



Once Upon a Cliché

A Peaceful Pilgrim Novel

Excerpt

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Chapter 1

"The decision to kiss for the first time is the most crucial in any love story. It changes the relationship of two people much more strongly than even the final surrender; because this kiss already has within it that surrender." ~Emil Ludwig

I slept with Brayla Sullivan.

Shaun Levi opened his eyes, and the implicating memories flooded in just as the sight of one of his oldest, non-romantic friends did. She was completely naked, having kicked off the blanket, and he found himself responding to the incredible view he was being given while she slept on in oblivion.

I had sex with Brayla. Brayla.

While a part of him couldn't get past the shock of what'd happened when nothing like it had ever been so much as *imagined*, he also couldn't get himself to regret it. His two

closest friends, Brayla and Lena Young--neighbors all their lives--had intended to get together on New Year's Day. As Chief of Police for the incredibly small and aptly named town Peaceful, he'd had to work on New Year's Eve. Luckily, he and his deputy hadn't had any serious issues.

The plan for getting together had been to meet at Brayla's. He and Lena were in charge of drinks and food while they'd left Brayla with about the only task she was capable of handling on her own: Entertainment. They intended to play games and watch movies together, neither of which required much forethought and planning.

Lena had ended up ducking out at the last minute. Her older brother's teenage daughter had her own plans fall through and Lena would never leave her alone with her father. Rick's drunken binges and violence were a certainty on holidays. While she and Neve had come over for a few hours, it wasn't long before Shaun and Brayla were alone. That hadn't been weird. It'd happened before, and there was nothing awkward about it. They'd practically known each other from out of the wombs and were all the same age, attended the same school in the same grade, and had lived in each other's back pockets all that time.

But in a million years I wouldn't have expected what happened. I anticipated we'd both get roaring drunk, and I'd go home after midnight, depressed out of my skull at another year of my life...alone. He hadn't gone on a date in months, and unfortunately he remembered the exact day and time of the last. He'd been turned down plenty of times in the meantime, and yesterday alone he'd been rejected twice.

He'd shown up at Brayla's with a case of beer, a bottle of whiskey, and their favorite snacks, aware that being with his friends would alleviate only a small portion of his misery and then only for a short time.

Brayla had started drinking pretty much as soon as he entered the door, despite that a teenager was among them and he'd opted to have wine coolers to start off with--just until Neve left. Brayla was more than half-drunk by the time Lena and Neve left, and she'd told him what he'd missed as the last to arrive: Her aunt Carolan had a date in La Crosse, about an hour away, and she was staying overnight at a hotel in the city because she didn't like to drive at night. As if Shaun's life couldn't get worse. Even her old, pudgy aunt had someone to kiss at midnight. So he and Brayla had been alone from that point on, and--no two ways about it--Brayla drunk had always been a lot more fun than Brayla sober.

Still...never expected...

Brayla shifted slightly, and Shaun had to bite his lip to keep himself from groaning out loud. How had she hid *this* under those two-sizes-too-big, huckster overalls and videogame-logoed jersey t-shirts for so many years? She literally looked shapeless under them. If he'd been forced at gunpoint to describe what he thought her body would look like naked, he would have offered several unflattering comments: Flat and out-of-shape. By all rights, the way she ate and based on how little she took care of her appearance, she should have been anything but what she was. She had very definite curves in all the right places and she was nowhere near overweight or out of shape. She was damn near perfect.

And I'll never forget what it felt like to--

Shaun supposed it made sense that people were rarely what they looked like hiding beneath layers of clothing unless those outfits were flattering and designed to highlight the choicest parts. Few would believe he was anything but the Jolly *White* Giant--a beanpole under the highly unbecoming, two-toned brown police uniform he wore nearly all the time.

He'd never been in the position of being allowed to prove to anyone he was in the best possible muscular shape. He worked hard for his highly-conditioned body.

He'd actually dated quite a bit since graduating high school, but most of those were blind dates set up by friends or family who felt sorry for him. Nothing had ever gotten so much as *promising*. He couldn't say he'd even once had a girlfriend in his life, though he'd wanted one desperately. His dates never turned serious. In every case, the woman broke it off first. Even if he hadn't felt chemistry, he wouldn't have done that. He wanted sex, a romantic relationship and marriage too bad to give up on anything that could turn into all he wanted if he was just patient. He'd had offers of sex--whenever he went on vacation every year (alone) to big cities around the United States, he met women who didn't seem to cast him in the role of uninteresting geek vampire ghoul, as they did in the town he'd grown up in. But those women were either prostitutes (no way would he pay someone to sleep with him--what could be more depressing?) or women who wanted a one-night stand and nothing more. No doubt, he'd been tempted, but he'd been raised a hell of a lot better than that.

