

DELETED SCENE (early draft) – school

Kat and Manny

"I'm sorry," we both said at the same time. Then we both laughed nervously.

Manny turned to his friends.

"Catch you later," he said, then put his arm around my shoulder. The weight of it, the sheer force of that limb stretched out across my neck was like a life preserver in the ocean.

"I was an idiot," I said. "I'm sorry."

"I was pretty hard on you," Manny said. "It's just that I get sick of people dissing people all the time. It gets old."

"I know," I said. "It's just that--"

"You're afraid I'll want to be with Libby again," he said. "I know." He shook his head. "I guess I need to come clean with all that."

I stiffened. Was he going to tell me what they'd done? Was I ready to hear it?

Manny must have sensed my discomfort because he squeezed my shoulders until I relaxed.

"It's not what you think," he said softly.

I glanced up at him. "It's not?"

He shook his head. "But we can't talk about it now. You going for a run fifth period?"

I nodded.

"See you at the gym." He kissed me quickly before turning down the next hall toward his Biology class. I stared after him, watching the swing of his arms, the way his butt moved just so as he strode away, smiling and nodding at people as he passed them. I still had Manny. I was giddy

with happiness.

"I see you've worked things out." Christy's voice beside me startled me. I kept my eyes on Manny until he disappeared into the crowd.

"B was a good choice." I shot her a look. "Thanks."

She hitched up her backpack and we turned down the hall. "I forgive you for practically hanging up on me last night," she said. "What was the big emergency?"

"Oh, nothing much," I said, looking over my shoulder so she wouldn't see my face.

Christy stopped beside me, grabbing my arm. "You went to see if he was at Libby's, didn't you?"

Now everyone was a mindreader, too?

"No!" I protested, too loudly. I pulled away from her and started walking quickly.

"You did, too."

"We're going to be late for class."

Christy caught up with me, shaking her head. "And I had such high hopes for you."

"Shut up," I mumbled, smacking her on the arm. "I'll get there. It's just going to take time."

We slipped into class just as the bell rang. "And would you quit shaking your head? It's not like you have never been paranoid about a boy. You've checked up on Nick plenty of times."

"Only in the beginning," Christy said. Obviously there was some paranoia schedule out there that I wasn't aware of. Or maybe my schedule happened to be a little different.

I got through the next three periods, lunch, and then fourth period, alternating between butterflies in the stomach and Imagination Gone Complete Wild in my head. What was Manny going to tell me? How much detail would he go into? How much did I really want to know? How

would it affect our relationship?

#

Manny was already at the gym when I showed up in my running pants and long-sleeved shirt, prepared for the cool weather that had arrived this week.

"How's the world of hard drives and virtual memory?" I asked as we started around the track. I thought it best to start out with a neutral topic and let him bring up the other thing when he was ready. Especially because I wasn't sure I was ready.

"I recovered two hard drives on Monday, both attacked by a virus. I was able to get most of the data back but geez. I can't believe some of these guys who don't back up their data."

I nodded. I didn't really have anything worth backing up on my computer, except my school papers, which I backed up to a thumb drive Manny had given me on our one month anniversary. I remember thinking, this guy spent at least fifty bucks on me, and then I found out he got a good employee discount so he probably spent around thirty, which is still pretty good.

We talked about his work and family and then about Mom's practice. I had him laughing as I imitated Linda, the chatterbox. "This is where it all happens," I said, tapping him on the head. "And here," I intoned, poking his chest.

"In my chest hair?" he asked.

"What chest hair?" I replied.

"Hey, easy there," Manny said, wrapping his hand lightly around my wrist. "Don't mock my manhood."

"I like your hairless chest," I said as he released my wrist and grabbed my hand. We were now running and holding hands. So much for keeping my arms at ninety degrees. But who was I to

argue with my coach?

"It likes you back," Manny said and his lips curled up in that cute little smile I loved. I squeezed his hand and slipped my fingers out of his grasp, getting myself back in proper motion. Our conversation had been easy and natural and I forgot all about Libby and our fight.

We ran in silence for awhile, our motion identical, front foot hitting the ground at the same time, arms pumping left, right, left right. All we heard was the crunch of gravel underneath our shoes and my breathing, hard and fast. Manny's was steady, as if he were taking a stroll across the park, not running at a slight incline on a bumpy path.

