

BUTTERFLIES IN THE SYSTEM

Tellwell

jane powell

Butterflies in the System
Copyright © 2020 by Jane Powell

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.



Tellwell Talent
www.tellwell.ca

ISBN
978-0-2288-4017-6 (Paperback)
978-0-2288-4018-3 (eBook)

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE	1
The Morning After	
CHAPTER TWO	7
Judgement Day	
CHAPTER THREE	19
Bad Buzz	
CHAPTER FOUR	35
A Home for Neglected Children	
CHAPTER FIVE	45
Queen Bees	
CHAPTER SIX	65
Tema	
CHAPTER SEVEN	77
AWOL	
CHAPTER EIGHT	95
Slumdoggin' it	
CHAPTER NINE	103
Gabe	
CHAPTER TEN	109
Sex Sells	
CHAPTER ELEVEN	117
Rich Boy Fantasies	
CHAPTER TWELVE.....	129
Love, Lust and in between	
CHAPTER THIRTEEN.....	139
The Devil is in the House	

CHAPTER FOURTEEN	155
Oh, Mother	
CHAPTER FIFTEEN.....	171
Dave	
CHAPTER SIXTEEN	179
Second Chances	
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN	203
There's More to the Grinch	
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN	225
Flirting with Death	
CHAPTER NINETEEN	235
Tig	
CHAPTER TWENTY.....	241
No really, I'm fine	
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE.....	251
Ms. Cohen	
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO	259
Strange Love	
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE.....	269
Gini	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR.....	279
A Butterfly Flaps its Wings...	
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE.....	303
No, I swear, I'm fine!	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX.....	315
The Montreal System Rat	
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN	337
New Beginnings	

Meet the Author347
Acknowledgments..... 351
Discussion Questions.....354
Endnotes356





Support for Butterflies in the System

“Great read! The first chapter alone brought me back 30 years. It’s fiction, but it was still very close to home for me. I recommend this book to anyone who even spent 48 hours in the system.” –*Lyne Meilleur, Alumna 1989-92, Shawbridge Youth Centres (Prévost Campus) and Youth Horizons in Montreal, QC*

“I loved *Butterflies in the System* for its raw and honest look at life in the DYP system as seen through the eyes of someone living it. As a Childcare worker and Special Care Counselor, I found the narrative accurately heartbreaking and inspirational. Sam’s journey is poignant, funny, riveting and brutally honest. The story reflects what still does and doesn’t work in our flawed social service network. A compelling read!” –*Janet Gallagher, Special Care Counsellor and Child Care Worker in Montreal, QC*

“As a retired Child Care worker, I was pleased to be included in Jane’s proof-reading group. Jane’s depiction(s) of life in the system as an ‘end user’ was enlightening and at times frightening—a really good read.” –*Ross S. Hillenbrand, Front line worker for 32 years Summer Hill*

Group Homes, Youth Horizons, Batshaw Youth and Family Services in Montreal, QC

“Butterflies in the System is a gripping novel of trials and tribulations for teenagers. I recommend it also to all who have had a tough childhood, to parents whose kids are having it tough, and especially those who need to understand tough kids.” –Penny Powell, parent and teacher in Laval, QC

*“An excellent follow up to *Sky-bound Misfit*, *Butterflies in the System* showcases Sam’s struggles when she finds herself within the youth protection system. I found the story fascinating and had a hard time putting it down. The characters were vividly real in the sense that they were easy to connect with and relate to when reaching into the past and recalling some of the “coming of age” experiences of our own younger years. I loved the connecting pieces that related to *Sky-bound Misfit*. Vincent’s appearance, along with Frankie’s, was stellar ... a great way to tie both novels together, which left me wanting to read *Sky-bound Misfit* all over again.” –Alicia Grills, mother of teenagers in Golden, BC*

Butterflies in the System can be read alone or as a sequel to *Sky-bound Misfit*. The lead character in this book, Sam, was featured in *Sky-bound Misfit* as Frankie's best friend during their early teen years.

This novel is a work of fiction. Although inspired by the author's life experience and interviews with youth protection alumni and workers, the story told within this book is a product of the author's imagination. Characters, places, and events are either fictitious or used fictitiously. Any resemblance of characters to actual people is a coincidence.

Trigger warning

This book contains episodes of physical and emotional violence, sexual violence, and substance use that may be disturbing or upsetting to some.

Tellwell 

For all youth gone wild, past and present

Tellwell 



CHAPTER ONE

The Morning After

July 31st

System rats. That's what they call us. Lost causes, fuckups, the *unwanted*. And they wonder why we run.

I took a long drag off my smoke and blew rings towards the sky. Swallows played in the morning mist that hovered over the river. The quiet was nice. I emptied the last few drops of my beer into the weeds and got up from the log I was sitting on. The place was littered with bottles and crap from the night before. I'd woken up on the beach by the river, under the train bridge. What a night.

Running my fingers through my hair, I shook my head to get the remaining sand out. The shaking made my face hurt. I stopped and held my head in my hands. I'd managed to get myself into two fights this time. Well, more like two chicks managed to get themselves into fights with me. I sure as hell wasn't looking to fight. Some crazy jealous bitch at the party knocked me flat on my ass, then I awoke this morning to Frankie shaking me, screaming like a disappointed banshee.

I touched my swollen eye and flinched. Time to ditch this place.

As I began to walk, I remembered my right shoe was still missing. I found it next to the fire pit, partly melted. My toes didn't quite fit in. I wore the shoe like a slipper, with my heel hanging over the back. It wasn't comfortable, but it worked. I put my earphones on and pressed play on my Walkman. Madonna's *Live to Tell* unwound, up along the wires into my mind, like a reflection with a secret.

My third day on the run. Freedom felt good, but mornings were damn lonely.

With no clear idea where to go from there, I stepped onto the tracks and headed south, Montreal-bound. The trains were real rattlers, and they'd be on Sunday schedule—if one somehow surprised me, I would sure be surprised.

My thoughts whirled around my fight with Frankie. What was her problem anyway? She'd turned into one of those annoying girls that had a perfect life but didn't realize it. I mean, seriously? She has one rough spot and her happiness implodes like a dying star with a burnt-out core. The definition of spoiled brat, plain and simple.

Yet, something inside me had crumbled as she'd yelled at me. Deep down, I knew the shit between me and Frankie was more about my crap than hers. But what to do? I didn't even know what to feel about it. "*Deep-down-Sam*" was a big ball of twisted up junk—like yarn the cat got into, all knotted and screwed up and unable to escape the fate prescribed by someone else's game.

Alone on the tracks in the boondocks, I held my emotions in check. Nope, not going to cry over someone else's bullshit. Fuck 'em. I am a survivor. I would survive this,

show 'em all, and rub their prissy ass noses in it. I am fuckin' *strong*!

