

Tell No One

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Extract

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Tell No One

HARLAN COBEN



There should have been a dark whisper in the wind. Or maybe a deep chill in the bone. Something. An ethereal song only Elizabeth or I could hear. A tightness in the air. Some textbook premonition. There are misfortunes we almost expect in life—what happened to my parents, for example—and then there are other dark moments, moments of sudden violence, that alter everything. There was my life before the tragedy. There is my life now. The two have painfully little in common.

Elizabeth was quiet for our anniversary drive, but that was hardly unusual. Even as a young girl, she'd possessed this unpredictable melancholy streak. She'd go quiet and drift into either deep contemplation or a deep funk, I never knew which. Part of the mystery, I guess, but for the first time, I could feel the chasm between us. Our relationship had survived so much. I wondered if it could survive the truth. Or for that matter, the unspoken lies.

The car's air-conditioning whirred at the blue MAX setting. The

day was hot and sticky. Classically August. We crossed the Delaware Water Gap at the Milford Bridge and were welcomed to Pennsylvania by a friendly toll collector. Ten miles later, I spotted the stone sign that read LAKE CHARMAINE—PRIVATE. I turned onto the dirt road.

The tires bore down, kicking up dust like an Arabian stampede. Elizabeth flipped off the car stereo. Out of the corner of my eye, I could tell that she was studying my profile. I wondered what she saw, and my heart started fluttering. Two deer nibbled on some leaves on our right. They stopped, looked at us, saw we meant no harm, went back to nibbling. I kept driving and then the lake rose before us. The sun was now in its death throes, bruising the sky a coiling purple and orange. The tops of the trees seemed to be on fire.

“I can’t believe we still do this,” I said.

“You’re the one who started it.”

“Yeah, when I was twelve years old.”

Elizabeth let the smile through. She didn’t smile often, but when she did, *pow*, right to my heart.

“It’s romantic,” she insisted.

“It’s goofy.”

“I love romance.”

“You love goofy.”

“You get laid whenever we do this.”

“Call me Mr. Romance,” I said.

She laughed and took my hand. “Come on, Mr. Romance, it’s getting dark.”

Lake Charmaine. My grandfather had come up with that name, which pissed off my grandmother to no end. She wanted it named for her. Her name was Bertha. Lake Bertha. Grandpa wouldn’t hear it. Two points for Grandpa.

Some fifty-odd years ago, Lake Charmaine had been the sight of a rich-kids summer camp. The owner had gone belly-up and Grandpa bought the entire lake and surrounding acreage on the cheap. He’d fixed up the camp director’s house and tore down most of the lakefront buildings. But farther in the woods, where no one

went anymore, he left the kids' bunks alone to rot. My sister, Linda, and I used to explore them, sifting through their ruins for old treasures, playing hide-and-seek, daring ourselves to seek the Boogeyman we were sure watched and waited. Elizabeth rarely joined us. She liked to know where everything was. Hiding scared her.

When we stepped out of the car, I heard the ghosts. Lots of them here, too many, swirling and battling for my attention. My father's won out. The lake was hold-your-breath still, but I swore I could still hear Dad's howl of delight as he cannonballed off the dock, his knees pressed tightly against his chest, his smile just south of sane, the upcoming splash a virtual tidal wave in the eyes of his only son. Dad liked to land near my sunbathing mother's raft. She'd scold him, but she couldn't hide the laugh.

I blinked and the images were gone. But I remembered how the laugh and the howl and the splash would ripple and echo in the stillness of our lake, and I wondered if ripples and echoes like those ever fully die away, if somewhere in the woods my father's joyful yelps still bounced quietly off the trees. Silly thought, but there you go.

Memories, you see, hurt. The good ones most of all.

"You okay, Beck?" Elizabeth asked me.

I turned to her. "I'm going to get laid, right?"

"Perv."

She started walking up the path, her head high, her back straight. I watched her for a second, remembering the first time I'd seen that walk. I was seven years old, taking my bike—the one with the banana seat and Batman decal—for a plunge down Goodhart Road. Goodhart Road was steep and windy, the perfect thoroughfare for the discriminating Stingray driver. I rode downhill with no hands, feeling pretty much as cool and hip as a seven-year-old possibly could. The wind whipped back my hair and made my eyes water. I spotted the moving van in front of the Ruskins' old house, turned and—first pow—there she was, my Elizabeth, walking with that titanium spine, so poised, even then, even as a seven-year-old girl with Mary Janes and a friendship bracelet and too many freckles.

