

UNCONDITIONAL

By Shannon DuBey

© 2007 by 1107 Printing

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner what-so-ever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Printed in the United States of America.

DEDICATION

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THOSE WHO HELPED SHAPE MY FUTURE AS A CHILD, AND TO THOSE WHO CONTINUE TO INFLUENCE ME DAILY.

To Jen, my rock, who found the courage to stand by my side. Your unconditional love and support continues to inspire me daily.

To my parents, thank you for being different. Your support and understanding throughout the years allowed me to find my place in the world.

To Jack and Stacey, without you none of this would have been possible. Your patience and friendship kept me going and I now look back at the challenges you helped me face with fond memories.

PROLOGUE

“Go ahead and cheat a friend
Do it in the name of heaven
You can justify it in the end
There won't be any trumpets blowin'
Come the judgment day
On the bloody morning after
One tin soldier rides away”
– Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter
–One Tin Soldier

High atop the bluff she sat quietly in the sand watching the leaves swirl around her feet. The cold north wind blew across the open waters of the lake below chilling her nearly to the bone. The air smelled of snow and a shiver ran through her body as she leaned back against the base of a tree. Slowly caressing the smooth silver barrel of the Glock with her thumb, she whispered aloud, "Funny how it shines, even in the dark."

She was regaining her nerve. Tears filled her eyes as she again clicked off the safety and squeezed the grip tight against the palm of her hand. With trembling hands and tear soaked cheeks, she slowly raised the cold metal barrel to her temple once more.

"What will it do to those you leave behind?" The haunting voice asked inside her head. It was the voice of a friend and a question she had been asked many times over the years. It was a question she had never found the answer to in all this time.

Violently, she slammed her head back against the trunk of the tree and screamed into the darkness, "I don't know! I don't care! Get out of there; just leave

me alone. Why can't you just let me do this?"

Much like she felt in life, she sat alone in the dark high atop that bluff shivering and in tears while his question echoed in her head. She had been here before, standing on the edge of sanity staring death in the face. The last time was years before and it was his question, the very same question echoing in her head tonight, that made her stop and think about what she was doing. This time she thought she could go through with it; she was convinced that it was the only way to end her torment and make things right again. With a quick pull of the trigger, her pain would vanish into the moonlit night forever; but what about his? "What will it do to those you leave behind? ... I believe in you," again the voice in her head spoke.

With a quiver in her voice she whispered, "I can't do this until I know for sure. He's all I have left, the last person who really cares. I can't just walk away from that, not yet. I have to make sure he knows it's not his fault." She squeezed her eyes tight trying to interrupt the constant flow of tears streaking her cheeks.

The open end of the barrel slid down her cheek slowly as she began to find the resolve to live just one more day. She knew in her heart there was a better way to deal with this, one that didn't involve hurting those she cared about the most.

Tomorrow is a new day. He'll be at school tomorrow. We can talk. Maybe I'll find the answer I need, a solution that isn't so drastic. If nothing else, I have to at least tell him it's not his fault; to make sure he knows he couldn't

have done anything else and that this is the best decision for everybody.

Slowly she rose from her sandy perch high above the water below and began to brush the dead leaves and sand from her legs with her empty hand. She looked out over the lake once more and was about to make her way back to the trail when she heard it; as loud as anything she had ever heard. BANG!

WALK WITH ME AND TALK WITH ME

“Walk with me and talk with me
And say you’ll be my friend
And together we’ll work out harmonies
Our road will never end”
– Kanga’s song

Footsteps toward the future
Leave a trail to the past
And each step we take together
In history is cast
– Shane

Chapter 1

Kerry Webber was a faculty member of Landville Consolidated Schools whom I had met and befriended early in my junior high days. With his warm smile and laid-back approach he was a teacher I could relate to in class and who genuinely cared about his students. Though we crossed paths many times in my early school days, I never paid much attention to him growing up, though I certainly knew who he was. All of that changed when I found myself in his history class my seventh grade year.

