

Erin Grey

By Emily Sewalson

Preface

If I only knew that my desire to attend Yale University was going to cause me so much pain and turmoil I would have severed that dream long before I applied. There are no words that can describe my actions the day of my personal tragedy, other than horrendous. What if I would have been more selfless, more understanding, and more caring? Would things be different today? If just one thing would have been different, maybe I wouldn't be in the place I am now. But, I couldn't just stand around thinking, "what if" I had to learn to deal with the permanence of my hardships... my decisions.

I never gave much thought to how I would react if something should happen to the family I cared for and held so dearly. It was something I was never worried about. I figured they would be there, because they were family and families were there when you needed them. I have come to the realization that what happened that sad day was no ones fault, it couldn't have been prevented. Yet, I still blame myself.

But, all of this would be better understood when written in detail, rather than summarized. So, I will tell you.

My name is Erin Grey... and this is my story.

Chapter 1

I sat arms, and legs crossed in the passenger seat of my mom's white suburban. I was angry, and I was going to make it known. She was the one that started talking about Yale, not me. She knew that every time one of us brought it up, it resulted in an argument. My selfish thinking would result in major consequences. I had just turned 18 a few days ago and I was ready for life out on my own.

As we drove through the subdivisions, I occasionally glanced at the passing houses. *Could our neighborhood get any more boring?* I thought as we passed the look-alike, cookie-cutter houses outside my window. It was very common in our small suburb for the houses to look alike. I couldn't wait to get out of here, see the world! There were so many options that I had as a future journalist. I had the option of seeing the great pyramids in Egypt, the Loch Ness monster in Scotland, and many, many

more. After many moments of visualizing my future, I clued back into what my mother was saying.

"I just think it would be nice for you to spend the summer here with us before you head off for Connecticut in the fall. We won't see you much after that. Plus, your brother adores you. He will, along with the rest of us, miss you terribly if you leave so soon." She said as we pulled into our neighborhood.

"Speaking of my brother... where is Matthew?" I asked my mom. "Did we leave him home alone when we left for the store? He's only 12." I said. Personally, I didn't think he was old enough to be home alone for long periods of time.

"You're right he is 12. That's how old you were when I started leaving you home alone" She told me as she glared at me. She, I could tell, was frustrated with me trying to judge her ability to parent.

"Yes, I remember that." I looked at her with a challengingly. "but, I think I was a bit more mature at 12 than he is now." I told her with confidence.

"Hmm... I don't agree with that statement." She rolled her eyes. "which is yet another reason I think you should stay home for the summer. I think you could use as much growing up as you

can get before you go out on your own." She raised her eyebrows and straightened her smile. She was egging me on.

I was getting on her nerves. This was one subject we had been arguing about since I got my acceptance letter in May. My letter also included an early orientation invitation, which was the reason for our relentless arguing. Although, this was one battle I refused to lose.

"Mom...this is a once in a lifetime opportunity! I am one of only 200 that have been invited for early orientation and classes. For freshman this is beyond remarkable. I love Matthew, dad, and you more than anything. I will miss you all immensely when I leave. But, it's not like I'm dying.. I am just going off to school." I told her, as I shook my head. I didn't understand why she was being so difficult about this.

"Oh I understand sweetheart." She said in a more gentle tone. "I just know how excited you are to be out on your own, but your father and I just want to see you and spend as much time with you as we possibly can before you go all independent adult on us." She responded.

I admired how my mom responded even in heavy arguments. She has always been the peacemaker, and very patient with me. I, unfortunately, had my dad's temper.

I spotted a smile escape from her mouth as I glanced out of the corner of my eye. My mother was absolutely beautiful; she possessed the longest, bounciest, dark, brown, curly hair I had ever seen. She also had the sweetest blue eyes that could leave anyone captivated. My dad tells me every day, "Erin, it's a good thing you look like your mother. I would feel awful if you got stuck with my looks." Then he would wink at me. "I thank the Lord every day for her. You know... she was the sweetest, most humble, and loveliest girl in high school. Every guy wished she would notice them." I heard that every day, and every day he would tell me more stories of their high school years together. I loved hearing those stories. The stories only made me admire my mom even more.

The rest of the car ride home was silent and uncomfortable. When we made it home, the awkward silence only grew. The moment we walked in the door, my mom broke the silence. She was frustrated, I could tell.

"Erin, you may be 18 but I still think you have quite a bit of growing up to do before you go off to college. I think a summer here, with your family, will help mature you." She said as she began preparing for dinner. Her words were a bit quicker and more forceful than before.

"Mom, I know exactly what you're saying! You have said it a billion times! I don't need to hear it again! Do I need a lecture every time I disagree with you? No!! I'm sick of this! I am 18... an adult and I can do whatever I want legally. So, I think it would be best if you just let me decide!" I dramatically stated as I very forcefully sat down on a chair at the kitchen table, red in the face with anger. Even my ears were burning.

I knew I had hurt her terribly when she looked at me, and her big blue eyes welled up with tears. Slowly they began to stream from her face. In my perspective, I was completely in the right, but I knew I had gone too far.

Knowing that I couldn't stick around, I looked back at her once and ran to my room. It was my own personal sanctuary... very calming colors. Soft blues and browns coated my walls with color. Books filled my room; my parents called it our house library. I had a deep desire to learn, to read. I desired knowledge the way a dehydrated person longed for water.

I laid on my bed for a few hours and read a book I had gotten from the library several days ago. I heard my dad come in around five, and I heard my mom telling him all about our blow out earlier. I could only pick out bits and pieces of their conversation. I heard my mom's muffled sob from in my room. She was

using my dad as her crying shoulder. I felt horrible for the way I acted, but I knew that I couldn't go downstairs yet... it would be too soon. I had to let both of us calm down. So, until we both had that time, I decided to take a nap.

I woke up to a very potent smell of smoke, it was in my room. Something was terribly wrong! No matter what it was, something was on fire and it was in my house. I had to get out of there fast! I jumped from my bed immediately and went to open my door. I knew I couldn't touch the door knob. If I did, the skin on my hand would be seared off. I quickly ran to one of my bookshelves, grabbed two book-ends, and ran back to my door. I took one book end in each hand, squeezed them against the knob, twisted, and pulled. I pulled it the rest of the way open with my foot. Clouds of smoke instantly entered my lungs and I could do nothing but cough. I stumbled back into my room and tried to breathe. I took several deep breathes and realized I had no time to waste... I had to find my family.

I took one massive breathe, covered my mouth with my sleeve, and opened my door. I couldn't see a thing, everything was covered with smoke. It was good that the fire department

came to my 5th grade class, so I knew to crawl on the ground. I crawled into my brother's room to make sure he wasn't trapped. I couldn't see him anywhere. I then came to my parent's room, frantically searching. I looked everywhere and I couldn't see them. My entire family was downstairs, which means they were close to the fire.

I was attempting to make my way down to the first floor, trying to stay close to the carpeted stairs. I rolled down several steps until I came to a halt on the landing mid-way down the steps. My eyes frantically searched the living room. My glance darted left and right as my worry grew to panic. *Where were they?!* I questioningly screamed to myself.

"Mom! Dad! Where are you?! Are you down there?!" I half yelled, half coughed as I scanned the living room. I prayed, and hoped they would respond, and fast.

"We are over here." I heard the sweet sound of my mom's trembling voice calling from the dining room.

I struggled to make it quickly down the rest of the stairs. I, once again, rolled down half of them in my attempt to move hastily. I finally made it to the dining room and found a horrifying sight. My parents limp, stuck under the china cabinet. My dad was frantically pushing.. trying to get it off my mother and

himself. He coughed constantly and took very short rests between pushes.

I crawled over to where they were, and they looked at me with tear-stained faces. The smoke was invading my lungs, it was getting harder and harder to breathe. I didn't know how much longer I could keep this up.

"Mom, dad, we have to get you out of here. Where is Matthew?" I said, trying to lift the heavy China cabinet.

"Erin, go find your brother." My dad commanded me, between his coughing and his attempt to get out from under the china cabinet. "You have to. Go get him! Stay together!" he said, even louder this time. "But... Erin, promise me something. Please?" He looked at me. I had never seen my father cry before, but tears streamed down his face as he was fighting for my mother's and his own life.

"Of course dad, anything." I spit out in my trembling voice. It was almost impossible to speak correctly when you were crying and had barrels of smoke gusting down into your lungs every moment.

"If we don't make it..." He looked at me with as serious of a face as he could put on without losing all composure. "I want

you to know that I love you, first and foremost. But I want you to promise me that you will always look out for your brother. Never let anything come between you two. Stay close, the both of you will need each other with or without us there." He nodded at me. "But, right now... I want you to go find your him. Get both of you out of here." He said as he motioned me to go on and began to push again. Clearly it was hard for him to send me away. After another push, as I began to crawl away, he stopped pushing and sobbed.

"Erin" my mom said, as she was reaching over to touch my knee to stop me. "don't feel bad for upsetting me earlier. I know you didn't mean for the words you said to hurt me. So, don't feel bad. I forgive you. I love you and your brother so much, don't ever forget it. If we don't make it, please remind yourself and your brother of that often." She smiled at me. She seemed to be more together than my father was. "Listen to your dad now, Erin, go find Matthew and get out of here. Your father and I can take care of ourselves." She told me.

Tears were overwhelmingly flooding my eyes. "I wish I would have never said those things, mom. I am so sorry I hurt you." I choked "mom, dad, I love you. I wish I would have said it more often." I took her hand in mine, and squeezed it tight. I wiped

my eyes and coughed. I hate that I hurt her. I hate how selfish I was.

"I love you too sweetheart, so much" they said in unison. Then my mom continued. "you need to find your brother before it's too late. Don't worry about us. God will take care of us. Tell Matthew we love him, and if we don't make it that we will meet you two in the kingdom of heaven. Someday, whether it be today or in heaven, we will be reunited. We love you, now go." My mom and dad's final words run through my mind over and over again, even today.

I crawled with intense speed throughout the whole main floor, to find my brother lying in the laundry room unconscious. I had to get us both out of here immediately, or neither one of us would make it. I pulled him up and threw him on top of my back. I could barely breathe now, I felt like my lungs were slowly closing up. I was desperate for air. All I could see, smell, and breathe was smoke. I passed room after room, knowing that I was still a good distance from the front door. The need to get Matthew and I out of here was urgent. My adrenaline was the only thing that helped me to carry on. I finally made it to the entry way, as I heard sirens alarming down our street. They

had finally made it. I sighed in relief, knowing they were coming. But, the struggle wasn't over yet... I had to get outside. I struggled as I reached for the door. Someone on the other side opened it as I leaned to push the door open. I collapsed and Matthew and I rolled out the door onto the front lawn. I was exhausted and couldn't move. I laid there on the grass, gasping for fresh air. I was frantic, and exhausted. I had to know that my brother was OK. I glanced to my left and saw Matthew right beside me. When I looked to my right I saw two firemen running out from the front door of my house with my mom cradled in one man's arms and my father over the other ones shoulder. They sprinted for the ambulance with my parents.

I sighed, and took one long deep breathe. I did it, I got my brother out. My parents were out as well. My eyes were starting to close as I looked up, and there was a nurse and a fireman standing above me. I closed my eyes as I slipped into the world of black unconsciousness.

Chapter 2

I awoke to the sound of a beeping monitor, and distant voices. The voices were soft, and quiet. As I opened my eyes, my vision was blurry and I couldn't see well. The more I opened and closed my eyes, the sight of a white tiled ceiling became clear. This certainly wasn't home. I felt for my book to my left, where I thought I had set it down before my nap, but nothing was there. All I felt were bed sheets, but they weren't the ones from my bed. I glanced to my left, and saw a chair and a nightstand with a few magazines lying on top of it. I then glanced to my right and saw monitors. I pulled myself up so I was in a seated position. When I looked at my arm, there was an IV fixed in it. I was in a hospital! What happened? I couldn't remember anything.

Then my chest felt compressed, heavy and tight. I remember the fight, the fire, and the desperate urgency to get out of my house, to get air. I started to breathe frantically, as I recalled the events that had occurred however long ago it was. I

didn't know how long I had been here, or how long I was asleep. I remember the frightening, dancing, red and yellow flames that engulfed the house I had lived in my entire life. I remember passing the fireplace what I had taken my first steps as a child.

I glanced out the clear, glass windows in my hospital room. Through them I could see the hallway. Outside stood a nurse with her back toward me and a doctor whose facial features I couldn't make out because he was focused on his clip board, and writing something on the papers it held.

"How's the situation with Matthew and Erin Grey?" I heard a doctor ask a nurse outside my room. They obviously weren't aware that I was awake.

"The girl is fine. She has several bruises and some severe second degree burns on her arms and legs. They aren't too serious enough to be thirds' though, we will just have to give her some medicine when she wakes up for the pain, but other than that she is doing well. She should be waking up anytime now." The nurse responded. "the boy, however, is not doing as well as his sister. He has undergone severe trauma to his head." She said with sadness in her voice. Some words came out a bit broken up. I was frustrated because when she spoke now, I could only

make out a few words here and there. They were talking about Matthew, I needed to know.

"He hasn't woken up yet?" The doctor asked shaking his head.

"No sir, he hasn't." The nurse responded.

I concluded that my brother was in a coma. My stomach tied into knots as I thought about what the possible outcome of this could be. Tears were beginning to fill my eyes. But I had to pull it together.

I had to find out what was going on with Matthew. As I started to get up from my bed my muscles ached, my joints were sore. But, there was an overwhelming stinging sensation that flooded my skin on my arms and legs. It hurt like nothing I had felt in my entire life. I cringed at the pain. I saw a few burns on my arms, but they were nothing compared to the burns on my legs. I lifted my gown to examine them, and from my knees to my ankles were, I was guessing, around sixty percent burnt. I pressed the nurse alert button with my thumb, and a nurse was in my room in moments.

"Watcha need honey?" the nurse asked me with a southern accent.

"The pain from the burns is a bit overwhelming! I need something, fast. Please?" I responded, trying to be as polite as I could through the pain.

"Oh of course sweetie." She said as she started filling my IV with some form of medicine. "you know, I am so sorry for you havin to take care of your brother when you're so young. I would collapse to my feet by the end of the day." She said.

I was kind of confused by what she meant. I assumed she meant that when I was out of the hospital I would come with my parents to visit and take care of him often.

"Yeah..." I responded. I didn't want to make her feel weird by correcting her.

The nurse made her way to the chair in my room, sat, grabbed a magazine, continued to chew her gum, and responded quite puzzled.

"Hmm... I guess Victoria will fill you in on everything you're gonna have to do." She said as she continued to smack her gum. "I'm guessin she'll be nice, but it's Victoria. Who knows."

"Who is Victoria?" I asked. I had just woken up, I didn't see how anyone expected me to know anything about what was going on. This was beginning to frustrate me.

"Oh, she's the child services gal that comes in here every time the hospital needs her for special case involving kids. Well, you're not really a kid, but you're certainly youthful." She chuckled at her own joke and turned the page of her magazine. "The hospital called her this mornin'. Told her we'd be needing her help over here." She continued.

"Why would my brother and I need her help? I saw the firemen carrying my parents out of our house. They got out." I told her. Yet, things seemed to out of place for everything to be just as they I remembered.

The nurse looked at me with wide eyes, and she began to breathe heavy. "Y...y... you don't know?" She stuttered.

"No... I have been asleep, remembered?" I smiled, trying to lighten her mood. I wasn't aware of depth of what she was about to tell me.

"Your parents" She started. She walked over to my bed and took my hand. "they... didn't make it." She brushed my bangs from my face. "I'm sorry honey." She told me with a frown on her face.

