



L M Trio

The Game Changer

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Cover Design by Melody Simmons

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Prologue

It's hard to believe that it only takes one split second in time to turn your world completely upside down. Everything that ever made you feel safe and secure; can be gone in an instant...

I stood facing the young, innocent girl staring back at me from the mirror. I threw my hair into a ponytail, once again focusing on the promise I made to myself: each day, starting with my birthday, would try to do something out of my comfort zone. I was a bit shy; it was one of the things I had planned to work on this year, to overcome my shyness.

My thoughts were interrupted by my Mom calling up to me, "JJ, you're going to be late!" I quickly buttoned my neatly ironed white blouse and tucked it into my plaid, pleated skirt.

Before I had entered the kitchen, I overheard my mom and dad, joking with each other as they discussed my upcoming birthday. My mom teased my dad, telling him it was only a matter of time before I dumped them for someone more interesting; most likely *a boy*.

"Not on my watch. Besides, who could be more interesting than us?" he replied, pulling mom onto his lap. She laughed as he tickled her, telling him how sorry she felt for him since he was in such a denial. After all, I would be turning fifteen on April 10th.

"Well at least I'll still have you!" he said, kissing her cheek.

"That's right, sweetie. You'll always have me!" She giggled back.

Or, so he thought...

Back then, I would have agreed with my dad. I was a bit of a late bloomer; unlike most of my friends that had already begun dating. I was one of those rare teens that actually enjoyed spending most of my spare time with my parents. They were cool and we had fun together. Most of my friends were embarrassed to be seen with their parents, not me.

I entered the kitchen and rolled my eyes at the two of them, suggesting that I had overheard their conversation. I grabbed a bagel from the table and kissed my parents good-bye as I headed out the door. I felt happy, content and was looking forward to the last day of classes before spring break. Mom called out to me, confirming our plans for dinner and shopping later that evening, it had become one of our rituals. Dad would be working late, so we were having a girls' night out.

I awoke in a strange place, my body ached terribly, my head pounded and my mind fuzzy and confused. My dad sat still in a chair beside me, staring at the wall. My throat hurt; it was dry. I could hardly speak louder than a whisper. I called to him, startling him. He didn't look right; he looked sick and unshaven. Had he been crying? I was confused.

"Where's Mommy?" I choked out.

His body began to tremble. He didn't answer, he didn't have to. I knew. My life was shattered...

(Jesse - 14 months later)

It is Friday, the second week of June. The sun is hot and it was unusually humid for this time of year. I stare out the window of the car, wondering if this move was the right decision. We turn onto Seascapes Drive where there is a sense of stillness. The cherry blossoms cast shadows on the perfectly manicured lawns, the houses seem to be vacant, the street deserted; nothing like the bustling sounds of the city of which we are used to.

I peek over at my dad to see if he notices the sound of my heart racing from fear. I am nervous about our new life. He seems to be too immersed in his own thoughts to notice. The car comes to a stop in front of a white house with blue shutters towards the end of the road. Once again, I glance over; he is staring straight ahead as he lets out a deep breath before turning off the ignition.

"Well kiddo, here we are."

"Yep. I'm excited. Are you?" I reply as I give him a quick smile, trying to ease some of the anxiety we both are feeling.

"Yeah, definitely. This will be good for us," he answers, giving me a reassuring smile. Deep down I know he is trying to reassure himself as much as me.

It's been over a year, and in that year, my life has been mostly a blur. Almost as if I have been standing on the outside, watching as time passes, and feeling like I am going to die, too. Anything would be better than feeling the constant pain that consumes me.

Even now, after all of the months of therapy, the details are still unclear.

My mom and I shopping, having dinner, having fun. We were in the car, on our way home laughing about something that I can't remember now. God, I wish I could remember.

There was screaming and I'm not sure if it was her, or me, or maybe was both of us. It comes in flashes that are usually in the form of nightmares... seeing her slumped over the steering wheel, her head dangling towards me. There was a lot of blood. I heard the sirens, people yelling, swarming around me; it was complete chaos. The EMT's frantically moving over me after they freed me from the twisted metal.

I hardly remember the funeral, either. I know it was at St. Bernadette's, which was our church and my school. I've been told that some of my classmates were there, although I don't recall actually seeing a single person that day. At that point, I had already chosen to close myself off from the rest of the world, including my dad. The months following, I grew worse and worse. My Aunt Kathy, my dad's sister, stayed with us for a while; hoping to fill the void of my mother leaving us alone. I didn't speak to anyone. I hardly ate. I never returned to school or saw any of my friends again. Physically, I had healed. Mentally, I was broken.

It wasn't until several months later when I awoke one morning to find my dad sitting on the edge of my bed, trembling in the same way he had *that day*. It scared me.

"Daddy?" I barely whispered.

He turned to face me, his face drenched in tears. He begged me, "Please JJ, don't do this to me. I can't lose you, too."

For the first time in months, I reached out to him. I cried and cried and cried. I told him I wanted to get better so badly, I just couldn't do it. I couldn't breathe. My heart ached. I was in constant pain. He confessed that I felt as if I were about to die, too. He held me tightly and told me he felt the same way. We would get through it together he promised.

I finally agreed to some intense therapy and was tutored at home through the remainder of the

year. Despite the therapy, I was unable to bring myself to face my former friends after all of the months that had passed. ~~By now, they had finally stopped coming by the house and calling.~~ I didn't blame them. I figured they must have heard about my breakdown or made up their own stories about me.

It was only after my Mom had come to me in a dream that I really began to push forward. I knew that was what she would expect of me. It was shortly thereafter that my dad approached me about a new beginning. He had an opportunity to transfer down to the shore. He was offered a job at the new casino as the Head Chef of their trendy new restaurant. I agreed, this was exactly what we needed, a new start. His only request was that come fall, I return to school.

I had missed the end of my freshman year and all of my sophomore year, being tutored at home. He thought it was a good idea that I start interacting with kids my own age, again. He was right. If I was truly going to move forward, I needed to socialize with people other than my therapist, tutors and my dad.

(Luke)

Oh, shit. I was late for class again. *Oh well*, I think.

It is a tactic I used often, most times it works. “Sorry, Mrs. Radnor. I stopped by coach’s office. I had a question about tomorrow’s game.” I say as I casually ease my way into my chair while flashing her a smile, dimples and all.

“Luke, this is the third time you’ve used that excuse in the last couple of weeks. You really need to get to class on time; it’s disruptive to your classmates... and me.”