As a general rule, most of the Landville teachers were far more interested in the material they were covering than the students they were instructing. Obviously there were exceptions I stumbled upon every once in a while and Mr. Webber certainly was at the top of that list. He was different, possessed a gift that was lacking in most teachers I encountered in my years of school. Kerry Webber genuinely cared about each and every student he came across and he had the ability to make a connection with them, to let them know they were as important as the subject mater, and that he believed in them, all while still covering the required material. Every single student he had the pleasure of instructing over the years knew it from

the first day of class and many never forgot it, even long after they had moved on in school. Mr. Webber was the single most popular teacher in Landville, and deservedly so.

By the time I entered seventh grade, I was already about as low as one could get on the food chain of junior high and my self-esteem was almost non-existent. I had spent most of my formative years on the fringe of the social structure in my little town and had figured a way to muddle through daily life just the same. In school, I managed to show up every day with a smile, complete my homework on time, learn the material that was covered, and participate in class. At least that was the case up to about Christmas time during my seventh grade year anyway.

I had always been picked on in school for one thing or another since as far back as I could remember. In Kindergarten, I was the smart kid who came to school on the first day already knowing my ABC's. I was called names on the playground and in the halls by the other kids for being smart. I tried not to let it bother me, and for the most part succeeded, but eventually it began to pile up.

None the less, every day I went home, changed into my play clothes, and was just another ordinary kid in the neighborhood ready to play ball, ride bikes, climb trees, or play whatever game we could make up that afternoon. By the end of second grade, I had figured out that being the smart kid was nothing to be ashamed of. I simply learned to keep my mouth

shut in class when ever possible to avoid their taunts, and my head down on the playground to avoid their physical abuse.

School was rough for me in those early years but eventually I found a place where I fit in and a group of friends who were misfits just like me. We all had our own quirks, our own reasons for being social outcasts and misfits in school, and in the social structure of Small-Town America. Some were picked on for wearing glasses, some for being overweight, some for being a little slower at learning than the others, and some just for hanging out with us. Those were the kids I really looked up to, the ones who had the courage to snub their noses at those who made themselves feel better by picking on the weaknesses of others, and were labeled misfits just for being our friends.

Our ranks dwindled over the years as some moved away and outgrew what made them targets for teasing in the first place. Others simply went off to be loaners in hopes of not sticking out so much. By the time I hit junior high, there were just four or five of us left in our little group and I was beginning to think I didn't belong with them any longer. I knew that my membership would only make things worse for the others if anyone ever found out the real reason I didn't fit into life in Landville.

My desire to separate from the remaining group of misfit friends happened around the same time that I began getting physically harassed, almost daily, by some of the boys in the hallway for being the 'weird kid'.

Separating myself from my group of friends had made me a larger target for their taunts and bullying.

Still, I would rather sit quietly reading a book, or writing in my notebook than hang with the others on lunch breaks and that was not normal behavior for a junior high girl in my school. To cope with these new attacks, I began hiding out in the bathroom before school and during indoor lunches so the boys couldn't find me. I was so preoccupied with staying out of the way of junior high life and avoiding those who wished to harm me that I no longer cared about getting my homework done. I no longer knew who I could trust because some who I used to consider friends were joining in on the name calling and as a result, I was much more careful with what I said and whom I spoke to.

I had spent my whole life up to this point feeling like I didn't fit in at school and was gradually beginning to realize that I didn't fit in anywhere. I was 12 years old and discovering that I was different from the rest of my friends. While they were chasing boys and deciding who was the cutest, I was not interested at all. Though I couldn't put a finger on the cause of my difference, I did know something was wrong with me and that I couldn't risk anyone finding out. I longed for a new group of friends, ones who didn't live inside this fishbowl of a small town, and who looked at the world from a point of view much closer to my own. Gradually, I began to segregate myself from the kids at school during the fall of my seventh grade year and

quickly went from being just another misfit to a total outcast. Whenever possible I would find someplace safe, someplace out of the way and on the sidelines of whatever situation I was in, and sit alone quietly watching the world go by.