Just then, my heart sank to the pit of my stomach. *My parents were gone?* My mom, my dad wouldn't be here anymore. I

curled myself into a ball. I grabbed my knees with my arms and began to sob. I failed to keep my composure, I sobbed uncontrollably for what seemed to be hours. I began to hyperventilate and the nurse came behind me and rubbed my back.

"Hun, you have to calm down." She spoke in a hushed tone to me. "you are going to make yourself sick." She said, still very quietly.

I knew she was right. Though the pain of losing my parents was extravagant, I now had full responsibility. I wiped the tears from my eyes, and wiped my tear-stained neck, sniffed my nose, and ran my hands down my face. I could cry about this another time. The pain was intolerable, and not just the physical pain. It was going to be hard for me to keep myself from crying, but I had to be the adult.

"I'm sorry, I'm so rude." I said, turning myself to face the nurse. "what is your name? I feel so stupid for not asking earlier."

"Oh don't worry about it darlin. You have enough on your mind. Something as small as a person's name is insignificant. My name is Georgie White. Well kinda, my real name is Georgia

but everyone calls me Georgie." She said, flipping through another magazine.

"Well, it's very nice to meet you. My name is Erin Grey." I responded, still trying to gather myself.

"It's nice to meet you too." She said, looking up at me, smiling, and nodded.

"You will be out of here this afternoon. Dr. Herman should be in here soon to tell ya how to wrap the burns to keep the open wounds from getting infected, so you can go home." She said, as she approached me. She took my hand and looked me in the eye, and held my gaze.

"I will be carin for your brother, even when you leave. If you need anything at all, please let me know. Sometimes this hospital isn't all that great with service, and to be honest Ms. Erin, they aren't really too concerned for their patients. So please let me know if there's anything I can do for you. I'll get you anything you need, as fast as I possibly can. I promise." She released my arm, and walked out of the room to the nurses' station.

Many thoughts were running through my head at that moment. But, I had to focus on the business side of things. First of

all, who is this Victoria? And what does she have to do with me? Second of all, I liked Georgie. She was sweet, kind, and really cared. Thirdly, I needed to find out what the situation was. So, I called for Georgie again and she came quickly to my room.

"You havin any troubles sweetheart?" She asked me when she entered.

"I was just wondering if you could go get the doctor for me. I'd really like to talk to him about a few things if you wouldn't mind." I felt bad for calling her when she was just in here but I needed answers.

"Of course not sugar, I'll be right back." She smiled.

Once again, she fled from my room. She skipped fluidly everywhere she went. I presume it was routine for her, and just for laughs. It was pretty humorous, I'll admit. It set her apart from all the other nurses.

Georgie took every request of mine as top priority. I knew she wouldn't break her promise of making sure everything I needed was taken care of. She brought the doctor in only a few minutes after I asked her to do so.

A doctor with, as I expected, a white lab coat with a name tag reading "Dr. Herman". He had dark brown hair, square glassed

and rather tall. His shoes squeaked as he walked into my room. The noise hurt my ears.

"Is there anything I can do for you Erin?" The doctor asked, glancing at me once and then returning his focus to his clip board that he held in his arm.

"Yes, there is actually. I have several questions for you. I need to know exactly what is going on with my brother, and with me. What happened? How long have I been asleep? How is Matthew? I heard a nurse say something about not waking up. Am I getting out today? Who is Victoria?" I asked with great urgency in my tone. I had so many questions for him. I am sure I overwhelmed him with the number of questions I asked, but I needed answers, and now. I deserved at least that.

"Ha, you certainly don't waste time." He replied as he rolled his eyes. "You have many questions, I can't say that I have all of the answers." He said looking right at me. "My goodness this girl talks fast" he said in a muffled voice after he redirected his glance to his clipboard. "well, you remember the fire don't you?" he asked as he glanced over his clipboard to look at me.

"Yes sir, very well." I was shocked that a doctor would ask something that had to deal with something so tragic.

"Ok, well I can start after that then." He paused, and rolled his eyes. "Well, your house is pretty much gone. You and your brother both suffered some pretty heavy damage to your heads. Your brother's injuries are more severe. You have been out for about 14 hours. Your brother has entered a coma, which is an extended period of unconsciousness. Most comas don't last any longer than 4 weeks. We'll just keep a close eye on him and see how he does day by day. We can only take this one step at a time. Since you are 18, you now have legal custody of your brother. But, there have been some questions of whether or not you are capable of taking care of your brother, if he wakes up. This is why Victoria Neville is going to meet with you in a few minutes. She works with child services, and she is going to come make a deal with you. Hopefully this answers your questions to your satisfaction."

"Uh, I guess so..." I responded hesitantly. I was overwhelmed by all this information. Why wouldn't I be able to take care of my brother. "Why does Vic--"

"good." He interrupted me. "because I have some other work I have to get done. Call for Georgie if you need anything." and he left without letting me respond.

Georgie wasn't kidding when she said that they didn't really care for their patients. This doctor's word choices and domineer were rather rude, abrupt, and frustrating.

Like clockwork, 3 minutes later, a woman started walking toward my room. I could see her clearly through the glass walls of my room. She had a navy blue skirt that came to her knees and was perfectly ironed, not a single wrinkle or crease. She wore a white shirt under she pin-striped navy blue and white suit jacket. Her hair was in a very tight, perfectly pinned, bun at the top of her head. She walked with authority, as she made her way to my bed, like she owned the hospital.

She shook my hand, "Hello Erin, my name is Victoria Neville." She sat in the chair to the left of my bed. "let's get right down to business." She looked at her wrist watch. "I don't have time to sit here and chat all day. How much money do you have in savings?" She started flipping through the papers in the folders she had resting in her arms.

"Um... I have about \$2,000 saved for college, I was going to work all summer to earn some more." I told timidly.

"Hm... well, I'm afraid that's just not enough to cover all of your brother's expenses. Were you ever aware of how much your parents spent on you two? When you take into consideration the

cost of a place to live, the cost of food, school, and clothing, it all adds up to be a large sum. Your parents left you a small right amount of money. They didn't keep much money in the bank, so it probably burned with your house along with everything else. This isn't really looking very good for you Erin. You also will have to pay for your brother's medical bills." She started flipping through some papers toward to the back of one of her folders. "So, do you want to sign the papers now, or when would be a good time for you?" She asked as she handed me a small stack of papers.

"I am not really sure what you are talking about. I don't understand. What are these papers for?" I was utterly confused. "What are these papers for?"

"Ugh, my goodness, you don't know anything do you? The high school you went to didn't give you a very good education did it?" She chuckled at her own hurtful joke. "These are papers that sign custody of your brother over to the state. He will be placed in a foster home, with a family that can actually take care of him. It will make your life, his life, and my life a whole lot easier." She said with a hint of kindness in her voice.

"Victoria, it's really nice of you to be thinking of me, and my brother. But, I love him and I promised my parents I would take care of him, always. I will be taking care of him from now on. I am sorry." I shook my head and pushed the papers she held before me back to her.

"As much as I wish it was that simple Erin, it's not. I was hoping you would make it easy and just sign the papers, but now you are going to have to come up with money by the end of 4 weeks in order to keep custody of your brother." She looked down at her papers. "If he ever wakes up." She said in a muffled tone.

"Oh, how much do I have to have?" I asked concerned.

"\$40,000 should about do it. That amount will go up depending on how long you two are in here. Keep in mind that is just an estimate." She told me.

"Wow... that's... ugh... a lot of money Mrs. Neville." I said as, once again, I began to hyperventilate. That's ridiculous! There was absolutely no way I could get that much money! *What am I going to do?* I thought to myself. I was stuck.

"Would you like to sign the papers now?" She glanced up at me and smirked.

"No ma'am, I can do it. I... I... I can get it." I told her trying to catch my breath. I wasn't so confident in my own response. "I think" I whispered softly to myself.

"Ha." She scoffed. "All right, we will see. Keep in mind that you don't have very long." She stood, and began walking out the door. "I'll be checking in regularly."

After she left, I laid back down in my bed. Whatever the medicine that Georgie gave me was, it was making me sleepy. I had a lot of thinking to do. I linked my hands, and laid them on my stomach and began to process what I was going to do. Shortly after I settled in, I fell asleep.

I woke up from a wonderful, peaceful dream that I wish could have lasted forever. My parents were still alive, and we weren't fighting. They were so proud of me for getting into Yale, and eager for me to start orientation. They planned on visiting me in a few weeks anyway. I was leaving for early admissions tomorrow. All of my friends were there too, telling me how excited they were for me and how I deserved it. It was wonderful, and perfect. If only that dream could have been reality.

But, in reality I knew my day wasn't going to be as pleasant. Today I would leave the hospital, to try and start life out on my own. Of course, I would be here regularly because of Matthew, and my new friend Georgie, and the fact I didn't have a place to sleep. I would sleep here, if they would let me. Georgie had been the best nurse to take care of me, in the short amount of time I was here. She and I became good, close friends. It was a friendship that you feel like you have known the person your entire life, when in reality you have only only known them for several days. This quick forming friendship was odd, but it is really nice to have a friend amongst all the chaos. I had faced utter defeat yesterday with Victoria. That woman made my stomach churn. She was heartless...simply heartless. As if my

parent's death wasn't enough, she just had to complicate it didn't she? My life came crashing down in only a matter of hours. It was hopeless.

I pressed the button on my finger and Georgie came skipping moments later. Her blunt and honest statements were always delivered with a smile. That smile made everything she said that didn't sound so nice, sound a bit better.

"Watcha need honey?" She asked me delightfully, as she handed me an orange juice box from the cafeteria.

"Uh, I was just wondering when the doctor is going to come in and see me so I can get the OK to leave. Do you know when that is?" I asked as I chugged the orange juice. I was tremendously thirsty this morning.

"Ah, tryin to get away from me now, huh?" She grinned, and took the empty juice box from my hand and tossed it in the trashcan next to my bed.

"Absolutely not!" I laughed. "you know I will be here all the time. I mean, I have to make sure that you keep up on your promise, remember... you have to take care of my brother too. Plus, I want to spend as much time with him as I can. Even if he can't respond when I talk to him I want to talk to him."

"Of course!" She laughed as she skipped out of the room. "He will be right in" she said when she peaked her head back in the door.

I was spoiled, having Georgie as my nurse. Soon after she left the doctor walked in with his clipboard and pen in hand. I could tell that he was in a hurry to get me out of here.

"How are you feeling Erin?" He asked when he took my hand and began examining the burns on my arms.

"Fine I guess. But, you're the doctor, you tell me." I said, trying to make funny, small talk conversation.

He looked at me with a look of disgust at my little joke. "You seem to be doing just fine. Your burns are healing quite well. You should have a pretty easy, fast recovery." He said as he began to examine the burns on my legs. "just make sure you

keep your eye on these burns, and you will be fine." He looked at me.

"Really? So will I be OK to leave today?" I asked as I slipped my legs back under my blankets. It was cold in this hospital.

"Of course, you could actually leave right now if you wanted to. We need the bed anyway. I will write the orders for your dismissal immediately." He said as he looked back at his clip board.

"Thanks. I'll get out of your hair as fast as I possibly can." I replied frowning. I guess I had overstayed my welcome. Either that or the doctor was just in a horrible mood all the time.

The thought of leaving the hospital was both frightening and exciting. The only exciting thing about leaving the hospital was getting away from Dr. Herman, and Victoria. I wasn't sure when she would show up again but she gave me the willies. Yet I was nervous about leaving the hospital. I should have listened to my mom when she told me I wasn't ready to go out on my own. I really wasn't ready. I wasn't ready for the responsibility of coming up with all this money and taking care of my brother.

"Thank you. I really appreciate it." He responded not noticing my disappointment.

I gathered what little belongings I had entered the hospital with and put them in a bag that Georgie had given me to use a while ago. I was ready to leave and begin the life I had dreamed of having for the past few years of my life. It would just be fulfilled in an unexpected way. I had to face the music eventually though. I guess now would be the best time. I had to start somewhere.

I went into my brother's room for the first time. Matthew, even though he was only 12, was always the strongest, most bold person in our family. It was weird to see him lying on a hospital bed completely helpless.

"I'm going to make this better" I told him as I touched his face, lifted my bag and threw it over my shoulder.

I left the hospital with little confidence. The only thing I could be sure about was that I had to find a way to keep my brother with me. I just wasn't sure how I was going to get it done. I needed to think, to make sense of everything that was happening. I needed to take a long walk.

As I made my way down the street, the small suburb I had grown up in my entire life looked different now. I had a new outlook, and respect for life. I walked slowly, noticing every person that passed by me. They all had lives, families, and friends that cared for them. They all had unique personalities with hearts, goals, and feelings just like me. Why had I never paid attention? Why had I never cared? Was I just too selfish to care about anyone other than myself? The feeling of regret for my actions, from what seemed like eternity when in reality was only two days ago, overwhelmed me. What kind of selfish child am I, to deny the only thing that my parents asked of me? They only wanted one thing... they wanted to spend the summer with me, and all I did was throw insults back in their faces. The ache in my heart was a feeling I couldn't either deny, or ignore anymore. My heart felt heavy. I felt like I was carrying the weight of the world. I knew it was the result of my grief, regrets, and realization of the large responsibility I had just taken on at the young age of 18.

As if that realization wasn't enough, as tears began to fill my eyes, a man in the crowd passed me. He was wearing the cologne my dad wore ever since I could remember. That sweet smell only enhanced the hopeless, empty feeling of being alone. I had no one. I didn't have anyone to go home to, let alone a

home to rest in. I wasn't able to go to college. I couldn't fulfill my dreams of being a writer. All the dreams and aspirations I had developed since I was young were crushed in the short period of 24 hours. It was just last night that I had lost both of my parents, my best friends. I was also at risk of losing the only family member I had left. Tears burst from my eyes as they flooded my cheeks and neck. I couldn't hold it together any longer. I dashed for an alley that was just around the corner.

I sat beside a dumpster midway down the empty alley. I didn't want everyone in town to see me cry. They never had seen me cry and I hoped they never would. I had always remained together in public, even when I would get hurt at recess when I was in elementary. I didn't want to seem weak to anyone.

I had to rid myself of my self-hatred for just a few hours while I came up with a plan. What could I do to gain a large sum of money in only a month? "I guess a bank job was out of the question." I said out loud, quietly and chuckled at my own joke..

I continued walking down Main Street when I glanced at the coffee shop where I did most of my studying during my high school years. I passed it, and remembered when my mom would call me on my cell phone to come home for dinner. I imagined myself

doing exactly that, in that moment, as I looked into the window of the busy shop.

I knew I needed a job. The coffee shop would be perfect for me. I knew the manager, and the rest of the employees. I opened the front door with determination, and a plan in mind. Shiny silver bells rang loudly, and danced above me. I had noticed them every time I entered the coffee shop. The manager, Heather Carrington, met me at the door. She greeted me with a large, warm smile and an even bigger hug.

"It's been a while since we've seen you Erin." She said as she made her way back to the counter to serve me.

"Yeah, it has. A lot of things have changed since I last saw you." I rolled my eyes at my own understatement.

"Really?" She looked at me questioningly. "Before you tell me about it, what would you like to drink?"

"Nothing actually, I am broke." I once again smirked at yet another one of my understatements.

"Hmm... ok. So tell me what has been happening in the Grey household." She said as she propped her elbow up on the counter and rested her head in her hand.

"Well, first of all... there is no longer a Grey household." I told Heather and paused for her reaction. She quirked her head and looked at me curiously. "It was burt to the ground in a fire two days ago. My parents were killed, and my brother is now in the hospital, in a coma. I am surprised you haven't heard about this. It's all over the news." Tears filled my eyes to the point where I couldn't see because of the subject. I pulled myself together and wiped my face with my cold hands to refresh myself and to keep myself from crying.

