



Give it a Try
by
Alessa

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by Alessa

"Amie, how's it going?"

I stepped into Ms. Taylor's office and shut the door behind me. "Well, my parents are still getting a divorce."

She stood up and tucked her chin-length blond hair behind her ears. Her black skirt was ironed to perfection and hugged her curves in a way that looked good without calling for attention. Her white shirt was tucked into her waistband and brightened up her face. She was a pretty woman, but I wasn't sure she knew it.

"Tell me what happened."

I sighed and sat down, dumping my school bag beside the chair. Over the few weeks since my parents announced they were getting a divorce, I'd been seeing Ms. Taylor, the guidance counsellor, and telling her all my problems. It was more out of habit than anything else now. Since I didn't have any friends I could talk to, a professional would have to do.

"Zoe said she wants to live with my dad, and my mom practically had a breakdown. She was on the couch, crying, all weekend. It was so pathetic."

"How would you feel if that happened to you?" Ms. Taylor sat down in her chair and wrote something on the calendar that sat on her desk. It was almost as big as the desk.

"Maybe I'd be upset. But Zoe's a lot of work. I'd be glad to get rid of her."

Ms. Taylor narrowed her eyes at me. "Amie, she has just as many good qualities as she has bad ones."

"Yeah, you just have to dig deep to find them."

"Have you ever wondered if Zoe feels the same way about you?"

"Of course she does. She's my sister." My sister and I went at each other at least twice a week, if not more. Getting away from her was a miracle, and I was glad for any time that she wasn't around me.

"If she went to live with your father and you lived with your mother, you'd miss her."

I rolled my eyes. "I'd be glad to get rid of her."

"Amie- "

"Look, I didn't come in here for a lecture, okay? I just needed someone to talk to."

She leaned back in her seat and held my gaze. "I'm not lecturing you, Amie. I just want you to see both sides of things."

I brushed a strand of brown hair from my face. "Do you think my parents would be mad if I chose one over the other?"

"Have you thought about that?"

I shrugged. "I sort of have to, don't I?"

"Well, one of your parents could get sole custody of you and your sister, so you wouldn't have to decide. But I think since you are twelve—"

"Thirteen in four months," I jumped in, somewhat bluntly.

"Okay, thirteen, and your sister is sixteen; it means you're capable of making your own decisions, and the judge may rule that it's up to you."

"I don't want my parents to think I hate them."

Both my parents had good qualities and bad ones. Finding the best quality would seem selfish on my part. Plus, it'd give the other parent ammunition to use. And I didn't want to feed the fire.

"They won't, Amie. They may be upset, but they won't think that."

I groaned and ran my hands through my hair. "This is too big of a decision for any kid. I wish they weren't getting separated."

"They can't pretend that they're happy when they aren't."

"I know. I just wish they were."

It was stupid to want them to stay together and just keep fighting. Being separated would give them a chance to break away from being with someone all the time. But I really wanted my parents to be together, to be happy, and to love each other like they had before.

Ms. Taylor peeled a piece of paper from her notepad and handed it to me. On the paper was a picture of a baby giraffe. Sometimes it was hard to take her seriously. Running the length of the giraffe's long neck were tips for kids on how to get over their parents' divorce, and I wondered how long she'd been holding onto it. I also wondered how long it took her to make the list.

"Keep this with you and use it when you need it."

I sighed. "You feel more like a shrink than a guidance counsellor sometimes."

She laughed. "I'm just here to help. The label you use is up to you."

"Can you just be my friend?" I looked up at her.

"If that's what you want, then yes. We're friends."

I nodded and got to my feet just as the bell rang for first period. "I'm gonna head to class."

"Good luck. And keep those tips in mind, Amie."

I stepped out of her office and sighed. It was so pathetic going to the guidance counsellor because I didn't have anyone else to talk to. I had a few so-called friends, but none I could tell my sad stories to. None of them would care, and some of them would laugh.

I walked to my locker and grabbed the books for my first class. Already, I was wishing it was the end of the day and I didn't have to be at school. Though going home wasn't a fun experience either.



"The girls aren't yours to keep, Lori. We *both* raised them!" Dad yelled.

"You hardly seem concerned about anything they do. They need someone to be there for them," Mom shot back.

I shut the door softly behind me and kept my movements quiet. I didn't want to get caught in the middle of a fight. I hated their fake happiness when they caught me.

"They need a parent, not a friend. They need discipline."

"You don't think I'm disciplining them enough? Maybe you should pay more attention."

"I'm done arguing over this." Dad's footsteps grew louder and louder until he was standing right in front of me. He held my gaze, silent, for a few minutes before he went past me into the kitchen.

Neither of us said anything.

I went upstairs, not being quiet now that my parents knew I was home, and shut my bedroom door behind me. I dropped my backpack on the floor and flopped down on my bed. I was tired of fighting. Tired of my parents fighting, tired of fighting my own battles, tired of it all.

I slowly drifted off to sleep, curled up next to my stuffed toys, and all my problems subsided for a while. Sometimes all I wanted was to forget that I existed.



I groaned when my locker door stuck. The lock opened, waiting for me to open the door, but the door wasn't opening.

I glanced around me at the few kids that were still in the hallway. One couple was making out just a few feet away. Two girls were looking down at a phone, laughing. None of them even noticed that I existed.

I leaned against the locker beside mine and closed my eyes. I hated when fate didn't agree with me.

"Need help?"

I turned around and saw a girl standing just a few feet away. Her blond hair was tied in a ponytail, revealing her round face. Her school uniform was fairly neat and proper, as if she put a lot of thought into making it comply with dress rules. I'd never seen her in my life.

