

“Girls, what’s going on? I should not be able to hear you from the other room.”

“She grabbed me, Miss Lauren!”

“She ripped my paper out of my hand and I am not okay with that!”

“She was writing mean things about me—”

“I was not. Look, you can read it Miss Lauren—”

“They have their own code—”

“Miss Lauren, aren’t you going to do anything? She can’t just take my stuff!” *Oh, for the love! Are you really fighting over a piece of paper? Grow up, already!*

“Both of you stop talking! Tamara, go sit in the quiet room for fifteen minutes. Use your self-soothers. Elizabeth, come outside and walk with me.”

“But—”

“Tamara, if I hear another word right now, you’ll get a discipline. You’re not in trouble, yet. I’m giving you the opportunity to use your wise mind and get control of those emotions. I’ll hear your side later. Elizabeth, stop mouthing words to her. I can see you and it’s not helping your case. Outside, now!”

Lauren took a deep breath before following her client out the door. *Come on, Lauren! Think back to when you were five and you thought life was unfair. These girls look fifteen, but they’re five on the inside.* There was little time to think. Elizabeth was already in rapid-fire mode.

“Miss Lauren, I don’t think it’s fair that you never take my side,” the whine had begun.

“Woah. Back it up there, sweetheart. I’m not taking sides.”

“You said she’s not in trouble, that means I am.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“I was just getting signatures for a petition when Tamara reached around me and grabbed my paper!”

“What was the petition?”

“See? You’re assuming it’s my fault! You guys always tell us not to assume!”

“What was the petition?” *This girl twists logic like a lawyer.*

“Why do you keep asking me that?!”

“Because I’m trying to learn all the facts.”

“You just immediately assume that I’m doing something wrong and that she’s perfectly justified in stealing my stuff!”

“Elizabeth, lower your tone, please. There is no reason for you to be disrespectful.”

“But, Miss Lauren, you’re not listening to me!”

“Okay, what’s the real problem here?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your tone is elevated, your body language is defensive, you keep attacking me instead of explaining the situation—which tells me that this is about more than just a piece of paper. A piece of paper isn’t worth this kind of emotional breakdown.”

“I don’t like people taking my stuff!” Lauren spotted tears threatening.

“Alright, Elizabeth, listen to me. I know that you are used to looking out for yourself. A lot of people have hurt you and you probably don’t ever want to feel like a victim again. It’s much easier to attack and be aggressive than be hurt.”

“I wasn’t attacking—“

“If your eyes could kill, both Tamara and I would be dead.” Lauren spotted a small smile. “And in the realm of verbal intensity, I think you could have launched WW III back there.” A sheepish grin. “You’ve been through stuff nobody should have to go through, sweetie. And you’ve developed skills to survive, I get that. But listen to me: if you continue like this, you’re only going to hurt yourself in the long run. In a little over two years you’re going to be considered an adult. You’re going to have to learn to get along with all sorts of people.”

“I’m not going to change who I am just to make others happy.” *What a little jerk.*

“But there’s more to Elizabeth than someone who yells at people,” Lauren countered gently.

“If someone steps on my toes, I’m gonna defend myself. I’m not going to let anyone walk over me.”

“You can communicate your needs respectfully,”

“I don’t respect her! She hasn’t given me reason to respect her!”

“Elizabeth, we’ve talked about this. Respect has very little to do with the other person and everything to do with you.”

“So if someone’s punching me in the face I should respectfully ask them to stop?”

“Don’t take this out of context. That’s not what I was saying.”

“I don’t get it.”

“I know. But I hope you will, someday.

Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to record this and put you on attitude watch for the rest of the week. Don’t look at me like that, you’ve proven you can do this. Don’t let other people push your buttons. Don’t get caught up in other peoples’ drama. Focus on your goals. Your mom’s coming in three weeks. I’m going to talk to Tamara and staff’s going to look at that petition. If there’s anything inappropriate you could go on discipline. Understand?”

“Well, is she going to go on attitude watch, cause if she isn’t that’s not fair.”

“I’m going to talk to her. That’s not your concern.”

“Actually it is my concern, because if you don’t punish her, that’s not fair and it means you’re showing favoritism.” The attitude was back.

