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UNRAVEL

by

Megan Murphy

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

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## Abstract

*Unravel* is a short story collection with strong female protagonists, both children and women. It is about family, especially mother and daughter relationships, but in particular about the secrets that they keep and the inevitable death that occurs around and within the family unit. The collection explores the raw emotions that burst through when confronted with both betrayal and the passing of loved ones. One story in particular, "Unravel," shows the journey of a woman who is so consumed with grief and pressure after a miscarriage that she steals a baby from another family. Another story entitled "Land Mines" deals with a character becoming preoccupied with abnormal feelings of her heart after finding out about a family history of heart disease while dealing with a rocky family dynamic. While a few stories are connected to each other, each story stands alone as they delve into the psyche of those wrestling with the fact of having and losing power and control.

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## Reflection

Lucy Wilson was twenty when her father passed away from a heart attack. She could not believe how much had changed in just a couple of years. She sat at a small table in her kitchen as she struck a match and lit the candle that was embedded into the heavily iced cupcake in front of her. It was her own little “birthday party”. “Happy birthday, Dad.” Since Lucy and her father shared a birthday, they would always get two cakes and hold hands while they blew out their candles when Lucy was younger. Now that her father was gone, all the family she had left was her mother. Lucy couldn’t remember the last time she had held her hand. She thought it must have been when she was about seven years old. It was a hot summer’s day and Lucy’s hands continued to be sweaty no matter how many times she wiped them on her denim shorts. She could feel a couple drops of sweat slide down her arms and she cringed as she wiped them away. Lucy didn’t even want to go to the zoo. It wasn’t because of the “poor wretched creatures in bondage” as her friend Suzie called them. Suzie claimed to be a vegetarian. Lucy was glad when someone else asked what that meant so she didn’t have to. She remembered just last year when she hosted a sleepover and Suzie was the first one to pipe in yelling, “Pepperoni” when asked what kind of pizza they wanted. Lucy decided to leave it alone though.

Lucy’s parents thought it would be a good idea to have a family outing. Because giraffes were her favorite animal, they concluded the zoo would be a good place to travel to instead of the water park which she would have enjoyed much more. As they snaked their way through the reptile and amphibian area, her mother walked with her head down. She hated this section no matter how much glass separated her from the animals. Her pace quickened as they made their way to the exit. Lucy reached out for her mother’s hand to make her slow down, but as she only

grabbed one finger, her mother was able to escape. The light hit their eyes as they emerged from the house, causing everyone to squint.

“I think I see the map over there. Let’s just find the giraffes already,” her mother said.

Upon approaching the map, the three of them stood there, eyes scanning the paths ending on pictures of different animals. Lucy reached out for her mother’s hand again. This time her fingers wrapped around four of her mothers. Almost immediately her mother pulled her hand up the map to trace a path. Her mother’s hand slipped through her own like sand. She looked around, becoming less interested by the minute about seeing the other animals. Seeing sprinklers around a small pool where other kids were playing made her want to go there more than anywhere else. “Mom, can I go?” Lucy clasped the end of her mother’s shirt and tugged, using her other hand to tighten the grip of the first. She felt her mother tug forth.

She looked down at Lucy, brows furrowed. “Lucy, please. Stop doing that.” Her raised voice caught the attention of a few patrons around them. Once she noticed that, her mother darted her eyes back to the map.

The sudden condemnation surprised Lucy, and her mother easily pulled her hand back. Lucy looked down at her own hands, eyes moving from one to the other wondering what was wrong with them. She wiped them on her shorts again. She remembered last year when she had a 102-degree fever and her mother cupped Lucy’s sweaty face in her hands, kissing Lucy’s forehead. Why was today any different? There was a sinking feeling in her chest and she began to wipe her hands more furiously against her clothing.

“Lu,” her dad interrupted her thoughts. “This way to the giraffes.” He was beaming and put his hands on her shoulders as she began to walk past him toward the path he indicated. She glanced down at her hands and noticed her palms were bright red. On the way to the giraffes, he

stopped at the monkey exhibit. “Sweetie, you remember how much you used to love looking at the monkeys?” She strolled up beside him at the railing while her mother was on his other side. He put his hand on her back.