I turn to my classmates and in my most sincere voice, I apologize. I flash them the same smile. The girls buy it; the guys, not so much. It’s my best defense. Mrs. Radnor buys it, though. She smiles and continues on with her lesson. Worked again.

I wasn’t really in Coach’s office. I was actually in the hallway talking to Sherri Adams, she’s into me and she is *hot*. We have a little side thing going on every now and then. My girlfriend, Alexa, and I are off and on so often, even I sometimes forget that I have a girlfriend.

My best friend, Mikey and I were probably around thirteen, maybe fourteen, when we realized we have this gift. We can pretty much talk our way *out or in* to anything, as long as we smile and seem sincere while we are making up whatever excuse the situation calls for. For instance, Mikey can turn a D into a C by just flashing a smile and giving a nice compliment. He’s a pro, much smoother than me and I think *I’m* pretty smooth. It’s all about how you play the game. We play it well. On and off the field.

We’re not bad guys. Actually, we’re pretty well liked. I have no time for the kids in school that think they’re so popular, they think they have the right to pick on the kids that aren’t. I’ll go out of my way to talk to a less popular kid, just to piss off the one that thinks he is. I’m pretty good about keeping myself out of trouble and I keep my mouth shut, most times. Mikey, on the other hand, tends to find himself in hot water every now and then.

One of the only things we both are truly serious about is baseball. We know that is the biggest gift we are blessed with; it’s something we never take for granted. When it comes to the game, we are both disciplined and we work hard for it. The fun, the games, the girls and the partying get put on the back burner when it comes to playing ball. It drives my girlfriend crazy when I choose to stay home instead of partying or staying up late when it’s game time, she doesn’t get it.

We’re in the state championship for the second straight year. Scouts will be there watching us like they usually are. It’s something Mikey and I are accustomed to by now. They’ve been watching us for quite some time. We’re invited to numerous tournaments throughout the year and spend summers at camps. We both have a real shot at the majors, but flashing a smile is not going to get us there.

(Jesse)

I take a deep breath as I step out of the car, taking in the scent of the salty ocean air, hoping to clear my head of the worry that consumes me. *It truly is a great street*, I think as I take inventory of the neighborhood. It seems quiet and peaceful with only about six houses; each one with its own unique look.

Our house, a white, cozy Cape Cod with blue shutters, sits nestled towards the end of the street. Directly across from us is a perfectly manicured, Georgian Colonial. Next to that is a well maintained, quaint little rancher, where an elderly woman, wearing an apron, kneels in her garden and tends to her flowers. She looks up when she hears our car and my dad gives her an overzealous wave.

If you stand in the middle of the street and look through the thick flowering trees you can see a long fishing dock with a gazebo and benches stretching out over the bay. I know right then that I will be spending a lot of my spare time there, sketching. That's what I do. Actually, *that's what I did*. I haven't sketched a thing since the accident.

My dad must have read my mind. "What do you think so, far?" he asks.

"I like it." For the first time in a long time I have a thought, other than something negative; it just might be possible to find a little happiness here.

Bay Point seems to be a great little town. My family used to love our summer vacations at the Jersey Shore. The town is only a few miles long, running along the bay. Everything is within walking distance, including what will be my new high school. In the downtown area, there are a few shops, cafes and a library. So here we are, rebuilding our lives in this new place. It is a perfect day for the beach, not so much for moving. Like I said, it is unusually humid for early June. My thoughts are suddenly interrupted by the annoyingly loud beeping sound of the moving truck backing into the driveway.

I make my way into the house, checking out each room. It smells of lemons and fresh paint. I can't help thinking how my mom would have loved it. There are a lot of windows, allowing the sunlight to filter into each room. Newly polished, old wooden floors cover every room in the house. The master bedroom is on the second floor with a private bath. Downstairs there are two bedrooms on each side of the house. As you step into the foyer, there is a family room to the left with one of the bedrooms off to the side. To the right is a large open kitchen, which leads to a narrow hallway with an additional bedroom and another full bath. I choose that room for my own. It's perfect.

(Luke)

Finally, the last day of school. I have about a month to just chill and relax before heading to our summer league and camp. We had a great season and another state championship under our belt. It's a good feeling, Mikey and I have a lot of people watching, keeping a close eye on us. This time next year, we'll be entering the draft.

While I clean out my locker, Alexa stands behind me, relaying our plans for tonight. It's the usual end of the year party at the inlet. I'm looking forward to a night of partying. I spot Mikey and Deanna, my sister, walking towards my locker, waiting for me to get the hell out of here.

"What are you doing? Let's go!" Mikey shouts from the middle of the hall, sounding annoyed, which is normal behavior for him when Alexa is around.

"I'm coming," I reply, laughing.

"Hi," Alexa says to them dully, knowing she's not one of their biggest fans. I shoot them each

look to be nice and they both halfheartedly greet her. Not that I can blame them, Alexa is not the easiest person to get along with. She's kind of full of herself and is rude to most people. At one time she and Deanna seemed pretty close, that's how I got involved with her in the first place. I'm not quite sure what happened, but they're not too friendly anymore. De thinks she's a bitch. I guess she can be but she is hot. I have to give her that. Most guys would love to be me. Sometimes, I kind of wish they were.

I kiss her goodbye and we agree to meet up later tonight. As the three of us head out the door, we have to take some bashing from the two of them.

"I think I'm going to meet Sherri Adams at the inlet tonight," Mikey states as he gives me a sideways glance. He knows I have this side thing going on with her.

"Cool," I reply casually. It doesn't matter much to me. I am only fooling around with her anyway. It's not like I care about her.

He starts laughing, punching me in the arm. "I'm jokin'."

"No shit... she thinks you're an asshole," I joke back.

"Actually, I'm workin' on her sister, Janelle. She's going to meet me there tonight."

"Yeah, she's hot, too," I reply.

"Ugh, I can't stand her, she's such a bitch," Deanna chimes in.

"So is her sister," I add, laughing. Mikey laughs, too. We don't really care much about that, it's not like we're planning on marrying them.

As we turn the corner to our street we spot the moving truck at the house across from ours.

(Jesse)

The sun is hot. I'm wiping the sweat from my forehead as I unload boxes out of the car when the laughter coming from the end of the street catches my attention. From a distance, I can see two boys horsing around, while a girl in the middle of them seems to be reprimanding them. I panic as I become aware of my appearance. I'm sweaty, wearing cut-off sweat shorts and a baggy t-shirt. Not to mention, my hair is braided in pigtails. It's too late to run in the house, it will be too obvious. I try to act busy while rummaging around in the trunk. Oh crap, here comes my dad. Mr. Friendly all of a sudden, and... there he goes, waving, again. Well, there's hope for him yet; he suddenly seems to have outgrown his shyness.