"I'm Brooke." She held out her hand, a smile spreading across her face.

I just stared at her. Was she really talking to me? *No one* talked to me. Ever.

She laughed and moved to the locker. "Don't talk much, do you?"

I shrugged.

She laughed even harder and pulled the locker open easily. "There you go."

"Thanks," I mumbled, staring down at the floor.

"Hey, she speaks!"

My cheeks blushed.

"I'm new here. First day, actually. Could you tell me where Mr. Wilson's room is?" She tightened her grip on the backpack that was held over one shoulder.

"Are you sure you wanna ask me?"

Her eyebrows rose. "Well yeah. You seem fairly nice. Aside from being shy."

I shook my head and grabbed my books from the stack inside my locker. "Not many people ask me for help."

"I don't see why they wouldn't. You're nice."

This time, I lifted my eyebrows at her. "You obviously don't know me."

She shrugged. "I'm a good judge of character."

"Yeah, right," I mumbled.

"So, um, the room? I don't wanna be late on my first day."

"Oh, it's down the hall; take a right, then it's room 204."

"Thanks. I'll see you around..." she smiled and paused, expecting me to say my name.

I sighed. "Amie."

"Okay, Amie. See you later." She turned and went down the hallway, disappearing around the corner. I watched her go, wondering why *she* had decided to talk to me. It was weird, didn't happen often, and kind of made me... happy.



I stepped into my last period of the day, 6th grade English, and almost sighed in relief as I saw a seat in the back of the room was empty. I quickly but slyly made my way to the back and sat down, dropping my books on the desk.

A second after I got comfortable in my seat, Brooke walked into the room. She smiled as she saw me and walked back to sit in the chair beside me. "I'm so glad you're here."

That made one of us. I plastered on a fake smile and opened my notebook.

She looked over at the drawings I flipped over to get to a clean page. "Boring class?"

"You could say that."

She laughed and showed me her notebook. The front cover was covered in her name, drawn in many different ways. "Great minds think alike."

The teacher shut the door, and I turned around in my seat, pretending to care about what he was saying.

"For homework tonight, I'd like for all of you to finish *Treasure Island*. I will be pairing you up with a partner to write an essay on the themes and motifs found in this book. You will be judged on your presentation as well as the information in your essay. You have two weeks to work on this assignment, so do not put it off. Late projects will be deducted ten points for each day they are late. Any questions?"

"Can we pick our partners?" Jessica Harris asked, flipping her red hair over her shoulder.

Mr. Johnson sighed. "No. I will be choosing your partners."

Collectively, everyone groaned.

"Settle down!" Mr. Johnson said loudly. He picked up a piece of paper and began reading off partner names. "Jessica Harris, you will be partnered with Lucas Green. Amie Walters, you will be working with... Brooke Carter."

Brooke grinned. "Perfect. I've read this book a million times already."

Maybe being partners wasn't so bad after all.

"Spend this time in class making an outline of how you plan on writing your essay." Mr. Johnson sat down at his desk and opened up a book.

Brooke moved her desk over to mine and took the thin paperback from my desk. "I'm not gonna give the ending away cause that's just mean, so you'll have to finish the story asap. Then we can get started on the essay."

I just nodded. I had a feeling she was neurotic and was going to take charge of the assignment. Which didn't bother me in the slightest.

She went on and on about how we could structure the outline and essay, and I tried my best to seem interested. My nods and smiles weren't believable, but she continued anyway. Maybe she wasn't as bad of a person as I wanted to believe she was.



I set the book down and sighed. How was I supposed to make it through this project? I barely understood the book, let alone the meaning it had. What if Brooke thought I was stupid and—

No. Why did I care what she thought of me? She knew the book better than I did. That wasn't a bad thing. It was okay for me to know less about it.

I laid back on my bed and ran my hands through my hair. Beside me, my phone started ringing.

I glanced down at it, and my eyebrows rose. I didn't recognise the number. "Hello?"

"Amie, hey. Sorry to bug you, but I wanted to ask when would be a good time to meet for the project."

Brooke. Of course. Why did she have to call me? How did she get my number?

I groaned. "It's not even due for a while."

"You'll regret not starting it sooner. I can promise you that."

"I don't know how things were at your old school, but the teachers here don't care if you aren't perfect."

"First impressions are everything."

"You really believe that?"

"Well yeah. Anyway, what day is best for you? My mom works a lot, so I'll have the house to myself most nights. Or I could go to your house—"

"Your place is fine," I said quickly, hoping the urgency in my voice wasn't super obvious. There was no way I wanted her to come over and hear my parents fighting.

"Alright. What night?"

"Thursday? Would that work?"

"That's fine. I'll order pizza, too."

"Is that necessary?"

"Not really, but it'll help. You can't work on an empty stomach."

"Says who?"

"Me. But it's still true."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine."

"See you tomorrow, Amie."

"See ya," I hung up, then groaned. She was going to drive me crazy. I just knew it.



"Did you finish the book yet? Because we're going to have to start the project so we don't fall behind —"

I sighed and turned towards Brooke, my head already hurting. "Why are you being so pushy? It's just a stupid assignment."

"One bad grade turns into a bunch, which then lowers my GPA. Then I can't get into good colleges, and I'm a failure."

"That's not true."

"I've read plenty of horror stories—"

"I bet you didn't even read any where someone turned out okay."

She sighed. "I just don't want to put myself at risk like that, okay?"

I closed my locker. "I doubt you have anything to worry about. But if it makes you feel better, we'll finish it as soon as possible."

She nodded. "Okay."

