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About 2,000 words

Fighting to Breathe
by Tammi Lea

The ticking of the clock echoes in my ears. I can't be late. My heartbeat kicks against my ribs and there's a weight in my chest. My palms sweat with just the thought of going to school. My breath quickens. I plug in my headphones and the pressure lifts. Warmth spreads from my head to my toes. I take a long deep breath in and let the music wash over me in waves. My breathing slows and I feel in control again. I slide out of bed and shuffle into the hallway.

"Taylor, come on!" Jade's voice startles me. I turn and slam into my mom's chest. Her lips curve into a soft smile and she's holding a glass of milk and a small white pill.

I shake my head.

"You don't have a choice," she says.

I reach for the pill. "I wish I was stronger than this," I whisper.

Her eyes narrow and I look down at my feet. "Depression doesn't make you weak, honey. But refusing help when you need it does." She tucks my hair behind my ear and runs the back of her hand down my cheek.

I look up and try to smile at her words. She gently lifts my chin with her fingertips, "What's worrying you?"

"School sucks. Everyone hates me, Mom."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because it's true." My bottom lip trembles, but I clench my eyes shut to hold back the tears.

"That's just your anxiety talking, no one could possibly hate you."

"Whatever," I say.

"This is your last year of high school try to make the best of it."

Guilt washes over me. I know she means well, but she just doesn't understand.

"Tay!" Jade's voice echoes up the stairs and tears through my room.

I jump and almost drop the glass. I push the glass into my mom's hands and fist my hands at my sides to calm my nerves.

“One breath at a time.” She squeezes my hand in reassurance. A small gesture, but I can feel it squeeze my heart like a hug.

“Coming,” I say. I sling my backpack over my shoulder and grab my converse.

I race down the stairs, my foot slips and I tumble into my best friend, Jade. We crash to the floor in a tangled mess of arms and legs. Screams turn into giggles and giggles turn into gasps.

I bend down to help her up. “I’m such a klutz,” I say when she grabs my hand. I check her for bumps and bruises but she bats my hands away.

“Seriously, are you okay?”

She bumps my hip with hers. “You can’t help but fall for me, babe.” She winks and pulls me out the door.

I shake my head at her antics and slide into her tiny neon green Beetle convertible. I start to fidget in the cramped space, but she opens the top and turns on the radio.

“Let’s find your fight song,” she says pushing buttons.

I feel it before I hear it. My heartbeat stutters and the words seep under my skin.

My power’s turned on.

Starting right now I’ll be strong.

I’ll play my fight song.

And I don’t really care if nobody else believes.

‘Cause I’ve still got a lot of fight left in me.

The song beats down every emotion, every fear, and every nagging thought. When my eyes find hers, she reaches across the console and squeezes my hand. I rest my head against the seat and sigh.

Her fiery red flames are slapping against her cheeks and her soft, blue sea green eyes dart from me to the road and back again.

“Stop thinking about it,” she says.

“Stop thinking about what?”

She slams her fist against the steering and exhales. “Whatever it is that’s making you crazy, Tay.”

“Everything,” I say staring at the space between my feet. “It’s like everything is out of control and the more I fight to hold on to myself the more I lose myself.” I tuck my shaking hands under my legs.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” She shoves a water bottle into my trembling hands.

I take a swig and meet her stare. “I can’t face her, Jade.”

“Maybe you should.” Her brows furrow and her words are sharp.

My eyes widen and I choke on her words. “What?”

She bites her bottom lip. “I’m just saying that maybe if you stand up to her she wouldn’t have so much power over you.” Her knuckles bulge against the steering wheel. “I hate seeing you hurting and it’s killing me that I can’t stop it. It’s your fight not mine. Don’t let one person hold you down.”

I know she can’t help it, but as her voice rises the pressure in my chest builds and my breaths shorten. “I can’t breathe.”

She pushes my head between my legs, “Your anxiety is giving me anxiety.”

I cross my arms over my chest and glare out my window. People don’t get it. I can’t just flip a switch and shut it down. It doesn’t work that way. It’s easier for her. She doesn’t live in a constant state of fear. Everyone loves her and wants to be her. She’s got ocean blue eyes and sand in her skin. Me? I’m just a broken white girl. Nothing ever comes easy. Not even words. No one likes me. I don’t fit anywhere. I’m the butt of every joke and a body with no soul.

