

Preface

Friction.

It is a force which human beings have striven to subdue, use, and overcome in all areas of life. Whether we are driving, flying, or sending a spaceship to the moon, we must understand, overcome, and even use, friction. The one thing we cannot do is eliminate it.

At its simplest level, the universe is made up essentially two things: matter and energy. Matter, which is essentially atoms and molecules, is constantly in motion, vibrating under the force of energy. These vibrations can cause the atoms and molecules to bump into one another. They bump and rub against one another in much the same way people do. We spend our days in a constant state of motion, bouncing from one person to the other, either physically, verbally, emotionally, or spiritually. It is simply inevitable that friction will be introduced.

In our relationships, friction is generally considered a bad thing. Friction ultimately produces heat, and it is heat that causes things like fear, anger, grief, and anxiety to overtake our

lives. We spend a great deal of time trying to "put out fires" or "cool off" or "chill out". Friction is constantly acting against these notions; constantly at work; constantly producing heat.

In high school the future is presented to us as something that we *must* prepare for. It is presented as something distant that *must* be planned out and pursued. The problem with that is, it is an abstract thing, the future. For people living in a society that is obsessed with the here and now, the future is more of an inconvenience, an obstacle used by those in authority to restrict our pleasure. So often the present is assigned significance only as to how it will affect our future.

Life is about the choices we make. It is also about the friends we choose and the influences that we allow to shape our thoughts, feelings, and decisions. We strive to reduce the heat in our lives, all the while pursuing those relationships, situations, and lifestyles that contain the most friction; the most heat.

And our story continues...

Chapter 1

The Friday afternoon pep rally usually kicked off the countdown to game time. It always ended promptly at two o'clock, giving the players time to eat a light afternoon snack before preparing for their game, and giving the rest of the students exactly five hours before kickoff to get home and get themselves ready for the game. Kendall Township was always intense when it came to Cobra football, but on Friday afternoons, it felt as though you could cut the tension with a knife. If you spend enough time in Kendall Township, you might notice that the community is every bit as committed to the games as the players are, sometimes even more so. A sports team has up seasons and down seasons, seasons in which the team is fun and exciting to watch and cheer for, and seasons where the team is as boring as watching TV reruns with the sound off. Sometimes there are characters on the team that the community particularly invests in, and other times it is hard to remember the names of even the starting players. But game in and game out, the Kendall Cobras could always count on their people being there on Friday night, raving mad, loud, and intense.

Every season though, there was one Friday where the Township settled down, where the intensity rested, and a brief period of calm settled over the entire town. Bye Week meant that there was no game on Friday night. It was a week off for the players and fans alike. This year, Bye Week brought mixed feelings. Many would have preferred to have the Cobras just continue on their dominating rampage across the league. To them the break threatened to disrupt the roll the team was on. To the players, most of them anyway, it was an opportunity to rest. The defense, taking its' cues from the example of Kevin Sinclair, had become one of the fiercest squads in

the league. Game film revealed a level of violence in their play that really was a cause for fear in opposing teams. The offense was still recovering from the loss of their starting quarterback, Mike Doyer, who was out with a broken foot. The new quarterback was freshman Scott Webber, who had shown great poise, and with the extra week to sharpen things up, it would only get better. The athleticism on that squad was all there to make for an explosive unit.

The pep rally was held even though there was no game that night. This year, the Kendall Cobras were undefeated through six games. It had been a long time since this kind of success had come to the Cobra football program and today was a celebration of those who had made it happen. The players were paraded in front of the school as always. Speeches were given. The students cheered. Everyone was pumped up and excited for the rest of the season.

The football team met briefly following the pep rally. They had not held a full practice all week, but each day they met and reviewed game film, studied their playbooks, worked with their respective units, and then worked out in the weight room. They didn't hit. They didn't really run, unless they wanted to. They didn't even put pads on. It was a light week, earned with the blood and sweat of a perfect record through the first six games of the year. Tonight, they were cut loose. No practice, no lifting, no game film. This was a three day weekend. It was well-earned. And on Monday, it would all be over.

Tony and Kevin were walking home after the meeting broke. Though they had spent the past week in meetings and at practice together, they'd had little time to talk. Kevin had spent the week in his wood shop, making ornaments and trinkets for sale during the upcoming holiday season. He also spent time with his girlfriend, Lindsey, though things had been a little distant lately. Tony, benefiting from an ever-expanding reckless disregard for personal humiliation, had managed to strike up what can only be described as an unlikely relationship with the stunningly beautiful Emily Vasquez. Her interest in him had understandably encouraged him to devote vast amounts of time to her. No one, even his best friend, Kevin, could blame him for that. But it had left an unusual communication void. Other than a few exchanged texts and quick chats in the school halls, the two best friends had not really had time for one another. Now, they were taking the opportunity to catch up a little bit.

“So,” Kevin was saying, “Emily...what's been going on with you and her?”

Tony grinned like the cat that ate the canary. “Dude, you wouldn't even believe it. She's super hot, everyone knows that, but she's actually really cool. Totally different than how I thought she'd be.”

Kevin nodded. “Makes sense. Lindsey said something similar.”

Tony's smile hadn't faded. It just stayed there, pasted on his face.

Kevin laughed. “Yavs, you're going to have to wipe that silly grin off your face at some point. It's been there since last Friday night.”

“Can't help it. I'm seeing *Emily Vasquez*! Can you *believe* it?”

Kevin shrugged. “Actually, no, I can't. But since you *are* seeing her, maybe you shouldn't walk around with a goofy smile on your face like you just started seeing Emily Vasquez.”

“Huh?” Tony frowned. “But I *did* just start seeing Emily Vasquez.”

Kevin raised his eyebrows. “Right. So maybe now you should start acting like you *belong* with her.”

“Why? You don't think I belong with her?”

Kevin shook his head in disbelief. “Are you kidding me? You *totally* belong with Emily. She's the hottest girl in Kendall High and you're the coolest guy on the planet. And I'm not kidding when I say that.”

Tony nodded, a little at a loss after that comment. Kevin was not the kind of guy to speak in hyperbole. He didn't build up someone's confidence just for the sake of building it up. What he had just said really did come from his heart. Anything less than that would be an unforgivable condescension in Kevin's eyes. It's the kind of friend he was. You always got the raw truth. Kevin also didn't make comments like this all that often, no matter how much he liked or respected a person, so when he did, it made an impression.

Getting close to Kevin Sinclair was not an easy task. It wasn't something you could work towards either. You didn't get there by being nice, friendly, or even good to him. None of that really mattered to Kevin. Other than his mother, Kevin had precious few really close relationships. His martial arts sensei, Cenzo Tanaka, was certainly the closest thing Kevin had to a real father, especially since he couldn't stand his step-father. There was Lindsey, Kevin's girlfriend, though Tony wasn't sure just how close she had actually gotten to Kevin. He knew Kevin's feelings for her were the closest thing to out of control that Kevin had ever had to deal with about himself. She was certainly special in a way that no other girl had ever approached.

But Tony was his best friend. He was Kevin's closest confidant. That was a position earned through the unconditional loyalty the two shared. It was about honor. Kevin had never said that specifically, but in training with him, in hearing the different things that Kevin talked about, Tony had learned what was really important to Kevin.