"You should know that worrying is not good for you," I said, heading towards my first class.

She caught up with me and continued to walk beside me. "I think I have a pretty good excuse."

I looked over at her. "Oh, really?" It was weird, but I was invested in what she was saying. Was I starting to care about her? No, it couldn't be.

She nodded. "Moving towns makes me anxious."

"How many times have you moved?" I didn't want to ask an obviously rude question, so I changed the subject a little.

"I think four, but I'm starting to lose track. The last place was a big town. The school had like a thousand students."

I nodded. That would definitely freak me out.

"Anyway, do you know much about chemistry? That thing is really kicking my butt."

"Mr. Bennett?"

She nodded.

"Sorry. Wish I could help you, but I barely scrape by."

"I was doing okay for a while, but there's a lot of math involved, and that isn't my best subject either."

"One thing at a time. We can't have a perfect assignment and you understanding chemistry all in one day."

She rolled her eyes. "I know that. I never said it had to be right away."

"But the sooner, the better, right?"

She winked at me and made me chuckle. "You catch on quick."



"I wasn't sure what kind of pizza you liked, so I ordered a Hawaiian pizza," Brooke said, sitting cross-legged in the middle of a circle of papers, books, and her laptop.

I walked over to her and stood just outside the circle, afraid that if I stepped somewhere, I'd ruin her project. "That's fine. If you order from the local place, you get a free order of bread sticks."

"Is that good?"

I shrugged. "Depends on how you look at it. It's mostly a pity thing. They barely get any customers, so the bread sticks are like an incentive to keep going back."

She frowned. "That's so sad."

"I guess."

She cleared some space on the floor and patted it. "So what'd you think of the book?"

I sat down beside her and glanced at the full outline she had already done. "I thought it was kind of boring. I mean, it was a good book, but it just... wasn't current."

"Well, it wasn't written yesterday."

I rolled my eyes at her. "I know that."

She laughed. "It was a bit outdated, but that isn't a bad thing."

"I know I'm going to regret this, but what'd you think of the book?"

"Well, I liked how they searched for hidden treasure and then later outwitted the pirates. It was a turning point, I think."

"How many times have you read it?"

"A few times."

I raised my eyebrows.

"I think seven. But that's just a guess."

"Geez, Brooke!"

"I can't help it. It's a really good book."

"Good luck convincing me of that."

The doorbell rang downstairs, and Brooke got to her feet. "Check out my outline and let me know what you think."

I watched her leave and glanced at the laptop screen. The outline was neatly organised and even highlighted with colour. It was impressive and intimidating at the same time. Her points were good, and some were things I wouldn't have even thought of. She definitely wanted that 100% grade.

Brooke walked back in with a large box of pizza and set it down outside the circle. "So what do you think?"

"I think we should just stick with what you have. I mean, it's so much better than anything I can come up with."

"I don't want to feel like I'm doing all the work. You should contribute."

"Honestly, it doesn't bother me."

She sat down beside me. "It wouldn't be fair, Amie."

"To me or you? I feel like you're defending the wrong person here."

She shrugged. "Is that a bad thing?"

"You could turn into a doormat."

"A doormat?"

"Someone who gets walked on all the time. They let people take advantage of them."

"Oh, right. I should've known that."

"Maybe... maybe with my... street smarts and your book smarts, we can make the paper more updated and still smart."

"That's a lot of smarts," she giggled. "But I like the way you think."

I took a slice from the box and took a bite.

"Good?" she asked, watching me.

I nodded. "Really good."

"Good," she said, taking her own slice. "I can write up the essay if you give the presentation," Brooke said, typing things on her laptop.

"Oh, yeah. Take the easy job."

"I have stage fright."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Oh, really? What if I do, too?"

She looked up at me, her expression serious. "Then we're in a bit of a pickle."

"I can help with the essay, you know. I'm not completely incompetent."

"I never said you were."

"It felt implied."

She sighed. "Look, I may be okay at talking to people one-on-one, but when I get in a group setting..."

"Did it ever occur to you that I have, like, no friends?"

"I just thought you didn't want friends, Amie."

I shook my head at her, feeling kind of sad all of a sudden. "Nobody wants to be alone."

"You're not unlikable. So why *don't* you have any friends?"

"I don't know."

She nodded but said nothing.

"What? I don't. I don't know why people don't like me."

"What if you push people away? I did that once. It ended horribly, and I learned my own lesson—"

"Why are you doing this?" I didn't see anything good in her bringing this up. Lecturing me about why I didn't have friends wasn't a good topic.

"I don't want you to be lonely forever. I want you to have friends and be happy—"

"I'm plenty happy."

"I don't think so, Amie. You shelter yourself so much that you have no way of being happy."

I got to my feet, annoyed at her, and grabbed my stuff. "I don't need to take lessons from you, Brooke! I'm done."

"Amie- "

"No, this is over. We're just two people who got assigned a project. That's it."

"I didn't mean—"

"Don't bother." I slammed her bedroom door shut behind me and ran down the stairs. I was out on the street in just a few seconds.

She was so wrong. I wasn't mean. I didn't push people away. Not having any friends was my choice. It was completely normal... wasn't it?

I wiped my eyes dry with the back of my hand and started running home. I didn't want to admit that Brooke was right. I didn't want to admit that anything she said to me affected me in any way. But it had.



Zoe sat down on the bed across from me and sighed. When I didn't look up at her, she sighed louder. This went on a few more times before I gave in.

"What do you want?" I asked, pulling my ear buds out.

She furrowed her eyebrows but otherwise didn't seem phased. "Do you think mom's mad at me?"

