

Eternal Mercury

Elaine Pinter

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Eternal Mercury
Third Edition

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This book is dedicated to Justin and Jonas.

Thank you to each and every one of my family members and friends for believing in me.

A special thank you to Beth, Charlie, Cindy, David, Elena, Mari, Sma, and Mom and Dad.



Trust fate. Live life. Finish well.

Book 1
Chelsee's Story

People are wrong when they say “It all happened so fast.” It doesn’t happen fast at all. It happens in slow motion. I felt every sway in the car and heard every sound the tires and brakes made as I braced myself for the unavoidable impact.

Chapter 1

Perfect

Perfect. That was how my life could be described. I had lived my entire life in the City of Trees. Boise is technically a city, but it feels more like a town. Maybe “perfect” was an exaggeration, but it sure felt like it in that moment. I was about to graduate from high school with all of my friends. Some of us had even been in the same class together since kindergarten. The commencement speeches were over and it was almost my turn to walk across the stage to get my diploma. I didn’t think I would ever stop smiling because it was awesome to think that the next chapter of life was about to begin for all of us.

Principal Shaw looked at me. “Chelsee Taylor.”

I stepped up onto the stage and took a deep breath to steady myself. *Don’t trip, don’t trip, please, don’t trip.* My family and friends cheered for me while I made my way to the center of the stage. Their excitement was so contagious that my smile got even bigger when I shook the principal’s hand.

“Go, CeeCee!” Max’s voice boomed out above the other cheers and applause.

My boyfriend, Max, was one of the kids I had known since kindergarten. When I whispered my name to him on our very first day of school, it came out as “CeeCee” when he repeated it and he’d never once called me anything else.

Max must have figured he could get away with making me blush in front of everyone since his last name was Cutler and he’d already made his trek across the stage. That actually wasn’t true—I wasn’t loud enough or brave enough to do anything other than clap for him when it was his turn.

I stood at the end of the stage and moved the tassel to the left side of my graduation cap. When I started down the steps, I caught a glimpse of just how many people were packed into the building. I’d been up in the stands before, but the view inside the university’s arena was a lot different from that angle. A wave of stage fright hit me and I looked down at my feet. *Just a little farther to my chair.* I was glad I’d turned down the heels Stacey, my best friend since third grade, had brought over to my house before the ceremony. She figured we could at least make our hair and legs look good in the unflattering graduation gowns. To smooth over my rejection of the shoes, I had to let her do my hair and makeup. It was a great tradeoff because whatever she put in my hair smelled really good and showed off my long, brown waves. I never wore makeup unless Stacey talked me into it. I preferred the natural look, but she was so good at it that I didn’t mind for special occasions. *Good, I made it back to my seat.* I breathed a sigh of relief and thanked my black ballet flats for an uneventful walk through the auditorium.

Eli Zimmer crossed the stage and sat back down in his chair. The applause was fading, but the anticipation was building.

Principal Shaw returned to the microphone. “Congratulations, high school graduates!”

A sea of blue mortarboards sailed through the air along with lots of excited cheers.

I retrieved my cap and pushed my way through my classmates toward the front of the auditorium. I peeked through the crowd and spotted Max's dark, tousled hair. When he turned around, I couldn't help but smile at his boyish handsomeness. He lifted me off the floor in a big hug.

"It's official—we made it!" he shouted over the roar of the voices. "Let's go find everyone."

He took my hand and led me through the wall of people. His five inches of height over my five foot five made it easy for him to find the way to where our families were waiting.

My mom and dad, Marcie and Sam, were sitting with Max's mom and dad, Janet and Randy. Max's older brother, Van, and Van's girlfriend, Sierra, were there, too. Our parents had become very close friends over the years because of all the time Max and I spent together. Not only was it great to have that closeness with everyone, but it made events and get-togethers convenient.

I noticed how my mom and dad made such a nicely matched couple. My mom was an inch taller than me, but her build was very slight. Her hair was graying and the way she wore it flipped up at the ends made her look classic. She was extremely friendly, but in a quiet way. My dad was a man of few words. His gray hair and strong build made him look distinguished. My slender but athletic frame and quiet personality were a combination I had gotten from both of them.

