sleeping with,” he said softly. “You should know that. I should have known not to say that to you. It was definitely the wrong thing to say. Kali, you are more to me than that. So much more. You are more to me than even just my girlfriend. I love you, Kali.”

Kali stopped crying and looked at him quickly. Bailey kissed her lightly on the lips.

“I love you, too,” Kali said softly.

Kali was happy and stunned at the same time. No man had ever told her he loved her except in return. Bailey was the first man to ever tell her he loved her without any prompting. When Kali had said it to other men, it was more like a plea for love than an actual declaration of love. It was an invitation for them to express the same emotions to her. Some never did. Others seemed to say it only out of obligation. Mike had seemed to say it for the same reasons that she did.

Bailey kissed Kali lightly again and then on her nose and her forehead. It was a sweet gesture that made her skin shiver. He moved his hands along her shoulders to her neck, meeting them at the nape of her neck and interlocking them in her hair. He kissed the tip of her chin and moved his lips down her neck and kissed her throat. He had full, soft lips that left warm kisses on her skin. Kali kissed him on the forehead and the eyelids, and he kissed her in the dip of her collarbone and her shoulder. He slowly slid off the straps of her dress and laid her back on the couch. Kali wrapped her arms around him tightly and pulled him closer to her. She breathed in the scent of his skin and kissed him along the side of his neck.

Bailey pulled back and kissed her across the chest slowly and lightly. Kali felt comforted and excited. She felt soothed and stimulated at the same time. Bailey scooped Kali up in his arms and pulled her close to him. He kissed her deeply and then led her to his bed. Kali slowly raised her dress over her head and Bailey caressed her skin with kisses.

For the first time, Kali made love to a man. She had always held a clichéd idea of what that meant. She pictured candles and bubble baths with flower petals and soft music. Never had she imagined the real emotional connection that it required. Sex had always just been sex for her—something from which she detached herself in her mind. Now, as Bailey moved on top of her while he scooped her in his arms and kissed her all over her face and neck, she felt something more—something real. When he whispered into her ear “I love you,” she believed him, not because she needed to, but because she was overwhelmed by the truth of it.

They fell asleep that night as Bailey spooned Kali in his arms, wrapping her whole body with warmth and security. They woke up in the same position. It was the only time that Kali slept the whole night in a man’s arms without discomfort or a need to turn away and create her own space on the bed. Bailey smiled at her when she turned to see if he was awake.

“Good morning, beautiful,” he said. Bailey wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. He had sweet breath even though he just woke up. He pulled her in closer and his arms engulfed her. “Come on. You get up and get dressed and I’ll make us some breakfast,” Bailey said.

“OK,” Kali said, smiling serenely.

Kali took a shower and looked at her body with new eyes. She moved her hands over her skin and remembered where Bailey had left the same caresses the night before. She could still smell his scent, even though he wasn't there. Her slightly protruding belly and supple thighs no longer seemed excessive; they seemed beautiful. Her skin felt soft and smooth beneath her touches.

Kali could hear Bailey whistling in the kitchen, accompanied by the sound of pots and pans banging down on the stove. She heard silverware rattling, whisks swishing against glass bowls, knives slamming against wood. It sounded like he was making a full-course meal. She smiled to herself and turned off the water.

Kali got dressed and hurried to the kitchen, anxious to discover the masterpiece he had prepared for her. When she entered the kitchen, she held her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. Crushed eggshells littered the countertop. Batter was splattered across the stove, the wall behind the stove, and a cast iron skillet. Four slices of black toast popped out of the toaster and another pan was starting to catch fire with pork grease. Bailey waved at it frantically with a hand towel, and a flame grabbed onto the cotton fringes. Bailey threw the towel on the white tile floor and stamped on it with his bare feet. Kali couldn't hold back her laughter anymore.

"You know, Bailey, we don't have to eat in," Kali said finally. "We can just go out. There's a place right around the corner."

"Oh, no. No, no, no. I don't think so," Bailey waved his hands in front of him and shook his head. "If you think that you're not going to eat this gourmet breakfast that I just

cooked for you, then you've got another thing coming. I am trying to do things right here. I want to be able to make you a meal, not just wave my credit card around town all the time."

"Bailey, you didn't have to cook the entire IHOP menu. What is this? Eggs, bacon, toast (I guess), pancakes, orange juice. You've got everything here but biscuits and gravy."

"And grits, you southern girl," Bailey said. "And don't think I didn't think of that. Just try to find grits in New York. They'll look at you like you just asked for hot chocolate in July. And I didn't get to the biscuits yet."

Kali laughed and shook her head. "Well, alright then. I hope you've got a lot of butter and syrup. We're going to need something to help get us out of this mess."

Cyphers of Identity

(Chapter 11)

For weeks after the gallery show and Bailey's declaration of love, Kali felt like she was happy for the first time in her life. Life had assumed a brighter hue. When she walked through the streets of New York, the city no longer seemed intimidating. When she walked to the edge of a building and looked up towards the sky (something she had done frequently when she first moved to the city), she didn't feel like the bulk of concrete bent over her and made her seem small and insignificant. Instead, she looked towards the sky and saw the lines of the skyscraper move toward each other into infinity, stretching on into the clouds. She could feel herself being pulled up with it.

The semester started, but Kali was no longer interested in anything that the university could offer her. She could think of nothing but Bailey and the excitement of her art being sold and getting recognition. The day after the show, she ran out and bought every newspaper and art magazine that she could find on the newsstands. Several of the papers mentioned the show, but did not address Kali specifically. A very small blurb appeared in one of the art magazines that called her 'talented' and 'someone to watch.'

Those two comments were enough to fuel visions of Kali standing in the middle of a crowded room of people dressed in black and sipping champagne while reporters milled around Kali and photographers snapped a flurry of pictures. Kali would smile serenely in the midst of it all and offer occasional insights into her art, leaving everyone awed and inspired by her vision. Gallery owners were paw over one another to attract Kali's attention, and

salivate at the chance to represent her. Kali indulged in these fantasies throughout her day—whether she was in class or at work or in her room. She started to feel like her life was moving forward—like she was striving towards a visible goal, not just groping blindly. She was living a real life like everyone else.

Classes became boring and passé. She felt like she knew all that she needed to move on with her life and begin her career. She no longer needed the stability that an education could offer her. In class, she would sit in the back of the room and doodle on notebook paper while her professors lectured. Sometimes she sketched pictures of possible paintings to pursue; at other times, she sketched images of herself as she imagined them on the pages of *American Artist Magazine* and in publicity photos for her next show. In the pictures, her skin shone and she looked into the camera demurely. Her hair was sculpted into a carefully windblown look, suggesting her effortless beauty.

If Kali was in an art class, she focused intently on her own work and ignored whatever the professor was saying. It was the only time she ignored the fantasies and worked like she depended on it. She heard no sound and did not see the edge of the canvas; she only saw the form taking shape before her. She receded into her subconscious vision and her hands moved without her willing them to.

Kali went to her painting class and had to show an assignment. The professor had asked them to paint a landscape or cityscape scene, and Kali had chosen to do an oil painting of a scene from Union Square Park. She often went there to work on her sketches or to study. The park offered a haven outside the noise and the bustle of the city; it offered an alcove of other people like Kali who were looking for escape. She blended in with all the other artists

who lounged on the grass or the rotting wooden benches with sketchbooks and charcoals or pencils. Most of the time, Kali just watched the people that passed through the park. A man with glasses and a brown turtleneck embraced a woman with a pleated skirt and long red hair passionately. Kali imagined a reunion of some sort, either from a breakup or a long trip. A skinny teenage boy with pimples and greasy hair bent over his sketchbook in an upright fetal position and drew without ever looking up. Kali smiled knowingly and returned to her own sketch.

For her painting for class, she chose a representational scene of some kids skateboarding on a wooden ramp that they had created against some bleachers. Various other artists and students spotted the background. Some stood and watched in awe, while others labored over their books, oblivious of the scene before them. The scene was rendered impressionistically, with swirls of color and flashing light to suggest the action and intensity of the scene. Kali stood before the class and propped her painting on an easel. She sat down in the front row and silently waited for her classmate's comments. Her heart pounded and she looked around to see if anyone could hear.

"I think it's really good," one boy began.

"I really like the colors you used," said another girl, wearing a spiked choker and pigtails. "It really creates a sense of liveliness and passion."

Kali smiled despite herself as she listened to their comments.

"I don't really like the subject material," said another girl, wearing a brown wool coat and a lavender striped scarf hanging around her neck. "It's kind of sophomoric. There's nothing really that interesting about what you've chosen to represent."

Kali's smile drooped and she looked at the ground. Several more of her classmates chimed in to agree with the girl who had criticized the subject material. Kali glanced back at her painting and cursed herself for picking something so simple and ordinary.

As more of her classmates spoke, Kali receded into her fantasies and thoughts about her art show. She felt more confident and surveyed her classmates with some disdain. What do they know? she thought. I've sold my paintings at a gallery. They're only students. None of them have ever sold any of their work. Kali crossed her arms and slumped down in her chair while they continued with their assessment. She did not listen to any more of their comments—she didn't need them.

For the first time, Kali could envision a future in which a university degree and an education weren't the only answers to a stable life and career.

Even her job became unbearable. She started calling in sick just to spend time with Bailey or paint. Her sculpture had been shelved to make room for time to paint, which had earned Kali the recognition she craved. But when she couldn't afford to miss work, she dragged herself in.

“Excuse me? Miss?”

Kali heard a customer calling her, but ignored him as she took an order at another table. She smiled at the elderly man before her and wrote shorthand in a small order book in the palm of her hand. She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck rising as the man behind her kept calling her. She punctuated the order with her pencil and turned to face the man in irritation.

“Garson?” the man asked, waving his glass in the air. “Waitress?”

“Garson means boy,” Kali said and grabbed his glass. “And my name is Kali,” she said, underlining the name on her tag with her index finger. She grabbed a tea pitcher off a ledge and filled it quickly. She looked at the man without smiling and sat the glass on his table firmly. She lingered momentarily to let the weight of her stare fall on him, then turned abruptly and walked away.

Kali passed a mirror over the register and looked at her appearance in disgust. She wore a pink uniform with white cuffs and a short white apron. It looked like a maid’s uniform, but a pale shade of vomit. Kali wore her long hair tied on her head and secured in a net. She wore a white paper hat over that. She wondered how she could ever work in such a place all her life—how Mimi could work in such a place all her life. Whenever the door opened and the bell chimed, Kali turned to see who it was. She dreaded the day that someone from the gallery or one of her shows would walk in and find her there.

All Kali could think of was the injustice of having to wait on people who were beneath her. She knew that college and working in the diner were only circumstances that had been forced on her, a temporary part of her life. When a customer was rude or condescending, she wanted to tell them just how worthless they were. She performed her job mechanically, with little interaction with the customers and the other employees. Her tips started going down and the customers complained about her more often.

Of course, with the start of the new semester, Mike came back to the university. Kali tried to avoid him and managed to do so for almost two months. She didn’t call him and didn’t return his calls. She was usually at work or out with Bailey, so she managed to avoid running into him at the apartment when he called on her.

Kali was in her room reading a magazine about modern sculpture when the knock came. Melinda was out with her new girlfriend at a yoga class, and Kali had spent the day working on a new painting. She had painted over the one that she presented in class and decided to work on something more personal. She could only paint the background before she was stuck and didn't know what else to add. Kali retreated to her bed and flipped through several of her old fashion magazines. She eyed the gray canvas standing in the corner and it seemed to mock her with its dark emptiness. She looked away and picked up the sculpture magazine instead. She smirked at the painting and lost herself in the magazine. When she heard the knock on the door, she jumped up with excitement, expecting that Bailey had arrived early to pick her up for dinner. She swung open the door and her smile dropped when she saw Mike.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Kali asked and walked inside. She sat on the couch and folded her legs underneath her; Mike followed her inside and closed the door behind him.

“I haven't seen you since the end of last semester and I wanted to see your new place, so here I am,” Mike said. Kali looked him over. He seemed to have gained weight since she saw him last. His smooth skin made him seem younger—almost more innocent.

“Why didn't you call first?” Kali asked and picked at a loose button on the couch cushion. “I was getting ready to go out soon.”

Mike's smile dropped. They had never had the kind of relationship where they needed to call first. Kali didn't have that kind of relationship with any of her friends.

“I guess I just didn’t think of it,” Mike muttered. He dropped down into the lime green recliner and looked around. He seemed to admire the paintings and drawings that hung on the wall. Kali had collected quite a number of pieces through her street acquisitions. There were several caricatures of her and Melinda from the times they had stopped during an afternoon stroll through SoHo or Greenwich Village. Some were oil cityscapes of the Manhattan skyline or the smaller neighborhoods, like Spanish Harlem. Some of Melinda’s band members had graced the walls with their ideas for album covers when they would supposedly one day sign a contract. Mike smiled and pointed to one that he liked of a dragon flying through an orange sky.

Kali shrugged. “Well, what have you been up to?” she asked him.

“Not much,” Mike said. “I’ve been really busy with work. I’ve got some really hard classes this semester. I’m going to have to study a lot more than before.”

Kali nodded, but said nothing. She shifted her attention to her toenails and picked at some flaking red polish. She would have to redo her nails soon.

“What about you?” Mike asked. He leaned forward in his chair and smiled energetically. “How are your classes going? Or are you beyond that now that you’ve become a big-time artist.”

Kali looked up at him and her eyes narrowed. “I’m not a big time artist now. I only sold a few pieces at a small group show. Besides, I still have to work like everyone else.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Mike said quickly. “I just mean that it’s a big deal, you know? You should be proud. I’m proud of you.”

“I am,” Kali said and crossed her arms.

“How are things working out with Melinda?” Mike asked. “Do you like living with her?”

“Yeah, it’s really great,” Kali said, letting her arms fall by her sides. “We have a lot of fun together. It’s been a lot better than living with Samantha.”

“How so?” Mike asked curiously.

“Oh, I don’t know. Samantha was always so...distant. She always seemed to be judging me. I never really felt close to her. But Melinda and I have become really good friends. I’m really glad I decided to move in with her.”

“I guess that’s good,” Mike said. “I just never knew you felt that way about Samantha. Have you talked to her lately?”

“There’s a lot of things about me you probably don’t know.” Kali shrugged. “No, I haven’t talked to her since I moved. We don’t really get along anymore.”

Mike nodded his head and was silent for several moments. “You said you were going somewhere?” Mike asked finally.

“Oh, uh, yeah. I’m going out to have dinner with someone.”

“Oh?” Mike asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Yeah. My...um...boyfriend,” Kali said and looked at Mike expectantly.

“I didn’t know you were seeing someone already,” Mike said and fell silent.

“We started seeing each other over the summer,” Kali said.

“Are things serious?” Mike asked softly. He crossed his arms at his waist and slumped over. He rubbed his lips together then bit his bottom lip.

Kali nodded.

“Do I know him?”

“Does it matter?” Kali asked.

“It doesn’t, I guess. I was just wondering.”

Kali stared at him in silence and they were both startled by a knock at the door. Kali looked at Mike nervously and then at the door. Mike looked at her in expectation.

“Are you gonna get that?” Mike asked.

Kali got up slowly and walked to the door. She glanced back at Mike, who looked towards the door in anticipation. She opened the door slowly and Bailey greeted her.

“Hey gorgeous,” he said and kissed her on the lips.

Kali turned her head away quickly. “Hi, uh...”

Bailey walked past her into the room and looked curiously at Mike. “Who’s this?” he asked Kali and pointed at Mike.

“Uh, this is my friend, Mike.” Kali walked into the room and turned her face into a bright smile. “Mike, this is Bailey. This is my boyfriend.”

Mike stood up slowly and looked Bailey over. Bailey stood at a distance and watched him curiously. Bailey looked at Kali with a slight smirk.

Mike walked with a deliberate step to where Bailey was standing. He stood before Bailey for several moments, staring into his eyes. After several moments of tense silence, Mike shot his hand out to shake Bailey’s hand and Kali flinched imperceptibly.

“Nice to meet you,” Mike said slowly.

Bailey shook his hand and nodded. “You, too.”

“Haven’t we met before?” Mike asked with a puzzled expression on his face.

“Uh, Mike, this is Bailey, the art dealer,” Kali cut in. “You met him back in May at the contest. Remember?”

A look of recognition slowly spread over Mike’s face and he nodded. Mike stood a few inches from Bailey and the two stared at each other as if they were in a face off. Kali stood next to them and stared between the two of them nervously.

“Is there a problem here?” Bailey asked finally.

“I think there is,” Mike said, maintaining eye contact with Bailey.

Kali shuffled nervously. “Mike, I—“

“Don’t bother,” Mike said, turning to her. “Forget this. Forget you. I can’t believe what a liar you are.”

Kali’s expression hardened into a scowl.

“You said you loved me,” Mike continued and pointed at Kali accusingly. “You said you wanted all these things with me. But you were sneaking around behind my back the whole time.”

“Mike—“

“Look, pal, I don’t know what your problem is, but I think you need to just settle down,” Bailey said, laying his hand on Mike’s shoulder.

Mike turned his head and looked at Bailey over his shoulder, then looked at Bailey’s hand. He grabbed Bailey’s hand and dropped it from his shoulder.

“I’m not your pal,” Mike said.

“I think you need to leave,” Bailey said. “You’re just going to cause problems here when there don’t need to be any.”

Mike turned and met Kali's gaze. She looked at him apologetically and he gave her a hard stare. "I'm going," he said. "I don't think I'll be seeing you again, Kali. I hope you're happy." Mike walked passed them both and out of the apartment. Kali stood silently staring at the ground.

"What was that all about?" Bailey asked.

"I don't know," Kali said and shook her head.

Bailey furrowed his brows and looked at Kali. "Wait a minute. Was that the 'boyfriend'?" Bailey asked. "The ex-boyfriend? The one you were dating when we met?"

"Yep. That was Mike."

"Why did he come here in the first place?"

"Just to say hi, I guess," Kali said.

"Well, that's over," Bailey said. "What do you want to do tonight? Go out or stay in?"

Kali shrugged. She focused her attention on the ground and rubbed her arm with her other hand. She blinked her eyes repeatedly.

"Why don't we go to my apartment and order something in," Bailey suggested, not seeming to notice her reticence. "I've got some things I want to talk to you about. I want to have you all to myself."

Kali looked up at him curiously. "You've got some things you want to talk to me about?" she asked slowly. "Is that code for something? Is that the 'we need to talk' speech?"

"No, it's not like that," Bailey said. "I just figured we could go back to my place and relax so that we could talk."

“Why can’t we stay here and do that?” Kali asked.

“You know I like staying at my place better than I do staying here,” Bailey said.

“My place is just much more convenient. There are more—amenities. There’s no roommate. It’s just better.”

Kali reluctantly agreed and she walked to her room to pack an overnight bag. She sorted through her underwear and held up a pair of lace and a pair of cotton. She looked between the two indecisively. She could be going home tonight, she thought. She threw them both in the bag to prepare for both scenarios. Bailey drove Kali to his apartment and she watched him anxiously in the car. She looked for some indication of what he had to tell her. As always, Bailey seemed relaxed and at ease.

When they got back to Bailey’s apartment, he ordered them some takeout Cuban Chinese. When he got off the phone, Kali could wait no longer.

“Well, are you going to tell me?” she asked him from the couch. “What do you want to talk to me about? You want to kick me to the curb or what?” she laughed nervously and pulled her feet behind her on the couch.

Bailey laughed and shook his head. “Can we talk about this later? Like after we eat?”

“Come on,” Kali said. “Just tell me. You’re making me really nervous.”

“Have some faith, Kali.” Bailey looked at her and sighed. “All right. Actually, I’ve got some good news for you.” He sat down on a leather recliner opposite Kali and leaned forward over his knees.

“Really? What?” Kali’s face lit up and her mind raced to figure out what he could have to tell her.

“I’ve got you another show,” he said and smiled broadly.

Kali looked at him blankly for a moment. “What?”

“I said ‘I’ve got you another show.’ And this time, there will be fewer artists, so you can show more of your own work.”

“Wh—How? I don’t understand,” Kali said. “I don’t even have any work to show to you. I haven’t done anything since the last show.”

“That’s what’s so great about it,” Bailey said and inched forward in his seat. “I talked to Susan about you again. She liked your stuff from the last show and she was impressed that you sold everything. A lot of people have been saying very good things about your work.”

“What about the fact that I don’t have enough paintings?” Kali asked, waving her arms in the air for emphasis. “How am I going to have a show?”

“You’re going to have to work double time to produce something in time,” Bailey said.

“Which is?”

“It’s in a little over a month.”

“What?” Kali stood up before Bailey. “And how do you think I’m supposed to have enough work ready for a show in just a little over a month?”

“You’re going to have to work everyday to make it,” Bailey said, his tone sounding more authoritative. “If you still don’t have enough by the show, we can use some of your older pieces that we didn’t use at the last show.”

“But you said those weren’t that great.”

“They weren’t,” Bailey said simply. “But if you don’t have anything else, we’ll have to use them anyway. We’ll just have to hang them in the back. I don’t know. We’ll figure it out.” Bailey laughed and squeezed Kali’s hand.

“I don’t know about this Bailey,” Kali said and sank down in her seat again. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Sure you can. You just have to have a little faith in yourself. You can do anything you put your mind to.”

Kali smiled at Bailey wearily. “OK. But if this all blows up in my face, then I’m blaming you. This will be all your fault.”

“That goes without saying,” Bailey said. “But it won’t happen so I’m not worried. I know you can do it.”

Bailey looked at Kali and his expression sobered.

“What is it?” Kali asked. “Is this the part where you really do kick me to the curb?”

“No, no, of course not. That’s the furthest thing from my mind.”

“Then what?”

“Well, I was just thinking,” Bailey began slowly. “We’ve—“ Bailey was interrupted by a knock at the door. He smiled at Kali and held up his index finger. “One second.”

Bailey leapt up and trotted to the door. He took the bags from the deliveryman and gave him two twenties. “Keep the change,” he said and kicked the door shut with his foot. Kali sat on the edge of the couch and watched him take the bags to the kitchen. Bailey took some plates out of the cabinets and put them on the counter.

“We don’t have to worry about that right now,” Kali called to him. “Just come sit down so we can finish our talk.”

“Patience,” he said and dumped some fried rice onto the two plates. Bailey laid out the rest of the food and brought the plates to lacquered wood and glass coffee table. He sat down in his chair and smiled at Kali.

“Where were we?” he said and scratched his head. “Oh, yes. I was thinking...you know we’ve been seeing each other for about four or five months now. I know for some people, that’s not really a long time, but for me it is. The time that we’ve spent together has been really great. It’s made me feel good; it’s made me feel...different. With you, I feel like I can be a different person. I feel like I can be a better person. I don’t have to pretend. I can take a break from all of my pretensions.”

“Me, too. I’ve been really happy,” Kali said.

“Well, I was thinking that I’d like to see more of you,” Bailey continued. He turned his body to face her and grabbed her hands. “I don’t want to have to wait until we both have time to do something together. I don’t want to wait until you’re not working or in school or I’m not working or have to go see an artist or a buyer. I want to see you every night when I go to bed and every morning when I wake up.”

Kali’s face burned and a smile stretched itself across her whole face.

“I want you to have more than just an extra toothbrush here,” Bailey said. “I want you to move in with me. I want all of your stuff here. I want all of you.”

“Really?” Kali’s voice squealed as she spoke.

“Yes, really.”

“That’s so great,” Kali said and threw her arms around his neck. “I wasn’t really sure if you would want to be with me like that. I really want to be with you all the time, too. When do you want to move in together?”