I shrugged and went back to working on my homework. I didn't have an answer for her, nor did I care about her stupid quarrels with mom and dad. That was her problem, not mine.

She put a hand over my book, forcing me to look at her. "Amie, please."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "I don't care if she is, Zoe. I'm busy."

"This is important."

"More important than my homework?"

She sighed. "I just need to know."

"Ask her."

"She'll get mad at me."

"Then there's your answer."

She watched me silently, her eyebrows furrowed. "Why are you always so grumpy?"

"You're bothering me."

"It's not because of me. I think there's something else. Is it a boy?"

"Go away, Zoe. I don't want to talk to you."

"You mean you don't want to talk about it, right?"

"Just go."

She sighed and jumped off the bed. "I know something's bothering you."

"Get out."

"Fine, keep being a sulky little brat," she rolled her eyes at me and left.

Sometimes she was so much like me that it scared me.



"Amie, are you listening?"

I blinked and looked over at Ms. Taylor. She was watching me with worried eyes, her hands crossed over her desk.

"What?"

"Are you alright?"

"I don't know. I'm really tired."

"Of what?"

"Just tired. My parents started fighting early this morning. My mom stormed off before I got out of bed."

"Is there anything else bothering you?" It was like she could see through me. Which I figured was a therapist thing.

"Why do you always think something is bothering me?"

She smiled just a little. "I've been meeting with you for almost a year now. I know when something's bothering you. I can see it on your face."

I frowned, wishing I could control my emotions better. Then again, any therapist could pick someone apart.

"Now tell me what's bothering you."

I sighed. "There's this new girl, Brooke. We got assigned a project in English, and when we were working on it, she said I was pushing people away, and that's why I have no friends."

Ms. Taylor waited patiently. Even after I stopped talking, she sat silently.

"I guess it's stupid, but I really don't think that's why I have no friends."

"Why do you think you don't?"

"I don't talk to anyone; I'm quiet—"

"Amie, you are not quiet. You may seem like it, but I think that is because you don't talk to anyone."

"I talk to you. Though I'm starting to wonder why."

"You have to branch out. Try to make friends."

"That's easier said than done."

"Have you ever tried?"

I shrugged. "I don't know... maybe?"

"I'd like for you to try this week, Amie."

"Please don't make me do this. I'm fine not having any friends." I wanted friends. Who didn't? But I was still fine not having any.

"Amie, you can't tell me you're happy not having anyone to talk to."

"I have you."

"Excluding me."

I sighed. "Why? Why change things? I'm happy the way they are."

"Do you really believe that, Amie?"

Why did she have to be so blunt? Maybe I did want friends, but I didn't want things to change. I didn't want people to find out that my parents fought all the time and that it was practically normal for me. I didn't want to be made fun of by people who were supposedly my friends.

"Things are fine."

She looked at me sympathetically but said nothing. Her signature move.

"Can I go to class now?" I asked, feeling tears about to spill down my cheeks.

She nodded, and I felt her eyes bore holes into my back as I left.



I sat in the bathroom, crying and praying that no one would come in. These were the times when I needed a friend—someone to confide in. But I didn't have any, and I wasn't sure that even if someone was there, I'd talk to them.

The door opened, and I held my breath. While I wanted friends, someone who wasn't one could have come in and made fun of me for crying. Wouldn't be the first time, either.

Someone knocked on the stall door. Oh, crap. My worst nightmare.

"Taken," I said, hoping the tears weren't obvious in my voice.

There was silence, but the feet were still there. Then the girl got down on her hands and knees and looked in at me.

It was Brooke. A random person would have been better.

"Hey, Amie, you okay?"

I wiped my eyes with my sweatshirt sleeve, hiding my face from her. "I'm fine."

"If you were fine, you wouldn't be crying."

"Just go away."

She rolled her eyes and crawled under the stall door. She sat up against the wall beside me. "What's up?"

"Leave me alone. I can take care of myself."

"At least tell me why you're upset. Maybe I can help."

"You can't help me!" I shot back, harsher than I intended.

She watched me for a few seconds before she got up and left the stall, leaving the door unlocked and opened just a few inches.

All she wanted to do was help me. She didn't want anything in return. So why was I being so mean to her? Sure, she's said some rude stuff to me before, but I knew she didn't mean for it to come out that way.

Why couldn't I just give her a chance?



Neither of us said anything in class. The teacher spoke, though I knew she wasn't paying any more attention to him than I was.

This went on until the day of our project. She had it all completed and finished. Though, when she tried to say she'd present it for the both of us, I told her no.

"No way. You've done enough. I have to do something."

"It's no big deal," she said softly, pushing the papers into a neat, composed pile. She couldn't even look at me.

I grabbed her hand, stopping her, forcing her to look at me. "It is, Brooke. Let me do this. You even said yourself that you hate speaking in front of people."

She watched me, reading my expression, waiting for me to blow up on her again. "Why?"

I knew she wasn't talking about why I was forcing her to let me present. There was more to it. "I don't want you to do the whole assignment yourself. That negates the purpose of us working together."

"It doesn't matter, Amie."

I laughed. "How could you say that? I thought everything had to be perfect with you."

"It's just a grade. I don't care."

I lowered my voice and forced her to look at me. "Since when do you not care about a grade?"

"Don't get into this now," she said, turning away from me and towards the perfectly neat stack of papers in front of her.

"Yes, now."

She narrowed her eyes. "Just drop it, Amie."

The teacher called up the first group, and I leaned back in my seat, confused as to why Brooke was suddenly so mad at me. And why wouldn't she care about the assignment? She was the one who wanted the perfect grade. Something was wrong.

