

# Breathe In

A JUST BREATHE NOVEL

Martha Sweeney

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***The Just Breathe Series***

Breathe In

Breathe Out

Just Breathe



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Breathe In



# One

As I attempt to lift my heavy eyelids, I discover a hazy darkness surrounding me. Blinking slowly several times, my half-opened eyes won't focus to give me any clear indication of what's around me and where the blurry, flashing lights above are coming from. My body feels heavy. Still unable to open my eyes all the way, I perceive that I'm laying down somewhere. A cool dampness near my left cheek reveals itself as a slight gust of air brushes past my face. Sliding my right arm up the side of my body like a snake, my fingers creep to my lips. Drool — or, at least I hope so.

Two large and oddly shaped figures materialize in front of me. They are so close, only a foot or two away. Voices suddenly emanate from the now more defined silhouettes. Their speech sounds muffled and trails off into the distance even as I try to concentrate on their words. Who are they? What are they saying? Why can't I understand them? One of the voices almost sounds feminine.

Another indistinguishable sound gradually becomes more apparent as it grows louder and the ringing in my ears subsides. It's the engine of a car. My brain finally starts to put the fuzzy pieces of evidence together. I must have fallen asleep in the back seat. A familiar smell creeps into my nose that reassures me — my mother's perfume.

"Mom?" my throat squeezes out in a raw, breathy, hoarse tone.

"We're almost home, dear," her voice replies in a low, sluggish tone.

I internally smile at her comforting words, though her voice sounds peculiar.

A sudden rush of nervousness enters my belly. The car feels as if it's flying down the road like a rocket ship as the speed of the flashing lights zooming above my head all blur into one.

"Mom," I try to shout, but not a single sound escapes my mouth this time. Confused, I try again. "Mom!"

She doesn't hear me. I don't hear me.

A single, bright white light races towards us, growing larger by the second. My mother turns her head towards me smiling. Why doesn't she hear me? How does she not see the light?

Again, with all my might. "Mom . . . !" my voice trails in my head like a deafening siren, stabbing my ears like a knife.

Time stops in this very moment. I can see everything with perfect clarity as I stare in horror into my mother's eyes. My mouth is left open, still screaming without a sound. I can't hear anything except a piercing ring that echoes in my body. Why can't she hear me? Why doesn't she see the terrified look on my face?

My body lurches backward as I attempt to scramble to grab my mother and I suddenly become paralyzed. Then, it happens all at once — I hear the sound of metal hitting metal as it wraps itself around and around. I watch my parents' bodies hurling forward toward the oncoming truck, bouncing around like ping pong balls, getting dented with each blow.

My heart is filled with terror as I desperately try to yell one more time, “Mom . . . !”

Jerking awake, I shout out in despair. The pounding of my heart and heaving of my lungs is only matched by the shaking that racks my body. Whimpers of a dog and the gift of warm, wet licks on my chin and neck draw my attention. Sadie is consoling me. It was just a dream. Yes, just a dream.

Wrapping my arms around Sadie's neck allows me to regain my composure. Mortified, a tear rolls down my right cheek. It wasn't just a dream — it's my mind's attempt to reconcile the death of my parents, even though I can't recall anything.

It's a nightmare that I haven't had in quite some time. It shouldn't surprise me for all the times I've dreamt it, but it does since I don't wake up like that lately near as often. I used to start every morning that way. Now, not so much. Yet, when it does happen, the effect is still the same.

I've been haunted by this vision since the day I regained consciousness in the hospital. Thrashing my body around and pulling out the I.V. the first time caused the hospital staff to sedate and strap me to the bed. It took four more times of the nightmare, plus heavy medication, before my mind and body finally became sedentary and numb enough to allow me to recognize where I was, the devastating pain I felt all over and in my heart, and that the memory was real.

It's not easy to find out from a stranger that your parents died in the horrific vision that keeps reoccurring in your head each time you sleep.

Well, there's no way I'm going back to sleep now, not that I ever did after having that dream.

Kissing the top of Sadie's head before looking directly at her, I half-heartily smile and say, “Looks like it's an extra early morning for us, girl.”

Sadie's mouth drops open and her tongue flops out as a sign of relief.

“Who's hungry?”

She licks my chin two more times knowing the meaning of those words and jumps off the bed in excitement. Stopping in the doorway, Sadie looks over her shoulder at me to see if I'm following yet.

“I'm coming, I'm coming . . .” I retort as I slide my legs to the side of the bed, stretch my arms up and yawn.

I prepare Sadie's meals a few days in advance based on what I've picked up at the store, farmers market or had delivered. Her diet consists of all raw meats, fruits,

veggies and/or seasonings. On occasion, I get her fresh beef or bison bones to chew on. Only the best for my little Sadie. Grabbing a glass container from the fridge, I dump the contents into Sadie's food bowl and add some turmeric and dried basil for extra flavoring and nutrition.

While Sadie eats, I mix and gulp down my morning routine of water with bentonite clay. There's nothing like cleansing the body before a yummy organic smoothie followed by a vigorous workout. To most, I'm a health nut. My two best friends tease me sometimes at how strict I am with my eating habits. I love food, don't get me wrong, but I love good food and I only eat the best.

I relieve myself before taking Sadie out. She follows me to the bathroom with her leash in tow as if that speeds up the process. Sadie doesn't really need the leash, it's more for the community. The apartment complex likes dogs. They allow pets in the buildings, but because others can't train their own animals properly, which caused an incident, all pets have to be leashed. Even if this rule wasn't in place, most of my neighbors would freak out if they didn't see Sadie on a leash. For starters, I'm a very quiet and private person. They don't know me and my ability to control Sadie. Second, Sadie is a pure breed pit bull. Her breed has a bad wrap for being vicious; a result due to the lack of competent owners only.

Once outside our gated apartment community, the cool winter air nips at my fingers as I unhook Sadie's leash. She stays close to my heels on my right side as we walk to the corner before crossing the street in front of the park. Sadie is trotting with excitement, but remains reserved. It's a part of her demeanor. She's a playful, loving, yet protective three-year-old. I wouldn't have her any other way.

On the edge of the grass, Sadie waits for my command to run. She would never run or leave my side in public unless I give her the signal. I sign for her to go and she takes off to the closest tree to relieve herself. She stays nearby sniffing, watching and waiting for me as I clean up after her. It's too early for the kids to be out playing on the jungle gym, so Sadie is left to playing catch with her favorite natural rubber ball until she tires.

Even in late winter, California is still beautiful and nowhere near as cold as the East Coast. I don't miss the gloomy Spring and Autumn days, cold, bitter Winters or humid Summers. California is home now and has been since I was sixteen. I love how quiet Pasadena is at four o'clock in the morning.

After a long morning exercise session for Sadie, I'm back in my two bedroom apartment with Sadie sitting on the kitchen floor watching me prepare my smoothie, hoping that I might drop something as she gnaws on her naturally harvested deer antler. Her head bounces between my hands and the floor. She wouldn't go after food even if it did drop. Sadie would just wait patiently until I told her to eat it. She's too cute. As I drink my breakfast, a smoothie consisting of banana, strawberries,

blueberries, mango, coconut milk, turmeric, cinnamon, and a raw egg, I plop myself down in front of my computer to check emails as Sadie lays at my feet. I love working from home. It makes things so much easier. No LA traffic. No distractions. Well, no distractions other than Sadie, but she's always a welcome distraction. Once I finish checking my emails, I start my workout music playlist and then clean out my cup. Time to stretch and rebound.