With my music turned up high, I stretched my arms to the sky and howled like a wolf signalling a successful hunt. I am the hunter, not the hunted. I laughed aloud, then shouted, "Fuck you, Frankie! Mom! Dad! It's my ball of messed up yarn, so screw off! Assholes!"

Startled, the doves on the power lines took flight. At least the boondocks are good for something—I could yell my guts out and only the birds took issue.

I searched my blouse pocket for the cigarette I'd bummed off some guy the night before. I'd bummed a few and this would be my last. Being broke sucked. Gripping the smoke between my lips, I felt my other pocket for my lighter, then realized I'd left it at the bridge. I stopped, cursed myself, and turned to go back for it.

That's when the train's horn hammered me for the first time.

Looking up, I saw the approaching train in disbelief and momentarily froze. The sound of its horn vibrated through me for the second time. I tried to jump right, off the tracks, but tripped on a rail nail, and then hit my head hard as I landed.

Dazed, I attempted to roll away from the track, but my body wouldn't respond. Adrenaline hit me hard. My mind became alert, but the rest of me was terrified. It was like trying to push myself through waist-deep mud. Everything but the train moved in slow motion. Its screeching brakes were deafening, the loudest nails-on-chalkboard ever. It occurred to me that this was it. This

would be my ending. On the tracks, alone, after I'd told my whole world to fuck off.

People say that your life flashes in front of you when you are about to die. All that flashed within my head was complete and utter fear, no thoughts, just active unrelenting "get me out of here!" FEAR. I was about to be cut in half, and my body was stuck in 'park'.

The scream trapped deep inside my gut surfaced, shortly before my failed defence system shut me down completely and I passed out.

•

I opened my eyes to strange faces, floating above me in a universe of multi-lingual concern and surprise. My lower body was under the front of the train and its wheels almost touched me. Never before had I considered myself a lucky person, but I began to re-evaluate. *Holy shit, I'm alive! I think.* Or was this some weird kind of heaven? I studied the faces above me.

An old guy in uniform with a handlebar moustache looked down at me intently. The moustache tugged at my memory.

"Oh, Mon dieu! Fille chanceuse, qu'est-ce que tu fais là?! You are one lucky girl. What de 'ell were you tinkin?"

Oh, yeah, the French conductor guy. The one that Frankie likes. What a relief! Not in heaven. I stared at him wide-eyed, amazed that I still lived.

A rumble of laughter gurgled up within me, slowly increasing in volume until it turned into a hysterical cackle. This wasn't the reaction people expected, and I

couldn't explain it myself. Just happy to be alive, I guess? Concerned, the train conductor asked me questions, but I couldn't hear him through my hysteria, so he gave up and waited for the first aid crew.

The first responders concurred that I had likely sustained a head injury. They loaded me into the ambulance, and we headed for the hospital. Having trouble stringing words together to answer questions, no one could figure out what my native language was. This resulted in a jumble of French and English, often one sentence in the former followed by the exact same in the latter. Awfully amused, my laughter persisted, contributing I'm sure to the diagnosis of concussion.

I tried to tell them I was just thrilled to be living, but it came out: "*J'suis un loup!* A lucky wolf!" I howled laughing, "Happy to be *en vie!* *Oui, oui, joix de vivre!*" Maybe they had reason to worry.

A ridiculous thought occurred to me: perhaps my mother's wish had come true, and I'd finally got some sense knocked into me. I howled again as we sped away towards the hospital.



CHAPTER TWO

Judgement Day

Early August

(after 4 days in hospital,
due to concussion and a
suspected psychotic break)

The courtroom wasn't much different from any other dated room where the rule of law is intended to prevail. Everything you could touch without too much bending or stretching was made of wood, everything below, linoleum, and everything above, the colour of cream pie.

I sat on the long wooden pew at the back of the room, plugged into my Walkman, flanked by my parents' lawyer, social worker, and mother. We'd been here for over an hour, waiting our turn to be heard. Waiting *our* turn to be *heard*. That's the way the lawyer put it. I would describe it more like waiting *my* turn to be sentenced to silence. There was no 'our' in it, and 'being heard' I'd come to understand as an obvious triviality in the youth justice system. Personally, I'd never been permitted to speak in a courtroom. The lawyer did the talking, I did the listening,

and my mother did the weeping. That was the process. That's the way it *always* went.

Pat Benatar's *Heartbreaker* thumped in my ears as I fiddled with the hole in my webbed tights, thinking. A few months ago, I became a ward of the court. I lived in a medium security group home not far from Montreal's *Centre Ville*. Not because I came from a typically defined broken family. Just because ... well ... just because. Maybe it was all *me*. I was the faulty part, I suppose. There had to be some reason for my brokenness, but I hadn't yet figured out what it was. What I did know was that I was glad I wouldn't be returning home. But that doesn't necessarily mean I was looking forward to going back to the group home. If I had a fairy godmother, I would've wished for complete independence.

The judge finally motioned for us to proceed to the front of the courtroom. On cue, my mother began to sniffle. It was strange to see her cry. Her normal stance towards me was one of anger and disappointment.

When I was born, my parents decided that I would be their only child. Rather than divide their attention between two or three children, they would put all their energy into creating one star child. Lucky me.

My mom's dreams for her only child to become successful had been shattered, and she would never get over it. Dad wasn't much different, but instead of blaming me for my failure at perfection, he blamed The Montreal School Board. He'd spent his childhood in a boarding school in England, where he'd been moulded into the proudest and most intelligent form of human being. My dad couldn't accept that his daughter, the fruit of his sublime British

loins, could be cast in any other way. I was not *his* failure, but rather the school system's.

As a kid, I *had* been a star child. I was a real smarty, with top grades, falling in line with all my parent's expectations. I did everything with the intention of making them happy. As long as they were happy with me, I got everything I wanted. I played the flute like an angel and my parents like a fiddle. In their eyes, I could do no wrong, as long as I stayed *perfect*.

I tried excruciatingly hard to stay perfect. But perfection is a fragile standard that tends not to allow for limits, and something in me broke at the age of fourteen. I hit my limit and their world fell to pieces. The first-class bubble that had been *me* popped like a soap bubble does when it touches something hard and real. And now the system had been granted the responsibility of putting me back together again. Here's what my parents failed to realize: a reality once contained within a bubble cannot be reassembled into its original form. Like a popped soap bubble, I will never reform back into the rainbow-tinted spherical shape that my parents ordered up.

Yup, I was changing alright. But not as Mom and Dad requested. So, here I stood, in queue with society's broken youth, waiting for judgment.

I pulled my earphones down around my neck, followed my parents' lawyer to the front of the courtroom, and *the process* began.

Mother and Ms. Cohen (my social worker) sit down in the pew behind us.

Judge motions for the lawyer to approach the bench, and she does so.