He greets them as they approach. I hear the first boy ask if we are moving in. Considering there is a huge moving truck in front of the house, I thought it was a safe bet that we are. *What a genius.*

"Yeah, me and my daughter, JJ. I'm David." He leans over and holds out his hand.

"Jesse," I correct quietly, peeking my head from behind the trunk.

"Luke," the first boy answers as he shakes my dad's hand and glances over in my direction, smiling.

The girl speaks up this time, shaking my dad's hand. "Hi. I'm Luke's sister, Deanna. This is Mikey."

I poke my head out to at least acknowledge them. "Hi," I say quietly and then quickly bury my head back in the trunk.

They start conversing about school and my dad's ears perk up when they tell him they attend Bay Point High. I can almost hear him thinking, *great. I found some friends for her.* He tells them I will be attending Bay Point in the fall.

Then, the nosey brother, the one I think said his name was Luke, asks if I am going to be a *Freshman*. I can feel the heat in my cheeks and this time it isn't due to the weather. I stop rummaging

around in the trunk and shoot him a look. I could swear he smirks at me.

~~My dad lets out a chuckle. "No... JJ will be a Junior."~~

I didn't hear neighbor-boy say anything funny. I self-consciously go back to fiddling around the trunk, while they talk as if I'm not there. What doesn't my dad get about keeping quiet? I'm already nervous enough about meeting people my age, let alone looking like I do. Especially, *the people*. Just what I need for a confidence booster. My first day in Bay Point and I have to meet probably the three best looking kids in the school. *Oh, I should fit in great*, I think sarcastically as I listen intently on what they are discussing. The girl will be a Junior come fall and the boys will be Seniors.

Thankfully, a big, burly mover with a beard yells from the house, "Where do you want the couch?" *Thank God! Saved by the moving guy!*

"I'll show you!" I yell, sounding way too enthusiastic. I quickly turn to my dad's three new friends. "I better go help... nice to meet you." I mumble, barely looking at them as I race up the driveway.

I spy through the blinds as the four of them continue chatting casually. The girl makes her way to the Georgian Colonial directly across from ours and the friend soon follows. My dad and the brother continue to chat as if they are old friends. *Please do not let my dad give too much information*, I pray.

When Dad finally decides to join me in the house, I am glaring at him with *that* look on my face. The one that says, *how could you do that to me*.

"What?" he asks with a huge grin on his face.

"Please tell me you didn't say anything that I'm going to be embarrassed about."

"No, of course not. They seem like nice kids. They were telling me about school and the neighborhood. Apparently, this Luke and Mikey play baseball for Bay Point High, and their team just won the championship last week. From what Luke said his friend, Mikey, and he are supposed to be really good."

My dad is a huge baseball fan. So I'm sure he's impressed by this. "Of course, he did," I say sarcastically, rolling my eyes.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he says, laughing.

"It's obvious he's full of himself. Am I a Freshman? Pleasssse!"

"So that's what this is about? He probably couldn't tell. You wouldn't take your head out of the trunk long enough for them to get a look at you." He laughs and then continues, "They seemed nice. The girl, Deanna, seems excited to meet you. She said she was going to get changed and stop over to see if you need some help unpacking."

(Luke)

Nice guy, I think to myself as I enter the kitchen and make a bee line for my favorite spot, the refrigerator. Mikey has beaten me to it and is already sitting at the counter eating a sandwich. I take out the lunchmeat and rolls and begin to build my own after-school snack while pondering over the conversation with my new neighbor.

He looks too young to have a daughter that will be a junior in high school, there isn't much of a resemblance; his features are somewhat darker in comparison to hers. I found him easy to talk with although something about him tells me he seems a bit lost. There was no mention of any one besides his daughter....

"Checkin' out the new girl next door?" Mikey interrupts, breaking my train of thought while he inhales his last bite.

"What? No... She didn't even speak. I could hardly see her. I was tryin' to figure out what the hell she lost in that trunk that she was so intent on finding." I laugh and sort of lie, shrugging off the question. I did catch a quick glimpse. At first, I thought she was much younger than us. Then, I caught a better look when I asked if she was going to be a Freshman and she shot those piercing emerald green daggers at me. Definitely cute with her silky, honey-brown hair, braided in pigtails; not as young as I originally thought and definitely cute.

"I thought she was pretty damn cute, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you and... I didn't notice," I say casually, searching through the fridge, not sure whether I'm lying.

(Jesse)

I'm not ready to meet anyone and I'm hoping she changes her mind about stopping by. "I look like a mess," I complain to my dad.

"No, you don't. You look like you've been working hard." He laughs.

"Oh, thanks," I reply. "Dad, did you get a good look at them? They don't look anything like me, that's for sure."

"Jesse, have you looked at yourself lately? You are extremely beautiful."

"You have to say that. You're my dad."

"You look just like her, you know."

"Yeah, right. Why does everyone think that? Aunt Kathy said the same thing to me the last time she saw her."

"It's true."

I'm relieved to be interrupted by a quiet knock on the door, yet, at the same time, I get that nervous feeling. These people make me nervous, they're overly friendly and I don't know how to answer or what to say. I haven't interacted with kids my age in a really long time. She'll probably think I'm strange.

"Hey, Deanna, c'mon in," my dad says, answering the door.

Even with her hair pulled back into a ponytail, wearing shorts and a t-shirt, she is still beautiful. I meet her at the door so I don't appear rude.

"I wanted to see if you could use some help. I can help you unpack boxes or hand you things whatever you need me to do," She offers.

I invite her in and give her a tour of the house, ending with my room. I try to make conversation

without sounding nervous, telling her my plans of decorating the room with a beach theme.

~~"This house is great JJ. I love it! I've always liked it from the outside. I'm glad I finally get to see it on the inside. It's just how I imagined it would be."~~

"Yeah, my dad and I thought the same thing the first time we saw it." Should I correct her and tell her my name is Jesse? Only my mom and dad call me JJ. My friends always called me Jesse. I don't want to embarrass her, if it happens again, I'll slide it in.

Deanna offers to take me to the boardwalk tomorrow; she thinks it will be the perfect place to find some really cool stuff for my room. I tell her I'll check with my dad to see if he has plans for us. I'm not ready to commit to a shopping trip with her; although, so far, she seems easy to get along with.