I'm thirty years old. I wanna be in love. I wanna be with someone who loves me as much as I love her. I wanna start a family...though that can wait a few years.

Had Brayla been as depressed as he was last night? He'd wondered about that more than once while she sucked down his beer and the hard liquor as if there'd been a time limit on its availability. They'd decided to watch a movie together after Lena and Neve left. He supposed the awkwardness started during that. There'd been a sex scene that had been so long and graphic, there was no way they could even look at each other during or after it.

Then they'd played one of the videogames that ruled her life, and, when he'd distractedly announced it was midnight (she'd insisted they celebrate as if it was still New Year's Eve) because the alarm he'd set on his phone went off, she'd out-of-the-wild-blue-yonder started kissing him. Literally, it'd be like one minute they were immersed in the videogame on the sofa of her game room together, and the next she was tossing her controller away and crawling over to his lap to put her mouth on his. She'd been utterly smashed at that point. He'd known it. Yet she'd seemed fully aware of exactly what she was doing while their characters had met with sudden death on the screen and neither of them gave a damn.

Maybe he should have been offended or turned off. He'd literally never had a single second of feeling attraction to Brayla before--any more than he supposed she'd had to him. She didn't take care of herself--certainly not in any way that normal women took care of their appearance. He understood she'd never had any incentive to care one way or the other.

If he was an oddball virgin with no life experience, Brayla was on the extreme of that. In most ways, she was little more than a kid who needed someone to take care of her 24/7. Her shockingly long, messily braided hair was always a washed-out, indescribable color and a rat's nest. She didn't shower every day--sometimes she stunk to high heaven (luckily she *had* showered yesterday--her hair had been wet when she opened the door to him, for once not braided into two messy plaits and later becoming a mass of soft waves when those fell out). Her clothes frequently had distinct food stains on them. The worst part was that she was oblivious. Sometimes he felt like she wasn't really even there with him and Lena in person. In her head, she was off in some game fantasy, whichever she was currently playing. She didn't seem to care about anything else except maybe being fed by someone

when she got really hungry, as she frequently did and then ate enough to rival a t-rex.

Despite how much alcohol she'd consumed, the taste of her mouth had been intoxicating. He'd responded eagerly even before she suddenly pushed herself off his lap and tore all her hideously ugly clothes off as if she couldn't shed them fast enough. That had pretty much sealed it for him. Maybe she wasn't thinking, but she wasn't oblivious for once, not when she crawled back on his lap naked. She'd seemed as aroused as he was when he helplessly touched all the parts she'd exposed to him, finally turning her over on the sofa so he had better access.

Even now, the memories of her responses brought--yes, some humiliating awkwardness--but mostly I-will-die-if-we-don't-do-this excitement. He'd believed she was feeling exactly the same thing he was, especially when he'd whispered (without any confidence but unable to stop himself) if they could go to bed. He'd felt her uncertainty creep in just a little then, during the trek upstairs to her bedroom, but he'd been too far gone. As soon as they were inside, he'd kissed her and she'd started yanking on his clothes without the slightest bit of finesse.

I slept with Brayla Sullivan.

I had sex with Brayla. Brayla.

Nothing has ever been so incredible...

A twinge of guilt filled him as his erection became painful now, just as it had then when, both naked, they'd crawled into her Queen size bed and he'd started exploring her all over again. Brayla had never seemed in the least interested in the opposite sex (or the same, for that matter). She didn't appear to care a whit about dating or the fact that she was alone. As far as he knew, she hadn't been on a single date her whole life. He suspected she'd never so much as been kissed. Her lack of experience had been obvious but, far from turning him off, he'd found it endearing, touching. *I was a virgin. She was damn sure a virgin.*

Everything prior to the final act had been mind-blowing for both of them. He hadn't expected to meet any resistance once they got to that point, but he had and a great deal of it. He hadn't stopped to consider her virginity prior to that. He'd wanted to be gentle. As much as he could, he had, but, despite all the foreplay that had--prior to the finale--made him think she was as ready as he was, there was no way to be gentle enough to accomplish what she'd insisted she wanted as much as he did. She wouldn't let him stop, even when she'd (inconceivably) cried at the pain.