We met two weeks later in Miss Sobel's second-grade class, and from that moment on—please don't gag when I say this—we were soul mates. Adults found our relationship both cute and unhealthy—our inseparable tomboy-kickball friendship morphing into puppy love and adolescent preoccupation and hormonal high school dating. Everyone kept waiting for us to outgrow each other. Even us. We were both bright kids, especially Elizabeth, top students, rational even in the face of irrational love. We understood the odds.

But here we were, twenty-five-year-olds, married seven months now, back at the spot when at the age of twelve we'd shared our first real kiss.

Nauseating, I know.

We pushed past branches and through humidity thick enough to bind. The gummy smell of pine clawed the air. We trudged through high grass. Mosquitoes and the like buzzed upward in our wake. Trees cast long shadows that you could interpret any way you wanted, like trying to figure out what a cloud looked like or one of Rorschach's inkblots.

We ducked off the path and fought our way through thicker brush. Elizabeth led the way. I followed two paces back, an almost symbolic gesture when I think about it now. I always believed that nothing could drive us apart—certainly our history had proven that, hadn't it?—but now more than ever I could feel the guilt pushing her away.

My guilt.

Up ahead, Elizabeth made a right at the big semi-phallic rock and there, on the right, was our tree. Our initials were, yup, carved into the bark:

E.P.

+

D.B.

And yes, a heart surrounded it. Under the heart were twelve lines, one marking each anniversary of that first kiss. I was about to make a wisecrack about how nauseating we were, but when I saw Elizabeth's face, the freckles now either gone or darkened, the tilt

of the chin, the long, graceful neck, the steady green eyes, the dark hair braided like thick rope down her back, I stopped. I almost told her right then and there, but something pulled me back.

“I love you,” I said.

“You’re already getting laid.”

“Oh.”

“I love you too.”

“Okay, okay,” I said, feigning being put out, “you’ll get laid too.”

She smiled, but I thought I saw hesitancy in it. I took her in my arms. When she was twelve and we finally worked up the courage to make out, she’d smelled wonderfully of clean hair and strawberry Pixie Stix. I’d been overwhelmed by the newness of it, of course, the excitement, the exploration. Today she smelled of lilacs and cinnamon. The kiss moved like a warm light from the center of my heart. When our tongues met, I still felt a jolt. Elizabeth pulled away, breathless.

“Do you want to do the honors?” she asked.

She handed me the knife, and I carved the thirteenth line in the tree. Thirteen. In hindsight, maybe there had been a premonition.

It was dark when we got back to the lake. The pale moon broke through the black, a solo beacon. There were no sounds tonight, not even crickets. Elizabeth and I quickly stripped down. I looked at her in the moonlight and felt something catch in my throat. She dove in first, barely making a ripple. I clumsily followed. The lake was surprisingly warm. Elizabeth swam with clean, even strokes, slicing through the water as though it were making a path for her. I splashed after her. Our sounds skittered across the lake’s surface like skipping stones. She turned into my arms. Her skin was warm and wet. I loved her skin. We held each other close. She pressed her breasts against my chest. I could feel her heart and I could hear her breathing. Life sounds. We kissed. My hand wandered down the delicious curve of her back.

When we finished—when everything felt so right again—I grabbed a raft and collapsed onto it. I panted, my legs splayed, my feet dangling in the water.

Elizabeth frowned. “What, you going to fall asleep now?”

“Snore.”

“Such a man.”

I put my hands behind my head and lay back. A cloud passed in front of the moon, turning the blue night into something pallid and gray. The air was still. I could hear Elizabeth getting out of the water and stepping onto the dock. My eyes tried to adjust. I could barely make out her naked silhouette. She was, quite simply, breathtaking. I watched her bend at the waist and wring the water out of her hair. Then she arched her spine and threw her head back.

My raft drifted farther away from shore. I tried to sift through what had happened to me, but even I didn’t understand it all. The raft kept moving. I started losing sight of Elizabeth. As she faded into the dark, I made a decision: I would tell her. I would tell her everything.

I nodded to myself and closed my eyes. There was a lightness in my chest now. I listened to the water gently lap against my raft.

Then I heard a car door open.

I sat up.

“Elizabeth?”

Pure silence, except for my own breathing.

