

Fiction Excerpts

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***Disclaimer:** The following excerpts contain adult language*

“Daddy” (short story) pgs 2-5

Summary: Taylor Hughes is a renowned singer who has come back from his whirlwind world tour. What awaits back home is his toddler son, Steven, who he will take care of for two weeks as his ex-wife Cassidy has to go on a business trip. Taylor hasn’t seen Steven since he was four months old. Will he be able to make up for lost time or fail miserably in trying to bond with his young son?

“At Seventeen” (short story) pgs 6-8

Summary: When the prim and proper daughter of the head pastor, Annie Philips, meets the precocious and promiscuous daughter of the new assistant pastor, Samantha Cathaway, they become unlikely friends. When Samantha lies her way to get Annie to come with her on a spur-of-the-moment trip to Las Vegas, it’s the most rebellious and exciting thing that Annie has done in her seventeen years. But she comes to find that a life of sin in the city of sin isn’t at all what she dreamed it to be...

Tangles (chaptered story) pgs 9-13

Summary: At the prestigious and preppy Stonybook Academy, it’s survival of the fittest. For some, to survive means to get the best grades and be in all the extracurricular activities; for others it means to rely on mom and dad’s endless cash flow; and yet for others, it’s to forge an identity as the class clown, jock, or gossip queen. For Brooke Lucas, however, to survive means to create a fictional world of things she doesn’t have like social status and supportive parents. Soon her lies begin to unravel and the one time she does cry wolf honestly, it’s too late.

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“Daddy”

[...]

Taylor was about to say something when a small voice called out, “Mommy hungwy.”

He lowered his eyes and drew in his breath when he saw Steven, tugging at Cassidy’s pants. He still had the same big, blue eyes that haunted Taylor’s dreams. He had round, chubby cheeks, a mouth that seemed too red to be natural, and a shorter version of the shaggy mop that Taylor was sporting. He had gotten so big.

Cassidy saw the look on Taylor’s face. His eyes glistened and he was chewing on his lower lip. She sighed and picked up the little boy. “Hey buddy, can you say hi to daddy?”

“Hi-hi.” Steven grinned, showing a set of tiny white teeth. The dimple appeared on his left cheek.

“He-hey, little dude,” Taylor said, his voice slightly quivering. “How you doing?”

Steven looked up at his mother. “Mommy, hungwy.”

“I know sweetie, I know.” She gave him a kiss on the cheek and then looked up at Taylor. “I brought some food and drinks for him to eat.” She pointed to the two plastic shopping bags at her feet, overflowing with food. “He loves mac and cheese and anything potato. Don’t give him anything too hard to eat because his teeth are still coming in. And uh, easy on the sweets.”

Taylor nodded.

“Um, you have my cell number in case of an emergency. And here...” She handed the duffel bag over her shoulder to Taylor along with Steven. “That has his toys, bedtime books, sing-a-long videos, his sippy cup, and anything else you may need. Oh, and he’s potty-trained already so you don’t have to worry about diapers. And...I guess that’s it.” She pulled an unruly, chestnut curl behind her ear and gave Taylor a hard look. “Please take good care of him.”

He looked down at the blond, little head. “I will.”

“I know you’re not used to kids and--”

“Cass I don’t need a lecture. I can handle it.”

Cassidy sighed. She picked up the grocery bags and placed them in the house. She looked up at her little boy and smiled. “Stevie-boy? Mommy has to go bye-bye.”

Steven’s lip started to tremble. “No bye.”

She gave him a kiss on his nose. “I’ll be back before you know it sweetie. Be a good little boy for daddy, okay?”

“No,” he whined.

She started to walk away. “I love you.” As soon as her back was turned, the waterfalls started.

“Mommmyyyy!” Steven cried, as he wiggled frantically to escape from Taylor’s arms. Taylor closed the door, hoping that Cassidy hadn’t heard his cries. “Shhhhh,” he said, rubbing the boy’s head. “It’s okay.”

Steven's wails only got louder.

"Um, uh, do you want to watch T.V.?"

"Mommmyyyy!!!" Steven yelled at the top of his lungs.