“Now. Today. Tomorrow. As soon as possible,” Bailey said. “I want to go get your things and move them in here as soon as we can. I just really want us to be together.”

“Oh, but what about Melinda?” Kali’s smile drooped slightly as she began to realize the logistics of moving. “I have to give her enough notice to find a new roommate.”

“Melinda can take care of herself,” Bailey said and waved his hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about her. She’s a grown woman.”

“No. That’s not right,” Kali said and shook her head. “She wouldn’t ever do that to me. I have to give her at least a month or two to find someone new.”

“All right, if you have to,” Bailey sighed. “Just do it as soon as possible. I’m so tired of only seeing you a couple of hours a few times a week. I want to be able to spend all the time I can with you.”

“Me, too,” Kali giggled. “What about school? You’re not going to mind that I’m always running off to class and studying? You won’t care that this place is littered with books?”

Bailey rolled his eyes. “No, I won’t,” he said. “Besides, you’ve only got a few more years left anyway. If you’re art career takes off, you won’t even have to worry about school. You can just work on your art.”

“I don’t know about that,” Kali said. “I still need school. I don’t think I can just quit.”

“Do whatever you decide,” Bailey said. “Just know that I think you have more important things to worry about. Like me. And your art. And this very trendy Cuban Chinese food that’s getting cold.”

Bailey grabbed a plate and handed it to Kali. He smiled and picked up a piece of sweet and sour chicken with his chopsticks. Kali grinned and tried to do the same, but her chopsticks snapped together and her chicken flew across the room. Kali looked at Bailey and laughed.

The Dance of Life

(Interlude)

Kali lay on her stomach on her bed and flicked her pencil over her sketchbook in casual but controlled motions. A picture of her brother lay beside the sketchbook on the bed. Kali looked between the picture and her sketch. The picture of George was taken when he was about three. His curly red hair poked out to the sides behind his ears, creating a bell-shaped frame around his face. His wide smile revealed his protruding first teeth and his eyes were squinted in delight. He wasn't smiling; he was laughing. George held his hands clasped around a white, stuffed bunny rabbit in his lap and gazed confidently into the camera. Kali had looked at the picture many times and she always thought the same thing: he looked so different. It was more than just the change from infancy to young manhood. Kali could hardly trace the likeness in George's infantile features to any semblance of the ones she saw in his face now. She looked at the picture of George like she looked at pictures of herself; she wondered at how they had changed so much.

As Kali worked on her sketch, Mimi walked into the room. Kali had her door closed and Mimi opened it without announcing herself.

"I thought I told you not to close this door," Mimi said, standing with her arms crossed and leaning against the dresser. Mimi's questions always sounded more like accusations.

"I was just sketching," Kali said. "What's the big deal?" She didn't turn her head because she didn't want her mother to see the look of irritation that stole across her face.

“The big deal is that I don’t want you hiding behind closed doors in my house,” Mimi said. “There aren’t any secrets in this house.”

“OK,” Kali said slowly. She furrowed her brows while Mimi was not looking at her.

“What are you doing?” Mimi asked, her tone casual and inquisitive. There were no traces of the demanding anger that she had displayed only seconds before.

“I’m just working on a sketch, like I said.”

“I know that. Is it for school? Are you working on it just because?”

“Just because, I guess,” Kali said and shaded the cheek bone on George’s infant features. “I’m not taking any art classes this year.”

“Why not?” Mimi asked. “Isn’t that what you want to do when you graduate?”

Kali’s pencil stopped and she turned to face Mimi with a confused stare. “I don’t know,” she said and turned back around and finished shading. “I don’t think so. I’ll probably go into business or something like that—something that will let me make money.”

“Well, if anyone in this family will go to college, it’ll be you,” Mimi said. “You’ve been on the honor roll since kindergarten.”

Kali nodded. She hadn’t shown Mimi a report card since she’d started high school. Mimi didn’t know that Kali’s grades were slipping since she’d stopped worrying about class and started focusing on friends.

Mimi sat down on the edge of the bed and fingered Kali’s hair. “You know, I can cut this hair for you,” she said. “It’s getting kind of long. You’re getting some split ends.”

Mimi always cut Kali’s hair. She had gone to cosmetology school after she dropped out of high school; it was her failed dream at becoming a makeup artist.

“Later maybe,” Kali said and brushed her hair to the side of her head out of Mimi’s reach. “I’m trying to let it grow.”

Mimi peered over Kali’s shoulder and Kali turned her sketchbook over.

“What are you drawing?” Mimi asked. “Aren’t you going to let me see it?”

“It’s a picture of George.”

“Well, let me see it.” Mimi’s tone became less inquisitive and more firm. Mimi reached out her hand for the sketch and Kali handed it to her over her shoulder, still lying on her stomach. Kali rested her cheek in her hand while Mimi looked over the sketch.

“It kind of looks like him,” Mimi said, handing the sketch back to Kali. “Where did you get that picture of him, anyway?”

“I got it from your box of pictures,” Kali said carefully.

“What were you doing going through my things?” Mimi’s tone sharpened once more.

“I just got the picture. I’ve gotten pictures from that box before.”

“You need to ask if you want to borrow anything of mine,” Mimi said.

Kali nodded and said nothing. She looked up at her mother in expectation.

“I’m ready to go to your grandmother’s,” Mimi said. “Get your stuff and let’s go.”

“Is George still coming?” Kali asked, rolling over and sitting up.

“Yes. We have to go pick him up from your father’s.”

Kali looked down and hesitated at the edge of the bed. Mimi walked out of the room without noticing.

Mimi yelled at Kali from down the hall. She took a deep breath and stood up. She grabbed her sketchbook and followed her mother to the car.

Kali rode beside her mother in silence on the drive to her father's house. She opened her sketchbook and thought about working on her picture, but couldn't concentrate. She turned her attention to the passing cars and buildings outside her window instead. It was February and the sky was grey and formless; no clouds could be outlined against the horizon. The light snowfall they'd had the week before had melted from the trees and the grass, but jagged heaps of black ice were scraped to the sides of the streets and dumped in parking lots where they still remained. The once pure white snow now looked dirty and spoiled, making the city look tarnished. Kali wondered what life was like in towns in those picturesque postcards with the folds of pure white snow and the children laughing on their sleds. Kali had never been sledding; the snow never fell heavy enough.

Mimi pulled into the driveway and Kali looked up at the house. Kali's father, Frank, lived in a run down cottage-style house that he was renting. The wooden planks that sided the house rotted near the foundation at places, revealing holes inside the walls. Rusty chairs were piled on the porch with a lawnmower and other yard tools. A wooden screen door hung by one hinge. When the car came to a stop, Kali opened her door slowly and walked up to the house. She took each step deliberately and watched the ground, noticing the tufts of grass that grew up between the concrete rubble, interspersed with cigarette butts and bits of paper. Mimi walked past Kali quickly onto the porch and knocked on the door impatiently.

Frank opened the door and bypassed Mimi. He smiled at Kali.

"Hey, Kali. How you doing?"

"Fine," Kali said and raised a tight-lipped smile.

"Where's George? We need to get going," Mimi said.

“He’s inside getting his things together,” Frank said. “Why don’t you come inside and wait for him—be civil?”

Mimi pushed past Frank and walked inside. Frank held the door open and Kali looked down and walked past him.

Kali sat down on the lumpy brown couch in the living room and a light cloud of dust floated up around her. The fabric smelled musty and sour. A thin cotton blanket that George used to sleep in was wadded up at the end of the couch. Frank sat down in the chair in front of her and smiled awkwardly.

“Where’s George?” Mimi asked.

“He’s in my room getting some clothes,” Frank said. “We got him a small dresser that he keeps in there.” Frank turned his attention to Kali. “How’s school?” he asked her.

“Fine,” Kali said and shrugged.

“Do you like your classes?”

“They’re OK.”

“What about your teachers?”

“Sure,” Kali said, shaking her head in confusion. “They’re OK. They’re just my teachers.”

Frank slapped his hands on his knees and looked at the ground. Kali noticed the grey hairs that had sprouted behind his ears. Deep lines ran from his eyes. She searched his face for some signs of her own features or those of her brother. His eyes were brown; hers were blue. His skin was dark and leathery; hers was pale and rosy. His hair was dirty blonde; hers was auburn. Frank looked over at Mimi and then back at Kali.

“So, what’s that you’re working on?” Frank asked, pointing to her sketchbook.

“Just some sketches,” Kali said.

“Of anything in particular?”

“Not really.”

“So, you just scribble on the page then?” Frank said, his voice betraying agitation.

“You don’t draw anything at all?”

“Of course I do,” Kali said. “It’s just not of anything in particular. Some are of people and some are of stuff I see around the house and other places. It’s not a big deal.”

“Do you want to show me any of them?”

Kali looked at her mother and then back at Frank. “I don’t think so,” Kali said.

“They’re just sketches right now. They’re not really that good.”

Frank nodded. “I better go check on your brother,” he said and left the room.

A few minutes later, Frank and George reappeared in the living room. George carried a black duffel bag over his shoulder. “Hey, Kali. Hi, mom,” George said. “I’m ready.”

“It took you long enough,” Mimi said, standing up. “Come on, Kali.”

Kali followed her mother and her brother to the door and smiled at Frank who was waiting for her to pass. Frank smiled back at Kali and she noticed the black hole where his front tooth used to be, and where his gums were black at the edges. His posture slumped even though he stood against the wall. Kali looked away awkwardly and shuffled passed him outside after her mother and brother.

On the way to her grandmother’s house, Kali listened to her mother talk to George and let her thoughts wander. She didn’t like seeing her father. He had divorced their mother

when Kali and George were still too young to remember. When he divorced Mimi, he had dropped out of their lives as well. He never came to visit them; Mimi always sent Kali and George to stay with him. He almost never sent birthday or Christmas gifts. He moved constantly. Growing up, Kali and George knew that their mother was the only one they could depend on to always be constant. When she was younger, Kali was angry at him. She listened to Mimi's rantings about his shortcomings, and she believed them. But now that she was older, she realized that he was never really enough of a part of her life for her to miss him—or to be angry at his indifference. She wasn't sure how she felt. She just thought that she *should* be angry or sad or indignant. For all that Mimi had put Frank through, Kali wasn't sure whether she should pity him. But really, she felt nothing. She didn't want to have a relationship of any kind with him. To have feelings of any sort would be to have a connection with him.

When they got to Kali's grandmother's house, they were welcomed by the aroma of chicken and garlic baking in the oven. Kali's grandmother, Louisa, was in the kitchen, stirring a huge pot on the stovetop.

Louisa greeted them as they came inside, poking her head around the stove and looking into the living room.

"Hi, grandma," Kali said as she walked over and kissed her grandmother on the cheek. "What are we having for dinner?" She asked and sat down at the small, wooden table in the dining area and opened her sketchbook.

"Chicken and dumplings," Louisa said and put the lid on her pot

Kali wrinkled her nose but said nothing. They ate chicken most nights out of the week—it was a low-budget staple in her house. She had eaten a meal with chicken in it for five nights out of the last week—fried chicken, baked chicken, chicken soup, chicken potpie, barbecued chicken. Kali didn't care if she never ate chicken again.

Louisa sat down next to her and peered over the table at Kali's sketch. "What are you working on?" she asked.

"Just a sketch of George."

"I remember this picture," Louisa said and smiled. "He was about—what? Three? That's really good, Kali."

"You really think so?" Kali asked.

"Absolutely. You keep working and you'll go really far. I always said that you had talent. Isn't that right, Mimi?" she asked, raising her voice so that Mimi could hear her in the living room.

"What?" Mimi asked, walking into the kitchen.

"I said that Kali's doing real good with her art. That picture she's doing of George now is really good. It looks just like him. Don't you think so?"

"I guess," Mimi said and shrugged. "She's good. I always said she had talent, too. I don't think the picture looks much like George."

Kali slumped down slightly in her chair and her pencil stopped moving.

"What are you talking about? That looks just like George when he was that age."

"Whatever you say, mother," Mimi said.

"What about me?" George asked, walking into the kitchen.

“Nothing,” Kali said and closed her sketchbook.

“Kali did a picture of you, George,” Louisa said.

“Really? Let me see it.”

“No. It’s not very good,” Kali said.

“Well, can’t you at least let me see for myself?”

Kali handed George the sketchbook reluctantly, letting him open it to the picture himself. She looked across at Mimi who was watching George to see his reaction. Kali looked back down at the table and drummed her fingers on the surface.

“Wow, Kali, this is awesome,” George said. “This is really good. I really like it. I think you should do one of me from recently.”

Kali thanked George and took the sketchbook back from him.

Mimi walked over to one of the cabinets and grabbed a glass. Kali and George looked at each other. Mimi walked to the refrigerator, put some ice in her glass, and poured herself a full glass of vodka.

“Isn’t it a little early to be having a drink?” Louisa asked her.

“It’s five o’clock,” Mimi snapped. “How is it too early?”

“Well, don’t you want to have that with your dinner?”

“Mother, I’m an adult. I’ll have a drink whenever I want to. I don’t need you to tell me what to do.”

Louisa looked back at Kali and George and shrugged. Kali watched her mother in the kitchen, pouring the vodka into her glass and taking a long drink before setting the glass back

on the counter and refilling it. She searched her mother's face, but saw nothing. Kali let her eyes fall and her head droop.

"Have you given any thoughts to college yet?" Louisa asked Kali and lit a cigarette.

"No. I've still got two more years after this one before I graduate anyway."

"Even still," Louisa said. "You should start thinking about it early." She picked up the deck of cards next to her ashtray and shuffled them absently.

"I don't know, grandma," Kali said. "I don't even know if I'll go to college."

"You should, Kali. You're very smart. You'd be the first person in our family to go to college."

"What about me, mother?" Mimi asked from the kitchen. "I went to beauty college."

"I mean a university," Louisa said and laid the cards out on the table for a game of solitaire. "Like a four year college."

"Uncle Bernie went to college for a couple of years, didn't he?" Kali asked.

"Yeah, he did," Louisa said. "But he dropped out. He couldn't afford to finish. He never actually got his degree. So no one in our family has gone to college yet."

The phone rang and Mimi hurried to it. George also moved to answer it, but Mimi stopped him.

"I got it. Hello?" she said, picking up the phone. After a pause, she said "Where are you?... "You know where I've been all day. Don't give me that bullshit." Mimi's posture stiffened and she crossed her arms. "I don't want to play these games with you, John. Are you going to tell me where you are or not?... "Right now? What are you doing over there?... "You're unbelievable." Mimi slammed down the phone and walked back in the

kitchen. She grabbed her drink from the counter, leaned her head back, and dumped it down her throat. Then she grabbed the bottle of vodka from the counter and refilled the glass. She grabbed the bottle and brought it with her to the table where she sat it in front of her. Kali shook her head and looked back at her sketch. She did not look back up from the page and did not listen to the conversation going on around her.

Kali did not know how much time had passed before she heard a car squeal into the front yard, followed by a loud crash. She jerked her head up and turned around to look out the window. Mimi, George, and Louisa all ran into the living room and stood behind Kali, leaning over the couch to see out the window.

A black thunderbird sat in the front yard next to the driveway. Tracks of dirt trailed the car and chunks of grass were flung onto the driveway. Two metal trashcans were knocked over and trash spilled over the yard. The car door opened and John stumbled out. He pulled his long, blond hair back behind his ears and clutched the car door for balance. Then he slammed the car door and walked up the driveway, yelling at the house.

“Mimi! I know you’re in there. You better come out here!”

Kali could hear the slur in his speech through his shouting.

Mimi moved outside in what seemed like one movement and Kali jumped off the couch. George followed Mimi outside and Louisa followed after George, yelling at him to come back inside. Kali ran to the phone and called the police.

When Kali walked back to the door, she saw Mimi pushing close to John and yelling into his face. They looked like two roosters in a fight. Kali opened the screen door and

walked onto the porch. John looked down at Mimi and kept his arms stiffly at his sides. His face was rigid and determined. Mimi's face was wild and distorted in anger.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Mimi spat. "You need to get out of my face. I don't want you here!"

"Slut! Whore!" John drew out each word to let its weight fall on Mimi.

"Who are you calling a slut? You're the one who's been disappearing over to other women's houses. You always know where I am."

"Fuck you!" John yelled and raised his hand to point in Mimi's face.

"Both of you need to knock it off and come inside," Louisa yelled. She went down and attempted to push them away from each other. Neither Mimi nor John paid any attention to her. Neither of them budged. Louisa moved back as the two inched closer to each other.

"Get your finger out of my face," Mimi yelled and pushed John in the chest, causing him to stumble backwards. He fell onto the car and sat on the hood. He leaned forward and his arms flailed out by his sides while he tried to regain his balance. His face almost looked scared while he stumbled to stand up again.

When his feet were rooted firmly on the ground, John lunged forward and pushed Mimi backwards, knocking her onto the concrete driveway. As soon as Mimi hit the ground, she sprang up again and lunged towards John. Mimi flung her fists in the air and landed a few blows on John's head and shoulders. John flinched. He picked up a rock from the ground and flung it at Mimi, just missing her head. Mimi looked at him in surprise, then braced her legs to attack. Before she could, John grabbed Mimi by the shoulder and struggled to push her to the ground.

Just as John grabbed Mimi, two police cruisers pulled up in the driveway. Mimi and John did not seem to notice their arrival, and John threw Mimi down on the ground. Two police officers jumped out of their cars and ran towards the couple. One of the officers grabbed John and jerked him backwards. As soon as she was free, Mimi jumped up from the ground and leapt towards John, despite the fact that he was being placed in handcuffs. The second officer grabbed Mimi and pulled her arms behind her back. Once he had her wrists firmly in place, he slapped handcuffs on her, too.

The officers tried to ask questions and find out what happened, but Mimi and John continued to yell at each other across the grass. After several attempts to quiet them, the officers placed them both under arrest and pushed them toward the police cruisers. Mimi and John both continued to yell and spit at one another. The officers pushed their heads down and into the backseats of two separate cruisers. When John and Mimi were both placed securely in the back of the two cars, the officers took turns questioning them separately and then questioning Kali, George, and Louisa. Kali watched the scene unfold as a passive observer. She never tried to intervene. She never said anything or moved forward to be a part of the scene in any way. She watched the cruiser's lights rotate rhythmically across the yard, the house, and her own skin. The sun was setting and the sirens illuminated the twilight. When the officers asked Kali what happened, she told them what she knew. She did not get upset; she did not cry.

Kali watched the officers drive away with John and Mimi after they were done questioning everyone. Only two days before, John and Mimi had sat on the couch in the living room and told each other how much they loved each other. They laughed. They were

affectionate. They looked like they were in love. They had even talked about marriage. Now they were in separate cars being driven to jail.

“Well, it looks like you’re going to be staying here tonight,” Louisa said to her.

“Have you got anything to wear?”

“I’ll just use what I have with me today,” Kali said softly and walked back inside the house. She picked up her sketchbook and started a new drawing.

Half-Caste Child

(Chapter 12)

A young woman wearing a knee-length powder blue skirt and matching blazer sat across from Kali and dabbed powder on her nose from a hand-held compact. Her brassy blonde hair shone brilliantly under the lights in the room and fell softly across her shoulders. Kali was amazed at how perfectly her hair stayed in place; not a single hair seemed to stray out of position. There wasn't a single flaw in her appearance. Her skin was smooth and even. Her tailored suit complimented her figure and her skin tone perfectly.

Kali looked down at her own slacks and noticed how they billowed out at her thighs and hung down past her ankles. Her silk blouse hung down on her chest and rose up over the back of her slacks. It was one of the few outfits she owned that Bailey had picked out for her. She had only brushed her hair that morning and wasn't wearing any makeup. The reporter had told her that she wanted to interview her, but didn't say that Kali would be photographed.

“Ready?” the woman asked her brightly.

“Sure. Whenever you are.”

The photographer moved behind the reporter, snapping pictures of Kali who blinked every time the shutter closed. Kali did not want the woman to come to her apartment where she would have no options for controlling the length of the interview. Instead, she asked the reporter to meet her at Bailey's gallery, just a few blocks over from their apartment on Fifth Avenue. Bailey had escorted Kali to the interview but could not stay—he said he had to meet a new buyer. He set up the space for the interview and took Kali to the side to

reprimand her for her appearance. She pleaded ignorance about the photographer, but he didn't seem to believe her. When he left, Bailey shot Kali a stern look and smiled warmly at the reporter. Now, Kali was left alone with her and the intrusive photographer. Kali sat on a wooden bench with no back and her paintings hung on the wall behind her. The young reporter sat in a metal folding chair in front of Kali with her legs crossed.

"OK. I'm here with hot new artist Kali Nichols," the woman spoke into a tape recorder. "Tell me, Kali, how do you feel now that you seem to be at the top?" She thrust the tape recorder in Kali's direction, and she stared at it awkwardly for a moment before responding.

"Uh...I don't know if I'm exactly at the top. I...I've had the luck of success, but I still have room to grow," Kali said, finding her voice. "My work has attracted some attention, but I'm not at the top just yet." Kali pulled her hair behind her ears and smoothed her slacks. She pulled her blouse straight.

"Yes, but you've had five shows in the past two years, all of them more than half sold," the woman said. "You've been on the covers of *New York Arts* and *Art Forum* magazines. And you've done all this at the young age of twenty-three."

"I've been very fortunate," Kali agreed. She looked around the room nervously, distracted by the constant clicks and flashes of the camera. She glanced at the photographer, but tried not to make eye contact or look directly into the lens.

"Now, a lot of people have praised your work for the powerful expression of emotion that they see in it," the woman said with a more serious tone. "Your work has been largely expressionistic and there has been a recurring motif of anger and darkness, touched

by sadness. Do you feel that this is an expression of how you feel in your life right now? Or is it something that you're working through in your art?"

Kali cleared her throat and shook her head. "I don't really understand the question," Kali said. "I think we all have anger that we have to work through. I don't think that's especially prevalent in my work or my life."

"Is there something in your work that you've had to work through from your past? Or are you just expressing something that you see in the world around you? Do you think that people are fundamentally sad?" The woman leaned forward in her chair with an expression of concern and confidence.

"Every artist is influenced by their past," Kali said, stumbling over her words. She furrowed her brow as she spoke. "Every artist has some expression of themselves in their art. I wouldn't say that there's anything specific in my art that I can trace back to an incident or a time in my life. I do think I'm expressing something that everyone feels. There's a lot of sadness in the world—I think that it's a part of life." Kali began to shift uncomfortably in her chair.

Flashes of light spotted Kali's vision as the photographer moved around her. The snap of the flash echoed against the empty hardwood floors and walls of the gallery.

"Let's switch gears for just a moment," the woman said in a pacifying tone. She looked down at her notepad, then back at Kali. "Tell me about your background training. Did you study in a formal program in a university or an apprenticeship?"

"I studied for a little over two years at Hunter College. But, I dropped out near the end of my junior year to focus on my art full time."

“Do you think that decision has helped or hurt you?” The woman propped her chin on the back of her hand, and her elbow was rested on her knee. She furrowed her brow and nodded her head slightly.

“It has definitely helped me,” Kali said. “I feel like I learned all I could from my professors there. And I was starting to sell a lot of my work. My art career was starting to take off. If I had put that on hold to focus on school, I might not be talking to you now.”

“And that would be a tragedy,” the woman said and laughed, leaning back in her chair. “What about your marriage to Bailey Sterne? You married him last year. He has been your representative since you began your art career. In fact, I believe that he discovered you. Now he has his own gallery and you show your work there. How has your personal relationship with him affected your professional relationship?”