Parents' Lawyer presents Judge with a folder, which presumably contains a list of my failures, and returns to stand beside me, and we stand there, stiffly, watching as Judge silently reads through the list.

Judge sighs and looks up at me. She takes her glasses off and stares at me. Her hair is short and dyed blond, her face bony and wrinkled, and her eyes tense and tired.

Judge smiles (or is it a frown?) and says, "Well, then. Sam, is it?" She checks my file and misses my nod. "I have here that you were about to be discharged into your parents care, after being in youth protection because of repetitive running away from home, an—albeit forgiven—theft charge, and a concern that you were a danger to yourself. Is this correct?" Judge glances down at my file, missing my nod again. She continues, "Yes. Yes. That is what your file says. It also says that you ran away shortly before your discharge date. Is there an explanation for this?" This time Judge looks at Parents' Lawyer.¹

Parent's Lawyer responds, "There is no explanation, your Honour. We are recommending that Sam remain in the custody of the youth justice system, as she has proven to be a continuing threat to herself and others."

Judge sighs again. "Please go on."

Parents' Lawyer continues, "Sam was found drunk, face bruised, and stumbling along the train tracks in Pierrefonds. The train was forced to stop because she would not remove herself from the tracks. Frankly, she is lucky to be alive. The police delivered her to the hospital, where she tested positive for marijuana use and was treated for alcohol poisoning. Furthermore, as you can see," the lawyer looks me up and down, "she also has an eating disorder. For these reasons, we think she

needs more supervision than her mother can provide and should therefor remain in youth protection until she has proven she is not a risk to herself or others.”

Judge glances back down at the papers on her desk, then studies me through her strained over-worked eyes. “What a shame. Your whole life ahead of you and you start it like this. I do hope you learn something from this and straighten up. I don’t want you back in here, do you understand? You’re from a cultured family. You look like a bright kid. Now, smarten up! Youth protection it is. Ms. Cohen and, uh ...” She motions to my social worker and lawyer, “both of you, see me in my office to discuss sentencing.”

Judge dismisses us all with an impatient wave of her hand.

Yeah ... the gist of it: apathetic, predetermined, and no room for *me*.

,

I arrived back at Charles A. Group Home shortly before suppertime. My room was not as I’d left it. In fact, I’d never seen it so clean. I briefly wondered whether they’d ditched all my stuff, as I couldn’t see any evidence of it. My breath caught at the thought. I quickly opened my closet door and breathed a long sigh of relief when I saw my clothes within it. If the staff had ditched my clothes, I would’ve been forced to depend on my mother to replace them. She would have surely turned me into the pretty n’ pink prep she’d always wanted. I thanked the almighty fashion god for sparing me from that humiliation.

Instantly, a more concerning thought hit me. When I’d split, I had forgotten to bring my journals with me.

There were three of them and the options for hiding places in my room had not been good—under my mattress or jammed behind my chest-of-drawers. I'd remembered the journals shortly after taking off, and the choice was either to keep running or to turn myself in only an hour after my great escape. I'd chosen to risk the discovery of my journals.

Pulling my chest-of-drawers out from the wall, I searched behind it. Gone. I wasn't surprised. Any moron could figure out where secrets were hidden in these bare rooms. I squeezed my eyes shut, devastated. Someone was now in possession of my most private thoughts. I hoped it was a childcare worker. If another kid stole them, I was bound to be bullied or blackmailed ... most likely both.

I muttered "Fuck" as loud as I could without being heard, then fell backwards onto my bed and stared at the ceiling. The whole room had been painted eggshell white and the ceiling was no exception. Even the furniture was white. The bedrooms in this place lacked creativity like Madonna lacked virginity. There must've been some purpose to the sterile blandness, I thought. Were they trying to bore us into submission? Yup, probably it.

I lay on my bed contemplating the concept of boredom, worrying about my journals, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

Gabe bounded in through my open door, interrupting my thoughts, and jumped onto my bed. He stood over me, bouncing up and down, laughing and chanting, "The cat came back, the very next day, the cat came back, she just couldn't stay away away away AWAY! HA! SAM! I knew you'd be back! I knew it!! Sucker!!" He collapsed on the bed beside me, rolled over and wrapped his arms around

me. He squeezed as if trying to do me in. "I missed your skinny Asian ass, girl!"

Gabe was referring to the quarter of me that is Taiwanese. I'm much more British than Asian, but my Asian roots show through my almond shaped eyes and straight black hair. Being *Taiwanese* was way more interesting than were my stale British roots. So, to my friends, I was Asian.

I pushed him off, "Gabe! Breathe! Gimme some space, dude! I was away, like, a whole three days ... I didn't come back the very next day. Dickweed." Sometimes Gabe behaved like a hyperactive three-year-old. But it did feel nice to be missed.

Gabe's huge smile revealed how much he'd missed me. He was my closest friend in the system, as I was his. I regretted not taking him with me on my AWOL² adventure. Things may have turned out differently if Gabe had been with me. Maybe I wouldn't have got beaten up by some dude's jealous girlfriend. Maybe I wouldn't have fucked up my friendship with Frankie. Maybe I wouldn't have flirted with death on the train tracks.

My memories of that second night on the run were blurry. I'd met up with Frankie, friend from my previous life (you know, the life where I was 'the good girl'), and we'd gone to a party at the train bridge near Roxboro. I spent most of that night getting drunk and high with some hot rocker guy, until his girlfriend showed up and lost her shit on me.

Next thing I remember was waking up on the river's edge in the morning, with Frankie freaking out at me. She said she'd thought I was dead. Man, what a drama queen. Then I freaked out. We fought. She left. I drank some more. Then there was the train incident ...

And here I was. Back in the fuckin' system after only three days on the run. I really should've brought Gabe with me.

We were both lying on the bed now, staring into the whitewashed abyss above us. Gabe turned his head towards me and observed me thoughtfully.

"Hey man, what *was* that anyway? You were supposed to get out next week. Why'd you run? You were almost free! Your parents serial killers or something?" He chortled, jokingly.

I smiled at the thought of my parents deviating so radically from the social norm. Mom and Dad, with blood up to their elbows and crazed smiles, plotting lustily over what they could do to their poor rebellious victim next. Ha! My parents, the epitome of human perfection, gone mad—what a sight that would be! The only thing they'd ever plotted to kill was my happiness.

I replied to Gabe, "Yup, something like that." My parents were serial killers of happiness.

Gabe laughed. Apparently, he thought I was joking. He replied, "So, what next then? You staying a while?"

"Seems so." I paused and sighed, not really knowing what to say. I didn't want to be in the system, but home was worse. Soon I'd be sixteen, which meant I could legally get a job and possibly live on my own. My present goal was just to survive the next few months.

•

"So, welcome back!" Dave smiled at me as he leaned back in his creaky wooden office chair.

I caught an inkling of sarcasm in Dave's tone, likely directed more at the situation than at me. For a childcare worker, Dave was OK. I couldn't help but smile back at him, slightly sheepishly.