Why did she keep going? Why didn't she tell me to stop and get out? Why did she seem to want me to finish it no matter how bad it hurt her?

How badly did I hurt her? Is it possible to make something like that--from a female virgin's point of view, an almost literal battering ram--pleasurable? I didn't and don't have any experience that could make me capable of something like that. The worst irony is that final act was the most pleasure I've ever experienced my whole life. I can't imagine anything could top that. I'd do just about anything for a repeat. The real thing is a million times better than a fantasy--a billion ways worth the endless wait I endured.

Brayla wasn't the woman of his dreams. Not even once had he considered *her* being the one he'd fall in love and share his life with. But was it so inconceivable? They'd been friends forever, almost literally. *After last night...I want more. I want our start last night to become something incredible, something permanent, something that could be everything maybe we've both always wanted. But will she give us a chance?*

More than that, Shaun wondered what was acceptable now. They'd made love. He'd

kissed and touched every inch of her body last night, more than once. He'd become a part of her in the best possible way. The sex hadn't been a one-night-stand for him. So...what did that mean? Was he allowed...?

His arousal so heavy, the reverberations carried all through him when he turned on his side so he didn't wake her so dramatically, she might never recover from the shock. He let the blanket fall off of him, too. He wasn't thinking about what he would say when she woke up. Point in fact, he'd spent his lifetime wary of ever opening his mouth. He'd grown up with older sisters who were constantly shouting over him or speaking for him things he didn't vaguely want so, if he wasn't at a loss for words, he was making a verbal mess that pretty much guaranteed he'd be a bachelor for life. Maybe it would be better not to wake Brayla with words at all. Wake her in a much more erotic way that negated the need for actual words--

He raised his hand, willing himself to touch her--start slow, work up to rousing her from sleep in the best possible ways...the ways she'd enjoyed most last night.

Brayla's eyes opened and for a long moment her deep, electric blue gaze (that he'd never noticed as so striking before) looked at him as if her memories were slow to catch up with reality. Her attention shifted from his face down his body, and she saw his erection so her eyes widened to almost impossible dimensions. Just as abruptly as the whole thing had started the night before, she was screeching in a cartoonish way that might have been hilarious if she wasn't leaping out of bed, now literally caterwauling her obvious distress and mortification. Over and over, she said, "I'm dreaming. I'm drunk. I'm hung over. This isn't happening. Wake up!"

"Brayla--" Humiliated beyond anything he'd ever experienced before, Shaun found himself dragging the blanket over his hips.

She'd found the biggest, bulkiest robe he'd ever laid eyes on and she wrapped herself up in it so she resembled the abominable snowman, right up to her neck and down to the floor. But she was having none of his attempts to calm her down. She'd grabbed his clothes from where they'd been strewn around the room last night and threw them on top of him, shouting, "Get out. My aunt will be home soon. Get out. You have to get out. Now. Shaun! Get up. Why aren't you listening?"

He didn't know what to say or do. The only course of action seemed compliance. He slipped out from under her comforter, reached for his underwear, but, no matter how jolting and rejected he felt by her reaction to waking up and realizing last night's intimacy hadn't been some drunk dream she'd had, he couldn't get his body to cool off. Maybe partly because he woke up every morning with this kind of almost painful swelling and hardness that didn't immediately go away when he was conscious, his male organ wouldn't be talked down so quickly this morning either. Even with his shirt and jeans on, he couldn't close the fly, and this painfully obvious fact wasn't lost on her.

Like a crazed animation that'd somehow entered the real world, she darted out of the room and returned less than a minute later with his winter coat. She shoved it at him, repeating her earlier litany. This time, though, she actually got behind him and started shoving him toward the doorway, then toward the stairs. He had no choice but to leave his jeans half zipped, fully closing his jacket over it to hide his treacherous bodily function. The whole time she was all but pushing him down the steep flight of stairs, he was trying to think of anything to say, something that wouldn't end what they'd started last night, even when it was cruelly apparent she didn't want that to continue...and possibly she wished it'd

never happened in the first place.

He tried again to speak, but she was shouting over him just the way his sisters had all his life, and he shut down instinctively. A moment later, she'd thrust him out on the front porch and slammed the door closed behind him in no uncertain terms.

Over. Finished. Fini. Goodbye.