Taylor cringed and racked his brain to think of a solution. "Uh, how about some music?" He walked over to the radio and turned to some rock music station. The banging drums and twangy electrical guitars only seemed to upset Steven more as his screeches got more high-pitched and desperate.

"Shit," Taylor said. "If I was a three-year-old, what would make me stop crying?" An idea came to him. "Hey little man, would you like a popsicle?"

Steven's cries slowly subsided. He sniffled and looked up at his dad with watery eyes. "Popkle?"

Taylor sighed in relief. Cassidy had said easy on the sweets, but one little popsicle couldn't hurt. And it would save his sanity for the time being. "One popsicle coming right up."

The days that followed were not what Taylor imagined to be "father and son bonding" time. It was more like "father goes crazy because son will not stop his fucking crying" time. All Steven did was cry and the only way Taylor kept from ripping his hair out was to give him a cookie, ice cream, candy, or a popsicle. The 'easy on the sweets' rule was long forgotten. In the few times that didn't work, Taylor popped a cranky Steven in front of the television that was in the guest room, put on one of his sing-a-long tapes, and locked the door. He usually quieted down or banged on the door to the point of exhaustion that he fell into a deep sleep. Taylor was relieved that Steven at least ate and slept relatively well. If he couldn't make his son happy here, at least he could give him that much.

On the fourth day, Taylor put a bologna sandwich, cut it into fourths, and macaroni and cheese in front of Steven for dinner. Steven just stared at the food.

"What's wrong now?" Taylor said, frustration edging his words.

Steven frowned. "Tummy hurt."

He did look a little pale. Taylor bent down beside Steven's chair. "Your tummy hurts? Let me see if I can--"

A brown, sticky, clumpy substance came spewing out of Steven's mouth unto Taylor's hand.

"Oh fucking gross!" Taylor cried. Steven started to cry. "Oh dude, it's not your fault," he said. He picked Steven up and gently patted his back, getting vomit all over his clothes in the process. "Here, go lie down on the couch." He walked into the living room and laid Steven on his leather couch. He groaned when he saw that the brown concoction had smeared on the expensive material. Taylor then walked back to the kitchen.

"Shit, what do I do?" There was no way in hell that he was going to call Cassidy and have her scream at him for being an incompetent father. He walked over to the sink to wash his hands. "Dara?" he said, thinking of his housekeeper. "Nah, I can't do that to her on her day off." Taylor grabbed a rag, wet it, and walked over

to the mess on the floor. He gagged at the smell. “This is so sick.” He suddenly thought of something and smacked his forehead. “Idiot! I’ll call mom.”

Taylor dropped the rag and felt around his back pocket for his cell phone. He swiped to his contacts and pressed the call button. She immediately answered. He wanted to kiss her through the telephone. “Mom?”

“Taylor, sweetie, how are you? How’s the little one?”

Taylor sighed. “We have a little problem.”

“What kind of problem?”

“He threw up.”

“Oh,” his mom said. “Well, what you have been feeding him?”

“Mac and cheese and sandwiches and little bite-size chicken things that you heat in the microwave. And uh, sweets. Lots and lots of...sweets.” He cringed. He knew what was coming next.

“Taylor,” his mom said warningly.

“Well, it was the only way to shut him up.”

His mother sighed. “Did you try making funny faces or weird noises or singing?”

“Um, no.”

“Sweetheart, he’s a three-year-old. You need to come down to his level of thinking.” She paused. “Have you been keeping him entertained?”

“Um, well, I always put on his sing-a-long videos.”

“And where are you when he’s watching these videos?”

Taylor cringed again. Maybe this phone call wasn’t such a good idea. “Uh, well, not with him.”

“I thought you said you were going to spend some quality time with him.”

“But how can I mom?!?!? All he does is cry for his mommy. What the hell am I supposed to do? I’m not Cassidy. I don’t know a fucking thing about kids!”

“You better not be using that kind of language in front of him.”

Taylor bit his tongue. He had tried to keep his dirty mouth in check, but there were a lot of slips here and there. That’s just what he needed when Cassidy came back. A trash-talking baby. “I’m trying.” He sighed. “Mom, I don’t need a lecture. I’m in desperate need of some help here.”