I work out longer than usual. Ok, it's not unusual on the days I wake up like I did today, but it's not as common as it used to be. Finally physically drained after about an hour, I stretch again. Sadie decides she needs some attention and lays across my right leg within a few seconds of me getting on the floor. Her full weight is on me and I can't help but laugh.

Reluctant to check the time, I roll my eyes when I find out that it is still very early. Well, not too early for me, but early for most people, including my best friend Jared. I don't think Jared has ever been up this early in the morning, ever, unless he's been up all night and never went to sleep. I decide to text Jared a happy *good morning sunshine* before hopping into the shower.

By the time Jared calls, I've completely showered, dressed, ate a raw organic yogurt and granola with blackberries and figs, played with Sadie for about fifteen minutes, made my to-do list for the next two weeks, responded to inquiries for my business, Naturally Me, started writing outlines for three months worth of blog and video topics, and plotted out what I'd like to see in our social media marketing campaigns that will be used after the already planned and almost completed next quarter.

Before I can even mutter a hello, Jared immediately questions, "Had the dream again?"

Trying to deny it, I reply, "Uh, good morning to you too."

I know he knows. It's obvious with how early I texted.

"It's been a while since the last one," Jared says with concern in his voice. "You okay, *Kitten*?"

Unable to avoid the subject, I reply, "Yeah."

"I'm on my way over to get started on all the stuff you've drafted," Jared replies, knowing my habits. "You know I don't get up this early for anyone else — unless he's naked and in my bed."

"Yes, I know. And, that's why I love you," I profess, trying to butter him up before he sees the mountain of work I've done and have planned.

"Yeah, yeah. I love you too," he says warmly. "Do you need me to pick up anything?"

"Nope."

"Okay. I'll be there soon. Smooches."

He's perky now. That's a good sign for it being almost six-fifty in the morning.

"Smooches," I reply with a smile on my face.

*Chapter One*

Knowing that Jared's on his way, I decide to stop and take a break for a bit. Sadie joins me on the couch to snuggle, laying completely on my body with her head tucked just under my jaw.



# Two

With a jolt, I wake to the sensation of Sadie getting up and rushing to the door. I must have fallen asleep while waiting for Jared. Still foggy, I jump up off the couch to let him in. I feel silly remembering when I'm halfway to the door that Jared has a key.

"Hey boss!" he exclaims when our eyes meet.

"I told you not to call me that," I proclaim with a little uneasiness.

"Seriously? It's been how many years now that I've been working for you and you still can't stand it?" he queries me playfully, wraps me in a bear hug which is a little longer than usual, and kisses me on the top of the head.

He's right. I know he's right, but I still haven't gotten used to it.

After a long comforting embrace, Jared bends down to his knees to give Sadie some love and attention. "What time did you get up today?" he asks, looking up while squatting.

"Just before four," I respond trying to brush it off.

"Thanks for not texting then," he says gratefully with a half smile pressed into his left cheek.

"I knew you'd threaten to quit if I did," I reply playfully.

"Please . . . you'd never let me quit. You'd kill me before I had the chance to utter the words."

"True," I answer slyly.

His smile widens. He's happy to see that my recovery from mornings like this is occurring much quicker than it had when we first met. It would take most of the day for the first year. As the months passed by, it would only take a few hours for the feeling of dread to fade. Now, an extra bout of physical activity works followed by borderline obsessive compulsion like today.

"Well, *Kitten*, you know I do love my job," he declares as his smile stretches from ear to ear. "And, I'd hate to disappoint my fans."

"You aren't one to disappoint," I say mischievously.

His smile is infectious as I return his perkiness.

Jared follows me to the second bedroom of my apartment which has been my office since I moved in a few years ago. Glancing at the clock, I'm surprised to see what time it is. When Jared said he was on his way, I didn't expect him to be here this early. Reaching the front of my desk, I abruptly turn around to him and sheepishly

announce, "I'm so sorry Jared. I didn't realize what time it was. When you said you would be here soon, I didn't think you would be here this early."

I know my eyes aren't playing tricks as I check the clock a second time to confirm that it is seven forty-nine.

"Anything for my, *Sex Kitten*," he declares.

"Seriously . . ." I start to protest, but he cuts me off.

"*Kitten*, it's no big deal. You're my girl . . . but, don't tell that to Maggie," Jared affirms while chuckling at his last statement.

Maggie and I are the only girls who have any place in his heart. The rest is for all his male lovers and fans.

"Besides, you should have seen how dead the streets were from WeHo all the way here. I've never seen LA like this. It's creepy," he shares.

I laugh wholeheartedly. Everyone in and out of California complains about the traffic only because they drive during the busiest times. Not many people know when the roads are as still as the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse.

Before I can muffle my laughter, Jared continues, "I just might have to start getting up earlier to travel like I'm *King of the Road*."

"Please," I mutter while trying to subdue my giggle and start shaking my head. "You will never come to the dark side."

"Yeah . . . you're right," he agrees. "But, one can dream."

Our giggles taper off as we sit on the white leather couch that's up against the wall across from my desk.

Getting into business mode, I profess, "I know we have next quarter's schedule already laid out and you've got the team way ahead of schedule for development and production . . . which I'm loving since it's almost midway through this quarter . . ."

"But . . ." Jared chimes in, seeing where I'm going. "You've already started the third quarter's ideas." He smiles, though I can see by the look in his eyes that his worry for me has returned.

"Actually, I have it completely finished," I admit with certainty, but nervous for his reaction.

"Wow. Really?" He takes a breath to process my confession. "How the hell do you do it? I mean, I know how you do it, but . . ." His eyes soften more as his voice trails off.

I desperately want to ease his concern and move forward.

"Years of practice," I state begrudgingly as I try to brush it off like a joke, but to no avail.

I haven't slept for more than five hours straight a night since the accident. My body shivers at the thought.

“Besides, you know I get phenomenal, intense focus following . . .” my voice begins to trail.

Wanting to keep our attention on the positive, Jared redirects us both, “So, what did you come up with?”

Jared is such a loving friend above everything else. He hates to see me in pain. I’ve gotten really good at fooling him and Maggie over the years. Not that I want to lie to them, I just don’t want them to worry too much. I know what he’s hinting at when he tries to praise me for my uncanny attention and ability while leading me back to the distraction at hand. My extreme ability to give my absolute focus to anything I decide is my way of coping. I won’t admit it to anyone, not even Jared or Maggie, only myself on some occasions. I just avoid or put up more walls.

I remember vividly the first time I met Jared. Just getting off the train from Newark, New Jersey to Union Square in downtown Los Angeles, California. I was exhausted, frightened and confused thanks to the restless sleep and the more than two-day journey. Not knowing where to go or what to do, I followed the mass of people getting off the train. In the tunnel of the station, I finally stopped, perplexed by which direction to continue. That’s when we met.

Actually, he scared the crap out of me when he said “Hello. I’m Jared. You look like you need some help.”

I grabbed my bike and tried to put some distance between us. He was too close to me, not for being a stranger, but for my recently acquired fear of men.