Because it was already late morning and he didn't want Lena or Neve, or even Rick for that matter, to glance out their windows and see him stumbling down the sidewalk, obviously having just left Brayla's house, he picked up the pace toward his house. His dogs in his backyard tattled on him, barking like mad at the first scent of him. He didn't detour to see them.

He let himself into his house, feeling flabbergasted and wholly discombobulated. What the hell had just happened? What did her reaction mean? Why had she acted so crazy? He didn't believe for one second she was truly worried about her aunt coming home and finding them in a state unlike any they'd ever been in before. She'd told him Carolan wasn't planning to be back until afternoon. She would leisurely have breakfast, check out of her hotel, maybe do a little shopping before heading back.

I slept with Brayla Sullivan.

I had sex with Brayla. Brayla.

Nothing has ever been so humiliating...

Why? Was it really so horrifying to her that last night wasn't a drunk dream? She regretted it. There was simply no other conclusion. Had she been too drunk to put up a fight? But *she'd* started it. He'd wondered why she'd been so adamant about pretending it was New Year's Eve. He'd thought he'd understood why when she kissed him straight out of his head--if she'd been planning it in advance, she'd needed the viable excuse New Year's Eve gave her. Now he had no idea about any of that.

And she'd been the one to adamantly insist that he finish it, even when he'd considered stopping, worried he was hurting her too much, despite his own overwhelming pleasure.

Could I have done something differently last night? We didn't talk after it was over, and she fell asleep almost immediately. Should I have tried to say something this morning? She didn't actually give me a chance to get out any more than her name and that was clearly enough to make her utterly insane. Would it have helped if I told her I didn't regret it, that I enjoyed it and wanted more than one night together? Or would that have made things inconceivably worse?

The only other thought about her reaction that came to him was beyond depressing: Maybe he'd just been bad at the whole thing, miserably disappointing her so she didn't even want to look at him this morning. But even that didn't seem likely. Other than that last act, she'd enjoyed everything he did and not silently or bashfully either. He'd never seen a display more wanton--and he'd loved every second of it.

That she'd been at a low point when she started the whole thing last night wasn't out of the bounds of reality. He couldn't have understood that better himself. And Brayla...hell, he'd never had to wonder why Brayla didn't give a crap about herself or seemingly anything else. She certainly didn't crave things like normal people wanted--love and affection, a place to belong, a purpose. Both of her parents had been nightmares. Between the two of them, they'd stripped her of every last ounce of desire to involve herself in this world. Losing herself in a fantasy where she was loved and respected, important and

wanted was a hell of a lot easier and ideal after all she'd been through in thirty years.

But Lena and I have been with her, been friends with her, all our lives. She has us. We both care about her. We take care of her. We accept her for who she is, even if sometimes that person isn't exactly pleasant. In truth, without us, I believe she would have lost herself completely in her imaginary worlds long ago. Is it so unthinkable that me and Brayla could end up together? That we came together last night the way we did? Is that idea so loathsome to her?

When she didn't leave the house at all that day, not even after her aunt returned, and ignored his carefully worded texts and voicemails, Shaun had his definitive answer.



"Kiss me until I forget how terrified I am of everything wrong with my life." ~Beau Taplin

How could I be so stupid? Why did I have to make that my New Year's Resolution? Well, not exactly that...

Brayla locked the door she'd just thrown Shaun out of, then backed slowly, one step at a time, away from it, afraid to find herself near a window where she could view his retreat to his house. She didn't want to see him. Ever again.

Never, never, never again.

When they'd been making the New Year's plans and Lena came to tell her what her part in contributing to it would be, Brayla had talked to her best friend about the fact that she'd never done anything in her whole life, nothing that mattered, *counted*.

She didn't mention the inciting incident that'd led her to realize that truth. She'd accidentally unearthed one of the few photographs of her mother she'd thought she'd destroyed long ago. For a long minute of staring at that photo, she'd thought it was a picture of *herself*. But further scrutiny and the note on the back with the year had brought home the truth to her in a scalding hot brand of realization. She *was* her mother. She looked exactly like her--the ugly, worthless cow who'd lazily sprawled on the sofa all day, stinking because she could never find a good reason to clean up her own s@#t, feeding her face, watching TV as if her whole life was *inside* that damn box instead of *outside* it.

I only told Lena I wanted things to change. I need to do something with my life. I need to not be my effing mother.