“Elizabeth, don’t do this. Don’t dig yourself a deeper hole. I want you to walk five more laps and focus on what you need to do to get through this week,” Lauren walked away before the girl could respond. She re-entered the dorm. *Time for part two with Tamara.*

“Oh, Lauren, there you are. I tried to call you on your radio,” Lauren’s coworker Sarah interrupted her.

“The battery must be dead.”

“You have a phone call on line two.”

“Thanks. Hello? Oh, hi, Dad. You know, just the usual crazy. *What’s the point of going into detail?* What? When did this happen? Is she alright? When are they releasing her? *Why can’t anyone in my life keep their life together?* Well, my shift ends tonight so I can drive down and spend the night with her. *I’m exhausted.* No, it’s fine I can be spend tomorrow with her. *I am massively behind on my paper.* She’s not going to hurt herself on my watch. Yeah, I can be there all day. *I’m exhausted.* I’m just having dinner with Sasha and Will tomorrow night. Okay. Love you. Bye.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yep. Just family plans for the weekend.”

Sarah’s radio crackled.

“Does anyone know where Lauren is?”

Sarah handed her radio to Lauren, “Go ahead.”

“Could you come over to the office?”

“Sure thing.” “Sarah, I told Elizabeth to walk five laps but she needs to come in after that and do her homework. She and Tamara have no reason to talk to each other. Thanks.”

Lauren felt soothed as she stepped out into the crisp October air. It was a relief to get away from the girls, even for five minutes. It wasn’t because they annoyed her, although yes, they could be annoying. In truth she often cared too much. Every week they tore themselves and each other to pieces. Take Elizabeth for example. Elizabeth was trying to find healing by lashing out at others and seeking negative attention. She probably saw that in a movie somewhere. Would she ever realize that in giving kindness she would

lose some of that painful bitterness? Lauren needed a break from the drama sometimes, not because the girls were annoying, but because she couldn't make their choices for them. She opened the office door.

Her boss was standing in conversation with another man. He was short and muscular with cropped, blond hair, glacier blue eyes and an all-too familiar crook in his nose. Lauren felt her face trying to flush. *Tyler Crawford. What are you doing here?*

"I didn't know you worked here," Tyler stuttered.

"Do you two know each other?" John Wells, the director was asking.

"Tyler was my next door neighbor when I was seven," she answered evenly.

"What a coincidence. Lurne, Tyler's going to be doing some promotion for us. I have to leave in fifteen for Robert's appointment. I've given him a tour, but he wanted to interview a few staff members. And now you guys will have a chance to catch up. Isn't it a small world?"

"Yeah, of course. I'm happy to help." *Oh great.* Tyler tried to hide a smile. Once John Wells left the room she turned to him with inquiring eyes.

"Yes," he answered with that infuriating smile she remembered so well. He opened his mouth to say more but she interrupted.

"Let's just get to the interview questions, if you don't mind." Lauren was trying desperately to keep her mind blank.

"How've you been, Lauren?"

“You know, life has its ups and downs,” she answered quickly. She didn’t see his eyes grown concerned. He cleared his throat and focused on his paper.

“So, how long have you been working here?”

“Thirteen months.”

“Yeah, it must be a challenging job,” he spoke as if agreeing with something she said.

“She looked annoyed, “The kids we get are in a lot of pain. We try to introduce some structure into their lives. Unfortunately too often they see us as the enemy.” *I’d like to show them who the enemy is. They know nothing about the real world.*

“What’s your success rate after graduation?” he seemed to be watching her mouth closely.

“Our goal is long term. A lot of these kids are going to leave and make bad choices. What we’re hoping is that somewhere down the road, five years maybe, they’ll remember this place and that there’s another way to live and they’ll put it into practice.”

He smiled awkwardly, “But you don’t really believe that.”

“What do you mean?” she asked defensively.

“Well, you’ve only worked here a year. So you probably haven’t seen much fruit. You’ve just seen all the poor choices.”

Lauren was uncomfortable, “You have to learn to detach.” He smiled again and she shifted in her seat. What was he doing here? “It’s true, I’m

new to the game so I don't exactly know how this works." *I have a different perspective.*

"So you work here, but you don't agree with their methods?"

"I didn't say that. I have a lot to learn."

"Well, it sounds like the three years you spent in Central America have given you a lot of practical insight."

"Stop doing that."

"What?"

"You know what, Tyler."

"I'm sorry. I'm trying not to," he said earnestly.