When it was our turn, Brooke did the presentation without even glancing at me. She said my name once or twice, making up things that I'd done for the project. When we were done, she went back to her seat and continued to keep her eyes forward and as far from me as possible.

She was definitely mad at me. And I needed to know why.



I stopped at the top of the steps as my mother came into sight, an old suitcase in her hands. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail, but many strays were making their way out. She turned to face the way she came, not noticing my presence.

"Don't let Amie skip school. She can't get behind in her classes this late in the year. And please don't feed her pizza every night." Mom sounded calm, but I could hear the hurt and sadness in her voice.

"I'm not stupid, Lori. I know how to take care of my children," Dad said, aggression filling his voice. I couldn't see him, but I knew he was hurt.

Mom sighed, though she stayed relaxed. "I'm sure she'll call if she needs anything."

Dad was silent. I figured he was waiting for her to leave.

"I'll call her later and check on her; let her know what's going on."

"She'd probably appreciate it more if you told her in person."

"If the situation was different, yes," and with that, she walked outside and closed the door on my father and me.

I didn't know what would become of the four of us now. My parents had never fought a day in my life. At least, I didn't know if they had. It was so weird that after this stupid disagreement, they would just leave each other broken and hollow.

Instead of breaking down and crying, instead of trying to go after my mom and talk her into returning home, he got mad and started throwing things around, cursing, and balling his hands into fists. It was one of the few times I'd ever seen my father angry.

I stood there for several minutes, watching him. I didn't know if I should comfort him or stay back. Sometimes people just need to be alone. Maybe this was one of those times. I didn't know what would have happened if I'd said something before or after my mother left, letting them know I was there. But I knew that leaving my father alone was the best thing for both of us at the moment. Because as much as I loved my parents, I hated both of them for walking away. I hated them for separating themselves, their lives, their love. I couldn't talk to my dad while I secretly hated him.

It seemed unfair to all four of us. We'd been so close and happy for so long. But happiness didn't last forever. If one wasn't happy, none of us were. Maybe sometimes sadness is better than pretending to care; better than being surrounded by fake love.

I went back into my bedroom and quietly shut the door. I scrolled through my phone and found Ms. Taylor's number. I hit *send* then waited for her to answer.

The phone rang many times before it finally went to her voice mail. I called again, and the same thing happened.

Sighing, I sat down on my bed and stared at my bare feet. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't talk to my parents because this was their problem, not mine. It would be selfish to bring it up as my own concern when it wasn't. So who could I talk to?

My phone chimed with a message from Brooke: *'Got an A on the project and presentation.'*

I stared at the message as tears filled my eyes. Of course, I could call her and talk to her. But would she want to hear from me? Would she want to deal with my petty problems?

I dialled her number before I could stop myself, then waited for her voice. My hands shook the entire time.

"What?"

I tried not to let her angry tone bother me. She had every right to hate me, and so did I. "I— I need to talk to you."

"About?"

I hesitated. How could I tell her without her thinking I was some kind of freak? Normal people didn't deal with their parents hating each other. And she wouldn't understand. She didn't even know her father, so how could she even help? Calling was a stupid idea.

But I spoke anyway. "M— my mommy just left. She had a suitcase, and... Sh— she left..." The tears poured out of me now as I sobbed quietly, curled up and afraid in my bed. I knew I'd always loved and cared about my parents, but it hadn't seemed very real for the past few years. Maybe I was a brooding,

hate-filled teenager who was too blind to notice the love around me. And now things were crashing around me, and the love has vanished.

"Where do you live? I'm coming to get you."

"D— don't."

"Don't be stupid, Amie. Tell me where you live."

Through deep sobs and a fountain of snot, I managed to tell her where I lived. She said she'd be there in ten minutes. Then the line disconnected.



"Do you want to talk about it?" Brooke asked softly, staring at her hands in her lap. She said nothing when I walked out of the house and followed her to the nearby park. She continued to be silent as we sat on the playground swings, with me crying and her trying not to stare at me.

Not long after Brooke left her house to come see me, dad came upstairs with no trace of anger on his face and told me he was going to bed. He told me to order pizza whenever I wanted it. That part didn't surprise me.

So I sneaked out of the house quietly in my bare feet and went with Brooke to the park. We sat outside, close to the house, but it still felt miles away.

I sniffed and rubbed my nose on my sleeve. "I have to, don't I?"

"Not if you don't want to, Amie."

I shook my head. "Life isn't fair that way."

She put a hand on my shoulder. "Life doesn't have to happen the way it's intended."

"I don't know why I called you. You hate me."

"I don't hate you."

"It seemed like you did."

"I really didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Amie. That was totally my fault, and I understand if *you* hate *me*."

"Wouldn't we just follow the same cycle?"

"I suppose so," she said, smiling.

"I don't hate you. I never did."

"Then why did you push me away?"

I opened my mouth to talk, but quickly shut it. I didn't have a good answer for her. I also knew that anything I said would make things worse. I wasn't good at coming up with things on the spot. This time was proof of that.

"You don't have to hide from me," she said softly. "We've all been through stuff. Good and bad. And I've already seen you at your worst. Twice, now."

I shook my head and looked at her. "I don't want you to think less of me."

"If I did, would I be sitting here with you now?"

That shut me right up. She was right. She wouldn't be here with me if she thought I was weird or stupid. There was a reason she was here. I just didn't know why.

"I don't think any less of you because of your family. You can't help the family you were born into."

"You should. My life's a mess."

"Well, so is mine."

"How?"