“Taylor,” she said, her voice sympathetic. “I can’t tell you anything that you can’t find out for yourself. Put yourself in his little shoes and try to think and feel like he does. Learn from mistakes. Spend some time with him. And most of all, be patient.” He heard his father yelling something in the background. “Sweetie, I gotta go. But keep in mind what I said. Oh, and just let Steven sleep off his tummy ache and he should be fine. And please, let the boy have some fresh air. Get out of the house.” She laughed and blew a kiss into the phone. “Goodbye dear.”

Taylor lowered his phone and laid it gently on the table. He eyed the uneaten sandwich, picked one up,

and started eating it. As he chewed, he pondered over his mother's words.

“Mommmyyyy!!”

Taylor jumped up and walked over to the couch. Steven was sitting up, his face still a little pale and his blue eyes wide and staring. “Hey little man, feeling better?”

Steven placed his tiny hand on his stomach. “Owwwie.”

Taylor picked him up and walked towards the front door. “I’m sorry about that Steve-O. I fed you a lot of shi, erm, junk didn’t I?” he said as he stepped out into the cool nighttime air. “Maybe some fresh air will help.”

Steven put an arm around Taylor’s neck and looked up at the sky. He pointed to the moon. “Wassat?”

“That? That’s the moon.” His mother’s words came back to him. “If you look really close, there’s a rabbit that lives inside of it.”

Steven looked at him as if he was crazy. Taylor laughed and held him a little tighter. He felt the little boy’s heart beating against his chest and watched his eyes, so full of wonder at the twinkling stars and the glowing moon, and smiled. This is what he had been waiting for. This is what...

He saw a bright flash coming from one of the bushes. “The hell?”

Taylor carefully stepped towards the bush. He heard rustling and then made out the silhouette of a figure standing up. He started to run. Taylor ran after him, gripping Steven firmly against his chest. With his extra baggage, the intruder was obviously able to outrun him, but Taylor saw him trip on the sidewalk and hurried as fast he could to his body. When he tried to get up, Taylor kicked him and held him down with his foot. In the dim streetlight, he could see that it was a scrawny, gray-haired man. He smirked. Hours at the gym had made Taylor buff and strong. He could take this guy no sweat.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Get off me!”

Steven started to squirm in his arms. Taylor shifted him to his other hip. “Give me the memory chip.”

“But-”

“Give it to me, you fucking asshole!”

“I can’t breathe,” the man wheezed out. Taylor pressed harder. The man groaned. “The camera’s already broken! Please! Don’t hurt me!”

“Give me the camera then.”

The man took off the camera with great difficulty. Taylor bent down and took it from him and then threw it as hard as he could against the sidewalk. It split open and the memory chip popped out. Taylor gave the man another kick and walked over to pick up the chip. “Get the fuck out of here!” he said, not turning around.

Taylor walked home, with Steven wide-eyed and gripping his collar. [...]

“At Seventeen”

[...]

“Oh it’s just beginning sweetheart.” Sam glanced at her watch. “But first...” Sam eased her way off to the side of the road, not even bothering to flip on her turn signal since the interstate was deserted. She switched off the car, grabbed the black handbag that was in between her and Annie, and began rummaging through it.

“What are you-why are we stopped?” Annie asked.

“Well,” Sam said, as she pulled out her cell phone. “We can’t exactly have the engine running in the background when you call your mom.”

Annie’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “Call my mom? Are you insane? What should I say to her, ‘Hi mom, change of plans, we’re on our way to Vegas, sorry, love you, bye?’” She shook her head. “Uh-uh. No way.”

Sam grabbed Annie’s hand and placed her phone in it. “Your mom asked me to tell you to call her as soon as we got to Long Beach,” she said. “Hypothetically, we should be there by now. And besides, this will seal the deal that we’re actually where everyone thinks we are.”

“Oh my God Sam, what’s the matter with you?” Annie said, tossing the phone back at her. “Do you realize how much trouble we’re going to be in? Our parents are going to flip! And I can’t lie! Are you kidding me? I haven’t been able to get away with a lie since I was like five!” She held her hands up. “No...just no Sam. I can’t do this.”

“Annie,” Sam said, “No one’s going to find out. There actually is a youth retreat going on, we just won’t be there, nobody will know, no problems.” She put up her hand when Annie tried to say something. “I gave your mom my cell phone number in case of an emergency, but I basically told her we’d be too busy to take calls. Trust me, she ate all this up.”