"Yup, in the flesh. What's my punishment?" The others had just sat down for supper and I hadn't eaten since breakfast. My issues with food came and went. I knew we had to do this, but I hoped Dave would hurry up and get it over with.

Dave relaxed even further into his chair and put his hands behind his head, weaving his fingers together. His curly salt n' pepper hair sprung up wildly over his bald spot as he did this. Dave was Dave. And he had all the time in the world.

"Sam, Sam, Sam. What happened? You were scheduled for discharge. Worried that you'll miss us or something?"

I nodded. Advice from a growling stomach: best to keep conversation to a minimum.

"Well then. You'll need to fill out these intake forms. Your social worker will be here in the morning ... save your explanations for her." Dave paused, observing me thoughtfully. "You know ... I think the time added to your sentence is punishment enough. Unless your social worker has something to add, let's leave it at that. Sound good?"

I nodded again, "um, yeah ... thanks."

Rumour had it that Dave had been a system kid himself, way back in the 60s. He had this way of understanding us that was different from the others. Although I didn't share much, if I *was* going to share stuff, you know, about myself, it'd likely be with him.

I entered the dining room and half the table cheered, mocking me playfully. The others were newbies. Except for Gini, of course, who glared at me, but that was nothing personal. Some chicks were born bitchy, and they didn't discriminate with their targets ... so, as I said, nothing personal. I ignored her glare and sat in the seat Gabe had saved for me.

"Eh man, what the fuck, what'r ya back fer?" Jack asked, genuinely perplexed.

Jack had been group home surfing since he was nine, after people stopped wanting to foster him. He was cool, but he had a ... how to put this? *Emotional? Passionate?* Let's just say, a *feverish* streak that some thought worrying.

"Language." Dave glanced at Jack and continued eating.

Jack mouthed "Oops!" and rolled his eyes. "No effen way I'd AWOL a few days before my discharge. Yer batshit nuts. Barely a scratch to show for it. What, d'ya hide out in *Le Château*?"

Jack always said things exactly how he saw them. No filter. Ever. Strange that folks had stopped wanting to foster him.

Some of the others laughed, unable to contain themselves. Jack had this thing for teasing me about my upper-middle class status—he'd playfully nicknamed me "*The Shopper*."

I glanced at Gabe for support, but he was too busy admiring Jack's wit. Gabe was enthralled by Jack, and lately it had got damn annoying.

Wil controlled his smile. He said, in his best parent voice, "Now, now children, give Sam some space. She's just come back from an arduous adventure in a *Le Château* changing

room. She's absolutely exhausted. The clerk was such a bitch and slow as hell. Sam tried to set her straight, but as you can see, *that* backfired. I mean, look at the poor girl. Black eye with nothing to show for it. Didn't even come away with fake leather!"

The room burst with laughter.

Jen glared at Wil, but even she was having trouble controlling herself.

Gabe glanced at me. His smile faltered. He studied his food intently.

This had to stop. I stood up and addressed the table in a voice that I meant to be calm but ended up sounding more like a cat's hiss.

"Here, here, my mighty tiddly-winks. The next person who mentions my AWOL or asks me why I'm back or who says anything about my effed up release date, is going to have their tongue pulled out and sh ..." Dave shot me a hard look and I softened my threat, "... twisted in knots. Got it?"

Jack cracked up and Wil tried, with obvious intention, not to follow suit. The others cringed, then suddenly became very preoccupied with hydration. Newbie Kim picked up the water jug and disappeared into the kitchen to refill it.

I lost my appetite. I didn't know why I was back. Why had I AWOLed? Home sucked. The system sucked. My head hurt. My eyes hurt. And I hated cold mac n' cheese. I left the table to cry without witnesses.

Jack yelled after me, "Eh, Shopper! Can I have yer Mac n' Cheese?"



CHAPTER THREE

Bad Buzz

Early August

I sat on the fire escape outside my window and lit my second smoke. Technically, we weren't allowed to climb out our windows, let alone smoke out there, but what were they going to do, ground me? Living in this place was already a form of grounding. Our actions were constantly observed, dissected, and controlled. Sounds like a good grounding to me. I couldn't imagine what they could add to it that would make it worse. I suppose my mother's yelling—yup, that would be worse—but they weren't going to send me home.

I lay back against the steps, blew smoke rings, and watched as they grew bigger and bigger until they disappeared up into the city's smog-clogged muggy August air. Jack could actually blow rings through rings, which was pretty cool. I tried again and failed again. I'd been pissed at Jack when I'd left the dinner table, but it wasn't his fault. He was just being himself, good ol' Jack—'same same, but different' should be his motto. I wasn't sure why I'd left the table,

why I'd felt all suddenly choked up. Life sucks, I guess. But ... I was really enjoying this smoke, alone, on the fire escape.

My thoughts skipped through the day's events. The most concerning part so far was my missing journals. Even my mother's tirade in the car on our way over wasn't as bad as losing my journals. She never said anything different anyway. Always the same crap about me being the cause of all her and dad's misery. Today, she'd dropped a gift into my lap before starting her journey down the *shit-on-Sam* path. I'd opened it quickly, while her mood was still semi-positive. It was a watch with a pink band and diamond-encrusted frame—the kind I liked before I'd become 'bad girl'. She took my smirk as her cue to speak.

Mom always started out positive and today was no different: "Sam, you know I love you, right?" Barely pausing, she went on, "We're just worried about you." And on, "Why do you want to worry us so much?" And when I didn't answer, "Do you think this is fair to us?" With the pretense of still waiting for me to reply, she kept going, "We have given our lives to you. We worked so hard to ensure you got into the best private school, with the best music teacher in the city. You *were* a musical prodigy! But all you do is mess it up, throw it in our faces, and waste your life away getting drunk and smoking that stuff, marijuana. What is wrong with you, Sam?"

Yup, that was the essence of almost every conversation we've had since I left home a year ago. Like I said, my journals were more of a concern to me.

I butted my cigarette out on the metal stair and let it fall to the ground beneath the winding staircase. I watched it as it bounced off each grated landing, falling between the

cracks, to finally make it all the way to the grubby ground far below. I could easily follow it down and disappear into the night, never to be seen again. I considered it briefly, then crawled back through my window and collapsed on my bed. Where would I go? What would I do? My last AWOL turned out to be a lonely mission towards getting caught. That, with a side of vexed mother. It had been far from worth it ... then again, it had served a purpose.

•

“Sam? You in there? Can I ...” Gabe opened the door, poked his head in and smiled. He stepped into my room before waiting for my response.

I took the opportunity to ask him about my journals. If anyone knew anything in this place, it was Gabe. He had a nose for mischief and an ear for gossip.

“Eh, Gabe? I’m missing my journals. You heard anything?” I said casually, as if it was no big deal but I’d like them back at some point.