"Oh Erin." She said. She rounded the counter so she was standing behind me, rubbing my back. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know anything about it. The coffee shop has been incredibly busy lately, and I don't like television so I don't keep one in my apartment upstairs. Someone had mentioned something about someone's house burning down, but I didn't catch whose it was. There is no excuse though." She shook her head. "I'm terribly sorry. I should have called you, when you didn't come in the last few days. I have your cell number. Goodness, I can be stupid sometimes." She said as she hit herself on the head in frustration.

"Oh Heather, my cell phone was burned in the fire as well." I smiled awkwardly. "There was no way to get a hold of me, and

you shouldn't be sorry. It's not your fault by any means." I told her.

"Well, even if I couldn't have helped it, I'm sorry." She said.

I didn't say anything in response. I couldn't say that it was all right, because things weren't all right. I just shrugged my shoulders unsure of what to say.

Heather was the kind of person that spoke every word with great intensity, and meaning. She always looked you straight in the eye when she talked to you. Some people might find this intimidating, when I found it quite refreshing. People that sincerely mean what they say are hard to come by these days.

"So, what can I do for you Erin?" she asked.

"Well... I was wondering if you had any job openings as of right now. I could start as soon as you needed me. I would love to start working as soon as possible if you have an opening." I told her.

"We could always use more people, Erin. You are perfect for the job too. But, just so you know... I can't afford to pay you too much. It's minimum wage, if that's all right." She said.

"That is just fine Heather. I just need a source of income, any source." I replied.

"Is tomorrow OK with you?" She asked.

"Absolutely! I'll see you tomorrow then?" I replied.

"Yes, you will." She said as I started walking out. The loud bells rang above me again as I left.

Well, I had found a job. That was a start. I needed to walk some more to figure out how I was going to get the rest of the money. I considered everything from working 3 jobs if I had to, to just giving up and signing the papers. After only moments of thinking about just handing my brother over to the government I thought about how stupidly selfish that would be of me, and how I would miss my brother. I also couldn't forget the promise I made my parents, that I would take care of him always.

I walked for what seemed for forever. The bright colors of fliers on telephone poles started to become a never-ending blur of color as I passed them. Then one caught my attention. It wasn't printed in bright neon colors like the rest. I scanned the telephone pole. I saw several ads for missing pets, babysitters, and a lawn mowing business, when I finally made it to the

flier that caught my attention. It was just plain white, with a picture of a man and a women running on it. Below it read..

THE BIG RACE

June 30

At: Calor Park

WINNER EARNS \$30,000

Money donated by Mayer Roberts.

Sign up by Friday at Miriam Middle School

I had only ran a little bit in high school. There was no way I was going to be able to run a race as long as this was insinuating. There is no way that I could do that on my own. Besides that, it was perfect! This is exactly what I needed! I had hope. I needed more details as well. The flier wasn't exactly specific enough. I needed to know exactly how long this race was. "Ah..." I sighed, I knew I could do it. I was determined now. All I needed was some encouragement. When I attempted track in high school my parents were always there to cheer me on. I needed someone like that, to cheer me on, motivate me. I needed a trainer...

Chapter 4

So I needed a trainer. The hard part would be finding the right one. I wasn't really sure what kind of person I wanted. I knew that I needed someone that was bold, nice, but was one of those trainers that when it came down to it he got in your face. Someone that like would be perfect, now all I had to do was find him or her.

I took the staples out of the flier from the pole, folded it, tucked it into my pocket, and continued to walk down the busy street. As I passed Bobby's Pizza Parlor I noticed a phone booth across the street. I checked the street for cars, and when it was clear I crossed it to the phone booth. I opened the door, stepped in, and began looking through the phone book. I wrote down several names of local gyms. There were only three or four gyms in our small town. One of them had to have someone that could help me. I first called "Buff Bill's Body Building"...

"Hello? Buff Bill's Body Building. How can I help you?" The cheery sound of the receptionist answered on the other side of the line.

"Hi, my name is Erin. I am just inquiring about your personal trainers you have there. What do they specialize in?" I asked as I tapped my pen to my chin.

"Well, we have three. None of them really specialize in anything. They all are more leaned towards weight lifting. Ma'am what are you looking for in particular?"

"I am looking for someone who would be willing to train someone in long-distance running." I replied.

"Oh... well unfortunately, as our name is pretty self-explanatory. Our gym is more for building the muscle you already possess. In fact, we host a lot of weight lifting competitions."

"That's not exactly what I am looking for." I frowned in disappointment.

"Well, I might just be able to help you." She said. I could hear the muffled flipping, and rumbling of papers in the background. "there is a local gym called 'Wanda's Gym' that has trainers specifically for certain spots. I think that they might have someone that trains people for track." She said kindly.

"Really? Oh that would be absolutely wonderful! Thank you so much!" I don't think I could have smiled any bigger even if I tried. Today was just going as well as it could. I got a new job, and now I could find a trainer and a good one.

"Just let me know when you're ready to write down the number." She said.

"All right, I'm ready." I held my pen above my paper preparing to write the number.

She then proceeded to give me the number. We both hung up the phone shortly after that. I was determined to get started today. It wouldn't be anything too terribly new to me, but it would be hard.

I inserted 2 quarters into the payphone, listened for the dial tone, and began punching in the numbers the receptionist had given me. I lifted the phone to my ear and heard devastating words.

"We're sorry, you have reached a number that has either been disconnected or is out of service." A recorded voice said from the other line.

Of course... just my luck, this would happen to me and in this sort of situation. They had gone out of business. I remember it now, it was on the news. A new mall had just gone up in the place of the old gym. Why did I not remember this? I would just have to try the other gyms. They had to have at least one person that could help me. I decided that instead of calling them that I would just walk there. My first and hopefully only

stop would be "Harper's Fitness Center". I only had to walk a few blocks to reach the building. I didn't really pay any attention to what was going on around me on my walk there.

When I arrived, the atmosphere was pretty good surprisingly. I had always expected gyms to be filled with stuck up body builders. I was glad that I was wrong. I glanced to my right and saw these two girls running on treadmills talking, and laughing. A few men were playing basketball in the court across from all the machines, and they too seemed to be having fun. It was a fairly small gym though. Not many people were there, and the few that were didn't seem to be too intimidating. So far, I was enjoying this so far. After deciding my standing opinion of the place I approached the front desk.

The girl working at the desk was blonde, and wearing a light blue shirt, and she was talking on the phone. I didn't want to disrupt her.

"I'm sorry, I'll come back another time" I told her as I began to walk towards the door. I was almost relieved that I had an excuse to leave. I was scared to do this on my own.

"Ginger, I'll have to talk to you some other time. Make sure you take care of that leg injury so we can see you in here

again soon." She said, and waited a moment for the response.

"all right now." Another pause. "Ok, bye."

"Ma'am, ma'am!" the receptionist called after me. I turned around before I arrived at the door.

"Yes?" I replied.

"I'm sorry about the wait. Welcome to Harper's, what can I do for you?" She asked me.

Reluctantly I walked back to the front desk and introduced myself to the receptionist. There was no way I could leave now. I guess I had to get down to business.

"Hi, my name is Erin Grey and I was just wondering what kind of deals you had membership wise. Do you have any trainers? Do they have any specific areas they do training for?" I told her.

"Well, we don't have any hired trainers right now." She said. "But..." she paused and called over to the area with all the exercise equipment. "Dempsey! Can you come over here for a minute please?" She called to a very tall, black man who quickly got off of his treadmill and approached the front desk.

I hadn't noticed him when I first came in, but this is the first person here that I would even remotely classify as intimi-

dating. He was very tall, maybe 6'3". Not a single ounce of fat from what I could tell. His eyebrows creased inward which made him look like he was concerned about something all the time.

"Sure, what can I do for you?" the tall man asked the receptionist. He had a rather low-pitched voice as well.

"This young lady, Erin, is in need of your expertise. Erin, this is Dempsey Craig. He is a former trainer at a gym that was sold and rebuilt as a mall." She looked at me, winked, and looked back at him. "She needs a trainer."

I was thinking everything through and realized I had overlooked one very important part of trainers. "I don't have much money to pay you with, sir." I said. My head lowered in embarrassment.

My parents always had the money, or came up with it somehow, for my brother and I to do anything we aspired to do. When I wanted to do ballet, my parents paid for it. Even though I quit several months after I began. Then was when I truly realized how clumsy I was. When my brother wanted to learn to play guitar, they bought it for him. He barely picked it up... but they supported him the whole way. They were at every meet when I ran track in high school. They were always there, and always made us their top priority. Looking back on it now this was something I

think my brother and I had taken great advantage of. Though this reflection was painful and was tremendously hard to think about, I had to stop reflecting and get back down to business. I had a job to do.

"How many of us do?" He said as he rolled his eyes and smiled back at me. "How about we go talk about it in the office. Is that all right with you Sue?" He turned and asked the receptionist.

"Of course Dempsey, you know you are welcome to use the office for as long as you need." She replied, smiled, and began making phone calls again.

The trainer, Dempsey, and I walked behind the front desk and into the office behind it. I noticed the plaque that sat on the desk in front of me. *This must have been the manager's office* I thought to myself as I sat in a chair that sat in front of the manager's desk.

"All right, so tell me your story." He said as he took a seat in the manager's chair, crossed his legs, wrapped his arms around his knees, and clasped his hands together.

"Well, I really would rather not bore you, or annoy you with my sad, sob story." I replied as I tried to make myself more comfortable in the very hard, uncomfortable chair.

Please, you will neither bore me nor annoy me. I have some of those kind of stories myself." He smiled, and motioned his hands to tell me to continue.

I proceeded to tell him the story about my burning home, and the situation with my family. I saved a lot of the details for both our sakes. I didn't want to cry in front of him.

"So you are the girl from the news. I saw your story on television last night. I am truly, and deeply sorry Erin." He said and shook his head. "I understand that pain to a certain extent. My wife was diagnosed with breast cancer just a year ago." He told me.

"Mr. Craig, I'm so sorry... that must be hard for you." We both frowned. We would make a good team. He understood my pain.

He wiped his eyes of tears that were beginning to form, and proposed an idea. "What I think we can do is I can train you outside of the gym, that way you don't have to pay for the membership. I won't ask for any money until you get on your feet, and have a steady income so that you can pay me weekly in

smaller amounts. Even then, I won't ask for as much money as other trainers. I understand what you are going through. My wife is sick with cancer, and I know how hard it is trying to take care of your family." He said.

"Wow, Mr. Craig... that is incredibly generous of you. I can't thank you enough. I hope your wife gets better as well." I said as I shook my head in astonishment of his kindness.

"Please Erin, call me Dempsey." He responded. "I will say, though, with my wife being sick and me trying to find another job, I am not sure how much time I will be able to spend with you. But, I will certainly do my best." He smiled at me.

"Fair enough, Dempsey." I smiled back at him.

"We will start training immediately. I will use one of my guest passes to get you in this time. We have some extra sweat suits in the back you can have. Why don't you go change, stretch, and hop on a treadmill. Do some walking, and once you hit about a quarter of a mile, start a nice jog and see how long you can go at that pace until you start sucking wind." He smiled, winked at me, and then left the office.

"I'll get right on it Dempsey." I nodded at him, and followed him out the door.

A sense of accomplishment hit me, and my mood had changed from embarrassment to hopeful, and delighted. I walked with confidence to the front desk. My head held high, and back straight. I was determined. When I made it to the front desk I asked the receptionist where I could find the sweat suits Dempsey was talking about. She signaled me to the back storage room that was located behind the locker room.

I walked past all the lockers and the showers, into the storage room. I quickly searched all the boxes of sweat suits with Harper's logo on it, found a size medium, and quickly changed. The receptionist handed me a water bottle and I walked quickly toward the treadmills. I stretched my legs and arms as I sat beside the treadmill. I then began walking at a slow pace on the treadmill, and gradually raised the speed. In only a few minutes I reached a quarter of a mile and began jogging. As I began to jog and as I jogged I began to think, about many things. I then disappeared into the lovely state of daydream.

Chapter 5

After only a few hours of working with Dempsey, I knew that my goal wasn't impossible to reach. He was exactly what I had been searching for in a trainer. Though everything moved so fast, things seemed to be falling in to place, and taking a turn for the better. My first day of training felt like it took forever to get through. I was exhausted by the end of the 5-mile run Dempsey encouraged me to complete. It is to my disadvantage that I have asthma. I was surprised I didn't have an attack. By the end of my run I was exhausted, and wasn't breathing too well. I was thankful that I was in the habit of carrying my inhaler with me.

When I finished my training, Dempsey and I agreed to meet the same time tomorrow afternoon in Westwood Park. At the park there was a cross-country course he would help me run through. He said it would be a beautiful run, and a great place to work

on my stride and pace. I was looking forward to continuing training, but I was sore from today's run and ready to rest.

I walked back to the hospital. Sometimes I was thankful to live in a smaller town. You didn't have to walk too far to get from place to place.

When I was about a block from the hospital, it came clear into view. My stomach tied into thousands of knots. It crept into my throat, and thought I was going to get sick. The lighted sign above the sliding doors reading "Kensington General Hospital" haunted my thoughts. Every time I came to the hospital, I was reminded of the tragic death of my parents and the devastating state of my brother. The doctor never gave me a clear answer when it came to Matthew. He always left that subject up in the air, very vague. A Tear streamed down my face as I entered the sliding doors of the hospital. Each step I took was long and drawn out. I knew that once I reached my brother's floor, and room I would be reminded of my large load I had to carry; and the fact that I had no one, no family. But, I knew I needed to see my brother. I had to set aside my emotions for a while and focus. I reached the elevator, stepped in, and pressed the button for the 6th floor.

I remember coming to this very hospital 12 years ago, I was 6 and Matthew was being born. I remember we spent hours and hours here just waiting for him to be born. My dad was in the room with my mom and I had to stay in the waiting room with a nurse that volunteered to sit with me. Several hours later, Matthew was born and the nurse took me hand and guided me to the room. I was so excited for the first I got to hold him. He was so soft and warm. It was a happy day for the Grey family. But those memories only created an intense pain in my chest and I couldn't think about it.

The doors opening in front of me as I arrived at floor 6. Immediately I saw Georgie. She turned around and smiled at me.

"Well hey there darlin'" She said. She ran, or rather she skipped and ran all at once, toward me.

"Hey Georgie" When we met she wrapped her arms around me, and linked my arm in hers and pulled so I would start walking. We began walking to my brother's room, she stopped me and took my hands in hers.

"Oh goodness, You look tired hun!" She said as she looked me up and down curiously.

"Haha, I ran 5 miles today. Of course I am tired!" I smiled back at her, and started to laugh. I haven't looked in a mirror in a while. I had no idea what I looked like. I bet it was bad.

"Well, now why did you do that, huh?" She asked me as she cocked her head to the left.

"Well, I am going to run a marathon. The reward will be \$30,000, and I bet I could raise the other 10." I said smiling.

"I guess that justifies your look then doesn't it" She said, and winked at me.

"I guess it does." I smiled back at her, and we continued walking.

Even though Georgie had lightened my mood a good amount... I still couldn't ignore my responsibility or the challenge that was set before me. As I entered Matthew's room, I saw him to my left on the hospital bed. His chest rose and fell, his breathe was even. He looked so peaceful. At times, even the state he was in was much worse than my own, I wished I could trade places with him. He wasn't at all aware of what was going on, and for the moment had nothing to worry about. Once he woke up that would certainly change, but for now he had no care in the world. I finished my walk to the end of my brother's bed, and wrapped

my hands around the bars. My gaze was held on my Matthews face. It was hard for me to see my brother with a breathing tube in his nose.

