



*Growing up in a small, conservative town in the 80's, Karen knew at a young age to keep her secret. Then she went to college where she met Erika and everything she'd tried to deny about herself became a reality. Now how would she tell the people that she loved the most - feared the most - that she was gay?*

## ***A Song for Everything***

By Karen E. Bacon

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# A SONG FOR EVERYTHING



KAREN E. BACON

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## Chapter 1

Jason said do these 4 things and you'll be ready: get a good night's sleep, eat a good breakfast, take 2 Advil and play some good music.

I couldn't sleep.

My idea of a good breakfast is 2 packages of Pop Tarts instead of my usual one.

I took 3 Advil.

I spent half an hour last night carefully selecting this morning's cd, *Ten*, and cranked "Even Flow" until I could feel it in my chest.

I didn't know if Jason's prep list was going to help, but I did know that nothing was going to improve my attitude.

I never wanted to be an R.A. I needed the money. Last year I had a work study job at the front desk in Dickinson Hall, but this year I didn't qualify. So here I was, stuck in Dickinson for another year *and* it'd been turned into an all-freshman dorm.

The thing is, I have no problem with rules. I like knowing what I can and can't do. And I'm uncomfortable when other people aren't doing what

they're supposed to do, so in this sense, it seemed like a good fit. But that was only part of the job, and as I learned in R.A. boot camp over the last week, the real emphasis is on 'getting to know your residents,' 'fostering good relationships' and 'being a support and resource.' And how was I expected to achieve this? "It's simple," explained a returning R.A., "just be friendly and outgoing."

I think I'm friendly *enough*, but outgoing is the last word someone would use to describe me. People make me nervous. In fact, being around people that I don't know is so uncomfortable, that I make up excuses to avoid it, or, if unavoidable, I'll leave as soon as is reasonable, which to me, is shortly after introductions.

I've never been a leader, nor have I wanted to be, and I squirm when I'm the center of attention, even as a kid at my Ronald McDonald birthday parties.

And now I was the one who'd have to take initiative?

I was dreading it.

And, kind of angry about it.

I opened the closet door and took one last look in the mirror; the crinkle was already forming between my eyes. *Shit.*

I slowly begin my decent down 4 flights of stairs to the lobby and I hear someone below, running up.

I lean over the metal rail. "What are you doing?"

"Hey!" Jason calls way too enthusiastically. "I forgot my clipboard in my last room."

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I stop on the stairwell and wait for him to pass me. “Maybe you should slow down...save your energy. You’re the one who said it’s gonna be hell.”

“Ha!” His pudgy cheeks are flushed. “I ate my Wheaties! Hope you did too!”

He smiles his school-boy smile as he goes by me and I return it with a scoff.

Resting my hand on the door to the front desk, I take a deep breath and brace myself for what’s on the other side. But as I push it open, I see Mrs. Ford, the security officer, sitting there, perfect posture, with a clipboard in her hand. “Name?” she asks. I watch as she checks off her list, hands them a welcome folder and sends them to the lounge to wait. The exchange is quick and efficient.

I should have expected nothing less. Mrs. Ford has been here for years, her face a hardened scowl from her time served. I’ve been told that she was nice when she was younger, but I can’t imagine a time that she didn’t look like this. She reminded me of my Principles of Geography professor last year. He looked miserable - sick of the students, disgusted with the system, just waiting it out for retirement. Rumor was that he graded papers by weight – he threw them up the stairs and the higher it went, the better the grade. In fact, one kid supposedly wrote ‘peanut butter and jelly sandwich’ in the text of one of his papers and got a ‘B.’

Except Mrs. Ford isn’t going to pass an ‘F’ paper. She continues to take her job very seriously and

everyone knows if you want to sneak something in, it'd have to be after 4pm, after Mrs. Ford left. She burned holes in our backpacks as we walked by and it wasn't uncommon for her to stop someone at 9am, to search their bag for alcohol.

In this sense, I was glad that she was working today.

And then she turned to me and shot me a dirty look, as if to say, 'Why are you just standing there?'

"Sorry." I step forward to check the clipboard for who's next. We'd spent hours organizing room keys into little brown packets, by alphabetical and numerical order, so I quickly find A31 and get out of Mrs. Ford's sight.

The double doors to the lounge are propped wide open - there must be 2 dozen people and the day just started. Several heads turn as I walk in and I try not to look more anxious than they do.

"Jonathan Burke," I call, weakly.

Nothing.

"Jona -"

"Jonathan Burke!" My Residence Director, Jean, booms.

I turn as she appears next to me. "Oh hi, thanks."

"You just have to speak up." She peers at me. "You're late."

Jean is large and pear-shaped with short brown feathered hair that I imagine is kept in place by Aqua Net. The industrial size can. She says things flat and pointed, I think partly to intimidate and partly because she's unhappy. Thankfully because I lived here last

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year, I know the way she is. But what she doesn't know about me yet is that 10 minutes late is basically on time. And staring at me or hovering over me or really using any kind of tone with me is not going to get me to hurry up. As my mom always says, 'I'll be late for my own funeral.'

Jack, as he corrects me, is very friendly and I'm grateful that my first resident doesn't require much from me - I half listened as he talked non-stop. And then he told me that he was a wrestler, and I looked at him a little too obviously as I sized him up. He couldn't be more than 5'5".

"Really?" I ask. "I loved wrestling. Jake "The Snake" Roberts and Randy "Macho Man" Savage. And of course, the man himself, Hulk Hogan."

That was when my brother and I could sneak it in. Naturally my mother didn't let us watch it - she thought it was too violent. The 3 Stooges was also 'garbage' TV - she said they weren't nice to each other and she worried that Keith and I would pick up some bad habits. Which, I guess wasn't a far reach to worry that we'd start slapping each other around.

"What?" Jack looks as if I've offended him. "That's not wrestling!"

"So, no pile drivers and body slams?" I ask, half-kidding.

"No! Real wrestling is actual technique. Take-downs and throws and grappling. There's actual skill involved."



“Oh.” I try to imagine Jack taking someone down, but I just can’t see it. But he’s so intense about it, I think he’d wrestle someone right now if he could. “Well, you got to have some talent to do that stuff. Come on, you gotta give ‘em some credit. That stuff’s got to hurt.”

“You’re right. Respect to them, man. They can get injured too. And get stuff like ringworm.”