It was mid January of my seventh grade year when I was first pulled aside after school by Mr. Webber. Apparently, he had been watching me in class, in the halls, and on lunch as I distanced myself from the rest of the student population. He was concerned. Stopping me in the hall on my way out of school, I think it was a Tuesday, he asked if he could talk to me for a minute. Since I had ridden my bike to school that day I had no bus to catch and didn't really have anywhere else to go but home. I agreed.

My heart was racing as I followed him down the hall and into his classroom. Being singled out by a teacher, any teacher was never a good thing in my book. That, added to the tone of his voice and the look on his face when he asked if I had a few minutes to spare before I left for the day, told me this was a conversation I didn't really want to have.

He claimed that he just wanted to ask me a few questions and that it wouldn't take long, but something told me this would take more than just a minute. I followed him into the room and pulled a chair down from the top of a table placing it where I could easily see the clock. Mr. Webber followed my lead and pulled a chair down as well. He sat across from me, slouching in the chair just a little to make sure we were at eye

level. Then, he quickly glanced over his shoulder to ensure that he was at a safe distance from where I was sitting and also sitting in the middle of the path between the door and me.

My hands trembled and a lump began to form in my throat; I was nervous. I wasn't sure what this was all about but somehow I knew he was about to ask me questions I didn't really want to answer. He cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and began with a simple one. "Shane, is everything okay?"

Am I okay? That's easy to answer, of course not! I'm defective! "Yeah, I guess so. Why?" I cautiously replied.

"Well ... you seem a little down lately; not at all like the girl I remember from last semester."

A little down, there's an understatement! What can I tell him? I have to think of something. "I'm okay; miss my friends from camp a little, but nothing big." *Yeah that's it just missing camp. It's believable and safe.*

I had successfully sidestepped his question and given him the same story I told my parents when they asked about my recent change in behavior. I liked Mr. Webber as a teacher but I knew he wouldn't understand what was really going on, nobody would. I figured there was no point in taking the risk of telling him the truth. Unlike my parents, he didn't fully buy into my story and took another approach immediately.

Mr. Webber began to ask different questions. Questions about what I did outside of school, my

hobbies and interest, and if I had any favorite classes. He seemed genuinely interested in my answers and gradually I began to open up a little more. It was a typical psychologist tact, an ice breaker if you will, used to show interest in someone and prove that you genuinely care about what they have to say. It worked perfectly on me and I began to see Mr. Webber as more than just a teacher I thought was cool. He noticed my change in attitude at school and was concerned by it. He took the time to pull me aside and try to find out what was going on. In doing so, he also let his guard down just enough that I was getting to see him as a person, not just a teacher. Nobody had ever done that for me before.

Eventually, Mr. Webber moved back to the reason he'd pulled me aside that day and began to ask harder questions. "Why do you always sit alone at lunch instead of with your friends?"

'Cause I'm defective! I don't fit in here and I can't let anyone find out why. The honest answer was screaming inside my head, echoing with each deep breath I took. I closed my eyes and tried to clear my head. I needed to find an answer I was comfortable telling him, one that wasn't a lie but didn't give away too much information. Finally, I just shrugged and said, "I don't know. I just want to be alone I guess."

He looked frustrated with my reply but decided to leave it alone for the time being. Rather than push for an honest response to his question he asked about my family, if everything was okay at home. I gave

him a typical seventh grade answer, "Yeah, they're as cool as parents can be I guess. They just don't get me sometimes." It was the truth. My parents were loving, caring, attentive parents who went out of their way to ensure I had everything I needed; they just didn't seem to understand my view of the world most of the time.

We talked for a while longer before I looked up at the clock and noticed it was already going on 4:30. "I need to get moving so I can be home before Mom gets there," I said grabbing my chair and neatly stacking it back on top of the table where I had found it.