“But it’s the principle of the whole thing Sam.”

“Yeah? Well, here’s what I think Annie Philips. I think you are so caught up in pleasing mommy and daddy dearest that you’ve forgotten that you’re just a fuckin teenager.” She glared into Annie’s eyes, then grabbed the phone. “I am offering you three days, not even three, to stop being Annie Philips, perfect pastor’s daughter, but Annie Philips, normal teenage girl that deserves to have fun. So...” She thrust the phone back at Annie, lowered back her car seat, and put her arms underneath her head. “Wake me up when you’ve made your decision.”

Annie sighed and turned away from Sam. She could see some cattle roaming in the distance and made out a figure clad in jean overalls and a straw hat. She breathed in the crisp, citrus-tinged air and leaned back in her seat to look up at the sky. The vastness of it made her feel lightheaded and she felt that if she stood up, she could maybe touch the top of it.

For the first time, Annie didn’t feel restrained, wasn’t stuck in the confines of the church or the house.

Here she was, in the middle of nowhere, breathing in the beautiful environment, with a friend who promised more exciting things to come. Her mind did a tug of war with itself as she fingered Sam's phone.

Finally after fifteen silent minutes, Annie opened up the phone and began dialing her number. She sensed Sam shifting beside her as she listened to the dial tone. One ring, two rings, three—"Hey mom, I'm here." She paused to let her mom babble for a bit and peered over at Sam. She gave her a slight grin and then faced forward. "Yes mom. Yes. I'll be sure to eat well. Okay. I have to go mom. I'll see you in three days. Okay. Love you. Bye." She looked back at Sam and saw her gaping at her. Annie smirked. "You're going to start catching flies in your mouth if you aren't careful."

"I thought you said you couldn't tell a lie," Sam said.

"Well, I'm willing to try some new things."

Sam raised her eyebrow. "Does that apply to everything?"

"Well, obviously I can't try anything if we're just sitting here, Sam." Annie paused to smile. "We're not getting any younger and neither is Vegas."

Sam grinned. "Well alrighty then." She started the engine and then turned the radio back on. Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" came on and Sam pumped her fist in the air.

"Woohoo! Let's get this party started girlfriend!" With that, they zoomed off, the music and their laughter filling the California air.

They arrived in Vegas at nine o'clock at night. Sam checked them into a luxury suite at the Venetian Hotel with her credit card, where they bathed, dined, and rested up for tomorrow. Upon waking up, Sam dragged Annie all over Vegas, prepping her for their "big night" at Club Utopia, one of the hottest nightclubs in the West. First, they went to a tattoo parlor, where Sam coaxed Annie to get a tiny tattoo of a fairy near her left hip. Next, they drove to a store called "The Hot Stuff" where Sam spent nearly six hours trying to pick out outfits for herself and Annie. Annie had tried on nearly twenty different outfits before Sam finally approved of something and she was too worn out to protest how little material covered her. Then she was dragged to a beauty parlor, where stylists curled, pulled, and sprayed her hair and powdered, plucked, and painted her face. Sam had then pushed her into the dressing room with Annie's outfit and shoes, with a smile and an encouraging pat on her bottom.

Annie now stood looking at her reflection in the full-length mirror on the wall. The exhausted funk she had been in was washed away as she turned around, looked over her shoulder, cocked her hip, and twirled in front of the mirror. Annie then stopped moving and peered closer to the glass, outlining her image with her finger. Her brown hair was curled and piled high on top of her head, with a few loose curly-cue's framing her face. A sprinkling of silver glitter created subtle, sparkling confetti on her hair. Annie's lips were painted red,

her eyes were lined with black, and silver eyeshadow stretched from her eyelids to the bottom of her eyebrows.

And then there was her outfit. The glittery silver halter top stopped three inches under her breasts, showing her toned midriff and long torso. Her back was completely bare, except for the strings that tied in the back to hold her top in place. She also had on a black silk miniskirt that hung low on her hips, strappy black heels, and no underwear or bra.

“Annie dear, did you die in there? What’s taking so long?” Sam’s voice was muffled behind the door.