I have no idea what that is, but it sounds gross, so I let him keep my pen.

It’d been non-stop for hours and all I wanted to do was disappear. I was exhausted from all the walking and back and forth, the forced conversations and on several occasions, having to endure commentary from angry parents. They waited too long, the room was too small, they want a different room, immediately. I imagine the painted gray brick walls set some people off - it does look institutional. But once you put up your cocktail recipe poster, right after your parents leave, you’re all set.

The extra package of Pop Tarts had done little for me. I was so hungry, I was getting cranky. But the next person is in my section, so I have to feign enthusiasm. And, walk back up 4 flights of stairs.

“So, you’re room’s right here, next to the bathroom and I’m actually on the other side of the bathroom. So we’re neighbors,” I say to Alexis as we reach the door.

“Oh.” She manages a thin smile.

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I know this really means ‘oh shit.’ And I don’t blame her - I wouldn’t want to live next to my R.A. either, especially as a freshman, just waiting to cut loose from my parents.

Alexis plops a large box on the floor and looks at the bunk beds.

“Oh, you don’t have to leave the beds like that. You can take ‘em down if you want,” I offer.

“Mom, you can just put my stuff on that one for now, I guess,” she says, pointing to the bottom bunk. “Shan and I will figure it out when she gets here.”

I don’t know how long they’ve been waiting, or how much stuff they’ve had to pack, but Alexis looks totally drained. Her brown hair is damp around her forehead and her ponytail’s falling out. Her whole vibe is negative, like she doesn’t want to be here, and she certainly doesn’t want to be bothered with me, so I quickly review the room condition sheet.

She scribbles her name without reading it. “Am I all set?”

“Yup, do you have any questions?”

“No,” she answers flatly, as in, *get the hell out of here.*

“Ok, well welcome to Dickinson. I’ll be right next door if you need anything.” I smile and thumb towards the wall. “Tell your roommate.”

Jason was right; the day had been crazy. I think I walked the building more in one day than I did in an entire semester. I must have moved-in 40 kids. Thankfully Jean ordered pizzas for us and now that I

was stuffed and exhausted, I expected to fall asleep the second I laid down. But it was the first chance I had to think about Erika.

Last night was the last time I'd see her for a couple days. We'd gone down to Stanley Park and walked far in, away from the streetlights. The moon lit the field just enough and the air was that early fall weather, warm enough that it still feels like summer but not so hot that we're sticking to each other. I just relaxed in her lap and watched the stars. It was perfect.

Well, *near* perfect.

The reason that we were hanging out in the middle of the park and the reason that she picked me up and dropped me off far from Dickinson, always tainted the happy little scene of us.

She wasn't gay.

Only with me.

Since February.

To her credit, she'd told me this from the beginning. The "gay lifestyle" wasn't for her and she planned on marrying a guy and having kids.

This meant she was super paranoid about people finding out about us, so we acted like friends in public and had to sneak away to be together. She'd tried so hard to hide it from our friends last year and of course, put the pressure on me to deny it too. And when it came out - because when two people are into each other, it's going to come out - she was mortified.

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As much as her way was in total conflict with mine - I was trying *not* to feel shame - I understood why she felt this way.

It did seem more like a lifestyle and less like a future. We didn't have any rights - we couldn't get married, have kids, or do joint anything; health insurance, tax returns. We weren't legally recognized as a family, so I didn't even think about that stuff. It wasn't an option.

I very much thought of the stigma, as did Erika. Being gay was a whisper, and not the good kind. It was 'there's something wrong with them' kind of whisper. The societal pressure felt like a force pushing me not to be who I was, always trying to stuff me back into the closet.

If it hadn't been for Lori Marcozzi and Jo, whom I'd met freshman year, who knows where I'd be.

They were like the gay council women and once it was determined that I was (more than likely) gay, my initiation began.

My required viewing included *Desert Hearts*, *Personal Best*, and *Torch Song Trilogy*, which prior to, I thought gay stuff only existed in porn. I was completely thrilled and embarrassed and uncomfortable, all at the same time.

I was immediately introduced to Melissa Etheridge and desperately wanted someone as the subject of "Like the Way I Do" and "Watching You."

And they'd told me about more successful women, that while not "out," were rumored to be gay - Jodie

Foster, Kelly McGillis, Queen Latifah and Ellen DeGeneres.

*Annd*, they took me to my first gay bar - a bar for just us! I'd never imagined seeing that many women dancing together and holding hands and kissing.

Of course I had shared all that I'd learned with Erika. I think it helped some - she certainly watched *Claire of the Moon* very intently and "Meet Me in the Back" became one of her favorite songs - but it wasn't going to change her course.

We were going to have to continue sneaking and lying and pretending, like last night.

And though I hated it, and I certainly wasn't doing myself any favors, the way that I felt about Erika - the way I felt with her last night - outweighed all of that. And most of the time, it didn't even feel like a choice. The pull to her was so strong, I couldn't stop if I wanted to.

I wasn't going to fall asleep, my mind was racing now about her and she hadn't called yet. It'd been our routine all week - we talk every night until one of us falls asleep. She usually does first and then her breathing puts me to sleep. This morning I woke up with the receiver in the bed. And starting my day knowing that's how my night ended, was better than anything Jason said to do.

The first few days after move-in, whenever I saw the girls that lived in the rooms surrounding mine, they'd smile small and lower their eyes. As if to say, 'please don't talk to me.' Which was fine with me - I

didn't want to talk to them either. But scurrying into their rooms and closing their doors made me feel kind of bad and even more, *pressured*. At next week's staff meeting, I'd have to report on how things are going in my section - 34 residents between 2 floors - so we couldn't avoid each other forever.

However, today was not the day that I was going to take initiative; instead I'd avoid the whole thing by leaving the building and going over to Courtney Hall to see Leah Moon and Leah Rousseau.

We'd been friends since freshman year, Leah Moon being my freshman year roommate. We hadn't started out that way and in fact, given its awkward, forced beginning, we're lucky that we became such good friends and didn't kill each other.

Originally, I was 1 of 3 people in what was really a 2-person room. Gail, the RD, had assured us that someone would be able to move in a few weeks and when that opportunity came, I volunteered. While Michelle and Jen were nice enough, I couldn't imagine spending a year with either one. There were only 2 rooms open - a 4-person on the 3rd floor and a 2-person just a few doors down from where I already was. So, I walked to the end of the hall, anxious to check out who lived there.

