

DARK CARNIVAL

A STORY OF HORROR AND RETRIBUTION

FICTION BY
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CHAPTER 4

Kelsey O'Neil

"Swear it, right now! Swear to me that you won't tell a single soul...not even Jared!" I yelled. I'd had more than enough to deal with over the last few hours, and my best friend was wearing on my nerves. I knew she meant well, but I couldn't find any sympathy or patience for her at the moment.

"Okay! Fine! I won't say a word! Are you happy now?" June screamed back at me, tears flooding her face.

She tried to hug me again, but I shrugged her off of me, not wanting to be touched.

Unfortunately, June had been the one to find me a couple of hours earlier. I had still been completely naked, drugged up and listless on the couch in the pool house. June had gotten worried when Kevin and I didn't materialize for the rest of the party, so she'd come looking for me. She managed to get me semi-awake enough to help me get dressed before trying to walk me back to her car. She was so upset over my condition that she forgot all about Jared, who was probably wondering where she was.

Somewhere between falling into the car and the trip home, I'd managed to pull myself together enough to answer June's incessant questions about what happened. She was angrily lecturing me, assuming that I'd been irresponsible and just passed out from drinking too much. It was my anger at her assumptions that finally cleared my head enough to explain everything to her.

She parked in front of my house, quietly listening as I recounted the night at the lake, and how the worst part wasn't being harassed by Holly. I gave her all of the gory details about what happened between me and Kevin, and then I haltingly explained what happened earlier in the pool house. We both concluded that Kevin must have slipped something into my drink.

June was having a hard time processing everything that I said. She mostly just stared at me with what I thought to be disbelief. Finally, I became quiet once I'd told her everything that had gone on between me and Kevin. I waited for a little while for everything to sink in, but when I finally got up the courage to look at June, I realized she was crying.

Of course, she completely blamed herself. It was her idea to hook me up with Kevin, leaving us alone at the lake and also not bothering to ask me whether or not I wanted to see him again before inviting him to the party tonight. Deep down, I agreed with her, but then I immediately hated myself for thinking that. June always wanted what was best for me, and I know there was absolutely no way that she could have known that Kevin was bat-shit crazy.

She begged me to let her take me to the hospital to get checked out, but I wasn't having that. My embarrassment with the whole situation was too great to deal with at the moment. I was already starting to feel better, hoping like hell that the drugs Kevin had given me would wear off. I still felt horrible – my head was pounding, my whole body ached, I could tell that Kevin had ripped me open with his roughness, and I felt like vomiting – but all I wanted to do was go to sleep.

June wasn't about to give up, though. When I refused medical care, she whipped out her phone, intent on calling Jared (now that she remembered he existed, and that she'd left him at the party). She swore that Jared would find Kevin and beat him to a pulp for what he'd done.

I was horrified! I didn't want the news of what had happened between me and Kevin getting out! I was completely hysterical as I ripped the phone out of June's hand and made her swear to me that she wouldn't tell anyone what I'd confessed.

She was pretty reluctant at first, thinking perhaps that I was just in shock, but after ten minutes of ranting and raving and screaming and crying, she figured out that I was serious, finally giving in to my demands. I could tell that she wasn't happy about it, but it wasn't her place to decide what was best for me anymore.

I was exhausted, and I was tired of talking about it. More than that, I was tired of June giving me those looks of pity. I just wanted to be alone right now.

"I've got to go," I said, avoiding her scrutinizing gaze. I knew she probably wanted to come in and stay for the night, or bring me home with her, but I didn't want her company right now.

"I'm fine, June," I lied, staring at her, trying not to reveal any emotion on my face. "I just need a shower and some sleep. And...next time you have plans, feel free to leave me out of them." I smiled, hoping to lighten the mood so she would let me go without a fight. It took a few moments, but she reluctantly smirked back at me before shaking her head in defeat.

"You are so stubborn, Kelsey. Fine...have it your way. Just know that I'm here for you if you need me, no matter what," she said earnestly.

"I know you are, and I might take you up on that offer. Just not tonight. I need some time to think about all of this, okay?"

She nodded, though I know she didn't agree with me at all. She was the type that talked everything to death. It was always so amazing to me how in the world we could be so opposite, yet still be best friends.

I swiftly gave her a hug, trying not to cringe at the contact, and she responded fiercely. I broke free of her arms at last and scrambled out of the car before she tried to change my mind. I raced to the front door and let myself in. I turned and gave her a quick wave before quietly shutting the door behind me.

Once I was securely in my room, I allowed myself to break down and go to pieces. I couldn't believe the horrible luck I'd been having lately, and was more eager than ever to get out of this place and start a new life.

I took a shower and scrubbed Kevin off of me for a second time. I never in a million years would have thought I'd be doing this again. I knew I should have probably listened to June and gone to get checked out, but I didn't want to face the questions or the looks from complete strangers. It was hard enough when they were coming from

June. Even worse than that would be the fact that EVERYONE would know, including my parents. That was one conversation I could do without.

I crawled into bed and fell asleep almost immediately, though most of my dreams were plagued with images of Kevin. When I woke the next morning, I ran straight to the bathroom and threw up. Too much alcohol. I threw up a second time and tried to drink some water. My head was pounding and I felt even sorer this morning. There was blood in my panties when I checked, and I knew that he'd ripped me open worse than I'd thought. It was extremely tender down there.

I cursed loudly, knowing that I was probably going to have to go to see a doctor, despite my hesitations to do so. I checked the clock next to my bed and saw that it was after ten in the morning. I got dressed slowly, aware of all of the aches and pains that shot through me. Luckily for me, my parents were not home, so I was able to hop in my car and take off for the single urgent care clinic in this crappy little town.

I sure wasn't going to go to the hospital, where they would probably ask too many questions, or go to my doctor, where I KNOW I would be asked too many questions. Maybe I could skirt around the issue at the urgent care clinic. It took me fifteen minutes to get there, and before I went inside, I checked to make sure I had enough money in my purse to cover whatever they might charge.

It was busy inside, and I had to wedge myself between two sick, screaming kids. My head felt like it was about to burst. I sat and waited for what seemed like hours, but just when I was about to give up and go home, I got called to the back. As I predicted, the staff rushed me through and looked to have bought my story of simply drinking too much and getting a little too wild with my boyfriend the night before. It was extremely mortifying to get checked out by the male doctor, but I knew it was necessary.

Fortunately, the damage wasn't bad and didn't require anything major. He gave me some cream and pain meds and instructed me to take special baths twice a day to soak. I

didn't tell him about ingesting anything suspicious because I didn't want him to run a ton of tests. I had my thoughts on what Kevin probably gave me, and I knew that if I voiced these thoughts, I would be taken a lot more seriously.

I slowly drove back home, feeling like I was in a daze. Somewhere along the way, I couldn't drive anymore. I pulled over on the side of the deserted stretch of road and got out of the car. I went to sit on the grass beside the highway and felt myself shivering. A thought had just popped into my head that made me upset. Kevin had purposely shot his load inside of me last night. Despite fears of various diseases that he could have given me, I was most worried about getting knocked up.

There was no way in hell I could handle something like that right now in my life. Out of all the people in the world that I might have suspected of getting knocked up right out of high school, I was not one of them. I never wanted this...any of this. I didn't have a reason to be cautious or take pills, because I'd never bothered with guys before.

I put my head in my hands and tried to figure out what to do next. Surely I could do something to prevent anything from happening...a shot or a pill or something. I didn't know where to start. I knew I was going to have to call June and ask for her help.

I was just about to get up and get back in the car. I hadn't been sitting here for very long – maybe two or three minutes – when I heard a car slowing down and pulling over on the shoulder. I turned around and spotted a car pulled up behind mine and for some reason I panicked. Why had I gotten out on the side of the road? What if this was another crazy person? I was all alone out here in the middle of nowhere and no matter how fast I moved, I doubted I could make it back to my car before the stranger could get to me.