When we reached the road that marked the two mile mark, I turned around to head back.

"Can we stop for a minute?" Manny asked. He was hardly winded at all.

"Why? What's wrong?" I jogged in place, looking back at him.

"I'd like to talk."

"Now?" I was feeling good. My legs were primed, my breathing was coming along. I needed to keep going.

"I just thought this would be a good place. Away from everyone." He motioned to a bench alongside the path.

"I need to keep moving," I said, pumping my legs higher.

"You're not trying to avoid it, now, are you?"

"No," I said, though after I said it, I wondered if it was true. "Maybe a little. And I'm just having a good run. I don't want to stop right now."

Manny nodded.

"How about the bench at the beginning of the path," I said. "Before we get back on school

grounds?"

Manny nodded. "Race you!" he said, sprinting past me in a blur of blue T-shirt and black hair.

"Cheater!" I shouted after him.

#

He was stretching out at the bench when I jogged up, completely out of breath. His legs were so long his feet hung over the end.

"My, don't you look comfy." I lifted his feet and plopped down, placing them on my lap. Leaning back, I closed my eyes, breathing deeply to bring my heart rate back down to a normal pace.

"You're looking pretty good out there, Jones," Manny said. "For a rookie."

"Thanks, Coach." I kept my eyes closed, enjoying the cool air on my warm face. We sat that way for a few minutes, me with head titled back, Manny's fingers playing lightly with my hair.

Then Manny slipped his feet off of my lap and sat up. He put his elbows on his knees and looked out towards the trees that lined the path.

"It's just...she's a little messed up."

I opened my eyes and matched his position, searching his face for signs that he knew about the Big P. I couldn't tell and didn't ask. As strange and bizarre as it was, I still couldn't say anything. The midwife-mother confidence thing was huge to me and I wouldn't break it, even if it was Le Skank.

"Yeah," I said, encouraging him on.

"When we were going out, she wanted to do stuff but I didn't want to. It didn't feel right."

He paused. "It was like she-- like--"

He stopped again, groping for words.

I furrowed my brow. "Like what?"

His face was puzzled and sad at the same time and I found my fear sliding out of me. He hadn't slept with her. He may have touched her but not too much. I could see that now. I could see it all.

"Like she was desperate or something," Manny said, running his fingers through his hair. He seemed uncomfortable, like he was revealing a secret he thought he needed to reveal but didn't want to.

"Why didn't you just tell me that?" I asked, pulling my knees up to my chin and wrapping my arms around them. Now that I was cooling down, the breeze fingered its way through my sweaty clothes, chilling me.

"I don't know. It was just weird." He stretched his arms over his head, moving his head back and forth to work his neck. "I'd never seen her like that and I guess, with the way you felt about her, I didn't think you'd believe me. Or you'd think I was stupid for feeling sorry for her." He glanced at me and then away. "Because I did and I do. Feel sorry for her. That's why I agreed to talk to her Sunday night. She's got nobody Kat."

We sat for a few moments in silence, me trying to take in this new image of Libby, as some desperate lost soul, not the Queen of the Backseat. I was having a hard time with it. It sounded like he was talking about someone else. And yet, the way she looked in the parking lot, and when she arrived home last night...

"Are you going to talk to her again?"

Manny shrugged. He seemed far away, his eyes focused on some distant spot beyond the trees, beyond the houses.

"How would you feel if I did?"

I was touched that he'd asked. He didn't need to. It was his life, his decision.

"It would bother me. But not as much. And if you really think she needs to talk, I guess you should."

He nodded, but I wasn't sure he had heard me. His eyes stared off into the trees, distant.

"It was like she would do anything to make me stay," he said softly, almost to himself. "To make me like her."

I put my hand on his arm and he started, as if I'd awakened him. I wondered if he knew that he'd spoken the last words aloud. He turned to me. "It was weird, Kat. It was like she thinks that's the only thing she has to give, and she hands it out like candy."

I stared at him.

Candy.

In a flash I saw kindergarten Libby, first grade Libby, second grade Libby. Long auburn hair, American Girl doll smile, always with a fistful of candy, making the rounds of kids on the playground. And they played with her. She had friends.

At least until she ran out of candy.