

“The Only Thing You Know How To Do”

Junior year of high school, the day after Kurt Cobain’s body was found, Tom gave up on his mother and moved out of his parents’ house. Everybody knew that Sarah Fawcett was as Regan put it, “a control-freak bitch.” Regan said it was traceable back to high school. Sarah had been two years ahead of Molly and Louisa and she was both homecoming queen and prom queen her junior and senior years.

“And your dad was prom king both years too, right? God, you must have totally missed the popular gene boat,” Regan joked one afternoon at lunch. They had just vacated the cafeteria where everyone was talking about prom for the parking lot. “Are you sure you weren’t adopted?”

Tom just shrugged.

“I know I wasn’t. I’ve definitely got the Dahle slut gene. Not anymore of course, sweetheart,” Regan added, pecking Tom on the cheek and reaching into his jacket pocket for his cigarettes. “You know,” she added, her hazel eyes wide, “my mom wasn’t actually a slut. She only slept with two guys before my dad.”

“Your mom told you that?” Emily shot her an incredulous look.

“No, I overheard Marissa telling some from hers that years ago. I’m surprised I never told you that.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “All the eavesdropping you do, I’m not surprised you can’t keep up.”

Regan shook her head at both of them, “You only children, you just miss out. Tom, I’m surprised you don’t have siblings. I’d expect your parents to have a whole brood.

Tom shifted uncomfortably, though he had known Regan and Emily for two-and-a-half years at that point, he didn't talk about his family with them. It didn't come up too often except when Regan would exasperatedly say, "I don't know how you put up with that woman," after Tom would show up to band rehearsal late because he was grounded again and had to sneak out. Sarah wouldn't even let Regan come over to do normal girlfriend things like have dinner with the family, her reasoning, "I don't want anyone to think you're dating *that* girl." When Tom had whispered back that he *was* dating her, he had gotten grounded.

Tom took a drag off his cigarette and said, "I don't think my parents have had sex since I was like five," because he knew Emily and Regan would laugh uproariously and they did. But Tom was straight-faced because he was serious. Not that they would know that, just like Regan never took his shrugs in reply to her "how can you stand that woman?" comments to mean *because I feel sorry for her* like he meant them to.

To them, like everyone else in Carlisle, Sarah had always been stuck up, but Tom remembered her softer side, back when she was in love with her life, her husband and her son. Back when she used to sing to him after she had tucked him in and read him a story, when she acted like she thought he was asleep even though she had to see his brown eyes fluttering slightly open to steal glances at her. She sat at the edge of the bed with her knees pulled up to her chest. Her long brown hair would be down, but her mascara, the slight gloss to her lips, and blush to her cheeks would still be there, smudged just slightly because she didn't have to be perfect all the time then. Her words were soft, just a hum in her throat, but sometimes Tom could hear his name. Back then being a mother was her world. But worlds crash.

One night Tom didn't want her to stop singing after just one song. He let his eyes fly open when she finished and said, "Sing another, Mama. Your voice is so beautiful."

Sarah smiled, "You think so? Music is God's greatest gift to the world." She started another one, louder so that he could actually hear the words, but he didn't remember them because after just a few lines the phone rang and she leapt up to get it. The sound of his mother's voice in the hall was angry. The last thing she said before slamming down the phone was, "Like hell you are!" She ran back into Tom's room, her eyes thick with tears and told him desperately. "I have to go get your father. I want you to be good. Don't get out of bed, promise me? Just sleep."

Tom had promised, but he didn't sleep. Not until an hour after they had returned and he finally dozed off to their stomping and feet and angry voices that rumbled like thunder, words indecipherable though he did hear his name. The next morning he awoke and his mother was perfect. That was when she started joining every committee, heading up new organizations, running everything in the town of Carlisle so that no one would figure out that her husband was having an affair with Paula Collins of all people, who was not perfect, who was years older than Sarah, and beyond strange, a recluse since her parents had died in a barn fire. No one could know that Sarah had almost been left for Paula, that was why she left her five year-old child alone in the house when she went running to retrieve her husband.