How do you breathe when every breath becomes a vise? How do you think of something else when every thought is a death wish? My body is constantly at war with my mind and my heart can’t decide if it wants to stop or go.

We pull up in front of our school and my stomach drops. There’s a reason our school has the highest suicide rate. Even in the bright daylight the light doesn’t touch it. The dull gray cement is smeared with dirt that clings to it like a second skin. The large windows that line the sides are cracked and caked with

grime. No birds are perched along its edges and the sun shrinks behind the clouds that sit above it. The sad thing is, the curiosity behind the suicides makes people want to come to our school. I never understood why people would want to come to a place that people are dying to get out of.

“I swear, this place is the face of death,” she says.

My head swings to hers as her words mirror my thoughts. A cold breeze tickles my spine and goose bumps pebble along my skin.

We slide out of the car and trek across the parking lot. We don't even get inside the doors before a group of black girls surround us. There are three of them and the one in front is tall with a bulky frame and a strong, jutting chin. Her skin, like her eyes are deep and dark. The one on her right is thick with wide hips, and her sleek, black hair hangs straight down to an angular cut at her jaw. But, the one on the left is the smallest of them all with gangly limbs. She has a tapered waist, and her paper-thin flesh appears to hang from her skeletal bones. With an oblong face and a long, narrow nose she's nothing but hard lines and rough edges. Her slit-like eyes sharpen at my slow perusal, and my mouth goes dry as I'm held hostage in those empty black depths. Fear grips me as she storms towards me with a sneer. Even the air stills in her presence. I don't breathe.

“I told you not come back here.” She slaps me.

The sting of it and her insult brings tears to my eyes. “Why do you hate me?”

“You don't belong here,” she says.

“Just because I'm white, that doesn't mean I don't belong here.”

Her eyes rake over my porcelain skin and her face twists in disgust. “You were born wrong,” she says. There's an edge to her voice that cuts right through me. She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

Their eyes zoom in on my scuffed black converse, up to my old skinny jeans with a hole in the knee from a bad fall, and even then further up to my Pink Floyd faded gray tee shirt. When they reach my face their lips curl in disgust and

slowly they move as one to form a circle around me. Before I can take a breath their hands are pushing and pulling, and I feel like I'm ripping at the seams. But it's their words that throw me. I fall to my knees gripping my head in my hands. *Freak. White bitch. Stupid. Mute.* They don't stop until each word is a living, breathing entity with a voice. Then they laugh at my tears. I'd rather they hit me but they never do.

Punches bruise and heal. Words seep under your skin and spread like an infection. They creep into the cracks and make a home of your bones. Not this time. Jade's words play back in my head like a song on repeat. *Don't let one person hold you down.*

Jade pulls me up and walks right through them knocking her shoulder into one of them. Jade is tall with an athletic build so the girl stumbles backward and in a flash slaps Jade right across the face. I shove the girl so hard she lands hard on all fours and cries out in pain.

"Maybe I'm not the problem." My voice shakes. "Maybe it's you."

"You white people think you got all the power. You ain't no better than us."

I stomp toward her and she scrambles to find purchase under her feet. "You're scared. You like to be in control and me being here puts you on edge." I inch closer.

The girls grab my arms and I fight against their hold but there are too many hands and only one me. Fear grips me. My stomach is in knots but I don't have time to deal with it because the girl is getting up. She leers at me with eyes that are so dark they are almost black. "You is gonna die today white bitch."

I stare right into those black empty pits. "I'm looking forward to it," I say with a shaky breath. I take a step forward and lift my chin.

She steps back. "Are you crazy?"

I laugh, but it comes out in a rasp. "I'm everything you're afraid of."

The girls slowly release me and back away. Her confidence slips away with them. She moves forward and her step falters. Her eyes dart back and forth.

I raise my chin. "Is there a problem?"

Her chest heaves. “You ain’t worth it.” She turns and storms away, but not before checking over her shoulder one last time.

“Wow,” Jade breathes.

“I think I like this being in control thing,” I say with a smile.

“Yeah, well don’t let it get to your head,” she says slinging her arm over my shoulder. “I’m proud of you, though.”

I glance up at the school and hope spreads through my chest. The paint is weathered and peeling off, and the gaping cracks etched into the face of the building are the only signs of life. The sun climbs up from behind the clouds and it doesn’t linger. It casts shadows that almost swallow it whole. Yet, it juts out of the ground and continues to stand brave and broken. I smile inwardly as we walk through the doors.