After finishing up with my room, we head for the kitchen. There are boxes in every room and loads of work to be done. The conversation seems to flow easily between us until I am startled by a loud knock on the door, my dad answers it.

"Hey, David, my mom asked me to bring this over. She thought you may be hungry since you were moving all day."

"Ahh... Luke, this is great! There's so much here, come in, grab something to eat with us, I'll call JJ and Deanna," he says, taking a tray of sandwiches from Luke's hands.

Oh, my God. What is he thinking, inviting *everyone* over on the first day? He's trying way too hard. I would have liked at least a few days to ease my way in before being bombarded by the whole neighborhood.

"JJ, Deanna!" he yells.

"We're right here," I answer, sounding annoyed as I stand right behind him.

"Look at this." He holds out the tray of food. "How nice. Let's take a break, we haven't eaten all day."

As this Luke kid sidesteps me and makes his way to the kitchen, following my dad, I steal another look. It is almost impossible not to. His dark brown eyes seem as if they are looking right through me. He is wearing dark colored jeans and a tight fitting grey t-shirt that shows off his body. His perfect face and muscular arms are nicely tanned. He smells good, too. He must have just showered because his dark hair is pushed back off his face and curls just at the base of his neck where it's still damp.

I have to admit; I checked out his sister earlier and made the same assessment: great body, dark brown eyes, long, straight, black hair and a beautiful face. Okay, so they're both ridiculously good looking.

Deanna and I sit at the table, while my dad and this Luke kid sit at the counter. They were babbling on about sports as they dig into the sandwiches, like they had been lifelong friends. Deanna fills me in about the town and the places they hang out.

She looks over to her brother. "Luke, are you going to the inlet tonight?"

"Yeah, Mikey should be back any minute."

"Where'd he go?" she asks curiously.

"I think to pick up Janelle."

She looks at me and sticks out her tongue as if she were gagging. "Can me and JJ come with you?" she asks, looking back at him.

Okay, *where is she inviting us?* I think to myself and there goes that 'JJ' thing again. I don't correct her this time because, for one, I don't want to make an issue of it in front of the brother and sister; I'm too focused on what his answer will be.

"Sure, but, just to warn you, Alexa is coming with us."

Deanna rolls her eyes at me. "Never mind."

He laughs and takes another bite of his sandwich. "Awe, don't be like that; she's not that bad."

~~"Whatever," she replies sarcastically. Again, she looks at me and rolls her eyes.~~

I have no idea what this is about, but, whatever it is, Deanna doesn't seem happy about it. Within seconds, his phone buzzes and he begins to text.

"That's Mikey, I have to go. See ya, David and thanks," he says as he stands up from the counter. He invites us to come with him, once again, but Deanna quickly declines his offer.

Deanna and I continue unpacking once we have finished eating. She hands the contents of boxes to me to place around. Several of the boxes contain pictures of my family, before the accident. I notice her observing the pictures, yet, she doesn't ask questions.

Finally I get the courage to ask about the exchange between her and her brother. For some reason I'm curious to know. Deanna informs me that her and Alexa were friends before she started dating Luke. Or, at least, that's what Deanna thought before she realized she was being used so Alexa could get closer to him. She says they hardly speak anymore. She's hurt, being used by someone she thought was her friend.

Her brother seems like a jerk to me; although, I get the impression that his sister doesn't share my feelings. Actually, whenever she talks about him and his friend, she acts as if they are the two greatest guys in the world, which somehow leads to a conversation about baseball.

She laughs as she tells me, "It's kind of a big thing around here. Everyone has been interested in them since they entered high school. Senior year is going to be huge for them. I'm sure you'll hear a lot about it. We just won our second state championship in a row last week."

"Really? That's cool." I really don't know much about baseball, but she seems impressed, just like my dad.

She opens another box filled with pictures and holds a picture of me, my mom and my dad. It was taken at a party at Aunt Kathy's house about a month before the accident. It is the last picture of the three of us together. My eyes begin to fill, thinking back to that time, just a little more than a year ago. I feel her glance over at me. She carefully places the picture on the table next to the couch.

"That's my mom." I blurt out.

"I know. She's beautiful," she says as she takes another picture from the box and carefully unwraps it.

"Yeah, she was," I answer, staring off in the direction of the picture. Then, I realize what she said. "How did you know it's my mom?"

She looks at me sadly and says quietly, "I know, because you look exactly like her."

My eyes fill even more.

"I'm sorry JJ; I didn't mean to upset you."

I explained to her how everyone has been telling me that lately. She asks if they were divorced. She figures it was the reason for the move.

"Given my options, I would have hoped for a divorce," I tell her. At least I'd still be able to see her. It's the first time I've ever spoken of it out loud to anyone other than my therapist. I tell her about the accident. Her eyes fill with tears, too, as she reaches out for my hand.

We are interrupted by the sound of my dad's footsteps coming down the stairs. I quickly wipe away the tears, not wanting to upset him. She reads my mind and does the same.

My dad is impressed with our progress, but thinks we need to quit for the night and relax. Deanna invites me to go with her to meet her friends at the boardwalk. I really like her, but I'm feeling a little overwhelmed and I'm not up to meeting any more people today.

Of course, my dad is waiting to hear what I think as soon as I get back from walking her out.

Surprisingly, she seems really nice and is easy to talk to. My dad feels the same way about both of them.

“It’s not too often that you see teenagers that are comfortable sitting around and talking with someone’s parents,” he states.

My dad worked all day on fixing up his room, he’s anxious for me to see how it turned out. When I enter, the first thing I notice is how his furniture is set up exactly the way it had been in our old home. I didn’t expect him to move my mom’s things with him. I figured it would have been a good opportunity to box up and donate her things, but, to my surprise, he has brought all of her belongings with him. I feel sorry for him. I always forget how hard this is for him, too. He actually packed up his things and brought them with him, only to unpack them again.

I don’t want to make a big deal out of it and I kind of get the feeling he knows I noticed. He tries to make light of it, saying, he thinks maybe I can use some of her things. I give him a kiss on the cheek and tell him he did a great job.

Actually, my mom did have great taste in clothes and she always looked so good. For some reason, I didn’t inherit that skill. Whenever she would pick out something for me that was a little out of my comfort zone, I would always shoot it down and go for the t-shirts and sneakers. Like I said, I was a bit of a late bloomer, which now leaves me way out of my league. Especially, if everyone in the town looks like the three people I met today.

I climb into bed, exhausted, but for some reason, I can’t fall asleep. My mind is racing, thinking about everything that happened today. I feel something I haven’t felt in a long time; excitement.