“Don’t worry, *Kitten*,” he said comfortingly. “I’m gay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

He must have known what I was thinking by the look on my face and was trying to calm and reassure me. Though he didn’t have any glaringly obvious gay traits that are overly embellished in the movies and TV, I honestly believed him. I wouldn’t have known from first hand experience since I hadn’t known anyone who was gay or openly gay prior to meeting him. There just was a look in his face that I couldn’t explain. A look of understanding. I swore I saw myself staring back at me.

He must have seen my expression relax, encouraging him to coax me more by gesturing with his hands as he took a few steps backward away from me through the tunnel to the right. “Come on. Looks like you could use some food. Maybe even some coffee. Do you like coffee?” He paused as his genuine smile grew bigger.

Calmer, I took a step towards him with my bike in tow while shaking my head in response to wanting coffee.

Assuming I was answering his latter question, he confessed, “Coffee’s overrated anyhow. How about some tea instead, then?”

I hesitantly nodded as I slowly stepped towards him.

“Great. Follow me,” he said as he turned his back to me and started walking. Every few steps he would turn his head over his right shoulder to make sure I was still with him and hadn’t run off.

I was at a place in my life where I needed a friend, and for some unknown reason, it was meant to be him. At the time, I didn’t know why, but I was grateful and still am. Since the accident almost three months prior, I’d had no one, until Jared.

Jared was kicked out of the house by his parents when he was eighteen. Apparently, according to Jared, they were God fearing, devout bible readers. That was the only book they read and they read it every day. Jared had come out to them the night of his high school graduation, convinced that they would love and accept him. After all, he was their only son. Unfortunately, his father spat venomous words at him as he tried to strike Jared with his belt. The disturbing thing was that it wasn’t the first time Jared was ever beaten by his father. He had received lashes in the past as a young boy for being foolish or misbehaving, but that night something snapped in Jared. After taking three blows to the body without flinching, he grabbed the belt on the forth swing, ripped it from his father’s hands, and returned the heartless attack on his father. He didn’t say a word, but stopped on the thirteenth smack when Jared’s mother begged him to stop. She didn’t stand up for Jared, ever, and he probably thought to whip her as well, but didn’t. She gave him as much money as they had in the house plus a check made out to cash and pleaded for him to pack his bags and leave. I think she was trying to save both of them.

Jared was almost nineteen when we found each other. He had been living on his own in a small rundown studio apartment on the edges of Chinatown. The only time he would leave his apartment before he met me was to go to work. His demons still haunted him too. We were both lost, but then found that day in the tunnel.

As Jared completes his review of what I have written down for the third quarter’s schedule, I look to him for his thoughts and suggestions. He seems seriously impressed and it takes him a little longer to verbally respond than I’m used to. It must be the early morning hour that is causing Jared’s brain to not fully catch up quite yet.

Glancing at me he says, “Damn. I think this is terrific!” Still with a little bit of shock on his face, “Man, Emma. You’ve surprised me yet again.”

Humbly, I reply with a smile, “Thanks.”

Jared adds in some other pointers to add to the Lesbian - Gay - Bisexual - Transgender, or LGBT, section of the website from some recent comments and questions he’s collected from our social media platforms and his friends.

Sadie gnawing on her bone catches our attention, and Jared becomes excited again.

“I have an idea!” he shouts.

“What?” I question.

“It might sound a little silly . . . at first, that is,” he cautiously replies.

“Just say it. You know I like ideas,” I instruct, prompting him to share his idea.

I’m having trouble understanding his hesitation. Maybe he isn’t completely sure of my mood yet. I’ll have to do some better convincing.

“You’ve done a lot already this morning. I don’t want to add to . . .”

“Just spit it out,” I politely demand, smiling as I cut him off.

“Ok . . .” he begins, seeming to be more confident now in his decision to bring it up. “We should create a whole section for pets. Mostly dogs to start because of Sadie, but I think we can increase the follower base even more. Sadie would be the face and we write everything from her perspective . . . well, our assumption of her perspective that is . . . what do you think?”

My business, Naturally Me, is a health and wellness blog that focuses on organic and natural products, recipes and the like. When I started it about six years ago, it was to suffice my interest, fascination and experimentation with female health, beauty and food products and questions about alternative health that I started to use when I changed my daily habits after some rocky moments I had while trying to figure out my life during the first two years in California. Jared was a very loving and patient friend from the start, even after learning about my demons.

I was already a computer wiz thanks to being homeschooled and my mother encouraging my learning to be around whatever topics interested me at the time. I was proficient in computer coding and graphic design by the time I was fifteen among other things. I was technically a high school graduate at the age of fourteen. Mom wanted me to have my high school diploma regardless of her thoughts of the ill-effectiveness of the public school system, so she scheduled the testing. The district actually had me take the test a second time, not because I didn’t pass, but because my scores were close to perfect and they wanted to make sure I wasn’t cheating. Mom was pleased with her teaching ability after the second test results came back practically the same as the first. Not wanting to thrust me into college at my young age, Mom began introducing me to a variety of college based courses until — well, let’s not get back into that.

The blog took a little time to get going, but after the first two years, it started to pick up enough that I was making almost twice as much as I was working with Jared at Jensen’s Florist. By the third year, I was making even more, almost four times as much money. Not long after the start of Naturally Me’s third year, Jared gave me some inspiration for topics to address on the blog from hearing him recount or discuss certain subject matters with me and his other friends. Knowing that I wasn’t quite legal yet to get into bars to see and hear everything first hand, I asked Jared to do some recognizance for me. Not understanding why I was so curious, two weeks later he showed up with a fake ID for me. Not willing to use the ID right away, I explained to Jared how I wanted to expand the blog. He instantly loved the idea.

Shortly after Jared's insatiable desire to see what he could find, he and I were quickly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of talking points we could add to the blog. From then on, Jared spent all his free time helping me establish the LGBT division of the blog with him as the face until I could pay him the same amount or more as Jensen's. Proudly, I was able to match his monthly income from Jensen's in just four months.

Currently, Naturally Me offers its readers health and beauty tips, tricks, product reviews, product referrals, homemade recipes along with a section dedicated to cuisine, home decorating, contests and giveaways, and an exclusive LGBT section. The thought of another division is mind blowing . . . but real.

Naturally Me expanded its reach by the end of its fourth year with the use of internet video sharing that allowed the company to instantly start making additional income which grew faster than I believed possible. Now, not only is Jared the main face of Naturally Me, he manages all communication and task completion between me, Naturally Me, and Naturally Me's independent contractors who handle our research, graphic design, video and editing, general inquiries and social media.

"Holy crap, Jared!" I blurt out in sheer astonishment.

"Yeah?!" he hesitantly replies.

"No. Seriously," I exclaim. In shock, then awe and joyous appreciation for the man, I squeal in excitement, "You are a genius!"

"Oh, stop it!" he counters, trying to seem bashfully innocent and humble.

I glare at him with a devilish smile to his response, suggesting that I know what he's doing, but pleased with his brilliance. "We can incorporate the pet section into the third quarter easily. We can hire a few more people to handle it under your direction."

"Sweet!" he shouts with enthusiasm. "Looks like I should be getting a bonus at the end of the year," he says teasingly.

"I'll throw in a night at your favorite strip club if it goes the way I'm envisioning it in my head," I toy with him with a sense of half truth.

"Mmmm . . . You sure know how to please a man," he replies, winking at me with a dirty grin. We both snicker like school girls for a moment before turning back to the project at hand.

