

Broken Strings

“I’m sorry, Ellie,” Mom said. “I’m so sorry.” That’s the last thing she said to me. Ever.

The lake’s like a mirror, reflecting the trees and houses and the dark sky. The cold morning mist bites my skin and three crows perch on a telephone wire, waiting for sunrise. Dew drops cling to blades of grass and the sun peeks up over the horizon. It’s so quiet along the edge of the water. I hear a familiar sound. It’s just my imagination. I keep running my usual morning route, but the sound gets louder until I stop. I crouch behind a bush and this is what I see: Kyle, the strange boy at my school. The guitar in his arms shines in the sun as he plays quietly, almost whispering the words. Something about the way he holds the guitar, the way he’s so connected, so absorbed in the music reminds me. A tear slips down my cheek, and I realize I’m crying. I take one last look, stand up and quickly run off.

Mom and Dad were fighting. I hid under my bed with cotton in my ears, waiting for it to stop. Mom stormed out of the house, and I followed her. “Mommy, where are you going?” I asked. She looked at me with those eyes that I’ll never forget. They were lost.

I don’t know what’s wrong with me. No, maybe I do, but it’s starting to freak me out. Forget about it. It’s over.

Music pulses in my ears. The air sticks to my skin and there are so many people squished together I can’t even see. I grab a can of root beer and push through the crowd, trying to find my friends. Sam is leaning against the wall, talking to a bunch of his friends. I don’t feel like dealing with him right now, so I hide in the crowd and try to get past him. When I stumble out of the mob of people, someone runs into me and knocks my drink out of my hand. It spills all over my dress. I see Kyle with his guitar case standing in front of me. Sam and his friends come over and stare Kyle down.

“Dude,” Sam says. “Did you just spill soda all over my girlfriends dress?” He walks right up to Kyle, making him back away. Sam’s friends laugh hysterically.

“Sam, it’s ok,” I say. “Just forget it.”

“Um... Hello? Dork just spilled soda on you. What do you expect me to do? Ask him to chill with us?” To Kyle he says, “Say you’re sorry or you’re gonna wish you’d never been born,” Sam says.

Kyle puts his hands up. “Bumping into someone doesn’t kill them.”

“Screw you,” Sam says and pushes Kyle against the wall while his friends crowd around them.

I start to walk up to Sam to tell him to knock it off, but at the last second, something stops me. My gaze lingers on Kyle and then I quickly walk away. Ariel runs up to me.

“Hey BFF!”

“Hey,” I say. “I’m gonna go home. I just remembered I have a big paper due Monday.”

“Nope. Don’t even think about it.” Ariel grabs my hand, runs up to our friends and starts talking about stuff that doesn’t matter. My mind wanders back to that morning and how as hard as things already are, how they’re a lot harder now.

“... What do you think, Elody?”

I blink at Bethany, with no idea what she just said. “What?”

“Hello, I know you’re not deaf,” she says and waves her hand in front of my face. “You *do* speak English, right?” My other friends crack up.

“Whatever,” I say. “Just drop it.”

“Aww, but I thought *you’re* the one who always wants to win,” she says.

“And I thought *you’re* the one who never wants to shut up,” I say back. They start laughing again, and Ariel stares at me like I’m a stranger.

“Elody... What the heck was that?” she asks.

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m just tired of... Of everything!” I storm away. I walk into a back room, slamming the door. I pound the wall with my fists.

“You ok?”

I jump and spin around. “God, don’t you know how to knock?!” Kyle is sitting on the couch behind me.

“Um... Hello? I was in here first.”

I want to disappear of embarrassment. “Oh... Uh, sorry....”

“That’s ok,” he says, grinning.

I sit down in the chair across the room and take a few deep breaths. “You can stand up to them, you know,” I say. “If you do, they’ll stop.”

“What would you know about it? I don’t think you know anything, ‘cause nothing ever goes wrong in your perfect little life, right?”

I turn and glare at him. He’s leaning back now, one foot resting on his other knee, his arms spread out across the top of the couch, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. It *really* pisses me off.

“What do *you* know about me? You know *nothing* about my life, so don’t pretend you do,” I say.

“You sure about that?”

“Can you, like, *stop* with all these stupid remarks and actually tell me why?” I say.

“Take a look, Ellie. I think it’s pretty obvious.”

I clench my hands into fists. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t. You don’t get to call me that.”

“Alright, whatever.”

I lean in closer, whispering to him even though no one can hear me. “My life isn’t perfect. It never was, and it never will be.”

“Well... I guess we have one thing in common, then.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you care?” he says. “Something about this just doesn’t seem right... Elody Kingston, the top of this whole school, asking Kyle Zeterstrom, the Dork, a *question*? Sure you got this straight?”

“Fine, I’m out of here.” I stand up and head for the door, but he stops me.

“Wait... Fine. My dad’s gone. A few months ago, I woke up and he wasn’t there. Never came back. So I moved on. Learned to take care of myself. So now you tell me. Why is your life so not perfect?”

“Um...” I squeeze my hands together and look away. “My mom’s gone, too... But that was a long time ago.”

“How long?”

“Five years... Five years today.”

“If she’s been gone five years...” he says, “she’s not coming back.”

I stiffen. I don’t know if I should tell him. I look down at my lap.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “Things break and you can’t fix them. So why waste your time trying?”