Although I trusted Gabe, if it got around that I was panicking about my journals, they’d surely be produced in the most embarrassing way thinkable. Besides, there was stuff written in them about Gabe—personal thoughts kind of stuff—and it wouldn’t serve our friendship well for him to get too curious. That’s the thing about journals—emotional cesspools of personified thoughts, an attempt to make sense out of the crap going on around us. I wrote the words in my journal for *me*, not for anyone else, not even Gabe.

“Oh. My. God. You lost your journals?!” Gabe said this with a look of pure astonishment, like it was the worst thing

ever but also more than a little hilarious at the same time. “Jeee-zus ... what are you gonna do? What if whats-her-face has ‘em?? Or Dave ... maybe he’s read ‘em all and has passed them onto your mom ...”

“Gabe! Shut it, OK?! Dave doesn’t have them. He would’ve talked to me about it. And he’s not a dick. He wouldn’t give ‘em to my mom. Shit, man. Can you help me out here?” I sounded exasperated because I was.

“Yeah, yeah, of course, sure thing. What d’ya want me to do though? I mean, I haven’t heard anything. Maybe your SW found them?” Gabe was referring to my social worker. He shrugged, came over to my bed, and fell back onto it next to me.

I bit my lip, thinking. I’d be meeting with Ms. Cohen in the morning. Perhaps then I’d have my answer. Gabe and I lay side-by-side, staring mournfully at the sterile ceiling.

He broke the silence, “Think they’d notice if we stuck some glow-in-dark stars up there?”

I glanced at him and then back at the ceiling, “Nope. You have some?”

He nodded and smiled, “You can have half. I’ll get ‘em.” Gabe jumped up and sped out of my room to fetch the stars.

•

My SW arrived as planned right after breakfast. Ms. Cohen and I sat side by side in the ‘office-living-room’ that was reserved specifically for meetings with social workers.

Designed to make kids feel 'safe' and 'calm', with a sofa and one of those huge round bamboo futon chairs, this room always had the opposite effect on me. My animal instincts were alert and ready for danger in this falsely at-ease *Hansel and Gretel* situation. If I let my guard down, the evil witch would surely trick me into getting her way and I'd end up in a big boiling cauldron of naughty children and rats' tails.

I sat on the edge of the sofa, quietly waiting for her to tell me where my life was heading. Ms. Cohen looked up from the form she was reading and acknowledged me with her usual 'welcome' smile that relayed a sense of 'you're safe with me, you can tell me everything', but that made me feel even more wary.

"Sam, how are you?" Said Ms. Cohen, tweaking her tone with reassurance.

I nodded, "Um, fine." Best to keep conversation to a minimum with people who were taking notes.

She studied me, with a hint of regret in her eyes, and I braced myself for bad news. She put her hand on my arm, in a comforting gesture (which always signalled something foreboding).

"Sam, the court decided that, given your history of AWOLs and the situation with the train, you should be subjected to stronger consequences."

My breath caught and I stared at her, silently waiting for more.

Ms. Cohen took my hand in hers and continued, "You'll be transferring up to Manny Cottage Youth Detention Centre for a bit."

Manny Cottage? I thought about what I'd been told about the place: faraway fenced-in institution with bars on the windows and kids who eat other kids for breakfast, lunch, and supper. This wasn't happening. I couldn't go there. It was jail for kids and I'd only AWOLed a few times. Got shit-faced drunk and stoned while out, but who doesn't? And, OK, almost killed. But I'd never hurt anyone but myself.

I blurted, "What? Why? No, no, please! Manny Cottage?! Why?"

Ms. Cohen seemed sincerely touched by my emotion, "Oh Sam, I'm so sorry. It won't be for long though. You'll be back here in two months. It's really not a bad place. Everyone who works at Manny Cottage is there to help you. You'll even get one-on-one tutoring, so there'll be an opportunity for you to advance in your school subjects. Concentrate on school and time will fly by, I promise you."

I put my head in my hands, and she stroked my back. I bristled, "Stop. Just ... stop." She withdrew her hand from my back. "When do I go?"

She regarded me thoughtfully for a moment. "Friday. I'll pick you up after breakfast and drive you up myself."

Normally, kids were transported up in a 'jail bus'. I recognized Ms. Cohen's attempt at support and thanked her with a nod.

When I exited the meeting room, Gabe was leaning against the wall in the hallway, waiting for me. I could see from the expression on his face that he'd been eavesdropping.

"Shit ... wow ... What're you gonna do?" Gabe followed me up the stairs, back to my room.

I shrugged, "Go, I guess. What am I supposed to do? Not like I have a say in it."

Gabe shook his head. "Damn, girl. Argh! I hate this place without you! I'm gonna visit you, OK? We still have two days. Let's do something ... like a going away party!"

I stared at Gabe as if he was from a totally different universe, "Seriously? You wanna end up in there with me?"

Gabe thought for a moment ... "No man, we'll all take our outdoor hour together, y' know, and meet up at the canal. It'll be like a *see you later* picnic." Gabe smiled a little too mischievously.

I considered pushing him on his party plans, but then thought, "*Ah, whatever, I'm on my way to hell so might as well dip into the hand basket.*"

,

The Lachine Canal was a short walk from Charles A. As our building didn't have much of a yard, we were allowed an hour each day of free time outside the premises. Gabe and I arrived first. We sat down on the grass in the shade of a towering maple, between the bike path and the water. The Montreal humidity index soared, and storm clouds had begun to appear in the distance, floating surreal-like in the otherwise clear-for-a-city blue sky. I took a smoke from my pack and passed one to Gabe.

"Eh, Gabe?" Gabe nodded and I continued, "Have you ever thought of like, totally ditching this place? Y' know, running and setting up somewhere and just, like, living?"

Gabe paused in thought, "Yeah. But I also like free food and a bed without lice." He laughed and shoved me sideways jokingly.

I fell to the side laughing along with him. "Kay, guess you've got a point."

Gabe was in the system because he had no one. His parents had died in an accident and there were no relatives to take him in. Shortly before the accident, his mom had left his dad too. Gabe said she was gay³ and just left one day. He'd blamed gays for a bit, which I thought strange. Out of everyone I knew Gabe was the gayest. Anyway, his social worker and the childcare workers became his lifeline, his surrogate parents, his home. He was one of the few kids doing 'well' in the system. The only reason he was in a medium security group home, rather than low security, was because he had developed a special connection with Dave, our star childcare worker.

Nonetheless, Gabe wasn't perfect and always enjoyed a bit of mischief on the side, under the noses of gullible staff that felt immeasurably sorry for him.

Jack turned up next, guitar strung over his shoulder.

"Eh, man! Ready to rock?!" Jack said with an explosion of enthusiasm.