Hearing that Kevin not only approved of his relationship with Emily, but even seemed to think that it was a match that made perfect sense was really all that Tony needed to hear. Kevin's opinion was something he valued. A lot of the time, it was the *only* opinion he valued. Maybe he *did* belong with her. Maybe it wasn't going to be the joke he had created in his mind. Maybe he shouldn't play it like a ride that was destined to end soon.

His thoughts were interrupted by the screeching of tires on pavement. A big black and silver van skidded to a halt right in front of them. Kevin and Tony immediately reacted by dropping their bags and spreading out in defensive positions. As they did so, Kevin had a feeling, like the van was vaguely familiar. Before he could complete the thought, the door opened and several scantily clad Brette Girls jumped out with menacing looks on their faces. Those looks didn't quite match their outfits, and even with five of them surrounding the boys, Kevin relaxed, an amused look on his face. He could see Tony's grin out of the corner of his eye.

"Get in." The command came from the driver, a very pretty brunette named Calista Fontineau. Everybody in Kendall High School knew who she was. Calista was the president of the Brette Girls and her participation was evidence of the serious nature of the sorority. She was among the top five GPAs in the senior class and had several scholarship offers throughout the Ivy League. Girls like that brought a great deal of credibility to the Brette Girls. Their insistence upon things like good grades and good citizenship did as well. It was a somewhat ignored fact in Kendall Township that the Brette Girls boasted a higher combined GPA than any single Kendall High program of more than twenty members.

Kevin and Tony exchanged amused glances. "I don't think so," Kevin said, a wry grin on his face.

"Yeah," Tony added, putting his fists up in a boxers pose. "Try and make us."

The girls all laughed somewhat humorlessly. They were really trying with this tough girl act. "They think they have a choice," said one who was standing behind them holding a pair of handcuffs. This one was a petite blonde weighing less than a hundred pounds who had on what could only be considered as *barely* a bathing suit or negligee under an open full length a silk

robe. They all had similar outfits. Some were obviously just bathing suits, while others were clearly more suited to the bedroom. Every one of the girls oozed sexuality and they were not being shy about it, *and* they were obviously very serious about getting the boys into that van.

Calista shook her head. "You guys don't understand. You're coming with us one way or the other."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "What's the other way?"

Another Brette Girl appeared in the doorway of the van, also clad in bedroom apparel. She stayed inside because she was carrying a strange looking rifle in her hands which she currently had pointed at the ground. It was like something out of the pages of Guns and Ammo. Kevin looked at her and then back to Calista.

Calista gestured to the girl. "That's Lori."

"So, if we don't come with you, you're going to have Lori shoot us with that thing?"

Calista shook her head and shrugged. "Sort of. It's a tranquilizer gun."

Lori smiled. "I work at the zoo." She patted the space age looking weapon affectionately. Somehow, she even made *that* seem sexy. "This baby is used for putting down elephants. These darts are filled with etorphine. It's about one or two thousand times the potency of morphine. I wasn't sure how much it would take to knock out a human, so I just filled it up all the way just in case."

"Sounds like a safe plan."

Calista shrugged. "So," she said, "please allow the pretty ladies behind you to restrain you with the cuffs so we can get on with it." She then smiled, licking her lips very slowly. "Trust me. You guys have nothing to worry about."

Tony thought about it. "So...the two of us in handcuffs with six insanely hot, barely dressed girls, all together in a van...what could go wrong?"

"Where are we going?" asked Kevin.

Calista shook her head. "That's not your concern."

Kevin said, "So our choice is either we get in the van with a bunch of beautiful, half naked girls, or they shoot us with an unspecified amount of sedative that will probably kill us."

Tony nodded. "Hmm. Give us a minute to talk this over."

As the boys' hands were secured behind them, the bags were placed over their heads and

they were led into the van and seated on bench seats. Actually, they were each sprawled across three girls on the seats. They both knew what was happening. “Brette Rides” are mythical in Kendall Township. Stories about them are never told from first-hand accounts. No one would ever admit that they had ever gone on a Brette Ride because doing so would ostracize the storyteller from all contact with the Brette Girls. It was quite simple: Tell anyone about it and you will never get to hang out with the Brettes again. Period. No one wanted that. The stories are always told vaguely, almost like urban legends; a friend of a friend of a friend.... As the van pulled away, Kevin couldn't help but wonder how many guys dream about this kind of thing happening to them.

The ride lasted forty minutes. Once they had gotten into the van, there were no further threats, other than the one about keeping this entire experience a secret. When they arrived at their destination, they were helped out of the van, and quietly escorted a short distance away. They could hear car doors opening and closing as they walked. Eventually, they were halted and told to stand still.

Calista spoke. “Girls, remove the handcuffs! Do NOT remove the bags, guys. That's our job.”

There were several clicks as handcuffs were removed.

Finally, Calista announced, “And now, presenting this years' twelve Kendall Cobra Calendar Studs!”

The bags were removed from their heads, and twelve Kendall Cobras stood, blinking, their eyes adjusting to the bright lights. Cameras were flashing as the entire Brette Girl sorority clapped and whistled and screamed at the boys. The Brette Girls' Calendar Party was another legend, only it was one that was undeniably real. Each year, twelve Cobras were selected to appear on the Brette Girls' Cobra Calendar. They were always “kidnapped” if it was their first calendar appearance, and taken to a secret location, where an exclusive party was held in their honor. They were the only males present in a sea of insanely beautiful and barely dressed Brette Girls numbering at least fifty. The girls always made sure the ratio was such because once this calendar came out, these twelve guys would be the kings of the school, and royalty had its

privileges. It was just one more part of the myth of the Kendall High Cobras.

In reality, the whole thing was a photo shoot. The guys drew out of a hat for their months and were then led to the appropriate room where the scenes for that month were set. Each guy posed shirtless, either in shorts or a bathing suit, *if* he had been on the calendar previously. First-timers all had to wear their underwear. That was the rule, and since each guy had four Brette Girls posing with them, all dressed in supremely sexy attire, there were very few complaints. This event had become the kind of thing that motivated the boys in Kendall Township to excel on the football field. Maybe, one year, they would get to pose half-naked with the Brette Girls. And who knew what would happen when the cameras were off?

Though the atmosphere created by the decor, the music, and, of course, the attire was one of debauchery and sensuality, the Brette Girls conducted themselves very professionally. They needed to get pictures for their calendar and it wouldn't do to have the centerpieces of those photos looking like deer in headlights. Four gorgeous girls in bathing suits and underwear usually got the guys attention away from the cameras. The pictures were always stunning and sexy. The calendar was always a huge hit throughout not only the school, but the community as well, raising several thousand dollars per year, which went to the Brette Girls' official charity, a local organization that worked to help find a cure for leukemia.

After the shoot, they guys were treated to a royal feast, courtesy of the Brette Girls. They were seated at a long table, their seats corresponding to the months they'd represent on the calendar. On the one hand, this was great for Kevin because as Mr. January, he was seated right across from Mr. December, who happened to be Tony. The unfortunate thing was that just to Kevin's right sat Mr. February, Matt Kildare, who was also clearly not pleased with the arrangement. They nodded coldly to one another and that was that. An unspoken truce was called out of respect for their hosts.

Later, the boys were all cuffed and bagged again for the ride home. The location for the photo shoot was a closely guarded secret known only to the Brette girls. The vans dispersed and took their captives home, the girls warning them not to discuss the event with anyone. The calendar was a secret until they released it on Monday. They were uncuffed, unbagged, and let out. The vans then disappeared into the twilight as though nothing had ever happened.

