**Prologue**

**T**he mocktail was the last drink of the night, but to me it was the best drink that I tasted all night. The simplicity of the drink—a light, non-alcoholic, home-made concoction decorated with a slice of lemon at the top—made it stand out among the other servings of the night. I was not drunk; I was careful not to touch anything alcoholic, as I’d have to drive myself home afterwards.

Tonight’s party was held by one of my girl-friends from college. We weren’t really close; just a couple of times when we’d exchanged assignments for cross-examination. Nearly everyone in my year was invited, so I could not think of any reason not to come. The party had started at eight, and it was close to an end now, with the clock approaching midnight.

“So, did you have fun?”

I spun around to find Layla, the hostess, smiling at me, a jar of mocktail in hand. I wiggled a finger to indicate that I’d had enough of the drink.

“Most definitely.” I nodded appreciatively. It was not like I wasn’t a frequent party person, but this was considerably the best party I’d ever been to. There was a live band, a crowded dance floor, sumptuous cuisine and refreshing beverages. And especially when it was right after the end-of-semester exams. Everybody was desperate for some much-needed fun after being in such a tense mood for a whole month.

“All thanks to whom, I wonder?” Layla prompted.

I smiled. “Who else but our incredibly ravishing hostess tonight?”

Layla flushed delicately, and it wasn’t because of the heat either. “Are you sure you’re not gonna stay for the sleepover? I’ve got extra beds prepared for you guys.”

I shook my head, almost regretfully. “I would love to, but it’s Mom’s Rules.”

As soon as I said the words, a flash of understanding appeared on Layla’s face. I could almost read her mind just then. *Oh, you’re a momma’s boy, I forgot,* said her eyes, radiating pity. Way to go, mom.

There were strict rules back at home. Not to return home later than eleven and no sleepovers. I’d already broken rule number one. Break the second rule and I might as well be grounded for the next century.

Downing the last of the mocktail, I gave Layla a hug goodbye and padded towards the door. I was aware of the cacophony that was coming from the upper floor. Boys and video games, I thought.

“Just make sure you guys survive through the night, okay?” I winked at Layla before getting into my car.

“I hope we do.” Layla smiled. For an awkward moment I thought I saw something more than the smile in her eyes. She seemed...apologetic. However, the look disappeared before I could be sure. “You too.”

Driving the dark and murky 10 miles home, I started reminiscing about the party out of boredom. For a moment, I found myself picturing Layla’s pretty, florid face in my mind. I blushed. I wasn’t desperate, but with the majority of my friends walking around in pairs, I felt awful being single.

And here came another Mom Rule. Never waste your time in a relationship before you graduate from college. Right. I could almost imagine myself a bachelor even after I’ve gotten my *Bachelor* degree.

All of a sudden, I found myself hit by an overwhelming sense of vertigo. *Too much dancing,* I thought. *Come on, it’s just five miles left. Focus.*

But it wasn’t working. My blurry mind was failing me. My car swerved in and out of control, snaking its way to a certain death if this was a busy road. Not to mention that the right side of the road gave way to a steep ravine. Fortunately for me, midnight wasn’t the favorite hour for drivers. Or at least, for *sane* drivers, unlike me.

To make matters worse, huge droplets of rain began splattering onto my windshield. I squinted my eyes hard, trying to make out the obscure road ahead of me. Thunder rolled overhead. *Damn you, rain,* I cursed. *Couldn’t you choose a better time than this?*

So heavy was the rain, that I heard nothing over the deafening noise it made. So heavy was the rain, that I saw nothing before I rounded the sharp bend. Not a blare, not a flash of light. Nothing. My head wasn’t cooperating either.

I never expected that tractor-trailer.

When the blinding headlights shone into my eyes, it was too late. I tried to swerve away, but my reactions, dampened by vertigo, weren’t very helpful as my car shot towards the tractor-trailer’s front bumper at seventy miles an hour. As panic gripped my heart, I made a split-second decision. I banked towards the right, hard.

My car screeched as it slid out of the tractor-trailer’s way. Unfortunately, with the road being so narrow, it slid off the road entirely. And into the ravine.

Did I scream like a crazy lunatic? No idea. All I knew for sure was that I was definitely falling. My mind, numb with shock and adrenaline, could barely make out the dizzying up-and-down motion as my car tumbled down the ravine. My head seemed to be hitting everything at once; the headrest, the window (which shattered into pieces), the steering wheel and even the roof.

Then, with a smashing agony, the world split apart.