Miraculously, no one did know. Except for Tom as the fights grew louder and he hung onto the words instead of the songs Sarah had sung, remembering them until he was old enough to figure them out. Sarah's lullabies were replaced by the rumbling in the kitchen, which, even worse, was eventually replaced by silence. And that was where the

rock 'n roll came in. Tom had to listen to it in headphones. He had to lie about the members of the band he had joined because Sarah objected to “those girls. If people associated Tom with Emily Black and Regan Parker, girls with colorful family histories, they might associate his father with Paula Collins somehow. Tom had always given into these things silently because he felt bad for the fights that his mother had already been through with his father and that she had never seemed to realize—despite that fact that Tom’s father was still physically in the house—that she had lost.

But a gunshot can change so much. Tom was grinding out his cigarette and Emily and Regan were taking their last drags, still bitching about everyone’s obsession with prom when it was only like April, when Jon Pearson jumped out of his red pickup truck and came running up to them. When he got about a foot away from Tom, he raised his arms, pulled his right arm back like he was cocking a rifle and placed his left pointer finger against Tom’s forehead.

“Bang!” He shouting, cackling. “You losers are all cowards, aren’t ya?”

Regan stepped between Jon and her boyfriend, putting her palm on Jon’s chest and shoving him back, away from Tom. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Jon looked back toward his car and signaled his equally oafish buddy with a jerk of his head. “TURN IT UP!”

And then they heard the local rock DJ announce, “Again, it has been confirmed, that Nirvana leader, Kurt Cobain is dead of an apparently self-inflicted shotgun wound.”

A Beatles song came on, but Tom was too shocked to even recognize the first few notes that played before Jon said, “Aww man, why are they acting like it’s sad? They should crank up the GNR and say thank God—OWW! FUCK!”

Tom's head jerked up to look at Jon after his sudden outcry of pain. He was holding his stomach and Regan's fist was curled, her arm tense and ready for another swing.

"You better get the fuck out of my face right now or I will fuck you up so bad..."

"I'm... not... gonna fight a girl," Jon said between labored breaths, Regan's first punch obviously hurting him more than he wanted anyone to know. He backed off quickly before she could respond to the girl comment with another swing.

"I've been dying to hit that asshole..." Regan whispered.

The three of them didn't go back to class that day. They went to Emily's where the only sound was Emily's guitar, which she only stopped playing to light another cigarette. It was the only thing she seemed to know how to do. Tom couldn't stop thinking about how Emily's father would come home and have something to say to her. Regan's parents too, and her sister would probably call from Minneapolis. To his mother, however, rock 'n roll was not music, not even the blues were music to her. Somewhere inside, Tom had already known that would be the breaking point, but he had never known how simple Sarah's words would have to be.

After about an hour of listening to Emily play, Regan had left without a word and Tom didn't follow, figuring she needed her space and he needed his. Eventually he had gone home, sat on the roof that covered the back porch just below his bedroom window with his big headphones, enveloping his ears, his brain, insulating him completely. Unable to do more than toss and turn in bed that night, he was lying awake as the sky lightened, but the sun never broke through the clouds. Around seven am, he decided to go

out to River's Edge and play some songs since it would be empty and it always felt more welcoming than his own house.

His mother was awake when he came downstairs. She always got up at the crack of dawn, even on weekends. She was showered, dressed, her brown hair dried and perfectly curled, and her neutral, barely there make-up applied before Tom or his father woke up. "Rehearsal," Tom muttered to her, tapping his guitar case.

Sarah studied him, still dressed in the torn jeans and scruffy gray t-shirt he had been wearing the day before, his unwashed bleached hair matted in some places from his attempt to sleep. "Have you even slept? And of course you couldn't bother with a shower." She glanced up at the kitchen clock and then back down at her open newspaper. "Rehearsal this early? What is it some tribute to this stupid, drug addict musician."

That was it. Tom mentally removed the words drug addict and the last three letters of musician. "Stupid music," was what she had said to him. It was a nasty coda to her statement about music being God's greatest gift.

"I'm out of here. I am so fucking out of here," he informed her. He took the guitar out the battered van he had bought the previous summer. Then he came back for his bass, his acoustic, his amp, his crates of records and tapes. And Sarah just stood there, making no move to stop her son like she had her husband. She either didn't have it in her or she figured her precious reputation was better off without him. Tom assumed the latter.