The door opened slowly and my eyes lowered to about 5'2".

"Hiii?" Her bright blue eyes looked at me, suspiciously.

"Oh, hi, I'm Karen, Gail told me that I could come look at your room, you're supposed to be getting a

roommate and right now I'm down the hall from you and I'm in a triple, so I thought I could just check it out, but I don't know, is that ok?" I said in one long breath. "Are you busy? I can come back."

"No, it's not a problem. Gail told me I'd be getting someone. I just didn't know who. They already moved in a bed and a desk." Leah opened the door wider and motioned her head toward the new furniture.

I stared blankly into the tiny space.

After a long pause, Leah raised her eyebrows. "So... do you want to come in?"

I reluctantly stepped in to what was clearly a single room being re-named a double because of the space shortage. The width of the room is measured by her desk and two small night stands against the window, separating the beds. I didn't really know sizes and measurements, but I knew one of our carpets at home was 10x12 and I doubted it was much larger than that. I couldn't imagine two people living in here.

I looked at the walls, covered in Absolut bottle ads and pictures of Calvin Klein men with no shirts.

"Soooo?" Leah asked.

"Um, yeah...I don't know. I guess I'll have to think about it."

Because right then all I can think about is the tight space and how could I possibly manage living on top of someone like this?

She had a funny look on her face, like I was being weird.

"Um, ok. So..." She followed my gaze to her side of the room. Her bed isn't made, clothes are piled on

top and things are thrown on the floor, including a curling iron with a bright red ‘on’ light that’s making me nervous. “Yeah,” she sighed, “I gotta pick that stuff up.”

She is so casual, I know she has no intention.

I’d left completely deflated – it was that disorganized closet-of-a-room or a 4-person, which meant 3 other personalities to manage. I could barely even deal with myself, so trying to get along with 3 other people seemed like a lot more adjusting than I could handle. After 2 days of deliberation, I decided Leah seemed cool enough and definitely more like me than Michelle and Jen.

But on my first day of unpacking, as she was headed out the door with one of her friends, she turned to me and said, “Whatever you do, don’t go through my underwear drawer.”

Despite spending the 1st half of the semester worrying about that drawer, things went ok with us. We moved through the early friendship awkwardness pretty quickly and found that conversation came easy. We both enjoyed in depth discussions and picking apart trivial things. Why you should toast bread on medium vs light could be a 10-minute debate. We had similar taste in music, we smoked cigarettes and weed and we drank. We were also opposites in many ways, most notably, Leah had one speed. There was no rushing, no sense of urgency for her. She seemed to kind of saunter wherever she went and it didn’t matter if she was late for something; there was no picking up the pace. This also translated into an inability to get



up in the morning; she would snooze her alarm for an hour. I would lay there, way ahead of the time that I needed to get up, and just yell, “Turn it off!” There would be a light moan, then a pause, and then... ‘smack!’ Snooze again. Naturally this resulted in me turning off the alarm one day – the same day that we both had an English exam. Leah never made it and I never heard the end of it.

“So what do you think I should do?” I ask Leah Moon. “You know I suck at getting to know people. I hate it.”

“Don’t worry about it. No one wants to talk to their RA anyway. Which means you can just stay in your room and be all introverted and depressed and no one’s gonna notice. Sounds like a win-win for everyone!” she laughs.

“But, these are freshmen. Remember us as freshmen? We didn’t know what the hell we were doing. Being away from home for the first time and trying to figure out the whole college thing. We were lost and overwhelmed and - ”

“Yeah, maybe you! I didn’t want to see my R.A. then and I don’t want to see ‘em now. I know you like to think the worst, but the most you’ll probably have to do is write people up. And I know you’re dying to do that!”

“Whatever, that’s not true!”

“Oh yes, it is - you love rules, Karen Bacon! Which is funny since you break them. What are you

gonna do now that you can't smoke pot in your room?"

"I'm coming to yours."

"Yeah right!" she laughs. "Now that you're an R.A., you're even more uptight and paranoid. You'll never do that! And even if you do, you'll drive us crazy, being all worried that you're gonna get caught. Nope, you're not smoking in my room. You can go to Megan's!"

For the first few weeks, it seemed Leah was right. Nobody was really trying to talk to me and I'd have to remind myself that I was supposed to be trying to talk to them. So I started with my immediate neighbors, Kate and Terry, to the right of me, because they always smiled and said 'hi' without immediately looking to the floor. They both were in the teaching program and wanted to work with children, not high schoolers. I took this to mean that they must think teenagers are difficult, so maybe they won't be difficult. Terry also played soccer, so that gave us a little to talk about. Little because I only lasted 2 years - I hated all that running. I also didn't like to head or chest the ball, so I figured that meant I wouldn't play much. But Coach Martin thought I had 'natural athletic ability' and seemed to hope that the more I played, the more I'd like it. She also didn't have a strong bench, which decreased my chances of sitting on it.

Because Terry and Kate seemed pretty serious and studious, I felt like they probably didn't mind much

living next to their R.A. Which I could not say for my neighbors on the other side of the bathroom. Alexis and Shannon hadn't been particularly friendly the day that I'd signed them in, but at the time I didn't put too much into it - moving day sucks. But since then I've hardly seen them and on the few occasions that I've had to knock on their door, they've been short with me. It's always the same request: 'can you please turn down your music?' And they always close the door practically in my face before I leave, always with the same *are you kidding me?* expression.

They're rude and I'm glad I don't see them often.

However, lately I purposefully go by their room, on my way to Katherine's, another R.A., to see if their door is open. It's been closed literally every time, so now it's become a thing, to see inside their room. I'm sure something must be going on in there - people usually leave their doors open, if not for the simple fact that it helps make their room feel less small, but also to let people know that they're around to hang out. I don't think they're smoking weed - I would have smelled that by now. Although I did see Alexis in the bathroom last week filling up a tall vase which I doubt was for flowers. Maybe they're just drinking all the time, which wouldn't be the worst thing, or surprising.

Today I've walked by at least a half dozen times, because I'm on duty, and there has been no movement. But I know they're home because "Tom's Diner" is blaring, again. I have to listen to this nearly every day. Shannon even takes her boom box to the

bathroom and plays it while she takes a shower. I pause at their door, contemplating to ask them to turn it down, and I notice the 'is' on Alexis has been scratched out. I'm just surprised they didn't rip off the entire door tag. In fact, everyone still has them up. It's probably like when you get a card from someone and you're not sure how long you have to keep it before you can throw it away.