"I am so proud of you, sweetie." My mom pulled me into a tight hug.

"Thanks, Mom."

My dad put his arms around both of us and smiled.

"Come here, Max." My mom held out her arms to hug him.

I turned around to get my hugs from Randy and Janet. I had been a fixture in their home for so many years that they felt like a second set of parents to me.

"Congratulations, honey." Janet tucked a piece of her short, dark hair behind her ear and reached up on her tip toes to hug me. I stretched my arms around her.

Randy came over next and wrapped his huge arms around me. "Nice job, little girl."

Randy was a big guy and could, at times, be intimidating. His size coupled with his buzz cut almost made him look like a drill sergeant, but I knew that on the inside, he had a soft heart. It was no secret he'd always wanted a daughter, and since she'd never showed up, I'd developed a special bond with him.

"Congrats, bro." Van punched Max in the arm and took cover behind Sierra, which was ridiculous since she was an inch shorter than me.

"Really? Why can't you guys just hug like normal people?" Sierra asked after Max dashed around her to punch his brother back.

When Sierra brushed the bangs of her soft brown, shoulder length hair out of her eyes, I glanced at her ring finger. We all expected an engagement ring to appear on it at any minute, but it was still bare. Van and Sierra had met playing co-ed softball a couple of years before and had been together nonstop ever since. It's not like I wouldn't have known about a ring ahead of time, but I wanted to be sure I hadn't missed anything.

I reached out to hug Sierra. "They've been like this ever since we were little."

"I know. I guess I shouldn't expect them to ever quit roughhousing—even in public places," Sierra said as we embraced.

"I thought Stacey's valedictorian speech was beautiful," my mom said.

"It was," Janet said. "And her shoes were so cute."

Janet's comment made me giggle. "Stacey will be glad to know that at least someone realizes the importance of good shoes." I showed off my unappreciated but practical shoes.

My dad and Randy were not interested in footwear and had drifted into a conversation about the upcoming Boise State Bronco football season.

". . . and not just football. This year, we'll be in the front row at all the track meets." My dad patted Randy on the back. "That kid of yours is fast."

"You better believe it." Randy smiled proudly. "Blue turf on the ball field and blue track inside the sports center."

Van grabbed Max in a headlock. "A lot of guys run a four-minute mile."

It wasn't just that the two of them were scuffling and joking around that made it obvious they were brothers. Even though Van was taller and Max was faster, they looked so much alike.

Max pulled his head free and got in one last punch.

He was so humble about how gifted a runner he was. I was still amazed at how he regularly blew off those kinds of comments.

Van put his arm around me. "Congratulations, little sister."

"Thanks." I squeezed him.

"Ready?" Max asked me and took my hand.

I nodded. *I am definitely ready to go hang out with our friends.*

"Be careful, you two," my mom said and gave us each another hug.

"Yes, please be careful out there tonight." Janet also hugged us again.

Max led me through the crowd to the room where we returned our graduation gowns. It felt good to be out of the gown and back in just my gray, flowered dress. Max must have felt the same way because the first thing he did was untuck his black polo shirt from his khaki pants. We found a side door to the parking lot and slipped out into the fading glow of the sunset.

"I didn't think it was possible," he said, "but you're smiling more than usual."

"I can't help it." I tried to make it less, but I couldn't.

"Don't you ever quit smiling, CeeCee."

He must have said that to me a thousand times and I answered just like I had a thousand times before.

"I don't think I ever could."

"Could you believe that dance Tommy did up there on the stage?" Max laughed again just like we all did when it was happening. "That guy is hilarious."

His hearty laugh got me started again, too.

"He probably really was that excited," I said. "He cut it pretty close. Still, I could never do something like that."

"Tommy is the only one I know who could." He walked around to the passenger door of his silver Pontiac Grand Am and opened it for me.

Lying on the seat was a jewelry box with a red bow around it.

"A graduation present?" I looked up at him. "I didn't get you anything."

"It's just a little something so that you'll always have a piece of me with you, you know, to remember me by." He winked at me.

"It's not like I could ever forget you. I've known you since we were five. And besides," I nodded toward the arena we'd just exited, "we're both going to go to college right here on this campus."

“I know that. But graduating is a big deal.” He picked up the box and handed it to me. “Open it.”