"My dad ran out on my mom and me." That's why we moved here. Mom grew up here and figured it'd be easier to be someplace more familiar to her."

"Why'd he leave?"

"He got someone else pregnant."

My eyes widened. "Does your mom know?"

"No. I found out by accident, but I didn't want her to know. She's already heartbroken enough."

"But doesn't it hurt you to see her still in love with him?"

"Not completely. Like, I know what he did was terrible, but he was a good father to me. And I'd rather have my mother just miss him and hate him for leaving than hate him for cheating."

"I wish I was as nice as you, Brooke."

"You are. You just don't know it."

"Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?" I asked, feeling pathetic for even asking.

"Not a single one. Care for some pizza?"

"Could we get Chinese? I can't stand pizza any more."



"Just know I warned you," I said, walking into my bedroom.

Brooke rolled her eyes at me. "I told you I wouldn't judge you. I'm not going back on my word."

I sighed. "Is it completely obvious that I don't invite friends over much?"

"No."

"You don't have to lie to make me feel better."

She walked over to my mirror and adjusted her hair. "Do you know any girls looking for a girlfriend?"

My eyebrows rose. "Um... no."

She turned around and held my gaze. "You're not gay, are you?"

I felt my face heat up. "Why would you ask me that?"

"Just wondering. I haven't had a girlfriend since before we moved."

I sat down on my bed and pulled out my phone. "I'm not like that, Brooke."

"Did you ever wonder? I mean, I'm sure everyone goes through that phase in their lifetime."

"I never did. I had a boyfriend once for a few days, but it was when I was like ten. No one else before or since then."

"Doesn't life get kind of lonely?"

I glanced at her. "My life is depressing and lonely in general. Besides, I can't date anyone if I don't have any friends."

"Who says you can't?" She looked at me. "Believe it or not, Amie, you're really pretty. I'm surprised you're not surrounded by boys and girls all the time."

I felt my cheeks turning crimson. I turned away from her. "It's not true. Besides, wouldn't I have to make friends with someone before we dated?"

She shrugged. "I suppose."

We ordered a Chinese takeout, then laid back on my bed. "I'm sure both of my parents would kill me if they found out I was gay."

"Why do you think that?"

"They're very opinionated people. I mean, they can't even stand each other."

"That doesn't mean you couldn't be gay. Or your sister."

I shook my head. "It wouldn't happen."

"Why do you seem so opposed to it? You don't think it could be a possibility?"

"Are you *trying* to make me gay?"

She sat down beside me on the bed. "I'm not trying to make you anything that you aren't already."

"You're nuts. You know that?"

She laughed. "Fully aware."



"Is it possible to be gay without even knowing you are?" I asked, pulling a book from the small bookshelf. Talking About Sex & Growing Up.

"Is there something you're not telling me?" Ms. Taylor asked, folding her hands on the desk.

"I'm just curious."

"Curious about..."

I sighed and turned to face her. "I just want to know, okay?"

"You can tell me anything, Amie. I won't judge you."

"You never answered my question."

Ms. Taylor sighed. "That's how most people live. They never truly know until something happens to change that."

I looked back at the bookshelf. Was that what I was dealing with Brooke?

No, no way. I wasn't gay. I didn't find girls attractive. I never let out a sigh when a hot girl walked by. That wasn't me.

Or was it? Was it one of those things where I didn't care about anyone in particular, except that one person who did something to me whenever I saw them?

No. That wouldn't happen to me. Not with a girl or a guy. People didn't do that to me. I wasn't sure I'd ever find someone I'd want to kiss, or marry, or have kids with. If I couldn't have a friend, how could I get a boyfriend? Or a girlfriend?

No. No. I wasn't gay. I *wasn't*.

"What was that?" Ms. Taylor asked, her eyebrows raised.

"Had I said that out loud?"

"Yes, you did."

My cheeks reddened. "Well, I'm not."

She stayed silent, but I knew her eyes were on me.

"This is nuts. I'm not gay. I can't be."

"Why can't you be? Are you afraid your parents won't approve?"

I sighed. "My parents wouldn't even notice. Even if I told them to their faces."

"They'd at least like to know what is going on with you."

"They're too busy with their own problems and their own... lives to care about me."

"How do you know?"

"I just do," I said stubbornly. My parents barely noticed me at all. My mother calls once every so often, and my dad only checks on me to make sure I had something to eat and that I'd left for school. I don't even know if he made it to work or not.

Ms. Taylor wrote something on a sticky note and held it out to me. "Talk to whoever this person is. See why they're interested in you, then see if that's enough for you to be interested in them."

"I'm not gay," I said. But as I looked down at the paper, the words written there weren't what I wanted to hear.

Give it a try.



I paced the length of the room, biting at my nails. My nerves were just about shot. My hands were shaking, I couldn't stop moving, and my stomach felt like it was about to turn upside down.

After my meeting with Ms. Taylor, I couldn't focus on class. I couldn't concentrate on anything my teachers were saying, and I couldn't even read the words in the book in front of me. My mind was stuck on what Ms. Taylor had said.

So after fourth period, right before lunch, I left school and headed for a place where I could think better. It wasn't a very bright idea, but it was something. I was moving. I was doing something.

The door opened, and Brooke tossed her backpack onto the floor. "What are you doing here?" She asked, her eyebrows rising. "And why weren't you in class?"

I handed the note to her. "Did you put her up to this?"

"Who?" She asked, taking the note from me.

"Ms. Taylor."

She shook her head. "I didn't put anyone up to anything. What's this about?"

I sighed and sat down on her bed. "I told Ms. Taylor that you liked me."