"I'm not a kid anymore, you have to respect my privacy."

"Lauren, I never asked for this with you—"

"You know what, I think maybe this is a bad idea. You should interview one of the other staff members," she started to rise from her seat, but he put a hand on her arm.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you...I...can we just finish the questions?" Lauren didn't hear what he said, but her body returned to the chair in hopes that his hand would stop scalding her skin. But his hand didn't budge.

"Can you remove your hand, please?" her face was turning red.

"I'm sorry, I just didn't want to let go of you," he spoke before thinking. When his words caught up to him he turned deathly pale. Lauren sincerely thought he was going to pass out. "Umm, what keeps you coming back to this job, day after day?"

“These girls have been abused and cast off. They deserve a second chance. Honestly, they’re selfish, short-sighted, warped, and infuriating. But they’re beautiful and I love them. And if being a patient punching bag for them will one day help them realize they deserve better then it’s worth it. Okay, I need to get back to work. Good luck with your interviews,” she jumped out of her chair and fled out the door before he could stop her.

She got home that night exhausted and began dutifully packing her weekend bag.

“Annie, I’m going to my parents’ for the weekend.”

“Oh, ok. How was your shift?”

“Fine.”

“Hey, I heard we have a cute new publicist. Did you meet him?”

“Tyler? He’s not really my type.”

“What is your type, Lauren? I’ve never heard you even talk about guys.”

“I don’t really have a type. You know, to be honest, most men are just a huge let down. I have never met any man who I thought was truly compatible with the life I want to live. I’m going to be everyone’s favorite spinster grandma.” *Because I am literally invisible to all of the good men.*

“Whatever. I’m going to find you a man. Be careful driving.”

“I will.”

When Lauren pulled up to her aunt's house she recognized her mother's car. She found the two women at the table.

"Alright, I'm here, go home, mom," she ordered while moving around the table to plant a kiss on her aunt's cheek. "I'm glad you're okay Aunt Calli." She noted her aunt's eyes were red and puffy.

"I can't believe they dragged you all the way down here. You've got enough on your plate," Aunt Calli spoke brusquely as she wiped her nose.

"My shift ended and I get to spend a night in someone else's house. That sounds like vacation to me." *I need a vacation.*

"Honey, how was your week?" her mother chipped in.

"It was fine. It's going on eleven, mom. Go home and rest, ok?" Lauren picked up her mom's purse and herded her out the door.

"What about you, Aunt Calli? Are you tired or should we put on a movie?"

"I've been crying for the last five hours. I think I'm ready for bed. You must be exhausted. You just ended your shift!"

"I'm not sure I could sleep, yet. I'll probably start a movie to unwind. Just leave your door open, okay?"

"I'm not going to do anything while you're here."

"I know."

Lauren got up around eight the next day to make breakfast and get to work on her paper. Her aunt slept until ten.

The day passed quietly. Aunt Calli seemed relieved to not be the center of attention. At one point she brought out her knitting project to work beside Lauren. They chatted pleasantly on and off through the day—never discussing the events that had put Calli in the hospital. At five Lauren was relieved by her cousin. She packed her stuff, kissed her aunt goodbye and headed to her parents' house.

She had dinner tonight with friends. Tomorrow would be spent studying again. Maybe Monday she could rest. She tried to wash away the stress of the week in the shower, then painted on make-up that she didn't normally wear to add a physical separation.

The city streets were alive with their usual weekend pomp. Lauren wove her way seriously through giddy college students and snobby businessmen until she found the appointed restaurant. Her phone rang in her jacket pocket. Work. Her stomach tightened. "Hello?"

"Hi, Lauren, it's Emily. I'm sorry to call you on your day off..."

"That's alright. What's up?"

"We found cuts on Elizabeth's forearm. She claims that you saw them yesterday while you gusy were walking laps, but you didn't say anything. We figured she's lying, but wanted to hear from you first."

"I did not see them on Friday. I would have told her counselor."

"I figured as much. That's another lie then. Thank you."

“Yeah, no problem.” Lauren breathed out in frustration but tried to shake it off before entering the restaurant. She was led to a table where her friends Sasha and Will stood to greet her. But suddenly Lauren noticed a third person rise. She stopped in her tracks as she recognized Tyler Crawford.

“Oh, Lauren, this is Will’s friend Tyler. He’s in town for work.”