Kali furrowed her brow slightly and her face darkened. “That’s true,” she said. “Bailey did help me get my start as a professional artist. He helped me to get my first show and really pushed to get my work noticed. Our marriage has only strengthened our professional relationship. But we try to keep personal matters separate to keep our relationship healthy—both personally and professionally.”

“Will he continue to represent you?”

“We have talked about finding someone else to represent my art, but we feel that the present situation is the best for both of us. We seem to work well together. I don’t really understand how this is relevant.” Kali’s voice rose and betrayed her irritation. She shook her head and held her hand in the air by her side.

“Kali, do you—“

“You know, I really have to go,” Kali said, rising and looking around the room quickly.

“What? But, we haven’t finished the interview yet,” the woman said and looked up at Kali incredulously. She glanced at her photographer quickly and he shrugged.

“I know. I’m sorry. I just...uh...there’s somewhere else I have to be. Uh, thanks. Sorry.” Kali nodded nervously to the reporter and the photographer and walked quickly toward the door.

Kali went back to the apartment that she and Bailey shared on the Upper East Side and found it empty as usual. The hardwood floors that seemed to stretch for miles made the emptiness larger. Kali sat down on the black leather couch, and slid over when she realized that she was squishing one of the new designer pillows that Bailey had ordered. She smoothed her hand over the tan silk and carefully fluffed it back into shape. Black and white photographs that Bailey had commissioned of scenes of New York hung over the white fireplace against a wall of royal blue. The apartment was perfectly ordered and manicured. A maid came in once a week to keep it clean. No personal items littered the coffee table or the room. The apartment looked like a showroom, not a space in which people lived.

Bailey was rarely at home, leaving Kali alone long hours working on her painting, and occasionally, her sculpture. He said that he had been busy with a new artist and had to attend a lot of dinners and other engagements talking up her work. Kali was suspicious but knew it was better not to say anything.

Kali remembered when Bailey took her out on the same dinners to meet with new artists, potential buyers, and critics. For each time, they met in an upscale restaurant and sat

around a large round table with about twenty other people that Kali did not know. The purpose of the gathering was always to celebrate a new show or to talk about paintings planned for the future. For the first few dinners, Kali was enchanted with the scene. She felt exalted as the center of attention and the reason for everyone's gathering. She answered questions with charm and humility. She laughed at everyone's jokes and flirted with the older men who leered at her and talked about buying one of her paintings. Bailey had always looked on in approval. He had lectured her for hours about how to behave, what to say, what not to say. She learned to meet his expectations.

After several months of the same dinners at the same restaurants with the same people, Kali cared less about those expectations. When she heard the same joke told for the countless time, she could not muster the strength to laugh, but could only sip her chardonnay indifferently. If a man winked at her or made a comment about how attractive she was, Kali would sneer at him or turn away abruptly. No one ever talked about her art—she wasn't sure if they ever did. She didn't know if it was something that she just noticed, or something that had changed over time. No matter what the answer, Kali became disillusioned with the scene. The whole ritual was created to reinforce a social hierarchy. They weren't buying art; they were buying people. And Bailey was at the head of it all.

Kali walked out onto the terrace, which they had turned into a makeshift studio. All of her art supplies and canvases were there; several tables and shelves were set up for her work. She leaned over the wire balustrade and looked out over the city and took a deep breath. The black sky loomed over the sparkling lights below, making them seem far away. It was as if Kali were in an airplane flying over the city below. The perceived distance made

her feel even more alone. Though Kali was high up, she still could not see the stars in the sky. It was one of the only things she missed from living in Winston Salem.

She stepped away from the ledge of the terrace and turned to survey her work. She studied a painting in progress that she had intended to work on when she got home. She shook her head in disgust as she looked it over. Swirls of dark color divided the canvas. No forms emerged; there were only two competing dark spaces. Feathery textures and patches of stucco stood out beneath the paint. There was nothing new in what she was doing. She had been working nonstop for the last two years and sometimes she even convinced herself that her work was progressing. As her life had been moving forward and she believed herself happier, she saw everything in a different hue, especially her art. What had once seemed so rose, was now black and gray. She was only now beginning to see things as they really were.

Kali walked to another corner of the terrace and sat down in front of a block of wood that she had begun carving several months earlier. It was to be a statue of Athena, goddess of knowledge. She abandoned it when Bailey told her that her time and talents were better spent on painting. Lacking any confidence in her ability as a sculptor, she abandoned it. Looking at it now, she could see that he was right. The form was rigid and blocky. There was no life in the expressions. Wood wasn't the right medium for her, she thought. There was no room for error. Once she made the wrong cut or too deep an incision, the wood would not forgive. There was no chance to correct the damage that had been done; the wood was forever scarred.

Kali turned to her supply of clay. With the clay, she could manipulate the shape of the work as it developed. If she pushed in too far on one side, she could balance it out by asserting the same pressure on the other. If she cut too far, she could fill in more clay and smooth over the wound, erasing all evidence of its existence. The clay yielded to her touch and was as suppliant as the skin she molded beneath her caresses. Kali could feel herself moving into the clay as she created a form.

Kali envisioned the ancient goddess in her mind, strong and serene. Visions of different body parts—an arm, a leg, a bare shoulder—flashed through her mind as she worked, like portions of a photograph. She smoothed over the bare shoulder and smiled in satisfaction as she saw the vision in her mind take shape. She pinched the clay and reveled in the sensuous feel between her fingertips. Using a stylus, she etched the fingernails in the tiny hands and added lines to her knuckles. Ripples of electricity seemed to flow through her as the form seemed to take life. There was no two-dimensional likeness before her as on a canvas; she saw real life before her.

As Kali finished the form, she worked on the head and the facial features. She briefly saw an image of the nose, the mouth, the cheeks flash through her mind. What lingered was a vision of the eyes. Kali focused on the eyes in her mind and gravitated to them as a magnetic force. They were so calm and expressive. They seemed to exude so much wisdom and experience, but also serenity. Kali turned from the statue to a small mirror she kept near the table and stared into her own eyes.

Kali worked intensely and felt herself awaken and she massaged the clay. She molded the same figure she had attempted in her wooden model. As Athena's head appeared,

she compared the two. The clay yielded a more lifelike form. Yet, there was still an awkwardness in her sculpture that suggested the imitation of form rather than the incarnation of it. The facial features were rendered accurately enough, but there was no hint at the emotion or inner thoughts of the subject. Her eyes seemed lifelike, but expressed none of the wisdom and serenity that Kali had envisioned so clearly.

After several hours, Kali's eyes began to droop. Her head nodded and fell and she jerked herself awake. She looked at her watch. It was half past midnight. Kali stood up and walked into the apartment; she felt a gust of warm air wrap around her. She looked for Bailey, but knew instinctively that he would not be home. A quick scan of the bare apartment confirmed her suspicions. Kali walked to her room, took off her clothes, and slipped into bed. She huddled under the thick cashmere quilt and felt like a child in the king-sized bed.

After she lay in bed awhile, Kali felt Bailey slip in beside her. The numbers 1:30 stood out in neon against the blackness of the room.

"Where have you been?" she asked, still lying on her side and staring into the darkness.

"I told you where I was. I told you that I had a show tonight," he said in a monotonous tone.

"How did it go?"

"It was very successful. We sold most of the pieces. It'll be a high commission."

Bailey lay rigid in the bed and his voice was flat.

"Why were you so late? Did you go out afterwards?" Kali remained with her back to Bailey.

“Yes.”

“Where did you go? Why didn’t you call to let me know?”

“Christ, Kali, do we really have to go through this again?” Bailey sat up in bed and swung his legs over the side. “I’m not going over this. I don’t need to call you every time I go somewhere. You’re an adult. You don’t need me to hold your hand every minute of the day.”

“Right. It couldn’t have anything to do with the new girl you’re representing, could it?” Kali muttered.

“What did you say?” Bailey turned around at the waist.

“Nothing.”

“No. What did you say?” Bailey’s raised his voice and stood up. He turned on the light next to the bed.

Kali sat up in bed and faced Bailey defiantly. “I said ‘it couldn’t have anything to do with the girl you’re representing, could it?’” Kali weighed each word with emphasis.

“Are you accusing me of something?” Bailey asked. “Because I really don’t need your bullshit tonight. You know, I don’t remember hearing you complain when I was working the same channels to get your work noticed.”

“You were also fucking me,” Kali yelled. “Do you do the same for all your girls or was that a bonus perk reserved just for me? Or just for the ones that you like?”

Bailey walked quickly around the bed and pointed his finger in her face. “You better watch your fucking mouth! I won’t take this from you in my own house. If you don’t watch—“

“If I don’t what? What are you gonna do, huh, Bailey?” Kali taunted him. “Are you gonna raise your hands to me? Are you gonna put me in line?”

Bailey lowered his hand and opened his mouth to say something, but Kali cut him off again.

“You’re just like my damn mother,” Kali muttered, and walked out of the room.

She knew that Bailey couldn’t stand to be compared to her mother. He stormed out of the room after her. “Fuck you!” he spat at her. “If you don’t trust me, you can get your shit and get the fuck out of my house. Go make it on your own—if you can. I made you what you are now. I gave you everything you have.”

“You’re right about one thing,” Kali said quietly. “You did make me what I am. Or at least, you’re one of the people who did.”

Kali walked back into the bedroom and put on her clothes and shoes.

“Where are you going?” Bailey demanded.

“I’m leaving.”

“What? Are you running over the Melinda’s? Or do you have some other guy on the side? Is that why you’re always so suspicious of me?”

“No, I’m not like you, Bailey,” Kali said while she tied the laces on her shoes. “I took a vow when I married you. I don’t fuck anyone else but you. In fact, I don’t even do that since you haven’t touched me in two months now that you’ve got someone else to fuck.”

Kali walked across the room and picked up her purse, keeping her eyes fixed on Bailey. She turned and left the room without saying another word.

Kali took a cab to Melinda's apartment, the same one that they shared together two years earlier. The streets were eerily quiet. No lights appeared in the windows of the offices and apartments that she passed. The cab driver looked in the rearview mirror repeatedly, but Kali ignored him. She saw two Hispanic men walking down an alley. An old man with gnarly hair and a tattered coat huddled next to a dumpster. A black dog trotted down the sidewalk with his nose pointed toward the concrete in search of food. He sniffed around a trashcan and a group of rats scattered. The city seemed so lonely.

Melinda opened the door and squinted at Kali as if she were staring into a spotlight. Dark circles formed beneath her eyes and her hair formed a tangled ball on the back of her head. She wore a pink terrycloth bathrobe wrapped tightly around her waist. "Not again," she said and sighed. Kali looked at her meekly and shrugged. "Well, come in."

Kali walked inside slowly and sat down on the couch. Melinda sat opposite her in the lime green chair, which was fading to a puke green.

"So, what happened?" Melinda asked, rubbing her eyes.

Kali looked at the floor and slumped down in her chair.

"Well, what happened this time?" Melinda persisted.

Kali told Melinda what happened. When she was finished, Melinda sighed and shook her head.

"You know what I'm going to say," Melinda said. "I don't want to tell you what to do. Only you know what's really going to make you happy—but you don't need that shit. You're better than that. You deserve better than that."

Kali nodded. "I know."

“Do you?” Melinda asked. “Kali, you go through this time and time again. He controls everything you do. He’s in control of your art, your money, your whole damn life. Why can’t you just leave him? Just take what you have and start over.”

“I don’t know. I just can’t.”

“Why are you still with him? What makes you stay with him?”

“I don’t know,” Kali said. “We used to have a really good time together. We would talk and we would share our ideas and our hopes. We seemed to really understand one another—we had a connection. And I’ve always thought he was really sexy. For a time, it seemed like he felt the same way about me. We used to have great sex...when we were actually having sex.”

“But what about now?” Melinda asked. “All the things that you’re naming are things you used to like about him.”

“Those things are still true. It’s just...now there are all these other problems clouding that.”

“Kali, honestly I think you should just leave him and stay away from him,” Melinda said, leaning forward in her chair. “He’s not good for you. I think you would be happier without him.”

“It’s not that easy, though.”

“Why not?” Melinda said, throwing her hands up in the air. “You’re always unhappy. You can’t even name a reason why you still want to be with him.”

“But I love him,” Kali flared. “I can’t just walk away from him. Not everything in life is as easy as that. I can’t just snap my fingers and stop caring about him. I can’t just

throw away everything that I ever felt about him—all the emotions that I have invested in him. I can't give up the history that we have together.”

A woman with short red hair and freckles popped her head out of the bedroom door and rubbed her eyes. “Melinda? Who's there? Are you coming back to bed?”

“Yeah, I'll be there in a minute. It's just Kali,” Melinda called over her shoulder without taking her eyes off Kali. The woman yawned and scratched her head before she turned around and disappeared into the room.

“Look, I want you to be happy, Kali, but this has got to stop,” Melinda said, her voice rising. “You really need to think about what you want. If you don't do something about the way things are going, then they'll never change. You have to make them change. No one else can do that for you. Especially not Bailey. If you want things to be different, then you'll have to do something real to make them different. You can't just sit around and be miserable all the time.”

Kali stared at Melinda with her arms crossed and said nothing. “I'm tired. I want to sleep,” Kali said after a moment.

Melinda gave Kali a blanket and she lay down on the couch. She lay awake for a long time thinking about what she had said and what had happened. She stared at the gray ceiling and listened to the sounds of the city outside her window, letting her thoughts wander. Taxis honked their horns and two prostitutes yelled at each other in the alley. A bass line pulsed in the distance. Kali let her thoughts disappear while she listened to the sounds, which created a rhythm and melody all their own. She finally fell asleep sometime near dawn.

Kali slept in late the next day. The sound of pots clanging and water running woke her up. She sat up on the couch and looked around sleepily. Melinda was finishing washing the dishes from lunch and was filling a bucket to mop the floor.

“It’s about time you got up,” Melinda said.

“What time is it?” Kali asked and rubbed her head.

“It’s about 1:00.”

“Where’s that woman that was here last night?”

“Adrianna had to go to work,” Melinda said. “Oh, and Bailey called.”

“What? When?” Kali said and threw the blanket over the side of the couch.

“About an hour ago. He wanted to find out where you were, when you’d be home.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Well, not what I wanted to, that’s for sure,” Melinda said. “I told him you were here and that you’d be home when you were ready. I told him that he better not come here and he should just stay away from you until you were ready to come home.”

“What did he say?”

“He wasn’t happy. But when did I ever care what Bailey thinks or says? I think he had a few words for me but I hung up on him before he had a chance to finish.”

“Great. I’d better go then,” Kali said, getting up off the couch.

“You don’t need to rush off,” Melinda said as she bent over the mop while she cleaned the floors. “Stay here as long as you want to. You don’t have to run on his command.”

“I don’t want to have more problems than I already do. I’m just going to go,” Kali said as she looked around the room for her purse.

“At least get a shower and change into some of my clothes before you go.”

Kali hesitated a moment and looked down at her clothes. They were the same ones that she wore the day before and that she slept in the night before.

“All right,” Kali said. “But I have to go right after that. I can’t stay here all day.”

Kali quickly took her shower and changed into the clothes that Melinda had laid out for her on the bed. She thanked Melinda for letting her stay the night and quickly left. She wasn’t sure if Bailey would be home when she got there. Sometimes, after they had a fight, he would leave and be gone all day. Other times, he would be waiting for her in a chair in the living room. Kali wasn’t sure what point he was trying to make in either situation.

She walked into the apartment and stopped in the front hall, looking around cautiously. The apartment was silent. Bailey wasn’t in the living room or the dining room. Kali let out her breath and walked towards the bedroom. As she rounded the corner at the end of the hall, Bailey walked out of the bedroom and stopped in the doorway. His face was blank. He didn’t look tired; in fact, he looked well rested and energetic. He wore a pair of pressed slacks and his hair was slicked back neatly. He put his hands in his pockets and stared at her, waiting for her to speak. Kali stopped in front of him and said nothing.

“Where were you last night?” he asked finally.

Kali furrowed her brow and walked past him into the bedroom. “You know where I was. You called Melinda’s. Why do you feel the need to ask me again?”

“I don’t know. Maybe your friend was lying for you. How do I know you were really there?” he asked, following behind her.

“Go to hell.”

“What? You don’t like it when I act suspicious about where you were?”

“There’s just one little difference,” Kali said. “I don’t lie. I don’t stay out until all hours of the night and then get pissed at you for asking where I went.” She sat on the edge of the bed and crossed her arms.

“I never lied to you about where I was,” Bailey said. He leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed. “I’m so sick and tired of your jealous behavior. When are you going to grow up and realize that I have other responsibilities in my life besides you?”

“When are you going to grow up and act like a husband and stop fucking around?” Kali returned defiantly.

“Kali, what proof do you have that I’ve been unfaithful to you?” Bailey asked, holding up his hands at his sides.

Kali paused. She knew she had none. It was what drove her so crazy about the whole situation. She knew that something was going on, but she had absolutely no way to prove it.

“No, I don’t have any proof,” she conceded. “But that doesn’t change anything. I know what I feel. The fact that I have no proof just means that you hide it well.”

Bailey sighed and leaned his elbow against the doorframe and his head in his palm. He looked at her imploringly. “Kali, I love you,” his voice softened. “You’re the only woman I love. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“You love me so much that you control everything I do” Kali asked, still angry. “You won’t let me have a life of my own, but you hide your life from me and get angry at me when I ask you about it. You’re just like my damned mother. She could never let me be myself either without making me pay for it.”

“Kali, I don’t make you pay for being who you are,” Bailey said and shifted away from the doorframe. “I just...I have a problem. I have a bad temper and I get really angry and I don’t know how to control that. I yell when we get in fights and I walk out instead of dealing with the situation. I’m not proud when I say those things to you. I don’t like who I am when we get into these kinds of arguments.”

Kali glared at him from across the room and didn’t say anything.

“Look, Kali, I don’t want you to think that I’m not happy with you,” Bailey continued. “You make me a better person when you’re around. But these arguments aren’t all my fault. You have just as bad a temper as I do. I can’t take all the responsibility for the problems we’ve been having.”

“Don’t you do that,” Kali said, her voice rising again. “Don’t you dare try to blame me for your behavior. I may not always say the right thing or act the way I should in every situation, but I do not deserve your abuse. And that’s exactly what it is. You aren’t going to try and pin that on me.”

“No, you’re right,” Bailey agreed. “I am responsible for my own actions. But you’re also responsible for yours. I can’t change if you won’t change with me. I want to be with you—just not like this.”

“Bailey, this is who I am,” Kali said, pointing at her chest emphatically. “I’m fucked up. Yes, there are things I need to work on, but for the most part, this is the only person that I’m ever going to be. If you married me like this, how are you going to tell me now that you can’t be with me if I stay the same?”

“Not, if *you* stay the same, if *things* stay the same,” Bailey said and gestured with his hands. “I love you and I always will. But I don’t think either one of us is happy right now.”

Bailey walked slowly over to Kali and wrapped his arms around her. Kali kept her arms folded across her chest as he hugged her. “I’m sorry,” He whispered in her ear. “I never meant to hurt you. I want to make things better. I want us to be happy together.”

Kali released her arms and wrapped them around Bailey. “You promise that you’re not seeing someone behind my back?” she asked into his shoulder.

“I promise. I would never do anything to hurt you. I don’t want to jeopardize our relationship. I love you.”

Bailey kissed Kali and stroked her hair. She looked up at him and smiled.

Bailey slowly moved Kali towards the bed and laid her down. They made love like they did before they were married—slow and sweet and meaningful. Their dormant passions for one another awakened. They felt like man and wife again, instead of the congenial strangers that they had become. When they finished, Bailey held her in his arms and cradled her head with his large hands.

“Do you really think we can work out our problems?” he asked.

“Yes. If we really want to, we can,” Kali said and nodded her head. “That’s all we need. As long as we love each other, we can work out any problems that we’ll ever have.”

“Sometimes I just feel like maybe we’re too different—or too much the same—and we’re just not right for each other,” Bailey said. “Sometimes I just feel like we should give up trying.”

Kali leaned over and kissed Bailey. She cradled his cheek in her hand and looked him in the eyes. “Look, Bailey, we both have a lot of problems we need to work out for ourselves. We both have very bad tempers and we both have a problem controlling our anger. You and I didn’t grow up the way most other people did. We didn’t have parents around who knew what they were doing and who could tell us the right thing. So we have to figure that out for ourselves. We have to learn how to make this work and be the people that we both want to be together. I know we can do that.”

Bailey looked back at Kali with tears rimming his eyes. He nodded and squeezed her tight in his arms.

The Persistence of Memory

(Chapter 13)

For weeks after their argument, Kali and Bailey got along like they did before they were married. They had no more arguments. Bailey came home every night. They went out for dinners in midtown and SoHo. They went out dancing and for walks in the park. They talked like they did when they first met and they still had everything to learn about each other. They were both more interested in the life of the other, asking questions about the other's day, what they thought about for the future, and how they felt about each other. Kali stopped questioning their relationship and was assured once again that Bailey would always be the right person for her.

The day after their argument, Kali came home and found Bailey lying on the couch, with his leg thrown over the back and the other on the floor. He sat up and grinned boyishly at her; he had a picture of the two of them taped to his forehead. It was a picture of them when they were SoHo, checking out a new gallery show. They sat on a bench outside in the street; they leaned toward one another with their legs crossed, holding hands. They smiled without restraint. A man wearing a red sequin jacket and purple platform shoes walked by them and turned around quickly and snapped the shot with a Polaroid. He looked at the picture, smiled, and handed it to them without saying anything. It was one of Kali's favorite pictures. "I've been thinking about you all day," Bailey said and hopped up off the couch. Kali stood in the doorway with her mouth open then laughed and shook her head. Bailey

walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her and dipped her. He kissed her deeply and drew in a breath of satisfaction.

Bailey started focusing on Kali's work again. She became his number one priority in all aspects again; she was his most important client again. He popped into her studio at random times to check on the progress of her painting, and to offer criticism or praise where he deemed appropriate. Her last show had been almost six months earlier and Bailey decided that it was time for her to have another.

"You don't want your public to forget you, do you Kali?" he asked her. "You've got to keep riding the wave before it crashes with you on it."

Kali laughed. "Sometimes I think you forget that I'm your wife. I don't think you know how to turn the bullshit broadcast off. You're just always on."

"Now, Mrs. Sterne," Bailey said and wagged his finger. "Oops, I mean, Miss Nichols—I think you need to realize that you have to focus on continuing to develop your work as an artist, my bad metaphors aside."

"So, I guess the answer is no," Kali said and laughed.

"But seriously," Bailey said. "What have you been working on lately? I haven't seen you in the studio for weeks."

"I've been working. You're just usually not at home when I'm out here."

Bailey nodded and said nothing.

"I've actually been working on my sculpture," Kali continued.

Bailey looked up in surprise.

“I haven’t been very happy with my painting lately,” Kali continued. “I decided I wanted to focus more on developing my sculpture. It’s what I always wanted to do. I just never had enough confidence. But now...I’m doing so well with my paintings that I have a lot more extra time and I also have more opportunity to experiment. I don’t have to worry about whether my art will ever be accepted at a gallery or sold—those things have already happened for me. Now I have more freedom to do what I want.”

“You’re right, Kali,” Bailey conceded. “You do have some more freedom than what you used to have. People know who you are and they respect your work. But don’t think you can do whatever you want now. People aren’t going to buy your work just because you did it. If you don’t continue to develop and move forward, it will become common. I mean, what would have happened if Monet had started sculpting? Or designing architecture? He might never have given us his water lilies.”