She said nothing for a few seconds before she sat down beside me. "What else did you tell her?"

I stared at the floor, afraid to tell her.

"Amie, tell me."

"I told her that... that I wasn't gay. She gave me that before I left," I pointed at the note.

Brooke stared down at the note but didn't say anything. I wasn't sure what she was thinking, but it couldn't have been good. I was breaking her heart. Of course she'd be upset, mad. She'd hate me.

"Brooke, are... are you okay?" I asked hesitantly, afraid of the answer.

She said nothing. Instead, she leaned over and kissed me, holding the back of my neck so I couldn't move away. Her lips were soft and careful against mine, not pushing me further than was necessary.

I was stunned. I knew she liked girls, and she was trying to win me over, but I never expected it to go this far. I never thought she'd actually kiss me.

And I never thought I'd like it.

I kissed her back, eager to know what it felt like to kiss another girl. I never thought it would actually happen. Especially with Brooke.

"Whoa," she said, pulling back. There was an uneasy look on her face.

"What?" I asked, though my face was heating up.

"I didn't think you'd kiss me back."

I crossed my arms over my chest just for something to do. "It didn't mean anything."

"Then why did you kiss me?"

"I— You kissed me first, Brooke, so yeah—" I said, not knowing what I really wanted to say and hoping she'd cut me some slack. She didn't.

"Yet you still kissed back," a smile surfaced in the corner of her lips. "Don't tell me that was just gravity or a cosmic accident or something. I've heard better excuses than that."

"What do you want me to say, Brooke?" I could already feel my eyes tearing up. This was a bad idea, and now I was going to pay for it.

Brooke watched me as if waiting for me to have an epiphany or something. Though that wasn't happening any time soon.

So I stared back. I wanted her to see I was about to cry, wanted to will the day to be over and Brooke to forget the kiss ever happened. But life wasn't fair that way, and I had to face the music.

Brooke spoke first. "Are you afraid of what people would think if you were gay?"

I finally turned away before tears spilled down my cheeks.

She reached for my hand and held it in hers. "Amie, don't cry. No one has to know. Not until you're ready."

I couldn't believe how selfless that sounded. She'd really give up happiness and a healthy relationship just to keep me happy. She was giving up too much for me. And what if I wasn't gay at all? What if all this was just a phase?

"No. I can't do that to you. Not if..."

"You need to figure out who you are and what you want. I get that. I went through that too. I want you to be able to figure that out without me pushing you too far."

"This isn't fair," I whispered.

She took my face in her hands, clearing away my tears and smiling. How could she be smiling?
"Pretend I'm just a friend helping you out. It doesn't have to be anything serious. I'm just helping you find yourself, Amie."

"You think that isn't serious?" I asked, a small smile appearing on my face.

"There's that smile," she said cheerfully.

I couldn't help myself, or the way she was revealing small traces of happiness for me. I laughed and cleared the tears from my eyes.

"I'm sorry if I sounded mean earlier. I was just... confused," I said.

"You don't have to apologise," she said, getting to her feet. She kicked off her shoes and put her jacket on top of her backpack.

"I don't want you to hate me, Brooke."

She laughed. "You think I'd hate you?"

"You have before."

She wrapped her arm around my shoulders and pressed her cheek next to mine. "Well, from here on out, I don't. I won't, Amie."

"Thanks."

"You wanna eat ice cream and watch some movies?"



Brooke took a French fry from my basket and dipped it in ketchup. "What about her? Would you date her?"

There was a girl a few feet from us, her black hair reaching her lower back. She swayed her hips when she moved. No wonder Brooke picked her out.

I glared at her. "Will you stop?"

"Come on. I'm just trying to find you a good girlfriend."

"You're my girlfriend."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm just here until you find someone permanent, then..."

"Brooke, stop. Please. You're my girlfriend. Now and until... I don't know. But I don't want this to just be some fooling around thing."

"I'm helping you discover who you are, Amie, so that way you aren't inexperienced when you get another girlfriend."

"You don't think this is serious?" It hurt me that she didn't think we would last, that she was just a filler for someone else.

She glanced over at me, a hidden look on her face. "I love you, Amie. I want it to be, but... I just didn't want to get my hopes high if that wasn't what you wanted."

I leaned over and kissed her, licking the taste of salt from her bottom lip. "I want it too, Brooke. Please believe me for once."

She stole another fry and grinned at me. "So I take it you don't like her?"

I rolled my eyes and ate the last fry before she could take it. "Not in the slightest."



I opened the front door and laughed at Brooke's ridiculous joke. "Do you have any that aren't about killing babies?"

"I have a great one about toddlers if you want it."

I stopped dead in my tracks, causing Brooke to bump into me. My parents, whom I wasn't expecting to see together, were standing in the entrance to the living room, watching me.

"Amie, I'm glad you're here. We need to talk to you," Mom said, her eyes flickering to Brooke.

It was then that I realised we were still holding hands. But I wasn't about to let her go. I wasn't embarrassed by her or being with her. I was mad that my mom was looking her up and down and judging her without even caring how much happier I was with her in my life.

"Alone," she added, her voice growing darker still.

"Brooke's staying or I'm leaving."

"Amie—" dad started, always taking mom's side. Even when they fought, he defended her actions.

"She already knows everything. Might as well let her stick around to see how it turns out."

I felt Brooke's hand leave mine. "It's okay, Amie. I have to go anyway," she said and walked out. "See you later."

"Brooke, don't—" I tried stopping her from leaving, but mom held my gaze for a few seconds before she walked me into the living room, closing the door behind us.