Mr. Webber, frustrated at my lack of communication but hopeful that I would eventually trust him enough to answer his questions more directly, followed my lead. He stood, placed his chair back atop the table next to mine, and stepped aside so I could pass. I quickly snatched my bag from the floor where I had dropped it a little over an hour ago and made my way toward the hallway. Stopping in the doorway for a moment, I turned around, paused for a second, and filtered my thoughts before telling him, "Hey ... um ... thanks."

Mr. Webber smiled back at me and said, "Shane, don't be a stranger. I'm here anytime you want to talk."

I never did tell him what was really going on; not that day anyway, but that was the first of many conversations with Mr. Webber. The more we talked after school, the more I realized that I could trust him. I guess you could say we clicked. Maybe it was something about the way he asked or the tone of his

voice but I knew he was genuinely concerned and wanted to help in any way he could. He sent me on my way that afternoon with a smile and I left his room knowing that I had made a new ally in the war zone of school. Something that was often impossible to accomplish for any student, let alone a misfit.

For the next few months, I spent at least one day a week after school just hanging out with Mr. Webber. Sometimes we would talk about what was going on at home or in school. Sometimes we would talk about sailing, skiing, or just what we did over the weekend. And, sometimes we would talk about nothing much at all. What we talked about was never as important to me as just being with him. He made me feel safe, as if no matter what I did or said nothing could ever hurt me when he was around. It was a feeling I had never felt before. I knew he cared about me and would protect me from all that he could. I looked up to him as a role model and took to heart all the advice he gave me over the next few years. What began as a simple act, a teacher who was concerned about my behavior and took the time to ask me if everything was okay, turned in to a life long friendship.

I didn't realize it at the time but I was one of the lucky ones. I learned later in life that there were others like me, misfits in their own world, who far too often fell through the cracks unnoticed. They didn't know that sometimes all it takes is one person you can trust, one person who cares about you to make it through another day. For me, Kerry Webber was that

person and quickly became my best friend, mentor, and father figure rolled into one great man.

It had been almost six years since Mr. Webber first pulled me aside to talk that day after school and he had remained my best friend. I had others, some my own age that I hung out with and saw at camp every summer, but the bond I developed with Mr. Webber could never be replaced by any of them. I had grown up a lot since the carefree days of seventh grade and fought many battles with depression over the years. For each one of those, Mr. Webber was right there by my side encouraging me to battle through it and, when things got really bad, setting me up with the right people to get the help I needed. Some days he was there to laugh and joke around with me, when things were good. Some days he was there to pick me up from that bad place I allowed my mind to venture off to, and occasionally he was there just to listen when I needed someone to vent my frustrations on. No matter what was bothering me I always knew he would be there as a shoulder to cry on, a wise friend sharing insight and advice, or just someone to offer a look of encouragement and a smile. I'd like to think I was as important to Mr. Webber as he was to me, but I'd probably just be kidding myself. Still, we shared a bond I've never had with anyone else in my life. If only I could tell him what's really been eating away at me all these years.

Chapter 2

Bang! My face slammed into the front of my locker for the third time in a matter of seconds. I felt the warm trickle of blood run down my upper lip and the sting of an open wound as the skin split wide open across the bridge of my nose. This was definitely going to leave a mark.

“Dyke! How does that feel? Huh?” the gravely voice of my attacker screamed in my ear. As he wrapped his fingers tightly around a handful of hair and began to pull my head back once more, I heard his sidekick Trevor chime in, “Hey Cole I bet you could turn her straight man. I bet all she needs is one good man.”

“Too bad Cole couldn’t be further from that description,” I blurted out without thinking. I was pinned face first against a wall of lockers by Cole, who out weighed me by at least 80 lbs of solid muscle. I probably should have just kept my mouth shut and taken whatever abuse he planned to dish out. Too bad I never was one to think before speaking when my emotions ran high and once again, I opened my big mouth before my brain could stop those words from escaping.