*Free them!*, she could hear Suzie’s voice saying. As they watched the animals, one of them pulled a baby to her, looking like a mother embracing her child. A woman near them commented on that and then proceeded to throw her arms around a teenager in a black hoodie, as hot as it was, next to her. “Mom, really?” He pulled away, taking a few steps from her. “You have to do that every time?” The woman tried to contort her face in a way that did not reveal she was hurt. Lucy looked up at her mother’s face, hoping she might do the same. ‘I won’t pull away,’ she wanted to say. Remembering what happened earlier at the map, she thought better of it and turned her attention back to the monkeys. After a few moments, her father continued walking down the trail, Lucy’s mother behind him, and Lucy bringing up the rear. She peered over her shoulder at the monkeys and then to the mother with her teenager. She wanted to go back, to soak up some of the affection. For a fleeting moment, she even thought that it wouldn’t be so bad to stay there for a while, but a call from both of her parents snapped her out of her trance, and she hurried to meet them.

mother stopped holding her hand soon after she overheard the argument, making her wonder if what her mother said was true. “She’s your responsibility,” Lucy heard. She couldn’t understand what she meant. She felt like a burden. She wanted both of them to love and take care of her. The day her mother pulled away felt unreal.

When she was done with what her friends called more of a pity party than a birthday party, she drove to her mother’s house. It was pretty clear to Lucy that the state was going to seize her mother’s estate and assets to help cover the cost of the court fees and incarceration

costs. Lucy definitely did not have that kind of money to help her mother with those costs. Sometimes she was just scraping by as it was. She decided to go back to her childhood home to see what she could salvage. When she entered through the front door, she noticed that the house was in a state of disarray though it wasn't that much different from how the house started to look after her father died. It didn't look as bad as it had before. At least it didn't look like the house had been ransacked, but she could tell that some of the hoarding tendencies had begun again since she had moved out. She walked over to the bookcase to grab the photo albums. If she wasn't able to take anything else from her old home, she at least wanted these to be with her. The early ones were what she was really looking for. She figured those would have the best memories. She grabbed the album from the year she was born. Upon opening it up, she saw pictures of her mother and father holding her at the hospital. Flipping through it, she watched as she grew up. Playing on the playground, school concerts, sleepovers. As she slid her fingers across the spines, across the years, she saw that the last one, had a scrap of paper sticking up, marking one of the pages near the end. She pulled it out and turned to the page that was marked.

Both pages had about five pictures each. She didn't know which picture this section was marked for, but one photo in particular caught her eye. She was standing on one side of her mother and her father was standing on the other side. They stood in front of a large brick building with a rotunda out front. In large white letters on the flat part of the building behind the rotunda were the words "Saint Joseph High". Lucy went there all four years of high school. She had very few good memories of her time there. Every year, the skirts got shorter, the boys got hornier, and the teachers started caring less and less. Every teacher except her mother. She started teaching at St. Joseph's when Lucy was going into her senior year. It wasn't much later



after that picture was taken that her father passed away. She stared at that photo, unable to process the emotions that were suddenly flooding her brain. The people in the photograph became blurry outlines. A humming in her ears started and she felt as though she was going to pass out. She sat down on the hardwood in front of the bookcase. Unsure of what exactly she sat on, she heard what sounded like the crinkling of fast food burger wrappers. She set the album down and leaned back until she could feel the coolness of the floor chill her skin. The photo drained all of her energy like she never knew one picture could do.

Lucy sat with her friends Morgan and Keith at one of the outermost tables at lunch. As the tables were large and round, the three couldn't just sit with each other. Usually some of Keith's friends from the track team would join them. One of them, Noah, always seemed like a jerk to her. She wondered why Keith was friends with him. As Lucy stuffed fries into her mouth, she started fingering the glass heart necklace that hung halfway down her chest.

Morgan looked over at her. "Oooo, is that from Liam?"