I must have finally dozed off because suddenly I’m awoken by the sound of a car outside my window. I glance at the clock on my nightstand; it’s after one in the morning. I jump up to peek out my window. I have a clear shot of Deanna’s house. A car idles in front of the Georgian Colonial across from mine. After a few minutes, the door opens and when the light in the car goes on, I can see that it is Luke. A girl is in the driver’s seat. I wonder if it is his girlfriend. I watch him as he coolly walks up his driveway and enters the house, I climb back in bed. I have a hard time falling back asleep because I can’t help thinking about who he was with in the car. Why do I even care?

(Jesse)

Hardly an ounce of light comes through my blinds before I jump out of bed and throw on a pair of shorts and a sweatshirt, hoping to beat the sun before it has a chance to rise. Racing into the bathroom I splash some water on my face and brush my teeth. It's the first time in a long time that I have the urge to draw. I know the perfect spot and want to get there before the sun has a chance to rise above the water. I grab my sketch pad and scribble a note for my dad, letting him know where I'll be.

I walk to the end of the pier and sit on a worn, wooden bench facing the water. It is so quiet and calm. In the distance I can see a few fishing boats bobbing up and down in the water. I open my sketchpad and start to draw. The scenery is beautiful as I begin to sketch the sun rising above the water, through the clouds. Looking down, I begin to sketch my mom's face.

This place reminds me of my dream that I had of my mom. That dream was a turning point for me in my recovery. I promised her I would do everything possible to try and move forward. I was afraid I wouldn't remember the details of her face, but as my hand glides smoothly back and forth along the page, her face suddenly appears just as clearly as if I had seen her yesterday.

I am so engrossed in my work I don't hear the footsteps behind me.

"JJ?" The voice questions in a loud whisper.

I jump, and then freeze. I recognize the voice. Quickly, I close my sketchpad. I glance up and smile, "Hi, Luke."

"What are you doing up so early?" he asks, smiling in return.

"Drawing...What are you doing here?" I ask nervously.

"I run in the morning and I usually end up hanging out here for a while... awesome, isn't it?" I says, looking out at the calmness of the golden-magenta sky meeting the blue-green colored water.

"Yeah, it is," I agree as I take a deep breath to fill my lungs with the fresh scent of the ocean breeze.

"You like that, too?" He asks as he cocks his head slightly to the side with his big, dark eyes looking at me curiously.

"Huh?"

"You just took a breath; do you like that, too... the smell of the air?"

Perceptive. I wasn't expecting that from him. "I love it. It was the first thing I noticed when we came to look at the house. Every time I step out, I take it in, but sitting here..."

"I know... the smell of the wooden docks, mixed with the salty ocean air, it's awesome here. I can't get enough. I can't believe you do the same thing. I thought I was the only crazy one that noticed."

"Nope, I noticed, too," I answer shyly.

He sits down next to me on the bench, confidently, and stretches out his long legs. "There are a few spots around here that are just as good as this. Maybe, I'll let you in on them some time," I teases while flashing his beautiful smile. "Can I see what you're drawing?"

He makes me nervous because he's a little intimidating and definitely nosey, but he seems okay, I guess, considering the fact that he knows he's nice looking. He smiles a lot.

I hesitantly hand over my book. He slowly opens the first page and starts to look through it. I watch him intently as he studies each page, taking his time. All of the pictures have been done previously; except for the one I'm sketching today.

"These are really good," he says as he turns to face me. "I mean, exceptionally good." When I

gets to the page I am currently working on, he looks at the picture, then out to the water, then up to the clouds. "Who's this?" He shows me the page and points to the image of the woman peering down from the clouds.

"It's my mom. She passed away," I blurt out. I figure I'd just say it. This way, he won't ask any more questions about it, but from what I have seen so far, I doubt it will work.

He is silent for a second. "Oh... I'm sorry. I didn't know," he says quietly as he lowers his head until his eyes meet mine.

He throws me off with his sincerity and the way he is looking at me so intensely. My nerves get the best of me and I jump off the bench. "Thanks... Well, I guess I'm gonna get going. Sorry if I invaded your space."

"You don't have to go. I don't mind sharing."

"Oh, no. It's not that. I don't want my dad to wake up and be worried because I'm not home." I call out as I rush off.

I must look like a complete idiot for running away from him, I think as I get closer to home.

As I enter my house I have this strange, nervous feeling in my stomach. My dad is sitting at the table having his coffee and reading the paper when I get in. "Good morning. How did the sketching go?"

"It was great; it felt good to start drawing again," I answer breathlessly, feeling flustered for some reason.

"You okay?"

"Luke was there." I'm not sure why, but I feel the need to blurt that out. "He said he runs in the morning and then sits out by the dock for a while. I sort of felt bad that I invaded his spot. He said I didn't mind." I wait to see what his reply will be.

"I'm sure he doesn't," he answers as he goes back to reading the paper.

That was it. No big deal. Why am I thinking it is a big deal?

Deanna stops by later that morning to offer her help, once again, with the unpacking. As we get to work, I casually mention that I ran in to Luke at the docks. I'm surprised when she replies that he thought her and has mentioned my drawings. "I would love to see them sometime. He said they were awesome."

I try to hide the grin that I can feel slipping from my lips. It makes me feel happy that he thought to mention it. I slide her over a box with some of my framed artwork that had been hanging up in our old house.

"Oh, my God, these are good enough to be in a gallery somewhere," She says, sounding impressed.

Later that day we shop on the boardwalk and I buy some really cool stuff for my room. Her parents are sitting with my dad when we arrive home.

"Hey, JJ. Come meet Mr. & Mrs. DiAngelo," Dad says cheerfully as we enter the room.

"Hello, JJ, it's nice to meet you. I'm Maria and this is Lucca," she says, rising to greet me. I can see immediately where Deanna and Luke get their looks from.

After they have left, my dad has a look of relief on his face. It eases his mind knowing they are stone's throw away. It won't be long before he will be returning to work, on the night shift, at the restaurant.

(Jesse)

The next morning, the sun has barely touched my window when I jump out of bed, quickly dress, grab my sketchpad and hurry out the door. As I near the docks, I can see a figure in the distance stretching on the same bench where I had been sitting the day before. I get that same fluttery feeling in my stomach as I did yesterday. My hand unconsciously goes to my head; thankful that I at least took the time to comb my hair today and put it in a ponytail. My second thought is to turn and run, but then I remember the promise I made to myself so long ago; the one about doing something each day outside my comfort zone.