When the driver climbed out of their car, I was shocked. I recognized him in an instant, but for some reason I was no longer scared. I know I should have been, considering he was a stranger and I knew nothing about him, but I didn't try to dash back to the car and lock myself in. I had just managed to get to my feet when he'd walked around the

front of his vehicle. His eyes met with mine and for a moment he seemed just as confused as I was. What was he doing here?

"Hi," he said with an amused expression on his face. "It's odd to be running into you," he said as he stared at me.

"I was just thinking the same thing," I replied, staring right back at him. "What are you doing here?"

"I was back in town for the day and was headed out when I saw the car on the side of the road. I thought someone was broken down and was going to try to help...but I never thought it would be you," he explained.

"Oh, the car's fine," I said hastily. "I just needed to pull over for a minute or two, but thanks for checking."

"No problem." We stood and stared at each other for a minute before either of us said anything. "Kelsey, right?"

"Yeah, and you're –"

"Ben," he interrupted quickly with a smile. I smiled back at him and the strangest look crossed his face.

"Well, I better go," I murmured, suddenly embarrassed. I tried to walk off to the car, but I swayed slightly and almost fell over. I didn't know if it was the hangover I was still fighting, or my still slightly pounding head, or the fact that I hadn't eaten anything that was causing me to be unstable on my feet. Ben caught me before I fell and a jolt shot through me.

"Are you okay?" he asked with real concern.

"I'm fine," I lied. "Just haven't eaten today...low blood sugar I guess," I finished lamely, improvising.

"Are you going to be okay to drive?" Ben asked.

"Sure, I'm fine." Unfortunately when I tried to walk off again, I felt woozy and had to grip Ben's arm to keep from collapsing.

"Come on, into the car," he said, helping me into the passenger seat of my car. He reclined the seat back a little and buckled me in. I had my eyes closed for a few moments, but noticed that he'd come around to the driver's side and got in. My eyes flew open when I heard the car door slam.

"What are you doing?" I asked feebly.

"Well, I'm not letting you drive yourself anywhere in your

condition. You look like you're about to pass out. I'm going to drive you home safely and then I'll call a cab to bring me back to my car."

It took me a moment or two to process what he'd said. I knew I should probably feel hesitant to allow a virtual stranger to drive me home in my car, but at the moment, I wasn't sure I had a choice. Besides, I still didn't have any sense of dread from being alone with him.

I weakly gave him directions to my house when he asked the way, and before I knew it, we were parked in my driveway. He leapt out of the car and ran around to my side and helped me out. I stumbled up to the front door, leaning heavily into his side, and let myself in. The house was empty, so I didn't feel bad about letting Ben come in with me. I nearly collapsed on the couch and held on for dear life as I felt my head spinning.

Ben disappeared and it took me a moment to realize I was alone in the room. I thought for a moment that he'd left, but he reappeared with a glass of orange juice and a box of crackers. He must have gone rooting around the kitchen.

I took the drink and food appreciatively. He stood over me, looking worried. He was so odd...why in the world should he be so worried about me? Maybe it was just because I'd helped him out before. He stayed with me for a while that afternoon. He made sure I was alright before he insisted that he needed to go. I thanked him for everything and he leaned in to give me a swift hug before going.

The hug made me cringe, especially since I wasn't expecting the close contact with him. He noticed my reaction and backed off immediately. The hurt look on his face coupled with the wave of memories that flooded my mind from the night before almost unhinged me. The tears started flowing before I realized what was happening.

"I'm so sorry!" he said immediately, holding his hands up as if in defeat. "I didn't mean anything, I swear!" He looked horrified and it took me a moment to realize that he thought my reaction was a response to his hug.

I shook my head furiously, trying to convey that he hadn't done anything wrong. I tried to catch my breath and then

cautiously explained to him why I was upset, making sure that he knew that it wasn't him. I gave him the general idea of what had happened the night before. I didn't go into detail, but he understood enough. He looked absolutely livid.

"Did you report this?" he asked angrily, though I could tell his anger was not directed at me.

"No, I didn't," I said, ashamed.

"You should. You cannot let him get away with that!"

"Well, he already got away with it before...it would be kind of stupid to do anything about it now!" I immediately regretted my outburst, for now Ben was staring at me, dumbfounded, and I was forced to inform him of my previous encounter with Kevin.

"Tell me about him...his name and where I can find him," Ben said threateningly.

I shook my head again, even more disturbed at his intensity now. Why was he taking this so personally? I would expect this kind of reaction from June or my parents, but this guy was a stranger to me.

It took a while, but I finally managed to convince him that I was fine, that nothing like that would happen again (at least where Kevin was concerned) and that he didn't need to worry about me. He was acting so protective...like a big brother or something. I finally got him to leave, but not before he slipped me a piece of paper with his cell number on it. I was told to call him, day or night, if I needed help.

After Ben called a cab and reluctantly left, I tried to work through our afternoon together. I still couldn't find any reason for him to be so concerned about me. It wasn't like I'd saved him from a burning building or something.

That night, I stayed up in my room and my parents didn't bother me. I found myself thinking more and more about Ben and how he behaved. My mind betrayed me often by flashing back to Kevin and his actions, but I did my best to forget about him.

June called non-stop, but I ignored her. I wasn't really in the mood to talk to her, because I knew she would only try to keep apologizing for what had happened. Days passed in a blur, which was surprising to me. I didn't go anywhere, I

didn't do anything, and I didn't see anyone. I mostly stayed secluded in my room all day and night. I lied to my parents and told them I was just trying to rest before heading off to college. I'd always been a recluse, so they apparently didn't see anything wrong with my behavior.

June finally started stopping at the house during the day, but I continued to ignore her. I knew I was in a depressive funk, but I didn't think seeing June or having to rehash events would make me feel any better.

I had finally healed up from Kevin's assault – physically, at least. If nothing else came from that night, I knew that I would never, ever be a binge drinker in college, if I even touched the stuff again. It wasn't until one early Tuesday morning a couple of weeks after the pool house episode that I woke up with a start, my heart hammering inside of my chest and a sense of unease overcoming me.

I bolted to my laptop and started going through my daily planner, counting days and realizing with horror what I'd forgotten about so quickly the day that Ben had stopped on the side of the road to help me.

I frantically snatched my cell phone from the bedside table and called June, but it went straight to voicemail. I left her a quick message to call me back, then I got dressed and grabbed my purse before flying out of the house to the car.

I was back home less than thirty minutes later, pacing outside of my bedroom, fear and worry nearly drowning me. I looked at the clock again, but it still showed the same time as it had when I'd glanced at the numbers before. How could that be possible? It felt like I'd been pacing for hours, but it showed not even two full minutes had passed. It was as if time were standing still.

Finally, enough time had passed and I couldn't wait any longer. I pushed my bathroom door open and walked over to the tiny counter, looking down at the innocuous little white stick perched on the edge. I stared down at it for what seemed like an eternity, not believing what I saw there. I sank to the floor, fearing that I might pass out at any moment and crack my skull in the process.

I tried June again but she still wasn't answering. She was

probably passed out from another fun night with Jared, totally oblivious to my issues. My life was unraveling quickly and there wasn't a thing I could do to stop it.

* * * * *

Ben "Junior" Stokes

I paced around the small RV like a caged tiger. I was still so damn furious, though I thought by this point the rage would have subsided a little bit. Never in a million years would I have thought I could be so angry. I wasn't even this angry at Davina, and that was saying something.

My mind, all of its own accord, once again flicked back to the day I "accidentally" stumbled upon Kelsey on the side of the road, playing the events over and over in my mind as if trying to discover some hidden clue that I'd missed.