I took off the bow and opened the box. Inside was a platinum necklace. The pendant on it was an abstract version of Mercury’s winged foot from Roman mythology.

“Max, this is so awesome. It’s exactly like your tattoo.”

I pulled up the right sleeve of his shirt to expose his upper arm and held the necklace up next to his tattoo.

“So, what do you think?” he asked.

He had the most beautiful, genuine smile I’d ever seen. It was a true reflection of the person he was. I loved it when that smile spread across his face and lit up his dark blue eyes like it was right then.

“Are you kidding? I love it,” I said.

I handed him the necklace and moved my hair out of the way. I turned around and he clasped it around my neck.

“The runner’s symbol of speed. It’s perfect,” I said. “But I’m definitely not as good as you . . . I’m not going to be on the track team anymore now that we’re starting college.”

“But you’re still my running partner. You love running on the Greenbelt every morning just as much as I do.”

“You’re right . . . I guess we’ll always have that. Thank you for this.”

I rubbed the pendant between my finger and thumb, and looked into his eyes. I threw my arms around his neck and waited for a kiss. *I’ve been kissing him for two years now, but no amount of years will ever change the fluttering in my chest and the tingling in my hands I feel every single time.* He pulled me in close, leaned down, and kissed me. And there it was—the familiar feeling surged through me. I knew more and more people were filtering into the parking lot, but I was able to ignore them because I never wanted to lose that feeling.

“They’re waiting for us,” he whispered in my ear as he brushed my hair back.

“Right.” I was sad that the kissing had to stop, but it was time to go. “I can’t believe how hot it is. Will you please get the air conditioner going?”

“Yeah, yeah of course. It’ll just take a minute to cool down. You’ll appreciate this heat once you’re sitting in a raft floating down the river.”

“That’s true, but the water feels cold no matter what.” I could already feel the cool air coming out of the vents in the dash. “What a perfect day. Graduation followed by a nighttime float down the river with a bunch of our friends.”

He nodded. “After we change our clothes, we need to pick Lance and Stacey up at Ann Morrison Park.”

“Sounds good.”

Max parked in the driveway of his gray, two-story house. I loved the way it always felt so homey despite its huge size. Even though my house was only a few blocks from his, I had thrown a bag of clothes into his car to save time. I went into the bathroom and traded my graduation dress and shoes for a pair of gray shorts, a purple tee shirt, and sports sandals. I glanced in the mirror and admired the way Stacey had done my makeup. It gave depth to my brown eyes and made my soft features look a little more like I really was eighteen. *Maybe if I could figure out how to do my own makeup, people would quit assuming I’m only sixteen.* I picked up my striped tote bag, and Max was already waiting for me when I came out of the bathroom.

“It is so ridiculous how tan you are.” I looked at him in his black shorts and gray tee shirt.

“I’m out there running with you every day and I’m still completely pale.”

He smiled and shook his head. “I don’t know why you worry about things like that, CeeCee. Ready?”

He tossed my bag onto the backseat of his car and we headed out to meet our friends.

Floating the river was my next favorite thing to running on the Greenbelt paths that followed alongside the river through the entire city. I loved the way it felt like you weren’t in a city even when you were actually downtown. The river and its paths were shaded by the huge trees that lined them and branched out into several parks, and even the university, along the way. I couldn’t count the number of times we had floated the river, but almost all of those times were during the summer months when the flow was a little lower and the river was officially open to floaters. The unseasonably dry winter and hot spring were the only reasons we could even think about getting on the river so early in the year. By the height of summer, the water would be moving at a pretty lazy pace, which always made it extra relaxing.

“I can’t remember for sure . . . how many times have we floated the river in the dark?” I asked.

“Just twice,” he said. “Once last summer and I think the first time was the summer before that.”

“Are you sure we can’t get in trouble for it?”

He smiled. “It’s mostly just frowned upon.”

When we drove into the park, Lance and Stacey were waiting next to Lance’s tan Ford pickup truck. Her petite size was exaggerated when she was standing next to his stocky body, but they went together so well, in an opposite kind of way. Even though Max and Lance had been best friends for almost as long as Stacey and I had, Lance and Stacey had only been dating for about a year. It was great because the four of us hung out together all the time.