As soon as he was in the van, Tom was at a loss of where to go. Whenever he had mentioned leaving home before, despite her hatred for his mother, Regan has always balked, "My parents are cool, but not so cool that they're going to let my boyfriend move into our basement or anything. Just wait till me and Emily graduate, then we'll go on tour

or we'll move to Minneapolis or Chicago or some place cool together." Tom decided that Regan wouldn't be up yet anyway and figured he might as well just go to River's Edge like he had originally planned.

By the time he got there he was thinking that he could probably live there. There was a couch backstage to sleep on and he could just put his stuff back in his car whenever there was a show. Of course there was no kitchen or bathroom, but these were things to be reckoned with later.

There was a truck at the edge of the parking lot when he arrived, but Tom thought nothing of it. It was rusty and battle-scarred, some kid had probably driven it for the show the night before or maybe even the weekend before, then it had broken down and he had left it, catching a ride with a friend. It happened all the time. In the other corner of the parking lot, there was an old Ford that had been sitting there as long as Tom had been coming there. Tom went through the side door that led to the little backstage area, but when he opened it he saw that the battered was already occupied.

Two people were tangled together, a dirty blue blanket thrown over them. The girl lay on top of the boy, stomach to stomach, her right cheek pressed against his right shoulder. Tom's face flushed and he almost turned to leave, thinking he should have known that this might happen, he and Regan had spent the night on that couch several times, but then he recognized the girl. The way she was always on top, how her legs didn't intertwine with the boy's, one was thrown haphazardly toward the back of the couch and the other dangled down, toes skating just above the sticky floor, how her arm was thrown loosely across the boy beneath her, angled just so part of the tattoo on her forearm was visible. Strands of her bright red hair fell across her cheek, and the rest stuck

to her neck or hung in the space between the boy's shoulder and the arm of the couch and in the space between the girls shoulder and the boy's neck. If he moved those short red strands would tickle him softly like the first gentle snowflakes dusting down before a big storm; they would make him shiver, and when he shivered, she would smile in her sleep. Tom knew all of this so intimately because the girl was his girl, Regan.

He stood there, holding the door open so the not-quite-spring breeze and the gray light of a morning the sun knowingly refused to shine on trickled in. He stood there convinced he was having some sort of out-of-body experience. Yesterday had been a dream. Clearly no one had died, and he and Regan had come to see a band play like they did every Friday night, and they had stayed backstage until everyone left and.... The dull light or the cool breeze woke Regan, her hazel eyes blinking hazily. She too seemed to be as confused as Tom at first, wondering why he was standing and not sleeping beneath her, but awareness of the reality of the situation hit her faster.

“What are you doing here?” she asked in a husky whisper. Too many cigarettes. There were two empty packs on the floor, his and hers, Tom presumed, and a bottle of tequila that probably wasn't quite split evenly because Regan always drank faster and always drank first. Her words had sounded sad at first, but then she growled them. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” she repeated venomously. Were the words directed toward Tom, to the guy beneath her? No one, even Regan herself, seemed to be sure, but they did wake the other guy.

He pulled the arm that was jammed between his body and the back of the couch out and shook it. “Damn, I got pins and needles,” he grimaced, not yet noticing Tom

standing in the doorway. When he rubbed his chocolate-colored eyes, and looked in the direction Regan was staring, he said, “Who’s this dude?”

No one responded. Regan was frozen, her head just lifted off his chest, her arms and legs curled in toward each other. Tom was still processing, still trying to believe that he was the one beneath Regan, though it was not his voice that spoke, nor did the person look anything like him.

The other guy took in this strangeness and deduced, “I better go.”

Though she hadn’t responded to anything else, Regan responded to this, springing from the couch like a cat, with the blanket wrapped around her. This left the stranger completely visible to Tom. He was stark naked, and he didn’t rush to correct the situation either. He just sat up, tossing long, tangled brown curls over his shoulder, scratching the large Celtic knot tattoo on the left of his chest and then leaning down to pick up his jeans, mercifully shielding his crotch with his body as he leaned over, but revealing the large, naked, female angel tattoo on his back and the crack of his bare ass as he bent down.

Tom knew that Regan was naked beneath that blanket, her clothes mixed in the pile that the tattooed guy sorted through for his t-shirt and jeans. Tom almost vomited.