“And what if Matisse had never experimented?” Kali said. “He would never have been famous. His early paintings would have been given some notice, but he never would have done his cutouts. Or Jackson Pollack? What if he never experimented with dribbling paint on a canvas? We might never have abstract expressionism.”

“Yes, but those artists all experimented within their medium,” Bailey said. “You didn’t see Matisse deciding in mid-career that he’d rather make pottery. Pollack didn’t abandon paintings to make jewelry. Those men used the knowledge they had of their art and pushed it past those limits. They were working with what they knew best to make their art even better.”

“That’s not true,” Kali said. “A lot of famous and well-respected artists experimented in other mediums. Dali and Picasso both sculpted. Rodin painted.”

“But Dali’s sculpture sucked,” Bailey said. “Imagine if he had given up painting for sculpture? He never would have been as influential as he was.”

“So, what are you saying? That I should never be anything other than a painter?”

“No. I’m saying that you shouldn’t abandon what you know best just so you can experiment with a form in which you don’t even know if you have any skill.”

“What difference would that make?” Kali demanded, losing her ability to argue the point logically. “I thought I was supposed to do what would make me happy.”

“Calm down,” Bailey said. “You should do what’s going to make you happy, but not at the expense of your career.”

“How do you know that would happen? Have you even seen any of my sculptures?”

“No. But I wasn’t aware that you even had any.”

“Well, I only have a couple,” Kali said and shrugged. “But I think they’re OK. I don’t think it’s as hopeless as you make it sound.”

“Then show them to me,” Bailey said. “I’ll tell you what I think.”

Kali looked at him suspiciously and then reluctantly led him to the corner of the studio where she kept her sculpture. She moved aside several wooden panels that were propped up in front of the table. Bailey looked at her in surprise and a bemused smile stretched across his face. Kali smiled sheepishly and pulled the hair behind her ears. She pulled a cotton cloth from the clay sculpture of Athena, but kept the wooden one carefully

hidden. She took a step back and stared at the sculpture. She held her breath and waited. Kali stared intensely at the sculpture then turned slowly to look at Bailey. He held his elbow in his palm and looked it over curiously.

“Well, Kal, it’s actually not that bad,” he said, raising his eyebrows and turning to face her.

“What? Were you expecting it to be horrible?”

“I don’t know what I was expecting,” he said simply. “I’ve never even seen you working on a sculpture. Every time I hear you talking about it, you act like you were the worst sculptor that was ever born. I mean, Christ, you thought you were so bad that you wouldn’t even attempt a piece of sculpture—or so I thought.”

“I didn’t think I was so bad,” Kali said. “I just didn’t think that I was so good.”

Kali paused and looked up at Bailey, waiting for him to say something more about her work.

“How long did this take you?” he asked.

“A couple of weeks. I worked on it here and there when you weren’t around or I had nothing else to do.”

“And have you worked on any of your paintings?”

“Not lately,” she admitted and looked at the ground. “Not since the last ones you saw me working on. I have to tell you, Bailey, I don’t really enjoy painting anymore. I’m not satisfied with what I’m producing. Everything I create feels so flat—so lifeless.”

“Then it’s exactly like I said. You have to focus on your painting more so you can progress. If it’s starting to be boring for you, you can bet it’s going to be boring for everyone else, too.”

“Oh, who cares about that right now,” Kali said and sighed. “Tell me what you think of the sculpture already.”

Bailey looked back at the sculpture and studied it for a moment.

“It’s not bad,” he began. “You have obvious talent. But there is something static in the form. Athena doesn’t look alive. She looks like a figure sculpted in clay, not a living form. But you’ve done a few things really well. Her body is beautifully formed, but her eyes are vacant. It’s the same problem you had with your paintings. The figure is well-represented, but the eyes aren’t very expressive.”

Kali listened silently and looked from Bailey to the sculpture as he spoke. She wet her lips and swallowed hard. She could feel her throat tightening. Bailey paused after every point he made and Kali nodded.

“Still,” Bailey continued. “I really think that it’s best if you continue to concentrate on your painting—at least until your next show. I think you could develop your talent as a sculptor, as well, but you should only work on it in your spare time. After the show, we can reassess what you’ve done and decide what to do from there.”

Kali saw the look of determination on his face. He didn’t address her as if he were making a suggestion—it was more like a subtle command. She realized it was useless to argue. He had made up his mind and there was no changing it. She nodded and sighed deeply. She crossed her arms and looked down.

“Kali, don’t worry. You really do have some talent that can be developed here. We just need to get past your next show to make sure that you don’t fall out of the limelight.”

Bailey rubbed her shoulder reassuringly and smiled.

“Sure. I understand,” Kali said, still looking down.

“Good. Look, I’ve got to run,” Bailey said and patted her back. “I’ve got to have lunch with a Jack Abrams in SoHo in a half an hour. I’m trying to get him to buy some new paintings. I’ll have to leave now if I’m going to beat traffic.”

Kali looked up at him quickly, then down again.

“Don’t worry though. I’ll be back as soon as that’s over. Maybe you and I can go out tonight. We can have a nice dinner—just you and me. Does that sound good?”

Kali pressed her lips together and nodded.

“I love you.” Bailey kissed her on the forehead and left.

Kali sat down in a chair and cast a sidelong glance at her easel and the blank canvas she had left there weeks ago. Her eyes focused on the white center and the rest of the room blurred in her peripheral vision. She drew in her breath and squeezed her eyes shut. She stood up slowly; she dreaded walking over to it.

Since her last show, Kali had begun to lose all interest in her painting. It never gave her the same satisfaction that sculpture gave her. When she completed a canvas, she looked at it like she would a photograph. She wasn’t drawn into the scene or the figure. But when she finished a sculpture, even if her vision wasn’t fully realized, she felt an odd pleasure, as if her creation had sprung to life. She saw her vision in physical form. Painting was only what got her noticed. It was what gave her the success and the attention that she needed. Her

picture had appeared in over a dozen art magazines and newspapers in the last two years. People from all over the city, and sometimes the country, flocked to her openings, and she was the center of attention in a crowded room. People noticed her; they praised her work. They told her that what she did was important. Kali never thought she'd continue painting. In the back of her mind, Kali always thought that if she made a name for herself, she would never have to worry about anything else. She would have enough money not to have to worry about being poor or working job after job that made her miserable. She would get the validation that she craved. Somehow she thought that if everyone knew her and admired her that she would have a real life, that she would be happy. Slowly, she was beginning to realize the transparency of that dream.

Kali began to think of all the art shows and openings that she had attended. She thought of all the people there who talked and laughed with perfect strangers as if they were new best friends even though they had no intention of ever speaking to one another again outside of what status they could glean from each other. They chatted over trendy new cuisine—Cuban Chinese, gourmet Southern, sushi and edamame—and cooed about new artists and dropped the names of dealers and galleries that they knew. If Kali had asked any of them about Baroque architecture or Mayan sculpture, they would probably have asked whether it was in the Whitney or had any new hot artist worked on it. The art world was a shrine to hypocrisy.

Kali walked slowly over to her canvas and she sat down before it. She hung her head in the cups of her hands and stretched her cheeks to the sides of her face. She blew out

air between her closed lips. She looked up quickly at the canvas and a smirk curled up on her lips.

Kali ferreted through her basket of paints and began mixing and laying out colors on her palette. She had a mischievous gleam in her eye as she began laying out plans for her next painting in her mind. She quickly began painting the first layer of the background across the canvas. Her hands flew nervously between her palette and the canvas like small finches.

Kali's work was interrupted when the phone rang. She threw down her brush in irritation and reluctantly ran to the phone. She wiped her hands on her jeans, smearing bronze paint across the knees, and grabbed the receiver.

“Yeah? Hello?”

“Kali?”

“Yeah? Who's this?”

“It's George.”

Kali caught her breath in her throat and her posture stiffened. “George? Wh—why are you calling? How did you even get my number?”

“Well, it wasn't easy,” he said. “I tried to get your number through your school and they told me you weren't a student anymore. Then I looked through the phone book and I didn't find you listed, so I tried the newspaper. I thought I might find an announcement or a clipping of an accident you were in—anything to let me know anything about you or where you might be living. Finally, I found some of your reviews for your art, but you were still using your maiden name and I didn't know you were married. Then I saw that interview you

did a couple of weeks ago that said you were married to that art dealer. So I just looked him up, found your number, and called.”

Kali was too stunned to respond. She should have known to have Bailey change the number to an unlisted one.

“Kali?”

“Yeah. I’m here,” she said and shook her head. She pressed her eyelid with her index and middle finger. “I’m sorry. I...I haven’t spoken to you in almost eight years. I mean, not since after you moved in with dad. I didn’t see you before I...I mean, why are you calling me now?”

“I know. I’m real sorry about that. I always wanted to call. I always wondered about how you were doing.”

“I’m doing fine, I guess,” Kali said.

“I just wanted to talk to you, ya know? It’s been so long. So much has happened.”

“Yes. A lot has changed.”

“I got married,” George said, his voice brightening. “Last month. I got married to my girlfriend, Jennifer.”

“That’s great, George,” Kali said. “That’s really good.” She wrapped her arm around her waist and stared at the far corner of the room with furrowed brows. She focused on a line of shadow that ran through the corner of the living room. She studied the gradation of color as it moved out of the corner and across the wall.

“I wish you could have been there, Kali.”

Kali shifted nervously. “Me, too. Look, George, why are you calling me now? I don’t understand. You’ve could have done this anytime over the last eight years. What’s going on?”

“I just wanted to tell you how good things are going here,” George said. He paused before he spoke again. “Mom went to rehab. She’s clean. She’s going to celebrate her one year anniversary next month.”

“Why are you telling me that?”

“I thought you could come.”

“Why?” Kali demanded. “Why would you think that was something that I would agree to?”

“Because things are different now,” George said. “She’s different now. It would be great if you could be there to show her that we all support her—that we’re all happy for her.”

A wave of conflicting emotions flooded through Kali as she listened to George. She felt confusion and anger and sadness. “I can’t do that, George,” she said. “I can’t go there and tell her I’m happy for her.”

“Why can’t you?” George said. “Isn’t this what we always wanted as kids? To have our mother get clean?”

“Do you really think that it will stay that way, George? She’s said that she would clean up in the past. Sometimes she even managed to make it work for awhile. But she always went back to the way she was.”

“She’s been clean for almost a year now. Isn’t that enough to show that she’s changed?”

“No, it isn’t,” Kali said. “I never remember a time where Mimi didn’t have a drink in her hand. Do you think that a lifetime of drinking every day will be broken just like that?”

“Yes, I do,” George said firmly. “You have to give her that chance. She will never change if we don’t let her.”

Kali said nothing and there was a long silence. She had shifted her attention to her toes. Her toenails were unpainted and chipped at the edges. Splashes of amber and hunter paint dotted her toes and nails. Kali rubbed the top of her foot against her calf absently.

“Kali, I know how you feel,” George said softly. “I grew up with the same mother—the same problems. Why do you think I moved out to live with dad? I was just as unhappy as you were. But that was the past. She is still our mother and now she needs us. She needs you.”

“She needs me? Where the hell was she when I needed a mother?” Kali said. “You’re right; she is our mother. But getting yourself knocked up when you’re only eighteen isn’t enough to earn you love and respect. She never did anything to be a mother to us. A blood relationship is just that—a blood relationship and nothing more. Blood doesn’t breed love. Love isn’t something that should be expected of a person because of a family tie—especially when it isn’t returned.”

“Kali, the past is over and we can’t do anything about it,” George said. “Mom was a sick woman for a very long time. I’m sure that she would take it back if she could.”

“Are you really so sure? When did she ever express regret or sorrow for the things she did?”

“Now. She’s expressing regret now, and she’s trying to change,” George said. “You don’t have to be unhappy for the rest of your life because she was a sick woman and couldn’t see that.”

“Well, it’s a little too late for that, don’t you think?”

“No, I don’t. You can’t keep living in the past. You should come here and make your peace with her. For your sake and hers.”

“I don’t have anything to say to her,” Kali said. “Why did you even call? Did she ask you to call?”

“No, she didn’t. She doesn’t know that I’m calling you. I don’t think she even knows where you are. Ever since she went to see you in New York, she hasn’t talked about you. I think she just gave up.”

Kali paused for a moment before she spoke again. “Why haven’t you called me, George? All this time and I’ve never heard from you either. You got in touch with me when you needed to. Obviously, not having my number wasn’t a problem.”

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “I wanted to. I guess I just didn’t know what I would say. I didn’t know how I was supposed to act after what happened—after you got sent away. Mom tried to see you and it just caused more problems. I wasn’t sure what would happen if I tried to do the same thing.”

“What are you talking about?” Kali asked. “She’s the reason that I got sent away. How could you think that the same thing would happen if you came? You didn’t have anything to do with what happened.”

“I know. I guess the whole family just thought that you really didn’t want us to come near you. I don’t think anyone really thought it was a good idea to try and contact you, especially with mom always around watching what we were doing. You know she would have tried to get herself involved and dominate what was happening if any of us tried to contact you.”

“Well, you should have,” Kali said. Her voice quavered slightly. “You should have got in touch with me if you really cared,” she said and cleared her throat.

“I know.”

There was a long pause on the phone.

“So, will you come?” George said at last. “It would really mean a lot.”

“I don’t think so, George,” Kali said. “I don’t think I can ever forgive what happened and I know I’ll never forget it. I can’t handle going back there or seeing her. I’m trying to put that all behind me, like you said. For me, that means leaving that part of my life behind me for good. I don’t need to make any other amends.”

“I really hope you change your mind.”

“I’m sorry, George, but that’s not going to happen,” Kali said. “Please don’t call me again.”

Kali hung up the phone and tears rushed to her eyes. She couldn’t understand why she was crying. George was right: she had hoped that her mother would get clean for a long time. But that was when she was a kid. When she got older, she knew that it wouldn’t matter. Too much damage had been caused. But now that Mimi had cleaned up, and she did seem to want to change, Kali wondered if it really did matter.

Kali sunk down on the couch and tears flowed freely down her cheeks as she thought about these things and as she thought about the other people in her family she'd lost. She didn't know for how long she stayed like that on the couch, but she slowly became aware of the room darkening and the sun fading outside. The royal blue walls looked gray in the dusk, and the showroom furniture looked like it sat in a warehouse. The men in the photographs over the mantle leered down at her and smiled demonically. Kali sat up abruptly and rubbed her eyes. Her head swam and she blinked repeatedly. She stood up slowly and paused in thought. She grabbed her jacket and went to Melinda's.

When Kali got to Melinda's apartment, Melinda greeted her with the usual chitchat but stopped when she noticed Kali's agitation.

"What's wrong?" Melinda asked her.

"I just got a call from my brother."

Melinda's eyes widened and she sank down slowly in a brown leather chair that had replaced the old lime one. "What did he want?"

"He wanted to tell me that he got married and that my mother is clean. She's celebrating her one-year anniversary next month and he wants me to come."

"Oh my god." Melinda held her hand over her mouth.

Kali nodded silently.

"What did you say?"

"I told him no. I told him that I wasn't ever going back there."

Melinda dropped her hand and looked to the side. She blinked repeatedly. “Are you sure about that?” Melinda asked. “I mean, isn’t this what you wanted? Isn’t it a good thing that she’s cleaned up?”

“No, it isn’t,” Kali said. She stared blankly at the beige carpeting and spoke in a far away tone. “She’s still the same person. I don’t believe she’s really changed.”

“Don’t you think you should at least go see her and found out? Isn’t it worth a try?”

“I can’t go back there,” Kali said. “What would I say? I’ve put that all behind me now. I have a different life. I can’t go back to that. If I do, I’ll never be able to move forward.”

There was a long silence and neither Melinda nor Kali knew what to say.

“I just want you to make the right decision,” Melinda said. “If cutting yourself off from your family is what’s going to make you happy—if it’s what you need—then I think you should do that. I just want you to be sure you’re making the right decision. This is the chance you need to talk to your mother and say what you need to say. Are you sure that you won’t regret not taking that opportunity?”

“I am,” Kali said. “It’s something that I’ve thought about for a long time. Since I was thirteen years old, I thought about nothing else but getting out of there and moving as far away as possible. I knew I was never going to be happy as long as I was there because I’d always have to live under her control. My whole family does. I didn’t want to end up like them. There’s nothing more I can say to her or them that will make any difference.”

“But what about now, Kali?” Melinda asked. “She’s clean. You won’t have to worry about that anymore. Are you sure that there aren’t things that you want to say to her now that you can?”

“Like what? I’ve got nothing to say to her anymore,” Kali said. “You know, when I was younger, I used to think that I could tell her—that if she would just calm down enough to listen—that I could tell her how I felt. I would tell her all the things she did wrong and how she made me feel and she would understand. I don’t know what she would say. I guess because I don’t think there’s anything she could say. It would just be for me to get it out—to know that she knew what she was doing and there wouldn’t be any excuses. There wouldn’t be any way to explain away the things she’d done or to blame it on me or to act like nothing had happened. But as time went on, I realized that was never going to happen. I realized that she would never ever understand—she wouldn’t even listen. There was nothing I could ever do except leave it all behind me. Sometimes I’m really thankful for what happened. If I hadn’t been taken to foster care, I don’t know if I ever would have been able to leave that house.”

Melinda nodded. “I’m sorry that it has to be like that.”

“Me too.”

“You know that I’m always here for you,” Melinda said. “I’m your family now. You can always depend on me.”

“I know,” Kali said softly. “Thank you.”

Venus of the Rags

(Chapter 14)

For the next month, Kali retreated into her art. She worked obsessively day and night, drowning herself in the paint and clay. The rest of the world faded. She ate and slept little. She rarely ever left the apartment. She didn't tell Bailey, but she worked on her sculpture more and more in secret everyday.

Art became a kind of meditation for Kali. She learned to focus on her work without thinking about anything else. No sounds penetrated her reverie—the phone rang, taxis blared their horns on the streets below, men shouted curses at each other. Once Kali decided on a subject, she thought about nothing else. She cleared her head and focused on the canvas taking form before her. Occasionally, she would be conscious of the bristle of her brush sweeping over the canvas. Most of the time, she only saw the paint gliding effortlessly over the subject. It seemed as if her brush were an eraser, removing a cover that hid her scene behind the canvas. At other times, she focused on the clay. Her fingers were only peripheral—she was not conscious of their movements. Only her subconscious feeling guided her hands.

Kali didn't think anymore about the call from her brother. She put it as far out of her mind as she could. She didn't even tell Bailey about the call. Bailey had noticed that Kali was more somber and withdrawn. She didn't talk as much and she rarely wanted to do anything but be in her studio. He had asked her several times what was wrong but she refused

to talk about it. When she denied that anything was on her mind, he made desperate suggestions to pull her away from her art and to get her more involved in their life together. He offered a vacation in the Hamptons, a shopping spree in the garment district, a night at the theatre. Kali refused them all.

“Kali, something is obviously bothering you,” Bailey said one day. “Why won’t you talk to me about it?”

“Just stop harassing me about it,” Kali snapped and turned her head to the side, but did not look at Bailey. Her hand was still poised before the canvas with a brush. “I don’t want to talk about it. I’ll tell you when I want to.”

“I thought we were supposed to be working on our communication,” Bailey said. “We were doing really well. If something’s the matter, you should be able to talk to me about it. Is it something about us?”

“No. It has nothing to do with you,” Kali said, her hand moving over the canvas again.

“Then tell me what it is,” Bailey said. “I’m your husband. Why won’t you tell me what’s the matter? I want to be there for you.”

“Because I don’t want to talk about it anymore,” Kali said, enunciating each word.

“I can’t believe this,” Bailey said. “I’m your goddamned husband and you won’t even talk to me about something that’s bothering you.” Kali heard Bailey turn and storm out of the room.

“When did that ever matter before?” Kali muttered to herself.

After several more repeated attempts at communication and no response from Kali, Bailey became more distant. He stopped trying to talk to her about what happened or what was on her mind. In fact, he seemed to lose all interest in anything that Kali did or said. He started staying out at all hours of the night again, taking out new clients and hosting openings. He went to dinners and met with new artists. He spent long hours on the phone at the gallery and at home. But none of it mattered to Kali anymore. Her old suspicions lingered, but they remained dormant.

The only thing that mattered anymore was her art. It was the only thing that helped her to move forward. Each stroke of her brush added something new to the canvas; each etch in the clay created a new detail. Kali discovered life through her art. She discovered a form that didn't exist before she began with each new painting and sculpture that she created. Passionate colors of red and orange and black swirled across her canvases. She no longer tried to express herself abstractly, as her earlier paintings had done. She tackled her subject matter directly, showing people photorealistically. She studied ways to portray emotion through expression and association. She began to realize the reasons for her earlier failed attempts—how she had attempted to portray a one-sided portrait of life, and of her subjects. She had attempted to capture the surface of the subject, not the inner life. Though she was beginning to understand that now, she still could not master the representation of her subjects. But she accepted the flaws in her work as she had her successes. They were the only evidence of her progress.

Bailey checked in on her work periodically; it was the only interest he showed in her daily routine. He usually came in during the evenings just before dinner, right after the

gallery closed and right before he left again to meet a group at a restaurant. He seemed pleased with the progress she was making, but was more hostile when confronted with the subject material.

“Kali, what the hell is this?” he asked, looking at the piece she had started when he first suggested the show.

Kali shrugged indifferently. “What the hell does it look like?” she said. “I think it’s pretty clear. There’s not much ambiguity to what’s being shown.”

“It looks like a giant cage with a bunch of people inside looking at art,” Bailey said, a look of confusion still lingering.

“Actually, it’s a gilded cage,” she said and giggled. “You know, like a pun on ‘The Gilded Age’? Mark Twain?” Kali smiled and looked to Bailey for signs of comprehension and found none. “Anyway, I thought it was a nice touch.”

“But what does it mean?” he asked. “What are you trying to say here?”

“Well, if you notice, the people are all in a gallery and they are looking at popular art,” Kali said and pointed out aspects of the painting as she talked. “This painting only has a band of color down the middle; this is just a painted canvas; this is just concentric circles expanding. So, despite the meaningless work on the wall, all the people are happy and they’re drinking their champagne. It’s a typical scene. But they don’t even notice the bars around them. Then there are a couple of these guys in the corner looking kind of unhappy. These guys are artists. They’re the ones whose work is not in this room. They haven’t gotten any recognition yet; they’re just trying to attract attention. But they’re not the only artists in the room. The other artists are the ones who are represented on the walls. They look happy.

And then on the outside of the bars, there are all these other works of art by great masters. See, there's Jackson Pollack and Pablo Picasso. Oh, and here's Salvador Dali." Kali shrugged. "It's pretty simple."

"Yeah, I can see what it shows," Bailey said in irritation. "What does it mean?"

"I think the symbolism's pretty obvious, don't you?" Kali said, unaffected by Bailey's frustration.

Bailey sighed and shook his head. "OK. Fine. What about this one?"

"Oh, I'm not sure if I can really take credit for originality on this one," Kali said, moving to the next painting. "See, I took an English class and we read this play by Milton about this guy who was half man, half god. It wasn't really a play, I guess. Anyway, he turned all the people who came into this forest into part man, part animal. They had human bodies, but the heads of animals."

"So?" Bailey asked and looked to Kali for further explanation.

"So, I just remembered it and it struck me that the symbolism has significance in our own times—maybe even more so."

"What significance?"