Max got out of the car to help Lance load some oars into the trunk and Stacey got into the backseat behind me.

“So, did my speech sound okay?” She moved my tote bag to the floor. “I was so nervous. Could you tell?”

“Stace, are you kidding me? It was excellent—I’m so proud of you. My mom said it was beautiful.” I turned around farther in my seat so I could see her better. “Oh, and Janet said so, too, but that she also really liked your shoes.”

“I told you . . . shoes and hair.” She looked pleased as she sat back and fastened her seatbelt.

“Well, all the work you put into our hair is about to go out the window. I’ve never made it down the river once without at least getting a little wet.” I took a ponytail holder out of my purse and pulled my hair back. “Want one?”

“And wreck this hairdo? No way—I’ll take my chances.” She ran her fingers through her perfectly straight, long, blonde hair and we both giggled.

“I figured as much,” I said.

I heard the trunk close and Max and Lance got into the car.

“Tommy, Eli, and Kayla already took the rafts up to Barber Park in their trucks,” Lance said. “Ainsley’s on her way to pick up the last few kids that are still waiting down here.”

We’d floated the river enough times to make sure we got everybody and the equipment all in the right place at the right time, but it still took some coordinating.

“CeeCee and I ran the Greenbelt just about every morning over the last week,” Max said. “We’ve been up and down the whole thing between here and Barber Park. Water’s pretty high,

but there're only a couple spots with downed trees . . . we'll see them in plenty of time."

"Nice job, Track Star," Lance said. "At least you guys are doing something useful with all that running you do."

Max glanced over his shoulder. "You guys don't mind if I run into Big Jud's, do you?"

"Seriously, Max? Another bacon cheeseburger and chocolate shake?" I asked even though I wasn't surprised at all. "How much does it cost you to support your habit?" *I love to mess with him, but I am really not exaggerating.*

"Nah, this is a snack—just the bacon cheeseburger, no shake." He winked at me.

"Good call, Track Star," Lance said. "I could use a burger. We're growing boys."

"You are a growing boy, Lance." Stacey ran her hand through his spikey, brown hair and then poked him in the stomach. "At this rate, you are going to have to take up running. We'll put you on river patrol detail next time, too."

"Nope, I'll get plenty of exercise to burn this off tonight by using my spectacular raft-paddling skills." Lance patted his stomach. "Besides, Track Star needs someone to cheer him on from the stands when he's winning all those medals."

Max smiled and shook his head as he parked in the lot at Big Jud's.

I unbuckled my seatbelt. "I could use a lemonade. Want anything, Stace?"

"No, I'm good, thanks," she said.

Max and I walked past the three bay windows on the front of the small, brown building and he held the door for me. I loved the casual setting inside the little burger joint. We had been there so many times that it just felt like we belonged there. Plus, the food was great.

When we got back to the car, Max tossed a burger back to Lance and we took off again. Once we drove onto the road in front of Barber Park, I could see all the other kids' cars and trucks parked in the turnout on the other side of the Eckert Bridge. Max parked at the end and Ainsley pulled her green sedan in next.

"Pop the trunk, Track Star." Lance grabbed the oars out of the trunk and sprinted ahead of us across the road and down the path next to the bridge.

Max finished his burger in what seemed like three bites as we walked across the road. The moon was almost completely full, and it was really big in the sky. With the moonlight reflecting off the water, I could see the outlines of people launching their rafts.

"It's funny how things look so different in the dark," I said to Stacey while we walked down the steep path toward the river.

"Yeah, I guess it's because you just don't know exactly what to expect in the dark, even in a familiar place," she said.

"Max, Lance!" Eli shouted from the bank. "Your raft is already down here."

"Right on, Eli. I've got the rest of the oars," Lance shouted back and hurried toward the river.

Stacey and I waded into the water and climbed in the front of the big, gray raft while Lance and Max held it steady for us. Then they shoved the raft off and hopped in with us. I couldn't help but keep my eyes on Max; he definitely had the physique of a strong runner.