"... ya stayin' darlin'?" Georgie asked as she swung and dangled her arms, and skipped over to me.

"I...I, I'm sorry, what?" I asked. I didn't quite catch all of what she said. I was caught up in my own thoughts.

"Well, where are ya stayin'? Where are you gonna live, since you don't really have a house?" she asked and then bit her lip. "I'm sorry... I can be so dumb sometimes." She shook her head. "I didn't mean to bring up you not havin' a place to live or anything, but I just thought I would let you know that you are more than welcome to stay with me. I know that we don't really know each other that well, but you can't deny that you need somewhere to stay and I've got room." She smiled. "hopefully that makes up for my slip. My words don't always come out the same way they sound in my head."

"Oh I wasn't offended one bit Georgie. I understood what you meant." I thought about it for a minute. She was right... I had no place to live. What was I going to do? I couldn't sleep in the hospital every night. But could I stay in the house of something I have only known for a short time? On the other hand

she was pretty much like a sister to me. Even though she was 17 years older than me, she acted like she was my age. "Well... you know what? I think I might just have to take you up on that offer." I nodded my head.

"Really?!" She asked with great excitement. Her eyes brightened, and she was smiling from ear to ear.

"Yes" I said, and nodded my head again, "I need a place to stay, and you are only one of my favorite people ever!" I smiled back at her.

"Well, I have so much to do" she responded quickly. "I have to go to the store and get some junk food, and to the movie store. What kinda movies do you like Erin?" She asked me.

"Any kind really." I responded, I certainly wasn't expecting her to be so open and accepting of me. I was surprised. I shouldn't have been though because of the kind of person Georgie was.

"Well then if it's up to me, I think I'm gonna have to go with a chick flick for tonight. Maybe tomorrow night we will do hmm... well a different kind of movie. I am not sure, I'll cross that road when I get to it." She smiled again and was off. She skipped out the door faster than I could say OK.

I smiled after Georgie left, turned to my brother, and took his hand. "I love you, and don't forget it Matt." I told him. After I said it, I felt his hand squeeze mine. He was responding! I didn't know he was capable. I thought that when someone was in a coma they were out completely. Was he waking up? Was something wrong? I had to find a doctor, and quick. I released his hand, and frantically began searching for his doctor. My eyes darted left and right to desperately try to find Dr. Herman, Matthew's doctor. My legs were quivering beneath me as I stood next the nurse's station. Either I would get some really exciting and happy news or I was going to hear something devastating like he was dying or something along those lines. I hated how I didn't know a lot about stuff like this. If I knew more then I wouldn't have to run to Dr. Herman every time something happened.

Finally he emerged from the double doors down the hallway. He, like always, had his face buried in his clip board. I sprinted for him, and when I reached him I tugged on his coat, and tried to find my words.

"Dr. Herman, he squeezed my hand!" I said. I had such hope in what had just happened.

"I'm sorry, who are you?" He looked at me curiously.

"I'm Erin Grey, my brother is Matthew Grey. He is the one that's in a coma." I looked at him tremendously surprised. He really didn't care did he? This would take some getting used to.

"Oh that's right, I remember now. I thought you left this morning." He said with his eyes still focused on his clip board. This man was going to drive me nuts.

"I did, but I wanted to come see my brother." I replied, still curious as to why this man was so disconnected with his patients.

"Oh, so I'm assuming you will be here every day huh?" He asked, and actually looked at me this time.

"Yes, and depending on circumstances... some nights as well." I responded. I wasn't sure if Georgie's offer went for every night that I needed it, or if it was just for the next few nights. I knew that some nights there might be a possibility that I would have to stay in the hospital.

"If and only if its last resort right?" he asked and directed his glance back toward his clipboard.

"Uh... I guess so." I lowered my head. Was I really that much trouble? Did I do something to upset him? "Well, I was wondering..."

"What?" he said agitated.

"Does Matthew squeezing my hand mean he is going to wake up soon?" I asked him. I didn't want to get my hopes too high, because knowing it could be bad news. But, as I watched the doctors face soften from concentrated and focused to relaxed my hopes began to rise.

"Well... it's kind of tricky with coma patients. They sometimes will respond with a small gesture like squeezing a hand, or creasing their forehead like they're focusing on something. The thing is though, Erin, he may never wake up." He told me. For the first time ever, Dr. Herman showed a small sign of compassion. But, it didn't make the news any less hurtful.

My heart sank in disappointment. It felt like someone had just hung a ten pound weight from my heart. I felt like I was going to get sick again. All my life, whenever I got stressed, my stomach would get terribly sick. The news I had just gotten from my doctor made me feel, once again, like I had no hope.

After he gave me the news, Dr. Herman left suddenly. One second he was in front of me, and the next he was walking fast-paced down the hallway. I needed Georgie, and to go to sleep. I walked over to the nurse's station to see if Georgie had left any notes for me. I had to know where she lived in.

"Did Georgie leave any messages for Erin Grey before she left?" I asked one of the nurses working at the computer.

"Um... yeah she did." She reached for a sticky-note to her right and handed it to me. "this is her address" she said and then continued typing on her computer.

"Thanks" I smiling politely at the nurse, and walked toward the elevator. I needed some rest. I had my first day of work tomorrow. I knew that I wouldn't get much sleep tonight though. I'm sure Georgie had some major party plans for us that night. I glanced at the note reading "24356 N. Park Avenue." I was thankful that her house was only a few blocks from the hospital. I entered the elevator and pressed the button for the ground level. Once again the smile returned to my face as I heard Mandy playing above me.

Chapter 6

I arrived at a small white house with a cherry red front door. The numbers above the garage door matched the yellow slip of paper I held in my hand. I walked to the front door and knocked on it. The events of the past few days seemed to string on endlessly, even though in reality it had only been 2 days. I was physically, and emotionally exhausted.

Georgie opened the door a few short moments after I knocked. Her long blonde waves covered her shoulders, and fram-

ing her face. Some people would find it strange for a women at the age 35 to be wearing pink pajamas with yellow rubber ducks on them, but I would know that this was ordinary for Georgie.

"Well hello there darlin!" She greeted me "I figured that since we were just gonna be hangin out this evening that I'd go ahead and put on my 'jamas." She said as she pointed to her pink pajama pants. "Come on in!" She grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. I stumbled into the house behind her.

She let go of me and I held my hands together in front of me as I scanned the setting of the simple home. She had just enough furniture to make her home seem homey. She had a couch and a chair in her living room with two bookshelves full of books, and a television between them. She had set a pair of pajamas on top of some blankets, sheets, and a pillow lying beside the couch. She had set up a place for me to sleep. In her kitchen she had a small table and all wooden cupboards.

As I scanned the house, from where I stood I could only see a few rooms, there were pictures of a little girl with Georgie in every room. In some pictures they were outside, some inside, some of them at a younger age. In all the pictures though, it was just her and this other girl. There was at least 2 or 3 in every room.

"If you don't mind me asking, Georgie, who is the little girl in all of these pictures?"

"Oh..." She replied in a sad voice. "That's my sister. She passed away when I was 18." She walked over to one of the pictures hanging on the wall in the living room and picked it up. She just sat there and stared at it for a minute or two and then she put it back. I said nothing until she started walking to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry Georgie. I didn't know you had a sister." I felt bad for asking now.

"It's all right. I haven't said anything about it, so there's no way that you could know." She took a pot out of one of the wooden cupboards in the kitchen.

"What happened? If you don't want to talk about it, I understand. I am just curious."

"She walking home from school one day. It was January it was slick outside. A bus was taking some kids home and when she was crossing the street the bus wasn't able to stop, and it hit her. She died that evening in the very same hospital I work in today. Ever since then I have had the desire to help people, and being a nurse seemed like the perfect job. It's hard to

work in that hospital but I love what I do. I wouldn't trade my job for any other."

"I'm so sorry Georgie."

"Oh, it's all right. Now ya know." She said, and then silence for several minutes.

"So what are we doin tonight?" She asked me as she took a box of spaghetti noodles out of the pantry. She filled the pot with hot water and set it on the stove. She poured the box of noodles into the pan of hot water and walked towards me. "Do you like spaghetti? I feel stupid for not askin before I started makin it." She said as she sat on the couch in front of me.

"Spaghetti is one of my favorite meals!" I smiled back at her. "You are wonderful Georgie." I said as I sat in the chair across from her. "Thank you again for letting me stay with you, and the meal, and everything else. You have been so generous. I cannot thank you enough." I told her. I shook my head in awe of this women's generosity.

"Honey, thank for stayin" She smiled. "I love havin company. I never have company here anymore. My folks live in Oregon, and I don't really have much time outside of work to make friends." She told.

"Well then I'm glad I can be your company." I smiled back at her.

"So what do you wanna do tonight? I went to the movie rental store and grabbed a few videos I think would be fun to watch. I also went to the grocery store and got some tasty ice-cream for us to have after dinner. But, I'm willing to do whatever. I am sure that you are exhausted. I can make up your bed for you. Oh... do you mind if you sleep on the couch? I could deal with sleepin on the couch if you wanna take my bed." I could tell she was feeling back for not asking me about some of these things.

"Georgie... absolutely not. The couch is more than enough for me. You are so kind just to let me stay with you, I would be perfectly happy with the floor. The couch is perfect." I told her. "Any movie sounds just fine to me. It's been a while since I have just sat down and relaxed for more than a few minutes. How about we set up the bed and put in a movie. That way if I fall asleep I won't have to get up and move. If that's ok with you." I smiled at her.

"Of course honey! That's a fabulous idea. Oh! Oh! And... we can eat our spaghetti and ice cream while watching the movie. This is simply perfect." She jumped off the couch and began

stripping the couch of its cushions. She pulled out hide-a-bed from the inside of the couch, and grabbed the sheets out from under the blanket and began putting them on the bed.

"I've got it Georgie" I said as I came over to her and took the sheets from her hands. "You have already done so much. Let me at least do something as little as making my own bed." I smiled at her, and she smiled back.

"Well... all right" She said "I'll just go check on the spaghetti and then I'll go grab my movie selection and we can decide." She smiled and then gracefully skipped to the kitchen with her arms dangling beside her. Then she turned around. "Would you like to use my bathroom to freshen up before you go to bed? You will feel much better." She offered.

"Sure." I replied. Georgie showed me her bathroom, got a fresh towel, showed me what products to use, and left.

I took a quick shower and returned to the living room. She was right, I did feel much better. I finished making the bed while Georgie was off cooking dinner, and other things. I sat Indian style on the bed as I waited for her. She returned a few minutes later with a stack of videos in her arms.

"Well I grabbed mostly comedies and chick flicks" She said as she looked at the stack of videos in her hands. "I have several to choose from. Take your pick." She looked up at me and smiled.

"How about... um... this one" I said pointing at a movie called 13 going on 30. Some of my friends at school told me this movie was good, and funny. I just hadn't had a chance to watch it yet.

"Oh that's a good one." She said nodding her head.

She walked over to the television and put it in the dvd player and pressed play. The movie began to play and I settled into my bed and started to watch. Georgie walked into the kitchen and was finishing cooking dinner. A few minutes later she returned with a plate of spaghetti for me. She also had a quilt, a pillow, and a plate of spaghetti for herself. She set the pillow in the chair across from me, sat down, put the blanket over her lap, and started to eat her spaghetti while watching the movie.

I finished my spaghetti a few minutes later. I don't think I realized how hungry I really was until I actually ate real, good food. I went to the kitchen and washed my plate, dried it, and set it to the side of the sink.

I then came back to the living room, and laid down in my bed, and about 10 minutes later I was asleep.

I awoke to the sound of singing. It was a very pretty voice. It must have been Georgie. I lifted my head and looked to my left and in the kitchen Georgie was singing and cooking something. The spaghetti last night was fantastic! I couldn't wait to see what Georgie had cooked this morning.

I got up out of bed and went to the kitchen. I walked up to the counter and glanced over and she was making pancakes. She continued to sing as she flipped each one. She then noticed I was there.

"Well good mornin Ms. Erin." She smiled at me and continued to flip the pancakes. "You hungry?" She asked.

"Good morning Georgie." I replied. "These look delicious, and yes I'm starved." I said. I wasn't really starved but I was hungry enough. The noises coming from my stomach were proof.

She put 3 pancakes on a plate and handed them to me. "Here ya go. Eat up!" she told me.

"You've got it!" I replied with a smile.

"What time do you have to be at the gym?" she asked me.

"About 1:00" I told her.

"Well why don't we eat our breakfast quickly, and then we will ride to the hospital together. Then whenever wanna or need to leave ya can. Plus I have to be gettin to work soon. Is that all right?" She looked at me and smiled.

"That sounds perfect." I smiled back at her. It was odd going by a schedule again. My parents, once school let out, pretty much let me come and go as I pleased.

She smiled back at me and we quickly ate our breakfast, and left for the hospital in Georgie's station wagon.

She was focused when we got to the hospital. She didn't have as much to say; which was odd for Georgie. But, I had to

keep in mind that my brother and I weren't her only patients, and we couldn't be her focus all the time.

When we came to the floor, Georgie went to the nurses' station and I went into Matthew's room. Georgie had lent me a book and a bag to carry my things in for the time being. I sat at the end of Matthews bed, Indian style... it was a habit, and began to read.

Time slipped bye, and the next time I glanced at the clock it was 12:30. I had to get going. I jumped off of my brother's bed, kissed him on the forehead, and left. I came to the nurses' station and told Georgie I would be back at the house around 8:00 that evening. I had to work after training. When I made it to the elevator, I waved back at Georgie to let her know I would be leaving.

I power walked to the gym, fearing I would be late. When I arrived at the gym, the same receptionist was working, and Dempsey was leaning against the counter waiting for me.

"Hey kid." He greeted me. "You ready to do some running?" He grinned at me.

"As ready as I'll ever be." I replied and smiled.

"Well then, why don't we get started." He walked out the door.

We couldn't train in the gym without paying for a membership, which Dempsey had, but I didn't. Dempsey helped me stretch and looked at me.

"Should we try for 6 miles today?" he asked.

"Uh... sure." I answered hesitatingly.

"I'm going to follow you on my bike. We are going to run to the park, OK?" He smiled at me.

"All right." I said, and we were off.

The continuous schedule of training, work, and keeping a close eye on my brother was beginning to wear me down. I was exhausted by the end of the day, and ready for a night of relaxing at Georgie's house. Victoria Neville would occasionally show

herself at the hospital while I wasn't there. Georgie would give me a daily report of what was going on with my brother, the doctors, and Victoria. It was to my convenience that she worked on the same floor where Matthew was. I always knew what the doctors were saying about Matthew, what they were planning on doing, and when Victoria would come. She was planning something. Every time Georgie talked about her, it gave me a cold shiver that crept up my spine. She gave me the creeps. Those piercing green eyes shot like lasers. They were enough to make any child run away screaming.

My morning consisted of the usual events. I left for the hospital with Georgie. The sight of the hospital still made my stomach churn, and caused a lump to form in the back of my throat. When I arrived on my brother's floor and made it to his room, what I found was no help to my already uneasy stomach. I was standing in the doorway and in front of me Victoria stood with her back to me. I could tell it was her by the tight bun formed at the back of her head, and her perfect pink tweed suit jacket, and black dress pants. She held a clipboard in front of her, and was writing on the paper held in it. I couldn't see what she was writing, I was too far away.