That day, I had chosen to see Kelsey one last time. I would follow her at a safe distance, never making her aware of my presence, but allowing myself to watch her before I moved on for good. At least, that's what I told myself. I was lucky that day, so I thought, because she was up and out of her house early. I was a little worried by how sick she looked when she climbed into her car, and wasn't surprised when she pulled up to a clinic.

I'd waited for a couple of hours outside of the clinic, hoping to catch a glimpse of her before she got in her car. She looked even sicker when she emerged than she had when she went in. I pulled out into traffic behind her, following slowly and assuming she was heading back home. She took the same route she had that morning, so I didn't feel the need to follow right behind her.

I was just happy to be able to see her, if only at a distance, and it never crossed my mind that I would actually interact with her that day. I was surprised to see her car parked on the shoulder of the highway. Surprise turned to alarm when I realized that the car was empty as I pulled up behind it. Was she having car trouble? Where had she gone? I hadn't been far behind her...

I had been relieved to see her sitting on the grass, but

then my relief quickly turned to worry as I saw her face whip around when she'd heard my car. I got out, feigning assistance, but the look she gave me made me aware that she'd recognized me. She didn't seem upset or scared, either. In fact, she seemed almost relieved.

I was beside myself at my good fortune...why had she randomly stopped on the side of the road? I was excited to get to spend a small amount of time with her, though I was sad when she said she needed to go. Then, I realized that she wasn't well. If I hadn't caught her, she would have fallen down on the side of the road.

I was also astounded that she allowed me to drive her home. I already knew where she lived, of course, but I made her give me vague directions so as not to alarm her. When I got her home, however, is when the rage came. I didn't expect her to tell me all about the man named Kevin and what he'd done to her. And why in the world wouldn't she tell anyone? What did she have to be ashamed of? He was the one that did wrong...not her.

Despite my efforts, she refused to let me help her or even give me any information about him. I would have gladly put a blade through that fucker's head for hurting her. Yet, I left without pushing the matter. I haven't been able to put it out of my head since. I've had to stop myself on more than one occasion from going back to the small town and finding her again. I knew I needed to leave her alone...for her own good.

I continued pacing around the RV, trying to figure out some way to leave Kelsey alone and get rid of this rage built up inside of me. I was momentarily interrupted by the shrill ringing of my cell phone. It was with great astonishment that I reached for my phone in my pocket and heard Kelsey's voice respond when I answered.

Had she known that I'd been thinking about her? Did she even give me a second thought once I'd left her house? I never really anticipated that she'd ever contact me, yet I wanted to hope...which is why I'd left my phone number with her.

"Kelsey, what's wrong?" I asked immediately, for she had

gone silent once she'd let me know it was her calling.

"I...I'm sorry to call you. I really don't know that you can help, but I didn't know who else to call. You're the only other one that knows," she said cryptically. I could hear the pain in her voice, and I knew that she'd been crying.

"What is it?" I prompted, wishing she'd explain.

"I'm in trouble," she whispered.

I didn't know what kind of trouble but I knew that I would do whatever I could to help her. I was already racing for the car before I responded to her.

"I'm on my way. It's going to take me a little while to get there, but I'll be there as fast as I can," I promised. I hated to feel happy that she'd called me, especially when I knew she was upset and hurting over something, but I couldn't contain the emotions that were coursing through me. If I tried to deny that I had feelings for this girl, I'd be deluding myself. She was the only one I'd even looked at in years.

I wasn't sure what drew me to her, but I didn't examine it too closely. All I knew is that, for some reason, I felt a bond with her and a desire to protect her.

"You don't have to come," she insisted, but I was already pulling out of the parking lot.

"Yes, I do. You wouldn't have called me just to chat," I replied. She didn't have a response to that.

"I suppose you're right."

"Are you going to tell me what's wrong?" Images flashed through my mind of her being hurt by Kevin again, though I had to be creative when I pictured him since I had no clue what he looked like.

"Not over the phone. I'll tell you when you get here."

"Okay. I'll see you soon," I promised again before she hung up. It was a long drive back to Danville, but I didn't care. I went as fast as I dared on the mostly deserted back roads, smiling to myself as I went.

I hated that it had to happen this way, but I was grateful for the chance to get closer to Kelsey.

Kelsey O'Neil

The day dragged on and on. It seemed like forever before Ben showed up. I don't know what made me call him that morning, or what made him drop everything to make the several-hour journey back to me, but I was grateful. When I heard his car outside, I ran to the front door and was relieved to see his concerned face.

Impulsively I threw myself at him and he willingly wrapped me in his arms. The tears came again and he took me back inside to the couch.

"Tell me what's wrong," he said, staring at me.

It took me several attempts to get the words out. I didn't want to say them out loud...that would make it real, but I forced them out anyway.

"I'm pregnant! I took a test this morning and found out...it's Kevin's and I don't want this! I don't want a baby, especially his...especially the way it happened and how could I have been so stupid! I should have done something to stop him! And now this! What am I going to do? I'm supposed to be going to school soon and I can't deal with this! It's going to ruin my whole life! I didn't ask for any of this to happen!" I knew I was hysterical but I couldn't help myself.

Ben sat, staring and shocked, without saying a word. I saw the emotions flick across his face. Shock, disbelief, hurt, anger, and finally rage. His face was turning a dark shade of red.

I was waiting for him to ask me where to find Kevin again, but instead he grabbed me and pulled me into another hug. We sat like that for quite a while before he spoke.

"I will help you any way I can. Just ask, and I'll do it."

"I don't know what I want right now, Ben. I just didn't want to be alone."

"Well, I'm here as long as you need me."

I had to admit that I felt better with him there. He was like an old friend already, though I still knew next to nothing about him. It still amazed me that he came from somewhere far away just because I called.

As I leaned against him on the couch, I thought about

what I needed to do. I never would have believed that I would have found myself in this situation, but here I was. Would I have the guts to go through with it? It seemed like it was going to be inevitable that I'd have to tell my parents what happened, but I knew that it was going to be so much more hassle.

I guess I couldn't really blame them if they took me straight to the police to file a report, if I looked at it from their perspective. Most of all I didn't want them to be mad at me for putting myself in that kind of situation. I should have known better. I shouldn't have drank at that party and I shouldn't have allowed June and Jared to leave me alone in a room with that creep.

Ben stayed with me all afternoon, and I was glad to have him there. He was a little worried about being there when my parents got home, but I persuaded him to stay. I didn't think I could face my parents alone, and June still hadn't called me back – I needed someone with me.

My mom got home first, and she was shocked to find Ben there with me, though she hid it well. I introduced them and told her where I'd met him. Knowledge crossed her face as she recalled the incident that I'd inadvertently been involved with that caused me to be accompanied to the police station by my father. When I firmly explained that we were just friends, mom seemed to relax a little.

I was surprised and happy to find that Ben seemed to have won my mom over in a short amount of time. He was discussing his lifelong involvement with the carnival and how he had inherited the job duties once his father passed away. I was saddened to hear that, and wondered why he hadn't told me about that.

Dad was a bit harder to impress, but at least he didn't seem angry. However, he knew by the look on my face that something was wrong. He kept staring at me inquisitively as mom and Ben continued to talk. Finally, I knew I couldn't put it off any longer. I scooted closer to Ben on the couch, oddly comforted by his presence, and put my head down for a moment.

"What is it, sweetheart?" my mom asked, worried now.

“I need to tell you guys something, and I want you to promise that you won’t overreact, okay? Just listen, please,” I asked, knowing that they were going to flip out as soon as they knew I was pregnant.

I looked up and saw my dad glaring at Ben, but Ben was unaware of this as he was looking down at me with concern. I took a deep breath and blurted it out. I couldn’t think of another way to say it.

“I’m pregnant,” I said hastily. I saw my mom jump back in her chair as if I hit her, and dad jumped to his feet. Ben was now watching my dad with caution, taking notice of the intense fury that was plain on my dad’s face. He assumed wrong, as I suspected, that Ben was the cause for my predicament. I rushed to his defense.