Most of the rafts had already pushed off ahead of us, but a few launched after us. I counted the shadows of fifteen rafts and guessed there were at least fifty kids riding in them. Max and Lance steered our raft to the middle of the river and I could hear the familiar sound of the moving water. I breathed in the cool breeze of air that rose over us as we floated down the river. It was such a stark contrast to the heat from earlier in the evening. The view of the sky above the silhouettes of the trees was completely open. Even with the bright moon, I could still

see quite a few stars. I leaned back against Max's legs and rested my head on his knees while I looked up at the sky. We all quietly enjoyed the serenity of one of our favorite places.

"Can you see the stars?" I asked Stacey.

"Once we get up to the campground tomorrow night, we really will be out of town and the sky will be even more incredible," she said.

Screams from the girls and laughter from the boys on the rafts ahead of us replaced the silence. The exhilaration of a bunch of freshly graduated seniors saturated the air.

"Watch out. Here comes the first drop-off," I warned Stacey. I righted myself, but I still shrieked when the frigid water sprayed into the raft. "I'll never get used to how cold that is." A shiver ran through me.

"It doesn't help with you two steering us into the spray!" Stacey yelled at the guys, only half-joking.

"Max, do you remember when we used to float down the river in inner tubes?" I leaned my head back toward him. "The raft is a definite upgrade."

"Yeah, yeah of course. We were kids, though, so I don't think we cared how cold it was because we were having so much fun." A smile crossed his face. "Remember how long it took me to convince you to jump in at the pump house bases?"

"Oh, come on, I was a kid." I smiled back.

"No, it was only a few years ago." He leaned over and kissed me on top of the head.

"That was more than a few years ago." I tried to defend myself, but I was secretly thinking of how many times I'd stood on the edge of the concrete pylon while Max jumped in fearlessly. It wasn't that high above the river, but it took me a long time to build up the courage to jump into the water instead of walking back down to the bank.

"We're almost to them—you could jump in tonight. We can stop there if you want, CeeCee." Max acted like he was going to paddle the raft to the bank.

"Oh, please. The water is freezing and it's kind of chilly now that it's dark. No one would jump in tonight," I retorted.

"I can't remember a time you guys weren't together," Stacey said. "You two are really just perfect together." She spotted my necklace, smiled, and then shook her head. "It's very annoying, you know."

My usual smile returned to my face.

"You really don't ever stop smiling, do you?" Lance asked.

I couldn't help but smile because what Stacey had said was true. Max and I had been inseparable since that first day of kindergarten. I had been smiling at him on the playground, and as soon as he asked me my name, he grabbed my hand and we ran to the jungle gym to play. Max was always holding my hand and showing me what to do because I was so quiet. His protectiveness over me had grown over the years, and I knew he would always be watching over me. I also knew that we were meant for each other and I promised myself that I would never take that for granted. I truly did appreciate what an amazing guy he was. It wasn't that we always got along perfectly; it was just that we fit together so well.

A huge splash followed by shouts and laughter rang out.

I gasped. "No, who—"

"Tommy," the other three said in unison.

"I can't believe he jumped in." I covered my mouth. "He's crazy."

Sure enough, I saw Tommy being pulled into a raft a few ahead of ours.

"I'm glad you guys aren't leaving to go to school," Lance said. "We'll still get to do all

this stuff together.”

Lance wasn't going to Boise State with us. Instead, he was going to automotive technical school. He could fix anything and his dad owned an auto repair shop. I was probably just as glad as Lance that Stacey was staying in Boise.

“Any ideas on your major yet, Stacey?” Max asked.

“I'm not totally sure yet,” she said, “but I'm pretty sure it will be something to do with science. It's easy for you, though, isn't it? You're going to be a coach just like your dad, right?”

“Probably not football, but something to do with sports,” Max said. “I'm thinking of getting my degree in athletic training.”

I loved the way Max was so content with life, yet he was also realistic at the same time. He was always sure and calm about things and that made me feel so safe and comfortable with him.

Max continued, “Oh, and Van and Sierra will be around, too. Don't forget—they promised to show us around campus.”

A puzzled look came over my face. It made me jealous that the three of them knew what they wanted to do. I looked at the lights on the Boise State campus while we floated past it. I thought about the ceremony we'd just had there, but I wasn't sure what direction my life was supposed to take as far as school and a career were concerned. *At least I have the whole summer ahead of me without any obligations so I can figure out what's next.*

As usual, Stacey picked up on my thoughts. “Don't worry, Chelsea. We preregistered for all the basics. You have plenty of time to figure it out.”