I looked for her silhouette again. It was hard to make out, but for a moment I saw it. Or I thought I saw it. I’m not sure anymore or even if it matters. Either way, Elizabeth was standing perfectly still, and maybe she was facing me.

I might have blinked—I’m really not sure about that either—and when I looked again, Elizabeth was gone.

My heart slammed into my throat. “Elizabeth!”

No answer.

The panic rose. I fell off the raft and started swimming toward the dock. But my strokes were loud, maddeningly loud, in my ears. I couldn’t hear what, if anything, was happening. I stopped.

“Elizabeth!”

For a long while there was no sound. The cloud still blocked the moon. Maybe she had gone inside the cabin. Maybe she’d gotten something out of the car. I opened my mouth to call her name again.

That was when I heard her scream.

I lowered my head and swam, swam hard, my arms pumping, my legs kicking wildly. But I was still far from the dock. I tried to look as I swam, but it was too dark now, the moon offering just faint shafts of light, illuminating nothing.

I heard a scraping noise, like something being dragged.

Up ahead, I could see the dock. Twenty feet, no more. I swam harder. My lungs burned. I swallowed some water, my arms stretching forward, my hand fumbling blindly in the dark. Then I found it. The ladder. I grabbed hold, hoisted myself up, climbed out of the water. The dock was wet from Elizabeth. I looked toward the cabin. Too dark. I saw nothing.

“Elizabeth!”

Something like a baseball bat hit me square in the solar plexus. My eyes bulged. I folded at the waist, suffocating from within. No air. Another blow. This time it landed on the top of my skull. I heard a crack in my head, and it felt as though someone had hammered a nail through my temple. My legs buckled and I dropped to my knees. Totally disoriented now, I put my hands against the sides of my head and tried to cover up. The next blow—the final blow—hit me square in the face.

I toppled backward, back into the lake. My eyes closed. I heard Elizabeth scream again—she screamed my name this time—but the sound, all sound, gurgled away as I sank under the water.

1

Eight Years Later

Another girl was about to break my heart. She had brown eyes and kinky hair and a toothy smile. She also had braces and was fourteen years old and—

“Are you pregnant?” I asked.

“Yeah, Dr. Beck.”

I managed not to close my eyes. This was not the first time I’d seen a pregnant teen. Not even the first time today. I’ve been a pediatrician at this Washington Heights clinic since I finished my residency at nearby Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center five years ago. We serve a Medicaid (read: poor) population with general family health care, including obstetrics, internal medicine, and, of course, pediatrics. Many people believe this makes me a bleeding-heart do-gooder. It doesn’t. I like being a pediatrician. I don’t particularly like doing it out in the suburbs with soccer moms and manicured dads and, well, people like me.

“What do you plan on doing?” I asked.

“Me and Terrell. We’re real happy, Dr. Beck.”

“How old is Terrell?”

“Sixteen.”

She looked up at me, happy and smiling. Again I managed not to close my eyes.

The thing that always surprises me—always—is that most of these pregnancies are not accidental. These babies want to have babies. No one gets that. They talk about birth control and abstinence and that’s all fine and good, but the truth is, their cool friends are having babies and their friends are getting all kinds of attention and so, hey, Terrell, why not us?

“He loves me,” this fourteen-year-old told me.

“Have you told your mother?”

“Not yet.” She squirmed and looked almost all her fourteen years. “I was hoping you could tell her with me.”

I nodded. “Sure.”

I’ve learned not to judge. I listen. I empathize. When I was a resident, I would lecture. I would look down from on high and bestow upon patients the knowledge of how self-destructive their behavior was. But on a cold Manhattan afternoon, a weary seventeen-year-old girl who was having her third kid with a third father looked me straight in the eye and spoke an indisputable truth: “You don’t know my life.”

It shut me up. So I listen now. I stopped playing Benevolent White Man and became a better doctor. I will give this fourteen-year-old and her baby the absolute best care possible. I won’t tell her that Terrell will never stay, that she’s just cut her future off at the pass, that if she is like most of the patients here, she’ll be in a similar state with at least two more men before she turns twenty.

Think about it too much and you’ll go nuts.