Happy with our successful meeting and my true love and gratitude for my friend, I tell him, "I love you, Jared."

He looks at me quizzically for a second. Not sure where I'm going with this suddenly serious tone. He tries to brush it off lightly joking around, "Yeah, yeah. I know. I love you too, *Sex Kitten*."

"No. I'm serious."

He rarely sees the serious and openly emotional side of me, let alone the fact that I don't say those three words loosely to just anyone or in just any context. Appreciatively and affectionately, I smile and repeat myself, "I love you."

Respectfully, he pauses to take in this still unaccustomed moment. Jared, genuinely grateful for the moment, smiles and replies back, "I love you too, Emma." He leans over to embrace me.

We sit, reassuring each other for several minutes and start cracking up when Sadie decides to wedge herself between our arms and onto our laps. Sadie never misses a beat.

We continue hashing out the details for the third quarter's targets to include the pet division while sipping on tea and coffee. I leave Jared to his now coherent and animated concentration to fix him some breakfast. Surprisingly, I can hear his stomach grumble in protest to his second cup of coffee in demand for more sustenance.

A few hours later, content with our goals and objectives, we resolve to bring our business meeting to an end. Any in-person meetings after this will be brief to just review the progress of what's scheduled and the testing of any new products that have arrived, unless it's to just get together and hang out.

"I need to check the P.O. Box for deliveries," Jared admits. "I completely forgot to before coming here."

"That's fine. You were here really early," I reply, letting him off the hook.

He did come over much earlier than regular, two hours earlier.

"How about we check after going out for some lunch?" I suggest.

His eyes gleam with elation. Grinning and pleased, Jared puts his notes and iPad into his bag.

Before we head out the door, I turn off the music streaming from the Baroque classical music playlist on my computer that has been playing since just before I got into the shower. I am disappointed to hear my favorite song, Suite for Cello No. One in G Major by Johann Sebastian Bach, start playing. I almost hesitate to turn it off, but both Jared and I are hungry and need to get out.

If I were musically inclined, I would have learned cello or violin, but alas, I am not blessed with the ability to play. I can dance and follow any beat. Jared and I have taken dances lessons for practically every style of music, but my creative gifts and abilities are the visual arts. Though I can't play an instrument, I have always been able to pick up tones and notes, which help greatly with the variety of languages I speak other than English.

My parents wanted the best for me. They never forced their views, religious beliefs or their particularly desired topics of study. They made learning a game, and I loved it. Though we were never able to travel internationally, we wanted to learn as many languages as possible. Before the accident, I spoke fluent English, Spanish and French,

and had four months into learning Mandarin. Each day of the week we would speak only in one dialect regardless if we stayed home all day or went out. It was funny to see people's faces when we spoke in a different language. We got the most looks when we spoke Spanish or Mandarin, but we didn't care.

"Where do you want to eat?" Jared asks as I pick up my purse, keys and hook Sadie's leash onto her collar.

"What are you in the mood for?" I answer with another question.

"Well . . ." he pauses for a second to decide.

Jared knows not to go back and forth with me on asking each other. It could take an hour before he caves in and chooses a place. I always win. As much as I like control, I know I'd be content with any restaurant he chooses.

"I want to go to Stinky Pete's."

Noticing his devilish smile, designed to get a specific response from me, I simply smile and nod.

"You sure?" he inquires, trying to get me to break.

"Sure. If that's where you want to eat," I reply with a relaxed grin.

He will not break me.

"You're no fun," he jokingly whines and sticks his tongue at me as I walk closer to him. "Besides, you know I can't stand their food either."

I smirk as he surrenders easily in defeat.

"Let's have Indian. What was the place we went to last time?" Jared questions.

"Akbar?"

"Yep. That's the one. I loved that place. I think it's my favorite Indian restaurant in town." He closes the door behind Sadie and me.

Though most places in Pasadena have outdoor seating, which is used the majority of the year, Akbar does not. The restaurant is on a side road off Colorado Boulevard which makes dining there more quiet and less distracting. With Jared as the main face of Naturally Me, we occasionally get interrupted at meals, especially if we are dining outside and he's not wearing sunglasses or a hat. My first name and face are used for the business as well, but I try to minimize how much my photo is posted. I don't enjoy being in the public eye as much. By bringing Sadie onboard, that may change.

Since we're bringing Sadie along for lunch, I grab her service dog vest to grant her access into the restaurant. Sadie is not a full-time service dog, but I did have her trained and certified so she can go anywhere with me. With the vest on, Sadie is accepted everywhere.

For our meal, Jared and I share several of my favorite dishes from Akbar. Since he can't remember what he had the last time, he asks me to order. Knowing he's hungry,

that he can pile a fascinating amount of food into his belly, and that we have the rest of the day to enjoy each other's company, I chose to order a full three course meal.

To start, we treat our taste buds to samosa, mixed green katchumber and the kaske-badamjan. Jared rinses his food down with a glass of water and mango lassi. I just have water. About five minutes after we finish the appetizers, our waiter delivers us tandoori salmon, tandoori chicken, vegetable bhuna and a side of rice suffused with saffron. Jared takes photos of each dish with his cell phone and even has me take a few pictures of him posing to post on his social media for all his adoring fans to view.

As we eat, our conversation bounces around a myriad of topics, mostly memories of glorious excursions we've had together and many of them that included Maggie. We recount our clubbing days in WeHo and all the weird and eclectic types of people who would hit on all three of us. Jared would be hit on by every gay man, whereas Maggie and I would get hit on by the women. Maggie and I never minded being hit on by other women. We felt safe around them compared to men, especially me. "Hey boss!" he exclaims when our eyes meet.

"I told you not to call me that," I proclaim with a little uneasiness.

"Seriously? It's been how many years now that I've been working for you and you still can't stand it?" he queries me playfully, wraps me in a bear hug which is a little longer than usual, and kisses me on the top of the head.

He's right. I know he's right, but I still haven't gotten used to it.

After a long comforting embrace, Jared bends down to his knees to give Sadie some love and attention. "What time did you get up today?" he asks, looking up while squatting.

"Just before four," I respond trying to brush it off.

"Thanks for not texting then," he says gratefully with a half smile pressed into his left cheek.

"I knew you'd threaten to quit if I did," I reply playfully.

"Please . . . you'd never let me quit. You'd kill me before I had the chance to utter the words."

"True," I answer slyly.

His smile widens. He's happy to see that my recovery from mornings like this is occurring much quicker than it had when we first met. It would take most of the day for the first year. As the months passed by, it would only take a few hours for the feeling of dread to fade. Now, an extra bout of physical activity works followed by borderline obsessive compulsion like today.

"Well, *Kitten*, you know I do love my job," he declares as his smile stretches from ear to ear. "And, I'd hate to disappoint my fans."

"You aren't one to disappoint," I say mischievously.

His smile is infectious as I return his perkiness.

Jared follows me to the second bedroom of my apartment which has been my office since I moved in a few years ago. Glancing at the clock, I'm surprised to see what time it is. When Jared said he was on his way, I didn't expect him to be here this early. Reaching the front of my desk, I abruptly turn around to him and sheepishly announce, "I'm so sorry Jared. I didn't realize what time it was. When you said you would be here soon, I didn't think you would be here this early."

I know my eyes aren't playing tricks as I check the clock a second time to confirm that it is seven forty-nine.