“Yeah, you're right . . .” My concern faded away. “Things will pretty much just stay the way they are.”

“Good friends and good times.” Lance summed it up and nodded to the left. “We're already coming up to the Pioneer Footbridge.”

“Wow, the water's moving pretty fast,” Max said. “That was way less than the usual hour-and-a-half trip.”

The guys paddled to the shore right before we got to the bridge. They hopped out and pulled us up the bank in the raft.

“Look, we kept you girls pretty dry,” Max said.

“I told you. Outstanding paddling skills.” Lance flexed his muscles.

“Yes, we are in awe, Lance.” Stacey reached up and poked him in the stomach again.

She had said it playfully, but I knew she really was in awe of him. And he was obviously in awe of her, too. He wasn't intimidated by how smart she was and we all knew she was going to be something great.

Stacey and I crawled out onto the river bank and deflated the raft while the guys helped load the rest of the equipment into Lance's truck. Once everything was packed up and everyone found their rides, Lance folded the passenger seat of his truck forward so Stacey and I could climb into the extended cab. The guys got in and we headed back up to Max's car.

“What time are you guys leaving for the campground tomorrow?” Lance asked.

“What do you think, CeeCee? Right after lunch?” Max asked.

“Yeah, that should give me plenty of time to get my stuff together and still sleep in,” I said.

“Remember, now, the car trunk isn't that big.” Max winked at me.

“Fine,” I agreed, knowing that I would still bring as much stuff as seemed good at the

time.

“What, no early morning run?” Lance asked like he thought he was proving his earlier point about running.

“We’re saving it up for a big hike once we get up into the mountains. That way, you can join us,” Max said.

Lance shook his head. “I’ll be busy working on my campfire-building skills at that point.”

“Oh, I’m sure you will.” Stacey rolled her eyes.

Lance parked next to Max’s car, and Max folded the seat forward so Stacey and I could get out.

“Later, Track Star, Chelsea,” Lance said.

“Bye, you two.” Stacey said after she climbed into the front seat.

“See you in the mountains,” Max said while I waved goodbye to them.

Once Max drove me home, he walked around to my side of the car and shut the door for me after I got out.

“That was such a perfect day,” I said.

“It was.” He leaned against the car and looked into my eyes. “Come here.”

I pressed myself up against him and got a couple more of those kisses that I enjoyed so much.

“I’ll pick you up after lunch tomorrow. Happy Graduation, CeeCee.” He put his fingers on the winged foot pendant and rested his palm over my heart.

“Happy Graduation.” I leaned in for one last kiss.

As I went inside my house, I breathed in the fluttering, tingling feeling that surged through me from his kisses. I showered and my phone beeped while I was putting on my pajamas.

Max had sent me a text:

Luv u. Sleep well.

I responded:

Luv u 2.

And then I settled into my cozy bed for a good night’s sleep.

Chapter 2

Wrecked

“Max is here, Chelsea,” my mom called out.

“Okay, I’m coming.” I gathered up my bags and headed into the living room.

“Don’t forget . . . the cooler, tent, and camping gear are already in the trunk,” Max teased as he took the bags from me.

“Ha, ha. It’s only two bags, Max.” *I love that he’ll find a way to squish in however much stuff I want to bring.*

“Yeah, it’s only one night of camping, CeeCee.” He looked at the bags. “Hey, I forgot my MP3 player. Is yours in one of these bags?”

“It’s in my purse.”

“Yeah, yeah of course it is.” He winked at my mom.

“Okay, you two, be careful out there. And have fun, too. Did I tell you how proud I am of both of you?” My mom reached out and squeezed us both into a hug.

“Only once or twice.” Max winked at her again.

“Thanks, Mom. See you tomorrow.” I gave her another hug. “Bye, Dad,” I called over my shoulder.

Max crammed my bags into the trunk of his car while I got in. It only took a minute of rearranging before he joined me.

“Lance called right before I left my house,” Max said after he pulled the car out onto the highway. “He said they still had to stop for gas and ice, but that most everyone else headed up an hour or so ago to get the campsite ready.”