Annie covered her bare stomach with her arms. “I’m not so sure about this Sam.”

The door opened and Sam entered. Her curly hair cascaded down her shoulders and she had changed into a leather mini dress, complete with a studded dog collar and wrist bands. She smiled at Annie. “Girl, what are you talking about? You look hot! Turn around for me.”

Annie kept her arms on her stomach as she spun around. Sam then walked over to her, removed her hands, and pulled her skirt a little bit lower. “There. You want to show off that cute little tattoo you got.”

“I feel naked.”

“You’re covering all your private parts, don’t worry.” Sam opened her bag and handed Annie a pair of diamond hoop earrings and a diamond tennis bracelet. “Here, these will complete your outfit.”

Annie’s eyes widened. “Where’d you get all this stuff?”

“Oh, I just borrowed them from my mother’s jewelry chest.”

Annie nearly dropped the pieces of jewelry. “What?! Oh Jesus, what am I thinking? I can’t pull this off, I can’t wear your mother’s expensive jewelry, I can’t go out like this in public, what am I-”

Sam put her hand over Annie’s mouth. “Annie, you look hot. People dress like this when they go out to clubs. And besides, guys will be swallowing their tongues with one look at you.” She smiled. “You’ll see. Just trust me.”

[...]

Tangles

Chapter 1

[...]

“Speak of the devil,” said Nikki, “Put on your ‘we love Brooke’ face on, since she’s making her way over here.”

Everybody shifted uncomfortably in his or her seat. Josh swirled his mashed potatoes, Brad took a big swig of his water, Nikki pretended to be absorbed in her nail polish with Lauren looking at and commenting on them.

“Hey crew. What’s shaking?”

“Hey Brooke,” the four chorused, hoping that their guilty faces didn’t give away anything that they had been talking about earlier.

An awkward silence ensued with Brooke looking expectantly at all of them to say something to her, which Lauren broke by saying, “Um, do you want to get something to eat with me, Brooke? I was actually going to get up and get something from the--”

“No, it’s okay. I actually came down to look for Josh to tell Mrs. Caroline that I won’t be in English today because I have a doctor’s appointment.”

Josh saluted at her and said, “I’ll pass that along.”

“What are you going to the doctor’s for?” Nikki asked, discretely mouthing a “*now*” to the end of her question at Lauren.

“Oh, I’m having stomach problems again. You know, my ulcer.”

Nikki simply nodded.

Brooke looked at her watch and plopped down into the seat next to Josh. “I have some time before I have to leave. What are your plans for the weekend guys?”

“Josh and I have play practice up the wazoo this weekend,” Nikki said as she looked at Josh and groaned.

Josh mimicked her groaning. “True that sister. I swear I wouldn’t have let you coax me into trying out for this stupid play if I had known that it would *own* me and my weekends. I need my beauty rest you know.”

Brad coughed into his hand. “Not going to comment on that. Anyway, I have a debate tournament on Saturday and then I’ll probably be studying the rest of the time.”

“Studying for what? It’s the end of the term! There aren’t any more tests,” Nikki said, eyeing Brad as if he had lost a screw in his head. “Unless, you sicko, you persuaded the teachers to give you more work so you could up your 99.9% in every class.”

Brad gave her an evil look. “Look here, Miss Sarcasm. We *do* have exams next Tuesday, you know.”

“But that’s next Tuesday! I’m not going to start thinking about those darn things until Monday evening.”

Nikki shook her head. “If Lauren here didn’t think you were cute, I would kick you in the balls for being such an overachieving perfectionist.”

Lauren blushed and kicked Nikki’s foot underneath the table. “Um, I’m going to Brad’s tournament.” Nikki returned a kick to Lauren. “And then after that, I’m leaving for Richmond for my grandparents’ anniversary.”

“Humph, so it sounds like you’re all busy this weekend,” Brooke said. “Because I was going to invite all of you to a party to meet the boys and Amber, but oh well. Maybe some other time.” She then jumped up from her seat. “Alright, chicks and chickadees, I gotta go. Don’t forget to tell Mrs. Caroline, Josh. Bye all.” With that, she skipped away.