A kiss--the only thing she'd intended to take place as a belated New Year's Eve normalcy--had led to full-on, gloriously naked fireworks. In seconds. One kiss led to killed-it. The mind-blowing in-between hadn't lasted nearly long enough to warrant the trauma she experienced after Shaun was shoved unceremoniously out of her house but not at all out of her mind.

How the heck did I end up translating that sense of purpose I spoke to Lena about into getting skunk-drunk and rolling around my game room sofa and bed with a guy--and not just any guy? Shaun. Shaun Levi. Shaun! God oh God oh God, kill me, please! Anything is better than facing that I did all that with Shaun.

They'd grown up together. As close as brother and sister without actually being. *Practically incest for us to have sex, and especially the way we did with all the incredible foreplay I've only ever seen in games or movies before and even then, I never imagined could be that totally awesome.*

The actual sex hadn't been good. Not at all. She hadn't expected that, though she supposed being a virgin should have given her a big clue pain was in the offing. She'd never kissed, never done a single thing that could be considered sexual in any realm other than videogame fantasies. Actual sex never looked painful there or in movies. But...wow, she hadn't anticipated going from lose-your-mind, out-loud-screaming pleasure to ripping agony that should have led to copious bleeding but somehow hadn't.

I wanna die. That's it. I don't want to remember anything, especially that. I would rather die. If only it hadn't felt so good, too good to stop, I could have shoved him out the door much sooner, before the worst happened. Now I can never leave the house again. Never show my face, see anyone, especially him...

She'd intended a kiss. Her first ever. And what other guy did she know that she'd consider even that with? There was literally no one else. She'd spent most of the day, afternoon, night, working herself up to that point, and the alcohol had given her the courage she wouldn't have otherwise had.

Shaun Levi had seen her naked. Shaun had touched her breasts--and a heck of a lot more than that...things she hadn't had the imagination to imagine being touched prior to that. Shaun had kissed her everywhere, done wildly blissful things...things that implied he wasn't a virgin, which she should have guessed because guys were never virgins. Never.

Ahh! Never. There was no amount of drunk-forgetfulness that could cover the memories, let alone the scorch of unexpected heat that caught her by surprise each time a recollection intruded, pointing out how skillful he'd been.

She'd kissed Shaun Levi. She'd French-kissed him. Swapped spit. She'd touched him, touched him in places she'd never seen "in person" before. And her inexperience had done nothing to relieve her of the humiliation, not only because he was as-good-as-a-brother to her but because she'd been so inept. True, he'd pretended to enjoy everything up until she actually touched his boy thing. But, when she'd done that, he'd had enough of her fumbling. He'd taken her hand away. *And then we segued right into the excruciating pain that was like a roaring-rude wake-up call to everything that happened prior. Somehow, that part seemed to bring him the most pleasure...*

She needed to think about something else, anything else. Squeezing her eyes shut only resurrected the memory of Shaun's climax. He'd had the same out-of-body experience she'd had countless times in their foreplay. At the time, she'd been thrilled (albeit torn to shreds) that he was enjoying at least *something*.

I wish I was dead.

She ran upstairs, intending to shower for the next two hours as if all the memories could go down the drain like dirty water, too. But, as soon as she entered the bedroom, she remembered waking up and seeing Shaun looking at her with his odd eyes. They were narrow, almost vampire-like--an icy crystal shade, slashes of eyebrows over them so close to them his eyes looked hooded. His eyelashes had always been so dark and thick, he actually looked like he wore eyeliner. Never before had she been forced to consider whether he was attractive, but her visceral reaction would have been 'no'. A resounding no. Brothers were never attractive, and he was as close as it got without him actually being.

Seeing her almost-brother in bed next to her, she'd remembered everything down to the smell and taste of him, and her gaze had been drawn to the part of him that had given her the most exciting jolt after his clothes were off. She'd seen him in clothing outside of his police uniform, but that outfit was what she associated him in the most. He worked out. A lot. For his job and just because he seemed to enjoy it (what the hell kind of fun was that? as the *Back from the Future* Barfly said). She should have realized he'd be in good shape. She just hadn't ever realized he was in *that* good of shape. Great shape. Phenomenal shape. Sexy as hell shape. There wasn't a spare ounce of fat on him and he was muscle from head to toe. His body had been like something out a male model magazine, and she couldn't prevent herself from recalling her back-to-back thoughts on seeing him completely naked: "Oh, mama" and "Now it gets fun".

Brayla groaned her mortification.