By the time I reach the end of the pier, he has finished his workout and has moved to the edge of the dock. He sits, mesmerized by the scenery before him with his legs dangling over the side, seemingly in deep thought as he stares out into the calm water. He is wearing ear buds, so he doesn't hear me approach. I stay quiet, not wanting to disturb him. After all, this is *his* spot.

I sit on the bench behind him and study him for a few minutes, wondering what he is thinking about. Finally, I open my sketchpad and begin to draw. I haven't been this relaxed in a long time. It's peaceful, except for the sound of the water, the seagulls, and the faint sound of music coming from his iPod. I'm not aware of how much time has passed, so when he makes the sudden move to get up, it startles me and, apparently, him, too. We both jump, he is extremely close to the edge of the dock and almost loses his footing.

"Jesus, JJ, you scared the hell out of me! Why didn't you say something?" He laughs.

"Sorry. You looked like you were in deep thought when I walked up. I didn't want to disturb you. Then I started drawing and I kind of forgot you were there," I say, laughing, picturing how he almost fell in the water.

"Oh, thanks," he says sarcastically as he sits down on the bench next to me. He pulls off his hooded sweatshirt, revealing the sweaty t-shirt that clings to his broad chest.

He stretches his long muscular legs and crosses his equally muscular arms behind his head in a relaxed position. I quickly divert my eyes, not wanting him to know that I noticed. There goes that fluttering again.

I don't want him to think I'm nervous to talk to him so I decide I'm not about to run off like I did yesterday, although, that's my first instinct. Instead, I initiate a conversation. "So, what were you thinking so hard about?"

He smiles that amazing smile again. "Did I look like I was thinking hard?" He coolly gazes into my eyes. *Definitely full of himself*, I think.

"Yes, you did. I thought I smelled smoke," I answer sarcastically.

"Oh... So you're funny? I didn't know that about you." He laughs. "Actually, you're right. I guess I was thinking hard." He nudges into me. Again, my stomach flutters. "I have a lot of big decisions to make this year and I don't want to screw it up. I just think if I come here and stare into the water long enough, the answers will somehow appear."

"How's that working so far?" I ask as I stare out into the water, wondering if I can see the answers to my questions, too.

"Nothing, yet, but I do feel better every time I leave," he says, flashing me a wide grin as he stares at me intently.

"Yeah, I can see what you mean... Do you mind me asking, what kind of decisions?" I ask nervously, afraid to pry, but for some reason I'm enjoying his company.

“Baseball decisions. It’s important; it’s my future. I don’t want to make any mistakes. What college do I choose? If the opportunity comes up, do I pass on college? Things like that. I’m good, I know that, but a lot of times I’m thinking to myself... *and now you*,” he emphasizes, playfully nudging me. “...am I good enough? There’s a lot of pressure. I just try not to let it get the best of me. Nine percent of the time, I’m relaxed and confident, but then there’s that little ten percent of uncertainty that sneaks up on me.”

“Would you want to pass up going to college?”

“The thing is, it’s a gamble. A lot of guys pass on the draft and stick with college, banking that at the end of three or four years, they’re gonna be worth more.”

“Are you thinking that may be better?”

“Honestly, it’s not about the money with me. I just want to play. I love it.”

“I guess the downside would be if they realized you weren’t any good after three or four years.”

“Thanks for reminding me. Yeah, that would suck. Then I wouldn’t be worth shit,” he says, busting out into laughter. “Believe me, it has happened.”

He went on to tell me about his dad and how he had played in the minors. He had to give it up, due to an injury. His dad, a coach at Rudder’s University, thinks Luke is much better than he was. Luke continues telling me how supportive his family is to him and Mikey. They want them to enjoy the game and not get caught up in all the hype that surrounds them.

Boy, could he talk, but I like listening. It feels good to have someone confiding in me for a change. No one has ever done that before. My dad is always so busy trying to make everything cheer up for me, like I’ll break if he tells me something negative. Luke and I continue to talk easily and I try to offer him advice the best I can. He seems to appreciate it.

“So, tell me about the other spots that you like, besides here?” I ask, beginning to feel more at ease with him.

“Maybe... I don’t know if I should let all of my secrets out,” he teases, still watching me as he’s trying to figure me out.

Uncomfortable with his eyes still lingering on me, I look out at the water. I’ve always had a tendency to look away when I get nervous. In the little time I’ve sat here with him, I notice Luke never takes his eyes off you when he’s talking. His gaze is so strong that it’s almost as if he can see right through you.

He continues, “I guess I’ll share... but only ‘cause I think you’ll love it as much as I do.” I look up at him and smile, excited that he will share his secrets with me. “First... this spot, at night, with the moon over the water. It’s so quiet except for the rippling sounds of the water splashing against the wood. I have to say it’s equally as good as early morning. The other spot is the beach at night. Far enough away from the boardwalk that you can barely hear the sounds of people and amusements. You can faintly smell the food, sitting in front of the ocean with no one around, listening to the crashing waves. That’s an awesome smell, too... The mixture of the sand, salt and water at night. It’s different from day; you can appreciate it more without everyone around.”

“That does sound nice. Do you go often?”

“Not nearly as much as I would like, but now that you mentioned it, I’m going to have to make a point to get there more often... I’ll show you sometime,” he adds casually.

I give him a slight smile. I know he is just being nice to me, being new and all. We sit silently for a few more minutes taking in the view and enjoying the silence.

Luke finally gets up. “Well JJ, I have to get going. Mikey should be over in a little while to pick me up. We have work today. Thanks for listening.”

“Anytime. See you later, Luke.” My heart races as I watch him walk away. So maybe he does have another side to him.

(Luke)

The heat of summer is in full force as Mikey and I move about a thousand bags of top soil to the outside tent at McKnaulty's Garden Center. I'm having a hell of a time getting my conversation with JJ out of my head. Something about her gets to me. I've never been that open with anyone, besides my family and Mikey. Even with them, I keep a lot hidden. Maybe it's because I feel sorry for her since she lost her mom. I don't know...

"Yo, what are you doin'?" Mikey hollers over to me.

"What?" I ask, confused as to why he is yelling.

"I've been talking to you for like five minutes. What the hell are you thinking about?"

"What? Nothing, I didn't hear you," I answer, shrugging him off as I sling two more bags over my shoulder. He continues to rattle on about something; I still don't hear him as my thoughts drift back to her.