Kevin and Tony stood in Tony's driveway, still reeling from the lightning fast sequence of events.

"Dude," Tony said, shaking his head, "did all that just happen?"

"All what?" Kevin asked. "We're not supposed to talk about it, remember?"

"I know, or we'll be cut off."

"Lindsey's gonna flip out. This is exactly the kind of thing that she's worried about. And I can't even warn her."

Tony stared at him. "Holy crap! Do you think Emily will get mad?"

Kevin shook his head. "Nah. Emily knows all about it. I doubt she'd give it a second thought. But Lindsey's another story."

Chapter 2

The Coach's Barbecue was another Kendall tradition that came about in a rather underhanded way. Coach Max Hall was the very first Kendall Cobra Head Coach. He was a mean and stubborn guy who lived and breathed high school football. Before he ever set foot in Kendall Township, he had won eight state championships in a twenty year career in Central Michigan. His daughter had settled in New Jersey with her husband and three boys. Coach Hall wanted to move to New Jersey so he could be closer to them. He settled in Kendall because the school was brand new and would be ready to open in less than sixteen months. He relished the

thought of building a program from the ground up and with his resume he was easily the best candidate for the job.

It was no mistake. Coach Hall took the fledgling program and immediately made it competitive. Within three years the Cobras went to the state quarterfinals. Two years after that, they lost the state championship game by only four points. Then they won two in a row and four out of the next six championships. During his 22 years at Kendall High he never once hosted a party of any kind. He showed up when it was necessary, but even when the boosters begged him to host a barbecue at their expense he refused. He just didn't want to be bothered. When he retired, Doug Chambers, a far more conciliatory man, was given the job.

To suggest that he was tricked into hosting the Kendall Cobra's Coach's Barbecue would be putting it mildly. The truth is that he was flat out lied to. He was led to believe that Coach Hall had always hosted a barbecue on the bye week and that it had become a Kendall tradition where the whole town was invited to participate. Rather than call Coach Hall and confirm this "tradition", Coach Chambers shrugged his shoulders and handed the planning for the event over to his wife, Daisy. After that, there was no turning back and the boosters saw to it that the Coach's Barbecue was written into the contract of every head coach the Cobras would ever hire from that point on. That is how traditions get started in the real world, and that is the story of how the Coach's Barbecue came to be.

Coach Larry Shultz and his wife, Debbie, stood on the steps of the back deck as their guests gathered on the grass in front of them. As the hosts of this annual event, they were expected to give a short speech to kick things off. For the past three years, the coach had to find inspiration in the midst of a struggling season, when many of those attending his event were calling for the school to fire him and find another coach. But today, he was all smiles. He raised his hands for silence.

"Debbie and I want to take a moment to say thank you to every one of you for coming out today. This barbecue is a tradition that can be a real hassle when things are going badly for our football team. But this year, I couldn't ask for a better day. Our Cobras are undefeated!"

The crowd of nearly two hundred responded with screams and whistles. Coach Shultz smiled, his hand raised in the air and four fingers extended. "Undefeated with four to go, right boys?"

The Cobra players all shouted, raising four fingers as well.

"I don't usually single out individual achievement during the season," he continued. "But I think this year I have to make one exception. Where's Sinclair? Get him up here."

Kevin hated to be recognized like this. He didn't want to be elevated above other players, but his teammates quickly got hold of him and he had no choice but to let them practically carry him to stand next to the coach. He stood there, feeling stupid, unsure how to react to all of the attention.

Coach Shultz was grinning, his hand firmly on Kevin's shoulder. "This kid's had quite a start, hasn't he?" Everyone cheered. There were even some shouts of "Mad Dog!" and a few whistles. Coach held up his hand. "I just want to say that this guy is on pace to shatter some pretty impressive state records on both offense and defense, and he's just a freshman. I for one can't wait to see what he does once we get back to it next week."

There were more cheers. The players started chanting "STATE! STATE! STATE!"

Coach Shultz let it go on for several seconds before raising his hands again. When they all quieted down, he said, "Now, let's get to it. Debbie's been busy cooking up tons of food for you all, so have at it and GO COBRAS!"

The crowd cheered one more time and began heading to the buffets which were set up on either side of the deck. Lindsey sidled up to Kevin and leaned into him as he put his arm around her shoulders. He saw the sly look in her eyes.

"Don't even say it," he said.

She shrugged, turning slightly and pulling his arms around her. "I'm not gonna say anything."

"Good."

She was silent for a moment, leaning with her back against him, resting her head on his shoulder. "You looked so hot up there..."

Kevin instantly squeezed her tightly. "I knew it! You couldn't resist!"

Lindsey laughed and twisted in his arms so that she was facing him. He kissed her before she could say anything further.

"Awww! Look at the lovebirds!" They turned to see Tony approaching with Emily holding his hand. Kevin released Lindsey and high-fived Tony. Emily and Lindsey hugged and quickly moved away from the boys. Tony glanced over at them.

"See how fast they ditch us?" he said.

Kevin replied, "What did you do to them?"

"Me? You're the one who was molesting that nice young girl over there. We came along and saved her. Why can't you keep your hands to yourself?" Tony laughed and wrapped an arm around his best friend's neck. "Come on, Kevo, let's get some grub."

Matt Kildare could barely contain his disgust. Having that Sinclaire punk honored in front of the whole town frosted him like nothing else. How quickly they all forgot the three previous seasons he had given this town. Sure they hadn't really competed the way this Cobra team was competing, but he still set every Cobra receiving record and was generally considered to be the best athlete Kendall Township had produced in over a decade. Now, he was relegated to second place status in the space of two months. Not that he was playing up to even his own standards, let alone the one Sinclaire had set. Everything he had worked for over the past three plus years was in jeopardy and everyone was wondering if this freshman was going to set records.

All of this would have been terribly frustrating, except that Matt had gotten one important thing right recently. He had straightened out his love life. Having dated the gorgeous Emily Vasquez for over a year in an arrangement that also allowed him to see as many other girls as he wanted, his whole life had become one long sex-filled party with Emily at the center. He had no solid ties to any one girl, even Emily. Then he met Tracey Overton, the truly stunning redhead, who had stumbled into his life just as things were beginning to really unravel. She had been a breath of fresh air in the stagnant world Matt had created for himself.

Though Tracey was very naïve and inexperienced compared with Matt and the girls he usually dated, he was drawn to her. With Tracey he could breathe normally, feeling like the pressure to be the King of Kendall High was off his shoulders. Tracey seemed to like him just for him. She obviously was very attracted to him. That was what had gotten things started and probably what had led to their first romantic night together. But since that night, they had taken time to consider what they both really wanted and finally agreed to be together exclusively. He had even agreed to keep their relationship nonsexual, which was a huge question mark for him. He really wasn't sure how he would survive that.

"Matt Kildare with no girls around him? Say it ain't so!" Matt knew her voice without

even having to look. Vivian Parker, captain of the varsity cheer leaders, had been dating his best friend for three years. He turned to see the couple coming his way and grinned.

“Just waiting for *you*, Viv,” he teased.