We spoke for a while—or, at least, she spoke and I listened. The examining room, which doubled as my office, was about the size of a prison cell (not that I know this from firsthand experience) and painted an institutional green, like the color of a bathroom in an elementary school. An eye chart, the one where you

point in the directions the Es are facing, hung on the back of the door. Faded Disney decals spotted one wall while another was covered with a giant food pyramid poster. My fourteen-year-old patient sat on an examining table with a roll of sanitary paper we pulled down fresh for each kid. For some reason, the way the paper rolled out reminded me of wrapping a sandwich at the Carnegie Deli.

The radiator heat was beyond stifling, but you needed that in a place where kids were frequently getting undressed. I wore my customary pediatrician garb: blue jeans, Chuck Taylor Cons, a button-down oxford, and a bright Save the Children tie that screamed 1994. I didn't wear the white coat. I think it scares the kids.

My fourteen-year-old—yes, I couldn't get past her age—was a really good kid. Funny thing is, they all are. I referred her to an obstetrician I liked. Then I spoke to her mother. Nothing new or surprising. As I said, I do this almost every day. We hugged when she left. Over her shoulder, her mother and I exchanged a glance. Approximately twenty-five moms take their children to see me each day; at the end of the week, I can count on one hand how many are married.

Like I said, I don't judge. But I do observe.

After they left, I started jotting notes in the girl's chart. I flipped back a few pages. I'd been following her since I was a resident. That meant she started with me when she was eight years old. I looked at her growth chart. I remembered her as an eight-year-old, and then I thought about what she'd just looked like. She hadn't changed much. I finally closed my eyes and rubbed them.

Homer Simpson interrupted me by shouting, "The mail! The mail is here! Oooo!"

I opened my eyes and turned toward the monitor. This was Homer Simpson as in the TV show *The Simpsons*. Someone had replaced the computer's droning "You've got mail" with this Homer audio wave. I liked it. I liked it a lot.

I was about to check my email when the intercom's squawking stopped my hand. Wanda, a receptionist, said, "You're, uh, hmm, you're, uh . . . Shauna is on the phone."

I understood the confusion. I thanked her and hit the blinking button. "Hello, sweetums."

"Never mind," she said. "I'm here."

Shauna hung up her cellular. I stood and walked down the corridor as Shauna made her entrance from the street. Shauna stalks into a room as though it offends her. She was a plus-size model, one of the few known by one name. Shauna. Like Cher or Fabio. She stood six one and weighed one hundred ninety pounds. She was, as you might expect, a head-turner, and all heads in the waiting room obliged.

Shauna did not bother stopping at Reception and Reception knew better than to try to stop her. She pulled open the door and greeted me with the words "Lunch. Now."

"I told you. I'm going to be busy."

"Put on a coat," she said. "It's cold out."

"Look, I'm fine. The anniversary isn't until tomorrow anyway."

"You're buying."

I hesitated and she knew she had me.

"Come on, Beck, it'll be fun. Like in college. Remember how we used to go out and scope hot babes together?"

"I never scoped hot babes."

"Oh, right, that was me. Go get your coat."

On the way back to my office, one of the mothers gave me a big smile and pulled me aside. "She's even more beautiful in person," she whispered.

"Eh," I said.

"Are you and she . . ." The mother made a together motion with her hands.

"No, she's already involved with someone," I said.

"Really? Who?"

"My sister."

We ate at a crummy Chinese restaurant with a Chinese waiter who spoke only Spanish. Shauna, dressed impeccably in a blue suit with a neckline that plunged like Black Monday, frowned. "Moo shu pork in a tortilla shell?"

“Be adventurous,” I said.

We met our first day of college. Someone in the registrar’s office had screwed up and thought her name was Shaun, and we thus ended up roommates. We were all set to report the mistake when we started chatting. She bought me a beer. I started to like her. A few hours later, we decided to give it a go because our real roommates might be assholes.

I went to Amherst College, an exclusive small-Ivy institution in western Massachusetts, and if there is a preppier place on the planet, I don’t know it. Elizabeth, our high school valedictorian, chose Yale. We could have gone to the same college, but we discussed it and decided that this would be yet another excellent test for our relationship. Again, we were doing the mature thing. The result? We missed each other like mad. The separation deepened our commitment and gave our love a new distance-makes-the-heart-grow-fonder dimension.

Nauseating, I know.

Between bites, Shauna asked, “Can you baby-sit Mark tonight?”

Mark was my five-year-old nephew. Sometime during our senior year, Shauna started dating my older sister, Linda. They had a commitment ceremony seven years ago. Mark was the by-product of, well, their love, with a little help from artificial insemination. Linda carried him to term and Shauna adopted him. Being somewhat old-fashioned, they wanted their son to have a male role model in his life. Enter me.

