**Chapter 1 - Class of 2016**

Some believe that life is a series of challenges or tests that make you stronger and lead you to some point of a big epiphany where everything finally makes sense..or something. I used to think so too. Now I’ve come to believe that life is actually a series of revelations that build upon the last. Each one opens into a new insight of realization and understanding. As I stood in the cram-packed foyer of the convention center where my two big girls just graduated from high school, I had one of those revelations. I stood there with my camera hanging on my neck and their class rings in my hand. I spent hours designing those rings on the Jostens website. I kept re-doing them with different stones and such. I just wanted them to be perfect. Every day I checked the mail, hoping that they would come on time and hoping that Omega didn’t check the mail first, see something from Jostens and find out about their surprise. On the day of the graduation, I checked the mail probably every hour and was a little more disappointed each time the rings weren’t there. When that UPS package was sitting outside of my front door, as we left for the event, I bounced up and down with excitement because I was so happy! Those positive affirmations must be working, I thought.

With my mood on full upswing, we all hopped in the car. My husband Jeremy, youngest daughter Bell, Jaime (one of my husband’s employees) and I were all dressed in Sunday best to go see Kalina and Omega graduate. All week I was filled with this surreal, mixed emotion over the whole thing. Raising these girls was hands down the. hardest. thing. I have ever done. And Before Jeremy came along, I did it 100 percent on my own. To say I struggled was an understatement. I more than struggled. I remember a time when Kalina was 3 and Omega wasn’t even 2 yet. They were hungry and asking for food. When I opened the fridge there was nothing. When I say nothing, I really mean nothing. No ketchup. No random containers of old leftovers. No half used sticks of butter. Nothing! For the few days prior I had been making “cookies” out of just flower, milk and sugar and now that was gone too. All I could do was go lay in bed and cry. But now that was in the past. We all got through it. Life had become consistently more comfortable every year since then and now this graduation ceremony meant that we did it. All of us.

We survived.

The stadium was huge. I counted the rows for the graduates. 25 rows on one side. 25 rows on the other side. 15 chars in each row. Damn that’s a lot! Around 750 kids graduating? No way. When Kalina and Omega came out they looked so far away and small. Even with my nice camera, the lense wasn’t good enough to get me in for a closer shot but it didn’t stop me from taking a million pictures anyway. It was alright because I would get close up pictures after. There were so many people in that stadium and the audio was terrible. Couldn’t hear shit really. We made use of the time wasted on random speeches that we couldn’t hear, by passing around my brother in laws baby. All I wanted to do was hear them call the name of my girls. Finally, Kalina was called before Meg and I jumped up screaming my most high-pitch, shrill scream. I felt the itchy burn in my throat. I mean I was really screaming. Kalina jerked her head up towards my direction of the nose bleed seats. She heard me! Over all of the applause, she heard me. That made me so happy and I will never forget it. I screamed for Meg as well and although she didn’t look, I felt assured that she must be able to hear me too.

At last it was over. I mean come on, who really wants to sit through all that crap. Everyone just wants to see their kid. Of course, when they all throw their caps; that was pretty cool too. But other than that, I was more interested in seeing their faces when I gave them their rings, getting some hugs and pictures with the family. I was already kicking myself in the ass because my dress was lavender. What the fuck was I thinking? I should have coordinated with their blue gown. Dammit! Hopefully the photo’s still look nice. I guess it doesn’t really matter anyway. At least I can finally get a picture of Kalina in her gown. She has been a rare siting this last year, since she decided to tell us all to fuck off and moved out. Now I got her cornered and I’ll get my picture. Muahahaha (insert evil laugh here).

As soon as those caps went up in the air I started heading toward the exit to go find my big girls. I ditched the rest of the family and simultaneously started sending texts in a group message to Kalina and Meg.

“Where can we meet for pictures?”

No response.

Kalina isn’t a fast text responder or even a responder at all most of the time but Meg is quick on the draw and like me, her phone is an extension of her right hand. But she didn’t respond either. Hhhmmmm… Weird. OK. I’ll call. Meg goes straight to voicemail. Kalina rang a couple of times then voicemail. I started to panic a little. I didn’t want them to think something crazy like I left and didn’t care enough to see them. Kalina and I have been on the outs. You know, teenage shit. Omega and I had a little tiff a couple of days ago. OK maybe a big tiff but we hugged it out and made up. I see one of Megs running buddies Krystal. “Where are they” I asked? Krystal pointed towards the bottom section of the stadium. “They’re still in there.” There was a security guard standing at the door, not letting anyone go inside. Well, that’s OK. I will wait here I thought. Every time the door opened I craned my neck to look inside and catch a glimpse. It was so hard to distinguish because all of these kids just looked like blobs of shiny royal blue everywhere. I kept looking for Meg’s hat. She decorated the top of it pink and it seemed to stand out when I was sitting above her in the stadium but I couldn’t see her or her hat now. I thought, in the continuous internal dialog that I always have running in my mind, “I should dig their rings out so I have them ready to hand to them.” I dug the rings out of my purse. On the drive over I wrote an O on the top of Meg’s box and K on top of Kalina’s, so that they wouldn’t get mixed up.

When I was digging in my purse, I noticed that Jeremy was calling. Yay! He must have found them. “Where are you” he asked. “My mom found the girls” he said. Nice! When I head back to Jeremy, I see him standing with his family all dressed up. Even his stoned, tattoo artist cousin was wearing a sport coat. Wow. How nice of everyone to show up and show out. None of my family was there. Nobody on Kalina and Meg’s paternal side of the family was there. Their grandma Judy sent a card. Their dad didn’t even return Megs phone call and hasn’t for a few years. Needless to say, it was touching that the family of the man I married ten years ago was so supportive of my kids.

I make eye contact with Jeremy and he points toward the other end of the never ending foyer, which wraps in a circle around the entire stadium and mouths “that way.” Pushing, pulling and maneuvering my way through, I keep trudging along trying to get a glimpse. I see Krystal again. She gives me the “I don’t know” shoulder shrug. My phone rings again. When I answer, Jeremy says in an exasperated, half yelling over the crowd way “my mom saw them and they walked off.”

What? Where? What is going on here? While this internal dialog of processing is occurring in my mind, I send another text in the group message I created for the girls.

“Well I have class rings for you and Mauricio, Josh, Stormy, Patty, Kevin, Cokie, Dora all came but I guess we will just see you later?”

Kalina actually responded and the simple “…..alright” spoke volumes.

Alright? ALRIGHT??? What the holy hell is going on here!?

As the realization started to wash over me, I stopped dead in my tracks. I stopped furiously darting my head around the room in my search mission. I understood.

They don’t want to see me.

They didn’t plan to see me.

I felt a hollow sadness in the bottom of my chest in that place just under the center of my ribs. “Don’t cry Cristina. Don’t you fucking cry in front of all of these people.” And in that moment, standing there, with my camera hanging from my neck and their rings still in my hand, giving myself one of my pep talks that I learned to do in therapy years ago, surrounded by swarms of families taking proud pictures of their happy graduate wearing cheap royal blue satin, I had another revelation to expand upon all of the preceding little bits of awareness that life had, little by little dished out to me. Like giving me tiny pieces of crumb that I greedily collected, in hopes that I will someday have enough to make a sandwich. It was in that moment that I had a new understanding of how different the girls felt about our journey, our story of survival and about me.

So I left the stadium.

Put the rings in my purse.

Took that stupid camera off my neck.

Walked to the car.

Then I gave myself permission to cry.