Cole again rammed my head forward screaming into my ear, “What did you say? You’re gonna’ pay for that!”

as he leaned against me from behind compressing my lungs and leaving me gasping for breath. I tried to respond, to take back what I had said, but no sounds came when I spoke. "Too good to speak up in your own defense now Dyke?" he asked as he stepped back, taking my head with him, and prepared to throw me into the locker one more time.

This time, as I felt Cole begin to shove my head toward the wall of lockers once again, I was able to turn my neck slightly and the right side of my face made contact with the locker first. I felt the force of the impact vibrate through my entire body as my vision blurred and my thoughts became cloudy. I was helpless to defend myself against Cole and unable to string together a coherent thought that might help to defuse the situation. My big mouth had done it once again and all I could do was close my eyes tight and prepare for the inevitable.

This is it isn't it? He's gonna' kill me. I knew I shoulda' kept my big mouth shut. When will I ever learn?

I felt Cole pull me backward again and assumed I was about to get another body slam into the locker. When he paused for a moment and began to loosen his tight grip on my hair, I opened my eyes. I was trying to see what he had in store for me this time and instead, caught a glimpse of someone walking past the far end of the hallway. Cole apparently saw him too. He immediately released my head from his vulture grip and fumed one last sentence in my ear. Through clenched teeth I heard, "You squeal, I'll make

it hurt twice as bad next time." I could feel his angry breath on the side of my face as a shiver ran down my spine.

As Cole and Trevor sauntered away, my adrenalin kicked into overdrive. I quickly began to gather my things from the floor while attempting to dry the tears now stinging as they flowed down my battered face.

Assholes! This whole damn town is full of them. I can't take much more of this shit but what am I suppose to do, nark on them and get my ass kicked? I guess I should just accept that it is what it is.

"You okay?"

Startled, I looked up to see a familiar face standing over me. "Hey Mr. Webber, yeah ... um, I just tripped and dropped my stuff. Everything's cool." My hands trembled as I quickly stuffed the spilled books and papers back into my bag.

I need to get out of here before he asks too many questions. He'll see right through my story. Never was any good at lying to him.

With a very matter-of-fact tone he replied, "Your nose is bleeding."

I nervously wiped away the blood trickle with my finger. "Yeah I hit my face on my locker. Must have hit it harder than I thought. I'll be okay, honest."

I couldn't explain what had really happened, though I honestly wanted to tell him. I knew it would only make things worse for me with Cole because there

was no way Mr. Webber would allow me to do nothing about the abuse. Cole had the upper hand, he'd had it since our days on the elementary school playground, and I wasn't strong enough physically or mentally to fight back any longer.

I had been fighting back against Cole and all the others my whole life. From the days of being a member of the misfit crew in elementary school to becoming the 'weird kid' in junior high who spent her free time sitting on the sidelines watching the world go by or hanging out with a teacher, I had never fit into the mainstream social structure of school or life in this small town. After almost 11 years, I was tired of fighting back and no longer possessed the strength to stand up against or stare down a school bully. Mr. Webber wouldn't see it that way. He would try to talk me into standing up for myself again, like he had so many times before, and I knew that I had to get out of there before I said too much. I crammed the remaining books into my backpack and zipped it shut as I jumped to my feet.

Suddenly, the room was spinning out of control and I instinctively reached out for something to hang onto as my peripheral vision faded. Before I could grab hold of something to steady myself, I felt the tips of my fingers brush against the cold metal surface of a locker and my left arm slip through the grasp of Mr. Webber who was trying to help. It was too late. The world went completely black as the ringing in my ears grew louder and my knees buckled.

Chapter 3

Shane was born Sheri Ann on May 15, 1974 to James and Patty Evans in a rural Northern Michigan community. She was their only child and never seemed interested in playing with the few girls around the neighborhood. Instead of playing dress-up, having tea parties, and playing with dolls, she would spend her time with the boys playing just about any sport or game they could think up. She was a rough and tumble little girl who could keep up with the best of them. Her favorite things to do involved bikes, trucks, and dirt and she could climb to the top of any tree in the neighborhood by the time she was 10. Shane was a tomboy from as far back as anybody could remember.