Why didn't he sneak out so I could pretend I drunk-dreamed it all? Why couldn't he have? Because I can't imagine he's not at home thinking exactly the same things I am right now. I'm his sister. Or as good as. And why can't he just forget all the stupid things we did, all the things we'd rather be dead than remember now?

She rushed to the bed, grabbing the pillow he'd had his head on, intending to rip the pillowcase off it and gather every single last thing on her bed so it could be shoved in a molten-lava-hot, soap-and-bleach-poisoned washing machine. But his scent was so strong, her eyes fell closed again and the memory of foreplay--glorious foreplay--started again like some movie that refused to be shut off.

Had he always smelled this good? She supposed he had. He did. She'd just never paid any special attention before. Why did her entire body have to go off like fireworks just smelling him?

She threw all her bedding in a heap in the hall outside her room, then returned while shedding her thick robe. Unfortunately, all she could see was a vision of herself completely naked in the full-length mirror hung on the wall right in front of her. The changes were invisible, but she told herself almost cruelly that every inch of her body was covered with Shaun's fingerprints. The police could ID him easily with those. And his DNA. Inside and out...

Brayla let out a scream that kept getting louder, more disturbing, as she let herself freak out. She never wanted to stop screaming. She forced herself into the shower, shaking when she realized she didn't want to touch herself, but she needed to soap up and use the entire, brand-new, thirty-three ounce bottle to wash away these memories.

When she got out and dressed, feeling weak and headachy from soap overkill, longing for food and coffee, she heard her phone making all kinds of noise. Her ringtones and notifications annoyed everyone around her. She liked listening to the songs, but for some reason a full minute of a song for a ringtone and notification pushed the boundaries into some extreme zone for everyone else on the planet. She didn't need to look at her phone to realize Shaun was calling or texting. But she did sneak over to have a look, wondering if Lena had called. She hadn't. Shaun had left a text *and* she had a voicemail from him.

She dressed quickly, not bothering to even towel or comb her sopping wet hair. She wanted to escape everything, and who knew how to do that better than she did? She'd learned from the queen of worthless oblivion.

For a moment, she almost slipped back into her horror when she saw the controllers thrown carelessly on the floor, the disk for the game they'd been playing still in the console,

the covering on the sofa askew and then some. But she started the game she'd been playing before yesterday and had bemoaned stopping for guests, and she buried herself in the familiar story.

She had no idea what time it was when Carolan pushed open the door of her game room and wrinkled her nose though Brayla had lit a candle hours ago to burn away Shaun's cologne, old beer stink, and other scents she didn't want to identify. She always got a headache from candles so she'd blown it out again not long afterward.

"What? You're not gonna open the repair shop?" her dad's pudgy, perpetually cranky and critical younger sister said without preface. Brayla ignored her completely, tuning her out easily while she complained that the house was a mess, spent a few minutes on the fact that the blind date she'd had with the guy from the online dating site had lied about his appearance (as if she hadn't herself), then moved onto the next set of oft-practiced speeches focused on how worthless Brayla was, never did anything but play her stupid games... *Just like Dad used to bust on my mom every single day of her life for her TV watching. Yet she never changed. Never lifted a damn finger. Mooched off him, didn't pay a minute's attention to me unless it was to tell me to get out or to hit me when I lingered too long...why? for what? I don't even know why I stuck around when I knew it'd piss her off. 'Cause it was something from her? Some bit of attention, bad as it was?*

Shakily, Brayla shied from the inciting incident that'd brought about her New Year's resolution, forcing herself deeper into the game. Not long later, her aunt brought her food. She set the full plate and glass of milk in front of her. "Your phone is going off like an alarm." She pulled the jumping device out of her pocket and set that next to the plate, then turned and walked out without another word.

Brayla plucked the phone up, instantly rejecting the call coming in. For a shocking moment, she actually considered putting Shaun's number on her auto reject list before she remembered they were friends. They had been friends. Maybe if she'd had a lot of friends, she would have done it without hesitation. But Lena and Shaun were the only two people who'd ever given her the time of day. Even if she wanted to die and never see Shaun again after their stupid--*and why doesn't he also want that?*--night, she couldn't block him like that. Instead, she turned the volume all the way off.

She picked up the plate of food her aunt had left, strangely grateful because she'd been starving all day and she couldn't do more than throw together a bologna sandwich or nuke a bowl of canned soup. She hadn't had the motivation to feed herself though. Her aunt was a good cook, almost as good as Lena.