My first real test came when Jean informed us that several dozen room inspection sheets had been lost and we needed to get them signed again. I thought it was silly given that we were 3 weeks into the semester; therefore, unlikely to find the rooms in the same pristine condition as when they moved in. But we needed a signed form on file, so I was given 8 rooms to visit, 3 of which are in my section. And of course, I cringed when I saw Alex and Shannon on the list. I instantly opened my mouth to ask Katherine to switch with me but caught myself before I sounded ridiculous - they are my residents. *And*, now I'd get to see what's going on in that room. They'd have to let me in so that they could sign it, right?

I waited until later that night, when I heard music, and then stood outside for a minute and listened for two voices. I didn't want to have to come back.

"They're home!" A voice from behind me calls.

Courtney is sitting cross-legged on her floor, smoking a cigarette. She looks at the paper in my hand. "What's going on?"

“Oh, I just have to have them sign a new room condition sheet - we lost a bunch of them.”

“Oh, why don’t you come smoke a butt with me? You smoke, right? I saw you smoking outside.” She sounds bouncy and friendly and has an eager look, like a child that wants to play.

“Yeah, I do, thanks, but I gotta get this stuff done. Maybe later, if you’re around?”

“Yeah!” she smiles big. “Stop by anytime!”

I don’t imagine this is the kind of activity that Jean has in mind, but I think it’s a great way to get to know my residents. There’s something about smoking a cigarette that makes conversation easier. A sort of bonding that happens. I make a mental note to take Courtney up on her offer as I knock hard to compensate for the loud music. The music stops, a few footsteps and then the door swings wide open.

Alex’s face quickly goes from disappointment to concern.

“Oh, hi KAREN,” she says loudly for Shannon.

“Hi. So, you prefer Alex, right?” I point to the scratched-out name.

“Oh yeah. Sorry.”

“No, I’m just surprised they’re still up.”

“We love the peace signs, Karen!” Courtney yells from her room.

“So what’s up?” Alex asks.

“We lost a bunch of room condition sheets and I just need you to sign another one,” I say, stepping forward. “Is that ok, do you have a minute?”

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I can see her trying to think of a reason to say ‘no,’ but instead welcomes me in. “Sure, no problem.”

Their room, like mine, has a short hallway before it opens up into the room itself. About 4 paces in and I stop short - straight ahead of me is the window sill, overcrowded with empty liquor bottles - Absolut, Smirnoff, Bacardi, Peachtree, Rumble Minze. There had to be at least 15. When did they have time to drink all this?

My eyes then follow a string of Budweiser bottle lights around the perimeter, seeming to frame the beer bottle caps stuck in the ceiling. And then my eyes land on a power strip, also illegal, with every outlet occupied and cords seemingly knotted. The beds are still bunked, I’m assuming to make room for the table that’s been missing from the resident lounge. By the looks of things, they must need the extra space to play Quarters or something.

I can feel the horror on my face. Their room is one giant violation.

Shannon looks nervously at Alex and then quickly steps a little closer to me, as if to say, ‘enough, don’t come any further.’ She probably thinks I want to find more things wrong when in fact I wish that I never saw any of this. Despite R.A. camp’s efforts to prepare us for drunk residents and various scenarios, I couldn’t get past how stupid the role plays were to actually consider how I’d handle one of those situations for real. This probably should have been an easy one - just write them up. But I was so caught off

guard by what I saw, and how unprepared I was, that I put the paperwork on desk.

“I just need you guys to sign this again because we lost it,” I say hurriedly, keeping my eyes down.

They scribble quickly and then look at me anxiously, waiting for their write-up. Shannon even glanced at the lounge table, as if she expected I was just going to throw it over my shoulder. But instead I pick up the papers and go straight to my room to figure out what to do.

I totally choked - how could I!? There were tons of things wrong, right in front of me, and I didn't even address one. They're probably celebrating right now with whatever is stashed in their closet, thinking I'm a pushover. I'm so mad at myself for failing on the spot that I decide to go to Megan's. If anyone can make me feel better about this, it's her.

Megan had an off-campus apartment with Kelly, Stevie and Erika. Some of us had been friends since freshman year and Megan was actually the first friend that I made - we met at orientation. She was staying a few rooms down from me and when I saw her smoking outside that first day, I was relieved. Another smoker meant a way to start a conversation, which, in this situation, I had no other idea how to begin.

I found her in the hallway after lunch. “Hey, I saw you smoking earlier, wanna go smoke a butt? I'm Karen.”

“Yeah, I'm Megan. Do you have any on you? Or we can just stop by my room on the way out. What do you smoke? I've got Marlboro Lights.”

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“Cool, that’s what I smoke.”

Megan was about 5’3” with Irish red hair and small, clear blue eyes. Her face looked relaxed, like she didn’t have a care in the world, and this softness made her feel approachable. Once we got outside, anxiety poured out of me.

“I don’t know how you feel, but I hate this,” I confessed. “I don’t want to be here, I don’t know anyone and I hate ‘getting to know you games.’ I’m wicked uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, it sucks. I don’t wanna do this eitha, but whateva. It’ll be over in 2 days.”

I smirked. “Are you from Boston?”

“Ahlington. But I live in Wobin now.”

I have no idea where either of those places are and I’m not even 100% sure what she said, so I just assign her ‘Boston.’

“What about you?” She nodded to me.

“Upton.”

She shook her head for clarification.

“It’s near Worcester,” I said.

“Oh, ok. Well listen, we can hang around, if ya want. We’ll just make the best of it. It’ll be fine.”

She had thrown me a life preserver that day.

Their apartment was about a 10-minute drive from campus, on a main street, on the way out of the city. They lived on the 2nd floor, above a paintball store. The building itself was a bit run down, the white paint peeling off the siding. Next to them was a small Italian restaurant that didn’t seem to get much



business, probably because of its location. The door to their place is around the back, in the dirt parking lot. I never bother knocking - it's always unlocked - but instead just announce myself as I open the door.

Kelly and Megan are sitting at the kitchen table, Megan's shoulders are shaking as she's rolling forward, gasping for air. She's in the middle of one of her stories which immediately makes me smile - I love her full-body laugh.