Victoria's presence certainly was not the best start to a morning. This woman caused the hairs on my arm and the back of my neck to stand on end. She was a person I would avoid at all cost to come into contact with, and I normally like everyone. I was not ready to be polite, or in any way kind to Ms. Victoria Neville. I knew, though, that my parents would not approve of me acting rudely toward an authority figure. Especially since she was in control of what might happen to my brother.

I cleared my throat, "May I help you?" I smiled politely at her.

"I didn't even notice you were standing there. I was hoping you might be here." Victoria replied with a smirk.

"Why?" I was angry she was here when I wasn't.

"Well... I need to give an update on your situation to my boss. She is the head of child services." She flipped through the pages on her small clipboard. "It doesn't look good to her that you weren't here when I arrived. You also have not been here all the other times I have come to check on you. It almost..

seems like... you just don't care." She shook her head and raised her eyebrows. She continued to scribble notes on the paper.

"I have simply been trying to do what you said I had to." I bounced my arms in frustration. "Right now, Victoria, I am working in the late afternoon on into late in the evening. I am also training for a race that, if I win, will most of the money I need. I am doing my best."

"Maybe your best isn't good enough. Maybe the director should know that too..." she began to scribble again as she trailed off.

The woman was taunting me! No matter what I did, she was going to find a way to make me look bad. She was impossible! My veins began to burn with anger, and my heart pounding furiously in my chest.

"What can I do to prove to you that I can do this?! What will satisfy your boss? I feel like I am doing more than enough to prove myself worthy." I tried to make myself sound as stern as I possibly could. "What do I need to know?"

"All you need to know is that \$40,000 is not enough. \$50,000 in the next to weeks or you can forget about your brother." She made no movement, and her face was serious. With

that she was gone. She walked out of the hospital room with her head held high. Of the two of us, she was the only one left with some amount of respect.

My anger, embarrassment, and feeling of utter failure were enough to make someone cry. Instead of doing what people would expect, all I could do was curl in a ball in the chair next to Matthew's bed, and bite my lip. I, once again, was at a loss of what I was going to do. I thought I had it all figured out. Victoria's little visit changed my somewhat positive outlook on the situation. Just a few minutes ago, I felt like I actually had a chance. But, work and the race still weren't going to be enough to pay for what Victoria was asking for.

Chapter 7

I had sat there in the chair next to my brother's hospital bed for hours, trying to come up with an idea. I knew that with what I was doing at the time would not be enough to satisfy Victoria. I had to find something else as well. I was already running on pure adrenaline. I was already too exhausted to stay standing by the end of the day. I could only imagine what it would be like adding more to my schedule.

"I'm sorry dad." I thought to myself. "I just can't do it." I shook my head; which was the only physical gesture I made that would hint the way I was feeling. My failure was unbearable, I was sick with myself. I hated who I was, an incompetent fool that was stupid enough to believe she was capable of doing something so huge. I hated that I let down my parent, my brother, and myself. I couldn't do it, and this was the end of me wasting my time in trying. "I'm just going to call Victoria and tell her to bring the papers so I can sign them and get it over with." I thought to myself.

I walked over to the nurses' station, thankful that Georgie wasn't there. If she would have been there, she would have tried

to stop me. I didn't want that. I was simply ready to get this over with.

"Hi, can I have the number for Victoria Neville please?" I asked one of the nurses.

"Sure, but can you hold on for one moment please?" The nurse replied. "I have to go check on a patient real quick."

"Sure thing." I replied.

As I waited for the nurse to return I glanced around the hospital floor. Most of the family members that were walking around I had begun to be familiar with. They had been there every time I had gone to be with my brother in the mornings. Since the floor Matthew was placed on was for long-term patients, they had a lot of regular families around the floor. The Smith family waved at me from another room across from the nurses' station. Their daughter, Susan, had been undergoing radiation and chemotherapy for 2 weeks because she has B-Cell Lymphoma. It is one of the most serious cases the doctor says he had ever seen. After a few moments, the nurse walked back and sat in her chair.

"Let's see... hmm... Victoria Neville..." She said as she typed on her computer. "Ah... here we go. Do you have a pen and a piece of paper?" she looked up at me and asked.

"No I don't actually. I'm sorry, but can I borrow a sticky-note and a pencil real quick?" I asked her.

"Oh sure." She smiled, and opened the drawer. "Here ya go." She handed me a pen and small yellow sticky-note, and closed the drawer. "Whenever you're ready."

"All right, I'm ready." I smiled at her.

"It's 620-785-4241." She told me as I scribbled the number onto my paper.

"Thank you so much." I told her, and handed her pen back. I spotted Georgie coming my way so I had to leave or she would suspicious.

I quickened my pace when I walked back to my brother's room so that Georgie wouldn't make it to me before I made it there, if she wanted to talk to me. I didn't want to tell her about Victoria's visit, or that I was going to call Victoria about signing the papers.

I sat in the chair next to Matthew's bed, and grabbed to phone that was on the nightstand next to the chair. I was get-

ting ready to dial, but I looked at the clock and it read 12:47p.m. I had 13 minutes to meet Dempsey. Really, I didn't have to go because I was done. I wasn't going to do it anymore but since he had done so much for me, I should at least tell him in person that I wasn't going to be continuing training.

I set the yellow sticky-note down on the nightstand next to me, and switched into the running shoes I kept there and put on every day when I went to training. Georgie let me borrow them along with so many other things. I wouldn't need them after today though.

I walked out of Matthew's room, and waved at Georgie to let her know I was leaving. She liked it when I would let her know when I was leaving. I took the elevator down to the main floor, and left the hospital. The further I got from the hospital, the better I felt. I felt like the burden was slowly lifting off me. My chest didn't feel as heavy as it did 7 minutes ago when I was sitting in Matthew's room getting ready to call Victoria. "Maybe I was doing the right thing." I thought to myself. "maybe this will just be for the best."

That feeling went away fast when the gym came into sight. As I got closer to it, the feeling of responsibly resurfaced.

Dempsey was waiting for me in front of the building sitting on his bike, holding a water bottle in his right hand.

"Hey Dempsey." I said in dull tone. I was far from enthusiastic about telling Dempsey about quitting.

"Hey kid! I brought you a water bottle today so you didn't have to keep drinking the water from the park's water fountain. That stuff is just nasty." He said scrunching his nose, making a sour face.

"Oh... well... thanks Dempsey, but..." I trailed on but he interrupted me before I could even finish saying what I was going to say.

"Look, I know... you're disappointed you haven't met the time goal I set for your 10 mile run yet, but I'm telling you... today is the day kid!" He slapped my shoulder encouragingly.

"Yeah... today's the day." I responded in a sad tone. I felt guilty about this. He was sure I could do this, and I knew I couldn't. How was I going to tell him? Well... what is one more day of training going to hurt?

"Well Erin, we have to get going if we want to get a good run in today. No more dilly-dolling, ok?"

"Yeah... sure, lets go."

The park was only a few blocks from the gym. I made the mistake the first time we ran of doing my all out sprint from the gym to the park because I figured we would be done when we got there. Dempsey had other plans though. He takes me on a 9 mile run from there and then we run back to the gym. We run the cross-country trail several times by the end of our run. I have learned, since then, to pace myself, and how to breathe to the rhythm of stride. Every three strides I took a breath. Dempsey had given me a lot of good instructions, and I learned a lot from him over the past few weeks of training.

We reached the park about 3 minutes after we left from the gym. From the gym to the park was only about a half a mile, so we made it there pretty quickly. As Dempsey rode his bike beside me on the trail, the sound of the tires cycling became mesmerizing and I became lost in my head with all the millions of thoughts running around my head that had nothing to do with running.

"What would dad think if I gave up?"

"What would my mom think?"

"Would Matthew hate me if he woke up to another family?"

"What would Georgie think?"

"After she gave me so much and I just gave up?"

"What would happen to me?" "Where would I live?"

"Would Georgie still welcome me into her home?"

"How would Dempsey react?"

"Would he hate me?"

"How would I repay him for all he has done for me?"

"What would my parents say if they were here?"

"Did I really want to give Victoria the Victory?"

These were only a few thoughts that ran through my head as I ran. My mind was crazed and flooded with negative thoughts of what would happen, and what people would think if I did what I was planning to do.

But either way I would fail. There was no way I was going to be able to raise \$50,000 in the next two weeks. I was a failure, and a quitter. I was once again disgusted with myself. I felt dirty, in my own personality. I was so selfish.

My father's words and the image of him and my mother lying beneath the china cabinet ran through my head.

"...I want you to promise me that you will always look out for your brother. Never let anything come between you two. Stay close together, the both of you will need each other with or without us there..." He told me.

"I promise" was my response and I was failing. I was an utter failure.

My throat felt like it was closing up and my lungs felt like someone was squeezing them in their fist. I couldn't breathe. Tears began to flood my eyes and pour down my face. I felt like I was treading water in my life. Just trying to stay above water. I finally lost it.

I stopped running, and fell on the ground gasping for air. It was too much. I laid there on the ground sobbing. I couldn't run anymore. I could barely breathe. This sensation reminded me of what it felt like carrying my brother on my back desperately trying to get out of my house. This reminder only made the tears stream even harder and faster from my eyes. I couldn't stop.

Dempsey knelt beside me, held my head up and began wiping the tears from my face.

"Hey kid. What happened? It's only mile 5. We can take a break though, if this is too much." He said with his eyes wide. I could tell he was concerned.

"No, no Dempsey... I, I, I." I stuttered through my tears and incapability to breathe. I sniffed a few times so I could try to talk again. "I was coming to tell you today that I was just going to sign the papers. I am done training, and that I'm not doing the race. Victoria raised the amount of money by another \$10,000 dollars. I just can't do it Dempsey, I just can't do it." I shook my head and grabbed the collar of his shirt so I could wipe my eyes.

"Now Ms. Erin," He said pushing me back so he could see me. "you are not the kind of girl that just gives up. I know you. Now... let's just wipe those tears and just get back to running. After a while you will be just fine. You will be better and back in your right mind." He told me as he tapped my head with his finger.

"Dempsey, you don't understand. It was already almost impossible for me to raise the \$40,00. There is no way that I can raise \$50,000 in the next two weeks. There's just no way." I told him.

"Erin, if my wife and I just gave up after she was diagnosed with cancer she would be dead by now. Erin, you know why she isn't. Because she's a fighter." He told, and shook my shoulders gently. "and you are too. You have the strength to do this. My wife's Victoria is her cancer. She hasn't given up and it's been almost a year. Now, tell me you can't raise a few thousand dollars." He smiled at me. "Don't give up on me Erin, please. I know you are capable of so much more than you give yourself credit for. Now common Ms. Erin, don't make me bike all by myself every day please?" He smiled at me.

"Dempsey, I don't know... it seems so impossible." I replied still unsure of myself.

"Don't make me repeat that whole speech Erin. Who knows Erin, you might fail." He said bluntly, and I looked at him curiously. "But who knows Erin... you might just win it all. But, you're never going to find out unless you try." He looked at me seriously.

"Well..."

"Ah... come on Erin." He pushed me on.

"All right." I smiled back at him.

"Then let's go." He stood up, grabbed my arm and hoisted me off the ground, and we kept running. But this time, with a new confidence and a new edge of inspiration.

Chapter 8

"Nice job kid!" Dempsey said slapping me on the back.

I had just finished my 10-mile run in 58 minutes and 34 seconds, my best time yet.

"Thank Dempsey. I felt really good about that one." I replied gasping for air. I was exhausted.

"I think... hmm... I think you deserve some ice cream." He smiled. "First of all because you did a great job and second ice

cream just sounds good right now. Normally I wouldn't recommend ice cream to one of my trainees but I think this calls for ice cream. But, only on one condition." His smile suddenly straightened, and he became serious.

"Uh... sure Dempsey, what is it?" I replied afraid he was going to say something negative; like he was going to make me run another 5 miles or something along those lines.

"I'm paying." His smile was even bigger than before, and his eyes were wide and bright.

"Well, if you say so."

"I insist." He responded politely. "But, one more thing."

"Yeah?" I responded.

"We're running there." He said with a sly smile.

"I just knew there had to be a catch." I hung my head, but smiling. It really was funny.

"Let's race." He said excited.

"Ok!" I responded enthusiastically.

I felt like a 5-year old. Agreeing to race to go get ice cream sounds like something only a child would do. But, it was a nice break from the extreme pressure I was under.

"Ready..." we positioned our legs like track runner. "Set..." Dempsey continued. "Go!" He shouted. With that we were off.

Our legs ran with wide strides as we paced to the ice cream parlor.

"Geez kid your getting fast!" He said panting. We had already gone 10 miles. Even though it was only a couple blocks to the ice cream parlor, that distance was enough to exhaust me.

"Well thank you." I responded smiling. I was panting as well.

We could see the shop only a few blocks away. We were close enough to see the sign reading, "The Scoop Shoppe" with a large ice cream scoop next to it. His pace started to quicken and his stride was longer. I attempted to match his speed, but failed. His stride was close to impossible to match. He had a 56" stride... we measured. His stride was almost twice as long as mine.

We were coming into town square and "The Scoop Shoppe" was at the end of the street. We squeezed through the crowd of people shopping. I was getting frustrated I had to turn from side to side to weave my way through the people.

Dempsey was running in the street clear of all people. "The cheater" I thought, but smiled. I cut through a group of people, and began running in the street several paces behind Dempsey. I caught up to him within a few moments. He must have slowed down thinking I was much further behind.

We both dashed for the door and squeezed through the doorway. When we got in we both looked at each other laughing and gasping for air.

"I won!" Dempsey claimed in between breathes pointing to his chest.

"Nuh-uh, I totally won!" I replied. "Did you see that come back?"

"I did, and great job Ms. Grey... but I still won." He said chuckling.

"Ha, well all right Dempsey... but next time, I get to win." I said.

"All right. Well how about that ice cream?" He asked as he pulled his walled out of his red sweat pants.

"Are you sure you are all right with paying for my ice cream? You really don't have to. I have a few dollars with me

that would more than pay for it." I said. I felt bad that he was paying for it.

"Absolutely not Ms. Erin. You have been working so hard. I have been pushing you so hard over the past few days, few weeks actually. You deserve some ice cream... paid in full." He replied walking over to the cooler where they displayed the ice cream.

"Well thank you very much. I really appreciate it." I said.

"Hey, it's no problem. What would you like?"

"Uh... rocky road please." I responded.

"Two rocky roads please." He turned and told the lady working.

"Yes sir." The employee responded. She put two scoops into each bowl and handed them to Dempsey.

Dempsey handed me one bowl and a spoon, handed the employee the money, and took his bowl and a spoon. "So, tell me how your wife... how is Jason doing?" I asked Dempsey.

Over the past few weeks he has been telling me about his wife, Lauren, and his son, Jason. Jason was 12, Matthew's age. Lauren was diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer 18 months ago,

and lately has been undergoing heavy treatment. The doctors are confident that she is improving and will be able to take fewer treatments weekly.

"Well... Lauren is doing just fine. The treatment is taking a toll on her body. She is tired a lot of the time, and isn't able to do a lot. But the doctors think that instead of two rounds of radiation weekly they can reduce it to one. Jason is missing his mom. Lauren and him use to go out walking a lot when she was a lot better." Dempsey said, and took a few bites of his ice cream.

"I am sorry she is not doing as well. Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked, sincerely concerned.

"Erin, you are doing enough for your family. Your plate is full. Plus there's not really anything you can do to help." He told me then shrugged his shoulders and took another bite of his ice cream.

"Well, if there's anything I can do... please let me know."

"I will Erin... thank you." He smiled back at me.

"No problem."

Dempsey's phone began to ring. He reached into his pocket, pulled it out, and answered..