She shoveled the food into her mouth, the way she always did, in-between playing her game, but the memory of her mother's bulldozer eating--as if she wasn't fully aware she was even consuming anything, bothered her so much, she paused her game and ate consciously.

Her head still ached and she was hung over, unnaturally tired. To top it off, she felt this obscene, alien urge to go thank her aunt for making a meal for her...and cleaning up the house. She remembered the pile of bedding she'd left in the hall, not detouring to the laundry room with it on her way downstairs because she'd desperately wanted to get back into her game so she wouldn't have to think about anything else. She had no doubt Carolan had washed all the laundry, made up her bed with the linens again, in addition to cleaning up after the New Year's Day festivities. She'd done it all while muttering under her breath, but she'd done it anyway. Usually, Lena and Shaun both pitched in on the clean-up, but this

time--

The weight of memories and berating herself grew so heavy, Brayla could barely keep her eyes open. She forced herself to save her game, shut off the console, and then stretched out on the sofa. Strangely, the lingering scent of Shaun's intoxicating cologne on the throw blanket over the sofa had a lulling effect on her.

She slept like the dead, waking with a start the way she had when she opened her eyes to see Shaun...naked Shaun...next to her in her bed. *Next to equally naked, recently and intimately probed Brayla Sullivan--*

She sat up, reaching for her chin and she groaned out loud when she realized she'd been drooling the way her mother frequently had when she'd been startled awake in the middle of the afternoon on a weekday. Sure, she'd always had things to do, but she'd never been bothered about doing them. So dinner wasn't on the table, her five-year-old had to get home from school on her own, the house looked like a tornado had razed a swath of destruction straight through it--what did any of it have to do with her?

She had couch sores. I don't.

The consolation did nothing to relieve her, and she forced herself to get up, grab the plate of dried-on food and sour milk left in the glass and put the dishes in the kitchen sink. She went up to brush her teeth for work, keeping the medicine cabinet door open the whole time so she wouldn't have to look at herself.

By the time she returned, Carolan had made breakfast and couldn't refrain from needling Brayla about her laziness, bills that needed to be paid, that dinner would be on the table if she could find anything to make it out of and not just thin air.

As much as she wanted to tune her aunt out--and normally could with no trouble at all--she couldn't seem to this morning. *If it doesn't bother me at all to hear this stuff...then I am my mom. She didn't give a damn about anyone or anything. Nothing could part her and her fat ass from the living room sofa and the life-box we call a TV.*

Carolan suddenly stopped talking--the first time in twenty straight minutes. "You look like crap. What did you do to your hair?"

Brayla lifted her gaze to her aunt but didn't meet her eyes. She rarely met anyone's eyes. When Shaun had tried to last night during the virgin-busting--*not last night, the night before--*she'd been half-crazed. He must have realized how much pain she was in and he'd been on the verge of offering to stop. But somehow that prospect seemed even worse to her than finishing it. She'd been asking herself what he'd gotten out of *any* of the preliminaries. The way he'd thrust her hand away from his...throbbing, swollen member...had reverberated inside her head like it was happening over and over again, humiliating her until she felt incinerated. If he could get some pleasure in exchange for the avalanche of wonder he'd given her, what was a little pain? Or a lot?

Without a word, she got up from the table and went upstairs to the bathroom. Looking at herself was the worst form of torment. She recalled that her hair had been wet from the shower, tended to require a good six hours to get fully dry and she hadn't even combed it, let alone braided it like she usually did to keep it out of her way. She'd fallen asleep on it and it was crushed and smushed up against one side of her head. She also had lines all over that cheek because apparently she'd been sleeping on the wrinkled folds of the blanket thrown over it. *How is it possible for someone like me to look uglier?*

She showered, using the 2-in-1 shampoo and conditioner on her body, because she'd finished all the liquid body soap last time she showered and would have to ask her aunt to

get more, though she'd just bought a new one. When she got out, she combed her hair and put on clean clothes. Her bed had been made, just like she knew it would be. Unslept in. Virgin. Again.

By the time she got downstairs, it was late morning, and she wasn't in the least worried about running into anyone outside. Only she, Shaun, and Lena and her brother lived on this street. They were both at work. They always left much earlier than she did.