"What's up, Karen?" She manages to ask.

"Nothing, I just caught Alex and Shannon with contraband. You know, the ones next to me that I've been complaining about."

"Contraband." Kelly says and gestures air quotes. "What'd they have, a beer?" Her voice is gravelly from smoking Newport's.

"No," I chuckle, "it's worse than that. Everything in their room is illegal."

As I'm telling the story, Kelly gets up to make a toasted grilled cheese sandwich. She's usually too lazy or too high to make an actual grilled cheese, so she just throws it together and sticks it in the toaster. In fact, most of what she cooks requires little effort: Mac & Cheese, heating up Dinty Moore or Spaghettios, boiling water for hot dogs which are then cut up and thrown into Spaghettios. She hits the cd player on the counter, next to the toaster. "Nuthin' But A 'G' Thang."

"Nice," I nod my head at the song.

"Yeah, let's smoke a bowl," Megan says as she leans forward to grab it. "I know you're upset about it,

Karen, but you're being too hard on yourself. So what that you didn't say anything? And who cares if they have that shit in their room. We all did. It's what you do - have shit in your room that you're not supposed to have."

"Yeah, you know I don't *really* care about it, but because I'm an R.A. now, I feel like I'm supposed to. Thank God I was alone - if Katherine or Jason had been with me, I would have been even more on the spot. They take this like wicked seriously. I dunno, I just don't know what to do now."

I wait as Megan takes her hit, her face scrunched.

"Just pretend it didn't happen." She says as she blows it out.

I know she's probably right. To go back and write them up after that fact wouldn't make sense. And I couldn't tell the R.A.'s about it. Except maybe Tim. I have the feeling he may be up to his own shenanigans. The best thing at this point was to ignore it and resolve that if I find myself in that position again, I'll do something about it. I'm not sure what, but something.

"Yeah I guess. And it's not as serious as my other problem. Listen to this one."

I proceed to tell them about Emily, a girl from my hometown who I hardly knew because she was two years behind me. As luck would have it, she was placed in Dickinson and immediately latched on to me when she saw I lived here too. Emily, as I found out rather quickly, had a lot of anxiety about being away from home for the first time. It started with her seeing

me at the front desk, or while doing rounds on duty, and she would start some small talk. Completely fine - I understood how relieving it could be to see a familiar face and I thought it was kind of nice that I could be that person for her. It wasn't long though before she'd stop by the front desk and ask me to come by her room, because she needed to talk. And then she told me what was really going on. She felt completely overwhelmed by how to do any of this. How to meet people, how to socialize, how to structure her day, how to discipline herself to get up for class and not skip. She confessed that sometimes she skipped meals because her roommate didn't wait for her to go to the cafe and she felt stupid walking in alone. She even showed up at my door at 8am on two occasions, saying she didn't think she could go to classes that day because it was too much. My heart broke for her. But I also didn't know what to tell her. It'd get better? That seemed insufficient. What was going on with her appeared excessive, and that's coming from someone who had freshman adjustment issues and current social anxiety.

“So,” I conclude, “I told her that I thought what was going on with her needed someone more experienced than me and she should go to the counseling center.”

“Yeah, Karen, that's a lot to take on. It sounds like she needs professional help,” Megan said.

“Yeah, she needs to get some other support besides me. I mean, I'm only 20 - I don't know what to say, ya know? I feel really bad for her though.”

*A Song for Everything*

“Remember you at orientation?” Megan smirks.

As she’s about to recall an embarrassing story, the door kicks open. It’s Stevie, holding several bags of groceries. My body deflated - I really wanted it to be Erika. I hadn’t seen her for a couple days and planned on waiting here until she got home.

“HI!” Stevie booms as she puts the bags on the floor and turns back to the stairs.

“Do you need any help?” Megan and I yell after her.

But she’s gone before she can hear the question and even if she did, she’d say no. Stevie’s a work horse and pretty much runs the house. She’s the one who keeps it picked up and organized, and not because anyone asks her to, but because she just does. It’s like it’s not even work for her - it’s just who she is, which probably has to do with her upbringing. She’s from a blue-collar hill town, where everybody knows everybody and nobody really leaves. Lots of drinking and drugs and problems; her parents included. She had an incredible amount of responsibility as a teenager, often responsible for her younger brother and sister and as a result, she’s tough, resilient and fiercely loyal. Her dark brown eyes have a seriousness to them that lets you know she’s been through some shit and caution you not to fuck with her. And who would – she was a naturally big girl and if she hit you, you were going down. When Stevie was around, you were safe, and Leah in particular took advantage of this. She liked to push people’s buttons, especially when she had a couple drinks, and wouldn’t

hesitate testing just how far she could push it, solely because Stevie was there.

Stevie drops the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of bags by the fridge, pulls out a cigarette from her purse and plops down. “Ok, so I got Doritos, Cheetos, chips, pizza, stuff for tuna noodle salad and meatball subs. And I’m gonna make a chocolate cake with white frosting. It’s my brother’s favorite.” She looks at me. “You comin’, Bacon?”

Her brother Brandon and his friend enlisted in the Army and were leaving for boot camp in two weeks, so Stevie was throwing them a party.

“No, I would, but I’m on duty.”

“Whatever!” Kelly digs. “You wouldn’t go even if you weren’t working! Stevie, what are we havin’, like 10 people? That’s way too much for Karen!”

She’s right. I like small groups and pretty much require knowing everyone that’s there. Even just 1 person that I don’t know, and I could be totally thrown off and clam up. I’m not sure where this comes from. My mother says I’ve been like this since I was a kid. When my friends had sleepovers, I didn’t want to go and when I did, I would often call them to come get me. Or if I did make it through the night, I’d hardly sleep because I was so upset about being there. My mother tells me when I was really little, I would cling to her when we were in public places. So it’s no coincidence that now if I decide to go to a party or a bar, it’s under the pretense that I’ll have an anchor. And Megan is always the first one to offer. Usually I just have to give her a look and she’ll say, ‘I’ll stay

with ya, Karen.’ She understands it’s a real thing for me and when she says that she won’t leave me standing there, alone, for any length of time, I know she means it. Kelly and Leah Moon; however, would not be reliable choices, especially when they’re drinking. I learned that the hard way sophomore year when I agreed to go to an off-campus party with them. They had good intentions, but it is a party, so who can blame them for wanting to socialize. Some guy ended up talking to me most of the night, who may or may not have been trying to take me back to his room. It was absolutely painful.