As soon as she turned away, Nikki grabbed Lauren’s hand and held onto it tightly. “Hold me back Laur. If you don’t, I’m going to go over there and bash her head in. Ulcer? My ass, she has an ulcer. Hasn’t she had this ulcer since the beginning of freshman year?”

Josh shook his head. “Not to mention the fact that we had a paper due today in English. Gee, she so conveniently scheduled her appointment so that she wouldn’t be in class. Out of all the times! Imagine that. What a coincidence.”

“And boys? What boys?” Nikki said, squeezing Lauren’s hand so hard that Lauren felt like its blood circulation had been cut off. “She’s been talking about these stupid college boys since the beginning of the year. They’re probably not even real! They’re all in her head! She’s a flippin nutcase isn’t she?”

“But why in the world would she invite us to a party if they weren’t real?” Lauren asked as she tried to wiggle her fingers out of Nikki’s grasp. Nikki looked down at their hands, gave her an apologetic look, and let go. Lauren shook her head. “You know what? I’m not even going to analyze. Let’s try something guys. When I come back with my lunch, let’s talk about something *other* than Brooke. I really want to have a nice, civil conversation with my best friends without the bitterness or badmouthing.” With that, she got up and headed for the salad bar.

Chapter 2

Brooke often felt as if there were two Brooke Lucas’s who were inhabiting the earth. There was the Brooke Lucas of Stonybrook Academy, the wealthy British belle who was so delicate that she often missed school due to health problems (‘it’s the terrible American air,’ she would often say) and lived with her doting, stylish mother while her father was a renowned professor back home in England at Oxford University.

This, however, was the farcical world that Brooke had strategically created over the past five years in America. The only thing that *that* Brooke Lucas had in common with the other, *real* Brooke Lucas was that they were both British. She was far from wealthy and was actually quite healthy (when she got enough sleep). She wouldn’t describe her mother as “doting” because she was in fact a woman who never got over the lost

glory days of past affluence and tried to hold onto that world by toting knock-off Prada bags, hanging with country-club dames, and making up, like her daughter, an imaginary world. As for her father, it was basically as if Brooke was fatherless, although he was, in reality, within close proximity.

When Brooke had driven out of the parking lot of Stonybrook, it was something that had become very routine for her. She had woken up this morning with the realization that she had a paper due today which she hadn't done. Thus, her mom made a phone call to the school office about a "doctor's appointment" that was, by convenience, during her English period and here she was, at 2 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, back at home.

Brooke gathered up her belongings and got out of her Honda Accord. She looked around for a maroon Mercedes Benz and groaned when she saw it parked next to the green dumpster. Her mother was home.

She locked her car and made her way to the shabby-looking apartment that she lived in with her mother in a small, old-fashioned neighborhood. It was a far cry from a three-story mansion that an upper-class British belle would be thought to live in and the mother-daughter relationship it housed was a far cry from what would be characterized as "loving."

Brooke trudged up two flights of stairs and walked to her door to unlock it. As soon as it opened, her mother pounced on her.

"I need some money," she said.

Brooke looked at her mother. Diana Chesters was wearing a black business suit with gold buttons and her hair was piled high on her head in a twisted updo. Her face was caked-on with way too much makeup and she had huge, golden hoops in her ears.

"What happened to the money I gave you last week?" Brooke asked as she closed the door behind her.

"Spent it on the suit. And, well, your father is about a week late in sending money."

Brooke sighed and took out her wallet from the back pocket of her backpack. "How much do you need?"

"Well, it's a dinner party at that new place on York. I checked the prices on-line and the meals actually aren't as pricey as the other places we've been. So taking into account appetizer, wine, main course...about eighty dollars?"

Almost mechanically, Brooke dug into her wallet and shoved four twenties into her mother's awaiting palm. "You do realize that this is subtracted from your monthly, right?" she asked, giving her mother a hard look.

Diana nodded as she put the money in her skirt pocket. "I know dear. I can actually pay you back once I get money from your father." She grabbed the black shrug and black clutch on the coffee table and reached to give Brooke a kiss. When Brooke turned away her face, her mother shrugged and said, "I'm going to be home late. There's leftover pizza in the refrigerator if you're hungry." With that, she pushed past Brooke, opened the door, and left.