During the winter months, she would spend her time after school doing homework and her weekends at the local ski hill. Her father had taught her to ski shortly after she learned to walk and would still join her at the hill on weekends when he could. Skiing on weekends was their time to bond as father and daughter and she regretted they had little time for this over the past few years. He was working longer hours to make ends meet and part of her felt guilty for all the comforts she had been afforded over the years. Like any good parent, they always made sure she had the basics but

they also spent a lot of money each summer sending her off to camp for two weeks and Sheri couldn't remember there ever being a time when she asked for something reasonable that was refused. She was by no means spoiled but by the living standards of Landville, she had it better than most. She was also one of the few who had two educated working parents and no siblings. In her eyes, this accounted for a lot of the resentment she felt from the other kids in this sleepy little town.

Sheri's summers were filled with days spent at the lake in town, hanging out with the boys around the neighborhood, and of course her annual trip to camp in mid July. Some days she would get up early and ride her bike into town spending her time on the beach or sailing alone on the family's boat kept along the shore of Long Lake. Other days, she would just hang out at home or a friend's house down the road and play with the boys. Sheri had never gotten into trouble and her parents trusted her good judgment so it never really mattered much to them where she spent her time during the day. They simply expected her to stay out of trouble and be home for dinner by 6 o'clock every night, no exceptions.

It was during one of her fifth grade spring afternoons spent playing with the boys that she was given her nickname. Sheri was participating in a quick game of street ball, a version of basketball where fouls don't exist, with some of the other boys from the neighborhood. There was a new face on the court that

day, an older boy who had just moved to Landville and was trying to get to know the other kids. About halfway through the game he finally asked what her name was. She smirked as she replied, "Sheri." He was shocked to learn that she was a girl and shook his head in disbelief.

Sheri kept her hair cut short and always wore her clothes a little baggy so she was often mistaken as a boy when meeting new people. She always got a kick out of seeing the look of surprise on their faces when they realized their first impression had been way off base and she was in fact a girl.

"What? Sheri? Doesn't fit your personality at all man. I can't call you that. You need a nick name!" the older boy exclaimed.

Sheri shrugged and nodded in agreement, as she told him, "Yeah, I never really liked it myself but that's what the parental units chose to call me. Some family name I think, but I never met anyone in my family named Sheri."

The older boy scratched his head looking at the ground as he said aloud name after name. With each one, he shook his head and moved on to the next. He was searching for the perfect nickname to fit this boyish and spunky girl. Finally, his eyes lit up and he looked directly at Sheri with a wide smile across his face. "Shane! What about Shane? I think it fits you a lot better."

"Shane?" Sheri thought to herself for a moment

repeating it over and over in her head. “Yeah, I kind of like that,” she said nodding slowly as it began to sink in.

The other boys on the court agreed that it seemed to fit her better and quickly adopted it. Before school let out for the summer her friends all referred to her as Shane, though the rest of the students and teachers still called her Sheri. Her parents were the last to make the adjustment. By the end of that summer, everyone including her parents was using her new nickname and she returned to school in the fall to discover that even the teachers were now using it. Sheri would forever be known around Landville as just Shane.

Chapter 4

“Shane! Shane can you hear me? C'mon, stay with me kid-o.”

I recognized the voice echoing in my ears but couldn't place a face with it. My thoughts were disjointed, my nose was throbbing, and my ears were ringing. I slowly opened my eyes only to immediately regret that decision. I had barely cracked them open when brilliant white light replaced the blackness and I quickly squeezed them shut again. My head was pounding, my chest was heavy, and I recognized the iron taste in my mouth as blood, but I had no idea what happened, how I got here, or why I felt so bad.