“I bet Stacey has more than two bags. That’s probably what’s taking them so long,” I joked.

“I believe that.”

I hooked my MP3 player up to the stereo and turned up the music. In just a moment, we were headed up Highway 21, alongside the river. I looked up at the rocks on either side of the canyon walls and breathed in the peaceful feeling of leaving town for the outdoors.

“I can’t wait to get up there and see the moon and stars tonight,” I said. “They were so pretty last night.”

The car climbed the incline of the road around the dam that created the reservoir, and the canyon walls gave way to a view of the rolling foothills.

“Me, too, but I’m looking forward to that hike,” he said. “Lance is right: I really would miss all of this too much if we went away to college.”

“I know, but I don’t care as long as I’m with you,” I said.

I rubbed my finger and thumb across the pendant he had given me. He saw that out of the corner of his eye and the smile I loved so much appeared. I looked out across the reservoir to our right as we crossed High Bridge.

“Look at the boats out on the water,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah of course,” he said. “The weather’s just right today; it’s not so hot.”

“It’s so pretty how the waves sparkle in the sunlight.”

He looked at me and smiled.

There were a couple more boats out on the water to our left and I could see the pine trees starting to dot the tops of the mountains. “Home” by Daughtry was playing on the stereo and I settled back into my seat to take in the scenery.

“Great song.” Max turned up the volume.

A little over eighteen miles up the highway, we started to head around a curve. The road had become very narrow, without much of a shoulder. A guardrail lining the left edge of the road was the only thing separating it from the drop-off to the water far below. On the other side was a solid wall of brush running straight up the steep slope of the hillside. As we rounded to the right, it was impossible to see around the corner. Without any warning, a stalled pickup truck towing an old horse trailer appeared on the road ahead of us. It was completely stopped and the passenger side tires were barely off the road. There just wasn’t enough room for it to be any farther out of the way, so it was blocking a large portion of the right lane. Max slammed on the brakes and steered to the left to try to go around it, but we were face to face with a car in the other lane.

“Max!” I screamed when I realized there was no way he could slow the car down in time.

My side of the car was headed straight for the left rear corner of the metal trailer. At the last second, Max cranked the steering wheel as hard as he could to the right and then all I could see was the dry brush covering the hillside.

People are wrong when they say “It all happened so fast.” It doesn’t happen fast at all. It happens in slow motion. I felt every sway in the car and heard every sound the tires and brakes made as I braced myself for the unavoidable impact. I never blinked once as the images raced past me.

The seatbelt locked hard against my chest and the tires continued to scream against the pavement as the car angled toward the edge of the road. An explosion ripped through the air when the driver’s side of the car plowed into the right rear corner of the trailer. The sickening sound of metal scraping against metal seemed like it would never stop. Smoke filled the car when the airbags blew out of the dashboard. The car shuddered so hard sideways against the trailer that the tires on the passenger side lifted up off the ground. The intense power of the collision pulled me at an angle, both sideways and forward, toward the impact. When the car and trailer couldn’t budge any farther, the car shifted the other way and planted itself on the road. The force of the sudden stop slammed me back in the opposite direction. My head twisted to the right and my forehead smacked into the side window until, finally, I was flung back against the seat. The horrible noises came to an abrupt end, and for a moment, there was nothing but complete silence.

My head started to sway. When I reached up, I felt pieces of broken glass intertwined in my hair. I moved my hand to my forehead to wipe away the blood pouring from the ragged gashes, but it kept dripping into my right eye.

“Max, Max . . .”

Feeling my way through the smoke, I reached my left hand toward him. When I finally found his shoulder, I could tell he was unconscious and slumped to the side. My hand got covered in his blood when I tried to shake him awake. The silence faded and I heard voices outside the car.

“Can you unlock the door?!” a man shouted at me.

I wiped my hands on my shorts to get the blood off so that I could flip open the lock. The door opened and a big gust of smoke rolled out of the car. The voice belonged to a man in his mid-forties with reddish hair, and his face was urgent when he looked me over.

“Do you think you can get out of the car?” he asked.

I nodded my head, so he leaned over me and unbuckled the seat belt. I tried to get out of my seat, but I was shaking and everything was spinning.