When Erika arrived, she was greeted by a kitchen full of smoke and the 4 of us singing “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.”

“Well, well, don’t you guys look fucked up,” she smiles.

“Wanna hit?” Megan holds out the joint.

Erika takes it from her and sits down. “What have you guys been up to? Besides getting high.”

Stevie tells her about the party Saturday and Erika’s face drops. “Nice of you to ask me.”

“Sorry Erika. We didn’t think it was a big deal,” Kelly responds with just enough sarcasm that we all know she really means ‘screw you.’

“No, but I mean, I live here too.”

I brace myself for what I know is coming next.

“So what, every time we wanna have people over, we have to ask you?” Kelly scoffs.

“No. No, it’s not that.” Erika lightly blushes as she smartly retreats. “I just...I just want to be included in things.”

We look at Kelly to see if she’s going to pursue.

“I’m gonna make popcorn,” Megan cuts in before it goes any further. “Anyone want some?”

We’ve dodged one, for now, because the reality is, I think it’s going to be a delicate dance all year. I’m not even sure how Erika came to live with these guys. I mean, we’re all friends, but Kelly, Megan and Stevie are similar - they’re laid back, go-with-the-flow kind of people that don’t take things too seriously. But Erika, while like that sometimes, can also be uptight, defensive and insecure and as a result, abrasive. And she doesn’t have the awareness of how she can come across, how she can rub people the wrong way. Like how she can get on Kelly’s nerves. Stevie doesn’t put up with her shit though and will put Erika in her place. While Megan, on the other hand, understands Erika and always cuts her some slack, which I think is a good thing - she’ll need someone on her side if she’s going to survive in this house.

Saturday night at Dickinson was long and uneventful, with the exception of a drunk girl doing cartwheels down the hall. She was having so much fun, she didn’t seem to care that Rob, the other R.A., and I were walking toward her. She did a cartwheel, smiled as she looked at us and took a sip of her beer, then continued with her cartwheels.

“Impressive,” I said, as we walked by and I picked up the can.

“Hey! That’s mine! Can I have that back?” She followed us to the end of the hall before she gave up. I considered writing her up, and probably should have, but I thought she was funny.

The next morning I called the apartment around 11am, to hear about the party, but whoever answered the phone - the voice was so low, I’m not sure who it was - said they were hung over. So now that it was almost 5pm, I figured they must be in better shape? However, I open the door to darkness and see only 1 body in the living room. Stevie’s on the couch, curled up in a blanket, the glow from the TV lighting her face. “Hey.” She sounds weak.

I sit at the end and look at Kelly and Megan’s door, just past her head. It’s still closed. “What’s up my friend? You still hurtin’?”

“Yeah, we had a great time. My brother got so fucken wasted. He and Paul just left a couple hours ago. They’re probably still drunk.”

Stevie’s probably still drunk. She looks totally zoned out at the TV. Though I am totally tuned it – Janet Jackson’s “Love Will Never Do (Without You)” video is on. Only a few short years between this and the “Nasty” video but a *major* departure from the black suits with the shoulder pads (though, I don’t care, she rocked those things).

“How long those guys been sleeping?”

“Knock on the door,” she suggests.



I tap lightly and hear Kelly mumble something, then Megan say, “Who in God’s name is that?”

“It’s Bacon. Get up!”

A minute later they’re out in sweatpants and sweatshirts, Kelly with the hood over her head, and we automatically shuffle to the kitchen, where there’s more room.

I pull out my cigarettes. “So, tell me about last night.”

There’s a look on Megan’s face that unsettles me, enough so that after they tell a couple stories, I return to it. “Why’d you look like that when I asked you about last night?”

“Huh? Whatdaya mean?”

“You know. You had a funny look on your face.”

I roll over Stevie and Kelly who also look uncomfortable now.

“What’s up? Did something happen?”

Stevie looks at me square, her eyes both soft and serious. “You should ask Erika.”

I feel the color drain from my face. “What do you mean, I should ask Erika?”

That was the next natural question, but I already knew the answer.

“Who?” I ask sharply.

“My brother’s friend, Paul.” Stevie answers flatly.

I immediately look to Megan, who says she’s sorry, and then stare at the center of the table, my mouth open. “What the fuck happened?”

Stevie looks at me, regretfully. “I think you need to talk to her.”

I know they don't want to get in the middle, and I hate to put them there, but *she* put them there.

"Really? Are you serious?" I scan the 3 of them, pressing them with my eyes. "That fucking sucks. I mean, if Megan hadn't made that face, were you even going to tell me?"

The question hangs for a moment before I wave it off. "Forget it – don't even answer that. It's just gonna piss me off more."

"Karen, I don't even know what to say. I know you're wicked upset right now and I feel awful. But, I...I just think you need to talk to Erika," Megan says.

"Fine, I'm not leaving then. I'm waiting here until she gets home, ok?"

"Yeah," everyone responds.

Erika's been at her parent's house all day – they only live about 20 minutes away, so I expect she won't be too late. Unfortunately, now everyone's night is ruined. I'm aggravated with them and they know it. They feel like they're walking on eggshells, and they are. And now there's the anticipation of a big fight, which in an apartment this small, will be very uncomfortable. The room was just one big fuse, waiting to be lit by a single wrong word.

Kelly stood up and grabbed her Newport's. "I'm going back to bed."

Stevie got up too but went to the fridge and grabbed a Mich Light. "Want me to make you guys some Captain 'n Cokes?" She asked over her shoulder.

In the moment, it was the best idea to take the edge off. And it did - it was an angry, screw-you drink.

Naturally, by the 2nd drink, I was crying.

“She doesn’t deserve you, Karen. She’s not nice to you. And I don’t mean just because of this. I mean she’s just really not nice to you,” Stevie says pointedly.

“I know she’s your first, but you’ll meet someone else that’ll treat you good and when you do, you’ll wonda what you were eva doing with her.” Megan takes a drag of her cigarette. “You know, I think she really cares about you, Karen, and she doesn’t mean to hurt you. I just think she doesn’t know what she’s doing as far as the whole gay thing goes.”

“I agree,” Stevie nods, “but I also think she’s selfish and not thinking about how it affects Karen.”

This is not the first time these things have been said to me, and while some of it may be true, I’m too upset to hear it.