“Yes, we’ve met. Mr. Crawford’s doing publicity for us actually.”

“What a coincidence! Babe, did you know that?”

“Tyler, you didn’t tell us.”

“I didn’t realize Lauren was the friend you were referring to. Actually, we used to be neighbors a long time ago.”

“You and Will met at college out of state. I always forget that you spent a couple years here as a kid.”

“Lauren, sit down and tell us what’s new in your life.”

“Not much, really.” Tyler gave a funny cough.

“How’s work?”

“It’s fine.” He choked on his water. Lauren shifted the focus of the conversation, “How are plans coming along for the baby?” The rest of the night Lauren avoided direct interaction with Tyler. But he continued to give her funny looks. Toward the end of the night he resorted to covering his mouth with his hand to hide it. She decided he had become smug and arrogant. In spite of Will and Sasha, she felt relieved when it was time to go.

“Where are you parked?”

“Five blocks over,” Lauren indicated with her hand.

“Let me walk you to your car,” Tyler offered. Lauren’s lips parted slightly in terror.

“Oh no, you don’t need to do that—”

“Please, let him, Lauren. Just last Friday a woman was mugged at Fort and 10th. If you don’t, Will and I will walk all the way there and back.”

“Thank you, Tyler,” Lauren accepted with her eyes on the floor.

They dropped silent after leaving Will and Sasha. The noises of late night city life should have compensated for their lack of conversation, but it didn’t. An awkward bubble of obligation seemed to be consuming both of them.

“It really is good to see you, Lauren. I’ve often regretted that we lost touch.”

“I’m sure you’ve been far too busy wooing the female species with your sympathetic and understanding nature.”

“Not really. Women are far too complicated, and I certainly don’t understand them...Why do you lie so much?” he asked suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“You tell people you’re fine when you’re stressed out. You told your friends there was nothing new in your life but your aunt tried to kill herself a few days ago and you started taking classes toward your masters.”

She gave him a penetrating look, “Okay, I guess it’s apparent that you can still read my mind, which never made sense in the first place, but

don't pretend you know my life! I'm not in a masters program. I am still working on my bachelors. I had to drop out of college four years ago to take care of my dying grandmother because the rest of my family was too busy and burdened to do it! Every day I go to work and try to convince emotionally dysfunctional teenagers not to hurt themselves and then I go home to find that my grown up aunt is doing the exact same thing. Maybe I don't want to be completely honest with my friends because I'm tired of crying! The last four years have been the hardest of my life! I clean up vomit and blood and listen to stories about abuse, STD's, abortions, and drug abuse and then I listen to my parents whine about lottery tickets and social gossip. My friends are married and having babies, or they have their master's degree and they travel to Europe every summer."

"If you're so unhappy with your life, why don't you change it?"

"Because I would go crazy pushing paper in an office. I'm so sick of this world tearing itself apart and all people care about is pretending to be someone who they're not!"

"And what does that make you when you can't be honest with your friends and family?"

She turned and began walking again as a tear slipped out. "I'm not very good at communicating what I'm feeling."

"People take you for granted anyway, so why fight the current?" She stopped again. More angry tears were slipping out.

"Why are you being sarcastic with me? You know what my family is like. Everyone literally

interrupts me when I'm speaking to talk about themselves. So I gave up sharing a long time ago. I don't know what's wrong with me, but it's like people hear the words I'm saying but nobody actually hears me. I'm invisible! I just stopped trying."

"Lauren, I hear you," Tyler said firmly.

"You left, Tyler! And I haven't seen you for almost twenty years. Nobody listened after you left. I had to grow up. So this is my life now and I'm doing the best I can."

He drew her close and kissed her. Lauren was by no means in the habit of allowing men close to her, let alone kissing her. But Tyler was so unexpected and familiar that he slipped past her carefully maintained decision making radar. Suddenly irrational terror gripped her heart.

"Goodbye, Tyler," she walked away again.

"Wait, wait, wait. You are not running away from me."

"I'm not running, I'm walking to my car."

"But you fully intend to never see me again."

"Why should I see you again? I knew you when I was seven, that doesn't mean I know you now," she was fumbling in her purse for her keys. But as soon as they emerged he snatched them out of her hand. "Hey!"

"Lauren, you are not going to shut me out of your life because you're scared."

"You're not even a part of my life."