“Sit down, dad. It’s not what you think, and stop glaring at Ben. I told you, we’re just friends. He had nothing to do with this. I just couldn’t face you guys alone and that’s why he’s here.”

Dad sat back down after a moment, looking more confused than ever. He tried to wipe the anger off of his face and compose himself. Mom was staring at me, mouth hanging open, as if I were a creature she’d never seen. I almost might have preferred to let them think I’d just messed up and done something stupid, because I knew once I’d told them what Kevin had done, they were going to lose their shit.

Ben reached over and squeezed my hand briefly, giving me the confidence I needed to go on.

“I need to tell you about the person who did this to me. I need you to listen to everything before you interrupt, or I might not be able to finish, okay?”

My mom nodded mutely. I sighed and started from the beginning. I told them about June setting me up on a blind date, then going to the lake afterwards. I flushed crimson and stared at the floor as I recalled what happened in the woods, noting that Ben’s grip on my hand got tighter.

I wasn’t able to look up once I’d finished the first part, but my pause must have indicated to my mother that I was done.

“Honey, I think – “ she said, but I held up my hand to stop

her. I needed to tell them the worst part.

I told them about keeping what had happened from June, so she didn't know that I wouldn't have wanted to see Kevin again. I informed them of the party she made me go to, and the shock of seeing Kevin there. I felt the tears welling up in my eyes as I whispered the next part...the really horrifying part. I kept my eyes firmly downward as I told them about being drugged and barely conscious and what Kevin had done, trying to leave out the more intimate details.

At this point, Ben was squeezing my hand so hard I had to force him to loosen his grip. I could feel the rage radiating off of him. When I was done, I told them about going to the clinic to get checked out the day after, and how I'd found out only this morning that I was pregnant. I hastily apologized for the whole situation before falling silent. Now, I just had to wait for the aftermath. It was a while before it came.

I think my parents were simply too stunned to say anything for a while. I finally couldn't help myself and looked up to see their reactions. They were staring at each other in horror.

"Is that why you've been hiding out in your room all this time? I've noticed you've lost a lot of weight and haven't been eating much. Why didn't you tell us sooner?" my mom whispered. I didn't respond. I just waited for it all to sink in and for them to go off the deep end.

Then, it all hit the fan at once. Dad leaped up and ran to the kitchen to get the phone. Mom was hot on his tail. I looked after them, stunned and unable to say anything.

"We're going to call the police right now and have that fucker arrested! You call June and get whatever information you can about that asshole! I'm going to call your Uncle Pete to handle this," my dad thundered when he came back into the room.

"No, dad. I'm not doing that," I said quietly.

He paused and stared at me as if I'd just spoken a foreign language.

"What do you mean, you're not doing that? Why the hell not?" he yelled at me, making me cringe.

"I'm not keeping it, and I don't want to spend my last bit of

time at home involved in something like this. It's going to be a big cluster fuck! It might even cause me to miss my first damn semester at school, and I am NOT missing my opportunity to get out of here!" I screamed.

My mom looked utterly horrified. "What do you mean you're not keeping it?"

"Do you honestly think I'd want to be saddled with a kid? Especially one that came about it such an unwanted manner? And I'm not going to go through months and months of hell for nothing. I figured you would be relieved," I said, watching the way my mom was now staring at me.

It turned into a mighty fight then. I found myself fighting with my dad over calling the cops and turning Kevin in, and fighting with my mom over not wanting to keep the baby. I had to give Ben his due...he stayed with me the whole time, trying to keep me from getting too hysterical, but he didn't try to get in the middle of everything.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed, but I was positively hoarse from screaming so much. My parents finally threw their hands up in frustration and went upstairs...no doubt to talk about this between themselves. They both made their points clear, and they were not at all happy about the decisions I had come to. Unfortunately, I was a legal adult now and there wasn't anything they could do otherwise.

Sure, dad could call the cops or Uncle Pete, but if I refused to press charges or make a big deal out of it, I didn't think they had a way to go after Kevin. And mom, well...I understood her point of view, but I had already made up my mind this morning when I saw that positive pregnancy test. I wasn't going to allow one incident to alter my life forever. I was going to get out of here and make something of myself...and never come back.

When we were finally alone, Ben did his best to console me. That had been just as awful as I had expected. I hated making my parents so angry and upset, but I had to do what I thought was best now. Maybe I would regret it someday, but for now, I felt I was making the right choices.

It was well after midnight and Ben managed to convey

that he needed to sleep. I felt guilty when I realized that he hadn't eaten all day, and neither had I. I knew he had to go, but I wasn't ready to be alone. I did something then that surprised me.

"Where are you going? You aren't going to drive back tonight, are you?"

"No...I'm going to find a motel to stay at. I'll be here for a few days. I'll call tomorrow and arrange for someone to take my place for a while," he promised me.

"Can I come with you?" I asked bravely. I watched his face for his reaction, and was glad that he didn't seem disturbed in the slightest. In fact, he seemed happy.

"Of course," he said at once.

I left a note on the coffee table for my parents. They would probably be pissed at me, but they would just have to understand. I needed someone with me that understood and wasn't trying to constantly change my mind.

I went into the kitchen feeling a little bit lighter now that I knew I was getting out of the house for the night. I rummaged around in the refrigerator and quickly put together something for me and Ben to eat. I hoped that he liked sandwiches. I wrapped them up and packed them into a small cooler I pulled from the pantry and added a bunch of junk food to the pile along with some bottles of water, juice, and sodas.

When that was done, I streaked upstairs quietly, leaving Ben in the living room. I packed a small bag with some clothes and my toothbrush, as well as my laptop and my cell phone. I grabbed my purse on the way out of my room and quickly shut the door behind me.

Ben was waiting with the cooler at the front door. I quietly shut the front door behind us, making sure to lock the deadbolt. We crept to Ben's car and shut the doors as softly as we could manage. He started the car up and drove swiftly away. I felt like I was sneaking out in the middle of the night, but I had to keep reminding myself that I was an adult now and that my parents would have to get over it.

Ben managed to get a hotel room at the edge of town, and I gratefully followed him into the second-floor room. I

dumped my stuff on the table by the door and started putting the cold stuff into the tiny refrigerator. I grabbed a bottle of water when I was done, and perched on the edge of the bed. Only then did I realize that there was only one king-sized bed in the room. That was going to be awkward, but at the moment, I just didn't care.

I took a sip of water and looked at Ben finally. He was hesitating at the door, not sure what to do. Then, everything that had happened today – and the last few weeks – finally crashed down on me. I found myself shuddering and holding my head in my hands.

Ben was at my side in an instant and did his best to comfort me. Though I felt as if he were a long-time friend, I realized that he might not feel the same. I didn't want to make him uncomfortable. I still wasn't sure why he bothered to have anything at all to do with me. I wasn't really his problem.

I tried to straighten up and pull away, but he wouldn't allow it. I willingly allowed him to hold me for a while until I stopped crying.

"Thank you, Ben. I don't know why you came today, but I'm really glad you did," I said hoarsely.

I looked into his face and studied his features intently for the first time. I realized that without the carnival setting to frighten me and make me shy away from him, I found him quite attractive. He was actually very handsome...and he most certainly didn't look like someone who belonged in a clown costume. If I had seen it with my own eyes already, I would have just laughed if he'd told me what he did for a living.

Ben noticed my intense gaze and stared right back at me. I couldn't tell what was on his mind. Just when I was about to ask, he leaned in and kissed me on the forehead. My blood started boiling and my heart was pounding in my chest.