Lucy beamed. "Sure is."

Noah snickered.

Lucy shot a glare at him. "Something funny?"

"Seems like he's just trying to get up in the world, if you know what I mean." He winked.

Keith elbowed Noah. "Dude, shut up."

"No, Keith. You obviously want to chime in. Why don't you impart some of your wisdom on us?"

He shoved five fries in his mouth. “Just saying that I’ve heard him talk a lot more about your mom than you.”

Morgan’s eyes widened and she clenched her teeth. “Noah.” She unclenched her jaw and tried to act nonchalant. “Were you born an asshole or did you pick it up through the years?”

Lucy felt a sickening feeling. Despite what she was feeling, she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was a grain of truth in what he was saying. She had been hearing rumors about her mother for a while. She knew that most of the people saying things were the boys who liked to brag about having sex but probably hadn’t actually had any. Throughout the day, images of her mother and Liam kept creeping into her thoughts; she had to know. Her mother’s classroom was just down the hallway and there shouldn’t be anyone there except her since it was after school hours. Her legs felt so heavy. The internal pull for her to turn around and wait in the library was great, but she had to know. She trudged toward the door, her heart pounding and stomach turning. There was the sliver of a window on the door. She peered through to make sure that her mother was in there. But she saw more than that. Her mother sat on the edge of her desk, her legs spread; someone stood in between them. She saw the man step forward and her mother’s arms and legs wrap around him. Lucy was shocked to see her mother doing anything like this, especially at the place where she worked and her daughter went to school. There was no way that was going to knock on the door. She could do little more than look away and head down the hall to try to clear her mind.

The window was too small to see exactly who it was. What made her did feel better though was knowing that Liam was at track practice, just like he said he would be, Lucy thought. She had no reason not to trust him. Noah is just being a dumbass. She felt bad for giving his comment a single thought. Lucy had just cornered a corner when she heard a door open.

She hesitated, wondering if she wanted to know who was going to waltz out of her mother's classroom. After a few moments she poked her head around the wall. Quickly, she realized that she had waited too long though. No one was in the hallway except for her. She decided to go to her locker to pick up books for her homework. When she returned to her mother's classroom, so many voices in her head were telling her not to go inside, but her mother was her ride home.

Her mother spun around, eyes wide, when Lucy walked into the room. "Oh hey, sweetheart." Her hand shot up to her chest. "I didn't know you were coming."

Lucy eyed her mother's wrinkled skirt and she felt nauseous. "Were you expecting someone else?"

Her mother was stuffing notebooks into her bag, not making eye contact. "What? Of course not."

Lucy opened her mouth to dig deeper, but the ring of her cellphone interrupted the conversation. It was Liam. "I'll be right back." She stepped into the hallway and answered. "Hey, babe."

"Lucy, we've got to talk."

She felt a lump forming in her throat, but she forced it down. "Okay. What's going on?"

"I think we should see other people."

"See other people? What do you mean? I thought we were fine."

"I just think that I need...more."

Her voice elevated. "More? What more could you-" She caught herself, remembering a conversation the two of them had just a few days ago. "Are you breaking up with me, over the phone never the less, because I wasn't ready to have sex with you?"

There was a long pause. "Look, Lucy. It's just not working out."

The lump in her throat was forming again and tears threatened to spill from her eyes. Not now, she demanded her emotions. “So, we’re done just like that?” She did not want to ask, but the words poured from her lips before she could think about it. “Is it another woman? Are you seeing someone else? Are the rumors true?” Lucy was practically screaming at this point.

“Don’t do this, Lucy.”

“Who is it?” Suddenly, she couldn’t hear as well. It was as if someone had stuck cotton balls in her ears and her vision was getting blurry. She slid down the wall and shut her eyes tight. The only thing coming from the other end of the line was mumbles. “What? What?” She took deep breaths and her hearing came back just in time for her to hear Liam say, “I can’t talk to you when you’re like this. I have to go to practice. Bye.” Then it was silent.