“Whoa! Hands off, big boy,” Mike cracked back with a grin of his own. He was still limping pretty heavily, and his foot was still in a thin hard cast, but he seemed to be in a lot less pain than before. Mike had broken his foot in the second game of the season, about five weeks prior.

“So,” Vivian said, hugging Matt, and then flipping her long, curly red hair back over her shoulder, “when do we get to meet the girl who took you off the market? Tracey, right?”

Matt nodded. “Yep. Tracey had a dance class to teach this morning. She should be here any minute.”

“Two redheads in our group,” Mike was shaking his head. “What's the matter with us, dude?”

Matt shrugged.

“What's the matter is that you two are just growing up and you want to experience the finer things in life,” Vivian said, putting her best snooty face on.

Just then Anquan Griffin strolled up with a plate full of barbecue in each hand.

“Hungry, Quan?” Mike laughed.

“Just getting started, QB,” the star running back replied. He was having the season of his life. “I gotta put the pounds on if Imma be running for Bama next year.”

It was his dream to run for the Crimson Tide. The way his season was going, what was once a pipe dream might just turn into a reality. State championships had been known to do that for a lot of kids.

“All right,” Mike said. “We'll catch up. Save us some seats.” He took Vivian's hand. “Come on. Let's get some food before he eats it all.”

Matt watched as the “royal couple” headed toward the buffet line. They were the real deal. Three years together, and they still seemed like they were rock solid as a couple. It made him wonder about his own relationship with Tracey. It was so new and yet he felt so right about it. He couldn't wait to see her.

Matt noticed Anquan was still standing next to him with a strange grin on his face.

“What's with that face?” he asked.

Anquan shook his head. "Nothin, Dawg. You just spacin out on a brotha."

Matt threw an arm around his friend's neck and brought their heads together. "Hey, bro, I need to say I'm sorry I've been such a jerk lately. We never talked about what happened at my place a while ago. It was all me, okay? You guys did what you had to do."

Anquan nodded with a big grin. "It's all good, bro. You ready to take State now?"

They found a table and sat down. Matt's expression was serious. "Dude, I don't know what to do. My game is way off. I can't figure it out."

"You gotta get your head on right. Stop tryin to *beat* Sinclaire and start playing *with* him. He's one great player. The *two* of you *together* catchin passes? Wheeeew!"

Matt nodded. "I know. I just can't stand him."

Emily's arm was looped through Lindsey's as they walked through the crowd of students, parents, faculty, and Kendall residents. She hadn't seen much of her friend over the past week and though she had thoroughly enjoyed the time she and Tony had been spending together, she really missed Lindsey's sarcastic cynicism and dry humor. The two had become fast friends from the first day they had met, less than seven weeks ago. It was a new experience for both of them. Neither had really spent much time over the years cultivating friendships with other girls. Lindsey was too introverted and self-conscious about herself, particularly her looks. She was so pretty that the boys had been paying her special attention for a long time. Her natural reaction to that was to do all she could to deemphasize her body. Throughout junior high she had dressed in loose and baggy clothing. She had developed a sarcastic personality designed to push people away. Emily was the polar opposite. She was also the kind of pretty that drew way too much attention, but she reveled in it, using it to her advantage as often as possible.

"I've missed you, Lindz," Emily said. "What's been going on?"

Lindsey shrugged. "Nothing much. I've been spending a lot of time with Kevin, but..."

"What?" Emily asked. "He change his mind?"

Lindsey shrugged again. "Not really. I've been looking for a way to set everything up, but we just don't have the time or space for privacy."

Emily chuckled.

"Don't laugh," Lindsey said. "I'm really frustrated."

"I'm not laughing at you, I promise. Listen to me. It'll happen. You guys are in love. Sex will happen when the timing is right. It always does."

Lindsey nodded thoughtfully. "And you and Tony? How's the timing with that?"

Emily looked at her, a frown on her face. "Seriously? I just started seeing him."

"So? The whole school thinks you two are doing it."

"Well, the whole school needs to get their own lives and stop living mine."

"You're saying you and Tony are *not* having sex."

"Correct. In fact, we haven't done much more than kiss since we started going out."

Lindsey wrinkled her forehead. "Why is that?"

Emily licked her lips in thought. "I'm not sure. I mean, I haven't really pushed him or anything. But he doesn't push at *all*."

Lindsey shook her head. "Just like Kevin. What is it with these guys?"

Emily smiled. "Actually, I think it's really nice. Don't get me wrong, I love sex. But a guy that's not so grabby and wants to be with me for me, is a nice change. Tony is a lot of fun to talk to and hang out with, Lindz. Trust me, sex is a lot of fun, but it's a little overrated compared with a nice safe relationship."

"Yeah, well, I'd like to form my own opinion."

Emily laughed. "Cute. I don't blame you for that though. Just take your time and let it happen. Don't let yourself get desperate. It's not sexy."

"Ya don't got ta *like* him," Anquan said, nearly finished with the first plate of food. Matt actually had to blink a couple times to be sure he was seeing properly.

"Did you just eat an entire plate of food in like six seconds?"

Anquan looked down. "There wasn't hardly nuthin on that plate!"

Matt looked at him. "Dude, that plate was piled high. Do you have a tapeworm or something?"

"Hey! You just worry bout your own plate!"

"I better get one before you get finished with yours." Matt got up and headed off to the line, passing Mike and Viv on their way back. "Don't sit too close to Quan," he said. "He might eat your food for you."

As he got in line, he saw Scott Webber talking to a pretty brunette named Kami. "Hey,

Webber!” he called out. Scott turned to him and nodded. Matt waved him over. Scott immediately headed over to him. Seniors still had that kind of power on the football team.

“What's up, Matt?” the freshman starting quarterback asked.

Matt nodded. “Who's the chick?”

Scott turned and looked at Kami. “Oh, her name's Kamille. Everyone calls her Kami.”

Matt looked at him. “She your girlfriend?”

Scott shrugged and grinned. “I'm workin on that right now.”

Matt nodded. “Good. She's a cute girl.” He took a breath. “Listen, you and the receivers get together early every day and work on stuff, right?”

Scott nodded. “Some do. Sinclaire, Yavo, and a couple others are there every day. Why? You want to come out with us?”

“I think it might help me a little to get in sync with you.”

Scott nodded. “Look, I've been trying to get you the ball...”

Matt shook his head. “No...I know you have, but I haven't been all there.”

Scott nodded. “Well, come on out. But Sinclaire's gonna be there. You okay with that?”

“Yeah, it's cool.”

Scott looked past Matt and gestured to him. “Dude, I think someone's looking for you.”

Mat turned to see Tracey Overton at the entrance to the yard, scanning the crowd. She finally looked his way and smiled as he waved her over. Scott took that as his cue to get back to Kami. Tracey came over and kissed Matt, squeezing his neck tightly in the process.

“Mmmmm! I missed you!” she said, her head pressing against his chest. He could smell the scent of her shampoo as he kissed her head through her bright red hair. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tightly for a long moment before releasing her and guiding her to the food line.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Starving,” Tracey replied. “I ran out of the house this morning with just some toast.”

They got themselves plates of food and headed back to the tables, where Anquan was sitting contentedly, patting his full stomach, and talking with Mike and Vivian. Matt and Tracey found seats right next to them.

Matt put his plate down. “You guys all remember Tracey, right? Tracey, you know Quan, Mike, and Viv, right?”