"This is Dempsey Craig." He listened to the man on the other line. "m-hmm... m-hmm... why?... what?" his eye brows creased in the middle of his forehead. "I'll be down there as soon as I can." He said. "Ok thank you... all right... bye." He hung up the phone and put it back in his pocket.

"Erin I, I'm sorry, but I have to go." Dempsey said. He was obviously disturbed and distracted by the phone conversation he just had. "The doctor called me. Today Lauren is having her check up and she isn't feeling good and he wants me there." He stood up and threw his empty bowl of ice cream into the trash can a few feet away from us against the wall.

"Oh no problem..." I glanced at my watch and realized I had to be getting to work in a few minutes. "I have to go to work. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Maybe, we'll see how Lauren is tomorrow. I'll call Georgie's house tomorrow morning to let you know." He said making his way to the door. "Goodbye Ms. Erin."

I only had a bit more ice cream to finish, so I ate it quickly, threw the bowl away and left. Thankfully the coffee

shop was just across the street and down a few stores from the Scoop Shoppe.

The silver bells rang above me as I entered the coffee shop for work. I walked behind the counter and put on my red apron with my name tag on it. I put my hair in a bun so it wouldn't get in the way of making coffee.

"Erin, I am so glad you got here before I left." Heather said very distracted trying to find the keys in her purse. "I am in kind of a rush. I have to get to a conference. But, I wanted to congratulate you." She took a break from the searching through her purse and looked up at me.

"Congratulate me? What do you mean?" I asked.

"You have been working so hard Erin. You are always on time, and always cover people's shifts when they can't make it. You are such a great help here, and you are reliable. I am promoting you to assistant manager. Your hours might change a bit but if you need, we can see what we can work out." She said smiling at me.

I stood shocked. I certainly did not see this pleasant surprise coming. I was tremendously happy about it. My smile

felt like it was stretched from ear to ear; of course this was an exaggeration. I was speechless and the only words I could manage to spit out were...

"Heather, I can't thank you enough for this opportunity."

I told her.

"Well you deserve it Erin, more than anyone. You work so hard, and are great at what you work at. Unfortunately I really have to get going." She found her keys in her purse, leaned forward, put her arm around me and hugged me.

"Good luck," she said smiling at me standing at the door. Then she left after a quick wave.

I wiped down the countertops, and all the other coffee grinders and makers as the beginning of my shift as assistant manager. I smiled at the thought of myself as the new assistant manager.

Chapter 9

My accomplishments made the last two days bearable. I loved my new job position. I loved having a responsibility that wasn't forced upon me and was appreciated. I was happy that all my hard work had been paying off.

Dempsey called for me at Georgie's house yesterday morning and said that Lauren wasn't feeling very well and the doctors would be testing all day yesterday and today so we haven't done training in a few days. The only thing I liked about that was that not training allowed me to be at work as often as Heather needed me. But it was strange that Dempsey would cancel two days of training. Lauren must really not be feeling well. But I understood his need to be there while she is going through testing.

I had been working a lot these past few days. I would leave from the hospital at 10 a.m. and I worked until 9 p.m. Today I left for work at nine. Lindy, a girl I work with, left early because she felt sick and she needed me to come in and cover the last hour of her shift.

So I wouldn't come back to training not running over the past few days I decided that for lunch I would run back to Georgie's house, make a sandwich, and run back to the coffee shop. But, while I was making my sandwich the phone began to ring. I debated with myself on whether or not I should answer it. This wasn't my home... it wasn't my phone to answer. But what if it was Dempsey called to tell me that he would be able to train today, and Lauren was fine. I decided I better answer it just in case it was Dempsey or an emergency.

"Hello?" I asked when I answered the phone.

"Hello, is this Erin?" The man's voice asked on the other line.

"Yes it is... who is this?" I asked curious to know who was on the other line.

"Hey kid! This is Dempsey."

"Oh, hey Dempsey!" I was relieved it was him. "I have been running from the coffee shop to Georgie's to make sure that I have been staying in shape. I know it's not as far as we usually run but I think that I'll be fine today when we go..."

"Erin." Dempsey cut me off mid sentence. "I won't be coming to training today." He said abruptly.

I was somewhat annoyed with his tone and manners. This wasn't like Dempsey to just cut me off. Maybe it had just been

a bad day. I could understand that. "Oh... well, that's ok. Tomorrow we can get started again, this time I say we go for 15 miles. I have been dying to run. You better be fast tomorrow because..."

"Erin!" He cut me off again. This time he sounded agitated. "I will not be able to train you anymore. My wife's testing results were not good. She has moved into stage 4 of breast cancer. We are at the airport getting ready to fly to the Mayo clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona right now. I don't know when we will get back, but it won't be any time soon. I am so sorry, but I need to be with my wife and son." By now his voice became softer and more informative than agitated.

"Oh..." was all I could respond, I had no words I could reply with. What Dempsey said simply left me with no words. This came as not quite a complete shock; I knew that Lauren wasn't well. I figured he would always be able to train me though. I completely understood why he had to quit. I of all people could understand the priority family takes in your life.

My stomach twisted and turned as I came to the realization that I couldn't do it. Without Dempsey's guidance I wasn't going to go far at all. There was no way I was going to win the marathon now. It was impossible...

"Erin? Are you still there?" Dempsey's voice called from the other line, interrupting my train of thought.

"Uh, yeah... I, I am still here." I replied with broken words.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah... I am fine." I said hoping he would believe me. But I couldn't ask someone to believe something I didn't even believe myself. The truth was I wasn't fine, but Dempsey didn't need to know that. He didn't need to feel bad, he already has enough that he is dealing with.

"I am sorry Erin, truly. I have enjoyed training you. You are very easy to coach and I have had a good time seeing you progress and accomplish. I just wish I could watch race to win. I know you will." He said attempting to ease the tension and silence that both of us brought to the conversation.

"It's ok Dempsey. Really... I fully understand why you have to leave. I hope she gets better, and keep me updated." I said. I wanted to stay informed. Over the past month, Dempsey had become a major part of my life and I was concerned about his family, and him.

"I certainly will Ms. Erin. I promise."

"Boarding for flight 131 to Scottsdale, Arizona." I heard a women's voice call in the background.

"Well that's me." Dempsey said.

"Yep. Have a safe flight Mr. Craig." I responded sorrowfully. I was sad he had to go.

"I'll be seein ya kid." He responded.

"Yep... bye Dempsey."

"Last call for flight 131 to Scottsdale, Arizona." I heard the women's voice call again.

"Goodbye Ms. Grey." And the line went silent.

I stood in Georgie's kitchen still confused and shocked at the conversation that just occurred. What was I going to do? With no trainer... I suppose I could still run in the race but there is no way I could or would win.

I glanced at my watch and I had 20 minutes to get back to the coffee shop. Since I wasn't going to run back it would take me longer. So as I left Georgie's house I locked the door behind me and began to walk back to work.

If I wasn't going to run, how was I going to come up with the money? I thought to myself. My brother deserves more than me just deciding to give up. But how was I going to do it without Dempsey. I suppose I could get another trainer but he or she would have some pretty big shoes to fill. No... there's no chance. I thought as I stuck my hands into my jacket pocket, and watched my feet take one step after the next. What have I been fighting

for this whole time? This is a question I didn't want to ask myself but I couldn't deny that I had lost sight of my goal. Matthew was still the most important thing to me. Was I just going to let him down because I was facing some hard times? Absolutely not!! I still had the endurance, a long stride, a good pace, and the drive to run this marathon. I can do this.

As my thoughts became more positive and reassuring my walk became a jog and a jog became a run and the closer I got to work the run became a full out sprint. My confidence grew and spread from my head and my heart to my face. Fully confident I could do this. A smile began to appear on my face, and the energy I felt inside was anything but negative. Even though Dempsey had just quit, and that truly hurt and is upsetting this gave the confidence boost and competitive edge I have desired and needed since my first day of training. Dempsey taught me well, and now I could apply what he taught me.

I pushed the door to the coffee shop with great force and it went swinging open and the bells chimed loud above me. I laughed at myself for my very graceful entrance. I have to admit... I felt rather giddy in this moment right now. I have no idea how, but I was.

"What's got you all happy boss?" Katie called from behind the counter. She was sitting on a stool flipping through a magazine and smacking the gum rolling around in her mouth.

"Oh nothing Katie. Has anyone come in?" I asked grabbing my apron.

"Nope, but you did get a call. From some girl that the name of some state." Katie said rolling her eyes.

"Georgie?" I asked.

"Yeah... that was it. She said you needed to call her immediately." She continued to smack her gum.

I frantically began to look for the company phone and couldn't find it. I began bustling through papers lying on the counter. Georgie never calls me at work, and she never would unless it was an emergency.

"Katie, where is the phone?!" I asked frustrated that she helping me look for it.

"Oh, it's on top of the cappuccino machine." She said pointing over at the machine without even taking her eyes off of her magazine.

"Thank you." I was too worried to ask why she didn't tell me that a few minutes ago.

I picked up the phone and dialed the hospital's number and hit the extension number of the floor my brother was on. I had it memorized because of how often I would call for Georgie.

"Hello?" Georgie was not the nurse that answered.

"Hi, is Georgie there? This is kind of urgent." I told her.

"Um...let me go get her." The nurse responded.

I tapped my fingers on top of the counter impatiently waiting for Georgie to pick up the phone and tell me what was going on.

"Is this Erin Grey?" The same nurse as before asked me.

"Yes, it is. Now can I please talk to Georgie?" I said frustrated. This nurse was not getting what I needed.

"She says to come down here immediately." She said informatively.

"Why? What's wrong?" I asked. "I need to know what's going on. Tell me now!" I demanded.

"Ms. Grey... you aren't going to get anywhere yelling at anyone." The nurse said. "All she said was to get down here immediately."

I did not like this girl treating me like I was a child. "Fine. I'll be down there soon." I said and hung up the phone before even saying goodbye.

I took off my apron and hung it back up.

"Katie, I need you to cover me while I am gone. I have to go to the hospital." I said walking over to the door.

"All righty boss." She said saluting me as I left.

Katie was not the most reliable person, but she was going to have to do. There was an emergency and I had to find out what was going on. I was thankful the hospital was only a few blocks from the coffee shop.

I ran as fast as I could. My lungs felt like they were closing, and I was having a hard time passing air through them. My pain, though, would have to be set-aside for now. I pushed my way through the crowd of people walking around Town Square. At this point I really didn't care if I ran into people, or anything. All that mattered was getting to the hospital, now.

I made it to the hospital in record time. I stumbled into the lobby gasping for air, but I walked quickly to the elevators, pressed the "up" button, and waited with my hands on my hips taking in large quantities of air.

Then the doors opened and I got inside and pressed the number for my brother's floor several times, this elevator was not being quick enough. I tapped my feet and messed with my hands all the way up.

Finally the doors opened before me and I jogged over to the nurses' station. I looked around the area for Georgie.

"Where is Georgie?" I asked one of the nurses sitting at the computer.

"Ah...you must be Ms. Grey." I recognized the nurse's voice instantly.

"And you must be the nurse I talked to on the phone. Which means you already know this is urgent. So where is Georgie?" I asked, not ready to play games with this nurse. I was going to find Georgie now.

"Well, I am not sure where she is right now, but I'm sure she will be back soon." The nurse responded smiling.

"You are of no help." I threw my arms up in the air out of frustration. This was going to make me nuts. "Fine, I'll find her myself." I told the nurse.

I began to walk around to all the rooms and glance in every one to see if she was there. All the families and patients looked at me like a freak, but if they knew they would understand. At last, Georgie emerged from the double doors at the end of the walkway.

"Oh Erin!" Georgie said, suddenly running to me. She grabbed me and hugged me and then pulled me back. "Your brother has been moved." She said and her eyes widened.

"Oh, they just moved Matthew to a different floor?" I asked walking back over to the elevators. "Georgie, you scared me... this is silly. What floor is he on?" I asked her shaking my head, relieved it was nothing serious.

"No, Erin..." She said walking over to me. "I mean, he's no longer in this hospital. Matthew is missing." She said, eyes wider than I have ever seen.

"What, what... what do you mean he's missing?" I looked at her curiously and frustrated. I was no in the mood for games, and if this was a game it certainly wasn't funny.

"I mean, he is not there. He is not in his bed, and I know he didn't wake up." She said with an edge in her voice.

"Who moved him? Where is he?" I demanded.

"Victoria..." she said standing still, looking at me like she had just seen a ghost.

"Georgie, I don't want to ask this again. Where is he?!" I asked, walked up to her and got close to her face. For the first time I was angry with Georgie. She has never kept information from me, and now certainly was not the time to start.

"Erin, I don't know where she has taken him." She said shaking her head. "She knows that you 'n I are close. She must have done it while I was assistin' a doctor in surgery today. The surgery wasn't goin' to well so I had to be in there longer

than planned. When I got out, he was gone. I thought maybe Dr. Herman had just taken him down for routine testin'. But when he didn't return for several hours I began to worry so I asked one of the nurses where he was." She told me.

"And..." I motion my hands for her to continue.

"And they said Victoria took 'im. They had a helicopter ready to transport 'im to another hospital. I have asked everyone where she took 'im, and no one knows. Dr. Herman wouldn't even tell me because I wasn't family and it wasn't my business." She said.

"Where's doctor Herman?" I asked and began walking around checking all the rooms again.

"I don't know Erin." Georgie said trying to keep up with me.

I didn't see him in any of the rooms. So I decided I would go through the double doors at the end of the hall. I needed an answer. Even though I didn't like Dr. Herman, I was going to have to deal with him just this once.

"Erin you're not allowed to go through there." Georgie called after me as I pushed open the double doors and walked right through them.

"Dr. Herman!" I called through the long hallway of rooms obviously used for surgery. I stomped my way to all the doors

and looked through the small glass window in the center. I didn't see him.

"Dr. Herman!!" I called again, even louder.

"Miss, What are you doing back here?" A nurse came out from one of the rooms. Her eyebrows almost met in the middle of her creased forehead. Oh yeah, she was angry.

When she met me she squeezed my arm and began to pull me back through the double doors again.

"Hey! Hey!" I yelled at her, trying to yank her arm off of me. "You can't just pull me out of here! Where is Dr. Herman? I need to know now!" I demanded.

"You are not aloud back here Miss. I am sorry but I don't know where doctor Herman is." She said and she fell behind me and pushed at the middle of my back to go through the double doors.

As we re-entered the large room with the nurses' station surrounded by the hospital rooms I spotted Dr. Herman standing next to a nurse talking to her, with his clipboard in hand as usual. I walked fast-paced over to him and put myself between him and the nurse to demand his attention.

"Do you need something Ms. Grey?" Dr. Herman asked me rolling his eyes and then redirected his focus to his clipboard.

"Where is Matthew?" I asked him, annoyed that he was asking me if I needed something. Of course I needed something! My brother.

"Oh... he is with Victoria." He said calmly. Was this man not aware of the situation?

"And you didn't tell me?!" I said. Shortly after I had bite my lip, and try to refrain from shoving the doctor. "How could you just let her take him without telling me?"

"I thought you knew..." his voice trailed off as he looked up at me with a concerned look. His eyebrows raised and his widened.

"How could I have known, Dr. Herman, I haven't been here since about 7:30 this morning. I had no idea. She didn't tell me anything." I tried to calm down for his sake. Clearly it wasn't his fault, and for once he seemed to was be sincere.

"All I know, Miss Grey, is that she took him to some hospital in New York City. She said she told you and you were meeting them there tomorrow at 1:00 p.m." He said.

"What do you mean I would be meeting them?" I asked.