Kali sighed and rolled her eyes. "About the way that people act. You know, your head is where your brain is, which controls your attitudes and behaviors. If you have an animal head, you act simple and base. You don't have standards or integrity. You don't make the right kinds of choices. Most people are like sheep who move through their lives without thinking about anything except for the present moment and what's going to satisfy their senses for the time being. Then you've got the ravenous wolves and various predators. These

are the people who are only out for themselves. They use other people without regard for anyone else's feelings or needs besides their own. So, I guess most people are represented here. I'm sure you can attribute your own qualities to the rest."

Bailey shook his head and moved on to look through the other paintings she'd finished. He sighed and rubbed his hands through his hair.

"Well, Kali, I don't know what you're trying to prove here," he said finally. "It's one thing to make social criticism in your work, but it's another to directly attack the art world, the people who buy and sell your art."

"I'm just doing what I always do," she said. "I'm expressing how I feel through my art. What's the problem? Am I supposed to just keep doing the same thing? Always feeling the same way? Always being the same person?"

Bailey looked at her and shook his head again. "Whatever, Kali. When will you be ready for another show?"

"I don't know," she said. "In about another month or so."

"I don't know why I'm doing this but I'll set it up for the end of August," Bailey said. "I don't know why I should even show this. You might lose some of your credibility."

"Then why do you show it?"

"Because people are expecting more from you," Bailey said. "They will forgive a certain amount."

"What is your problem?" Kali asked, losing her patience. "This is no different than what I started out doing in the first place—the kind of stuff that got the attention of my professors. You told me I needed to work more and develop myself. Now I am. I'm doing

something different than what I'm known for. I'm not creating something abstract or expressionistic; this is more direct, more representational, almost surreal. Why are you giving me this attitude now?"

"Because, Kali, these are a complete and sudden departure from what people know of you. Not only that, but these are a direct attack on the people who buy and sell your art."

"Do I always need to kiss everyone's ass to make sure they never stop liking me or my art?" Kali asked. "Do I just keep creating the same old art that everyone recognizes and loves?"

"Of course not," Bailey said. "I just don't think this kind of work is what you were doing when you started getting noticed. You got noticed because of the strong emotional power that came through in your work; it was honest and vulnerable; it was real. The only thing that's coming through now is a kind of bitter resentment. Why are you so bent on telling people to fuck off through your art? Why are you so unhappy?"

"First of all, the paintings are a social critique, which is common to a lot of great art," Kali said. "It's not necessarily a sign of unhappiness. Some people would think the new level of social criticism in my work is a sign of development. And second, I am unhappy. I'm so sick and tired of all these openings and dinners and all the mutual mental masturbation that takes place. None of those people care about me—or any of the art. The only thing they care about is making money and building a reputation for themselves based on the people they know and the art they've seen. What they admire or criticize is all a game. They love or hate whatever is in fashion. No one has a real opinion about any of it. They're all clones of each other. They're spitting out what they've been fed."

Bailey shook his head and threw up his arms in exasperation. “Is that what you think of me then, too?” he asked. “Because I’m one of the people that keeps the system moving. Is this message meant for me, too?”

Kali looked down at the ground and was silent.

Bailey pressed his lips together and nodded slowly. “Do whatever you want, Kali. You need to really think about what you’re doing. You need to decide what you want to do and where you want to end up. Do you want to be an artist or do you want to be broke?”

Kali shrugged and looked back at Bailey defiantly.

“Fine. I’m leaving,” Bailey said and turned to walk out of the room.

“Where are you going?” Kali yelled after him.

“Out,” he yelled and slammed the door.

Kali stared at the door in anger, then turned defiantly. “You want me to decide what I want to do? I’ll make a decision. I’ll make a decision right now.”

Kali walked over to her easel and grabbed a canvas that she had been working on for over a month. She was attempting a portrait of Melinda. The effort fell flat and Kali was bored with it. She strived for realism in the work, but all of her efforts were painful and contrived. There was none of Melinda’s warmth or honesty in the portrait. She jerked the painting off the easel and held it up for examination. She curled up her lip in disgust and shook her head as she looked it over. The features were all out of proportion. The nose was too big and the eyes too cold. She threw the canvas onto the ground and cracked the frame. She picked it up and smashed it on the ground until the wood had splintered into small pieces.

“I don’t need this shit anymore,” she muttered to herself. “I don’t have to paint if I don’t want to—and I won’t anymore. If I do paint, I’ll paint whatever I want to. Screw Bailey. I don’t care what he thinks. And I don’t care what any of those other pretentious bastards think either. I’m not going to do what other people want me to do anymore.”

Kali looked around at the other paintings indecisively. The momentum of her rage had not yet subsided and she wanted to destroy something else. Yet she could not bring herself to destroy another one of the paintings that was already completed. Each one was a creation that she had made out of herself. Even if they did express dissatisfaction and bitterness for the confinement in which she found herself, they still expressed her feelings. They expressed a part of who she was.

Kali stopped and her shoulders drooped in defeat. She panted lightly and swallowed hard. The energy of the moment compelled her to some action nevertheless. She walked to her table in the corner and portioned out a lump of clay. She pounded the clay with the broad side of her fist as she kneaded and softened it. Kali didn’t know what she wanted to create; she only felt the insistent need to work the clay. She needed to create something out of her energy. She worked without thinking, letting the clay take shape independent of her control. She only guided its shape with her squeezing and clenching.

Kali worked for hours into the night, oblivious of the time passing or the physical needs of her body for food or rest. The sculpture that she worked on mutated into several different shapes as she worked, and she became dissatisfied and started over again. When she began, the clay formed into a large bird of prey, with its wings outspread in flight. Then it changed to a woman, with her legs flung behind her and her hands over her head in a dance.

Then it changed to a young child, with her head curled over her knees. Then it was an old man, sitting cross-legged with his head resting on his hand and his eyes closed in a restful sleep. After the fourth attempt, Kali pounded the clay back into a lumpy ball to start over. Her eyes drooped and her kneading slowed. She rested her head on her shoulder, then leaned down on the table and rested her head in the crook of her arm. She fell into a deep sleep.

Kali was stirred by the sound of the water beating down on the tiles in the shower and looked around her in confusion. She looked back down at the clay and saw an impression of her head and fine lines from her hair. She ran her fingers through her hair and pulled out tiny clumps of clay. She shrugged and walked to the bedroom. She crawled under the covers with her clothes still on. Bailey lay in bed beside her.

Bailey turned over in the bed and looked at Kali in disgust.

“Are you still wearing your clothes?” he asked. He looked at her pillow and ran his fingers over the lumps of clay he found there. “Jesus, Kali. What is this? You’re disgusting. Get up and take a shower.”

“Leave me alone,” she said in a sleepy voice. “I’m tired. Go sleep on the couch if you don’t like it.” Kali thought she could smell a light scent of vanilla on Bailey’s skin, but it was overpowered by the soap.

Bailey gathered up the sheets and the blanket that covered them and went to the living room to sleep on the couch. Kali curled up on her side and pulled her jacket around her for warmth.

For weeks, Kali kept her distance from Bailey as he sulked over their argument. Bailey didn’t sulk in the sense that he remained visibly upset, as if waiting for an apology.

Rather, he remained distant from her and kept his interaction with her as minimal as he could. He never made it obvious that he was doing this, and if Kali asked him what was the matter, he would shrug it off and act like she was the one with the problem because she even asked. Kali had learned to deal with these periods by ignoring him and pretending like she was didn't notice he had a problem just like he pretended that he didn't have one.

After a couple of days, Bailey broke the silence when he came to her studio and found her working on a sculpture.

“What are you doing?” he asked her from the doorway.

“What does it look like?” she said without turning around. She craned her neck around the backside of the figure and poked it gently with her stylus.

She heard Bailey sigh and then there was a pause. She grabbed a towel to wipe off her hands and turned around slowly to face him.

“What is it? What do you want?” Kali asked, not trying to disguise the irritation in her voice.

“I set up the show for the end of August,” he said. “It'll be a group of artists; it won't be your own show.”

“Why?” Kali crossed her arms and slumped down in the wooden chair. She let her legs fall open.

“Because that's what we discussed.” Bailey leaned in the doorway and stared back at her indifferently.

“I don't really see the point,” Kali said. “You said yourself that you don't think it's a good idea to show the work I've done.”

“It’s your suicide,” Bailey said. “If you don’t care about your career anymore, then I won’t either.”

“I never said that I don’t care about my career anymore,” Kali’s voice began to rise. She sat forward in her chair and gestured with her hands as she spoke. “It’s exactly the opposite. I do care about it. I want to move forward. I don’t want to be the same person in five years that I am today just like I don’t want to be the same person today that I was five years ago. I don’t want to be the same artist.”

“I don’t really care anymore, Kali,” Bailey said. “You do whatever you want. You go be your own person.” Bailey waved his hand dismissively and turned to walk back into the apartment.

“Well, I’m glad you said that then, because I don’t want to do the show,” Kali said.

Bailey stopped in the doorway and turned around slowly. “What?”

“I don’t want to paint anymore,” she said. “It doesn’t make me happy. I don’t know if it ever really did. I’ve reached a stale point in my art. It bores me. I feel suffocated. I don’t feel like I’m doing what I want to.”

“Which is what?” Bailey sneered. The high afternoon sun beat through the lattice on the far end of the terrace and cast small flecks across his features. His face glowed demonically. “You’ve never known what you wanted. You’ve always been confused.”

“You’re right,” Kali said softly. She remained steady eye contact with him as she spoke. “But I want to start finding out what that is. I want to find out what’s going to make me happy.”

Bailey's eyebrows were furrowed and his mouth curled up at one side. "And how do you think you're going to do that?"

"By not doing the show. By focusing on my sculpture. By listening to the way I really feel and not being afraid to act on it. By letting go."

Bailey snorted and turned away from her to let his eyes wander around the studio. "Well, you're doing the show," Bailey said and turned his attention back to her. He stared at her firmly. "You can go search for your inner child or whatever else it is you plan to do on your own time. But you will do the show."

"This is my own time," Kali said forcefully. "And I will not be told what to do by you any longer."

"Oh, is that a fact?" Bailey asked, raising his eyebrows. "Well, you will do the show. Do you know why?" Bailey walked the short space to Kali and leaned over close to her face to stare her in the eyes. "Because you can make a fool out of yourself, but you will not make a fool of me. I represent you and your art. My reputation is on the line, which means my career is also on the line. Not to mention that you are my wife, so everything you do reflects back on me. I will not let you fuck things over for me, too."

Kali looked away and felt a lump form in her throat. She could feel Bailey's hot breath on her cheek and neck. She opened her mouth to respond and then saw the leftover splinters of wood from the painting she had destroyed laying on the floor in the far corner. The canvas lay in tiny shreds beside the wood; some of it was piled in the metal bin by the door. Her anger flared up and her features hardened. She looked back at Bailey and held out her arm to push him back a space. He moved back and stood by the door again.

“I will not,” she said, drawing out each word with force. “I’m sick of you telling me what to do and controlling me. Every move I make has to be approved by you. I can’t do anything unless it makes you happy. Well, I’m not going to do it anymore. I’m doing what makes me happy! And if you don’t like that—if I’m such a failure and a disappointment to you—then why don’t you just divorce me and move on with your own life?”

“All right. That’s enough,” Bailey said, taking a step towards her. “You need to watch the way you’re talking to me. I’m sick of your mouth.”

“What are you going to do about it, huh, Bailey?” Kali taunted him. “Are you going to put me in my place?”

Bailey raised his hand instinctively, then held it near his shoulders and pointed in Kali’s face instead. “Fuck you,” he said quietly. “Whatever your problems are with me, you will do the show. I won’t watch you ruin your career and mine because you’ve got a point to prove. I don’t care about whatever else you do.”

Kali faced him, but said nothing. They stared at each other for a long moment. Bailey shook his head and walked out of the studio. Kali heard him stomp across the hardwood floors in the living room and slam the door as he left the apartment.

She sat for a long while staring at the ground. Tears welled in her eyes and fell down her cheeks. She wiped them away hastily with the back of her hand.

Death and the Masks

(Chapter 15)

Kali skulked near the corner of the room and grabbed a glass of champagne off a waiter's tray as he walked by. She leaned against the wall and surveyed the people in the room. There were the same people that she saw every time. Women that looked ten years younger than they actually were, and wearing black dresses and hair drawn on top of their heads, sipped champagne and laughed delicately. Men wearing pressed suits and hair that was more manicured than the women's moved around the room with an air of confidence. Kali hoped that no one would notice that she was in the corner. She hoped that no one noticed that one of the artists of the show seemed to be missing. No one had ever seemed to notice before.

Bailey spotted her from across the room and walked towards her. Kali turned her head away and sipped her champagne. When he stood a few feet from her, Kali turned her head and raised her eyebrows at him, as if she just noticed him there.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Bailey stared at her with pursed lips and a scowl. "What are you doing over here?" he asked. "Why aren't you out there talking to people?"

"I told you I didn't want to be here. I never wanted to do this show in the first place. If this show's a failure, then you only have yourself to blame."

Bailey grabbed her elbow and leaned close to her ear. "Look, I don't need your attitude right now, Kali," he said in a low growl. "If you didn't want to keep making the

same kind of art that your audience recognizes, then you're going to have to get out there and turn up the charm. You need to be out there selling your paintings."

"I told you, I don't want to be here," Kali said, jerking her arm from Bailey's grip. "I don't give a fuck if anyone buys one of my paintings. I'll never see that money anyway. You horde every dime I make. I don't care what you think and I sure don't care what any of those people out there think."

Bailey grabbed Kali's arm again and jerked her body around to face the room. He squeezed her arm tightly as he slowly walked her across the room. He spoke to her in a low voice through clenched teeth.

"I don't care what you want right now, Kali," he said. "You will mingle with guests and discuss your work enthusiastically and you will try to sell as many paintings as you can. You will do this without an attitude and without any more prompting from me because I have a job to do. I have people to talk to and paintings to sell. I don't have time to hold your hand or to cater to your temper tantrums."

Kali glared at Bailey but said nothing, aware of all the people that surrounded her. Bailey led her up to an older woman with gray hair, wearing a black gown and a gray shawl. He cast a broad smile at the woman and did not loosen his grip on Kali's arm.

"Mrs. Jones, have you met our artist yet?" Bailey asked her.

"No, I don't think I've had the pleasure," she said and smiled warmly at Kali.

"Mrs. Jones, this is Kali Nichols," Bailey said and nudged Kali forward.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Nichols. I've actually purchased one of your pieces from your last show. But it was very different from the pieces you've produced at this

one,” she said as she glanced at the painting of the men with animal heads on the wall before them.

“Actually, it’s Mrs. Sterne,” Kali said and glanced at Bailey. She freed her arm from his grip and rubbed her bicep. “I started painting before I was married and my husband and I decided it was better not to change it for the sake of recognition.”

“Oh, I had no idea you were married,” Mrs. Jones said to Bailey.

“Yes. It’s been almost three years now,” Bailey said with a slight grimace. “Well, I’ll let you girls talk. I’ve got to go talk to some other people. Good to see you, Mrs. Jones. You look beautiful as always.” Bailey flashed her a smile and squeezed her hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Sterne,” Mrs. Jones chuckled. “You’re just as charming as ever.”

Bailey flashed Kali a stern look and walked away.

“Well, Kali, as I was saying, I’m a great fan of your work,” the woman said, returning to Kali. “I’ve been to your last two shows. It’s a wonder we haven’t met until now.”

“I usually don’t circulate around the crowd much during these things,” Kali said and tipped back her glass of champagne. She took a long drink and sighed. “And I never stay too long.”

“I see. I was wondering about the dramatic change in your work. Your style has shifted significantly. The work here is actually quite unlike what I saw at your last two shows.”

“Actually, these pieces are a lot like what I started doing when Bailey first met me. It’s just not the same style of art that gave me the success I have now.”

“Yes. There is a lot more social criticism in your work now. Your earlier work shows more personal emotional investment. Why the sudden change?”

“Like I said, it’s not sudden,” Kali said. “But either you like it or you don’t. It’s just a change of style, not a new world order. It’s not really something to spend so much time thinking about.”

The woman looked at her uncertainly, as if she were unsure of whether or not to be genuinely offended. Kali walked away before the woman had a chance to decide. She walked to the other side of the room and grabbed another glass of champagne on her way. She left her empty glass on a ledge underneath a watercolor print of a sunset by another artist. She walked to another corner of the room that wasn’t so crowded.

Kali resented being at the show. Despite all her resolution and her adamant proclamations that she absolutely would not come, she submitted. She didn’t want to fight with Bailey anymore. She was able to stand up for herself to a degree, but she didn’t want to go out of her way to provoke him. He still had power over her. He controlled their money; he controlled her art. He could still inflict harm.

Kali didn’t notice that another man had wandered over to stand next to her. He looked at her curiously and smiled.

“Hi. You looked like you were drifting off there,” he said and laughed.

“Oh, I was just thinking,” Kali said, shaking her head. “I guess I was trying to get away from all this—if even in my mind. You know, that whole here but not here mentality. This champagne certainly helps,” she said, lifting her glass and taking a sip.

“Not a big art fan, huh?”

“Not lately,” Kali shrugged.

“Sometimes these things can be pretty mundane.”

“Tell me about it.”

“So why are you here?”

“Someone dragged me here,” Kali said. “What about you?”

“Actually, I’m a dealer. I’ve been hearing a lot about this one artist and I wanted to come see her work. This one here,” he said, pointing to the painting on the wall. “Kali Nichols.”

“Oh, great. Another one,” Kali thought. She took another sip of her champagne.

“What do you think so far?” she asked.

“She’s pretty good. I don’t really see what all the fuss is about.”

“Me, neither,” Kali said.

“But a couple of the people I’ve been talking to said that the style of the artist has changed in this show.”

Kali nodded and smiled. She gestured to the painting that he had motioned to. “What do you think of that one there?” she asked. It was a painting of scenes from city life. A crowd of people swarmed the street; none of them had faces.

“This one is okay,” said the man. “I actually kind of like this one,” he said, pointing to “The Gilded Cage.” “The technical skill in the piece is nearly flawless. But there is no emotional depth here. It’s also derivative—not very original.”

“Hmm,” Kali nodded.

“What do you think?” he asked her.

“Me? Oh, I agree,” she smiled. “It’s totally derivative. Not an original idea in the room, I’d say. But I do disagree with you on one point. I don’t think the technical skill is flawless. I think this artist has a lot of room for improvement. I think she still has much to develop.”

“Really? That’s interesting,” he said. “Oh, by the way, I’m Rick. I’m sorry. I’m Rick Silverman.”

Rick held out his hand to Kali and she looked at it for a moment before taking it. She smiled and shook his hand.

“I’m Kali Sterne,” she said. “That’s my married name anyway. Professionally, people know me by my maiden name: Kali Nichols.”

Kali shook his hand and watched as the smile dropped from his face and a slow look of recognition spread over his features. His eyes widened and he looked quickly at the painting and then back at Kali.

“You’re—you mean—y—“ he sputtered while he pointed at the picture and looked at Kali. “You mean you’re her? You’re the artist?”

“Yep, I’m her,” Kali nodded and smiled mischievously. She held the side of her hand to her cheek and whispered in mock confidence. “That’s me. But keep it down. I’d rather people didn’t know that if they don’t already. I like to keep in the background during these things.”

Rick stared at her for a moment, his mouth half open and his eyes wide.

Kali laughed. “Don’t worry about it,” she said. “You’re allowed to have your own opinion. I’m not like all of these other artists who think that their work is the next greatest thing and all people should fall down on their knees and worship it.”

Rick laughed nervously and his eyes darted. “Well, like I said, it’s technically flawless,” he said. “You’re a very talented artist.”

“Thanks for saying so,” Kali said. “But you don’t have to worry about telling me how good my work is now.”

“But I’m being honest.”

Kali winked and raised her glass.

“So, like I said, I haven’t seen your work until now, but everyone keeps saying that it’s changed dramatically,” Rick said, trying to regain his composure. “Would you say that’s a fair assessment?”

“You sound like an interviewer,” Kali said and giggled. “Um, I guess it’s fair if you’re speaking chronologically. But it’s really quite similar to the work I was doing when I started.”

“Well, chronologically speaking, why the sudden change?”

“I just got sick of doing the same thing for every show,” Kali said. “I want to move forward, develop myself as an artist.”

“Do you think you’ve done that?”

“No,” she shrugged. “This show was really just a chance for me to experiment. This reflected my state of mind—my feelings—at the time. It just doesn’t seem to have gone over

as well with the rest of these people.” Kali made a dismissive gesture toward the room with her glass in her hand.

“Staying true to yourself is important for any artist. You should never apologize for that.”

Kali raised her eyebrows at him. “I really don’t want to be painting anymore,” she confessed. “That’s really what this is all about. I feel stifled and I want to branch out to other areas.”

“Oh? Like what?” Rick asked.

“Sculpture.”

“Do you have many sculptures that you’ve completed?”

“A few,” Kali said shyly and looked at Rick conspiratorially. “I work on it when I’m not painting. I don’t know that I’m really all that good, but I enjoy it—a lot more than what I’m doing now.”

“How does your agent feel about it? Are you going to try to change your image? Do more shows with sculpture and less with painting?”

Kali chuckled lightly. “Uh, no. Actually my husband is my agent. He owns this gallery. He thinks that I should work on developing my painting more before I spend any time on sculpture.”

“That’s too bad,” Rick said. “I think art is all about freedom of expression. You should work on what you’re moved to do. So what are you going to do? Are you going to listen to his advice?”

“I really don’t have much choice,” Kali said. “He’s my agent and my husband. There’s really no escaping his influence. But he’ll come around eventually.”

“Have you ever thought about seeking new representation?” Rick asked.

“Sure,” Kali shrugged. “But it’s just such a hassle. Not only do I have to go through the drawn out process of courting an agent, but then I have to deal with Bailey. We also have a contract. I just don’t know if it’s worth it. It seems better just to work on getting Bailey to see things from my point of view.”

“I can understand that,” Rick said. “Kali, I don’t want to say anything out of line here, but I would be happy to look at your work—your sculpture—and possibly represent you. I understand the special relationship that you have with your husband. But as we’re talking, I can see that you want to branch out and develop other areas of your artistic talent and that maybe you can’t really do that in your current situation. I want to offer you that opportunity. Maybe help you find a way out of your contract.”

Rick took a business card from the inside of his jacket pocket and handed it to Kali. She looked at him suspiciously and slowly reached out to take the card. She turned it over and looked at it curiously. Rick wasn’t affiliated with a gallery; he was probably trying to start his own. Kali thought he was probably one of the dozens of new agents trying to prove themselves to a gallery and win them over with a new find.

“Like I said, it’s just a possibility,” he continued. “There are no promises. I might not like your work; you might not like me. And then there’s the relationship you share with your husband—personally and professionally. I tell you what, we can get together and talk and

you can show me your work and we can decide from there. You don't have to make any decisions before then and you won't have to discuss it with your husband."

Kali stared up at him with furrowed brows. "Yeah. We'll see," she said slowly. "I'll have to think about it. I'll give you a call when I decide."

Rick took her hand in his and squeezed it. She looked down at her hand and then back at Rick. "I understand," he said. "But don't take too much time making up your mind."

Kali withdrew her hand delicately and smiled awkwardly. Just as she was going to make excuses and walk away, Bailey interrupted her.

"Kali, there you are." Bailey stopped and looked at her quizzically. "What are you doing just standing over here in the corner?"

"I was doing what you said. I was talking to this man about my art. This is his first time at one of my shows."

Bailey looked quickly at Rick, then at Kali, then back at Rick again. He looked unsure as to whether to dismiss Rick and ignore him or engage him in conversation about the show as a potential buyer. Rick made the decision for him.

"Uh, hi. I'm Rick Silverman," he said, holding out his hand.