"Anything for my *Sex Kitten*," he declares.

"Seriously . . ." I start to protest, but he cuts me off.

"*Kitten*, it's no big deal. You're my girl . . . but, don't tell that to Maggie," Jared affirms while chuckling at his last statement.

Maggie and I are the only girls who have any place in his heart. The rest is for all his male lovers and fans.

"Besides, you should have seen how dead the streets were from WeHo all the way here. I've never seen LA like this. It's creepy," he shares.

I laugh wholeheartedly. Everyone in and out of California complains about the traffic only because they drive during the busiest times. Not many people know when the roads are as still as the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse.

Before I can muffle my laughter, Jared continues, "I just might have to start getting up earlier to travel like I'm *King of the Road*."

"Please," I mutter while trying to subdue my giggle and start shaking my head. "You will never come to the dark side."

"Yeah . . . you're right," he agrees. "But, one can dream."

Our giggles taper off as we sit on the white leather couch that's up against the wall across from my desk.

Getting into business mode, I profess, "I know we have next quarter's schedule already laid out and you've got the team way ahead of schedule for development and production . . . which I'm loving since it's almost midway through this quarter . . ."

"But . . ." Jared chimes in, seeing where I'm going. "You've already started the third quarter's ideas." He smiles, though I can see by the look in his eyes that his worry for me has returned.

"Actually, I have it completely finished," I admit with certainty, but nervous for his reaction.

"Wow. Really?" He takes a breath to process my confession. "How the hell do you do it? I mean, I know how you do it, but . . ." His eyes soften more as his voice trails off.

I desperately want to ease his concern and move forward.

“Years of practice,” I state begrudgingly as I try to brush it off like a joke, but to no avail.

I haven’t slept for more than five hours straight a night since the accident. My body shivers at the thought

“Besides, you know I get phenomenal, intense focus following . . .” my voice begins to trail.

Wanting to keep our attention on the positive, Jared redirects us both, “So, what did you come up with?”

Jared is such a loving friend above everything else. He hates to see me in pain. I’ve gotten really good at fooling him and Maggie over the years. Not that I want to lie to them, I just don’t want them to worry too much. I know what he’s hinting at when he tries to praise me for my uncanny attention and ability while leading me back to the distraction at hand. My extreme ability to give my absolute focus to anything I decide is my way of coping. I won’t admit it to anyone, not even Jared or Maggie, only myself on some occasions. I just avoid or put up more walls.

I remember vividly the first time I met Jared. Just getting off the train from Newark, New Jersey to Union Square in downtown Los Angeles, California. I was exhausted, frightened and confused thanks to the restless sleep and the more than two-day journey. Not knowing where to go or what to do, I followed the mass of people getting off the train. In the tunnel of the station, I finally stopped, perplexed by which direction to continue. That’s when we met.

Actually, he scared the crap out of me when he said “Hello. I’m Jared. You look like you need some help.”

I grabbed my bike and tried to put some distance between us. He was too close to me, not for being a stranger, but for my recently acquired fear of men.

“Don’t worry, Kitten,” he said comfortingly. “I’m gay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

He must have known what I was thinking by the look on my face and was trying to calm and reassure me. Though he didn’t have any glaringly obvious gay traits that are overly embellished in the movies and TV, I honestly believed him. I wouldn’t have known from first hand experience since I hadn’t known anyone who was gay or openly gay prior to meeting him. There just was a look in his face that I couldn’t explain. A look of understanding. I swore I saw myself staring back at me.

He must have seen my expression relax, encouraging him to coax me more by gesturing with his hands as he took a few steps backward away from me through the tunnel to the right. “Come on. Looks like you could use some food. Maybe even some coffee. Do you like coffee?” He paused as his genuine smile grew bigger.

Calmer, I took a step towards him with my bike in tow while shaking my head in response to wanting coffee.

Assuming I was answering his latter question, he confessed, “Coffee’s overrated anyhow. How about some tea instead, then?”

I hesitantly nodded as I slowly stepped towards him.

“Great. Follow me,” he said as he turned his back to me and started walking. Every few steps he would turn his head over his right shoulder to make sure I was still with him and hadn’t run off.

I was at a place in my life where I needed a friend, and for some unknown reason, it was meant to be him. At the time, I didn’t know why, but I was grateful and still am. Since the accident almost three months prior, I’d had no one, until Jared.

Jared was kicked out of the house by his parents when he was eighteen. Apparently, according to Jared, they were God fearing, devout bible readers. That was the only book they read and they read it every day. Jared had come out to them the night of his high school graduation, convinced that they would love and accept him. After all, he was their only son. Unfortunately, his father spat venomous words at him as he tried to strike Jared with his belt. The disturbing thing was that it wasn’t the first time Jared was ever beaten by his father. He had received lashes in the past as a young boy for being foolish or misbehaving, but that night something snapped in Jared. After taking three blows to the body without flinching, he grabbed the belt on the forth swing, ripped it from his father’s hands, and returned the heartless attack on his father. He didn’t say a word, but stopped on the thirteenth smack when Jared’s mother begged him to stop. She didn’t stand up for Jared, ever, and he probably thought to whip her as well, but didn’t. She gave him as much money as they had in the house plus a check made out to cash and pleaded for him to pack his bags and leave. I think she was trying to save both of them.

Jared was almost nineteen when we found each other. He had been living on his own in a small rundown studio apartment on the edges of Chinatown. The only time he would leave his apartment before he met me was to go to work. His demons still haunted him too. We were both lost, but then found that day in the tunnel.

As Jared completes his review of what I have written down for the third quarter’s schedule, I look to him for his thoughts and suggestions. He seems seriously impressed and it takes him a little longer to verbally respond than I’m used to. It must be the early morning hour that is causing Jared’s brain to not fully catch up quite yet.

Glancing at me he says, “Damn. I think this is terrific!” Still with a little bit of shock on his face, “Man, Emma. You’ve surprised me yet again.”

Humbly, I reply with a smile, “Thanks.”

Jared adds in some other pointers to add to the Lesbian - Gay - Bisexual - Transgender, or LGBT, section of the website from some recent comments and questions he's collected from our social media platforms and his friends.

Sadie gnawing on her bone catches our attention, and Jared becomes excited again.

"I have an idea!" he shouts.

"What?" I question.

"It might sound a little silly . . . at first, that is," he cautiously replies.

"Just say it. You know I like ideas," I instruct, prompting him to share his idea.

I'm having trouble understanding his hesitation. Maybe he isn't completely sure of my mood yet. I'll have to do some better convincing.

"You've done a lot already this morning. I don't want to add to . . ."

"Just spit it out," I politely demand, smiling as I cut him off.

"Ok . . ." he begins, seeming to be more confident now in his decision to bring it up. "We should create a whole section for pets. Mostly dogs to start because of Sadie, but I think we can increase the follower base even more. Sadie would be the face and we write everything from her perspective . . . well, our assumption of her perspective that is . . . what do you think?"

My business, Naturally Me, is a health and wellness blog that focuses on organic and natural products, recipes and the like. When I started it about six years ago, it was to suffice my interest, fascination and experimentation with female health, beauty and food products and questions about alternative health that I started to use when I changed my daily habits after some rocky moments I had while trying to figure out my life during the first two years in California. Jared was a very loving and patient friend from the start, even after learning about my demons.