My emotions were definitely fucked up today, because the absolute last thing that should have been on my mind was sex or anything to do with sex. Yet, I found myself lunging at him, taking him by surprise when I attacked him with a kiss. He hesitated for a moment and then he responded. Before I

knew it, I was sprawled on the bed and he was lying on top of me. His tongue was practically rammed down my throat, and I was ashamed to admit that I was enjoying it. Ben's hand was rubbing up and down my right side – my thigh, my hip, my waist, my arm – as he kissed me.

I gripped my hands in his hair and pulled him closer to me. I didn't really stop to think about what we were doing. For once, I was just going to go with my gut feelings instead of overanalyzing the situation. Besides, how much more trouble could I get into? I was already pregnant...

Ben suddenly pulled back and looked at me. The expression on his face was odd. I had a moment of doubt as he looked at me, wondering if he'd finally come to his senses and was breaking it off before he got in too deep with me. I wouldn't have blamed him...he wouldn't have been the first guy that had turned me down, and I doubted he would be the last.

"I'm sorry," I said immediately, feeling embarrassed and stupid. Why in the world did I do that? Ben wasn't interested in me...he was only trying to pay me back for helping him.

"Sorry for what?" he asked, panting slightly.

"Attacking you like that...I should have known better. I don't know what's wrong with me today." My face was bright red at this point.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Kelsey, and I didn't mind being attacked. Just the opposite, in fact. But, I just didn't want to push you into doing something you didn't want to. I know you've got a lot going on and I don't want you to regret anything."

I smiled hesitantly up at him and he smiled back. Ben was the sweetest guy I'd ever met. How in the world was he still single? Granted, I didn't know much about him, but he seemed like a really great guy. I wondered idly how old he was. I knew it was much older than me, but the age gap didn't really bother me. He looked relatively young. Besides, I didn't have much appreciation for guys my own age, and for good reason.

Ben leaned a bit closer to me. I thought he was going to kiss me again but he hesitated for just a moment, looking

torn.

"Kelsey, I have to confess something to you. I hope you don't think it's odd when I tell you this, but...I really like you. I've been intrigued with you since the first night I met you. I hung around that police station just to get a chance to talk to you, and I've been thinking about you ever since. You're not like any other girl I've met," he admitted, looking nervous.

I almost couldn't believe what I was hearing. Why in the world would he be intrigued with me? I was not intriguing in any way. I found myself extremely turned on all of a sudden and panting. Ben watched me curiously for a moment and then he raised an eyebrow at me. I realized I hadn't responded to what he'd just told me.

"I don't think it's odd, Ben. I've sort of...been feeling the same way. I just thought you were being nice because I helped you out. I never figured it was anything more than that. But I'm really glad you're here, and I won't regret anything that we do. You make me feel safe. You've made me feel safe all day long. I thought perhaps it was weird that you and I felt so comfortable with one another so soon, but I'm not going to question it."

Ben's eyes lit up as my words sunk in, and before I knew it, he was on top of me again, kissing me even harder than before. I let him take the lead, and was grateful for the distraction. One thing led to another, and before I knew it, we were getting serious. I wasn't sure how far he was willing to go tonight, but when he pulled me up and yanked my shirt over my head, I had a feeling that he would go as far as I would allow him.

He seemed impressed with every single inch of my body that he explored. Despite everything that had happened, I had to admit that I was pleased with the weight loss that had occurred over the last couple of weeks. I felt better about myself...less shy and reserved.

Ben freed my breasts from my bra and made a low grunting sound that made my nipples hard. This was nothing like my encounter with Kevin. I felt wanted and desired by Ben, and that made all the difference.

Ben's mouth found my nipple and as he sucked hard on it,

I groaned and arched my back. He moved back and forth between both hard nipples, giving them equal attention with his mouth. I gripped my hands in his hair and tried futilely to control my breathing.

After about ten or fifteen minutes, I could no longer stand it. My body was writhing beneath him, ready and wanting. I boldly grabbed one of his hands and pushed it down between my thighs. That got his attention and he sat up immediately. I was still wearing my blue jeans and underwear, and I wanted him to peel them off of me.

His wide eyes were staring down at me, looking bewildered. "Are you sure, Kelsey? I don't want you to do this just to make yourself forget about everything else."

"Yes, I'm sure...and I want this because I want you. It's true that it's making me forget my other problems, but that's just a happy side effect. I need this Ben...I need this with you, if you're okay with it," I insisted, panting even louder than before.

Ben nodded once and gave me a huge smile. I stared at his handsome face and nearly melted. What did he see in me? He was certainly capable of having any number of women...so why me? I pushed the thought from my mind, not wanting to dwell on the negative right now.

Ben wiggled down the bed until he was positioned over my legs. He slowly unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans and pulled them down my legs. He made me gasp when he bent down and pulled my panties off with his teeth. I knew I should have been extremely self-conscious at this point, considering I was completely naked, but I didn't feel that way...not with him. The only thing I felt was turned on and wanting.

Ben wrapped his hands around my ankles and forced my legs up the bed, bending my knees in the process. I felt exposed now, but the look on his face kept me from losing my nerve. He was staring with what I interpreted to be carnal appreciation. He looked up at me swiftly before grinning wickedly and diving between my legs.

I gasped and jerked at the contact as his tongue met my clit. He grasped my thighs roughly as his head bobbed up

and down and his tongue tortured me. My nipples got so hard that they actually hurt a little. My hands grasped his hair and pulled hard. I pushed his head down so that he was putting even more pressure on my clit. My eyes rolled back into my head, and I bit down hard on my lip to keep from screaming. Ben kept going and going, torturing me in such an awesome way. My whole body was on fire and all of my muscles were extremely tense.

“Oh God...fuck, Ben! Fuck! Fuck! Don't stop, baby! Please don't stop!” I begged, which seemed to please him immensely.

I felt his fingers slip inside of my pussy and feel around while he continued licking me. I instinctively reached up with my hands and began tugging on my nipples, making them more erect with each tug. Ben's fingers got faster as he pumped them in and out of me. I arched my back again and started to grind myself against Ben's face over and over.

I felt the building orgasm inside of me and Ben seemed to know it was imminent because he clamped down on my thigh and began licking even harder. I felt the orgasm take over, locking my whole body down as it ravaged me. I called out Ben's name along with a series of grunts and groans as I shuddered and convulsed on the bed. I reached a new intensity I'd never felt before as my climax peaked and started to fade away. I felt the gush of liquid fill my pussy and soak Ben's fingers down.

I sagged back on the bed, completely spent. Ben pulled his fingers out of me and teased my nipples with them, spreading my wetness all over my breasts. When he'd coated both nipples with my goo, he grabbed both of my tits in his hands, shoving them together. Then, he stuffed both of my nipples in his mouth and sucked hard, groaning as he licked. I was hoping that meant that I tasted good.

After Ben was done with my tits, he crawled up on me and started to kiss me again. I felt his dick in his pants...it was hard as a rock, and it turned me on feeling it against me. Ben grabbed a fistful of my hair in both of his hands and held me still as he overpowered my tongue with his. I felt myself rubbing up against him, wishing that he wasn't still wearing

his clothes.

After a few intense minutes of kissing, he finally pulled away. He yanked his shirt off and threw it on the floor. Next, he moved to his pants and quickly yanked his jeans and his boxers off, too. I was staring at him and was sure that my mouth was hanging open. He was even better looking when he was naked, and I was extremely impressed with his dick. I had the urge to stuff it in my mouth, but I refrained from attacking him again.

He smiled down at me, as if he knew exactly what I was thinking. He leaned down on me and his dick was suddenly right there, waiting to be thrust inside of me. He hesitated though, looking down at me once more.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked, sounding worried.

"Yes!" I practically yelled at him, wishing he would fuck me already. He smirked at me and obliged, finally. He thrust his hips once, slamming into me, making me gasp and cry out. He pulled out and slammed into me once more, and I gripped his arms tightly, relishing the feeling of him inside of me. I boldly wrapped my legs around him and pushed my pelvis against him. He steadied himself over me and really let me have it.