My throat tightens. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It isn’t easy. It is what it is. Caring only makes things worse.” He stands up and walks toward the door. “So... I guess I’ll see you later.”

Before I can answer, he walks out of the room and shuts the door behind him. I can’t stay here. I need out. I run out into the pouring rain, and all the way home.

She drove in silence, both of us lost deep in thought. But I was just happy to be with her. As long as I was with her, everything would be OK. The wind was strong, and the road in front of us was dark. Suddenly I saw a flash of white, and before I could react... Blackness.

The next day is a typical school day: Bell, class, lunch, annoying people, boring class, bell, hallway drama, and so on. As I walk to the cafeteria, I hear a roar of laughter from the science wing. I run towards it.

“Gosh man, I feel for you. I really do. It must be a shame for your own dad to leave like that...” “I guess he didn’t have anything worth sticking around for.” Sam says. He pushes Kyle against the wall while his other friends jump into a semicircle around him.

“Yeah Kyle, are you sure you looked everywhere? Oh wait! Did you look in all the other houses? Maybe he’s sleeping with another woman right now.”

I’m so outraged that I push my way into the circle and stand in front of Kyle, facing Sam. All eyes stare at me.

“Leave him alone,” I say. We glare at each other.

“Whoa, slow down,” says one of Sam’s friends. “Since when does the perfect Elody Kingston stand up for Dorky Kyle?”

“Aww, aren’t they so cute together?” says Sam’s other friend.

“Stop being so stupid!” I say.

“We’re the ones being stupid? You sure ‘bout that?” Sam says through clenched teeth.

“Don’t talk about his dad! None of you have *any* idea how it feels to lose someone you love.”

“Elody... It’s ok. I don’t care,” Kyle says.

I turn and stare at him. “What are you talking about?!”

“See, Elody?” Sam says. “It doesn’t bother him one bit.”

“Be quiet!” I turn back to Kyle. “How can you say that? How can *you* say you don’t care?”

“Because I don’t.” He sounded so simple, so careless, so empty.

“Kyle...” All I can do is stare at him. His eyes slice my heart in half. “Tell them you care,” I say, unable to get any louder. “Tell them. Tell them you care...” All he does is stare back at me. The look in his eyes kills me; no one has ever looked at me like that.

“Well, this is weirdly amusing,” Sam says.

I jerk my head towards Sam. “SHUT YOUR MOUTH!” I lunge at him and push him back as hard as I can. He stumbles back. I feel like I’m on fire. Tears stream down my face. I can’t see anything, only blurs of color. I run through the halls and my legs give way as I fall to the floor. Right before I hit the tiles, I fall into someone’s arms. I look up through my tears, and Kyle looks down at me. I feel like I’m shattering, like broken shards of glass.

Kyle never said what to do if it’s *you* who’s broken.

I woke up in the hospital with Dad by my side. The look on his face said everything. That guitar Mom gave me for my 8th birthday never felt the same after that. It was too heavy, too sad. So ever since that day it’s been sitting in my basement. Until now.

I sit at my window, locked in my room, as I stare out at the lake. My tangled, greasy hair falls over my face, my eyes barely able to stay open from not being able to sleep. The sky is gray; the world is bare.

On Monday, I leave a note in Kyle’s locker telling him to meet me outside the cafeteria before lunch. School is a pain; the minutes slowly creep past. When the bell finally rings, I sprint out of the room with my stuff, throw it in my locker and run to the cafeteria.

“So... What was it you wanted to talk to me about?” he says.

“Um, I wanted to say sorry about yesterday... I lost it and... It all just got so messed up.”

“Why are you apologizing to *me*? I should be apologizing to *you*. I’m sorry about Sam... I should’ve known better.”

“No, no. It’s not you. Everything has just been so messed up lately; I don’t even know what’s going on anymore. I want everything to be ok.” I look away, trying not to cry. “But anyway... Do you wanna maybe hang out later tonight? Maybe play some guitar?”

He looks at me with that face that’s impossible to read. “Maybe? What do you mean *maybe*? Heck yeah!”

I smile.

Later, I walk along the water to his house. The sky and water sparkle in the sunlight. A flock of sparrows chirp under a madrona tree. I find Eli sitting on the front steps playing his guitar.

“Sounds good,” I say.

He looks up and smiles his crooked half smile. “Sit down.”

I sit next to him and pull out my guitar. I run my hands over the six steel strings and the smooth spruce. I put my fingers on the strings and strum my first chord. My heart beats fast. We sing song after song, and I let the muscles in my fingers remember how to form each chord. The music is like a wave, letting me ride it, holding me up.

We keep playing just like that, the sun warm on my cheek, the sound of guitar strings the only thing I need. The lake is so beautiful; I don’t think I ever really saw it before. Life is so many things: opportunities, possibilities... all at once. You try so hard to get it that you don’t realize what you *really* want is right in front of you. Everything you’ve ever wanted, ever dreamed about, ever imagined, disappears, and you don’t know *what* you want anymore. But that fall, all those bruises, make you stronger. That fall, the one you thought ended your journey, is the one that really only started it.

“It’s funny,” I say, “how in so little time, so many things can change. It’s like... a big curtain suddenly falling, revealing a whole world you never even knew existed.”

He looks at me with that inscrutable face again.

“You probably think I’m crazy, but... You know what I mean?”

He smiles. “I’m starting to.”