I was already a computer wiz thanks to being homeschooled and my mother encouraging my learning to be around whatever topics interested me at the time. I was proficient in computer coding and graphic design by the time I was fifteen among other things. I was technically a high school graduate at the age of fourteen. Mom wanted me to have my high school diploma regardless of her thoughts of the ill-effectiveness of the public school system, so she scheduled the testing. The district actually had me take the test a second time, not because I didn't pass, but because my scores were close to perfect and they wanted to make sure I wasn't cheating. Mom was pleased with her teaching ability after the second test results came back practically the same as the first. Not wanting to thrust me into college at my young age, Mom began introducing me to a variety of college based courses until — well, let's not get back into that.

The blog took a little time to get going, but after the first two years, it started to pick up enough that I was making almost twice as much as I was working with Jared at Jensen's Florist. By the third year, I was making even more, almost four times as

much money. Not long after the start of Naturally Me's third year, Jared gave me some inspiration for topics to address on the blog from hearing him recount or discuss certain subject matters with me and his other friends. Knowing that I wasn't quite legal yet to get into bars to see and hear everything first hand, I asked Jared to do some recognizance for me. Not understanding why I was so curious, two weeks later he showed up with a fake ID for me. Not willing to use the ID right away, I explained to Jared how I wanted to expand the blog. He instantly loved the idea.

Shortly after Jared's insatiable desire to see what he could find, he and I were quickly overwhelmed by the sheer volume of talking points we could add to the blog. From then on, Jared spent all his free time helping me establish the LGBT division of the blog with him as the face until I could pay him the same amount or more as Jensen's. Proudly, I was able to match his monthly income from Jensen's in just four months.

Currently, Naturally Me offers its readers health and beauty tips, tricks, product reviews, product referrals, homemade recipes along with a section dedicated to cuisine, home decorating, contests and giveaways, and an exclusive LGBT section. The thought of another division is mind blowing . . . but real.

Naturally Me expanded its reach by the end of its fourth year with the use of internet video sharing that allowed the company to instantly start making additional income which grew faster than I believed possible. Now, not only is Jared the main face of Naturally Me, he manages all communication and task completion between me, Naturally Me, and Naturally Me's independent contractors who handle our research, graphic design, video and editing, general inquiries and social media.

"Holy crap, Jared!" I blurt out in sheer astonishment.

"Yeah?!" he hesitantly replies.

"No. Seriously," I exclaim. In shock, then awe and joyous appreciation for the man, I squeal in excitement, "You are a genius!"

"Oh, stop it!" he counters, trying to seem bashfully innocent and humble.

I glare at him with a devilish smile to his response, suggesting that I know what he's doing, but pleased with his brilliance. "We can incorporate the pet section into the third quarter easily. We can hire a few more people to handle it under your direction."

"Sweet!" he shouts with enthusiasm. "Looks like I should be getting a bonus at the end of the year," he says teasingly.

"I'll throw in a night at your favorite strip club if it goes the way I'm envisioning it in my head," I toy with him with a sense of half truth.

"Mmmm . . . You sure know how to please a man," he replies, winking at me with a dirty grin. We both snicker like school girls for a moment before turning back to the project at hand.

Happy with our successful meeting and my true love and gratitude for my friend, I tell him, “I love you, Jared.”

He looks at me quizzically for a second. Not sure where I’m going with this suddenly serious tone. He tries to brush it off lightly joking around, “Yeah, yeah. I know. I love you too, *Sex Kitten*.”

“No. I’m serious.”

He rarely sees the serious and openly emotional side of me, let alone the fact that I don’t say those three words loosely to just anyone or in just any context. Appreciatively and affectionately, I smile and repeat myself, “I love you.”

Respectfully, he pauses to take in this still unaccustomed moment. Jared, genuinely grateful for the moment, smiles and replies back, “I love you too, Emma.” He leans over to embrace me.

We sit, reassuring each other for several minutes and start cracking up when Sadie decides to wedge herself between our arms and onto our laps. Sadie never misses a beat.

We continue hashing out the details for the third quarter’s targets to include the pet division while sipping on tea and coffee. I leave Jared to his now coherent and animated concentration to fix him some breakfast. Surprisingly, I can hear his stomach grumble in protest to his second cup of coffee in demand for more sustenance.

A few hours later, content with our goals and objectives, we resolve to bring our business meeting to an end. Any in-person meetings after this will be brief to just review the progress of what’s scheduled and the testing of any new products that have arrived, unless it’s to just get together and hang out.

“I need to check the P.O. Box for deliveries,” Jared admits. “I completely forgot to before coming here.”

“That’s fine. You were here really early,” I reply, letting him off the hook.

He did come over much earlier than regular, two hours earlier.

“How about we check after going out for some lunch?” I suggest.

His eyes gleam with elation. Grinning and pleased, Jared puts his notes and iPad into his bag.

Before we head out the door, I turn off the music streaming from the Baroque classical music playlist on my computer that has been playing since just before I got into the shower. I am disappointed to hear my favorite song, Suite for Cello No. One in G Major by Johann Sebastian Bach, start playing. I almost hesitate to turn it off, but both Jared and I are hungry and need to get out.

If I were musically inclined, I would have learned cello or violin, but alas, I am not blessed with the ability to play. I can dance and follow any beat. Jared and I have taken dances lessons for practically every style of music, but my creative gifts and abilities are the visual arts. Though I can't play an instrument, I have always been able to pick up tones and notes, which help greatly with the variety of languages I speak other than English.

My parents wanted the best for me. They never forced their views, religious beliefs or their particularly desired topics of study. They made learning a game, and I loved it. Though we were never able to travel internationally, we wanted to learn as many languages as possible. Before the accident, I spoke fluent English, Spanish and French, and had four months into learning Mandarin. Each day of the week we would speak only in one dialect regardless if we stayed home all day or went out. It was funny to see people's faces when we spoke in a different language. We got the most looks when we spoke Spanish or Mandarin, but we didn't care.

"Where do you want to eat?" Jared asks as I pick up my purse, keys and hook Sadie's leash onto her collar.

"What are you in the mood for?" I answer with another question.

"Well . . ." he pauses for a second to decide.

Jared knows not to go back and forth with me on asking each other. It could take an hour before he caves in and chooses a place. I always win. As much as I like control, I know I'd be content with any restaurant he chooses.

"I want to go to Stinky Pete's."

Noticing his devilish smile, designed to get a specific response from me, I simply smile and nod.

"You sure?" he inquires, trying to get me to break.

"Sure. If that's where you want to eat," I reply with a relaxed grin.

He will not break me.

"You're no fun," he jokingly whines and sticks his tongue at me as I walk closer to him. "Besides, you know I can't stand their food either."

I smirk as he surrenders easily in defeat.

"Let's have Indian. What was the place we went to last time?" Jared questions.

"Akbar?"

"Yep. That's the one. I loved that place. I think it's my favorite Indian restaurant in town." He closes the door behind Sadie and me.