Bailey took his hand reluctantly and introduced himself.

"Oh, right," Rick said. "Kali was telling me that you're her husband and her agent."

"You were talking about me?" Bailey asked curiously and looked at Kali.

"I just asked her who her agent was and that's how it came up," Rick cut in before she had a chance to answer.

“Well, Kali, I need you,” Bailey said and drew her to the side. “I want you to talk to a possible buyer. She’s interested in meeting you and hearing your spin on your work.”

Kali sighed. She turned to Rick and nodded her goodbye. He winked at her and smiled confidently.

Bailey grabbed Kali by the arm and led her across the room. As they walked, he leaned closer to her and whispered forcefully in her ear. “What the fuck was that all about?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why did you and that guy look so cozy when I walked up to you? What were you talking about?”

“Nothing,” Kali said. “He was just interested in my art. Why are you so paranoid? You really need to work on your trust issues.”

“I’m not in the mood, Kali,” Bailey warned. “Save your condescending attitude for another time. Right now, you just need to smile and talk nice. I don’t want to see any more of this attitude from you.”

Before she could respond, Bailey led Kali up to a woman in a black cocktail dress drinking champagne. Another woman drinking in a black cocktail dress—how unique, thought Kali. She wondered how Bailey could pick this clone woman out of the crowd since she looked identical to every other woman in the room who was under sixty.

“Mrs. Donovan, this is the artist, Kali Nichols,” Bailey said, as he presented Kali before the woman. “Kali, this is Cheryl Donovan.”

“Sterne, actually. It’s Kali Sterne.”

“Nice to meet you,” the woman said, holding out her hand.

Kali took her hand and shook it clumsily. “Great to meet you,” Kali said, leaning closer to her.

Mrs. Donovan looked to Bailey nervously and Bailey grabbed Kali’s arm forcefully. “What are you doing?” he whispered into her ear through closed teeth. “Are you drunk?”

“I’m just being friendly,” Kali said and beamed back at him. She turned her attention back to the woman in front of her. “So, what do you think of all this?” Kali asked the woman, making a sweeping gesture with her arm.

“I think it’s great,” the woman said, relaxing. “I love your work. I really love this new direction you’re taking.”

“Thank you. Thank you very much,” Kali said and looked at Bailey. “You’re the first person to say so.”

“I was thinking about buying a piece from this show,” the woman continued.

“Which one?” Bailey asked.

“I was thinking about this one with the animal heads.”

“That’s a great piece,” Bailey said. Kali shot a glance at him.

“You know what? I think I’ll take it,” Mrs. Donovan said. “Just take care of it for me. Send it to my office and my husband will take care of the bill.”

“I’ll take care of it for you,” Bailey said. “Now, if you ladies will excuse me, I need to go talk to some other people.”

Mrs. Donovan nodded to Bailey and Kali glared at him as he walked away. Kali turned her attention back to Mrs. Donovan and took another drink of her champagne.

“So, Mrs. Donovan, is it?” Kali said.

“Cheryl.”

“OK, Cheryl. How do you know Bailey?”

“We’ve known each other for a long time,” she said.

“I’m surprised we haven’t met yet then,” Kali said.

“I’m not.”

“What do you mean?” Kali asked, sobering slightly.

“Nothing,” Cheryl said and smiled. “You know Bailey. He likes to have things his way. He likes his privacy.”

“I guess you’re right.”

“I have to congratulate you though,” she continued.

“Why?”

“I don’t think many women could have married him and made it work as long as you have,” Cheryl said. “He has too much of a past—too much of a reputation.”

“Yes, he did, but that’s in the past now,” Kali said, studying her carefully.

“Sure,” Cheryl said and shrugged. “You’re probably right. Besides, what do you have to worry about? You’re married to him now.”

Kali nodded carefully and said nothing.

“Good luck with the show,” Cheryl said and winked. She walked away and left Kali standing alone by the painting. Kali turned and looked at Bailey across the room. He talked to a group of woman standing in a circle. None of them looked at the paintings on the wall. Bailey laughed and winked; his dimples stood out on his tanned cheeks. She watched him steadily and squinted her eyes, but made no movements towards him.

To her surprise, Kali sold all six of the paintings that she showed at the gallery. Bailey was pacified for the time being.

Kali thought about her meeting with Cheryl Donovan and her old jealousies flared up again. What had she really tried to tell her? Kali thought about all the times that Bailey came home with a floral scent lingering about his collar. She thought about how he showered before bed every time that he came home late. She had walked in on him several times whispering conspiratorially into the phone. Cheryl's strange behavior would usually have offered Kali some sense of vindication. She would have usually gone directly to Bailey and made accusations and demanded confessions. But it didn't matter. She felt a strange calm. She put it out of her mind and focused on her work.

Kali thought about her meeting with Rick Silverman all week. She looked through the sculpture she had completed—about six pieces—and thought about how each one would be assessed. Three statuettes were figures in different stages of life. A young girl curled over her knees with her hands draped over her neck as if she were pulling down her own head. One was the head of an old man with no hair and large ears. His withered lips were pursed in a pucker and the skin under his eyes drooped. Another was a pregnant woman holding her hands over her plump stomach. The three other sculptures were of birds: one was a young sparrow in a nest, another a falcon in flight, and another a small robin with its wings tucked neatly at its sides. She grew nervous as she looked over each piece and weighed its impression in the minds of others. Kali had grown proud of her achievements as a sculptor. The features in her figures grew more expressive. The cold clay had taken on warmth and seemed more pliant. She felt that she had developed significantly since she first began her

serious study of art at the university. Yet she began to question herself when she thought of how other people would consider her talent.

Part of Kali wanted to call Rick and find out what he would think of her chances; another part of her felt vulnerable and was terrified to expose her art to another person who could criticize her efforts. Rick also reminded her too much of Bailey. She thought about her meeting with Rick, and immediately, remembered images of Bailey at their first meeting. Still, she didn't want to let this opportunity pass her by or she knew she would regret it.

Then of course, there was Bailey. He would be furious if he knew she was even considering finding new representation. He would never allow that; he was far too controlling. She had no idea how she would ever be able to leave him and find a new agent. Even if she did, she wasn't sure if their marriage would stay together. But Kali wasn't sure how important that was to her anymore. She was more and more unhappy in their marriage. They fought all the time about money and art. Kali always had to ask Bailey to give her money, and he always made her plead her case before he granted it. He was hardly ever at home anymore; he was starting to stay out late nights again. He was more hostile to her now when she asked about where he was or what he was doing. A few times, he even refused to tell her. He didn't even attempt to make an excuse for himself anymore. She wasn't sure how long it would be until he told her that he was leaving her.

Bailey was the most charming and attractive person that Kali had ever met. He made her feel beautiful and sexy and wanted. But he was also the most dangerous and destructive person she had ever known—outside of her family. He was controlling and he only cared for Kali's success and happiness as far as it bolstered his own. She felt like he would abandon

her as soon as she stopped serving her purpose. He became less willing to please her and less concerned about what she thought. Kali was starting to realize that the man she first met was just the created Bailey, the artificial one that he showed everyone. She had gotten to know the real Bailey in their marriage. She had stayed because she needed him. She needed the image that he gave her—the image of himself as well as the image of Kali that he fostered. But now he wasn't giving her the same things. The things he gave her now only intensified her need for the old image of Bailey.

Your body is a bodyground?

(Chapter 16)

A few weeks after the show, Kali sat alone on the sofa clicking through the channels on the television. Two characters on a late night soap opera exchanged passionate declarations of love. The fluorescent lighting revealed a thick layer of makeup on the couple, and the kiss they shared was melodramatic. Kali flipped the channel. She fidgeted nervously and kept watching the clock. It was 2:00 a.m. and Bailey still wasn't home. She was expecting him to walk through the door at any moment, but an unusual feeling of dread pervaded her.

Earlier in the evening, a woman had called and acted very strangely when Kali answered the phone.

"Is Bailey there?" she asked.

"No, he isn't. Who is this?" Kali asked absently and rubbed her eyes.

"Oh, um...do you know when he'll be home? Or where he's at?" the woman asked.

"No. Why? Did you have some sort of meeting set up with him?" Kali let her hand drop by her side and she turned her head closer to the receiver.

"Yeah. Yeah, I was supposed to meet him for um...a meeting...about some art."

"At one in the morning?" Kali asked.

"No. We were supposed to meet earlier. He never showed up."

"You're an artist?" Kali asked.

"Yes. I'm an artist."

“What’s your name?”

There was a pause and Kali repeated her question.

“I have to go,” the woman said. “I’m sorry for calling so late. Thanks. Bye.”

The woman hung up abruptly and Kali held the phone in her hand, staring at it for a moment before resting it on the receiver.

Kali immediately thought the worst. After the phone call, she thought that she finally had conclusive evidence that confirmed all of her suspicions. It was the only scenario that made sense. Bailey had no sisters and the woman sounded too young to be his mother. If she was calling about her art or some other business matter, she wouldn’t have acted so nervous or suspicious. She also wouldn’t have been calling so late at night. Kali’s anger mounted as she turned these thoughts over in her mind and waited anxiously for Bailey to come home.

As time wore on and he didn’t come home, her anger subsided and she became less certain about the accuracy of her conclusions. She started to wonder what the phone call had actually revealed, if anything. She started to make excuses for Bailey, explaining away the weirdness of the call and telling herself that it was just the girl. She was strange. She had a nervous personality. What did any of that have to do with Bailey? Maybe she had a crush on him and he had tried to dust her off politely but she couldn’t take a hint. Maybe she had tried to get him to represent her art, but he wasn’t interested. She was just a new artist, nervous to call a successful agent and ask for a meeting with him. But then there was the lateness of the call. No artist would be foolish enough to call an agent in the middle of the night, no matter how eager she was. How could any of her explanations account for the time?

Kali looked at the clock. It was 3:00 a.m. Her anger had turned to doubt. She only wanted to hear an explanation and be satisfied with whatever she was told. She was worried about Bailey. He had never come home this late. He might be hurt or stranded somewhere. Any number of things were possible in the city. Maybe he was mugged. Maybe he was hit by a cab crossing the street. Maybe he got caught up in a fight in a bar somewhere. Kali grew tired as her mind raced. She glanced at her studio through the glass French doors and thought about working on a sculpture she had just started. Her stomach tightened and her head swam. She wouldn't be able to work. Kali stayed on the couch and tried to stay awake, but her head started to droop and she had more trouble keeping it up. It was just before four when she last looked at the clock before falling asleep.

Kali woke up on the couch, confused about where she was. She looked down at the clothes she wore, the same ones from the day before, and rubbed her head. The television was still on and a young woman with orange hair was trying to sell her some new exercise equipment that promised to make her thinner and more attractive to the opposite sex. The sun cast bright beams across the multi-colored tapestry in the living room. Kali squinted her eyes and turned her back to the sun. She looked over at the clock and she remembered all her thoughts from the night before. She jumped off the couch and ran into the bedroom. The bed was still made and the blankets were smooth. She moved quickly from the living room to the kitchen and out onto the terrace. Only empty space waited for her; Bailey was nowhere in the apartment. Kali stood on the terrace and looked out over the city. Shadows lingered in the alleys, creating dark crevices. Bailey could have been lying helpless in any of them. Kali walked back to the living room and fell down on the couch. It was noon.

Visions of all the times that she spent alone while she lived with Mimi floated through her mind. Mimi never came home before midnight, and Kali spent every night lying in her bed with her eyes wide open and straining to see through the darkness. Every noise was amplified. Every shadow was someone lurking in the darkness. Then Mimi disappeared for a whole week, leaving Kali to walk the streets at night, rather than lay wait inside the house for whatever might befall her.

Kali started to panic as those memories came back, coupled with the realization that Bailey was still not home and it was the first time that he had stayed out all night. Something had to be seriously wrong. Kali called the gallery and the phone rang more than a dozen times before she finally hung up. She immediately called the police. They told her that there was nothing they could do and that she should call back later that night or the next day if he still didn't come home. Kali grew furious. She made call after call to his friends and the hospitals in the city. She called every place she could think of that Bailey could possibly be or that would have any knowledge of his whereabouts. At just after two, Kali was searching through the house for the phone number to Bailey's parents when he walked through the door.

Kali slammed the drawer shut on the end table and turned around to face him. She stood in front of the couch motionless with her mouth open and her eyes wide. Bailey stood by the door and looked her over indifferently, his hands in his pockets.

"Where in the hell have you been?" Kali yelled, taking a step towards him.

"Are you wearing the same clothes you wore yesterday?" Bailey asked. "Have you showered?"

“What?” Kali screeched. “Are you fucking joking? You don’t come home all night and the first thing you do when you walk in the door is ask me about my wardrobe? I’ve been up all night worrying—I’ve been calling every place I can think of for the last two hours trying to find out if you’re alive or dead and the first thing you do when you come home is ask if I’ve showered?”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Bailey said. “I had things to do. I was out. So, I didn’t call you. I’m home now. There’s no need to assume the worst.”

“Are you kidding? Is this for real?” Kali half laughed. “You were just ‘out,’ huh? No big deal? You didn’t come home all night and I had no idea where you were and you just expect me to shrug and act like it’s no big deal?”

“No, you’re right. I don’t expect *you* to do that. Actually, I guess I expected the exact reaction that I’m getting.” Bailey walked past her into the bedroom and took off his jacket. Kali followed behind him, and he sat down on the bed and started taking off his shoes.

“Where are you going? You’re not walking away from me,” Kali said as she walked behind him.

“Look, Alexandra told me that she called here and she talked to you,” Bailey said, looking up at her. “I know what you think. You’ve been throwing accusations at me since before we were even married. I figured, why fight it anymore? You’re going to keep thinking the same thing anyway. And you’re right. So why should I try to hide it anymore?”

“Alexandra? Hide what? What am I right about?” Kali’s complexion deepened to a dark red. Her expression hardened as her thoughts ranged from confusion to curiosity to anger.

“You’re right about everything,” Bailey said. “I have been seeing somebody else. It hasn’t always been the same person, but that’s beside the point. I thought that I could stop and things would get better between you and me, but that hasn’t happened. But I couldn’t stop and things didn’t get better. For a while, it seemed like they might, but they didn’t. It didn’t matter whether I was being faithful to you or not. I’m the same. We’re the same together.”

Kali’s anger mixed with tears and her eyes widened and her lips pursed together. “You’re sleeping with someone else?” she asked. “How long has this been going on?”

“For awhile.”

“How long?” she repeated. “Who is she? Why don’t I know her?”

“Look, Kali, it doesn’t matter,” Bailey said. He sat on the edge of the bed with his hands hanging limply by his sides. His head was erect, but he drooped his chin slightly and he focused just below eye level. “It doesn’t matter who or how long or anything else. It has nothing to do with you. It has nothing to do with our problems. It’s over.”

“Don’t you love me anymore?” she cried. “Why don’t you love me anymore?” Kali began to cry loudly and bitterly.

“I do love you, Kali,” Bailey said and looked up at her with a pleading look in his eyes. “But that’s not enough anymore. We’re just too different. I’m a lot older than you. We both seem to be working towards different goals in our lives. It’s not enough that we love each other anymore. We need to have compatibility. We need to be happy. All we ever do now is fight and hurt each other.”

Kali said nothing. She could only think of the dozens of brief memories that flitted through her mind like birds swooping down on their prey. She thought of the way Bailey cradled her head in his large arms after they made love, the way he smelled in the morning when she woke up beside him—like cotton and musk—or the way he kissed her gently and stroked her hair on lazy afternoons. She thought of all the things he had told her and they passed through her mind like changing frequencies: You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen; I want to spend the rest of my life with you; You've helped me become a better man; I love you. A piercing pain shot through Kali's head when those memories confused themselves with thoughts of Bailey and another woman. Had he said those same things to all those other women? Had he looked at them the same way? Had he felt the same way?

Bailey stood up and walked over to Kali, who had inched against the wall and slid down to the carpet. He stood in front of her and looked at her helplessly. "Kali? Kali, don't cry."

Kali wondered how many women there had been. Had he ever left her to go to another woman? Had he ever come home to her after he had just been with someone else? Had all the things Bailey said to her even been true? Had she read accurately what she saw in his eyes when they were together? Maybe he didn't even remember the things he had said to her; she had just gotten confused in the jumble of bullshit and lies. She was another person to deceive, to sell the image. Kali felt suffocated when she thought that what Bailey had told her had been a lie, or worse, that it hadn't, but that he could feel the same way with someone else. The thought was unbearable.

Bailey squatted down next to Kali and watched her carefully. “Kali? Are you listening to me?” he said. “I’m sorry. I love you. I love you so much. I—“

“Don’t!” Kali screamed, holding her hands over her ears. “Don’t! Don’t! Don’t! Don’t! Don’t! Don’t you ever say that to me ever again! Don’t you tell me that you love me! You’re a liar! You never loved me! It was all a lie from the very beginning.” Kali leapt to her feet and stood at a small distance from Bailey.

“Kali, just calm down,” Bailey said, taking a step closer to her. He held out his hand as he approached her. “Kali, I do love you. I—“

“You stay away from me,” Kali warned, pointing at him. “You stay the fuck away from me. Don’t you touch me. I won’t have you touch me ever again!”

“Kali, it’s OK,” Bailey said softly. “I don’t want to hurt you. Let’s talk about it. I don’t want it to be like this.”

“You don’t want it to be like this?” Kali said. “How did you expect it to be when you told me that you were leaving me for another woman? If you didn’t want to hurt me, you’re a little late for that.”

“Kali, I’m not leaving you for another woman. I don’t love Alexandra. We have an understanding.”

“Oh God,” Kali said, bending over and rubbing her temples. “You don’t even love her? You did all this with a woman that you just ‘have an understanding’ with? I can’t believe this. This isn’t happening.”

“Kali, relax.” Bailey’s voice started to show signs of irritation. “I know you’re hurt and upset. Just come here. Come here.” Bailey reached for Kali and pulled her towards him. Kali struggled, but allowed him to pull her to him slowly and wrap his arms around her.

Kali softened momentarily as she felt the comforting warmth of his embrace. Then she felt the secure enclosure of his arms wrapped around her and breathed in the scent of his skin and heard him whisper “I love you” and all her thoughts from a moment earlier came rushing back. She remembered where he had just come from and her sight went black.

Kali balled her fist and struck out blindly and hit Bailey on the side of his face. She saw him stagger back and look at her in confusion.

“Don’t you ever fucking touch me again!” Kali screamed. Her cheeks burned like fire and her body was shaking as she yelled. “Don’t you ever tell me that you love me again!”

Bailey stepped forward and grabbed Kali by the shoulders. “Calm down!” he yelled. “Calm down! What the hell has gotten into you? Where do you get off hitting me? You think you can hit me? Huh?” Bailey shook Kali forcefully as he spoke.

Kali moved her arms out to her sides like the blades of a windmill to disengage Bailey’s grip on her. “Stay away from me,” Kali said. “I’m warning you, stay away from me.”

“Stay away from you, you fucking crazy bitch?” Bailey yelled into her face. “What are you going to do, huh? Who do you think you are?”

Bailey moved towards Kali again with his fists clenched and Kali stepped back. “Does it make you feel good to hit a woman?” Kali taunted him. “At least it shows me who

you really are; it shows me the liar you are. I don't know why I couldn't see it before.

Everyone else did. Go ahead! Hit me! Make your daddy proud!"

Bailey grabbed Kali again by the shoulders and Kali pushed him with all the weight of her body.

"That's it! I've had enough of you, bitch! You're not gonna push me around!" Bailey drew back his hand and brought down a blow on Kali's head. She fell to the ground. Stunned, she looked back up at Bailey hovering over her. He drew back his hand again and crouched down to swing another blow across her head. Just as he began to crouch, Kali swung up her legs and kicked them against Bailey's chest. Bailey fell back. He drew in a deep breath and struggled momentarily to regain his composure. Kali crawled to the side of the bed and Bailey lurched forward. He grabbed her.

"What are you thinking?" he yelled. "Are you crazy? Do you really think you can hit me?"

Kali only saw him raise back his hand again before she felt another blow alongside her head and she saw nothing else. After that, she only felt the occasional blow to her body or heard snatches of threats and warnings. She entered a realm that was not quite conscious but not quite unconscious. Memories snapped through her mind like photographs and were punctuated by a surfacing conscious picture of Bailey's face or body before her.

Her memories came in layers. The outer layer consisted of those memories of her life with Bailey. She saw him in her mind much as he was at that moment—his face contorted in anger, looking down at her with disdain. As each year passed, it was harder for Kali to remember the times when Bailey looked at her with love. He had once found her beautiful

and intriguing. He told her that she was different and that she offered him the chance to be someone new. Kali believed him and, for a brief moment, believed that she was happy. She looked at herself the way he looked at her.

As that layer peeled away, another revealed itself. She remembered being in high school after she had just told her mother for the first and only time that she hated her. Kali was locked in her room for a month after that, unable to go anywhere or see anyone, including school and work. She lay for hours on her bed, staring at the ceiling, planning her escape and her future. Kali lost her job and her plans for saving enough money to move out were postponed. When Kali went back to school, she told everyone that she had been sick. Everyone acted like they believed her, but they watched her curiously when she entered a room, looking for some hidden sign of the truth. Kali pretended not to notice their stares, their pretenses that everything was normal. Kali never told her mother how she felt again, but kept it hidden inside her. It lay hidden within her, devouring her hope and leaving her numb to her own emotions.

Another layer fell away and she was even younger. She was twelve and lying on the floor near her bed. Her mother had flown into a rage when Kali didn't wash the dishes immediately after dinner. Suddenly, Kali was lazy and selfish and worthless. And as on so many other occasions before, her mother told Kali about all her other flaws that had somehow accumulated and contributed to that very moment where. Her mother listed everything that she had ever done wrong. Kali never did anything that she was told. Kali was self-centered. Kali didn't care about anyone but herself. Kali thought that she was better than everyone else.

After Mimi's tirade, Kali went to her room once she had finished her chore in humiliation. She fell down to the ground and stretched her body out next to her bed. Kali lay sobbing with her arms tucked underneath her chest and felt the emptiness of her life, like she had on so many occasions before and many more to follow. She felt no other emotions except the empty realization of the hollowness of her life and her hopes for happiness. The emptiness was the absence of love that she had felt on all those times. The absence of love combined with the desperation for it to fill the void. It was that absence which fuelled an even larger void in her soul and her heart—the love for herself. Kali remembered all of this as she lay on the floor of her own apartment and she quickly began to lose consciousness. It was the last thing she remembered before drifting off into complete darkness.

Song of Love

(Chapter 17)

Kali woke up confused. Her limbs and head felt heavy. She looked around the room but was unable to recognize her surroundings. She rubbed her head near the temple where it itched and felt a cotton band around her hair. Her throat was dry and felt like the wrap around her head. She looked down and saw cold steel rails along the side of the bed and a plastic tube running out of her hand. A sour smell of medicine and sickness wafted through the air.

Kali heard a noise at her side and looked over quickly. Melinda stretched her arms over her head in a chair next to the bed and yawned. Kali smiled faintly, then let her eyes droop and turned her head away.

“How do you feel?” Melinda asked.

Kali turned to Melinda who smiled back at her with sleepy eyes.

“Do you feel OK? Are you in pain?” she asked again.

“I have a headache,” Kali said and cleared her throat. She looked at a monitor by her side and saw a number flashing in neon lights. She held her breath to see if the number would change; it didn’t. “How long have I been here?”

“Since yesterday afternoon. You’ve been sleeping ever since.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Bailey called me right after he called for the ambulance,” Melinda said. “I guess he panicked when he saw that you weren’t waking up. I don’t know why he called me. I’m the

last person who would be sympathetic to what happened. I met him at the hospital when the ambulance brought you in to the emergency room.”