After pulling on his jeans, Regan’s conquest slid his Sabbath t-shirt over his head and then walked toward the door, flipping his long curls out of the collar of his shirt. He lied nonchalantly as he passed Tom on his way out the door, “Nothing happened, dude. We were just drinking to the dead guy. Y’know, toasting Cobain, the poor bastard.”

Tom’s fingers curled into fists and he looked up slowly, wanting to meet this guy’s eyes, but he got stuck on his neck, which was covered in red and purple hickeys, and the stretched out collar of his shirt revealed scratch marks that scraped down his

chest, probably his back too. Tom stared long after the stranger walked out; by the time he looked back over in Regan's direction she had sloppily dressed. She had rushed and not seen her bra though; he noticed it at her feet, a black strap sticking out from where it had slid beneath the couch. His eyes climbed her body, hidden beneath faded denim, a worn cotton t-shirt, her nipples poking through the fabric. He imagined her small breasts beneath, probably marked as roughly as the guy's neck. He could not take in any more of her, definitely couldn't look at her face, so he turned to leave.

Before he could walk out the door, her voice came, so toneless and quiet, it might have been feedback still echoing from the night before. "I can't apologize, Tom. It would do no good. I just did it and I don't know why. I guess I was upset and I know you were too, so maybe I should have been with you, but when I hurt, I want to hurt people, so I hurt him instead of hurting you. Sometimes I just..." Regan trailed off.

Tom slowly turned, the angry words spilling out without him even knowing he was saying them because he was still trying convince himself he wasn't him, that he was the boy that had been on the couch beneath her, where he belonged. "Sometimes?" Tom's voice asked callously. "How many times, Regan? How many times have you cheated on me?"

And in the silence, the space between his accusation and her answer, he saw her the first night she had spent the night in his bed. It was over a year-and-a-half ago, Halloween night, exactly a year after she had made it known that she liked him by drunkenly climbing into his bedroom window with Emily and asking him to join their band. He and Regan had been together since then, but she waited that year before sleeping with him because, she had said, he was not like the others.

They had played a show that night they finally first slept together. Tom never stuck around after they played. He didn't like people coming up to him afterwards, telling him what they liked. He couldn't get past the suspicion that they were lying and that the things they were saying were really hints about where he could improve. Regan and Emily always stuck around long after the show, but that night when he mumbled his goodbye, Regan grabbed his wrist. "No," she said, her eyes dancing, "I want to come home with you."

"It's past eleven and you're not allowed in my house," Tom reminded her sheepishly.

"I know how to get into your room," Regan said, standing up on her tiptoes so her face was just an inch from Tom's. "Remember?" And in case he had forgotten she kissed him gently and then softly bit his lower lip just like she had that first night.

So they had climbed in through the window together, giggling softly, and then slipped into Tom's bed wordlessly. Tom remembered how his hands had slid up over the ridged fabric of her tights, the taught, tender skin of her belly, gathering the fabric of her dress and pushing it off over her head. Then she did the same with his t-shirt, her hands moving after the fly of his jeans and his to her bra and then the elasticity fabric that encased her long, lean legs, kissing her all the while. This is where they usually stopped, just pressing chest against chest, fingers wandering, exploring and tangling while they kissed, but that night Regan's hand went to the elastic of his boxers sliding them down and when Tom's hand didn't reach for her panties, she guided it, just as she guided him into her a few moments later, murmuring, "It's ok, it's ok, it's ok."

Afterwards, they didn't dress, just pulled the blankets over them. Regan fell asleep soundly on top of Tom, but he just drifted in and out of dreams. Every time his eyelashes fluttered open, he looked at her, the tufts of her short red hair, the perfect curves of her, cheekbones, neck and shoulders, and then those curves beneath the sheets, breasts, hips, thighs, the flesh of which pressed against him, like a mystery finally unveiled. He felt the dampness of her, the sweat between their skin like morning dew and heard her whispering, "It's ok, it's ok, it's ok." And it was, it finally was. For the first time, Tom was no longer trapped alone in the silent house of his mother.

Tom was lost in this memory without even closing his eyes. But then Regan's voice startled him. "I don't know. Maybe five times." The words shattered him, shattered her old whispers. It was no longer ok.