Tracey nodded, smiling brightly. "We've all met. How are you all?"

Vivian switched seats with Mike so she could be closer to Tracey. "Hi, Tracey. I know we've met, but we've never really talked..."

The conversation was light and pleasant. Tracey felt herself being accepted into the world Matt occupied. His friends all seemed to be happy for him, though she wondered if they all secretly thought he was crazy for choosing her over Emily.

Kevin and Lindsey sat together with Tony and Emily, eating and laughing as the Cobras were celebrated by the community. Kendall Township was in high spirits because their Cobras were undefeated and poised to win the division, giving them a place in the state tournament. They constantly came over to where the young couples were seated to pat them on the back and wish them well. The group was getting used to the attention. Even Lindsey seemed to be basking in it. Kevin was impressed with the changes he'd seen lately in her. She normally was insular and didn't want any attention. Since the season began, he noticed that she had somehow become more and more willing to deal with the attention she was receiving as well as the attention he was receiving, though the attention from the Kendall High ladies was still bothersome to her.

Kevin loved that his best friend had a girlfriend now too, assuming that was the case. Emily was a surprise to all of them. Tony had taken the plunge and asked the prettiest girl in the world to dance and she had said yes. Since then, the pair had spent a great deal of time together and seemed to be working out quite well. Emily was tough to read and many thought she was playing a game, trying to make Matt Kildare, her ex boyfriend, jealous. Kevin didn't think that was the case, though he wasn't sure he trusted her either. She was interesting because she had her own rules for living and didn't seem to spend a whole lot of time worrying about what other people thought. He supposed that was what made her so interesting to Lindsey. Kevin was determined to get to know her because it looked like she was going to be a permanent part of their little group.

Chapter 3

Emily carefully applied her eye shadow, eye liner, mascara, and finally, clear lip gloss. The Coach's Barbecue was a pretty informal event. Last year though, she had gone with Matt Kildare, the King of Kendall High, when their relationship was just getting started. They had been the new "It" couple at Kendall High School and *that* day she had been dressed to kill. Today she would be attending the event with Tony Yavastrenko, a freshman player who was the farthest thing from Matt Kildare. To most of the student body, she had fallen from her pedestal atop the Kendall High student hierarchy when Matt broke up with her just over a week ago. She would not be trying to make any points today other than to show everyone that life goes on without Matt Kildare.

"You are so beautiful."

Emily smiled, seeing her mother smiling back at her in the mirror. She was standing with her shoulder against the door frame.

"Hmmm," Emily said. "Wonder where I get *that* from."

Emily Vasquez was generally considered the prettiest girl in all of Kendall High School. She had achieved that distinction early in her freshman year and had it confirmed by the most popular guy in Kendall High, Matt Kildare. But if Emily was pretty, beautiful, or whatever other adjective you choose to assign, her mother was even more so. Camila Vasquez possessed the kind of beauty that artists have historically sought to duplicate in their work. One such artist actually told her that her image belonged on a canvas or carved in granite so that it could be preserved through the ages. She was the kind of beautiful that caused men to risk everything just for the possibility of having her.

But Camila didn't want that. She had made her share of life-changing decisions. The beautiful young lady standing in front of her was one of them. Having a baby at age 17 was not something she would recommend to anyone, but it was also not something she would wish to change for herself. What she had worked so hard for over the past decade and a half, and what she still wanted so desperately was nothing more than to make a good life for her daughter. To that end she had been forced to make some very hard choices. Men were always throwing money at her, making offers to take care of her, even marry her. These were often men who didn't even know her.

Working as a cocktail waitress in the casinos had been very fruitful financially, but it also brought dangerous temptations into her life. Camila had to grow up quickly and learned very early on that her best friend was her sharp intellect. She was very smart; a straight A student in school. She had managed to finish high school even through a pregnancy and early motherhood, but she couldn't go to college with a baby, so she had gone to work. But she learned that advancement in the world often required a little piece of paper that said you were qualified. She earned her business management degree through a combination of online and local college classes. It had taken six years, but she had done it, and was now in casino management, earning a decent salary, but still working long hours in the afternoons and evenings. It left her daughter with little parental supervision and she knew that Emily was on her own, often making important decisions alone. It saddened her a great deal and she wondered if maintaining their fairly comfortable lifestyle was worth the sacrifice.

“So, who is this new boy you're seeing?” Though she spoke perfect English, her slight Colombian accent was still prevalent. It was the one thing about her that Emily couldn't emulate. Anyone who knew Emily would never believe that she wanted to be like another person. Her fierce independence, strong opinions, and apparent disinterest in how other people thought of her gave the impression of someone who knew who she was and was happy with it. For the most part that was all true of Emily, but in her heart, what she really wanted was to be like her mother. She wanted to walk like her, dress like her, look like her, and even talk like her. Emily could do most of that, but she couldn't fake that amazing accent. Emily spoke fluent Spanish and could sound just like a native Columbian when she did so, but when she spoke English, she sounded like a plain old American.

“His name's Tony.”

“I wish you would take a break from boys, just for a little while, *mija*.” Camila always called Emily “*mija*”, pronounced “me-hah”. It means, quite simply, “my daughter,” but sounds so much more affectionate when *they* say it.

Emily shrugged. “Actually, I wasn't really planning on this one. It just kind of happened.”

“But why can't you slow down a bit? You were so heartbroken after Matt. Why jump back into another relationship so quickly?”

Emily turned to her mother. “I'm not jumping. Nothing's even really happened. We're just seeing each other. He's nothing like Matt. Being with Tony is way less serious. He's just fun to be around. He makes me laugh. I need to laugh right now.”

Camila smiled. “I'm glad someone makes you laugh. You should smile more, you *and* that Lindsey. You both need to smile. It's good for your soul.”

Emily laughed. “Really? Our souls?”

“Yes,” Camila said. “Trust your *mama* on this. And I want to meet this boy soon.”

Emily nodded. “His name's Tony. You can meet him right now, if you want. How about we invite him to dinner Sunday night?”

“Perfect. I'll make *homiga culona* and *chunchillos*”

Emily stared, her mouth twisted in feigned nausea. “Roasted ants and fried intestines? I don't think so.”

“Colombian delicacies. I want to see if he has what it takes to date a real Colombian girl.”

Emily shook her head. “No way I'm bringing a boy home to that. *I* don't even eat that stuff. Neither do you.”

There was a knock at the door.

“That's him,” said Emily. “Better let me answer. He has trouble around pretty girls. You'd probably give him a heart attack.”

Camila laughed as her daughter hurried to the door.

“Hey,” she said, opening the door and letting Tony in.

“Hey,” he replied, leaning in and kissing her softly on the cheek. It was an amusing ritual he did, the kiss on the cheek, whenever he first saw her. They had kissed plenty over the past week, so he could easily have kissed her on the lips like normal people. But Tony always kissed her on the cheek when he greeted her. It was so *nonsexual* that Emily didn't know if she ought to

take it as a signal that they were not really together. He sure acted like they were together when they kissed. Tony was a very different kind of guy and Emily wasn't sure if his unease had to do with inexperience, intimidation, or if this was just his way. In any case, he was incredibly sweet. She could see why both Tracey and Brittany had been so horrified to see them together at the last party.