I raised my arm slowly and placed it against my forehead to shield my eyes before I cautiously opened them again. I needed to piece together the last few moments of my life, starting with where I was and what face belonged to the familiar voice. Gradually, the brilliant white light faded and fuzzy dark objects began to appear in my vision. “Wha –what happened? Where am I?” I asked the shadowy figure hovering above as I gently lifted my head.

“It's okay, you're at school. You just blacked out for a minute,” the familiar voice spoke again.

Finally, my eyes adjusted and my vision cleared enough that I could focus on the mystery face at my side. It was Mr. Webber. Still not certain of where I was exactly, I looked past him for a moment at the room around me. White tiled ceiling, harsh florescent overhead lights, and gray lockers lining the walls. He was definitely correct about where I was. I was lying on the cold tile floor of the high school hallway.

Still confused about how and why I was on the floor to begin with, I took his hand for assistance and slowly sat up. I rested my throbbing head in my hands and began to gently massage my temples. I was hoping to ease the pain but also to possibly jog my memory about what had happened. The last thing I remembered was Cole walking up behind me as I gathered my books after school.

How did I get here? What happened after he walked up behind me? And why does my head and face hurt so bad?

I lifted my head slowly and looked around for something that would trigger my memory. I saw my backpack on the floor next to me and remembered filling it with books after Cole left. I closed my eyes for a second searching for memories of the last few minutes. I could see Mr. Webber standing next to me as I knelt on the floor, open backpack in hand. I was picking up books and papers from the floor and shoving them into my bag frantically.

Why were they on the floor?

I opened my eyes, slowly turned my head to the right, and winced at the sharp pain that instantly shot down my neck and across both shoulders. I paused momentarily, allowing the pain subsided before lifting my chin slightly and looking up at my locker. The door was closed, the lock opened and dangling from its hole in the door latch apparently hooked only by the notch in the shackle.

Like a levee holding back rushing water had broken, instantly my memory came flooding back. Overwhelmed by the visions and sounds of Cole yelling in my head, I closed my eyes again hoping to silence his words. In a matter of seconds, the blank spots in my memory were filled in with vivid details and I knew exactly what had happened, why my books and papers were on the floor, and why I needed to get out of here quickly.

I squeezed my eyes tight and wiped them with the thumb and index finger of my right hand as if to wipe away the horrible scene playing in my head. I needed to flush the memory from my vision, and to exit stage left as soon as possible. With my right hand on the nearby lockers for support, I attempted to stand up. I didn't want to re-live those horrible moments with Cole any longer and I knew I couldn't afford to give away any clues as to what had really happened. Mr. Webber would begin asking questions very soon and a quick escape was my best option to avoid saying too much.

Mr. Webber held out his hand. "Take it easy, no need

to get dizzy again."

I paused for a moment, then let go of the lockers next to me and took his offer of help. With his firm grip for support, I managed to get to my feet without the room spinning out of control again. "I'm okay. Head hurts a little but I need to get going. I'm going to be late getting home."

"You sure you're okay? Maybe I should give you a ride home, just in case." Mr. Webber snatched my backpack from the floor near my feet and gave me that 'concerned father' look I had seen many times over the years I had known him. For someone with no children of his own, he was amazingly good at reproducing that look. In fact, he was probably even better at it than my own father was.

In all the years I'd known Mr. Webber and considered him a friend, there were two very strict rules he always followed; any time we spent alone together my parents had to be aware of and okay with, and no riding in his car unless there was someone else with us. It had very little to do with any lack of trust between us but instead, was mostly to keep others from getting the wrong idea about why we were spending time together.

Knowing these rules all too well, and having never gotten a ride home on previous occasions when I had asked, unless there was someone else with me, I was more than a little surprised at his offer. It was clearly breaking one of his steadfast rules.

I must look as bad as my head feels right now. He looks concerned and offering to give me a ride, against his rules, is HUGE!

In light of my current condition, my head throbbing and my ears still buzzing a little from Cole's angry ranting and the pounding against the locker, I knew I was in no shape to be riding my bike anywhere let alone the five plus miles required to get me home. Obviously, Mr. Webber knew that as well. "Yeah, okay. Might be better if I didn't pass out in the middle of the street on the way home. I've got my bike though," I finally replied.