He let his dead eyes take her in as she was at that moment, red hair disheveled, rumpled t-shirt and jeans that stuck to her with someone else sweat. The curves of her body had been tugged at and molded roughly like a child tearing apart playdough, someone else had prodded his way inside of her, with his tongue, with his.... "Fuck you, Regan," Tom said, his voice a complete deadpan. "Fuck you."

She just stood there numbly, dumbly, not even trying to respond or apologize, begging him with her eyes to leave.

He turned to do so, but when he reached the door, he whirled back around. "No," he said. "You fucking leave. I don't have anywhere to go. I finally fucking did it. I left because I thought I had someone out there waiting for me." Tom cackled darkly, "What a fucking joke."

Regan ran her fingers roughly through her hair and then bent down to pick up her leather jacket. “Ok, I’ll go,” her voice rubbed raw with cigarettes, tequila, and stifled regret. She put the jacket on slowly and then walked, trying with all her strength to hold her head high as she passed him, but he didn’t let her pass, his hand shooting out at the last minute, fingers wrapping around her arm just above the elbow, pressing firmly into the leather, that crinkled in the cavernous silence.

“No, I need you to tell me one thing,” Tom’s voice cracked. He steadied it and stared her in the eyes. “Tell me why you’re so fucked up. Your family is the happiest family in this town. Your parents love each other more than I’ve ever seen two people love each other. So tell me how, seeing that example everyday, you could give up on love?”

Regan stared straight back into his hazel eyes. “What made you finally leave home, today of all days?”

Tom shook his head. “I asked you first.”

Regan lifted her shoulders and shrugged out of Tom’s grasp. “All right, you want to know what made me give up on fucking?” she said callously. “I’ll tell you, but you might want to sit down for it, it’s not pretty.” She whirled around and stalked back to the couch, but when she turned to face Tom, she saw he hadn’t moved.

He was staring at the cushions, thinking about Regan and that guy’s fluids, Regan and who knows how many other guys’ fluids mingling together there. “No thanks,” he said sharply.

“Suit yourself,” she snapped, throwing herself down on the couch and picking up on of the cigarette packs on the floor. There was one cigarette left, which she shook out

into the palm of her hand and then lit. Tom took a few steps forward as she did this to listen to her.

“You know how I eavesdrop,” she began. “So I learned about the birds and the bees about four years too soon because I was listening to my mom tell Marissa about it and then I had a question so I just walked into the room and let it be known that I knew what they were talking about. No one ever really gave me a refresher course even though I was like seven when it was first explained, so I pretty much filled in the hole with stuff I overheard Marissa saying. When I was twelve, I listened to another conversation between her and my mom, and I didn’t walk in and ask questions that time, but maybe I should have because it was about rape.” Regan looked up at Tom to gauge his reaction. He was looking at the floor, barely hearing her words, the shocks from Friday afternoon and that morning swirling his thoughts. “Tom,” Regan snapped, getting him to look at her. “I never told Marissa this or Emily and if I’m going to tell you this you have to promise that you won’t tell either one of them even if you walk away still hating or,” she scoffed in self-effacement, “should I say when you still hate me.”

“Ok,” Tom mumbled, trying to push away his own thoughts to listen to the story he had asked for.

“I was like twelve. It was Marissa’s sixteen birthday and after like two years of moping around the house, she was herself again, and she and my mom had gotten really close, which was weird because before that she had always been Daddy’s little girl, y’know. Anyway I don’t know what snapped her out of it, probably her music, her band was really taking off then. And she was downstairs practicing and I saw my mom go down so I followed her. It was really boring at first. I almost left. My mom was listening

to Marissa play, telling her she was good. Then Marissa sat down on the couch next to my mom and my mom looked at her all concerned and then she asked Marissa if she was better. And Marissa clearly knows what she's talking about because she looks away, acting like her old sullen self and says, 'What do you mean?'

"My mom is blunt as usual and she says, 'Marissa, two years ago today, Jeremy Pearson almost raped you.' And Marissa said she didn't want to talk about it and tried to get up, but my mom grabbed her hand, made her look at her and took my sister's face in her hands, 'Tell me you know that wasn't your fault. Tell me you know that now,' she demanded.