We hear the 1<sup>st</sup> floor door open and my eyes dart to the clock: 10:41pm. Maybe this is on purpose, hoping everyone’s in bed so that she wouldn’t have to face them. Maybe it means she feels like a piece of shit. But my expectation of a guilt-ridden Erika was smashed when she opened the door.

“Hey!” she says with happy surprise, “I didn’t know you were going to be here!”

*Oh. My. God.* She’s not going to tell me. She’s actually going to try to slide this one past. There is no sign of worry or regret or shame on her face - she’s

looking at me, completely normal, like she has nothing to hide.

Megan and Stevie say ‘hi’ and I just wait. Wait for the disgust on my face to register with her.

She asks us what we’re up to, as she proceeds toward me and then stops abruptly, like she’s hit a wall. Now she gets it - I’m still not smiling. She looks at Stevie and then to Megan and her eyes turn panicky, which is their cue to get up.

“We’re gonna go to bed. Karen, feel free to make another drink or do whatever,” Megan says as she passes me and gives me a pained look.

I don’t even wait for their doors to shut. “What did you do!?”

“Nothing,” she says defensively.

“Bullshit! Let me make it a little clearer for you. What did you do with PAUL!?”

She just stares at me, which means she’s trying to figure a way out of this.

“Don’t just stand there and try to think up a lie. I already know. The girls told me something happened. And don’t blame them. *You* put them in this position.”

Now her face is guilty because she knows she’s against a wall.

“I made a mistake,” she says low.

“A MISTAKE!?”

“Can you please stop yelling?”

“Oh why? Because now you’re worried about your roommates. You didn’t seem too concerned about them last night or give a shit about me!”

She lowers her shoulders and tips her head down. “I made a big mistake. I was really drunk and I don’t know...I don’t know...he kissed me and I didn’t stop him.”

I would have leapt at her if I hadn’t felt so nauseous.

“Is that it? Because I know you, Erika.”

I wait, leave room for her to say something.

And the fact that she doesn’t makes me snap even harder. “So you’re telling me you didn’t sleep with him?”

“No, we kissed and that was it. I swear I’m telling you the truth. I don’t even know why I did it. I hate myself right now.”

“Sure didn’t look like you hated yourself when you walked in. In fact, it looked like you didn’t have a care in the world. You weren’t gonna tell me, just like Janet. I only know because you got bagged.”

She bravely takes a step closer to the table. “Can we go to the living room?”

I’m sure because it’s dark and the kitchen lights are like an interrogation room.

I stare at her in disgust for a long moment before standing up and then once in the room, I wait for her to sit down so that I can take my place just out of reach. Because within my rage, there still lies an undeniable pull towards her.

“Karen, I’m so sorry - ”

“You know what,” I hold up my hand to cut her off while simultaneously hoping she’ll grab it. “I

seriously can't believe you'd do this after this summer."

We'd put each other through hell.

June we started off together, but a very shaky together. A few weeks before we'd left school, I'd found out at Lori and Jo's 70-degree party that she'd cheated on me with our friend Janet. And found out by pure luck - Janet's girlfriend, Beth, whom Janet had also cheated on - happened to be there and told me. Things were tense from the 'Janet thing' but she was trying to prove that she wanted to be with me. We'd talk on the phone a lot and she borrowed her mom's car a couple times to come visit. We had agreed that it was better for her to stay at my house. She was too worried that her parents would suspect something, I guess from the way that we acted with each other. And honestly, I'll always opt for being in my own, familiar space.

My parents' house has a large, mostly-finished basement which we referred to as 'down basement.' I don't know why, but this is what my family calls it. The beams in the ceiling are exposed, but the walls are sheet rocked and wallpapered light gray with Colonial period pictures in muted olives and beiges and reds - a Colonial house, an eagle holding a ribbon, a barber shop looking light post, a sailboat in a bottle, a butter churn. The long halogen light that hangs above slightly buzzes, which surprisingly, has never bothered me. A big Zenith console TV sits on the floor, across from a well-worn couch and rocking

chair. To the right of them, a cast iron wood stove where we've laid our wet snowsuits and boots for as long as I can remember. And then behind the couch, as odd as it may seem, a full-size bed. My parents have friends in Oklahoma - my mother's childhood friend and her husband - that come every fall for a week or two, so it was there to accommodate them. But now that my brother and I are in college, our friends benefit from it just as much.

And it was assumed that Erika would benefit. Of course there was no way that we weren't sleeping together, so I told my parents that she was uncomfortable staying in the basement, that far away from everyone in the house. She needed to sleep in my room, on the floor, obviously. I could tell by my mother's face that she knew something was up and when she questioned why I couldn't stay in the basement with Erika, on the couch, I simply told her that I didn't like sleeping down there. At least she knew that much was true. I'd choose sweating upstairs in my room, with my little window fan, then sleeping in the cool basement.

Plus, if we did sleep in the basement, there was a solid chance that we wouldn't hear someone come down and we'd be caught in bed together. At least my room had a lock on it and while it was ballsy to be doing what we were doing only 10 feet away from my parents, it still seemed to be the safer option.

But the sleeping arrangements turned out to be a short-term issue. We were broken up by the 2nd week of July. It seemed like every time we talked, we ended

up in an argument. And I knew why: I didn't trust her. "Janet" was always there and because of this, I was constantly analyzing and weighing things she said, or didn't say. Of course physical distance and not seeing each other much added stress, not only because I missed her, but because it related back to our first issue - if I didn't see her, I didn't know what she was doing. And then there was the glaring problem that we communicated differently. I was expressive and affectionate; Erika was cool and reserved. The way she was didn't jive with how I thought people were supposed to be in a relationship. To me, if you liked someone, you acted like it. So when she didn't express herself like the way I thought she should, it confused me and made me feel insecure. And when I'd try to explain why I felt the way I did, she'd get frustrated and defensive. It seemed that we couldn't even work on working it out without some miscommunication.

In spite of all of this, I was surprised when Erika said we needed to break up, mostly because she was so reassuring in May. But she was sick of the fighting and my neediness – my neediness!?! - and took no responsibility for her role in our problems. I was so angry that my friend Courtney drove me the next day in the pouring rain to get my stuff: 2 t-shirts and a pair of sweatpants. Erika conveniently wasn't there and when her mother handed me a brown paper bag with a curious look, I didn't even try to hide the hurt on my face. I didn't care what Mrs. Chesnik thought; I was done acting like Erika was just my best friend.