"She was meeting with the head of Child Services to look over your case and decide on whether or not you deserved to be responsible for Matthew." He said, and his became even wider. I

think he finally realized how serious this was and how Victoria had been against me this whole time.

"The... the..." I was having a hard time breathing. "The head of Child Services." I couldn't believe what Victoria had done. I should be able to believe it, considering everything she had done so far. But, this... this was too much.

"Erin, you need to sit down." The doctor put his hands on my shoulders and guided me to a chair and had me sit down.

"What... what" I took another deep breath. "What hospital?" I asked rubbing my face. I was getting light headed.

"Maybe you should lay down Erin." The doctor suggested.

"No! No! Dr. Herman which hospital?!" I asked as I stood up, trying to dismiss my stomach pains and lightheadedness.

"Erin, I don't know..." He said. "Just sit down." He put his hands back on my shoulders and tried to set me back in the chair but I resisted.

"No, I am going to find my brother!" I saw Georgie standing behind Dr. Herman, listening to our conversation.

"Here." Georgie walked over and took a cell phone out of her pocket and handed it to me. "Take this with you. In case you need to get a hold of me."

"Are you sure Georgie?" I felt bad taking her cell phone.

"What are you doing with a cell phone on you during work?"
Dr. Herman asked looking at Georgie.

"Does that really matter right now Dr. Herman?" I asked Dr.
Herman annoyed.

"I guess not." He responded.

"Well I'm going to go over to the middle school to make
sure that I am signed up for the race and have my number ready.
I will be going to the hospital right after that. I have my
money with me." I said patting my bag at my side.

"Good luck hun." Georgie said walking over to me and
hugged me.

"Thanks Georgie. I'll see you when I get back." I said
trying to smile through everything that was happening.

"Erin, you don't need to fake smile for me. I know this is
hard for you." Georgie said. She knew me surprisingly well, and
could tell easily when I was faking.

"Yeah... uh, good luck." Dr. Herman said. "I'm not really a
sentimental guy." He said with broken words.

"So I've noticed." I whispered to myself, turned around and
headed to the elevator.

I called the coffee shop, and Katie answered.

"Hello?" Katie asked.

"Hey Katie, this is Erin." I said entering the elevator.

"Oh hey boss!" Katie responded, I could still hear her smacking her gum.

"Can you cover my shift tonight and tomorrow, and possibly the following day? I realize it's short notice but it's an emergency." I didn't want to explain the situation to her.

"Sure boss, whatever you say, I got nothing to do anyway."

"Don't forget to close up tonight. Would you call Heather for me and let her know? I don't have her number with me." I told her.

"I won't forget, I promise. I'll call Heather for you. Don't worry about a thing boss." She said.

"Thank you so much Katie. I owe you big time. If you need anything, just call this number, all right?"

"All right boss. I have everything covered, don't worry."

"I'm trusting you Katie." I told her.

We both hung up the phones just as I reached the main floor. I left the hospital and began jogging for the middle school. It was only down the street, and I wouldn't have to jog far... thank goodness. I had done a lot of running today.

I entered the doors of the middle school and the secretary was sitting in her chair in the office. I opened the door and entered the office.

"Hi, my name is Erin Grey... I am signed up for the Marathon in three days and I just wanted to make sure I had the date right." I told her. "Sometimes I can be so forgetful." This was my sad attempt at small talk with her.

"Um... what marathon?" She looked up at me with raised eyebrows.

"The one with the reward of \$30,000 offered by the mayor... the 20 mile race."

"Oh, yeah... that's been canceled." She told me.

"What? Canceled?" I responded, shocked. Could this day get any worse? I thought to myself. My stomach pains returned and this time the lightheadedness was harder to shake. I tried to remain focused.

"I mean... the mayor pulled out, he withdrew his money offer. There is no marathon." She told me.

I said nothing and I turned around, pushed the office door open, and walked out. My face was expressionless. I had no idea how to react to the news I was just given. I would figure out a way eventually, but for now I would set it aside and focus on my brother.

"Miss! Miss!" the receptionist called after me as I left the building.

I held up my hand calling for a taxi. Surprisingly in our small town we did indeed have taxis. One came soon, and I eased my way into the backseat of the car.

"So, where are ya going?" The taxi driver asked.

"The airport please." I responded, still emotionless.

"Yes ma'am."

We arrived at the airport 35 or 40 minutes after leaving the middle school, and I entered the automatic sliding doors. I walked up to the people behind the counter in front of me.

"One ticket to New York City please."

"Which class?" The woman asked me.

"B please." I responded.

"Aisle or window?"

"Doesn't matter... um... window." I said.

"What time? What form of payment?"

"Next flight out please. Cash." I told her.

She then continued with all the routine questions and then I proceeded to the waiting area. We would be boarding in 30 minutes. I stood next to a trashcan, with my bag hung over my shoulder, and phone in hand.

About 25 minutes later the phone in my hand began to ring and vibrate. I looked at it and I didn't recognize the number.

"Hello?" I answered curiously.

"Boss? Is that you?" Katie's frantic voice called from the other line.

"Yes, yes... Katie, it's me... what's wrong?"

"It's gone! It's gone!" She screamed at me.

"What's gone Katie, what's gone?" I asked still utterly confused about what she was talking about.

"The coffee shop! I left for an hour to have dinner with friends and now it's gone. I left it for an hour, and some hoodlums burnt it down! I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry." For once Katie actually sounded serious.

The stomach pains, dizziness, and lightheadedness was too much this time. I quickly shut the phone, turned to my right, keeled over and vomited into the trashcan, and soon after collapsed. The last thing I saw was a crowd of people hovering over me.

Chapter 10

I awoke in a room painted all white with one table and a chair sitting next to it. My purse, luggage, and phone were sitting on the chair. I became curious. I heard a crunching noise as I shifted my body weight from one side to the other to try to sit up. I looked down and I was lying on the waxy paper that doctors put on the examination tables. I was in the nurse's office. I started to get up so I could go get my phone, but I sat up too quickly and became dizzy again. I stayed seated with my back leaned against the wall behind me. This was one position I could be comfortable in until the dizziness went away. A nurse walked in a few minutes later.

"Hey there!" She said walking over to me.

"Hi." I replied. I was distracted because I was trying to focus on one object until everything stopped spinning.

"Can you stand up for one moment please?" The nurse asked me kindly.

"Uh... sure... it might take me a minute though." I told her. I was sure she was aware of my ill-feeling.

"No problem. You want some help getting up?" She asked me extending her arm and opening her hand.

"Yes, that would be great." I responded grabbing her arm and hoisting myself off the table. I held on to her arm for a few moments while I gained my balance and let everything come into focus. When it did, I walked over to the chair and grabbed Georgie's phone. I opened it to check the time. I had missed my flight!!

"Why didn't anyone wake me?" I questioned the nurse. My tone was slightly harsh but reasonably so. "I missed my flight!"

"Oh I know that dear. You were in no condition to be flying. We let you rest and booked you on the next flight to New York City, same cost. I was actually coming in here to wake you up. Your plane leaved in 20 minutes." She responded kindly.

"Thank you so much Miss. I am sorry I got upset." I really felt awful for the way I acted. She was just trying to help.

"It's all right. I understand. You need to get some rest before you board your plane Ok?" She told me.

"All right." I sat down and rested my eyes and quickly fell asleep.

The nurse had security take me to my gate. I boarded my plane only moments later. I then found an open seat at the front end of the plane and slept all the way to New York. Doctor Herman told me they went to New York City. So I would take a plane to New York City and then a train to wherever I had to go from the airport.

I stepped out of "LaGuardia Airport" around 8:00pm. It was dark and raining outside. My brother was somewhere in this city on the west side of the river.

I remembered passing a coffee shop on my way over to the exit doors. I stopped myself before leaving because I remember seeing computers against one of the walls. I retraced my steps back to the coffee shop.

"Would you mind if I used one of your computers?" I asked one of the men working behind the counter who was cleaning the cappuccino machine.

"Absolutely, you are more than welcome." He turned and smiled at me.

I walked over and set my bags on the floor beside me, and began searching hospitals west of the river. I found a list reading...

Lenox Hill Hospital

Rockefeller University Hospital

Fountain Pen Hospital

Bellevue Hospital

New York Downtown Hospital

St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital

I was thankful the list wasn't as long as I was expecting it to be, but it still seemed overwhelming. I clicked on each link to site of each hospital and began dialing the number for the first hospital listed. I pulled the phone to my ear as it rang twice before someone picked up.

"Lenox Hill Hospital, how can I direct your call?" A women's voice answered on the other end.

"Hello. My name is Erin Grey and I was wondering if a Matthew Grey is being treated there? I am his sister." I told her, hoping she would give me the information.

"Um... one second." I heard typing going on in the background. "Yes, Erin Grey, daughter of Martha and Jeff Grey, sister of Matthew Grey." She said. "One moment please." The typing continued. "Not here ma'am, sorry." The woman said quickly and hung up.

All right. I thought to myself. Maybe the next one. I went back and clicked on the next one on my list, found the number on the center of the screen, and began dialing. Once again I waited two full rings until I heard a man's voice answer this time.

"Rockefeller University Hospital, how can I help you?" The man asked.

"I need to know if there is a Matthew Grey being treated there." I told him.

"Are you family?" He asked me.

"Yes sir, I am his sister... Erin Grey." I responded.

"All right then, let me see." I heard the keys of a computer clicking in the background. After a long moment of silence the man said, "I'm sorry miss but there is no Matthew Grey here."

"Thank you sir." I told him disappointed.

"You are very welcome." And then the line went dead.

This is going to take forever! I thought to myself. I was tired. Today's events had left me feeling exhausted, and they still weren't over with. Matthew was here, with Victoria and her boss. Victoria had been plotting on how she could make me fail, and this would be a good way to try. This only gave me the adrenaline rush and the desire to make Victoria fail miserably.

I continued my calling through the list of hospitals. Each one telling me that my brother wasn't there. I did not become discouraged; I was going to find my brother. I picked up my phone once again and began dialing the number for Bellevue Hospital. After hearing three rings someone picked up.

"Good Evening. Bellevue Hospital, how can I help you?" A women's voice said.

"Hello. My name is Erin Grey and I am calling to see if my brother Matthew Grey is being treated there." I told her.

"Well, let me check." The women said and then once again I heard the clicking of letters on the keyboard in the background. "Why yes." The women told me. "Would you like to know what room he is in?" She asked politely.

"Yes, please!" I told her. I was thrilled that he was there. A tingling sensation took over me from the pit of my stomach to my fingertips. Finally something was going right.

The lady continued typing and soon answered, "He is in room 422."

"Thank you so much ma'am!" I told her.

"You are welcome miss. Did you need directions on how to get here?" She asked.

"No thank you, I have the address right in front of me and I think I can find my way there. I appreciated your offer though." I said. I clapped my hands in front of me because of my accomplishment.

"You are welcome." Said the woman and the line went dead.

All right, I thought to myself, I know exactly where Matthew is down to the room. I had just enough money to get there by bus. I walked out of the airport with both my bags hanging on my shoulder, and cell phone in hand. I glanced at the small piece of paper that I held in my other hand. I had written down the address of the hospital on the back of an order for more coffee beans for the coffee shop. The paper read..

462 1st Ave. #A

New York, NY 10016

If I caught the next subway I would be there by about 9:00. I had so many things to tell Victoria. The more I thought about what I'd say to Victoria, the angrier I became. Matthew was the only family I had left, and she was trying to take that away from me? No! No, no, no! I was not going to let that happen. I promised my dad! My whole body shook in anger. Then my stomach began to churn as I came back to the realization of what was really important. I had to convince the head of child services to keep Matthew. This gave me drive and several other emotions. My anger and nerves are what kept me going, on top of adrenaline.

I stomped out of the airport realizing I probably looked like a 4 year old was throwing a fit. At this point, though, I didn't care. All I wanted was Matthew. I needed him, and he needed me. I started running, looking for the subway.

"Excuse me sir, but where can I catch the subway?" I stopped this man on the sidewalk.

"If you're going to be in this city, you should know how to get around!" He yelled at me. "Here, take this." He shoved a piece of paper against my arm and walked away.

"What's your problem mister?! Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning huh?" I yelled at him as he continued to walk down the street. He looked back at me with a scary face. I was worried maybe he was going to come back and hurt me, so I turned the other direction and kept walking.

This certainly wasn't a welcoming city. I looked at the paper he had given me as I kept walking. It was a map of the city. I pinpointed where I was at and found the closes subway entrance. It was only two blocks away.

I started running through the crowds of people. It was now pouring rain. Every drop that hit my face hit hard and every step drenched my denim jeans even more than they already were. The booming thunder occasionally startled me but I found the entrance soon and hastily ran down the steps as I entered a large concrete room with a large crowd of people waiting for the next train. It was a smoke filled room, musky, and smelled awful. I could bear it for the next few minutes because my train would be there soon. I stood among the crowd of people, thankful for dry shelter so I could warm up. New York, even in the summer, was still cold compared to where I grew up.

The train arrived about 10 minutes later. This train would take me to the west side of the river. I walked in and sat in a

single seat. I sat with my right leg of my left, holding my hands together. I was a wreck. Not only did I look like one, but inside I was nervous, furious, and still felt sick. I leaned my head against the metal pole behind me and shut my eyes.

I felt brushing up against my legs and the sounds of people talking. I opened my eyes and everyone one was leaving the subway. I hurriedly grabbed my bags and ran out with the last of them. That ride seemed so short, but I was exhausted so I wasn't shocked that I slept the whole way. I came out of Astor Place station, and looked down at the map I held in front of me. I was only blocks away from the hospital.

I threw my bags over my shoulder so they crossed over each other, folded up the map and put both the map and Georgie's phone in my pocket and started running. My mind was only focused on Matthew. Even though I wouldn't be running the marathon, all my training had come down to this very moment. It was crucial that I make it to Bellevue before Victoria convinces the head of Child Services of anything negative that would affect my life.

I reached down and grabbed the map out of my pocket and looked at it. I had about 18 blocks left and I'd be there. I pushed my way through the crowd. Some people got very upset with my pushing and shoving. Normally I would apologize, but I ignored their yells and complaints and kept running.

I was down to about 10 blocks now and my mixed emotions of anger, nervousness, and distress were causing me to get distracted. I couldn't get distracted though. I had to correct this. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath. I put my arms over my head and rested them for a moment. After I took a breather I started running again.

1,2,3-inhale... 1,2,3 exhale... I practiced the breathing technique Dempsey taught me and started pumping my arms. This lengthened my stride and quickened my pace. My forehead creased as I became more focused.

I was down to the last block and the large sign reading "Bellevue" was clear. I was so close. I arched my back and began running in an all out sprint. The bags hit my back hard as I ran with everything I had left in me.

I reached the entrance and ran straight through the automatic doors as they opened. I needed to find the elevator. The receptionist desk was right in front of me right next to a wait-

ing room. I gasped for air, and saw the elevators out of the corner of my eye and jogged over to them and hit the "up" button. I saw numbers 1-10 above the elevator doors and watched how slowly the elevator was coming down based on which number flashed yellow. I attempted to wait patiently, and failed miserably.

This is taking too long!! I looked around for the stair and saw them behind me. I shoved the door open and started sprinting up them. Room 422, I reminded myself of the room number. I made it to the third level and sprinted up the last flight of stairs panting.

My exhausted body hit the door full force and the door went flying open and I stumbled through trying to keep myself from falling. Everyone around me was staring at me curiously.

"Hi... sorry." I said pulling my arms up and shrugging my shoulders.

I fast walked down the hall as I passed room 411, 412, 413, and the number continued on until I finally reached room 422. I opened the wooden door and my heart sank to my stomach as I saw the tight bun fixed at the top of a blonde woman's head who was wearing a tweed skirt.