"Marissa shook her head, loosening my mom's grip and said, 'I'm better, aren't I?'

"But my mom was real adamant about it. 'Better is deceiving,' she told her. 'You could think you're better and then four years down the road walk out on your family, you have to *know*, Marissa. You have to know that it isn't your fault.'

"And I'm glad she said something cause otherwise I would have walked into that room and given myself away asking and never heard this part. But Tom, this is the part you can't tell, Emily, ok? Because I mean I only heard this little part and I don't know the whole story, so she better hear it from the person who knows the whole story, ok? You promise?"

Tom could feel the heat of Regan's stare. He wished she wasn't asking him to listen to this and even more so he wished she wasn't asking him to respond somehow because he didn't feel like he could. He could hardly hear her words over the laughter he imagined hearing, hers and that guy's intertwining like their bodies had been when he

found them together. Somehow he managed to force his head into a nod, so she would just continue, just be done and leave.

“Ok. Well, Marissa asked my mom what the hell she was talking about about leaving her family. It sounded like Marissa’s heart was in her throat just like mine was, thinking my mom was talking about getting ready to leave us. But my mom just said in this strangled whisper that I barely heard, ‘Lou.’

“And Marissa repeated back, ‘Lou?’

“My mom clearly didn’t realize she had said it out loud cause she had been staring into space but then she looked over at Marissa like Marissa had said something awful. ‘I... Can you forget I said that? You can’t forget I said that can you?’ She pressed her lips together, stalling for what felt like forever. She always does that when you’re asking her to let you do something you know you’re gonna have to fight for. Finally she said, ‘You don’t tell your sister this and you sure as hell don’t ever tell Emily this. You let her daddy tell her this when and if he feels good and ready. Louisa was raped, ‘Rissa. This asshole she was dating, Eric Lisbon. It was really ugly and really brutal and she never got over it. Not after he killed himself, not after she got married to that wonderful man and had that wonderful little girl, cause she couldn’t forgive herself. She thought she was to blame, that she had gotten herself into that mess. But it wasn’t her fault and it wasn’t yours. I don’t care that you went out with him when your dad and I said you couldn’t. I don’t care that you were three sheets to the wind. I don’t care if you kissed him back at first. What he almost did, it wasn’t your fault, ‘Rissa.’ My mom was crying then. She don’t cry much,” Regan’s voice cracked and Tom looked up and saw tears streaming down Regan’s face as well, dislodging the makeup caked and crusted in the

corners of her eyes. Regan wiped the tears away angrily. “Yeah, she was crying and my sister was crying and she tried to get my sister to say that she knew it wasn’t her fault, but Marissa just couldn’t say it. She just couldn’t. And I walked away from that all kinds of confused, but I figured it out a couple years later. Not all of it, just why Marissa couldn’t say it wasn’t her fault,” Regan laughed bitterly and she rolled her eyes back and sniffed a few times trying to contain more tears.

Listening to Regan recite her mother’s words, Tom had caught a hold of something and crawled a little way out of his own pain. “What are you trying to tell me, Regan?” he asked, the words coming out as dry as his throat.

“I don’t know what I’m trying to tell you, Tom. I’ve been trying to figure it out for almost three years now. I’m fucked up is what I’m trying to tell you. I guess that’s it. That’s my excuse for all this, right?” As her sniffing failed, she reached up and rubbed her dripping nose on her leather jacket.

“This isn’t about your sister or Emily’s mom, this is about you. What happened to you, Regan?” Tom’s words came out sounding harsher than he meant them to. He ached seeing her in pain, but he still ached more for himself.

“You’re right, Tom. You’re right. It’s about me. About me getting fucked on this couch last night and about me getting fucked on this couch for the first time when I was fourteen years old. Except there was a difference. Last night I was in control and that other time I wasn’t. But what you should be concerned about was that last night I was and I made that decision and I hurt you.”

As her voice hardened, Tom’s softened. “But you didn’t make that decision the first time, did you?”