The real question Emily needed to answer is whether or not she *wanted* a sweet guy. She wanted a real relationship, to be sure, but she had really wanted that relationship to be with Matt Kildare, who *could* be sweet when he wanted to, but was also far more self-serving in his relationships. Girls didn't really think of Matt as sweet. She suspected the same would be true of her. She never thought of herself as being sweet or needing a guy to be sweet to her. She wondered if she and Tony ought to talk about these things so early in their relationship or should they be saved for later, if and when things progressed?

Camila came into the room. Emily saw Tony's reaction and smiled, holding his arm reassuringly.

“Mami,” Emily said, “this is Tony. Tony, this is my mother, Camila Vasquez.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Tony,” Camila stretched out her hand. Tony took it gently.

“It's nice to meet you, Miss Vasquez. Your daughter is a really great girl.”

Camila smiled. “Thank you so much. And you must be pretty great too, if she's seeing you.”

Emily already had enough. Maybe dinner was a bad idea. “Okay, enough with the slobberfest, you two.” To Tony, she said, “Let's get outta here before she invites you to dinner.”

Camila quickly said, “Yes, Tony. I'd like to have you over tomorrow night for dinner if it's okay with your mother.”

Tony nodded. “I don't think it'll be a problem. I'll ask my mom when we get to the car.”

Brittany finally caught up to Tracey as the party was winding down. She came over and said hi to everyone in the group, then asked Tracey to walk with her.

“So?” she asked when they were alone. “How are you?”

Tracey shrugged. “I guess I'm as well as I could expect, considering.”

Brittany nodded. “Have you said anything to Matt yet?”

Tracey shook her head. “I'm really not sure how to do it. I can't even figure out who to talk to first.”

Brittany nodded sadly. “Yeah. I can imagine. How about your mom? That might be the best place to start. She *needs* to know. Then tell your sister, and then Matt. Other than that, you don't have to explain anything to anyone.”

Tracey slumped her shoulders. “I don't know. It's like if I just keep it to myself no one will treat me differently. Once I tell everyone, everything is going to change, and except for this, everything is perfect right now.”

It was hard for Brittany to handle this situation but she knew she had to be strong for Tracey. It was especially hard being the only one who knew the truth about Tracey's condition. Just a week before, she had been sitting on the floor of Tracey's bedroom when Tracey came out of the bathroom with the news. All three tests they had purchased read positive. Tracey Overton was pregnant at age fifteen.

“Well,” Brittany said, “you need to start thinking about your health...*and* your baby's health.”

Tracey sighed. “I know. I promise I'll go to the doctor's soon. I just can't bring myself to talk about it right now.”

“And you have to tell your mom. You can't do this alone. And I can't be the only person who knows. It's making me crazy.”

“I don't know how I'm going to do that,” Tracey said, leaning against the fence. “This is gonna crush her.”

Brittany nodded. “Are you sure? I mean you're family's not like my family. I imagine your mom's pretty liberal about this kind of thing.”

“Yeah,” Tracey said, “when it comes to *other* people's kids. She's gonna have a heart attack. She has no idea I've even had *sex*. She only just met Matt two days ago.”

Brittany grimaced. “She hasn't noticed you being sick a lot?”

“Not really,” Tracey said, “but I've been keeping to myself whenever I feel sick, so it's no big surprise she hasn't caught on.”

“Well,” Brittany replied, “pretty soon things are going to be getting larger. It's best to have the conversation now so she can help you through it. I think that once she gets over the initial shock, she'll be fine.”

"Oh, sure," Tracey said sardonically. "She'll be super happy about it once she gets over the initial shock."

Brittany rolled her eyes. "You know what I mean. Just talk to her."

"I will. I will," Tracey promised, "eventually...when I get the nerve up."

Chapter 4

Anxiety, turmoil, and frustration.

These were the words floating through Brittany's mind as she prepared for church Sunday morning. It was amazing how much had changed in just ten days. Her whole world was in disarray. The people around her had all seemed to go off track at the same time. Tracey was pregnant, but wouldn't tell anyone, forcing Brittany to keep a secret from her family; something she hated to do, but she felt obligated in this case to let Tracey reveal her secret in her own time. Nonetheless, it caused real anxiety and frustration for Brittany.

Plus she was sad for Tracey. Her life was going to be forever changed the moment her secret got out. Brittany understood Tracey's desire to hold onto her current life as long as possible, but it made her think of the passages in scripture about those who seek to save their

earthly lives. Tracey was *so close* to faith. Brittany could see it in her just a couple of weeks ago, sitting in rapt attention as the clear gospel was presented. But then, just as it seemed as though she would accept Christ, Matt Kildare pulled her away with his stupid “no sex” compromise. Tracey was just too new to faith to see the foolishness of trying to maintain a Christian walk with a non Christian boyfriend. On top of that, she just found out that she got pregnant the first time she ever had sex, and was now wondering what kind of a God would do that to her just when she was beginning to believe in Him.

Brittany had to admit that she had asked God a similar question the night she and Tracey confirmed their fear. In fact, lately she had a number of “why” questions for God. Why was it that Tracey had to suffer at such a tender time in her walk? Why would God not lead her away from Matt Kildare? Why should a guy like Kevin Sinclaire be allowed to go through life knowing the truth but never having it change his heart? How come he can live life by such a strict moral code, yet never realize that his morality comes from his Creator God? Why does Lindsey Overton get to mock Christians and God and still get a guy like Kevin? And perhaps, the most difficult of all for Brittany, why would God seem to call a guy like Tony to faith and then let him start a relationship with a girl like Emily Vasquez?

Ugggh! Emily Vasquez?

Brittany truly hated the fact that Tony was seeing Emily, though she couldn't figure out why it mattered to her so much. She'd never seriously had any intentions of dating Tony, though his apparent faith had made the impossible all of a sudden possible. But still, she knew she shouldn't feel such resentment about him and Emily. But, for *whatever* reason, it really *did* matter to her. She found that this particular thought had been occupying a good deal of time in her head. She had spent a good deal of time the past week praying about all of this, and it always helped her feel better, but then a stray thought would pop back into her mind and set the whole chain reaction off again.

By the time she walked into the High School building, Brittany's mind was once again caught in between her strong faith and her troubled heart. When she saw Kevin sitting at the counter, eating a bagel with cream cheese and talking to a group of boys, she slumped a little bit. Walking over to the group, she tried to smile as best she could and asked Kevin about Tony.

“He just texted me,” Kevin replied. “His mom's dropping him off. He should be here soon.”

That brightened her up a bit. “Awesome,” she said. “So, are he and Emily really going out? I mean seriously?”

Kevin shrugged. “They're seeing each other. I don't think they're seeing other people, like she and Matt used to do so...” He turned back to his bagel. “...who knows?”

Brittany shook her head. “I hope she doesn't mess him up.”

“Mess him up?” Kevin grinned. “You mean like...” he looked around furtively, and then whispered, “...by having sex?”

Brittany didn't smile. “Very funny. Don't you care about your friend?”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “I think caring about someone is a little different than trying to control them.”

“I'm not trying to control anyone,” Brittany protested, “but he's new to faith and he's in a really vulnerable position, dating a girl who's *very* sexually active.”

“Like Tracey,” Kevin responded pointedly, tilting his head back toward Brittany.

Brittany nodded. “Like Tracey.” She sighed, putting her head in her hands.

Kevin saw the look right before her hands covered her head. He frowned. “What's wrong, Brit?”