Victoria...

Chapter 11

"Victoria!!" I shouted as I entered the hospital room with my hair and clothes sopping wet from the rain.

I looked around the room and there lay my brother in a bed, still oblivious to what was going on in the world. In a seat in front of Victoria was a woman, I would guess early 50's, with long brown hair sat with her legs crossed and her hands in her lap.

"Why Erin... so kind of you to join us." Victoria replied calmly as she turned around and smirked at me.

"What on earth are you thinking?!" My rage over came me and I flew my arms around in the air.

"What do you mean? I think you need to calm down." Victoria kept a straight face, and then looked at her boss. "This is typical Erin for you." She said shaking her head.

"No, no, no... ma'am..." I looked over at the lady sitting in the chair. She must be the head of Social Services. "This is not what I am normally like." I begged her to believe me. "I didn't--"

"How come you are just getting here?" Victoria interrupted me in the middle of my attempt to explain everything to her boss.

"I, I had to take a plane. You should know... you just."

"I know... I know Erin. You were just too busy to come take care of sweet Matthew." Victoria interrupted me again. She walked over to my brother and started brushing his hair out of his face.

"Don't touch him!!" I yelled at her.

"Oh, Erin... it's all right. I won't hurt him. I'm not like you." She looked at me, tightened her lips and shook her head at me.

"What are you talking about?" I asked her sincerely confused.

"You would hurt him by making him live with you." She walked over to me and got close to my face. She was in heels so she towered over me. I'll admit I was rather intimidated.

"How is would that be hurting him?" I asked. "he needs me, and I need him." I said. My heart felt heavy. *Was I hindering him from leading a happier life if I made him stay with me? Was I just being selfish this whole time? What if Victoria was right?*

Victoria stepped back. She was grinning from ear to ear and she crossed her arms. She was satisfied she was making me re-think everything I've worked for in the past month and a half.

What am I thinking? I shook my head. *This is just another one of her games. Of course it would be best for my brother. I made a promise to my parents, I couldn't and wouldn't give up!*

"No! He would be better off with me. You aren't going to trick me into thinking otherwise." I told her.

"She's hysterical." Victoria said looking over at her boss. She raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders, all while

keeping that smirk on her face. "I would never trick anyone into thinking anything. If you think that then it's you, not me. You're just imagining things Erin." She told me.

"I am not imagining things! Ever since day one you have done nothing but try and please you and you!" I motioned over at Victoria's boss. "I don't know what else to do..." I started to sob. It's true. All I had ever wanted to do was prove to them I was capable of taking care of Matthew. "And you! You continually put me down." I walked over to the Child services lady. "I bet you don't even know half of what she's done."

"She can't even handle that Lori, do you see?" She asked the women in the chair. I guess her name was Lori.

"What? What? Do you have any idea how much I have done?!" I yelled at Victoria. I looked at Lori with tear filled eyes. During this whole conversation, Lori was just observing. She seemed rather confused by what was going on.

"Every day I get up and spend time with my brother first thing in the morning. I go to training so I can win my race, which is now canceled." I flung my hands up in the air. "after training I go to work for hours, which now my work place is gone. It burned to the ground." I told Lori, looking over at her. "Then I go back to someone else's house so I can get some

rest and do it all again the next day!" I was struggling to catch my breath. This was a lot to say in one breath. "and you're telling me that's not enough?!" I continued crying. "Then please, please... tell me what is!" I wiped my eyes and tried to stop crying.

"Well... did you come up with the money?" Lori asked nicely. She had a more gentle approach than Victoria.

"No..." I hung my head as I told her.

"Well then I'm afraid there's nothing we can do." Lori shook her head.

Victoria stood with her arms crossed continuing to grin. I hated that face. She had won... there was nothing I could do about it... I failed. I just broke my promise to my parents. I didn't just fail my parents but my brother as well. He wouldn't want to be with anyone but me. He would be scared. But, I didn't just fail my family... I failed Heather, Georgie, and Dempsey as well.

I walked over to Matthew and sat at the edge of his bed. I took his hand in mine and I rubbed it. "I'm so sorry Matthew... I'm so sorry. I tried so hard. I did everything I could." I was numb. I couldn't believe it was all over, and I wasn't com-

ing out on top. All of that hard work, all the hope I had was false and everything I did was meaningless. "I tried to do what was best for you..." Just then I had an idea. I wiped the tears from my eyes and stood up.

"Your job is to do what is in the best interest of the child isn't it Victoria?" I walked up to her with new confidence.

"Yes..." She responded, with a look of curiosity on her face.

"Wouldn't you think that moving him to a completely different state, away from his home is not healthy for him in his condition?" I asked her.

"Well I thought he would be fine and-"

"I don't think so. Dr. Herman agrees with me too. He said he wouldn't have given you approval." I told her.

"I had Dr. Herman's approval." She told me trying to stay on top of this argument. My confidence was intimidating and scaring her. I could see it in her face with her raised eyebrows and creased forehead. She was still trying to hold her smirk and kept her arms crossed.

"But was he fully aware of the situation?" I asked her.

"Yes... he was." She responded.

"Wrong! None of the nurses knew. You didn't tell them did you?" I questioned her.

"And how you know that none of the nurses knew, and that Dr. Herman wasn't fully aware of the situation?" she bobbed her head side to side.

"Because I talked to Georgie... you know Matthew's nurse? All she knew was that you had taken him to a hospital on the west side of the river in New York City. Dr. Herman was clueless... I asked him." I told Victoria, and then looked at Lori for her reaction. Her eyebrows started to rise and she straightened her posture in her seat.

"Is this true Victoria?" Lori asked her.

"Well yes... but" Victoria started to say before I interrupted her.

"Aren't you also supposed to inform the legal guardian of everything? Not only informing but asking as well. Including where you have taken them! I think that's a rather important piece of information you left out. I think that if it's not already, it should be illegal." I told Victoria. I then directed my stare to Lori. "I was not aware that Victoria had taken him

to New York... I had to find out from Matthew's nurse. I then had to spend almost all the money to get here by plane and then the rest of the money I had saved to give you on the subway ride here." I told Lori.

"Victoria..." Lori said standing up. She was scolding her like she was her own daughter. She then looked at me and said, "I can't simply overlook the fact that every time Victoria went to the hospital that you were never there. Victoria only reported twice that you were there." She told me.

"She came every time I wasn't there. Like I said, I was there every morning until noon. Georgie, Matthew's nurse can testify to that. So can all the other nurses on the floor." I told her.

"And 50,000 dollars in a month and a half?! Are you insane Victoria?!" I yelled. All this yelling came from a month and a half of silence and obedience, and finally I was able to say something. I was triumphing. I wasn't giving up.

"50,000 dollars?" Lori whispered to herself and she shook her head. "That's not right." Her face squinted and she looked up at Victoria with narrow eyes and called her... "Victoria?..." Lori said.

"Yes Lori?" Victoria responded quietly.

"You told this girl she needed \$50,000?" Lori asked.

Victoria nodded

Lori shook her head and then looked at Victoria. "You're fired!" She yelled at her. "Now go home..." Lori said with a very controlled but very stern voice.

"What?? What do you mean I'm fired?" Victoria stuttered and looked Lori with wide eyes.

I just crossed my arms in satisfaction of my victory.

"I mean, you're fired. I'll make sure you never work in this field ever again. How long have you been doing this?" Lori asked and then stopped herself. "You know what... I don't even want to know. All I know is you will never work for Child Services again." She said.

"Fine!" Victoria huffed, threw her arms up and walked up to me and sneered in my face. She then backed.. "Brat!" She said. She went to the chair and grabbed her coat and she stormed out of the room.

"Ms. Grey... I am embarrassed and terribly sorry you went through all of this." Lori said walking over to me and put her

hand on my shoulder. "I wish I would have known this was going on long ago. You have gone through so much..." She shook her head. "You have proved to me that you are more than capable of taking care of your brother. You are most deserving and your brother will be just fine in your care." She smiled at me and then hugged me. "I'm sorry you had to go through all of this." She said.

"It's all right." I smiled back at her.

She then looked at me curiously with her eyebrows raised.

"Ok, well maybe I'm not and it's not all right." I admitted. "But I'm glad it's all over and I can stop worrying."

"You won't have to worry anymore, promise." She said. She put her arm over my shoulder and started to lead me out the door.

It was refreshing to meet a social worker that wasn't rude or harsh. Lori genuinely cared. She clearly had a passion for this line of work.

"You're right..." I told her, wiping my face. "I can't thank you enough for helping keep my family intact Ms. Lori. I owe you the world." I told her.

"How about you make a monthly payment of \$300 until we can reach the \$5,000 you are supposed to pay? Will that work?" She asked me smiling.

"Oh yes, that is perfect! Thank you so much!" I hugged her.

"Well listen Ms. Grey... I have to get going, but I'll see you around, back in your home town of course." She told me.

"Yes, yes... absolutely!" I stood up with her, and she took my hand.

"Now, go spend time with your brother." She told me, squeezed my hand and walked away.

I waited until she left the floor. Before she got into the elevator she waved at me and I waved back. Then, I went back into my brother's room and sat at the edge of his bed and took his hand again.

"I'm here Matt. We'll be a family always... we won't be separated, I promise you." I took his hand and rubbed it gently.

I just sat there enjoying being carefree. I spent time with my brother talking to him for hours, even though I know he couldn't respond. I was still very upset that he was still unconscious but in that moment I just wanted to enjoy that he was mine, forever.

Chapter 12

6months later

I approached apartment 27B with three bags of groceries cradled in my arms. My keys were in my purse that hung from my left shoulder. *How am I going to open this door?* I thought as I moved my arms around trying to reach my keys.

"Here... let me help." Matthew said as he walked up to me. He set down the bags he was carrying and took the ones in my arms from me.

"Thank you." I responded.

"No problem. Just open the door, I'm starved." My brother complained.

It was about 5:00 in the evening and we haven't had any food all day. We had been at a science museum all day with his class. I opened the door and the image of a small apartment displayed before me.

"I'll make the macaroni n' cheese." I said as we entered.

The living room was bare. It had two couches that didn't match. A small television and an end table with many coffee stains on it also resided in the small living room. The long maroon curtains billowed in the reckless wind coming in from the window. I set my keys down on the white counter tops in the kitchen where Matthew had put the groceries and then quickly ran off to his room.

I smiled at my accomplishment as I began pulling groceries from the bags and putting them in their designated places. I would admit that the small, One-bedroom apartment that we live in could be considered a dump. But this small living place was what Matthew and I called home... for the moment. No longer did I have to rely on someone else for a home, we were independent...

happy. I was paying for it on my own and that was satisfaction and achievement enough for me, even if people felt otherwise. I opened the drawer beneath the stove and pulled out a pot.

Things weren't perfect. I couldn't just press the rewind button on my life story, and get rid of what happened. But, I know that I don't regret any of the choices I made. Somehow I kept our family together, as promised, and we're going to make it. I filled the pot with water, set it on the stove, and turned the heat control to 10.

I didn't have and wouldn't be able to get a college education... we didn't have the money. My goal is to be manager of the coffee shop someday. As assistant manager, I barely make enough money to support what my brother and I own today. The water in the pot on the stove began to boil. I poured the noodles into the pot and turned the knob down to 6.

I caught sight of the picture of our family together hanging above one of the couches. Though two members of our family were missing now, it never really felt like they were gone. I know they would be proud of the life that Matthew and I are living now. I miss what they would tell me in certain situations. I miss that my biggest fear was not having a date to prom, rather

than being scared that I won't be able to feed my brother and I for the week. I have gained a new respect for what my mom and dad use to do and I appreciate how hard they worked to provide for us. I just wish I would have recognized that much soon. Once the noodles were ready, I strained them and added the milk and cheese. Matthew came into the room soon everything was prepared.

"I smell food!" He said approaching the counter.

"It's all yours Matt." I told him as I walked into the living room.

"Hey, can Jason come over?" Matthew asked me.

"Sure, just make sure that it's all right with Dempsey." I responded. Over the past few months Dempsey's son Jason and Matthew had become exceedingly close. They both had things in common. Both of them had lost a parent. Lauren, Dempsey's wife, passed away three months ago due to her stage 4 breast cancer. Dempsey is still grieving, but he took Lauren's death and made something positive come from it. Now Dempsey is heading up his own, non-profit organization that helps fund cancer research because of his love passion for Lauren and the desire to fight was she died from.

"Yes!" Matthew exclaimed as he ran into his room to call Jason.

Knock-knock-knock! Someone pounded at the door. "It's me!" called a voice from the other side.

I recognized her voice immediately. "Georgie, come in! It's open!" I responded.

The door opened and the woman I met 10 months ago, that assisted me through all my troubles stood with her long blonde waves covering her shoulders and the nurse's uniform.

"I got your mail for ya. I thought it would save you a trip." She said as she sat a small stack of letters on the counter.

"Thanks!" I said standing up off the couch, and walking over to the kitchen.

I sorted through the small stack of letters. "Bill... bill... bill... bill." Then I noticed one small letter that stood out from the rest of the bunch. It was from Yale University. I hastily opened the letter and whipped out its contents.

"It's a letter..." is all I could say.

"Well, I realize that but from who Erin. I'm dyin to know what's got you all excited!" she said.

"It's from... Yale." My eyes widened at the very thought of who had sent me this letter. I wasn't sure what it was about... if it was personal or just another brochure. One thing I was sure of... that thought sent my stomach into anxious, rapid waves turning in my stomach.

"Well hurry up and read it! Don't just stand there lookin' at me... read it!" She said motioning her hands for me to hurry along.

"The letter says..."

Dear Miss Grey,

It is to my understanding that your decision to not attend our university is as a result of a major tragedy. I am incredibly disappointed with this decision, not because I think it was the wrong decision but because I know you would be one of our best students.

I did not come to this recognition on my own. I received a letter by the name of Lori Pence explaining to me why you chose to give up the generous offer of coming to our college.

You possess many desirable traits. One which has become most evident to me is that you prioritize well. You put your family first. "Give credit where credit is due", as I always say. I would like to give you more than credit Miss Grey. I am offering you a full-ride scholarship to our college, room and board included. Child Services gives one scholarship to someone in their program annually. Even though you are not a child, she decided that you were the best person to give the scholarship to.

I would like to see you for our spring semester.

Please get back to me as soon as you can.

Sincerely,

The Board of Administration,

Gary Olson.

I stood with my mouth gaping open in awe of what I just read. Georgie hovered over my shoulder and read it as I did.

"Congratulations!!!" Georgie yelled as she wrapped me up in a massive hug.

I still couldn't believe what I read. My body went numb I was so happy and shocked inside. Full-ride scholarship, I wouldn't have to worry about living in a crummy old apartment. I would be well taken care of, and I...

I then came to a realization. "I can't go." I said as my head lowered. I couldn't believe I had forgotten the one person that mattered to me most. The person I fought for... my brother.

"Why not sweetie? This is an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!" She exclaimed.

"I can't just leave my brother here while I go gallivanting off to New Haven, Connecticut. I can't just throw away everything I just worked for over the past 10 months."

"That thought didn't even cross my mind." Georgie responded. "But you're right," Then she paused for a few moments. "Unless you took him with you!" She said excited.

"I never thought about that. Maybe that would work." I looked at Georgie. "I'll take him with me..."

So I would take my brother with me to Yale. We would live in a nicer place than this. I would be able to provide for him better by having a college education. Things would work out. I would fight whoever I had to for him to come with me. After all, I had only been practicing that for the past 10 months. I would take him with me... we would stay together, a family... always.