I laughed, "With that thing? I love some guitar Jack, but the only kind of rock you can let rip with that thing are ballads! Maybe some Cheap Trick?"

Jack examined me with mock insult written all over his face. "No way, man! What planet are *you* from, eh? I can totally make this thing howl. Name a song."

I thought for a second, “OK, how about Metallica’s *Crash Course in Brain Surgery*?” I grinned menacingly.

“Some metal. No problem, man. But I’ll need percussion and vocals. Who’s up?” He glanced at me and started to play. His question was more of a *ready, on your mark, go!* type of comment.

Gabe produced a couple of spoons from his pocket and took on the percussion, so I was left with the vocals.

I observed Gabe and his spoons curiously.

“What can I say, I plan ahead. Spoons are super useful.” Gabe smiled, held the spoons together in one hand, and began drumming them on his knee.

Funny the things you learn about your friends along the way. He wasn’t half bad at playing the spoons.

I put on my best Madonna voice and gave it a twist—like, shove a Madonna in a car crusher and come out sounding like young James Hetfield. Jen and Wil joined us in time for the chorus. We pelted out *Crash Course in Brain Surgery* in between fits of laughter.

The ‘perfect’ family that had been picnicking close by got up and left, looking fretful and startled. It never ceased to amaze me how easy it was to scare such well-established people who had it all.

“OK, so now that the Cosby family’s left, anyone bring some pot?” Jack winked at me and I couldn’t help but blush a little. He could be an ass, but his charming attitude made something inside me melt and I think he knew it.

I dropped my gaze and fiddled with my shoelace.

“Fret no more, Jack-o baby, I come bearing gifts.” Wil’s smile was secretive, in a guess-what-I-have-under-my-trench-coat kind of way.

Jack raised an eyebrow, “Is that an enormous dube in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?”

Wil produced the dube and motioned for my Zippo. I threw it over, he lit the joint, and took a long drag. I had a flash of my dad tasting the wine at a fine restaurant—slosh, whiff, sip, consider, approve. Wil finally exhaled his approval and passed the joint to me. After I’d also approved, I kept it going around the circle.

“Eh, man ... or, uh, chick or *chic* ...” Gabe drew the word *chic* out with an extra French twist, as if he were referring to a *chic femme fatal*. “We’re gonna miss you, you *chee-eeec chick*.” He winked and blew me a kiss.

“Fuck off, Gabe. I’m no chick. I’m, like, child-bearing age, man—that’s like at least a full-grown chicken.”

Jack added, sounding way too serious, “If you were a chicken, you’d like be able to fly outa here, eh ... if chickens could fly and all.”

I glanced at Jack and wondered about his brain cells. “Eh, Jack?”

He looked at me, “Yeah, Sam?”

“How old were you when you started smoking this stuff?”

There was a brief splutter of laughter between everyone who wasn’t Jack. My poke flew right on over Jack’s head.

“Dunno. With my mum, I guess ... got into her stash when I was eight. Boy was she ever pissed, eh!” Jack laughed as he remembered. “She like, locked me in my room for

a week! Just, y' know, passing me food now and then ... What a psycho. Wasn't like I got into her smack or nothin'! Anyways, smack's fucked up. Never gonna do that shit. That's what got'er in the end. Yup, stickin' to nothin' more 'en pot n' acid—none of that wacko shit for me, eh."

I hadn't known all this about Jack. We all fell silent, not knowing where to take the conversation next.

Jen saved the buzz with, "So you were like born into Cheech. Cool. Or Chong more your thing?"

Jack laughed, "Yup, you got it girl. Cheech for ever more! Or Chong ... whatever. Eh man, pass it here." He motioned for the joint and Jen passed it over.

As Jack was inhaling his freedom from reality, an unwanted guest turned up.

Gini stood over us, glaring at our gathering with disapproval, as was her norm.

"Well, well, look at what I've found. The hot-boxing Adams family. Does Dave know you're here? Or did you not invite him either? Well, don't worry your little hearts out because I've come anyway. And, guess what? I even have a going away present for our pint-sized slanty-eyed bitch over here."

I stared at her, more than slightly worried, considering what she might have on me, but was too stoned to come up with anything.

Wil interrupted my worried silence, "Gini man, uh, I mean chicken, uh, or maybe turkey? ... Is a turkey just like, a humongous chicken? Whoa ... Revelation."

Everyone giggled and then caught themselves and stopped.

Wil continued, "Chill out ... Take a toke. Ganjaman time ... Cloud 9 is callin' ya, man ... chill big chicken, chill."

Gini glared at Wil. "Fuck that. Whatever. *Your* bitch over there ..." She pointed at me, "is a two-faced little twat. You do know that, eh?"

"She's not *my* bitch, man. You miss the class on the hippie revolution or somethin'? She's *her own* bitch." Wil smiled, proud of his wit.

Jack fell backwards, laughing on the grass. "Ho! Ya' burnt, bitch!"

Gini wasn't shaken in the least. She stood, feet firmly planted in place. The smile that grew across her face was menacing, knowing.

Pot-buzzes were two-sided and now the anxiety side began to take hold.

I scrutinized Gini. "What the hell, Gini? You have something to say? Say it! You're fuckin' up our buzz."

That's when the shit really came pouring down.

Gini pulled my journal out of her bag. Pieces of paper stuck out from various pages. She'd bookmarked parts. I thought, '*Oh, fuck. Here we go.*' I desperately wished myself away, but remained in my place, hopelessly stoned, bug-eyed, and about to be squished.

Looming over us, Gini stood erect and confidently in jerk-mode. Her expression was that of a cat that's finally cornered the bug it's been after for ages. She opened my journal to her first bookmarked page and shot me a smug grin before launching my secrets to the world.

Stunned, I sat there fear-ridden, like the tiny insect she thought I was. There was nothing I could do. Gini was a scrapper. She was likely betting that I'd lunge for the journal. That's what she wanted, to put me on my back, to have an excuse to pummel me in front of my friends. But it was either that or let her reveal my deepest thoughts to everyone.

I jumped up and ran at Gini with my hands out in front. My plan was to grab my journal and keep running.

But Gini held on tight, as the smirk grew across her face, and within a split-second I was on my front with her on top of me. She straddled my back, legs on either side, as I lay completely helpless, with my arms flayed out on the grass as if trying to swim myself free.

Pleading with Gini would be futile, so I decided on threats instead. "Get the fuck off me Gini or I'll ..." I couldn't think of anything I had on her, of a good threat.

Gini was a bitch, but she generally didn't break the rules much—well, besides beating on people, but that seemed to be a tolerated right-of-passage in group homes. Every home had an 'alpha' and I suppose she was ours.

Gabe was now standing beside us, "What the fuck, Gini! Get off her!"

Ignoring Gabe, Gini placed the journal on my back, opened it to the first book-marked page, and began to read.

"Dear diary," Gini feigned my voice. I never started like that, but the next part was all me.