Maybe it's those green eyes or maybe it's her mouth; the way it slightly curves when she's trying to hide a smile at something that I say. Wait, what the hell am I doing? Do not even think about going there... She is beautiful, though, the crazy thing is, she has no idea.

Later that afternoon, the clouds grow a deep shade of gray and the thunder can be heard in the distance out over the ocean. The rain isn't far behind, so Mikey and I decide to hang in for the night and finish our MLB2K12 tournament on Xbox.

(Jesse)

Deanna invites me to stop by after dinner, so I run through the downpour of rain over to her house. She and Maria are sitting at the kitchen table having coffee when I arrive and Luke is eating at the counter. Shortly after I arrive, Mikey walks in from the family room and joins him. I like the way they sit around together as a family.

"What are you guys doing tonight?" Deanna asks.

"Nothing, hanging in; it's crappy out," Luke answers casually.

"We should play *Rockband!*" Deanna says excitedly.

"Wow, JJ's gonna play, too?" Mikey asks.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," I answer nervously, not knowing what Deanna is getting me in to.

"You're kidding me? We have to make her play!" Deanna says amusingly. They can't believe I have never heard of it.

As we walk to the rec room, Deanna explains what *Rockband* is. "You have to try it, and you can't be embarrassed." She giggles as we enter the room.

The rec room belongs to them. It was a private room built off of the garage. A big screen TV hangs on one wall, sports memorabilia and framed newspaper articles cover the others. A pool table sits off to the side of the couch. A large trophy case holds Luke's trophies, along with a few cheerleading trophies and what looks to be, by the dates, a couple of Lucca's. I begin to read some of the articles that cover the walls. Luke arrogantly, but jokingly, asks if I'm impressed with his fascinating baseball career.

"See, now you can see for yourself how amazing I am!" he exclaims.

Mikey adds, "Whoa, what about me, I also cover these walls! Impressive, huh?"

Luke laughs and throws in, "Yep, we rule the world around here."

I just look at them and roll my eyes. There's some truth to that first impression after all.

Deanna adds her two cents, "You two are such idiots."

"What? You don't think we do?" they chime in, high fiving each other. "C'mon De, admit it. You know everyone treats us like Kings around here!" Mikey teases.

"JJ, please do not listen to these two morons." She turns back to them. "Just set the game up. We could care less about how great *you* think you are." She looks over at me, not allowing them to witness the smile that crosses her lips.

Luke's phone rings. He looks at the number and hesitates before he picks it up. "Hello? He what's up?" He looks at Mikey and rolls his eyes. Mikey makes a motion for him to hang up, but continues talking, "No, not tonight. I'm staying in... Mikey... my sister... Why? No, not tonight... I told you. I'm hanging out with Mikey... Look, I gotta go, I'll call you tomorrow, I'm in the middle of somethin'... Okay, I'll call you later then... See ya."

"You gotta get rid of her; she's a pain in the ass," Mikey says.

"I agree," Deanna chimes in. I have a pretty good idea of who it must have been.

"Alright guys, enough," Luke says, blowing them off. "Are we going to play or what?"

"I'll sing," Deanna said.

"I'm on guitar," Mikey chimes in.

Luke takes the drums. I laugh so hard that it hurts watching them. They take turns and argue the whole time over who is better. After about four or five times they turn to me. "Okay, your turn."

"No, I can't. I don't know how." I protest.

"You can sing," Deanna says.

"No, I can't sing. Believe me."

Luke is holding the guitar. "Here, try this." He hands it to me. "I'll help you until you get the feel of it."

I don't know how to hold the guitar. "This is going to take more work than I thought," Luke teases as he moves in, standing close behind me. His chest is skimming the back of my body, causing goose bumps from the back of my neck and down my spine. He wraps his arms around my own and places my fingers on the keys, and then he places his long fingers over mine. His breath is hot as he brushes the back of my ear, telling me to follow him. My heart is thumping so loud, I think they will all notice. All I need is for big head to think that he gets to me. I want to turn and run, but I'm frozen in the spot with Luke standing so close.

I'm not sure how I do it because I can hardly concentrate with him standing so close, but I actually master it on my own. It's fun. When we finally get bored with playing, Deanna and I watch a movie while the boys shoot a game of pool.

It's late by the time the movie has finished. As I head out the door for home, Mikey offers to walk me across the street since he is heading out as well. I overheard him tell Luke earlier that he was stopping by some girl's house later. I thought I saw Luke shoot him a look when he offered to walk me out, but maybe not.

"They're crazy, aren't they?" he asks as we step into the warm misty air.

"Yes, you all are. I had a lot of fun tonight."

"Me, too. They're great. They're like my family."

"Yeah, Deanna said the same thing about you."

We are at the street now so I start to cross. "Thanks for walking me over. I'll see ya later."

"See ya, JJ," he says as he gets into his car.

(Jesse)

I can hear the rain pelting against my window when I wake up. I can't sketch at the docks today. I'm disappointed that I won't be able to spend time with Luke and also a little disturbed that it bothers me so badly.

Dad and I finish unpacking the house. It finally feels like our home. We both agree my mom would be impressed. We talk about her more frequently now. I like talking about her. It makes me feel closer to her.

Deanna and I decide to make it a shopping day since the weather is crappy and there is not much else to do. She suggests we head over to *The Walk* in Atlantic City. My dad is more than happy to give me plenty of money to get whatever I think I need. I think he's relieved that I found someone to do this task with me. My mom had always been the shopper. I'm not even sure if my dad has ever stepped into a store. I don't think he would be thrilled with taking over that role. Not that I would have wanted him to. Having no idea where to start, I was happy to have Deanna go with.

"Alright JJ, what style are you into?" she asks as we step off the bus and are now surrounded by hundreds of stores.

"De, are you kidding? Do I look like I'm into any style?" Pointing to my shorts, sneakers and oversized t-shirt. That is why you're here. I need help."

"Oh, good. I was hoping you would say that," she says, checking me out before giving me a wink.

I love her sense of style. She always looks older and more mature than me. Well, that's not hard to do... her clothes are stylish; they show off her perfect body, though not in a sleazy way.

"Okay, what do we have to work with?" I can tell she is excited to get started.

"I have \$300. And he gave me an extra \$20 to treat us to lunch. Will that work?" I laugh.

"Oh... He's so good. That's perfect. I can't believe he gave you so much."

"Well, he said I haven't bought anything for myself for so long that he agreed I was in need of a new wardrobe."

"Great. Let's go to H&M. They have a nice selection. You can get more clothes for your money."