She looked up. “I just told you.”

Kevin shook his head. “There's something else. You look really scared...or worried. What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

She shook her head. “It's nothing I can really talk about right now.”

Kevin nodded. “So, it's *something*.”

“Yes, it's something.”

“Something big?”

She chuckled despite herself. “It's pretty huge, but that's really all I can say.”

Kevin bit his lip. “That's cool. Let me know if you need anything.”

Just then, Tracey Overton walked in. Brittany's eyes grew wide. She glanced at Kevin, then quickly back to Tracey before waving to her. Tracey smiled and came toward them. Kevin caught the little indecisiveness in Brittany's eyes and stared thoughtfully at his bagel.

“Hey,” Tracey hugged Brittany. “Hi, Kevin,” she said, picking up a bagel and cutting it in

half.

“What's up, Trace?”

“Nuthin much,” she replied. Kevin quickly flicked his eyes to Brittany whose face was troubled.

“How's Matt?”

Tracey looked at him. “Are you making fun of me?”

Kevin leaned back, frowning. “I asked you how he was. How is that making fun of you?”

Yeah, get over it already.

Tracey looked at him skeptically. “I don't know, but you all hate each other, so why would you care how he is?”

“I care about *you*. You care about him. So, therefore, *I* care about him...sort of. A plus B equals C.”

Huh?

Tracey looked at him blankly. “That's math, right?”

Kevin laughed. “Something like that.”

Tracey nodded, smiling and trying not to stare too much at Kevin's amazing eyes.

Just stare at the ground or something. Or better yet, close your eyes.

Kevin continued. “I heard he was gonna come out to our prepractice practice.”

Tracey nodded. “Yeah, he mentioned something about that. You guys aren't going to treat him like a jerk are you?”

“*Us?*” Kevin said. “None of us have anything against him. *He* hates *me*.”

“He doesn't hate you,” Tracey replied. “He's just worried about losing his number one status.”

“Well,” Kevin said, “he ought to be more worried about losing *games*.”

“Just be nice to him.”

“You know me.”

“Uh huh...Exactly,” Tracey replied. Then her eyes brightened a little as she looked beyond Kevin to the doorway, where Tony was entering. “Hey, Tony!” she shouted.

Tony grinned and came over, slapping Kevin on the back, then hugging Tracey and kissing her on the cheek. “What's happenin, gang?”

“What's happenin with *you?*” Tracey said. “I guess you and Emily are doing okay?”

He shrugged. "So far, so good."

Tracey nodded slowly, as if waiting for more information. "Aaaannnd? Care to elaborate?"

Tony shrugged. "Not in church."

Brittany, who had been silently eating a danish through all of the conversation, nearly choked on it. Tracey giggled and Kevin patted Brittany on the back as Tony burst out laughing.

"I'm kidding!" he exclaimed. "Geeez! You really think she's that much of a slut?"

Brittany shrugged. "I try not to think about her at all."

Kevin raised his eyebrows and turned away. Tracey frowned. Brittany grabbed Tony's arm and walked him toward the door.

"Hey," he protested. "What'd I do now?"

She took him outside and released his arm rather roughly. Her light blue eyes were blazing. "Do you think this is all a big joke?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't you realize how silly you look, dating Emily Vasquez and then coming to church on Sundays?"

Tony frowned. "What difference does it make if I date Emily? What, people who date Emily shouldn't go to church?"

Brittany poked him in the chest. "Stop making fun of me. You know what I mean. Do you take this seriously or not?"

"Do I take *what* seriously?"

"God!" Brittany shouted. "Do you take *God* seriously? Or have you been faking it the past few weeks to get me to think you're really becoming a Christian?"

Tony was hurt. "You think I'm *pretending* to be a Christian?"

Brittany shrugged, twisting her lips. "I really don't know *what* to think. How can you date Emily Vasquez?"

Tony spread his arms. "How can I *not*? Have you ever *seen* her?" As Brittany opened her mouth to reply, he continued. "And what difference does it make to *you* anyway?"

"What do you mean, what difference does it make?"

Tony shrugged, his eyes wide. "Well, you made it clear to me that you aren't interested in me. Now you seem to care about who I date."

“I don't care who you date. I just think you need to be careful if you're really thinking about being a Christian.”

“So,” Tony said, “me being a Christian means I have to break up with Emily?”

“She's not a Christian, Tony.”

“So, what?”

Brittany looked at him in disbelief. “Even if you don't know all about Christianity, you have to realize that Christians generally agree that sex outside of marriage is wrong.”

“So?”

“Are you serious?” Brittany replied. “You're with Emily Vasquez.”

“And?”

“Come on,” Brittany said. “You expect me to believe that you two aren't doing it?”

“Doing what, Brittany?”

“You know what I'm talking about, Tony.”

“But,” replied Tony, his blood pressure beginning to rise. “*you* don't know what you're talking about. You don't even know Emily.”

“I know she's a trashy slut,” Brittany shot back. “She doesn't even pretend she isn't.”

“Have you ever even *talked* to her?”

“She would *never* talk to me,” Brittany said. “Plus, I don't need to talk to her to know all about her. It's not like she hides it. She *embraces* her reputation.”

“No. I mean, have ever really *looked* at her even?” Tony asked. His temper was nearly at the boiling point, “I mean other than down your nose?”

“She's...”

“Because,” Tony continued, pointing a finger in Brittany's face, “Emily is *not* a piece of trash, like all of you snotty, holy, superior little *brats* like to think.”

Just then Kevin came up. He and Tracey had come out together and caught the end of the exchange. He gently pushed Tony back away from the stunned Brittany. “Come on, dude,” he said. “Let's take a walk.”

As they headed away from the building where Tracey stood with Brittany, watching the boys walk away, Tony shook his head, beginning to cool down. “I'm sorry, man. I don't know what I was thinking, coming here. She almost made me *lose* it just now.”

Kevin bit his lip. “Look, Brittany's a little naive and very opinionated, but she means

well. She's just worried about you, that's all.”

“Yeah? Well she's more focused on Emily than me, that's for sure.”

“She sees Emily as a threat.”

“Threat to what?” Tony spread his arms. “Brittany wants nothing to do with me! If Emily knew how I felt about Brittany, she'd probably drop me on the spot. Who's the real threat?”

Kevin chuckled. “That's not the kind of threat she's worried about.”

“What then?”

Kevin shrugged. “It doesn't matter.”

Tony stopped, leaning against a tree. “Tell me.”

Kevin shook his head. “Look, dude. You're having a good time with Emily, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you really want to get into all this religious stuff now?”

“I'd like to understand what everyone is so uptight about.”

Kevin shook his head. “All right, fine. I'm not the guy to really talk to about this because I really don't *care* about any of it, but here goes. If you're really a Christian, you can't date non Christians. It's kind of that simple.”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Seriously? Why not?”

“Because, if you think about it, how will a non Christian influence a Christian?”

Tony shrugged.

“If you had a choice to make between going to church on Sunday morning and seeing Emily, what would you do?” Kevin held up his hand. “And before you answer, what if Emily was really pressuring you to come with her? Would you skip church for her?”

Tony thought about it and nodded. “I don't know. Probably.”