"Jesus fuck, if Gabe had any more energy he'd be glowing, like one of those wind-up toys that lights up and zooms around when you release it. He can be such a fuckin' kid.

Especially when he's going on and on about Jack. He's totally got a thing for him. Jack this, Jack that, "Jack's so great, no he's an ass, no he's god-sent, he's such a jerk, he's the best, why is he such a jerk??!" Boo-the-fuck-hoo! What a gaylord. He should follow his mom's footsteps and just come out of the fuckin' closet already."

The group fell silent.

I closed my eyes and chewed on my lip.

Gabe was still for a moment. Then he turned to leave without saying a word.

But Gini wasn't finished. "So, is it true Gabe? You gotta a crush on Jacky-o?" She laughed and no one joined in.

Gabe kept walking.

Jack ran after him and pushed him hard from behind. Gabe fell forwards to the ground but didn't look back. He got up again and resumed walking away.

"Knew there was somethin' fucked up about you! Stay away from me you fuckin' fag!"

Jen stood up and said to no one in particular, "Wow. Bad buzz. You're fucked up, Gini. What was that for?"

The others began to get up off the grass.

Gini rose to the occasion. She jumped up off me, shoved Jen, and Jen tripped backwards. Dripping venom, Gini glared at Jen, "Say that again ya' little cunt."

Wil took Jen's hand and pulled her away from the brewing fight. Jen resisted and turned towards me, "C'mon Sam. Let's go."

“Yeah, *Shopper*. Off you go, little rich girl.” Gini paused for effect, “Oh ... don’t forget this!” She threw my journal at me, then walked off in the other direction, proud of her ... something or other.

I held onto the book, glad that she hadn’t kept reading. Then I got up and followed the group, just far enough behind that I didn’t have to interact.

Gabe hid in his room over the next couple of days, only surfacing for meals.

I knocked on his bedroom door on Friday morning before I left.

“Eh ... uh ... Gabe?”

No answer.

I gave it one more shot, “Gabe? Eh man, Ms. Cohen’s here. I gotta go.”

Silence.

I turned the doorknob and something in me made me pause. I wasn’t strong enough for this kind of shit. What would I say? What would he say? I released the doorknob and sighed.

The door stood in front of me like a looming question mark.

I put my hand against it. “See ‘ya, Gabe.”



CHAPTER FOUR

A Home for Neglected Children

August

Just as my journal was a poor reflection of the way I felt about Gabe, my sentencing to Manny Cottage was a flawed depiction of who I was as a person. If public opinion were to rename Manny Cottage, it would be called *The Home for Neglected Children Who Will Amount to Nada*, because that is the heavy label that teens in Manny Cottage bear. Like jail time, a sentence at Manny Cottage is a branding difficult to escape.

,

I stood naked in the shower block. Betty, a tall muscular woman with pale pink skin and a Lady Di haircut, watched as I washed my hair with a mysterious shampoo that smelled like bleach. When done, she handed me another.

I looked at her, puzzled.

Betty clarified, "This one's for lice."

When satisfied that I was thoroughly sanitized, Betty handed me a towel, watched as I dried myself, then set herself to combing my hair.

She investigated the comb for evidence of infestation while I stood shivering wrapped in my towel. After a few minutes, she nodded decisively. I had passed her louse-free test.

Betty retrieved her clipboard from a nearby chair and checked some boxes. I was a lab rat awaiting an unpredictable fate.

Motioning to a pile of clothes on another chair, she told me to get dressed. "Put those on. They're Bethel unit clothes. Kids all wear the same thing here, so don't worry, you're not special."

I stared at the pile of beige clothes. "Where are *my* clothes? I mean, I'm going to get them back, eh?" The jeans I'd been wearing were the ones signed by Bono. They were irreplaceable.

"Yes. All your stuff will be returned when you leave. Now put 'em on, don't have all day here." Betty switched her attention back to her clipboard and the message was clear: conversation terminated.

When I was beige from head to toe, Betty led me down a hall to a very clean room with a bed, desk and chair. A notepad and pen lay on the desk, along with some pamphlets and a couple of books.

"This'll be your room for the duration of the 3-day induction program⁴."

I stared at her blankly and thought, *'The what?'*

Betty picked up on my confusion. "Oh my, they didn't fill you in, did they? Jeez, they never do." And continued without waiting for a reply, "Every kid that arrives here goes through a 3-day induction program. During this time, you will stay in this room for three days. Your meals will be brought to you. The only time you will leave this room is for washroom visits. You will not be permitted to interact with the other kids in the unit. Upon the completion of the induction program, you will be assigned another room and will be introduced into the general population in Bethel unit. Got it?"

I nodded.

"My office is right here." Betty motioned to the closed door behind her. "When you need to visit the washroom, let me know by knocking on your door and I'll accompany you. I will be supervising you throughout the induction program. Your bedroom door will be locked at all times." Betty nodded as if to say, *'OK, you got it.'*

I looked at her, unsure of how to react.

Abruptly, Betty turned and headed for her office, closing my door behind her. There was a loud *clunk*, as the deadbolt engaged.

I sat on the bed and took in the room.

The walls were pastel green and the Plexiglas window had wire-mesh woven through it. The desk and chair were made of maple wood, which gave the room its only sense of homeyness. They resembled the desk and chair I'd had in my own room as a little kid. My parents loved maple wood. Maple wood and mahogany, all over their house. In

fact, the lonely sterile feeling in this room reminded me a lot of home. The anxiety felt a bit different though. At home my mom was always on my back, nagging, shouting, controlling. Here, it was somewhat opposite. No nagging or shouting. Just orders and silence.

My sense of loss of control surged. *That* they did have in common.

My left eye began to randomly twitch, like it does when I've been home for a few days. I pressed on my eyelid with my fingers to stop the twitching and lay back on the bed.

Even the ceiling was pastel green. I was trapped in a green gift box. But who was I a gift to? I imagined the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk opening this box to find me inside. Would he be surprised? Amused at the little trapped and helpless girl inside? Or maybe he'd be disappointed at the lack of fat on my bones. Would he pluck me up and add me to his hamster-cage with all the other trapped kids? Maybe he'd think he was saving me. The cage at least had an exercise wheel, and also bars with air flowing through and no solid walls. If he let me just wander around freely, then what would happen? Chaos for sure.

I had to get out of here. I curled up in a ball and did the next best thing—went to sleep.

•

Betty came in with a tray of food sometime in the afternoon. With no clock on the wall, time had become elusive. She placed the tray on the desk.

“Your chart says that you aren't on the pill. Is this correct?”

“Uh ... yeah? Why?” Was this seriously any of her business?

She pointed at a little paper cup on the tray. "You have to take this."

I glanced at the cup with the tiny pink pill in it. "Oh, uh, I stopped taking the pill because it messes with me, y' know, my moods and stuff."