Kali looked down at the bed. It was covered in paper sheets and bordered by the unforgiving rails. She wore a flimsy paper gown. The room was white. The only hint of color was provided by the steel machinery in the room. Next to the bed stood a machine that monitored Kali’s heart rate and blood pressure. Some sort of medicine flowed through plastic tubes into her veins. Humanity had been replaced by technology. No flowers lined the wooden shelf along the wall.

Kali touched the bandage on her head again. “What is this? What’s wrong with my head?” she asked.

“You had a slight concussion,” Melinda explained. “You also had a cut on your head and you had to have stitches.”

“Oh God,” Kali groaned. She couldn’t remember much of the night before or what her injuries might now be. “What else?”

“What?”

“What else is wrong with me? What else should I know about? You don’t need to hide anything from me.”

“Well...you have a mild concussion, bruises along your back and neck, and a fractured collar bone. The police are waiting down the hall to talk to you—to see if you want to press charges. I think you should at least talk to them.”

Kali’s eyes burned with tears. “I can’t talk to the police,” she said. “I don’t want to go through that again. I just can’t.”

Melinda nodded. “How do you feel?” she asked and leaned forward. Kali rolled her head back and looked at her. “I mean, besides the obvious. I know you don’t feel good. But are you going to be OK?”

“Look at me, Melinda. What am I going to do?” she said softly. Kali hesitated a moment as she tried to articulate her thoughts. “Why do I always end up in these kinds of situations? This is the second time I’ve landed in the hospital because of someone that said they loved me. No one can ever love me without a price. First, it was my mother, and now it’s Bailey. When am I ever going to be good enough? Just me? When am I ever going to be good enough to love?”

Melinda grabbed Kali’s hand. “Kali, you are good enough. You have to realize that these people are not the mirror for you to judge yourself. They aren’t capable of love—for anything. Not even themselves. You don’t deserve the things that have happened. No one does.”

“What do I do, Melinda? Why do I keep ending up here?” Kali asked and brushed a tear from her cheek. “I mean, it has to be me, doesn’t it? It’s not just bad luck. I keep attracting the same kind of people into my life. There must be something about me that invites that. It’s not just chance or coincidence.”

“You also attract good people into your life,” Melinda said. “You’re not the problem. You have problems and you need to work on certain things about yourself, but you don’t deserve this. You need to get away from Bailey and anyone else who’s going to do this to you. You left your mom and that was obviously a step in the right direction. You’ve been

able to do more with your life than you ever would have if you stayed with her. Now you just need to take that same step with Bailey.”

“What if I can’t?” Kali said and covered her brow with her hand.

“You can,” Melinda said and squeezed her hand. “Kali, you are the strongest person I know. You have pulled yourself up and made something out of you life. You came to New York with nothing. Now you have a successful career and you’re a talented artist. You can do anything. You’ve proven that through everything that you’ve done.”

“I’m afraid, Melinda,” Kali said and looked her in the eyes.

“Of what?”

“Of being alone. I’m afraid that I’ll get a divorce and go through a series of bad relationships and bad marriages just like my mother. One failure will lead to another and then another. It’ll be the first step in the downward spiral. I’ll be just like her. She’ll win.”

“Kali, you’re not your mother. You never will be. You recognize her failures and you don’t want to be like her. That’s a big difference. That you’ve managed to make it this far has proven that you’re not like her. You have to realize that your marriage’s failure is not your fault. Bailey is abusive. He hit you. It’s never OK to hit—ever. You didn’t ask for that and you don’t deserve it.”

Kali stared at Melidna in silence for a moment. “Melinda, I have to tell you something,” she said. She paused and took a deep breath. She winced and a tear squeezed from her eyes. She held her fingers over her eyes. “I...hit Bailey...first.”

Melinda said nothing. Kali looked at her to gage her reaction and saw only a blank stare.

“He told me that he was sleeping with another woman and that he had been for a long time,” Kali continued. “I just felt so...hurt. Betrayed. Then he tried to tell me that he loved me. He hugged me and told me that he loved me. I couldn’t take it. I just thought about all the things that he said to me and all the things that have happened...then I thought about that other woman. I just snapped. I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t know what else to say. I didn’t know how to handle it. So, you see, I’m exactly like my mother.”

Kali looked at Melinda again for a reaction, but tears flooded her eyes. She hung her head in her hands and wept. Melinda wrapped her arms around her shoulders and rubbed her back while she cried.

“You’re going to stay here until you get better,” Melinda said. “Then you’re going to come stay with me until you can make it on your own. We’ll go get your stuff when Bailey’s not going to be around. We’ll have the police go with us if we have to.”

Kali nodded with her head still in her hands.

“It’s going to be OK, Kali. Once you get away from that environment and put it all behind you, you’ll be able to work on changing the things that need changing. We can find you help if you need it.”

“Thank you,” Kali said through her tears.

Melinda sat up and smoothed the hair behind Kali’s ears and wiped the tears from her cheeks. Kali wiped her nose and squeezed her eyes shut as a new pain pierced through her head. She wiped her eyes and looked up at Melinda. She smiled and opened her mouth to speak, but hesitated. She became still and stared across the room over Melinda’s shoulder

with her mouth open. Melinda turned around. Bailey stood in the doorway, with a bouquet of flowers in his hand.

“Get out of here,” Melinda said as she stood up and walked towards Bailey. “You’re not allowed to be in here. Get out of here before I call the police. They’re right down the hall.”

Bailey walked past Melinda into the room. “I just wanted to talk to Kali,” he said. “She’s my wife. I have a right to see her.”

“No, you don’t,” Melinda said as she tried to push him out the door. “You don’t have any rights where she’s concerned. You’re lucky you’re not in jail right now. You’re—“

“Melinda, it’s OK,” Kali interrupted her.

Kali’s voice was weak and did not carry across the room. Melinda continued to push Bailey, and he remained immovable.

“Melinda, let him in the room,” Kali said, her voice rising. She pushed herself up in the bed.

“Kali—“

“It’s OK,” Kali said, waving her hand. “I can handle it. Don’t worry. We need to talk.”

Melinda looked at Kali for a moment without saying anything. She looked back at Bailey and leaned closer to him. “You better watch what you do,” she said. “I’ll be right outside this door. I won’t hesitate to call the police down here. If I hear anything at all that I don’t like, I’ll be in here in a second.”

“OK,” Bailey said and held up his hands. A slight smirk flitted across his features. “Don’t worry. Everything will be just fine.”

Melinda looked back at Kali one more time and Kali nodded to her to leave. She looked back at Bailey again and walked out of the room.

Bailey stood by the foot of the bed as the door shut behind him. He smiled meekly at Kali and held out the bouquet of flowers. “They’re gardenias,” he said. “Your favorite.”

Kali stared at him in silence. He wore a gray t-shirt and black dockers. His eyes looked tired and a light stubble covered his cheeks and chin. Other than when he just woke up, in all the time that they had been together, Kali had never seen him when he was not clean shaven.

“I’ll just put them down over here,” Bailey said. He laid the flowers on the table next to the bed and sat down in the chair that Melinda had previously occupied. He looked at Kali and at the tube running out of her hand and grimaced. “How do you feel?” he asked.

Kali gathered the sheets around her. She cleared her throat and crossed her arms. “How do you think?” she said.

“Kali, I am so sorry,” Bailey said and reached for her hand. Kali pulled it away before he could grab it, and he hung his head in defeat. “I never meant to hurt you,” he said. “I have never hit a woman before, and I never wanted to hit you. I’m so, so sorry.”

“What do you want me to say, Bailey? That everything’s OK? That I forgive you? Do you want me to tell you that I understand why you did this and that it’s not your fault?” Kali looked at Bailey with tired eyes.

Bailey's glanced up at the bandage on Kali's head and he squeezed his eyes shut. He rubbed the skin between his eyebrows lightly. "No, I don't. I—"

"Because it's not OK," Kali said, and raised her hands and dropped them on the sheet. "I'm sick of ending up where I am now. I'm sick of letting people take out their problems on me."

"Kali, I know what I did was wrong," Bailey said, his eyes pleading. "Don't you think I know that? I grew up watching my dad hit my mom and I swore that I would never be like him. I hated him. But I always knew I'd end up like him anyway. And I fought hard against it. I thought that I would beat it for a long time. I was never with a woman long enough to hurt her. I never tried to stay with a woman for any length of time until you came along."

"Lucky me," Kali said, and raised her eyebrows quickly. "Bailey, whether you ever hit me or not, you did the same thing. You used me. You thought that I could help you beat your demons because I could understand what you were going through. Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not here to help you figure out your life anymore. I need to figure out my own life. You're not the only one who has a past."

"I'm sorry, Kali," Bailey said and hung his head. "I never really loved a woman until I met you. I never let myself get close enough to a woman because I was too afraid. But you made me believe that things could be different. I felt like you saw the real me. I didn't have to pretend around you. I thought we could be different together because you understood me—because we both had the same struggle."

“But we couldn’t,” Kali said. “It wasn’t enough. I don’t know if I ever saw the real you, Bailey. I can’t help you change your life just like you can’t help me. We both have to do it alone. We should have never gotten married.”

“Don’t say that,” Bailey said and grabbed Kali’s hand. “We could’ve made it work. We still can. I can change. We can change together. I know we can.”

Kali withdrew her hand. “No, we can’t, Bailey. Don’t you see that now? No one else is ever going to be enough to change things for you or for me. You have to change yourself by yourself. I can’t do that for you. Not even your own desire to do that for me is enough to do it for you.”

“But I do want to do it for myself. I always have.”

“No,” Kali said and smiled. “You just told yourself that you did. But you didn’t ever really try. You stayed away from women and you stayed away from your family. When you met me, you thought I could help you because I faced the same struggle. I thought the same thing. I thought you would be the answer to my problems. I thought you could make everything different just by loving me and helping me make a life for myself. But you can’t help me. That’s not the way it works. I have to do it alone and so do you.”

“So, that’s it?” Bailey said. “Just like that. You don’t want to work it out? You’re going to leave me?”

Kali nodded her head. “Yes. But it’s not just like that,” she said. “It’s what you said you wanted, too. I think you’ve wanted it for awhile. Our lives have been building up to this point for a long time. I have to do this if I’m ever going to be happy with myself. I have to be alone for the first time in my life. I have to be really alone. I have to make a real change.”

Bailey hung his head. “What about me?” he asked in a low voice. “What will I do now?”

“I don’t know,” Kali said. “You have to figure that out on your own. You have to figure out what’s going to make you happy and make peace with yourself.”

Bailey looked up at her and rested his chin in his hand. “What about your art?” he asked. “What will you do now?”

“I’m going to do what makes me happy. And I want you to release me from my contract,” she said firmly. She looked at him with a steady gaze.

Bailey let his hand drop and his eyes widened. “I don’t know about that, Kali.”

“Bailey, you don’t need me anymore—for anything. Let me go. Let me follow my own path.”

“But the gallery?”

“You built that gallery out of your own dreams,” Kali said. “You’ll find new artists. You already have a lot of other successful artists. My loss won’t make that much of an impact.”

“What will you do instead?” Bailey asked.

“Don’t worry. I’ll figure out what to do. I’m not afraid.”

“Who will represent you? You’ve got no one.”

“I’ve got myself,” Kali said and smiled.

Bailey nodded and squeezed her hand. “OK,” he said. “I really do love you, Kali. I love you as much as I will ever love anyone, even myself.”

“I know you do,” Kali said.

Bailey let go of Kali's hand and smiled at her one last time. He stood up and turned and walked out of the room. Kali watched him through the open doorway. He paused in the doorway and looked at Melinda, who was leaning against the wall across the hallway with her arms crossed. Bailey smiled at her and waved goodbye. Melinda stood forward and dropped her arms by her side. She watched Bailey walk away then looked back at Kali in the room. She walked back inside and sat down beside the bed.

“Are you OK?” Melinda asked.

“Yes. I'm going to be OK,” Kali said confidently.

“What did he say?”

“He told me that he was sorry and that he loved me,” Kali said. “But I told him that I had to be on my own so that I can move on with my life, and that he needed to be on his own.”

“Do you believe him?” Melinda asked.

“Yes, I do.”

Melinda nodded. Kali let her eyes droop. She rubbed her arm and breathed deeply. She could hear her own heart beating. “Melinda, I need to ask you something,” she said and swallowed hard.

“What is it?”

“Will you...go to North Carolina with me?” she asked and rose her eyes to meet Melinda's. “I think I need to make a trip. There are some things I need to do—some people I need to see.”

Melinda smiled and nodded. “Of course I will.”

The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living

(Chapter 18)

Kali drove a rental car to her grandmother's house with Melinda by her side. It was the house in which she had spent most of her childhood. Whenever her mother lost another job or left another boyfriend or husband, they always moved back in with Kali's grandmother. Kali remembered spending more time in that house than in any of the other houses combined.

Kali pulled into the driveway and turned off the car. Her heart raced and her breath quickened. She sighed deeply to calm herself, and stared for a long while at the house as the memories of its details surfaced. The carport was filled with boxes stacked along the edge of the wall. The same tree that she used to climb when she was younger grew next to it. So much was the same, but there were some things that had changed. The pebbled drive was now paved with concrete. A blossoming gardenia bush was now a stump that sprouted only a few leaves. The once green paint was now a light brown; though once fresh, it was now cracked and peeling.

"So, are we going to go inside?" Melinda asked.

"Yeah," Kali said.

"They do know we're coming, right?"

"I called my grandmother," Kali said. "She knows I'm coming."

"Well, let's go in then. It's too cold to sit out here in the car all day long."

Kali and Melinda got out of the car and walked slowly up the driveway to the house. Kali stood on the step a moment before she knocked on the door. She looked at Melinda, then out at the yard. Patches of dirt were mixed in with the grass. Kali breathed deeply. After a moment, the door slowly opened and a frail, elderly woman stood before her.

“Hi, grandma,” Kali said awkwardly.

“Oh, you’re here,” Louisa said, throwing open the screen door and wrapping her arms tightly around Kali. “It’s so good to see you,” she said and squeezed her harder.

Kali tried to hug her tightly, but could feel the frail bones along her back and was afraid to squeeze too hard lest she should hurt her.

“You’ve gotten shorter, I think,” Kali said when she looked at her again.

“Oh, I’m just getting old,” she said. “Come on in. It’s cold as hell out here.”

Kali smiled and led Melinda inside.

Once inside, Kali introduced Melinda to her grandmother and they all sat down at the kitchen table. Kali looked around the room, but could only recognize some of it. An antique hutch displaying china plates stood against the far wall. The walls were a pale yellow from Louisa’s years of chain smoking. There was a new table and upholstered dining room chairs, not wood like the old ones. A new stove stood in the kitchen. The old one was green; this one was white.

“How have you been?” Louisa asked her once they were seated. “I haven’t seen you in ages. How are things in New York?”

“They’re OK, I guess,” Kali shrugged. “I guess my art’s doing pretty well. I’ve had some successful shows.”

“Well, that’s great news,” her grandmother said.

“I guess.”

“What do you mean you guess? No one in our family’s ever done anything like that. That’s a big deal.” her grandmother said and lit a cigarette.

Melinda looked around at the details of the room and held her hands in her lap.

Kali leaned her cheek on her hand and drummed her fingers on the table. “What is everyone down here up to?”

“Well, your brother’s been working out at this new plant across town,” her grandmother said and flicked the ash off her cigarette. “He got married to that girlfriend of his last year. They’re talking about maybe having a baby. Your uncle John’s been on the road. He and his wife are talking about getting a new house. They’ve got a new piece of land they want to build on.”

“Are they coming here for Christmas?”

“Oh sure, ever year. You know everyone comes here every year for Christmas.”

Kali looked at the corner of the living room, which she could see from her position at the table, and remembered the tall Christmas tree that stood there every year, covered with handmade beaded ornaments that had been made by Louisa and her mother before her. Visions of her family ripping through presents and burying themselves in a pile of wadded wrapping paper rose like pale ghosts. She turned to look into the kitchen and saw more apparitions of her grandmother baking batches of Christmas cookies. The entire counter top would be covered by dozens of batches of several kinds of cookies: chocolate chip, sugar, gingerbread. It was one of the only traditions that Kali could remember in her family.

Kali looked down at the table and rubbed her hands through her hair.

“I’m going to go in the other room and watch some TV,” Melinda said and stood up. She had been sitting quietly at the table while Kali and her grandmother talked. Kali smiled at her and nodded then looked back at her grandmother.

“So, I plan to go see mom” Kali said.

“That’ll be nice,” Louisa said. “I’m sure she’ll want to see you.”

“George said that she was clean now.”

“Yeah. She was going to meetings for awhile. But you know.”

“What?” Kali asked.

Louisa took a drag on her cigarette. “Well, you know Mimi,” Louisa said and blew out smoke. “She celebrated her one year anniversary for being sober and things looked like they would be OK. But, like always, she started going back to her old ways. She started seeing this guy and going out all the time again. She’s been drinking again.”

Kali blinked her eyes rapidly and shook her head. It was what she expected, but she still held out some hope that things could be different this time.

Kali shook her leg on her knee. She wet her lips and swallowed hard. “Grandma, why didn’t you ever do anything before? About Mimi?” she said softly. “Why didn’t you ever try to help us—me and George?”

“Well, you know your mother would never change. Mimi was always gonna be Mimi. You know that neither you or I or anybody else was gonna be able to do anything about that.”

“But why? Why didn’t you try? Or anybody else?” Kali asked, leaning forward.

“Why didn’t anyone at least try?”

Louisa stared at Kali in silence and took a long drag on her cigarette. “Why do you think you went to foster care?” she said finally. “Why do you think you weren’t brought to live here, or to live with your father?” Louisa stubbed her cigarette and took another one from the pack.

Kali looked at her in confusion. “What are you saying?”

“Social services came to me because your mother told them I was your next of kin when they picked you up. They asked me if I could keep you, or if your father was around. I told them no.” Louisa paused and looked at Kali in silence, letting the weight of her words fall.

Kali furrowed her brow and shook her head. “I don’t understand. How is that helping me?”

“Kali, I knew that if I took you in, Mimi would get out of jail and she would only come here and want to take you back. It wouldn’t have mattered what the law said or what I said. She would have found a way to be in your life in the same way that she was before. It would have been the same if you had lived with your father. I told them that we didn’t know where your father lived and that we hadn’t had contact with him for years. I helped you the only way I could. I gave you a chance at a real life—with a family that could give you things that Mimi could never have.”

Kali’s face burned and tears fell down her cheeks. “How could you—“ Kali caught her words in her throat as a lump formed. Anger leapt up.

“Why would you think that would be helping me?” Kali cried. “I was left alone there. If you wanted to help me, you should have stood up to Mimi. She was your daughter. Why couldn’t you have done something? You always let her push you around. Everyone did. So I was left alone to live with strangers. That was better?”

Louisa opened her mouth and made several attempts at speech. “I thought it would help you,” she said finally. “I only hoped that you would be able to get away from Mimi finally. I thought I was doing the right thing.” She paused and shook her head. She rubbed her arm and hung her head. “I’m sorry, Kali.”

Kali couldn’t understand how to process what her grandmother told her. She broke down in tears and laid her head on the table.

Louisa rubbed her back while she cried. “I love you, Kali. I did the best thing I knew to do for you. I hope you know that.”

Kali’s sobs subsided after a time and she lifted her head. She wiped her eyes and looked at her grandmother. “Why did it have to come to that?” she asked. “Why couldn’t you have done something before that?”

“What could I do, Kali?” Louisa said, holding her hands in the air. “Your mother dominated everyone in this family, including me. I’ve been tryin’ to keep her out of my house for years. And if I ever said anything to her about you kids, I was considered the nosy grandmother. She never listened to anything I said.” Louisa drew another cigarette out of her pack and lit it.

“I just don’t understand why she was the way she was,” Kali said and shook her head. “What mother treats her children the way she treated us? I mean, I know that I had a worse childhood than she did, and I didn’t turn out a mean and abusive drunk.”

“Well, your mother was always mad at the world,” her grandmother said and flicked ash off her cigarette, then took another drag. “She always thought that her problems were everyone else’s fault but her own and the whole world owed her somethin.’ She was always that way. Ever since she was a teenager.”

“But why?” Kali asked. “What was so wrong in her life that she had to make everyone else around her so miserable?”

“Your mother wanted to be an only child. She wanted all my attention. She was always accusing me of favorin’ her brothers over her. The truth was that I treated them all equally, but nothing I ever did for her was enough.”

Kali squinted her eyes and shook her head in confusion. “What about her dad then?”

“Well, I sent her to stay with him when I couldn’t take it anymore,” Louisa said and nodded. “She had dropped out of school and she was running around and getting into all kinds of trouble. I tried to take her to a counselor and see what I could do better—you know, see how I could improve the relationship. But the counselor told her flat out that she was spoiled and self-centered. She didn’t like to hear that. She came out of there and said ‘I don’t like him. He don’t know nuthin.’” Her grandmother crossed her arms and squinched her face in imitation as she told Kali this. “So, I sent her to her father,” she continued. “I don’t know what happened the twelve months she was with Charlie, but he ended up sending her to juvie.”

“Why?” Kali raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“I don’t know. Said she was causing trouble with the other kids. He was remarried then and his wife had two other kids. So he said she was causin’ a whole bunch of problems. She was probably doing what she did with her brothers and tryin’ to be the boss. She was always tellin’ them boys what to do and tryin’ to be mommy. She always wanted to dominate everyone.”

“How old was she then?”

“About fourteen, I guess.”

Kali nodded. She looked in the living room and saw Melinda watching music videos on the television. Kali had heard the stories about how her mother had gone to stay with her father and been sent to juvenile hall just after she dropped out of high school. It wasn’t long after that she started drinking. Kali couldn’t remember all the details of those stories now, she only remembered Mimi saying that he favored his new wife and kids over her and that she didn’t get much attention. She had tried to make it sound like her dad was really awful to her, but Kali could never understand what had happened to make her feel that way. From what Kali knew from Mimi, it sounded like she was just acting spoiled. But Mimi was so angry about it and for such a long time that Kali wondered if something more had happened that she didn’t know about.

“I just don’t understand why she ended up the way she did,” Kali said, looking back at her grandmother.

“It was the drinking. And it was that attitude she had that everything was somebody else’s fault. She never wanted to take responsibility for her own actions.”

“So, why did you put up with it for so long?” Kali asked. “She pushed you around just like everyone else. She was always telling you what to do and taking advantage of you. Why did you let her keep on doing it?”

“I could never stand up to her, Kali,” her grandmother said and stubbed her cigarette in the ashtray. “I tried a couple of times, but she always had her way in the end. There was no arguing with your mother. Plus, she was my daughter. I still loved her.”

Kali nodded and fidgeted with her hands. Her face was getting hot. “What about me?” she cried. “Why didn’t you ever try to call me, or write me, or anything after I was taken away? Why haven’t I talked to you until this very moment in over eight years?”

Her grandmother looked at her in surprise. “I didn’t try to contact you—at first—because your mother was absolutely crazy about what happened. I couldn’t get in touch with you. Then you moved. I didn’t know how to reach you.”

“But George found me when he needed to. You could have, too.” Kali wiped away a tear as it fell down her cheek.

“Well, why didn’t you call here, Kali? The phone number’s never changed.”

Kali shook her head and shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I didn’t want to risk further contact with mom. I didn’t think you cared. No one ever called me. I thought if you really cared, you’d call.”

“Of course I care, Kali. You’re my granddaughter. I love you.”