Lucy gathered up the strength to pull herself off the floor and step just inside her mother’s classroom. Her mother was just finishing packing her bag. “Who was that?”

“Liam.” Lucy felt a numbing sensation creeping up her spine and shooting through her veins.

“Is everything okay?”

Her mother had to have heard everything; Lucy was just outside the door. “Really?”

Her mother stared at her blankly for a few moments. “Oh no. Did you two break up?” Her expression didn’t change much.

“Yes.”

“Oh well. That just means that you two weren’t meant for each other.”

She felt hurt now. She didn’t know if it was more from the breakup or from her mother’s seemingly lack of care. “Thanks,” Lucy said sarcastically.

Her mother put everything down and looked right at Lucy. "I'm sorry." There was a flicker of what Lucy thought was sympathy pass in her mother's eyes. "I really am."

"Yeah, sure." Lucy's eyes scanned the room, looking for anything to fixate on, anything but her mother. She did a double-take as her eyes landed on a jacket. It was red and black, just like the jackets the track team was given. Even though her eyes widened, she could not be sure what she was seeing.

It's not what it looks like. It's not what it looks like, she repeated to herself over and over.

She was thankful for her ribcage; if it was not there, her heart would shoot from her chest and flop onto the floor like a wet towel. She could vaguely hear her mother saying something about it being "just a break-up".

She tried to slow her breathing down but to no avail. She thought that she might hyperventilate, but instead she felt something churn in her stomach. She covered her mouth to cough and knew exactly what was happening. She slapped both hands over her mouth and ran to the bathroom. As soon as she reached the toilet, she let everything go. She heaved and heaved until nothing else came out. After that, she sat on the tile floor and leaned against the toilet. Smelling the vomit right behind her head was almost enough to make her throw up again. She reached behind her head and patted the air until she found the handle and pushed it down. A couple of drops flew out and fell on her face. She didn't care though. She didn't even care that a little bit got in her hair.

After sitting there for a few minutes, she got up and walked out of the stall. She rinsed her mouth out and cleaned her hair. She wasn't going to wait for her mother in the library. She

began walking home as it wasn't far from the school. As soon as she made it home and dropped her stuff, she called Keith. "Keith. I need you to drive me somewhere."

Keith picked Lucy up and they began driving to the cemetery. It was raining hard enough that you could see the individual drops as they fell on the windows but not hard enough to have to use the windshield wipers constantly. Lucy watched the trails that the droplets made on her window as they rolled with the movement of the car. She picked three or four drops and tried to predict which one would make it to the back of the window first like a race. As she did, she remembered when a big storm would rage outside when she was younger. The thunder didn't bother her as much as the lightning did. Something about the whole sky lighting up, or worse just the streaks that seemed to split the sky in half, sent her running under the dining room table. It wasn't an easy fit either; she fumbled trying to maneuver around the wooden plank that sat about three-fourths down from the top. Her mother would always find her there and fumble around trying to fit underneath the table to be as close to her as possible. Nothing her parents did ever really enticed her to come out until the storm had calmed down. Her mother was actually the one who invented the racing raindrops game. "Pretty boring down here, isn't it?" she said one time. She then found a way that Lucy could just see the raindrops instead of the sky by sitting in one certain spot. The rules were that if her mother won more times, Lucy would have to get out from under the table, but if she won, she could stay. No matter how many times her mother won, she always ended up letting Lucy settle there for as long as she needed. Her mother even brought her a blanket a few times when it was cold so Lucy could wrap herself up. She actually fell asleep under the table a few times but always woke up in her bed under the covers.

As the car rolled up the long driveway through the cemetery, Lucy let her eyes roll over all the decorations that populated the graves. Keith had been to her father's grave enough to at

least know generally where it was; Lucy was grateful for that. The location was something that she would never forget. Keith parked the car a little further than she would have liked to walk, but she was too tired to care. She usually brought a small horse figurine to place at his grave. He loved going on the carousel when he was a child and he shared his joy with Lucy, putting her on whichever animal she wanted and standing beside her whenever they came across a carousel. Considering everything that happened, she figured that her father would understand her not bringing one that day. She spotted his flat black headstone with gold lettering and walked over to it. Kneeling down next to it, she cleared away all the grass that had grown long and covered it. Keith squatted right beside her, holding an umbrella for the both of them.