My parents sat beside each other on the love seat, and I immediately knew what was going on.

I sat down as far away from them as I could, and then I just watched them until one of them decided to speak.

"Amie, we never meant to hurt you or Zoe. We just needed to sort things out. Can you understand that?" Mom said, her voice softening.

"No," I said stubbornly, crossing my arms over my chest. "You never told me you were leaving. You never said you were taking Zoe with you. Not even a goodbye."

"I didn't want you to hate us."

"You really didn't handle that well then."

Dad interjected. "I know it's selfish, Amie, but we did what we thought was best for us."

"You didn't tell me shit. Mom never told me she was leaving, and you moped around in your room so much I was practically raising myself."

"We really are sorry, sweetie," mom said, lowering her voice. I think I saw tears in her eyes, but I didn't care. She needed to know how I felt, even if it hurt.

"I understand that you two have a thing you need to sort through and work out, but you never once asked me how I was doing or how I was handling anything. What if I had killed myself? Would you have thought it was because of your relationship? I doubt you would have thought about my own problems or my own relationship. My lack of friends. Good parents would have picked up on that, and cared, and wanted to help their child. You didn't!"

"Don't joke about that, Amie. We would have cared a great deal. You know that."

"I needed you. *Both* of you. And you weren't there. You didn't have to be in the same house as me. That part didn't bother me. It was that you practically fell off the face of the earth."

"If you so wanted us around, why don't we know about... *her* then?" I hated the way mom talked about Brooke, as if she were a decorative plant and lesser than the rest of us. It made me sick.

"I was embarrassed, okay? Every time I was home, you two were fighting. You think I'd invite a friend, my *only* friend, over while you two are busy throwing things at each other?"

"I'm sorry we did that to you."

"So are you two getting a divorce?" It wouldn't surprise me. I wasn't even upset about it. My parents needed to become their own people, instead of the couple they'd been for almost twenty years.

Mom looked at dad, and... *I just knew.*

"We want to work things out. To see how it all goes," mom said.

"I'm tired of you two fighting all the time. I mean, I do want to see you together, but if it comes down to it, I won't be upset."

She nodded. "Alright. Thank you, Amie."

I held up a finger. "I'm not done. Mom, dad, I need to know if you can be okay with Brooke and me. Because she is my girlfriend, and I really like her."

Neither of them said anything for a long minute, leaving me to wonder if they were going to forbid me from seeing Brooke ever again.

Dad was the first to speak. "It's going to take time before either of us can make up our minds."

I was stunned. I really wasn't listening to what he was saying. Sure, I knew he was saying he wanted to think about things before he could, or would, be okay with me dating a girl. But my mind was telling me he was saying *no*.

I got to my feet with tears in my eyes. "Mom, dad, please give her a chance. For me." And then I left them at that, walking to my bedroom without another word.



I shut my door and slid down to the floor, feeling like an idiot. My parents wanted to be okay with me; I knew that. But it was like I couldn't, *wouldn't*, listen to them.

They had done things I hated, and part of me just assumed they would keep that up, keep disappointing me. It was practically impossible to believe they would make me happy for once.

The door opened and bumped my leg. I didn't get up or move.

"Amie, why did you run away? We only wanted to talk with you."

"Mom, I'm sorry."

She sat down on the floor beside me and took one of my hands in hers. "Neither of us think of you any differently because you like a girl."

"What if I *only* liked girls?" I'd never thought about liking girls, boys, or one over the other. I just knew that I liked Brooke.

"Then we'd love you just as much as we love you now."

I rested my head on her shoulder. "I really want you to like Brooke."

"She's a nice kid."

"You think so?"

"I've seen the way she looks at you, the way you hold your hands."

My eyes widened a little, afraid of what she would say. "So... you're not mad at me?"

"What I'm trying to say is that your dad and I can see you're in love with her and that she loves you back. It's not right to be mad at someone because they're in love."

She loves me? Brooke and I had only been together for... what, a week? It seemed like it was too early to start loving each other.

"But at the same time, you're only twelve, Amie. You're still growing up, and we are responsible for you."

"I know what I feel, mom. I need Brooke or I'll go mad."

"I can understand why, and I'm happy that she's been there for you... when your dad and I couldn't."

"But do you understand?"

"I want to say yes, but I'm not totally sure. We'll try our hardest," she kissed the side of my head. "For you."

I got to my feet and pulled mom up. "Can I go to her place? I want to talk to her."

"Your father told me you've spent more time at her place than your own home," she said, a bit of disapproval in her voice.

"I haven't. I mean, there was no one at home. I was lonely and needed someone to talk to."

She patted my hand. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. We'll try to make things better for you and your sister. I promise."

"So... can I go and see her?"

"Of course. But I want you back home before eight, alright?"

I nodded and gave her a quick hug. "Thanks mom."

"Come on now," she gave me a gentle push. "Don't keep her waiting."



"How are things with you and your parents?" Brooke asked, taking a handful of popcorn from the bag.

"If they're happy, I'm happy."

She rested her head on my shoulder. "I'm glad to hear that."

"How did you... come out to your parents?"

"I gave them a brochure on dealing with a gay child."

I laughed. "You didn't."

"I was eleven, and that was what the guidance counsellor gave me."

"You went to the guidance counsellor?"

"I told him it was for a friend who was gay. It was stupid and totally obvious, but he never asked questions."

"Thanks for being here for me, Brooke. I couldn't have done this alone."

"It's what girls do for one another."

I hugged her and laughed to the point where tears were coming out of my eyes.

Then she turned my head so I was facing her, and she kissed me. "I'll always be here for you."

The End