But mostly I was devastated. I was completely in love with her and couldn't imagine not being with her. My entire world changed the day she kissed me and I had no idea what that meant without her. I was pretty sure that it still meant that I was gay, but it seemed unimaginable that I'd find someone else to be gay with. I sort of fell into a mini-depression, moping around the house, disinterested in doing anything fun with the rest of my summer.

At least I was preoccupied during the day - my dad got me a job at his company as an office assistant, mostly doing filing, copying and collating. The ride in was usually quiet because I was tired and trying to wake up. And then Naughty by Nature's "Hip Hop Hooray" would come on the radio and we'd sing the chorus together and it'd make me laugh to hear him say, "Hey ho, Hey ho."

I'd generally be ok once at work, but then at some point in the afternoon, nearly every day, the easy listening station that was softly broadcast over the intercom system, played Tina Turner's "I Don't Wanna Fight." And I would stop whatever I was doing and listen. And then I'd be in a mood for the rest of the day. If the song happened to come on in the morning too, I was pretty much screwed.

So then the ride home was quiet because I was upset, and my dad knew it. Sometimes he'd ask by saying, "I hate to see you down." That was his way of inviting me to talk about it. But I would simply tell him I was fine.

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Once we got home I'd go down basement and rock in the chair and listen to what I referred to as my lesbian mix-tape of torture, mostly comprised of Melissa songs, but also included were Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game," Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You," Gloria Estefan's "Here We Are" and my 'screw you' song, "You're So Vain" by Carly Simon.

Then 2 weeks before going back to school, my family was having dinner on the porch and I'd just taken a bite of steak smothered in A1 Sauce when my brother said that someone's here. I leaned left to see through the garage door window and almost choked. It was Erika. She was already turning the knob, her eyes fixed on me, radiant from her tanned skin.

"Hi, sorry to interrupt your dinner. Karen, can I talk to you for a minute?"

She looked confident, but I heard the slight shake in her voice. And I felt my face instantly flush. I grabbed the glass of milk to try to smooth the lump in my throat and sat there, stuck in my chair, for what felt like minutes, with my parents staring at me, looking annoyed and confused. When I stood up, all I could manage to say was "yeah" and motioned for her to follow as I walked past.

"I have Rudy in the car, waiting. We're on our way back from the Cape. I just stopped to get my pillow," she said matter-of-factly the second we crossed into the den.

I had kept the soft, squishy feather pillow with the silk cover because it was awesome. And it was hers. My head screamed 'No!' but instead I stepped

forward to leave the room and get it. And then she gently grabbed my arm. "Wait a minute," she said low.

I leaned back on the desk, glad it was there to support me because I felt sick. She looked at me, melancholy, which made me uncomfortable. "What?" I asked, sharply.

"I hate this. It's been really hard you know."

I felt my eyes start to tear and my throat so tight, I thought the steak might still be stuck. But I didn't bite. Then she added "I miss you" and the words shattered any bit of progress I'd made over the last month. Still I wanted to conceal just how happy I was to hear that.

"You too," I said flatly.

I waited for her to make the next move and when it took too long, I went for the door again.

"No, no. Just wait a minute."

She'd closed the distance between us and now she was too close. Everything I was trying to accomplish, instantly forgotten, and the only thought I had - that I was trying to fight - was how badly I wanted to kiss her.

"I want to talk, but I've got Rudy in the car. How about this. Keep the pillow for now. I'll drive him home and then come back."

"So you're going to drive all the way home and then turn around and drive right back?"

The intention in her eyes weakened me even more.

"Yes. Unless you don't want me to."

I couldn't believe it. Was I actually getting my Judith McNaught moment? Her books were my frame

of reference for romance and I'd fantasized that someone would declare their love for me through some chivalrous act. And Erika driving all that way was comparable to riding for a fortnight.

For the next few hours I drove myself crazy with possible scenarios, most of them ending poorly. I couldn't imagine anything good was going to come from this, but I desperately hoped I was wrong. I tried to distract myself by watching *Benny & Joon* but I just kept wanting it to be *Fried Green Tomatoes* - I didn't want to think of Mary Stuart Masterson as anyone other than Iggy.

She was back just after 10pm and thankfully my parents were already in bed. We went straight down basement and when she took a seat right up against me on the couch, I knew where it was headed.

Now, sitting here, I find it revealing, the way the moonlight sort of divides her face – half in the dark, half in the light. Exactly how she is: so loving and reassuring in one moment, and then hurtful the other.

“You know, it was you who said you wanted to try this again. You came after me, remember, when you came to my house for your pillow? That was 6 weeks ago. And now... you're... *don't cry*...you're...*oh God, please don't cry*... kissing some guy.”

Erika reaches for me and I let her pull me into her arm, tears bursting. “I'm so sorry. I know. I'm so sorry. I don't want to hurt you.”

We stayed like that for a long time, I think both hoping the silence would offer some comfort. But after a while, the lull also seemed to cause memory loss.

“Will you stay over?” She asks.

I spring up from her. “Are you crazy?”

I walk over to the table, grab my keys and cigarettes and then hesitate, making sure she sees it. I want her to beg me to stay just so I can say ‘no.’

But when she came up behind me and touched my shoulders, I crumbled. Despite everything, I still wanted to be with her and she knew it.

When I left the next day, it was understood that we were still together but ‘working on it.’ I knew it was a ridiculous notion, that someone was going to work on being faithful, but I just wasn’t ready to let go. When I told Megan about our talk, she put it plainly. “You just haven’t had enough yet.”

It concerned me that she’d say this, especially because it seemed to contain an implied prediction. I wondered what Erika would have to do for it to really be over, which Megan assured me I’d know when it happens.

I optimistically corrected her, “You mean if it happens.”

She looked at me as if I just told her the sun is blue.

“I know. I’m worried too,” I said, answering her expression. “No, I don’t trust her. And I know it

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doesn't make sense that I still want to be with her. But she just has this hold on me, Megan."

"The hold is that she's your first."



*Growing up in a small, conservative town in the 80's, Karen knew at a young age to keep her secret. Then she went to college where she met Erika and everything she'd tried to deny about herself became a reality. Now how would she tell the people that she loved the most - feared the most - that she was gay?*

## ***A Song for Everything***

By Karen E. Bacon

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