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# Three

A fear of men, heterosexual men, came from my last night in New Jersey. After the accident, the State arranged for me to go into foster care once I was released from the hospital. I didn't have any family other than my parents; they were orphans too. I was in a daze when the whole process began. Eight days after waking up in the hospital, I was turned over to state custody. I would have been handed over sooner, but they were monitoring me to make sure I wasn't a danger to myself anymore. I was placed with a husband and wife who already had two foster girls. Brittany was seven and her sister, Leslie, was five. The State was apparently so bogged down with foster kids, that they weren't as picky with foster parents as they should have been. I had to share a room with the two girls. They slept in one bed and I slept in the other. Though I already was a high school graduate, the State and the foster parents insisted that I attend public school. I just figured they didn't really want to bother with me. The teachers were nice, but I was bored and depressed.

Two weeks into living with the foster family, I started taking care of Brittany and Leslie. Dean and Amber, the foster parents, if you can even call them that, wouldn't really bother with me or the girls. They both drank, were unemployed, watched TV the majority of the day, unless they went out, and it was clear that they were living off of the foster care money. I wondered if the social worker who placed me with them knew that Brittany and Leslie needed me.

I had stopped talking since the day I woke up in the hospital, but that didn't seem to hinder me assuming a motherly role for the two girls. They were young, sweet and never a handful. Since I wasn't really sleeping either, and I was up before the girls from the nightmares, it was easy to make sure they were dressed and fed before walking them to the elementary school which was right across the street from the high school. At the end of each school day, they would wait for me until my school was over. We'd walk home, do homework, and then I'd take them out to play for an hour before going inside to cook dinner. The brutal cold winter weather was much more palpable than the storms of Amber and Dean. After dinner, we'd play some more in our bedroom before I got them bathed and ready for bed. Since I didn't speak, the girls would pretend to read books and describe a different adventure each night from the pictures. They were even able to make me smile a few times.

Our daily morning and evening routine for the week spilled over into the weekends. I would take the girls out of the house for the whole day to avoid the foster parents' drunken fits and rages, which occurred daily. We didn't have

any money, but we always had fun everywhere we went. I was determined to distract them and myself from the miserable house we lived in. Since the foster house was a brick row home in Hoboken, we did have some nearby places to go to other than the park when the days were too cold from the winter gloom. We'd venture around town going to the local bookstore and some of the shops on the block. One of the restaurant owners would invite us in to rest, warm up and even started giving the girls and myself food every time we visited. The owner, Martin, was even nice enough to invite us to the Christmas and New Year's feasts he and his wife would host in their home above the restaurant. I made sure we attended. It was a pleasant distraction. They even gave the girls and me a few gifts, mostly clothing, but we accepted graciously.

On one particularly dreary day, towards the end of January, Dean saw us in Martin's restaurant from across the street. He was picking up his weekly secret ration of liquor that he hid from Amber — I knew where he hid it. Spotting us in the window, he stormed into the restaurant shouting and cursing. Dean accused me of stealing money and sneaking the food we were eating as he grabbed me by my still injured right arm just below my shoulder — when I was released from the hospital, I never received any further care for my injuries. One of the restaurant staff members quickly ran to get the owner.

Martin intervened by placing himself between Dean and me. "She didn't steal money from you, Dean!" Martin shouted loud enough to make his point to Dean while trying not to scare Brittany and Leslie. "Get out of my restaurant. You are not welcome here. The girls are, but you aren't." Martin nodded to Conor who was behind the counter and Conor picked up the phone.

"Don't you tell me what to do," Dean's mouth slurred.

"I gave the girls the food. Let them be and go home," Martin insisted, taking a step closer to Dean.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Dean blurted out with a breath that reeked of whiskey that I could smell even six feet away.

"This is my restaurant. Get out before I call the cops," Martin demanded.

"Fine, but they're coming with me," Dean barked as he reached to grab Leslie's left forearm, but Martin blocked him.

"No. I'll bring them home later after they are finished and you've calmed down," Martin sternly commanded.

Dean glared at Martin with rage. Suddenly, Dean went to strike him, but missed as Martin easily moved out of the way, causing Dean to fall to the floor.

I wondered if he saw the punch coming.

“That’s it . . .” Dean muttered as he tried to stand up straight several times. He repeated his attempts to strike Martin; each time Martin ducked and Dean fell.

The police station wasn’t far, so the police arrived just after one of the times Dean got to his feet, still stumbling from intoxication.

Once the police removed Dean, the girls huddled on my lap. Martin and Conor cooperated with the police and gave statements. The police tried to get me to talk, but Martin told them that I was mute. So instead, they just asked questions and I nodded or shook my head.

The girls and I finished eating slowly out of complete amazement and shock of what had just occurred. I cringed at the thought of what would happen when we got back to the house that evening. I prayed that they would keep Dean locked up until morning.

When Martin and his wife, Celia, dropped the girls and me off at the house, they parked the car and followed us in. The house was dark and empty. They hugged us goodbye and Celia gave me their phone number just in case anything should happen. I nodded my understanding and appreciation.

I picked up Brittany and Leslie and carried them upstairs. I knew they were exhausted and scared from what had happened with Dean, so I only had them change into their pajamas. Instead of tucking them into their bed, I climbed in and gestured for them to join me. I sat up against the wall as Brittany and Leslie fell asleep with their heads on the pillow I had placed across my lap. Nervous about Dean’s state when he finally comes home, my eyes stared unblinking at the wall across the room.

The need to leave was evident — good thing I never really unpacked my stuff from my two bags when I first arrived. Once the girls were asleep, I quickly and quietly snuck out of their bed. I stuffed the rest of my things into one of the bags and took them both to the backyard. I strapped one to the front of the bike and left the other one on the ground next to it. It would be on my back when I was ready to leave. Then, I returned to girls. I couldn’t just leave them home alone without any adult supervision, but I was scared.

The sound of a door being slammed roused me and my head jerked up. I blinked my eyes rapidly to clear them as I listened. I slowly crept off of the bed, trying not to stir the girls, but desperate to know who had arrived. I tipped toed to the door and cracked it open slightly. I heard Amber mumble something and my heart settled a little.

As I turned after shutting the door quietly, time stood still as a roaring sound got closer. Dean’s boots stomped up the stairs as he took them two at a time — I’ve seen him do it a number of times to know the echo.

“What the hell, Dean?” Amber shouted after him.

The door swung open just missing my back by a few inches, and before I was able to turn all the way around, his cold, rough hand was around my neck. My feet lifted slightly off the floor as he propelled my body into the bookcase behind me on the wall and held me there. My eyes, wide with fright, got even wider when the girls screamed in terror. Deans right arm hooked and caught me in my stomach. I clawed at his hand on my neck, gasping for air. Brittany suddenly jumped at his free hand as he swung back to give another excruciating blow. He flicked her off his arm like she was an ant, and during that brief moment of distraction, I was able to clip him in his groin with my right knee. Dean slumped to the floor wailing in pain.

Still gasping for air, I saw Amber standing in the doorway frozen and watching. I stumbled to Brittany to help her up when one of Dean’s hands seized my right ankle and yanked it, swiping my feet out from under me. I fell onto my still injured right shoulder with a thunderous sound, just missing Brittany by an inch or two. The pain in my right arm subsided, most likely due to the rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins, as I quickly rolled and shoved my left foot into Dean’s face.

I ran to the doorway and shoved Amber out of the way. She was still standing frozen like a statue. I stumbled downstairs to get the phone. Before dialing, my eyes were drawn to Amber’s body that thudded heavily down the stairs followed by Dean staggering in delight. My eyes searched for things to throw at him as I pressed 9-1-1-send. I tossed the phone towards Amber’s limp body at the base of the stairs just as Dean lurched for the wrist of that hand. Suddenly, pain exploded in my head. I was on my back on the floor. Dean towered over me and my eyes flickered to see Brittany grabbing the phone from behind him. Good, he didn’t see her.