Next to what I see at work, we’re talking *Ozzie and Harriet*.

“No prob,” I said. “I want to see the new Disney film anyway.”

“The new Disney chick is a babe and a half,” Shauna said. “Their hottest since Pocahontas.”

“Good to know,” I said. “So where are you and Linda going?”

“Beats the hell out of me. Now that lesbians are chic, our social calendar is ridiculous. I almost long for the days when we hid in closets.”

I ordered a beer. Probably shouldn’t have, but one wouldn’t hurt.

Shauna ordered one too. "So you broke up with what's-her-name," she said.

"Brandy."

"Right. Nice name, by the way. She have a sister named Whiskey?"

"We only went out twice."

"Good. She was a skinny witch. Besides, I got someone perfect for you."

"No, thanks," I said.

"She's got a killer bod."

"Don't set me up, Shauna. Please."

"Why not?"

"Remember the last time you set me up?"

"With Cassandra."

"Right."

"So what was wrong with her?"

"For one thing, she was a lesbian."

"Christ, Beck, you're such a bigot."

Her cell phone rang. She leaned back and answered it, but her eyes never left my face. She barked something and flipped the mouthpiece up. "I have to go," she said.

I signaled for the check.

"You're coming over tomorrow night," she pronounced.

I feigned a gasp. "The lesbians have no plans?"

"I don't. Your sister does. She's going stag to the big Brandon Scope formal."

"You're not going with her?"

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"We don't want to leave Mark without us two nights in a row. Linda has to go. She's running the trust now. Me, I'm taking the night off. So come over tomorrow night, okay? I'll order in, we'll watch videos with Mark."

Tomorrow was the anniversary. Had Elizabeth lived, we'd be scratching our twenty-first line in that tree. Strange as this might sound, tomorrow would not be a particularly hard day for me. For

anniversaries or holidays or Elizabeth's birthday, I get so geared up that I usually handle them with no problems. It's the "regular" days that are hard. When I flip with the remote and stumble across a classic episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* or *Cheers*. When I walk through a bookstore and see a new title by Alice Hoffman or Anne Tyler. When I listen to the O'Jays or the Four Tops or Nina Simone. Regular stuff.

"I told Elizabeth's mother I'd stop by," I said.

"Ah, Beck . . ." She was about to argue but caught herself. "How about after?"

"Sure," I said.

Shauna grabbed my arm. "You're disappearing again, Beck."

I didn't reply.

"I love you, you know. I mean, if you had any sort of sexual appeal whatsoever, I probably would have gone for you instead of your sister."

"I'm flattered," I said. "Really."

"Don't shut me out. If you shut me out, you shut everyone out. Talk to me, okay?"

"Okay," I said. But I can't.

I almost erased the email.

I get so much junk email, spam, bulk emails, you know the drill, I've become quite handy with the delete button. I read the sender's address first. If it's someone I know or from the hospital, fine. If not, I enthusiastically click the delete button.

I sat at my desk and checked the afternoon schedule. Chock-full, which was no surprise. I spun around in my chair and readied my delete finger. One email only. The one that made Homer shriek before. I did the quick scan, and my eyes got snagged on the first two letters of the subject.

What the—?

The way the window screen was formatted, all I could see were those two letters and the sender's email address. The address was unfamiliar to me. A bunch of numbers @compama.com.

I narrowed my eyes and hit the right scroll button. The subject appeared a character at a time. With each click, my pulse raced a bit more. My breathing grew funny. I kept my finger on the scroll button and waited.

When I was done, when all the letters showed themselves, I read the subject again and when I did, I felt a deep, hard thud in my heart.

“Dr. Beck?”

My mouth wouldn’t work.

“Dr. Beck?”

“Give me a minute, Wanda.”

She hesitated. I could still hear her on the intercom. Then I heard it click off.

I kept staring at the screen:

To: dbeckmd@nyhosp.com

From: 13943928@comparama.com

Subject: E.P.+ D.B //////////////////////////////////////

Twenty-one lines. I’ve counted four times already.