He pounded me for quite a while, and I enjoyed every single second of it. His dick was hard and hot inside of me, sliding in and out easily thanks to my wetness. He was big, too, and I had the sensation of utter fullness every time he slammed into me.

He leaned down and kissed me often as he fucked me and I let him have his way with me. He squeezed my tits occasionally or grabbed my hip with his free hand, but he never let up with his dick. On and on he pounded, making me groan and scream his name often.

"God you feel so good, Kelsey...I could fuck you all damn night," he panted as I tightened my pussy around his cock.

I was completely covered in sweat and had no clue how long we'd been at it, but I felt a change in his rhythm. It was if he'd become more urgent.

"Can I come in you, baby?" he begged. I nodded, giving

him my permission, and he groaned loudly.

He pounded my pussy harder than ever, and after about ten or fifteen more thrusts, I felt him tense up. He cried out, yelling my name, and I felt a warmth spread inside of me as he shot his load deep in me. It was unlike anything else I'd ever felt before. When he finally became still on top of me, I knew he was done. We stayed like that for a few moments, both panting and sweating.

Eventually, though, he pulled out of me and rolled over on the bed beside me. I reached over and grabbed his hand, squeezing it reassuringly in case he was worried that I might be regretting what we'd just done.

We both turned at the same time and stared at one another, and for some reason, we both started laughing. I don't know why, but it all seemed absurd. Nothing about this night made sense, and none of this should have happened, but it did and we were both okay with it.

Finally, Ben coaxed me off of the bed and into the shower so we could clean up. I stared at his naked body like a fool, appreciating every part of him. In the shower, I quickly soaped up and rinsed off. I was about to step out and dry off when Ben caught my arm and pushed me up against the shower wall. I wasn't sure what he was doing until he pushed himself up against me, flattening me to the wall. I saw the little glint in his eyes and knew that he was up to no good.

He reached down with one hand while his other hand fondled my breast. He found my clit easily and started rubbing it rhythmically. When I gasped, he kissed me, his tongue darting into my mouth. I groaned and closed my eyes and allowed him to torment me some more. He kissed me with an intensity that I hadn't felt in the bed earlier, and it set me on fire. I moved my hips from side to side as his fingers massaged my clit. It was a weird sensation, trying to have an orgasm while standing up and being pinned down. I wasn't able to move my legs or do anything...he was completely in control as he continued rubbing me.

I grasped his waist with my hands as his fingers worked me over and his tongue invaded my mouth again and again.

Finally, I felt my muscles beginning to strain as my climax hit me. There was nothing I could do but accept it, and it nearly did me in. It was a completely different feeling this time...much different than when I'd been on the bed. It was almost painful as my orgasm shot through me and made my body bow under the strain of the climax.

When it was over, Ben released me from the wall, though I immediately sagged against him for support. He chuckled at the expression on my face. It was a mixture of awe and agitation. Once again, I soaped myself up and rinsed off, and this time he allowed me to get out of the shower. I towed off and went into the room to get my bag and some fresh clothes. Ben wasn't far behind me.

We didn't speak as we dressed, and that was fine with me. For some reason, now that it was all said and done, I felt shy. I wasn't having second thoughts at all...but I was surprised that I'd gone as far as I had. I couldn't look him in the eye now.

Once I was dressed, I headed to the tiny refrigerator and pulled out the sandwiches I'd packed earlier. Ben gladly accepted one when I held it out to him, and I turned to dig in the small cooler to extract some chips. Ben pulled a soda out of the fridge and I grabbed my bottle of water from earlier. We both sat on the bed and ate in silence. He must have been extremely hungry because he finished his sandwich in about four bites. I felt guilty for starving him all day. I, too, was famished and plowed through my own sandwich in an unladylike manner. We shared the bag of chips and finished those in no time.

When we were done eating, I was so tired I could barely keep my eyes open. Ben seemed to realize this, so he pulled the covers back on the bed and motioned for me to get in. I did so without hesitating. He pulled the covers up over me and started to walk away towards the chair in the corner. As if! We'd just had sex...so why in the world would I deny him access to the bed for sleep.

I reached out and grabbed his hand, pulling him back towards me. He almost fell on top of me because he wasn't expecting me to do that. I laughed at the expression on his

face and moved over, motioning for him to join me. He raised his eyebrows momentarily, but then shrugged and climbed into bed with me.

For the first time in a long time, I felt good. I wasn't thinking about Holly or June or Jared or Kevin or the mess I was in or school or moving or my parents. There was nothing but me and Ben and this moment. Ben didn't push me away when I curled up next to him. I heard him sigh contentedly before I passed out. It was a peaceful night with no dreams of Kevin to haunt me.

I knew it was morning because the room was filled with sunlight. I was annoyed and not ready to be awake. I didn't even know for sure what time I'd gone to bed last night, or what time it was now, though it felt early. Then, I realized what was disturbing me. My cell phone was ringing inside of my bag. Though it was muffled, it was still annoying. I groaned and my eyes fluttered open, trying to adjust to the bright light. I stumbled out of bed and rooted around in my bag until I located the phone.

I rolled my eyes when I saw the number and knew that this was going to be a fight. I answered cautiously, waiting for the yelling to start.

"Hey," I said quietly.

"Are you okay?" my mom demanded.

"Yes, of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, you just took off and that seemed a little strange to me and your dad...especially after what happened last night." She sounded really worried.

"Mom, please don't stress. I'm fine. I just needed to get out of the house and clear my head. I'm with Ben, and he's keeping an eye on me," I assured her. I couldn't tell if this made her feel better or worse.

"Just keep your phone with you so I can call, okay? You know how I worry. And please, honey...come home soon. Your dad and I, well, we were just taken by surprise last night. We know you are an adult now and can make your own decisions, but we want you to think about it before you decide, okay?"

"I know mom...it's okay. I'll come back soon, I promise. I'll have my phone with me, so call if you need to. I won't be very far away. Please try not to stress out," I begged, already feeling guilty for leaving the house and worrying my parents.

"We'll try, hon. We love you, you know that, right?"

"Yes, mom...and I love you and dad, too. Just give me some time, okay?"

"Sure, baby. Whatever you need...we'll be here."

I felt depressed when I hung up the phone. I turned to find Ben staring at me, once again looking concerned. He saw the expression on my face and got up at once to give me a hug. When he released me, he gave me a swift kiss that made me blush for some reason.

"What did I do to deserve someone as good as you?" I asked suddenly, taking him by surprise. I didn't know where this was going, but I would enjoy every moment with him that I was allowed.

He looked sad and weary as he backed away from me to sit on the edge of the bed.

"Kelsey, I'm not nearly as good as you might think."

I waited for him to continue but he just looked at me. After a few minutes he got up and went to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him. I was left staring after him. What was that about?

I heard the sink running full blast in the bathroom and Ben making some sort of noise. I walked closer to the bathroom door, straining to hear, and it almost sounded like he was crying. I backed away immediately, embarrassed for eavesdropping on him and grabbed a bottle of juice from the fridge. I tried to put Ben's reaction to my statement out of my head and not dwell on it too much.

However, at that precise moment, the first night we'd met came flooding back and I remembered my Uncle Pete and Mason talking about Ben having a criminal history that fit with what had happened to Holly...which is why they were so quick to believe her story. Goosebumps crawled up and down my skin as I tried to figure out what in the world Ben might have done. I would not figure that he'd have any kind of criminal history, given his sweet personality and kind

ways. Is that what he meant by saying he wasn't nearly as good as I thought? I felt a little sick to my stomach and reminded myself that Ben was completely foreign to me. I didn't know hardly anything about him. I was stupid to have trusted him so completely, but I still couldn't help but feel perfectly safe when I was around him.