Regan leapt up from the couch like it had burned her. “I don’t fucking know! How do I know? I was fourteen, I had many beers. I wanted to lose my virginity that night. I planned on it. I don’t know why. Why?” Regan spat the word, questioning herself. “Because my sister always said it was a thing to get rid of and I never questioned why she said it, even after that discussion I overheard, I never stopped and thought, *oh, that’s why Marissa wanted to just get it over with*. I was too young, too stupid to make that connection.” She stopped ranting momentarily and took a deep breath. “So yeah, I planned on losing my virginity that night to that drummer cause I thought he was pretty and I thought he was strong and I got the last part right at least, which is why no one, not you, not anyone will hold me down when I’m fucking them. *I’m fucking them*,” she murmured to herself. Then she looked up at Tom, tears making her eyes look like deep brown stones lying on the bottom of a creek, “I planned on fucking that guy, that eighteen year-old drummer I thought was so fucking hot, but then I changed my mind. And I told him, I slurred it and sorta pushed at him, all “*Ichangedmymind*.” And he told me that I was already past go and I couldn’t change my mind. So yeah,” Regan shrugged, shaking it off.

“Regan, I... You know that’s not...”

Regan lunged forward, pointing in Tom’s face, “What did I tell you about ‘not your fault?’ What did I tell you about Marissa and Emily’s mom? I will never be able to fucking say that, ok? I don’t even know what to call that. I mean what happened to Emily’s mom sounds like rape. What almost happened to my sister sounds like rape. What happened to me... I don’t fucking know. But whatever the hell you think of me you cannot tell Emily or Marissa or especially my fucking mom. Not any of it, but especially

not that part about me. You got it?” Regan growled fiercely. “And I didn’t tell you that as an excuse for my behavior. I told you there was no excuse, that I didn’t have any ‘I’m sorry’s’ for you because that would be bullshit. I fucked up. But then you asked me why I didn’t believe in fucking, so I told you. So now we’re square.”

Regan whirled around, attempting to stalk off, but Tom grabbed her wrist. He was crying, not even trying to hide it, but his voice was still clear. “I didn’t ask you why you didn’t believe in fucking. I asked you why you didn’t believe in love.”

Regan’s lip quivered looking at him. “Same fucking thing.”

“No, it’s not. I love you, Regan. Do you know what that feels like? Or is it really the *same fucking thing* for you? Am I no different than the guy on that couch, the first, the most recent, any of ‘em? Was I that stupid?”

It was as if hearing him call himself that melted something inside Regan. “Of course, I know what love is and of course I love you. Why do you think I waited to sleep with you?”

“Then why are you still fucking other people?”

“I told you at the beginning of all this. When I’m hurting that’s all I know how to do. I don’t why that is. You can shrink me, analyze why I would do that considering my first sexual experience or whatever, that don’t matter. What matters is what you want to do about it. You want to break up? You want to go fuck five other girls, ten other girls to get back at me? You’ve gotta to do, what you’ve gotta do and I can’t do anything about it.”

“Can you stop doing it? Can you stop cheating?”

Regan looked away from him. “I don’t know.” Tom reached up, guided her face toward his, made her look at him, so she said, “I want to. I really, really want to.” But then she pushed him away gently. “It ain’t up to me, like I said, the ball’s in your court. Do what you gotta do.”

“What do I do?” Tom asked softly. He thought of his mother on the she walked into his room and caught Regan standing on her tiptoes, kissing him hard before she crawled out of his bedroom window. Tom’s mother had screamed and screamed and Tom had just laughed. He couldn’t stop laughing, something pent up inside of him finally released. He didn’t stop laughing until his mother slapped him hard across the face, something she had never done before.

Immediately she started to cry. “I didn’t mean that! You just made me so frustrated. That girl is so horrible. But, God, I hit you. I hit my child, like I’m some... I always said I would above that,” she spoke haltingly, her sentences not fully forming beneath the tears.

Tom didn’t speak, he didn’t cry. Eventually he had just hugged her, repeating that he was sorry even though he knew that he had done nothing wrong. Nothing had ever hurt him more than that slap, except for maybe what Regan had just done.

Tom looked up at the defiant girl in the black leather jacket before him, her face in his hands. He slowly let go of her, seeing both Regan’s face and his mother’s as he spoke. “I forgive. I forgive until you push me too hard, too many times. You push me too hard and I’m gone. Out of the blue. And I won’t go back. That’s what I do. It may be fucking stupid, but I forgive.”