"Listen, I'm only stating what's in your file. This is not an option. I'm guessing it's because you've been classified as sexually active, perhaps promiscuous. You have to take it in front of me." Betty embraced her inner cop. She wouldn't be taking questions and certainly not protests.

I put the pill in my mouth and feigned swallowing.

"Open up." Betty gestured for me to open my mouth.

I pushed the pill up between my cheek and teeth and opened wide.

Betty looked in my mouth, told me to raise my tongue, and she searched under my lips with her fingers. "Nice try. Now, let's do that one more time."

I swallowed the pill.

Betty gave me an exasperated look. "You girls. You're all the same, every one of you."

She set the tray on my desk and retreated back to her office.

I considered the meal in front of me. Food. Mashed potatoes, peas and carrots, and a pork chop. My stomach clenched. I wondered how much of this food I'd be required to eat. There was nowhere to stash it.

I ate the peas and carrots and half the potatoes, then pushed the pork chop up onto the other half, making it

seem like I'd eaten more. When Betty came to retrieve my tray, I lied that I was vegetarian. She scrutinized me for a moment, then shrugged and left with the tray.

Betty never seemed to register the vegetarian message and kept bringing me meals with meat. But she never made me eat it. This worked out well for me, as the meat took up a third of my plate, so I only had to deal with the other two-thirds. I guess she wasn't that observant after all.

Before bed, Betty watched me brush my teeth and pee. She handed me some light green pyjamas. I thought they matched the walls quite well and wondered if the buyer had colour coordinated on purpose. I put them on and instantly felt an allegiance with the walls.

"Goodnight, Sam. Sleep well. And if you have to pee, stamp on the floor. The security guard's office is right below you. He'll come up and bring you to the washroom."

I wondered if he'd watch too. Yup. Pretty sure I wouldn't be needing to pee.

Betty closed and locked the door.

•

On my second day of isolation, I wrote all my angry thoughts down on that pad on the desk. Then I drew pictures of what I would do to all the people who'd fucked me over.

With Gini, I'd dig up all the dirt I could on her and scream it out to the world. That bitch would *not* be getting away with reading my journal, that was for fucking sure! I drew a picture of her crying and pleading for me to forgive her,

and I scribbled Xs across her eyes like serial killers do in horror movies.

As for my mom, I'd lock her away in this room and give the key to the *Jack and the Beanstalk* giant. I complemented my mom-rant with a drawing of her being squished inside the giant's humongous fist. He didn't much like her either.

And that creep Christien, the one who'd fucked with me and Frankie, he'd roast on a spit over a bonfire, like the pig he is, all bound up and sizzling. His skin would bubble and his eyes'd burst with the heat. All the while he'd be screaming, "je t'en prie! je t'en prie!" *I beg you! I beg you!* And I'd laugh and turn the spit.

I looked at the butterfly tattoo on my wrist. Frankie had one just the same. Christien had given us tattoos that same evening, before shit went sideways. Thirteen, first time drunk, and naive as hell. I'd been so dumb, had even defended him at first ... until he did the same to me while on the run that first time. That fucker was twenty-seven. I cringed. None of it would've happened if it weren't for me. He was *my* uncle's friend, and I had begged Frankie to go to his stupid party. I wish I'd never met that piece of pig's ass.

I scratched at my butterfly tattoo and the pain was gratifying. I began to gouge my wrist with the pen, slashing at that stupid butterfly with blue ink. The pen wasn't sharp enough to break through, but at least I'd defaced the fuckin' tat.

Hot and sweaty, I began to hyper ventilate. I reminded myself to breathe. Anger was like that. Bubbling hot lava, followed by an explosion, then the lava cools again, morphing into something more solid and resilient to being fucked with.

A cold sweat replaced the hot one. Dizzy and suddenly very tired, I folded my arms on the desk and collapsed forward into them. Anger and guilt were exhausting. I studied my irate doodles and frowned. The system sucked. My parents sucked. When would all this end? I tore the pages into tiny pieces so no one could read my thoughts. If anyone saw my doodles and rants, they'd commit me to the Douglas Mental Hospital and ditch the key.

I lay back on the bed. What the hell was this place? All I'd done was run away. A prison for runaways. Nothing made sense. Punishment for wanting freedom was taking it away? Well, they'd better have secure locks on this dungeon because I damn sure wouldn't be staying.

My eye began to twitch again. I fought back tears. No way this fuckin' hellhole would make me cry.

,

On my third and last day in solitary confinement, I read all the pamphlets and the two books.

The *Welcome to Manny Cottage* pamphlet had a map of the whole place. There were eight buildings on the map, and they surrounded a grassy outdoor common area which was encircled by a running track. The school sat on one side of the track and the administration building on the opposite side. The other buildings were units with varying degrees of security. The pamphlet said that each unit was suited to the needs of the kids assigned to it. Although everyone had the right to schooling, the kids from only four units had the right to go to the school building. Bethel, which was the high-security unit I'd been admitted into, had in-house schooling. On the bottom of

the pamphlet, big bold letters exclaimed, "**WE ARE HERE FOR YOU.**" I thought sarcastically, 'Wow, what a relief.'

Another pamphlet, titled *Birth Control is Your Right*, described a women's right to choose. Confused, I thought about the birth control pills I'd been made to swallow.

Then there was the one with a picture of a smoker's lungs on its front cover, and another about gateway drugs. According to those ones, I was already doomed.

The books were more interesting.

The Little Prince I thought kind of cute, but *Go Ask Alice* really grabbed me. Its edges were scuffed, it had obviously been read a million times, for good reason. I wondered if Betty had read it. Perhaps she'd put it in the room by mistake.

Go Ask Alice is a journal written by a runaway girl from a middle-class family who got addicted to drugs after mistakenly trying acid. She'd never done drugs before and couldn't get enough of the experience. Her life soon goes off the rails, she ends up in the slums, gets raped, and it doesn't get better from there. No happy ending in this story. I was definitely doomed. Maybe it was all the fault of drugs ... maybe that's why I was a runaway and rape victim.

I thought back to the first time I ran. Nope, the rape had happened before the drugs. I sighed in relief. Maybe this book's being here was intentional after all. It was sure an effective scare tactic.

Man ... rumination was bad for the soul.

I'd meet my new prison mates in the morning, just a few hours away. The thought made me anxious. What if they

were all fucked up like Alice? Druggies never made for good friends. I'd have to watch my stuff and forget about writing. Wasn't going to repeat the Gini incident. What if each one of them was an embodiment of Gini? Gini should really be here instead of me. She's the one who's truly fucked up.

Betty showed up for washroom duty at 8 PM. I'd begun to feel safer locked in my room by myself. Betty never took her eyes off me while with me—listening, observing, jotting things down on her clipboard.

The lights switched off. Day 3 had finally ended.

Tellwell 