There were a few weeds beside the grave. She leaned over and picked them, making them into a bouquet. Her fingers traced the letters of her father and the years he lived. He was only forty-six. Died of an aneurysm. She didn't want to blame her mother for her actions after he died. It was such a shock after all, but Lucy wasn't having sex with anyone and everyone. Hot tears fell from her eyes and straight to the ground as she doubled-over. Keith's umbrella wasn't doing much to keep the rain off, but she didn't care. She would have rather endured the rain, drowned in it. At the very least, she might not be able to tell the difference between her tears and the raindrops. "I don't have anyone now. I can't go to you. I can't go to Mom. I can't go to Liam. Dad, what am I supposed to do?" she whispered. She became angry. Angry at her dad. Angry at her mom and Liam. Angry that she was crying. Angry at Keith. Still clutching the flowers Lucy scooted over so that she wasn't under the umbrella, shot up, and ran. She didn't know where she was running to. Maybe if she ran long enough and fast enough, whatever was following her to cause all these bad things to happen would fall off and leave her alone. She could hear Keith calling after her, but she couldn't stop.

The cemetery was huge. She didn't know how long she had been running. Her legs ached. Her head and stomach didn't feel much better either. She didn't know if she tripped or if her legs just gave out. Her body hit the ground. She didn't try to get up. She didn't move. She could taste the mud in her mouth. Whenever she tried to move her head, she could hear the mud squishing into her skin.

She could hear the mash of footsteps against mud approaching fast. "Lucy. Lu," Keith was yelling. The rain had picked up and it was going to be impossible to talk without raising your voice. "Oh my God, Lucy." She could not see him, but assumed he had just seen her. He stepped over her legs and knelt down next to her head. He began to roll her over. She let her body flop onto her back. She had to continuously blink her eyes to keep the rain out. Her mouth was still wide open and as the water dropped in, she began choking, and with some trouble, sat up. Keith grabbed her arms. "Lucy, are you okay?" He was breathing heavily. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Everyone is leaving. Why are they leaving?"

Keith helped her to stand, blinking to keep the rain out as if he were looking at the sun. He had dropped his umbrella while chasing after her. "Lucy, what are you talking about?" he yelled. "Let's just get to the car."

"Do you even fucking care?" She realized she was still clutching the weeds she had picked. She threw them at him.

"Everyone isn't against you, Lucy," Keith shot back.

"That's not true. Not true." She began to trail off until she was whispering, "not true" over and over. Keith gently pulled her into a hug like he was gathering her up. She felt herself falling into his body. He put her left arm around his shoulder and wrapped his right arm around



her waist as they walked to the car. He opened the passenger side door and let her slide in. When he got in, he stared at her but didn't say anything. She just sat there, feeling weighted inside and out. Keith finally looked at the pathway ahead and started driving. When they reached her house, Lucy stared the floorboard, slumped. "Please," she said softly. "I don't want to go in there."

"You have to go. Where else are you going to sleep?"

She looked at him.

He opened his mouth, seemingly about to protest. He stopped though. He looked back at the road and started driving to his house. When they arrived, it was late at night. They were able to walk right in. Keith lived with his brother and no matter how many times he was told to, his brother rarely locked the door at night. Keith would always have to do it. His brother was studying in his room so it was easy to get in without being noticed. She got a shower and borrowed one of his shirts and pajama pants to sleep in. All of her clothes were soaked. Keith said that he would let her sleep in the bed, but she snatched one of his two pillows and practically collapsed on the floor.

"Lucy?"

She rolled over to look up at him sitting on the edge of his bed. Her whole body felt exhausted. She rubbed her eyes. "Yeah?"

He hesitated and then just laughed. "Nothing." He grabbed a blanket from his bed and threw it at her.