“I know it might not be best to move you, but we can’t get to the other side of the car to check on the driver. We’re a ways up the mountain, so it’s gonna take a little while for rescue to get here.” He tried to keep his voice calm. “His side of the car is pretty wrecked, so we need to check on him from this side.”

“Yeah, my head is just woozy. Please help him.” I raised my arms up toward him in the hope that he could help me out of the car.

“Okay, I’m gonna get you out of here.” He slid one arm behind my back, the other under my legs, and lifted me out of the car. “We need something to stop the bleeding from her head!”

He tried to be gentle as he carried me past the front of the stalled pickup truck, but I felt the intensity in his movements. I squeezed my eyes shut to try to calm the nausea.

“I got it,” a woman said. “Here, lay her on this blanket.”

He laid me down and ran back toward Max’s car.

The woman knelt on the ground beside me and pressed a towel to my forehead.

“Help is on the way,” she said. “You don’t look too bad, just a lot of blood from your head. You’re gonna be just fine.”

I did my best to focus on her face. Her tan complexion and the sun streaks in her hair made me think she spent a lot of time outside. I figured she must be with the man because she looked like she was about the same age as he was. I finally heard sirens in the distance, but it seemed like it was taking them so long to get there. The nausea overpowered me and my eyelids grew heavy. And then everything went black and silent.

“Stay with us,” a different man’s voice said.

The voice pulled me back out of the darkness and I forced my eyes open. The nausea was worse and I realized that I was on a stretcher being carried down the shoulder of the road. The rocking of the movement made my head spin even more. I heard a machine getting louder, so I turned my head to the side when we approached the sound. The metal of the twisted wreck was so mangled that I could hardly tell where Max’s car ended and the trailer began. A firefighter was perched on the hood of the car and another one was squeezed into the triangular opening between the trailer and the driver’s side door of the car. Panic flooded me when I became aware that the sound was some kind of saw. Both of the passenger side doors were open and a paramedic was leaned in across my seat. I tried to scream for Max, but it just came out as a gasp.

“We’re going to take good care of you. You’re going to be okay.” The man’s voice captured my attention again.

I looked up and saw that the voice was coming from a paramedic who was holding the stretcher behind my head. He had thick, brown hair and looked like he was in his mid-twenties. I looked toward my feet and saw the back of another paramedic, a lady with a blonde braid running down her back. Behind the ambulance was a sheriff’s car and it was blocking the traffic. A short, olive-skinned deputy got out of the car while the paramedics guided the stretcher toward the open doors of the ambulance. Once my stretcher was locked into place, the

lady paramedic climbed in with me and started pulling supplies out of the storage cabinet. The other paramedic started to shut the ambulance doors, but they didn't latch. When he turned to talk to the deputy, no one seemed to notice that one of the doors had swung back open.

"The driver got the worst of it. Just a kid," the deputy said.

"Yeah, Air St. Luke's is on its way," the paramedic said.

"St. Luke's? Why not the Trauma Center at St. Al's?" The deputy shook his head. "Kid's not looking too good."

"Sending them both to Luke's; Al's is dealing with a pileup on I-84. Chopper can land in the gravel turnout just around the bend. The other paramedic crew'll stay with him until they load him." He paused. "Did you see the way he angled the car?"

"Yeah, I was first on the scene." The deputy took a deep breath. "No way he could've seen this around the corner. Witnesses said there was a car headed down, so he couldn't go to the left. Looks like he cranked his side of the car as much as he could toward the impact. Passenger side doesn't look too bad."

"Yeah, she's lucky. She'll be alright."

"I wouldn't call it luck. He meant to save her."

"Yeah, he took the brunt of it."

A rush of adrenaline burst through my body and I tried to get up off the stretcher. I could hear myself screaming things that didn't make any sense. I knew I was hysterical, but I didn't even try to stop myself. They all looked startled when they figured out that I could hear them.

The man paramedic pulled the other door back open, climbed in, and pushed my shoulders to the stretcher.

"Sedate her," he ordered.

"I'm ahead of you," the lady paramedic said.

I looked down just in time to see her inject something into the I.V. in my arm, and then the darkness rolled over me again.