It was a cruel, sick joke. I knew that. My hands tightened into fists. I wondered what chicken-shitted son of a bitch had sent it. It was easy to be anonymous in emails—the best refuge of the techno-coward. But the thing was, very few people knew about the tree or our anniversary. The media never learned about it. Shauna knew, of course. And Linda. Elizabeth might have told her parents or uncle. But outside of that . . .

So who sent it?

I wanted to read the message, of course, but something held me back. The truth is, I think about Elizabeth more than I let on—I don’t think I’m fooling anyone there—but I never talk about her or what happened. People think I’m being macho or brave, that I’m trying to spare my friends or shunning people’s pity or some

such nonsense. That's not it. Talking about Elizabeth hurts. A lot. It brings back her last scream. It brings back all the unanswered questions. It brings back the might-have-beens (few things, I assure you, will devastate like the might-have-beens). It brings back the guilt, the feelings, no matter how irrational, that a stronger man—a better man—might have saved her.

They say it takes a long time to comprehend a tragedy. You're numb. You can't adequately accept the grim reality. Again, that's not true. Not for me anyway. I understood the full implications the moment they found Elizabeth's body. I understood that I would never see her again, that I would never hold her again, that we would never have children or grow old together. I understood that this was final, that there was no reprieve, that nothing could be bartered or negotiated.

I started crying immediately. Sobbing uncontrollably. I sobbed like that for almost a week without letup. I sobbed through the funeral. I let no one touch me, not even Shauna or Linda. I slept alone in our bed, burying my head in Elizabeth's pillow, trying to smell her. I went through her closets and pressed her clothes against my face. None of this was comforting. It was weird and it hurt. But it was her smell, a part of her, and I did it anyway.

Well-meaning friends—often the worst kind—handed me the usual clichés, and so I feel in a pretty good position to warn you: Just offer your deepest condolences. Don't tell me I'm young. Don't tell me it'll get better. Don't tell me she's in a better place. Don't tell me it's part of some divine plan. Don't tell me that I was lucky to have known such a love. Every one of those platitudes pissed me off. They made me—and this is going to sound uncharitable—stare at the idiot and wonder why he or she still breathed while my Elizabeth rotted.

I kept hearing that “better to have loved and lost” bullshit. Another falsehood. Trust me, it is not better. Don't show me paradise and then burn it down. That was part of it. The selfish part. What got to me more—what really hurt—was that Elizabeth was denied so much. I can't tell you how many times I see or do something

and I think of how much Elizabeth would have loved it and the pang hits me anew.

People wonder if I have any regrets. The answer is, only one. I regret that there were moments I wasted doing something other than making Elizabeth happy.

“Dr. Beck?”

“One more second,” I said.

I put my hand on the mouse and moved the cursor over the Read icon. I clicked it and the message came up:

To: dbeckmd@nyhosp.com
 From: 13943928@comparama.com
 Subject: E.P.+ D.B //////////////////////////////////////

Message: Click on this hyperlink, kiss time, anniversary.

A lead block formed in my chest.

Kiss time?

It was a joke, had to be. I am not big on cryptic. I’m also not big on waiting.

I grabbed the mouse again and moved the arrow over the hyperlink. I clicked and heard the primordial modem screech the mating call of machinery. We have an old system at the clinic. It took a while for the Web browser to appear. I waited, thinking *Kiss time, how do they know about kiss time?*

The browser came up. It read error.

I frowned. Who the hell sent this? I tried it a second time, and again the error message came up. It was a broken link.

Who the hell knew about kiss time?

I have never told anyone. Elizabeth and I didn’t much discuss it, probably because it was no big deal. We were corny to the point of Pollyanna, so stuff like this we just kept to ourselves. It was embarrassing really, but when we kissed that first time twenty-one years ago, I noted the time. Just for fun. I pulled back and looked at my Casio watch and said, “Six-fifteen.”

And Elizabeth said, "*Kiss time.*"

I looked at the message yet again. I started getting pissed now. This was way beyond funny. It's one thing to send a cruel email, but . . .

Kiss time.

Well, kiss time was 6:15 P.M. tomorrow. I didn't have much choice. I'd have to wait until then.

So be it.

I saved the email onto a diskette just in case. I pulled down the print options and hit Print All. I don't know much about computers, but I know that you could sometimes trace the origin of a message from all that gobbledygook at the bottom. I heard the printer purr. I took another look at the subject. I counted the lines again. Still twenty-one.

I thought about that tree and that first kiss, and there in my tight, stifling office I started to smell the strawberry Pixie Stix.