“You fucking bitch!” Dean howled at me. “You fucking bitch! I’m going to fucking kill you.” Dean hovered over me as I tried to shake the dizziness from my aching head. We locked eyes and my body froze at the expression on his face. “But first . . .” a sinister voice oozed from his mouth. “I’m going to have a little fun with you.”

As he lowered his body over mine, I scrambled to get away and kicked furiously at him, almost clipping him in his manhood again, but he deflected my attempts. He pinned both of my hands above my head with such force that I felt the rug burning my skin. I screamed out in horror.

“That’s it. Scream. Fight. It will make this all that more enjoyable,” he growled his intent.

Trying to unbuckle his pants in his drunken stupor — Dean must have refueled himself after Amber bailed him out of jail — my left arm broke free and I jabbed my thumb into Dean's right eye. He yelped in pain as both of his hands shot to his eye. Feeling me scurry away, he swung his left arm as he tried to focus and find me with his only good eye. I swiftly kicked him again in the groin and down he went.

I took a few steps back to give myself distance from him as I plotted my next attack. Brittany caught my attention and nodded, waving to the phone as she and Leslie embraced each other. I nodded back. She pointed to the closet at Amber's back and my eyes lit up, remembering the baseball bat.

I grabbed the bat and handed the girls their coats and boots as I escorted them to the front door. I unlocked it for them to leave, but turned around abruptly when I heard Dean trying to crawl at us.

"Get back here, you bitch!" he grumbled,

I raised the wooden club above my head, poised to whip it down into the side of his skull.

"Emma?" Leslie uttered meekly.

I looked back pained, realizing that Brittany and Leslie were still in the house. Lowering the bat, I thrust my foot into the side of Dean's head. He was out cold after that.

Compelled by a vengeful thought, I went over to Dean's hidden liquor stash and found eight bottles of whiskey, five bottles of tequila, and four and a half bottles of vodka along with several boxes of cigarettes. Dean doesn't smoke — I never saw him and never smelled it. Picking up one of the boxes, I was surprised to see wads of money stuffed in them. I opened one box all the way and it was packed full of one hundred dollar bills. I took all of the loose cigarette boxes and a full carton that were hidden at the bottom.

I rushed back to the girls who were still standing in the front door while Dean and Amber lay unmoving. Without saying a word, the girls knew my intentions and hugged me. I could hear the police cars in the distance and knew the clock was ticking for me to get away. I gave Brittany four of the six packs of money along with a piece of paper. Brittany hung up the phone on the police dispatch. I punched in the number for Martin and Celia and held it to her head.

"Martin," she said confirming more than questioning as the phone rang on the other end.

I nodded.

We embraced and for the first time since the accident I spoke, “Take care of each other.” They sobbed as I led them out front before I turned to leave; they probably knew we would never see each other again.

I snuck out the back to my bike after grabbing my coat from the closet. I hoped that the police would handle the situation at the house for the next few hours and not bother looking for me right away. With pain seeping back into my bones, I rode to the Hoboken train station, got on the arriving shuttle and rode it to Union City station near the home I grew up in. The neighborhood was dark and motionless at four o’clock in the morning and an empty feeling crept into my heart.

My house was lifeless when I found the spare key under the back step and unlocked the door to let myself in. Nothing had changed. Nothing had moved. The State hadn’t done anything to it yet. Thank God.

I went into the house only to collect a few things. I knew that I couldn’t stay. My eyes remained dry the entire time as I went throughout the house grabbing what I needed and wanted. I switched out some clothing, grabbed some non-perishable food from the kitchen and opened the safe my parents had hidden in the wall of the closet at the top of the stairs that no one would be able to find — unless you knew to look. The safe was there for emergencies. This was an emergency.

My parents weren’t rich, but they were smart and they made sure to pass that on to me. There was ten thousand dollars cash, our social security cards, birth certificates, and even passports that we never got to use. I grabbed it all before fastening it closed again.

I left the house with nothing other than a few family pictures, a few of my mother’s books, my laptop computer, Mom’s first aid kit to help with my injuries, and never looked back as the door closed shut. A single tear found its way down my face that night, but it was the only one.

Still aching, I biked back to the train station that let me off eight blocks from the house. I knew I had to get away, far away, or else the State would thrust me into another questionable situation. This time, I rode to the Newark station and bought a one-way ticket to California. It was several hundred dollars more for a private room, but I didn’t care. It was a small price considering the amount of money I had on hand. I stopped in the twenty-four hour convenience store that was across the street to pick up a few minor things before hiding in the restroom of the station until boarding to make sure I wouldn’t be spotted — just in case the police were looking for me. While in the restroom, I cleaned myself, used some of the stuff from my Mom’s first aid kit and ate some of the food I had in the bag.

I looked in the mirror and knew that another step needed to be taken before leaving the restroom, using the materials I purchased from the convince store. When I finally stepped out to board the train, my naturally dirty blond hair that flowed just below the middle of my back was now jet black and shoulder length. I blended with the small group of passengers easily. The sling for my injured right arm would stay hidden under my jacket until I got to my private cabin.

The journey went smoothly. I stayed in my cabin for most of the ride across the country, only exiting my accommodations to eat a few times or use the restroom. After my first round of sleep and food, I counted the money Dean had hidden in the cigarette cartons several times. I was shocked to find out that I had nineteen thousand, four hundred and seventy-eight dollars total, including the ten thousand I had gotten from my parent's safe. I rolled up the majority of the money in small wads and hid them inside my bike frame. No need to have that much exposed. The cash would buy me time to find a place to stay and get a job. Unable to sleep consistently for the rest of the trip, eating or reading became my main distraction while awake.

A weight was lifted from my heart and gut when I stepped off the train and breathed in the sunny, cool air of California. Though I didn't know where to go or what to do at the moment, I didn't care. I felt free.

That's when I met the man that sits before me today, sharing with me this wonderful meal, this wonderful moment. He is not just a friend. He has become family. He has become my brother. Other than my parents, he and Maggie are the only two people who truly have my heart — and who could break it.

Before heading back to my apartment after lunch, Jared and I decide to walk Colorado Boulevard to do some shopping instead of going to the P.O. Box right away. We take a break on Miller Alley to get some gelati and to give Sadie some more water and a little snack before resuming our stroll. We both find a few cute items in Banana Republic and J. Crew that are on sale. We figure we owe ourselves a little shopping spree after our successful morning. Jared complains at the lack of accommodations Kate Spade has for gay men before continuing on.

Our last stop is at Tiffany's. I'm not a big jewelry kind of girl, but all that sparkle is sure fun to drool over. They do have a beautiful pair of ruby studded earrings that I decide to purchase. I convince the salesman to give me a good discount by flirting with him. Jared tries to sell me on the ruby teardrop set that are encrusted with diamonds, but I politely decline. I may have money, but I never go anywhere that would warrant wearing those gorgeous accessories.

Dropping us off at the gate, Jared kisses both Sadie and me as we say farewell. Returning to the apartment, I find a place for each of my new items. Snuggling on the couch with Sadie, I read a book to kill some time before dinner, then some business research and streaming a movie before bed.