Kali shook her head and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. Her grandmother leaned across the table and hugged her.

Kali stayed with her grandmother a while longer and talked more about the family and what was happening in their lives. Kali kept looking into her grandmother's face for any signs of resemblance. Her grandmother looked nothing like her. She had changed so much since the last time that Kali saw her. She looked fragile and she had lost too much weight. Her skin had grown thin and wrinkled. At age seventy, she had finally begun to grow gray hair. She wore a hearing aid. Even when Kali was younger, the pictures of her grandmother had never looked anything like her. Kali had always looked like her mother.

Kali took leave of her grandmother late in the afternoon.

"Your brother's stoppin' by later with his girlfriend. You sure you don't want to stay and visit?" her grandmother asked her from the doorway.

"Maybe," Kali said and smiled. "I've just got to take care of some things first."

"Where're you stayin'? Why don't you stay here? I've got that extra room."

"No, thanks," Kali said. "We've got a hotel already. We want to get up early and drive back."

"Why the rush? Why don't you stay awhile? I know a lot of people would be happy to see you."

"No. I just needed to take care of this. Then I have to go back to New York and take care of some other things."

Kali's grandmother nodded and smiled weakly.

"Maybe another time though," Kali offered. "I think I'd definitely like to come back for another visit."

"I hope you do. We'd all like to see more of you."

Kali gave her another hug and said goodbye.

As Kali and Melinda drove across town to Mimi's house, Kali let the weight of her grandmother's words fall on her. Louisa's admission had awakened new emotions in Kali—feelings that she hadn't had in a long time. What she told Kali also quieted some emotions—feelings that she had struggled to quell. As these conflicting emotions washed over her, Kali felt both excited and nauseous; she felt almost dizzy.

Kali and Melinda talked little on the drive over. Melinda asked Kali about her talk with her grandmother and Kali briefly related it. Kali told Melinda about the stories Mimi had told her from her own childhood. She told Melinda as much to give her the history of her family as to work out some of her own questions about it. Melinda was a sounding board for Kali to make sense of her thoughts. Kali didn't cry; she talked like she wanted to understand. She searched for the answers in what she told Melinda.

Kali drove up to her mother's small stucco house and sat in the car in the driveway. She let out a deep breath and stared at the house. The structure was a simple square with only two windows facing the front yard. A dirt path led up to the house and functioned as a driveway. Weeds with small orange and yellow blossoms grew up next to the entrance. A tree in the center of the yard had been left bare and lifeless by the hard winter months.

"Kali, do you want me to stay in the car?" Melinda asked her.

Kali looked at her with a blank expression. She nodded and said nothing.

"Are you going to be OK?" Melinda asked.

Kali looked back at the house and then at Melinda. She pushed her eyebrows together and looked down in thought. She looked back up at Melinda and nodded again. “I can do this,” she said.

Kali walked up the dirt path to the front door. She raised her hand to the door and let it hang in the air. She looked down, took a deep breath, and then rapped on the door.

Kali stared at the door and her heart pounded in her chest. Her breath came quicker and she swallowed hard. She opened her mouth to take in more air and wrung her hands together. Kali looked back at the car and saw Melinda sitting inside. Just as she was about to turn to leave, the door opened. Kali turned back and looked into the eyes of her mother.

Mimi stared at her in silence, and then crossed her arms and leaned her hip against the doorframe. She watched Kali in silence, waiting for her to speak.

“Uh, hi,” Kali said in a whisper. She cleared her throat and spoke again. “Hi. Can I come in?”

Mimi moved aside and watched Kali with a scowl as she walked inside. Kali stood near the doorway and surveyed the room. A brown couch sat on a concrete floor. A faux Persian throw rug covered the floor directly in front of the couch. A handmade afghan throw of blue and red was thrown over the back of the couch. A small television with manual knobs sat on top of a small cart in the corner. Kali sat down in a worn beige recliner with dark stains on the arms.

Mimi walked past her and sat on the couch. Kali and Mimi watched each other in silence. Mimi had aged since Kali saw her last. Her pale brown hair was streaked with gray. Once long and straight, her hair was now cut and permed in a tight curl against her scalp. Her

dark, penetrating eyes were cloudy and dim. Her slender fingers were now knobby and square at the fingernails. She wore a faded blue t-shirt and torn jeans. She wore no jewelry or makeup. The woman who once looked so intimidating and strong to Kali, now looked weak and pathetic.

“What are you doing here?” Mimi asked finally.

“I’m not exactly sure why I’m here,” Kali said awkwardly. “I guess I thought if I came here, I’d undergo some sort of magical transformation.” She laughed nervously. “Like if I just came here and faced you—faced my past—it would just disappear—go away.”

Mimi crossed her arms and stiffened her posture. “What do you want?”

“Well, I...uh...I came to talk to you.”

Mimi smirked slightly. “So, you came to talk to me—after all this time?”

“Well, uh, there are some things that I’d like to say to you,” Kali said.

Mimi eyed her suspiciously and said nothing. Kali looked at her uncertainly and rubbed her hands on her knees.

“Well, what do you want to say?” Mimi asked.

“Um...I don’t really know where to start,” Kali said and looked around nervously. She spoke slowly and carefully. “I guess, you see, the thing is that I’m not...at peace. I mean, I’m not happy. I really don’t know if I ever have been. I thought that if I left North Carolina—if I got away and made my own life for myself—that I would figure out how things were supposed to be. Like if I left, I would figure out how normal people lived. It always seemed like everyone else had things all figured out.”

Kali looked at Mimi and winced slightly. She waited for Mimi's typical flash of anger, but was surprised when Mimi only sat motionless on the couch. Her expression betrayed no reaction.

"Well, what I realize is that even though I was always trying to separate myself from the past, I was always still in it," Kali continued. "I was looking at my life from the perspective of what I had known before. I couldn't see the world the way other people did because I started out from this other place that was distorted. I kept looking for love and was never able to find it. I couldn't recognize it because I never got it."

Mimi sighed loudly and rolled her eyes. Kali hesitated and looked at her uncertainly.

"So, I just kept running away and running toward something else, something I thought would be better," Kali continued. "When I thought I was really happy, it was because I had found what I had always known. I got married to a man who told me he loved me, but abused me. I kept taking the abuse because I kept getting the love. But something happened. Something changed inside me. I realized that I was becoming just like you. Maybe I was a little different because I tried to make a better life for myself. But I really was doing the same thing you were. I mean, weren't you trying to run from your problems by drinking? Weren't you trying to find some sort of fulfillment in yourself through all those men?"

Mimi looked up at Kali in surprise, then shifted uncomfortably and stared at the floor. After a pause, she looked up at Kali with hardened features. Kali jerked back in her seat imperceptibly when she saw Mimi's expression.

“How dare you judge me,” Mimi barked. “You don’t know anything about the men I was with. You don’t know anything about me. You weren’t abused. I did the best I could raising you and your brother. You have no right to judge me!”

Kali looked at Mimi curiously and blinked several times. She took in a deep breath and moved her head back slightly. “You’re right. I probably don’t know anything about you,” Kali began slowly. “But that’s just the point. I never could know you just like you never could know me. You wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Kali, I have my own problems,” Mimi said. “They have nothing to do with you. You can’t keep blaming me for your life.”

“No, you’re right,” Kali said. “I can’t keep blaming you. I have to take responsibility for myself. So, I realized that the only way to move on is to let go. It’s the only way I’ll ever be happy. I used to think that doing that meant that I would have to forget or say that what happened was OK. But I know now that’s not true. I just need to not let it control me anymore. I need to move on and learn to find love in myself and be a whole person. I don’t have to forget, but I don’t have to keep remembering.”

Kali paused and wiped the tears that had fallen down her face. She drew in a deep breath.

“There’s nothing for you to forgive or forget,” Mimi said with a bitter expression. “You had a normal childhood. I wasn’t a bad mother. You had things no worse than I did.”

Kali looked at her mother and sighed. Mimi watched her defiantly with her arms crossed. Kali focused on a frayed edge of the afghan throw on the back of the couch while she spoke. “Look, I’m not here to say that I forgive you,” she said. “I’m just here to say the

things that I've needed to say all these years—to somehow try to make you understand. I want you to know that I'm not angry at you anymore. I know you were a sick woman.”

“You had no reason to be angry,” Mimi said. “I've tried to get clean. I was in rehab. I was sober for over a year.”

“I know,” Kali said. She wiped the last of the tears from her eyes and sniffed. “I know you were. But you always go right back to drinking. It's always been that way. If you could ever clean up for good, then maybe things could be different. But I don't know if you ever can.”

The defiant expression on Mimi's face slowly faded and her cheeks and her eyes drooped. She let her arms fall and her head drop. She sat silently for several moments. She sniffed and wiped her cheeks. “Kali, I...” Mimi could not finish and her words were lost in tears.

“It's OK,” Kali said. “It's your own struggle. But I've got my own. Which is why I have to say goodbye now.”

Mimi looked up at her quickly and shook her head. “No, you don't have to go,” she said. “You don't have to say goodbye.”

“Yes, I do,” Kali said softly. “I need to—to move on with my life. I'm sorry that things couldn't have been better. I'm sorry that your life was so hard for you and you couldn't ever find peace or happiness. I'm sorry that things had to be the way they were for me, but I'm not going to dwell on it any longer. Most of all, I'm sorry that I never had a mother I could love. But now it's time for me to learn to love myself.”

Mimi winced and tears flowed freely down her face.

“I’m sorry,” Kali repeated softly. “It’s what I have to do for myself. I don’t think I’ll need to visit you again, but I might come back to get to know the rest of the family better than I do now. If you can ever change and get clean, then maybe we can talk again. But you need to know me as a person before you can hope to know me as a daughter.”

Kali stood up and stared at Mimi silently. Mimi wiped her eyes and looked up at Kali.

“I’m sorry,” Kali said softly. She turned slowly and walked outside. A cold wind blew across her face and she wrapped her jacket tighter around her. The gray sky was still cloudy, but a section had cleared to reveal the sun. Kali felt it warm her skin.

Kali got back in the car and Melinda looked at her in expectation. “How did it go?”

“Better than I thought,” Kali said. “But also worse than I thought.” She paused and looked at Melinda. “Thank you for coming. I don’t know if I could have done all of this myself.”

Melinda smiled. “Yes, you could have.”

Kali backed down the driveway and took a last look at the house. Mimi walked out onto the porch and leaned against the rusty column. She wrapped one arm around her waist and waved slowly at Kali as she pulled onto the road.

Kali smiled and waved back, then turned her attention to the road to begin the long drive home.

Res Ipsa

(Epilogue)

Kali moved around the room confidently, smiling at the people around her and holding her head high. She wore a flowing green skirt and a ruffled white shirt that tied at the neckline. Her skin glowed and her eyes shown. She wore no makeup and her hair was knotted loosely on her head. She seemed to glide across the room, as she greeted those she knew and introduced herself to those she didn't.

Waiters crossed the room with champagne, but Kali did not take a drink. She kept her head erect and made eye contact with everyone that she passed. People laughed and talked over the sculptures displayed on bases throughout the room. Kali was in light spirits and did not entertain any thoughts of doubt.

Kali spotted a woman standing next to a clay statue of a woman. She walked over to her and introduced herself. The woman looked up at her in surprise then introduced herself.

“Do you like this piece?” Kali asked.

“Yes, very much,” the woman returned. “I really like the features of the face. You've really captured the mixture of fear and sadness here.”

“Well, thank you,” Kali said. “I was really trying to capture the inner emotion that most women feel. I was trying to show how strong we are, despite the fears that we hold inside, or the sadness that we feel. How do you like the rest of the show?”

“I was kind of expecting to see some paintings,” the woman said. “I was at your last show and was interested in buying one of your pieces, but didn’t. I thought there might be something here for me.”

“There still might be,” Kali said. “Take a look around. There’s a lot here. This is my first showing of sculpture. I’d really be interested in what you think after you’ve had a chance to look around.”

The woman nodded quickly and smiled politely before she turned and walked away. Kali spotted another group standing around a sculpture across the room and turned toward them. On her way across the room, Melinda intercepted her.

“The turnout is really great, Kali,” Melinda said, grabbing Kali’s hands while she surveyed the room. “There are a lot of people here—a lot more than you expected. I’ll bet you’ll sell a lot of work tonight.”

“I hope so,” Kali said. “Realistically, I don’t know. I’m just happy that I was able to convince the gallery to give me the opportunity.” Kali nodded and smiled at Susan Sloane, the gallery director that Kali had worked with when Bailey worked as her assistant. She stood across the room staring at Kali.

“Oh boy, I don’t think she’s too happy,” Kali said. “If this show doesn’t turn out some profits for her, I doubt I’ll be able to convince her to let me back.”

“Don’t worry about her,” Melinda said. “I think what you’re doing is fantastic. You’ve been wanting to do a show of sculpture for such a long time, and now you are finally getting your chance. Don’t let anyone else let you get down tonight.”

“I won’t. I’m having a great time. I’m really happy that I’m here and I’m finally getting to do this, you know? It doesn’t really matter to me if I sell a thing. I just want to make sure I get a chance to do this again.”

“If you don’t sell anything, I might even buy a piece,” Melinda said. “It would be a good investment anyway. I could get one of your first pieces on the cheap before you become world famous.”

“Let’s not get carried away,” Kali said and laughed. “I never got world famous from my painting and people were a little more enthusiastic about that than they are my sculpture. No, I’m just glad I’m here tonight. And I’m glad that you’re here with me.”

“Of course,” Melinda said. “I wouldn’t miss it. I’m so happy for you. You’re really doing great. I was a little worried after your split with Bailey. But you’ve really been doing just fine on your own. I’m really proud of you, Kali.”

Kali smiled and hugged Melinda. When she pulled back, she looked around the room and spotted the group that she had originally intended to approach.

“I think I’m going to do some mingling,” Kali said. “Now that I’m my own agent, I have to talk my art up a little more. There’s a group over there that’s been talking over that piece for some time. Who knows?” Kali raised her eyebrows and shrugged at Melinda.

“Good luck,” Melinda said. “I’ll be doing some mingling of my own. You never know.” Melinda smiled deviously and straightened the straps on her short silver dress. She walked across the room to where a young woman with long red hair and a daisy perched behind her ear was sipping champagne.

Kali smiled and walked over to the group of people that were standing by the sculpture in the corner. Two women wearing long, flowing skirts accompanied two men wearing Oxford shirts and Dockers. Kali walked up behind them and introduced herself gently.

“Hello,” she said, interrupting their conversation. “I hope you’re all having a good time tonight. I’m Kali Nichols, the artist.”

A look of recognition replaced the looks of confusion and anticipation that Kali had first encountered.

“Very nice to meet you,” said one of the women, shaking Kali’s hand. “We were just saying how much we love this sculpture.”

“Thank you very much,” Kali said and looked down at a sculpture of a dead bird. It was the first piece of sculpture that Kali had finished after she went to North Carolina. It was inspired by the same bird that Kali had seen in the park so many years ago when she was still a young art student in college, and still dating Mike.

“You’ve really captured the loss and loneliness in the vacant eyes,” the woman continued, her head nodding vigorously as she spoke. “I can just look at those eyes and feel the weight of my own humanity staring back at me.”

“Oh, Leslie, you’re so deep and abstract,” one of the men poked at her. “The next thing you know, she’ll be giving us all a treatise on existentialism and the human condition,” he said to the man standing next to him. The two men laughed and Leslie glared at them with a flushed face.

Leslie turned back to Kali and smiled in embarrassment. “Excuse my friends,” she said. “But I really do love this piece. Like I was just saying to them, I feel like it’s the stark reality of our own mortality staring back at us. So, in a sense, it is a symbol of our humanity and that which connects us all.”

“Thank you, again,” Kali said. “I agree with you completely. I’m always glad when someone else can connect with my work in much the same way that I do.”

Kali looked at the two men and the other woman in the group and they looked down or smiled as she met each person’s gaze. She turned her attention back to Leslie.

“You know that all the pieces in the show are for sale,” Kali said.

“Oh, I don’t think I could afford it,” Leslie said quickly.

“We could work something out,” Kali said. “I’m more interested in someone taking the sculpture who is really touched by it than I am interested in the money.”

“Oh, really. I really don’t think that I could.”

Kali looked back at Leslie’s friends who watched her with slight smirks on their faces. She turned back to Leslie. “What if I cut ten percent?”

“Really? That would be great,” Leslie gushed. “Thank you so much.”

One of the men rolled his eyes and whispered to the man next to him. Kali eyed them in her peripheral vision and nodded to Leslie.

“I’ll tell Susan, the gallery director,” Kali said. “I’ll have her take care of it for you.”

“Thank you so much.”

“It was nice meeting you,” Kali said and shook her hand. “I hope you enjoy the rest

of the show. Let me know if you're interested in any other pieces." Kali looked at the others and nodded politely to them.

Kali walked to a corner to survey the room. There was a hum of voices as people talked over her sculpture. She could not hear what they were saying, but it did not matter to her. Some of their expressions showed disappointment, others confusion or understanding. But none of it affected Kali. She felt content.

While she stood in the corner, Susan Sloane interrupted her reverie with an abrupt greeting.

"Kali, I should think you would be out in the crowd trying to sell some of your work," Susan said. "We haven't sold a single piece yet."

"I just talked to a woman who agreed to buy a piece at a ten percent discount," Kali said. A look of irritation spread across Susan's face. "I told her that you would take care of it for her. She was a very nice woman. I liked talking to her."

"Kali, you're not here to enjoy talking to people or to make friends or whatever you're doing. This is about making money. Right now, you're not making any. If you sell any pieces, they certainly should not be at a discount. We can't afford to lose any more than we already are."

"It's OK, Susan," Kali said. "I'm sure we'll sell a few more of the pieces. The show's barely begun. We still have all night. Don't worry so much. I'm sure the show won't be disappointing."

"Kali, you know I only agreed to host this show because of your relationship with Bailey and your reputation as a painter," Susan said.

“Susan, I would appreciate it if you would stop referring to my relationship with Bailey,” Kali said firmly, but gently. “That’s over. If you are going to deal with me and my art, you need to remember that I represent myself now. Now stop worrying. I’m sure that we will sell some more work before the night’s over.”

“I hope you’re right,” Susan said. “You definitely need it.” Susan turned abruptly and walked away. Kali mused silently and returned to the crowd to do what she could to promote the show.

By the end of the night, Kali had sold only three pieces of sculpture. Susan begrudgingly congratulated her on the small success, but made no mention of a future relationship between the gallery and Kali. Their initial agreement was for one show only. Though she knew that she would have to work harder to convince another gallery to host a second, Kali returned home in good spirits. She had accomplished what she had intended.

Kali returned to her small, empty apartment and sank down on her worn and dirty couch. Her studio apartment was not much bigger than the dorm she had lived in at college. Her paintings and earlier sketches covered the painted brick walls. She couldn’t afford to have them framed, so many of the drawings were taped and the canvases hung on nails. She had no television and only the couch and a chair occupied the living room space. Kali had few belongings in the apartment, but she could look around her and tell that the place was her own. She closed her eyes and rested a moment on the couch before she went to her room and changed into a pair of gray sweats and a t-shirt. Though it was late into the night, Kali did not feel tired. She was energized and ready to work.

Kali walked to the corner of the room that she had set up as a workspace. She had begun a clay statue the week before and decided that she would finally finish it. She prepared a bowl of water and placed it next to the statue. All of her tools were still lying on the table from the last time that she used them, some still smeared with the clay. Kali sat down on the hard, wooden stool and began to work.

Kali looked down at her unfinished creation and moved her hands up the sides of its figure. The full hips angled out in a pose that suggested a relaxed indifference and confidence all at once. A mixture of water and clay splashed onto the table as Kali worked her hands expertly and lovingly over the form. The small wooden desk on which Kali worked was covered in a thick coat of the gray clay and water, which was beginning to harden in places, creating a second layer on top of the wood. Kali's arms and face were smeared with the gray mixture, but she did not seem to notice. She wiped her forearm across her face to scratch her nose and spread more of the liquid across her cheeks and the top of her lip. She continued undistracted.

As her nimble fingers progressed upwards across the bosom and shoulders of the statuette before her, she let her thoughts wander. Though she had lost Bailey, she felt at peace. She knew that she loved him and that he loved her, but also knew that they would never be right together. They had learned that they were too much alike in all the wrong ways to ever be happy together. They brought out all the negative qualities in one another and they weren't strong enough together to overcome that. Kali smiled and pinched the clay at the shoulders of her figure, creating a thin line to accentuate the haughty posture.

Kali had only sold the three pieces of sculpture, but she felt good about her future. Though her first attempts at sculpture weren't as successful as her first attempts at painting, she knew that she would continue to move forward and would do better with time. She still had much to learn and develop. For the first time in her life, she felt like she was working towards something that she really wanted: it wasn't for her mother or her family; it wasn't for her friends or her husband; it was completely for herself. She had nothing to prove or earn from anyone else. She only worked to make herself happy and to fulfill her own goals. Kali knew that she didn't have to work to please her public. If she did not earn enough as a sculptor, she knew that she could always sell her painting.

Kali molded the face of her statuette and formed the frame of the features: the cheekbones, the forehead, and the chin. Kali glanced in a mirror that she had set up on the table next to the statue. Her high cheekbones shined under the light that fell through the open window. Her brown hair glowed auburn beneath the lights and fell softly over her forehead. Her eyebrows arched high over her almond eyes. She turned back to her statue and began etching the features in the clay with a stylus.

Kali thought about her mother. Since she was a little girl, everyone had told her that she looked like her mother. It had been a very long time since Kali felt proud to hear people tell her that. When she was six, Kali remembered a time when she looked up at her mother and saw the reflection of youthful energy and hope shining back at her. Mimi was married to her second husband, James, and Kali's brother still lived with them. For awhile, they resembled a normal family. Mimi had a steady job and a husband who treated her with

respect. They seemed happy. Kali could still look to her mother for strength and protection, and she still thought of her mother as the most beautiful woman in the world.

During that time, they gathered for family dinners and watched television together in the evenings, lying on the floor and the couch with their legs draped over one another. Kali's artistic talents were blossoming and Mimi would shower praise on the endless drawings that Kali produced. George worked on his homework in the evenings and felt proud when he worked hard enough to bring home an A, even if it was only in gym or music. Mimi and James still laughed together. They would listen to music and dance in the living room. They would hold hands while they sat together on the couch. It was not an idyllic time; it was a happy time. It was a time that Kali could think about her family and be proud. She could still think of herself as normal. Kali could still look at her mother and think that she was beautiful. Kali could look at her mother and feel better about herself.

Then Kali thought about the last time that she had seen Mimi. Her face was drawn and tired; traces of wrinkles showed on her still young face. Her once full and shiny hair was limp and dull. Large dark circles formed under her eyes and lines traced her thin lips. In her eyes where there was once hope, there was now emptiness.

Kali looked back down at her statue, which was nearing completion. She touched the stylus to the clay in practiced, meticulous motions, adding the final touches to the features of the face. Kali thought about her mother and the decision that she had made. She no longer had a need to hold on to her anger or her sadness. She had finally reached a place in herself where she could not only tell herself that she would try to be happy and wasn't angry, but she had reached a place where she was actually capable of doing so. Kali realized that she did not

have to be controlled by her mother. She did not have to be Mimi. She had found a place where she could look inward without fear. She was beginning to recognize herself, instead of the reflection.

Kali looked down at her sculpture, which was finally finished. She looked into her own eyes staring back at her and felt a sense of peace. Before her she saw herself, and she saw her mother before she had lost all sense of self and hope.