"Well, maybe I want to be again," his face turned pale, giving it that sincere quality. Her frown deepened.

“Don’t play with me. It’s not fair.”

“I’m not playing.”

“Oh really? Are you sure it doesn’t make you feel powerful, the fact that you can see right through me?”

He looked hurt, “Did I ever use it to my advantage? Did I ever betray you?”

“You left. And two months later my dad started drinking.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know it was your parents’ choice and not yours...but I guess I always thought you’d come back. And you didn’t.”

“I never forgot about you. I just...I lost my way for a long time.” He laughed. “I may be able to hear your thoughts, but I always thought you could see straight through me.” She looked at him differently. “Life turned out a lot different than I expected,” he rejoined seriously, “and I made a lot of poor choices. But I’m beginning to understand what I want in life.”

“That’s so cliché,” she said grumpily.

“I was talking about my job. I help nonprofits market themselves. These organizations give everything they have to help other people but they don’t know how to speak for themselves and get the help that they need. Which, when I say it out loud it sounds an awful lot like a girl I used to know.”

“That sounds right up your alley,” she said quietly.

“You say you don’t know how to communicate, but I remember the girl who barely spoke five words a day.”

“I’ve grown a lot. I have. And it’s good to see you, Tyler, and hear where your life is going, But I don’t think I’m in a place for a relationship—”

He rolled his eyes, “Do I have to kiss you again?”

“Don’t touch me.”

He smiled, “What do you want from me, Lauren?”

“I don’t want anything from you, except my keys.”

“So you just want to keep living your life like a doormat?”

“I’m not a doormat! Why does everybody think you have to be super aggressive to be a good human being? I listen to peoples’ problems. I let them yell at me and I don’t yell back. That’s who I am. What’s so wrong with that?”

“Because you’re in a lot of pain.”

“No, I’m not. I’m actually fine. I balance my weeks out. I’m just—you’re making me angry! I don’t normally talk this much. Give me my keys!”

“Lauren, you are an adult and if you want to push me away you have that right. But just remember I know that you’re a complete fraud.” Her face froze. “I want to be with you. And I know that probably sounds terrifying to you. But do you want to remain the invisible girl who’s bitter because no one sees her or do you actually want to be seen?”

“What if what you see isn’t who I am? And when you really see me you want to bail?”

“Impossible. I’ve already heard what you hide from everyone else. You got more? Bring it!”

“Do you really mean that?”

“Try me,” he spread his arms out demonstratively, then handed her keys over.

“Are you going to kiss me again?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Maybe.”

He smiled shyly at the sidewalk, “Why don’t we try actually going on a date, first? Are you free tomorrow?”

“I have about ten hours of homework to do.”

“Great, I can bring my reading along.”

“What are you reading?”

“Moby Dick.”

“You’re totally lying.”

“Isn’t that your favorite book?”

“Yes, that’s my favorite book. But tell me the truth: you are not reading it.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll peruse my well worn copy of Art of War.” She smiled.

“That would be nice—but it’s going to be boring for you.”

“Tell me the coffee shop and I’ll buy the coffee.” He was standing very near to her now.

“Okay. It sounds very romantic. But I’m thinking...just in case you change your mind tomorrow and decide I’m not worth the trouble...maybe you should grant me a parting kiss...as a sign of good will.”

He smiled and interlocked his fingers with hers, “Nice try. But I’m pretty sure if I gave you a second kiss you would take off for Timbuktu and never look back, swearing that you had your romantic experience for life.”

“Get out of my head.”

He kissed her fingers, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"There's that bratty little boy I remember. Is there anything else I should know about you?"

"I probably don't shower as much as the average American. I get obsessive during NFL season. I always wear socks to bed but then I kick them off so I end up with sock stashes at the bottom of my mattress. I have a hundred faults and I'm sure you'll find out all about them, starting tomorrow," he released her hand and took five steps back to watch her get in her car.

"Thank you for walking me to my car."

"My pleasure."

"Don't get mugged."

"Not even a little bit?" he asked teasingly.

"Don't toy with me, Crawford. I can't have you going to jail for thrashing a mugger."

"Yeah, I'm not sure I'd go to jail for that."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Crawford."

"Hey, Lauren!"

"What?"

"I don't hear it anymore."

"What?"

"What you say on the inside and the outside are the same now."