Brooke walked over to the loveseat, slumped into it, and closed her eyes. In the back of her mind, she

was bitter at how messed up her relationship with her mother was. What *normal* sixteen-year-old girl dishes out money to her forty-year-old mother? Better yet, what kind of *child* works and makes money while the parent doesn't and frolics around with people she has no business associating with? But Brooke never dwelled on her bitterness long. When she had entered the ninth grade, she had made a deal with her mother: Brooke would make money through different odds and ends and would give a certain percentage of it to Diana every month, *if* Diana would lie on behalf of Brooke when it came to school-related things when the need came up and then leave her to do basically anything she wanted. Brooke knew that any normal parent would never have even considered such a ludicrous proposition, but Diana was no ordinary parent.

Even since her parents divorced when she was in the sixth grade (the same year that her family had come to America from England), Diana and Brooke had relied on Thomas Lucas's financial support. While he had lost his high-paying job and still had a lot of pent-up rage against his bitter divorce, Thomas still loved his daughter, and knowing what kind of person his ex-wife was, sent money as often as he could to support her. After paying off the expenses, however, Diana would keep the leftover money for herself, but it was never enough to keep up with her need for extravagance. As for Brooke, she realized more and more as she got older that to uphold her image at her fancy private school, she was in dire need of money, money that she knew she would never be able to squeeze out of her mother. Thus, her proposition was a win-win for both of them, albeit a bit screwed-up and absurd. [...]

Chapter 3

Bradley Smith always seemed like he was always in a rush and running off to go somewhere. Josh always joked that he would fit in perfectly in the bustling, busy streets of New York City since New-Yorkers were *all* like Brad. Or was it that Brad was like a New Yorker? Josh mused. The fact was that Brad was a busy young man, involved in everything that Stonybrook had to offer, which was why he was always in a great rush to get to everything (and at least two minutes early if at all possible). If there was some event taking place, one could be sure that Bradley had a hand in organizing it or would be in attendance.

On Monday afternoon, Bradley Smith was running for a different reason. He had five minutes to catch the bus home and he was running late after talking to his biology teacher about a particularly pesky review problem that he had encountered in his hours of studying. He sprinted down the hallway and didn't notice that someone was approaching him.

That someone was Brooke, who was in a starry-eyed daze, as she sauntered down the hall. She had been like that the entire day and Nikki had joked aloud that Brooke was 'on' something and that they should report her. Brooke simply giggled uncontrollably, which seemed to justify Nikki's reasoning even further. The fact was that Brooke's loopy euphoria was not stimulated by drugs, but by a boy. She had immediately hit it off with Amber's cousin and they had spent almost the entire Saturday night talking, joking, laughing. Brooke felt

really comfortable with him and it didn't hurt that he was absolute eye candy.

Both were in their own little worlds, which finally collided when Brad crashed into Brooke. Bodies and bookbags went sprawling, and the folder of papers that Brooke was carrying flew into the air and then descended in a zigzag of fluttering papers.

"Oh God, I am so completely sorry Brooke. I totally didn't see you," Brad said as he sat up and rubbed his left shoulder, which had slammed into Brooke's chest. "Are you okay?"

Brooke sat up and breathed heavily as she held a hand over her heart. "Yeah. Whoo, you knocked...the wind....out of me Brad."

Brad went over to Brooke and helped her up. "Crap, I'm sorry about the mess I caused." He bent down and reached for the pile of papers beside his shoe. A math problem, with two triangles underneath it, caught his eye on the top paper.

"Trig problems?"

Brooke blanched when he saw what he was holding. "Um, uh, yeah. Mr. Burgers gave me some extra problems to do because uh, I'm having, uh problems."

"I see."

"Um, listen Brad you seemed like you were in a rush to get somewhere." She looked at her watch. "Oh, the busses are leaving soon aren't they?"

Brad nodded as he picked up more papers.

"Hey," she said, snatching the papers out of his hand. "Listen, I can pick these up by myself. I don't want you to miss your bus ride."

Brad gave her a grateful look. "You sure?"

"Yeah. Now go, sprint!"

Brad smiled at her, picked up his backpack, and turned on his heel to run as fast as he could.

Brooke sighed and looked at the pile of papers. "Shit."