She wasn't paying attention to anything until she realized Shaun was standing right next to the driver's side of her car, which she always parked on the curb because her aunt insisted her fancy, newer car should go in the attached, one-car garage. Accepting it had been easier than arguing about it. *Mom did that. Always, whatever anyone wanted, accepted abuse. Like she could tune it out and then go back to her coveted state of incognizance--*

"Brayla, shouldn't we talk about what happened?" he said, and she wondered in panic if he'd been lying in wait for her to appear. For how long? Why wasn't he already at work? It was nearly nine-thirty. He was the police chief!

"Talk?" She shook her head wildly, her gaze flying *around* him--anywhere but *on* him. She'd yanked open the car door to create a physical barrier between them.

"Look, I know you're embarrassed. So am I. But...it happened. It happened and--"

"And what?" She risked a glance at him, not having a clue where he might be going with this. Why wasn't he just pretending it'd never happened? Avoiding her for the next six months like she intended to avoid him?

He looked like he wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole. Yet he spoke anyway. "It happened, and I wanna know what it means."

"What it means?" she crowed, even more confused. "What *could* it mean? It was...stupid! A mistake! And I don't have the slightest clue how I ever went through with it in the first place--"

She would have had to be truly dead not to notice how hurt he looked at her visceral words, spewed like poison darts from her mouth. She might have well have punched him for how much pain she caused with mere words. What was happening? Why was he acting like this? She couldn't fathom any of his words or reactions--not since *it* had happened.

"Are you saying you didn't want that? That you regret it? You don't want it to happen again?"

Was this some kind of joke? If any other guy had said the words to her in connection to an actual incident like they'd shared, she would have assumed he was playing an elaborately cruel joke on her. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time. She'd had the most miserable time in elementary and high school. She'd been the butt of every joke, every mean prank imaginable. "Of course I didn't want that! I regret it and I don't want it to ever happen again--just like you must. We were drunk. It wasn't a choice. It just kind of...happened."

He made a noise as if she'd punched him in the gut with every ounce of her strength when he was least expecting it. Still, he spoke and made her confusion all the worse. "Well, *I* wasn't that drunk and I don't believe you were either," he said in a forceful voice she barely recognized. He was clearly mortified, so why was he going through with this? "We've been drunk together before and it never happened then. It did this time, and it wasn't because we were so trashed, we didn't know what we were doing. I knew exactly what I was doing...or--"

She couldn't lie even to herself about that. She'd known exactly what she was doing,

too, drunk or not. She suddenly realized she'd been shouting at him, and her aunt would be rubbernecking, even if it the house curtains didn't appear to be harboring a chubby, nosy aunt behind them.

"It can't happen again. I don't want it to and you don't either."

"Speak for yourself, Brayla," he muttered unhappily. "I would like it to happen again."

Who was this guy?

This couldn't be Shaun, her gawky, vampire-resembling, next-door-neighbor who was always outside when she was little. Her mom had thrown her out on a daily basis. He'd wanted to escape too many sisters who were as likely to dress up him in a tutu and force him to endure a tea party as they were to beat the living snot out of him. His sisters had been mean, especially to him.

This couldn't be Shaun, the grown-up who'd bailed her out of tax fraud she'd had no clue she was perpetrating, took her to the hospital and stayed with her until she was released when she'd launched herself at Lena's brother after finding out he'd knocked her around yet again because he was a pathetic, angry, drunken a-hole. Lena had told her later Shaun had almost crossed the line as a police officer (though he'd been off-duty when he went after Rick) in making Lena's brother pay for what he'd done to both of them--and not just with jail-time.

Brayla couldn't take another second of this torment. The photograph of her mother she'd mistaken for a picture of herself had started everything. Now, between expecting her aunt to fall out into the hedges she was no doubt leaning so far out the living room window eavesdropping on them from and Shaun saying things he couldn't possibly mean--she didn't *want* him to mean--she was overwhelmed and panicked.

She dived into the driver's seat, jammed her key in the ignition and started the car, then yanked the door closed. A second later, she tore off down the road, seatbelt-less, muttering the same thing she used to when the kids at school were tormenting her, threatening to hurt her, and she'd take off on her bike. She'd pedal harder and faster, not paying attention to anything around her. The wind was an alarm siren getting louder and louder in her ears. Only a miracle had prevented a car from hitting her or vice versa. She'd later wondered if she'd actually reached 55 mph on that old Huffy bike. "You're okay. They're gone. They can't get you now."

Instead of feeling better, just like back then, she was only reminded she'd escaped *that time* but they would come after her again. They would never let her go for long before the next round.