Kevin shrugged. “So, what does that mean? Think about this. Your parents are not Christians, so they don't care if you come to church or not. *I'm* only here because I have to be here. Outside of that, who has the most influence over you? Emily. Your girl is *not* a Christian, so she probably thinks you're wasting your time coming here every Sunday. See how hard life could get if there are no Christian influences in your life?”

Tony took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “So you think I need to break things off with Emily?”

“I didn't say that,” Kevin replied. “I just told you that I don't care about this stuff. My

girlfriend is not a Christian at all.”

“Well, I'm not breaking up with Emily just because Brittany says so.”

“She's just trying to look out for you. You're a new believer...*if* you believe, so she is trying to help you. Go easy on her. She's not used to big tough goons sticking their fingers in her face.”

As the boys walked away, Tracey looked at Brittany quizzically. "What was that all about?"

Brittany shook her head, still staring at the boys. "He has no idea what he's getting into, jumping into a relationship with Emily Vasquez."

Tracey looked up at the sky for a few seconds. "Brittany, he wanted *you*. He's here because of *you*. If you don't want him, why is it so important to you who he's going out with?"

Brittany looked at her. "He may have *come* here for me, but he's *still* here because he felt something change in his heart when he heard the lesson. And *that's* what I'm worried about."

“Well,” Tracey shrugged, “people have to make their own decisions.”

“Yes,” Brittany replied, “they do. But it is the responsibility of their Christian friends to at least *try* to hold them accountable to their faith.”

“It seems more like judging their lives to me.”

Brittany shrugged. “I guess it could, and I might come off as judgmental sometimes, which is wrong on my part. But if the advice, or judgments, as you call them, is accurate, and if the person really is a Christian, they need to think about it and pray about it. And Tony is on really dangerous ground. Emily Vasquez will not be a godly influence in his life.”

As they sat, listening to the lesson, Brittany's words continued to float across Tracey's mind. Brittany hadn't directed any of her comments at Tracey's situation, but how could Tracey ignore the similarities between Tony's relationship with Emily and her relationship with Matt? Brittany had, in fact, made her feelings about Matt very clear both before Tracey had decided to

date him and once more, right at the outset, the day she found out about Matt's "no-sex" clause. While it was a little uncomfortable, Brittany's opinions hadn't persuaded Tracey away from the relationship. But now, sitting here in the very spot she had been sitting when she had first come to this church, she began to feel the pangs of guilt. She tried to focus on what was being taught.

The youth pastor, Gavin Dalrymple, was talking about living for the kingdom of God.

"What really makes life worth living?" he was asking. "What is worth pursuing?" He let the question hang in the air. "Think about everything we pursue in this life outside of Christ. Money, power, fame, sex. Those are the really big ones, right? But what about other things? Hobbies, knowledge, education, social status, athletic accomplishment." Some eyes glanced quickly at Kevin and Tony, neither of whom reacted. Mr. Dalrymple went on. When we pursue these things, any of them, in any combination, what is the result, even when we get them?

"King Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived. He was so wealthy that it was said that silver was like rocks on the ground to him. He had so much money that silver to him was worth less to him than pennies are to us. He writes in the book of Ecclesiastes how he denied himself *nothing*. He begins the second chapter by describing how he had decided to indulge his every desire. He tried drinking, pursuing knowledge, building great monuments, houses, vineyards, gardens and parks, huge amounts of livestock and cattle, countless slaves and servants. Solomon had over one *thousand* wives and concubines. If he wanted it, he went and got it. Solomon had something that very few people ever have. He had everything he ever wanted. He withheld nothing from himself.

"And guess what he thought of it all when everything was said and done? He said it was all worthless. It was like chasing after the wind. What are we chasing today? Are we chasing happiness? Love? Money? Knowledge? None of those things are bad things, right? God gives us all good things, but we abuse them. We use them all for our own pleasure and glory and rarely, if ever for God's glory or pleasure. That's when they become worthless, and even harmful.

"Many of you are in relationships with boyfriends or girlfriends. It's exciting and fun and you feel wanted and needed. You feel pretty or handsome. You feel understood. You feel complete...for a little while. Because if that is all the relationship is about, how you *feel*, then it is empty. There is nothing holding it up but you and your girl or guy.

"Life without Christ is nothing more than this: Eat, drink, sleep, repeat, all the while collecting things to ourselves. And we can't take any of it with us when this life ends. Life *with*

Christ, life *for* Christ, is a never ending accumulation of joy and riches, and we get to take it all with us...”

Tracey's eyes were moist with tears. She wasn't sure whether she was crying because she knew her relationship with Matt was empty or because she was feeling guilty for it. It sure didn't feel empty and worthless when she was with him. And she didn't understand what there was to feel guilty *for*, other than that first night, but that was before she had ever set foot inside church. Their relationship was different now, and they weren't doing anything wrong, so what was the big deal? Why is it that just when she gets the guy of her dreams, the whole world decides to collapse on her head?

Maybe you're just wasting your time here...

Tracey pushed that thought aside. The truth was that whether she believed what was being taught in church or not, she knew she could never bring herself to end things with Matt. At the same time, she really wanted to be in church. She really wanted to know more about how she could know God. But why should she have to give up the one thing in the world that made her happy? She hadn't even noticed that Brittany's hand was holding hers. When she looked at her best friend she felt the gentle squeeze on her hand. She squeezed back gently in thanks.

As they walked out of the Youth Center, Brittany and Tracey found a quiet place to talk. Brittany knew that her friend was struggling, but lately she had been frustrated because whatever advice she gave, Tracey always seemed to do the opposite. She knew that Tracey was struggling inside. She could see the inner conflict.

“Why is it,” Tracey asked, “that I'm expected to give up the only thing that makes me happy? Of all the guys in the world...” She spread her arms. “Don't you think that having a baby with a guy is enough of a reason to try to make a relationship work? Doesn't God want parents to be together?”

Brittany shook her head. “Don't put this on God. You can't blame Him for your bad judgment. You guys screwed up. Your relationship has nothing to do with the baby. Matt doesn't even *know* about it yet.”

“So?” Tracey said. “He's still the father.”

“Then why haven't you told him?”

“I told you. I just want things to be normal for a little while.”

"Whatever," Brittany said. "It doesn't change the fact that he is not a Christian."

"Well," Tracey replied, "maybe I'm not either."

"Maybe not," Brittany allowed. "Is that why you cried through the whole lesson today?"

Tracey slumped. "This whole Christianity thing is just too hard."

Brittany looked at her. "Tracey, you have no idea how hard it is to live as a Christian in this world."

"Trust me, I get it, Brittany. I know life is hard."

Brittany shook her head. "No, Tracey, you don't get it at all. You haven't even *tried* living your life as a Christian. You think just because you and Matt aren't having sex that you've made some kind of unique compromise? You think you're the first to try that? Christianity isn't about not having sex until you're married. That's just one little piece that a lot of people get hung up on."

"I understand that. But if I'm not having sex with my boyfriend, what's the problem?"

"The problem," Brittany replied, "is that by dating someone who could care less about God, *you* are not loving God. Your relationship...and his," she said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder at Tony, "has nothing at all to do with God."

Tracey was confused. "What does *any* relationship have to do with God?"

"See?" Brittany said. "That's what I'm talking about. You two both are so new to all this."

"So? What are you saying? I don't get any of this."

Brittany shrugged. "I know you don't get it. That's the point. It's the whole reason I told you not to start dating Matt Kildare."