"Sounds good to me." I have no idea what she is talking about, I don't know what H&M is, but she sure does; so I follow along.

Once inside the store, she is like a kid in a candy store. She pretty much sticks me in the dressing room and just keeps handing me things to try on. Some of the things I'm not used to wearing, it almost too much for me. "De, I don't know if I can pull off some of these things the way you do."

"JJ, you have a cute little body and you're going to show it off. Now, I thought you were going to leave this in my hands? Trust me; I will not give you anything that I wouldn't wear myself. Everything I'm handing you is very tasteful."

"You're right; I'm just not used to it. Am I going to have enough money?"

"More than enough, everything I'm picking is from the sale racks. Now here, try this on. This emerald green will look perfect with your eyes and hair."

She continues to hand me things based on how it will look with my eyes, my hair, and my shape. She is having fun and, for that matter, so am I. She picks out two bathing suits. Nothing I would ever have picked out for myself, but I like them, they are grown up looking. I am a little nervous about wearing a bikini, so she picks out a black two piece, sort of like a tankini, except the top shows more of my stomach, but not quite as revealing as a bikini. I like it. The other is a turquoise one piece, cut high on the legs and low in the front. It reveals more than enough skin, though I like it even more than

the other. I feel grown up. I have to say, I'm impressed with my body. I have put on a little more weight, which was greatly needed because it added more curves. I look older.

I peek out of the curtain nervously. "What do you think?"

"I think you are going to be turning a lot of heads in Bay Point this summer!"

"Oh, right, sure. I don't think I've ever turned anyone's head in my life."

"I think you have, you just haven't noticed. You'll see."

As we check out, I still have plenty of money left over. She asks me about shoes and I point out the sneakers I'm wearing. "This is pretty much it," I tell her. "Other than a pair of sandals from last summer, but they hurt my feet."

Of course she has found a deal for shoes as well. "Ugh, look, three pairs of flip flops for twenty dollars. That's a good price. We live at the beach, so that's all we wear all summer!" She says as she picks them out, while I sit back and admire her shopping abilities. They are stylish, not your basic flip flops. They are beaded, come in different colors and have a nice wedge to give me some height something my five foot two frame lacks.

Finally, exhausted from shopping, we have lunch at a Mexican Restaurant, *Los Amigos*. We talk about plans for the summer as we snack on salsa and chips. She fills me in on the parties at the inlet, a small stretch of beach separated by thick woods that you can't get to by car and can only be reached by foot. It's where the bay meets the ocean.

While we finished our order of chicken enchiladas, I ask if she has a boyfriend, but she doesn't at the moment. I know about Luke and Alexa, but I wasn't sure about Mikey.

"He has lots of girlfriends. He's a little wilder than Luke. Not that he's an angel, either, but Mike is more of a jerk when it comes to girls, from what I hear. The girls just throw themselves at him anyway, and Luke, too, it's pretty pathetic."

"Why?"

"I think because they're like our own local celebrities. It's not every day that two kids from the same school may have a chance at the big leagues," she answers.

"Yeah, Luke told me about that."

"How about you? Have you ever dated? I know you missed last year, but what about before?" Deanna and I have become close rather quickly, so I filled her in about the accident one day while we sunbathed in my yard. I feel I have to come clean about my past. As horrible as it is to talk about, I confide in her about everything from my breakdown to the therapy sessions that took place not so long ago. Surprisingly, I don't scare her away. She is compassionate and understanding and says she'd read the same way if something ever happened to her mom.

"No, I've never dated. You think I'm shy now? I was probably worse then," I answer when she turns the relationship back to me. She laughs and tells me not to worry about it. She is anxious for me to meet her friends, but says she won't push until I feel I am ready.

(Jesse)

I finally build up the courage to go to the beach with Deanna and meet her friends. I've grown comfortable with my routine over the last couple of weeks. Hanging out at De and Luke's house, having lunch on the boardwalk every now and then, and mornings spent talking to Luke at the docks, sometimes just sitting silently, watching the sun come up. We form this bond as we talk. I get to see his goofy, cocky, playful side along with his serious, concerned, looking for advice side. I get the feeling he rarely shares the latter with anyone. It makes me feel important, needed. By now, Luke knows most of my secrets as well. I know I should be meeting other people, but I've become content with just hanging with Deanna, not to mention, Luke and Mikey when they're around.

It's right before the Fourth of July and all I keep hearing about is how this is the last week before the 'Shoobies' come down for the remainder of the summer and take over their beaches. Laughing, Deanna explains to me how every summer their beach and town gets invaded by 'Shoobies', aka, the "tourists." I guess that's what I am, a 'Shoobie,' since I'm originally from Philly. I didn't realize they had a name for us.

"Hey, I was thinking, I might come with you to the beach today if you're still going?" I say to Deanna as she sits down on my bed. The look on her face makes me laugh.

"Are you serious? Did I just hear you right? You know there will be other people there besides me, right?" she jokes.

"I know. I want to go." I smile at her sarcasm.

"Great, now I can finally see one of those new bathing suits on you. All that time shopping and you still haven't seen any of your new clothes."

"I know, but I wasn't going to wear them just sitting around the house."

"Great. Get ready. We'll catch the bus at twelve thirty. I'm so happy that you are coming with me today. I've been waiting for you to come around!" She gives me a squeeze as she heads out the door.

"I'll be over as soon as I'm ready," I call out as she is leaving.

As I walk back in my room, I sit down on my bed, deciding what I should wear and what I should bring. This is my first trip to the beach without my parents and my mom always packed us up for the beach.

I can hear the sound of the lawn mower out back so I rush outside to get my dad's opinion. He turns off the mower when he sees me.

"I think I'm going to the beach with Deanna today, she's meeting up with her friends." The look on his face tells me that he is pleased that I'm finally venturing off our street. "What should I bring?"

Pausing, he seems as clueless as me. "I have no idea, Mommy always brought everything. She has a whole closet full of stuff up there. Go look around. You'll figure it out." As I race up the steps, I think about how he sometimes talks about her as if she is still here. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not, but who am I to judge how he copes.

I haven't been in my dad's closet since the first day we moved in. I can't help thinking that it is a little funny and sad how he has everything set up the same way it had been in our old house. My mom's clothes hang exactly the same way and the shelves are stacked just as they were before.

I look through the racks of her clothes. She had some really nice things. I'm just about the same size as her now. I could probably wear a lot of these things. As I make my way back to the beach gear, I come across a black mesh beach bag, a silvery looking one, a few different cover ups, bathing suits, and beach towels.

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