I convinced myself that his history probably wasn't nearly as bad as I thought, and that he'd never done anything to make me think badly of him. Besides, if he happened to be a psycho, he could have easily done something to me while I slept last night...yet here I stood.

Eventually he came out of the bathroom, and he was back to his old self again. I was glad for that, because I needed his support right now. We went out for breakfast and came straight back to the hotel room to eat. While I listened in, he made a few calls to some co-workers and arranged to be away for a few days. I was eternally grateful for this. When he was done sorting out his business, he turned purposefully to me. I gazed back at him, unsure what to say.

"We should talk," he said, coming to sit beside me on the bed. I felt a bit uneasy but couldn't figure out why.

"Okay," I replied quietly.

"Are you sure you've thought about this...situation...enough to have made the right decision?" he asked, seeming almost hesitant to bring it up.

He was talking about Kevin and the pregnancy. I breathed a little easier for some reason. I guess I was worried he was going to tell me he'd made a huge mistake last night.

I took his hand in mine and held it up to my face. "Yes, I am one-hundred percent positive that I've made the right decision. Ben, you don't know what life's been like for me...especially living here. Well, maybe you do. You've seen how Holly was. I've been dreaming of the day I could move away from here for years. And this shit with Kevin was just another thing to add to my list. I know this will be hard – probably the hardest thing I'll ever have to do – but I can't have a baby right now. I just can't! I have to get out of here! School is waiting for me...a whole new life! I will not give that up because some asshole raped me and knocked me up. I

know that probably sounds harsh, but I just couldn't live with myself if I gave up on my dreams so easily."

Ben stared at me as if he understood exactly how I felt. I realized again that I didn't know him at all, and that he probably had a similar childhood. He grew up with carnival people, for crying out loud. And Holly had been just as mean to him as she was to me.

"Okay...I just wanted to make sure," he said with a nod before he attacked me again. I found myself back on the bed again and at his mercy. It was a good place to be.

Later that afternoon, Ben helped me find a clinic to take care of my situation. It was over six hours away, but he promised me that he would take me there and stay with me as long as I needed him. I thanked him over and over for his support, but it never felt like I could say it enough. He seemed to be happy to be with me, regardless of the depressing circumstances that had brought us together.

We agreed that I would stay with him one more night and then I would go back home tomorrow afternoon to have another discussion with my parents. I knew that they were going to try to change my mind, but my mind was set. That night, I was perfectly content to let Ben hold me while we watched television. I was startled when my phone started ringing, and I crawled unwillingly out of bed to answer it.

"Hello?" I answered, figuring it was my mom again.

"Kelsey!" June screamed at me, making me jump. "Where are you? What's going on? Why haven't you talked to me for so long?" She sounded irritated but worried.

"June, calm down! Sorry about ignoring you...I needed some time to myself. Besides, I've been trying to call you for the last couple of days myself."

"I know! I'm so sorry, Kelsey! I was off with Jared for a couple of days. We went hiking and camping and I had no cell service out there. I heard your voicemail, and you sounded upset. What's wrong? I tried calling the house but your mom said you weren't there!"

I looked back at Ben and he was staring back at me. "Do you care if my friend comes over for a little while?" I asked

him quietly. He shook his head and gave me a reassuring smile.

“June, I need to see you. Can you come right now?”

She agreed and I gave her the address of the hotel, which surprised her. She promised she would be here within thirty minutes, so after I hung up with her, I changed out of my sleeping shirt and quickly made up the bed. Ben offered to leave while I talked to June, but I refused. I needed his support too much to watch him leave. What was I going to do when he had to leave me for good?

I almost panicked at that thought, but luckily June had good timing. I heard her beating on the door and calling my name. I rushed to answer it and she nearly knocked me over trying to hug me.

“Oh, I’ve been so worried about you! You are so damn stubborn, I swear! I came to your house, and I know you were home! I called and called and you were just so determined not to talk to me, you big jerk!” she yelled with tears in her eyes. Jeez...I didn’t realize she’d be this upset.

I hugged her back and tried to apologize but she wouldn’t hear of it. She apologized again for being involved with what happened between me and Kevin and then she stopped dead in her tracks. She must have finally noticed that Ben was here.

“Oh...um, hi,” June said hesitantly. She cocked her head to the side and stared at me for a moment.

“June...this is Ben. I don’t know if you remember him, but he’s – “

“The guy from the carnival!” June interrupted. “Yeah, I remember you. How could I not? The guy who pissed off Holly!” June was smiling now.

“Guilty as charged,” Ben said with a chuckle, getting up to shake June’s hand.

June turned to me again, questions blazing in her eyes. I wondered if she could smell the sex in the room.

“Sit down,” I commanded before she could start in on me. “I’ve got a lot to tell you.”

June sat on the chair in the corner while Ben took his usual spot beside me on the bed, holding my hand.

I told June about finding out that I was pregnant and trying to call her. I informed her that Ben came to my rescue and how we'd accidentally ran into one another in town a couple of weeks ago. She listened, looking astonished, as I told her about what I wanted to do and the fight I'd had with my parents over my decisions.

I filled her in mostly everything, but I didn't tell her about the most intimate details between me and Ben. I didn't know if he'd be comfortable with me sharing that with her, and I wanted to keep it to myself for now...my own little secret.

June burst into tears and threw herself at me.

"I'm so sorry, Kelsey! This is all my fault! I swear I didn't know! Tell me what to do to fix it!"

"It's okay, June. It's not your fault. It's Kevin's fault and mine too, for not telling you about him. If you want to help, just be there for me. I know the next few days are going to be hard, and I'll need my best friend."

I told June about the clinic, and though I could tell that she wasn't fond of the idea of an abortion, she promised that she would come with me. I was going to have to wait a couple of weeks before the clinic recommended that I come in, but I was okay with that.

I wasn't okay with the fact that Ben was going to be leaving me soon and I would have to wait over ten days before I got to see him again. I was scared he would come up with a reason to back out of coming back to be with me. Plus, once I had the procedure done, there would be no reason for him to come back again. I was going to be going off to school and he traveled all over the place with his business.

I was suddenly depressed again, and I wanted to be alone with Ben. June seemed to realize my wishes, because she left not much later. I promised her before she left that I would answer if she called again and that I would let her know how I was doing so she wouldn't worry.

After she left, Ben and I seemed to be feeling the same thing about our impending separation. Surprisingly, he started talking freely about his past, and I listened with rapt attention. He talked about his father, the business, the

people he'd grown up with in the carnival, his education, his job as a teacher, his eventual return to the carnival due to his father's failing health and, sadly, his father passing away recently from a heart attack.

I felt badly for him. He'd had it just as bad as me and he got out! He had an education and had been a college professor but still ended up back where he started. I didn't know what to make of that.

I wanted to ask him about whatever might have been on his criminal history report, but I hesitated every time I tried to bring it up. It wasn't really any of my business and I knew that. Ben saw my hesitation several times before asking me what I was trying to say.

I shook my head, but he pressed on, insisting I spit it out. I figured the worst he could do is get pissed and not tell me. Unless he told me and it was something so awful I would want to run away.

"Well...I don't want to pry or anything...but the night that I helped you out with the cops...uh, Mason said something about your history and how it fit in with what Holly said happened to her. I thought maybe he was just being an asshole, but my Uncle Pete said the same thing." I could not look him in the eyes as I spoke. I knew I was probably overstepping the boundaries here, but my curiosity was killing me.

I heard Ben sigh loudly and then his hand was under my chin, pulling my face up so I had to look at him. He didn't look angry, so that was a plus.

"I figured you might have heard something about that. Kelsey, I will tell you the whole story that led to that charge, but you have to believe me – none of it happened. You know there are people out there like Holly that are mean and malicious for no apparent reason. Well, I happened to have taught one of those people. She was very wealthy and her father was an influential force at the university. When it came right down to it, it was her word against mine, and of course the university sided with her and her father."