"No problem, it's a nice day. We'll just toss it in the back of the Wrangler."

We walked in silence back to his classroom where he gathered his things and dug the keys out of his bag. I waited in the hall while he turned off the lights and pulled the door shut behind him, checking the latch to be sure it was locked. Tossing my backpack over his shoulder as we walked toward the door, he took a deep breath before asking, "So you really tripped huh? You sure there wasn't something else going on? 'Cause I thought I saw Cole and Trevor there when I walked by the first time."

I swallowed hard and bit my tongue to keep my composure. With the most serious face I could muster, I looked up at the 6 foot 2 inch man who was my best friend in the world. "Yeah, just tripped."

He knew it wasn't the truth, it was written all

over his face, but I doubted he would ask again. The pounding in my head intensified as I realized that I had just lied to my best friend again. I had been doing that a lot recently. I quickly wiped the back of my hand across my face drying a stray tear slowly making its way down my cheek. I hoped he didn't notice.

Chapter 5

As I sat in the front seat of the Jeep Wrangler, I wondered if I possessed the strength to tell him the truth. The secret I had been hiding since the early days of junior high, the one that made me a misfit in the first place, was becoming a much larger part of my life. I knew it would eventually surface; it was only a matter of time. I also knew that, because of our friendship and all he had done to help me out over the years, I owed it to Mr. Webber to be the one to tell him, face to face before he heard it through the small-town rumor mill.

But can I do it? What if he can't handle it? What if he doesn't want to be seen with me anymore? How can I make it through without him there by my side?

My head was spinning in a million directions all at once. I was trying to remain calm, to keep from worrying about what might happen now that Cole and Trevor knew the truth. I didn't know how long I could deny the growing rumors and I was afraid my life would only get worse from here on out. I had managed to keep my secret for 5 years, I hadn't told a soul about my true feelings; yet somehow they knew.

How? How did Cole find out?

"You're awful quiet over there Shane. You sure everything's okay?"

I slowly rubbed my forehead trying to message both the questions and the pain away. "Yeah, just have a headache."

"Headache huh? You hit that locker awful hard by the looks of it."

"Hard enough to knock me out I guess," I quickly shot back with a cocky smile across my face and a touch of sarcasm in my voice.

Mr. Webber looked my way and winked as he said, "You need to be more careful Shane."

I knew what he meant. It was his way of letting me know he'd seen enough to understand at least part of what happened in the hallway and that he didn't buy my story of just tripping. Just as I had feared, he saw through my lie with ease once again.

What does he know? What did he see? Did he hear what they were saying? Does he already know, or suspect my secret? I have to tell him, he deserves to hear it from me not from some rumor. But how do I tell him something this big? I guess I should just go for it, throw it out there and see what his reaction really is. What's the worst that can happen?

Just as I was about to finally come clean, to tell Mr. Webber what had really happened at school and why, I looked up to see the Wrangler pull into the driveway of my house. As I scanned the windows for signs of

life, I heard him say, "Doesn't look like anybody's here. You want me to hang around for a bit 'till your mom gets home?"

I need time to get my face cleaned up or Mom will know something happened. If she sees him here when she gets home she'll know something's up. "No, I'll be fine. Promise!" I said with an absolutely fabricated smile as I tossed my bag into the gravel-lined driveway and walked to the back of the Wrangler for my bike. I had nothing to smile about, but I didn't want him to worry about leaving me here alone, and I didn't want him to be here when my parents arrived.

"Alright, I'll go but I expect to see you in my room tomorrow before *AND* after school young lady!" He almost couldn't keep from laughing aloud as he scolded me.

"Yes Sir!" I shot back sarcastically. "I'll see you about 8 tomorrow morning. K?"

"See you tomorrow kid-o." He smiled back at me before driving off and leaving me alone with my thoughts again.