Ben looked away from me now as pain flicked across his face. I instantly regretted bringing it up and wished I could

somehow take it back.

"It's okay, Ben. You don't have to tell me. I shouldn't have asked. I'm so sorry."

"No, it's fine. Not many people know about what went on. No one really cared to know the truth. They all just wanted it swept under the rug." He reached over to push my hair out of my face and force me to look at him.

"I want to tell you, and I want you to look at me while I explain, so that you know I'm telling you the truth."

He sighed again before he launched into his story about Davina Davenport and how she'd set him up when he refused to give her a passing grade solely based on who her father was. He explained about being lured to her apartment under the pretense of helping with her final project and her intentions to seduce him. He then told me how she'd made sure that other students saw them together and when he'd threatened to turn her in, she'd gone straight to the administration and filed a false report that he was demanding sex for her in exchange for not purposely failing her.

I listened and realized that she sounded exactly like an older version of Holly. And really, how could I not believe his story? Hadn't Holly herself tried to have him thrown in jail on totally fake charges? Maybe those fuckers at the college never had to deal with people like Holly and Davina, but I sure had and I knew perfectly well what they were capable of.

I felt ill when Ben admitted he'd lied about why he'd gone back to the carnival with his father. The real reason was because he'd lost everything after he'd been released from his job and he had no choice. I unconsciously moved my hand to my stomach as I thought about what might force me to stay where I was instead of making the escape I desperately wanted. I knew what would make me come back if I left. In my mind, I imagined myself keeping this baby, at least until I gave birth and could give it away.

I knew it would be hard enough to be pregnant and in college. I wasn't sure I could be off on my own and deal with that...not to mention what everyone else would think,

especially if I gave birth but didn't come back with a baby. And if I gave birth, I wasn't sure if I'd have the nerve to give it away. No...if I kept this pregnancy, I knew I'd be doomed to stay here until it was over, with the risk that I might end up saddled with a kid at such a young age. I was also worried that if I didn't get away RIGHT NOW, I might never get away and be stuck here forever and ever.

I couldn't take the chance of being stuck here. So, my mind was more firmly resolved than it had been before. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that I would be doing the right thing in a couple of weeks.

Ben was reassured by my easy acceptance of his version of events. I don't know why he doubted that I would believe him. I was so immensely relieved now that the air was clear between us. Now I knew why he was so upset earlier when he'd locked himself in the bathroom. He was probably so worried that I'd think badly of him.

That night was one of the best nights I'd ever had. Unfortunately, it didn't last nearly as long as I'd have liked it to. The morning came too early and I found myself in a grumpy mood. Ben seemed to think my bad mood was adorable, which made me feel a little better.

I was packing my bags, getting ready to go home when Ben grabbed me from behind and scared the shit out of me. He was apparently just as reluctant to leave as I was. I knew he had to get back, though, and I didn't want to keep him here. He'd already done so much for me...I couldn't keep asking for more.

We checked out of the hotel and drove back to my place. Ben was going to go back tonight and work until my appointment at the clinic. I was a bit depressed as I walked into my house, and was glad that my parents weren't home yet. I figured it would be best if Ben was gone before they got here, though. We were saying our goodbyes and I was trying to make myself let him go. Why in the world was it so hard?

Suddenly, my phone started ringing in my pocket and I fished it out. It was June. I rolled my eyes, but answered anyway. I'd promised her that I wouldn't avoid her calls

anymore. I held a finger up to Ben as I answered the phone.

"Hey, June," I said. Before I could say anything else, June interrupted me.

"Have you seen the news?" she yelled.

"What? The news? No...why?" I asked, wondering why she sounded so alarmed.

"It's Holly!" June said even louder. I couldn't figure out what was going on. "Turn your TV on, K! They found Holly!"

"Hold on," I said, walking over to the TV and flicking it on. Why in the world would Holly be on TV? I thought she was on a senior trip or something. Or had she really turned up pregnant and married?

My smirk quickly faded as I watched the screen. The news station was reporting live and Holly's face was plastered on the screen. It took me a moment to realize what was going on.

"June..." I said quietly. She understood right away.

"She's dead, K. Someone killed her and cut her up and put her in garbage bags and threw her away." June sounded like she was strangling on something.

I hated Holly with a passion and often had fantasized about choking her or running her over with my car, but even that crazy bitch didn't deserve to die like that. I was horrified as I sat watching the screen.

The graphic images they were flickering across the screen came with a warning for younger viewers. It was almost too much for me to handle. I kept staring at Holly's face on the TV. I recognized the photo...it was one of her favorites that she'd posted online.

I had to turn the television off when the news report went to her sobbing parents. They looked like they'd just walked through hell and back.

"I can't believe this," I whispered to June. She sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

"I know. I mean, Holly was fucking mental and a total bitch, but who in the world would be capable of something like that?" June whispered.

I felt bile rise in my throat as I envisioned someone hacking Holly up and putting her in garbage bags.

"I'll call you later, June," I said urgently before I flung the phone down and streaked to the bathroom.

I just barely made it to the toilet before I threw up. I felt really sick...and not just physically. I wanted to undo the last ten minutes of my life. I wished I'd have never turned on the television and seen any of that.

I felt Ben behind me then, and his touch startled me. I'd honestly forgotten that he was in the house. He pulled my hair back away from my face as I got sick again. When it was over, I let him help me back to the couch.

"Did you see that?" I asked him quietly. He didn't answer...he just nodded his head.

"That was the girl that tried to get me thrown in jail, wasn't it?" Ben asked.

"Yes," I answered. He seemed to be taking it just as hard as I was, based on the look on his face. "Who in the world could have done that? I mean, Holly was no saint, but still. God, I hope there's not a killer loose around here!" I blurted, suddenly terrified.

Ben put his arm around my shoulder and held me, but said nothing.

"Stay with me until my parents get home, please. I don't want to be alone...not now."

"Okay."

It was several hours before mom and dad got home. Ben had been acting...weird ever since we saw that news report. I couldn't figure out why, though.

Surprisingly, mom and dad were both glad that Ben was with me when they got home. They'd heard the news and they, too, were worried there might be a killer on the loose. Dad shook Ben's hand and thanked him for watching over me. I followed Ben out to his car and told him goodbye, but he seemed preoccupied with something.

When I kissed him briefly, he seemed to snap out of it momentarily. He smiled down at me and gave me a proper goodbye kiss and hug before promising that he'd be back before I could miss him. He promised to call at least twice a day to check up on me...maybe more. I waved and watched sadly as he drove away.

I went back in slowly, not wanting to start the conversation again with my parents. However, they immediately told me that they would support me, no matter what I wanted to do. They seemed so relieved that I was back home safe instead of being the one on the TV.

That night, I slept uneasily without Ben next to me. My parents guessed correctly that something more than friendship was going on between us now, and I almost denied it. However, it seemed silly to lie to them at this point. Besides, I was trying to persuade myself that it was just a fling and it wasn't going to last once I left for school. There was no way it could work out between us.

I tried calling Ben several times that night, but my calls went straight to voicemail. He never called to check in, and I was worried. I wanted to believe that he was just driving in the middle of nowhere and had no reception, but something told me that wasn't the case. When I finally fell asleep, I wasn't plagued with dreams of Kevin, but something much, much worse. I was running from a faceless killer who wanted to murder me and hack me up before stuffing me in bags and throwing me away.

I woke up several times that night, automatically reaching for Ben and then realizing that he wasn't there. If only he were here to chase the bad dreams away and protect me from the type of monsters that were real...the type of monsters that could brutally murder a teenage girl and have no regrets about it...

TO BE CONTINUED

**THIS NOVEL IS PRESENTED IN SERIAL FORM. NEW AND
SUBSEQUENT CHAPTERS WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE AT
REGULAR INTERVALS.**