She turned over, wrapping herself up like a burrito and closed her eyes that was sure were puffy from crying. She looked at her phone. She was both thankful and disappointed that her mother had not called to see where she was.

She refused to talk to Liam. Morgan wasn't her friend anymore. More rumors started spreading around school. The more rumors that spread, the less time Lucy spent at home. Every day, Lucy had to endure her classmates, male and female, harassing her, calling her names, and saying that she would turn out just like her mother. She was so close to graduating. As soon as she did, she wanted to leave town. There would be no point staying where she was. The day after graduation, the police arrived to arrest her mother. Lucy learned that the charges were more than just sex with a minor. She was also accused of stealing and assault. Lucy realized that she had no idea what was going on while she wasn't at home. Two police officers came. The house went from being populated with four people to being populated by one as the officers handcuffed her mother and led her out of the house. She was all alone. That was the last time she could remember being relieved that she was finally by herself.

Lucy didn't pay much attention to the news about her mother's trial. She knew that people would talk to her about it anyway. She was actually surprised at the amount of people that talked to her about it. She figured people would talk about it behind her back more. There was still a fair share of that. While that was going on, she had already moved in with Keith. When Keith's brother ran off to Vegas to marry a girl he had met at a club a couple of months ago, Keith stayed at the apartment, putting it in his name. Keith was the one who told her that her mother had been moved to a mental hospital.

Lucy was there alone one cold afternoon, wrapped up in a large red throw.-Despite what happened earlier that day, she smiled when she realized that it was the same blanket she used that first night she stayed there on Keith's floor. As soon as she got comfortable, she heard her phone

ring. Reluctantly, she stuck her arm out from under the blanket. It was not a number that she recognized, but something told her to answer. “Hello?”

A recorded voice came from the other end. “An inmate from Anderson Correctional Facility is attempting to call you. Press one to accept. Press two to deny or hang up.” Lucy knew exactly who it was and her chest hurt as her heart pounded. She worried herself at how fast she pressed the number one. She barely thought about it.

“Oh Lucy, it’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Mom?” Lucy almost did not recognize her mother’s voice. It sounded tired, a bit haggard. She had rehearsed what she would say to her mother when they spoke, but all of her words were lost. She desperately tried to grab onto something, but all that came out was, “Hi.”

Lu-lu, how are you?

Her mother had not called her that since she was about five. She thought it would make her feel angry, but she felt upset. “Mommy,” she whispered.

“What?”

“What- What’s going on?” What’s going on? She’s not a friend calling you to hang out, Lucy thought.

“There’s not much to do here. I have been thinking about you a lot lately.”

Don’t freak out yet. “Yeah?”

There was a short pause. “So, how is everything going?”

Lucy had never wanted to hold onto a moment and want it to be over at the same time. “It’s going well, thanks.”

“Good. That’s good.”

After a few moments, Lucy could not take it anymore. “Mom. Why are you calling?”

“I’m sorry that we haven’t been able to talk. I have really missed you.”

Lucy could not stop the thoughts of suspicion that suddenly popped into her head. “Do you need anything, Mom?”

Another pause. “Just that I love you. You know that, right?”

Lucy had trusted in her mother before and look where that ended up.

She sighed. “I never meant to hurt you. I was feeling a lot of pain and I didn’t have anyone to turn to. I wish I had done things differently. If only your father were still alive.”

Lucy did begin to feel bad for her. That feeling faded when she said this. “Please, don’t bring Dad into this.”

“I know how fiercely you adored him. I only wish you felt the same way about me. You know that he wasn’t the perfect parent either. He missed a lot.”

“Mom, please-”

She continued as if she hadn’t heard her daughter. “It’s like that time at the zoo when you were young that you mentioned at the funeral. I know that you think he was the one who was engaged in the animals with you. I didn’t have the heart to tell you that it wasn’t him. You began saying that you did a lot with him that you actually did with me when everything had calmed down and I was never able to figure out why.”

Lucy shook her head and her brows furrowed. No, that can’t be right, she thought. That was Dad. She paused. It had to be him. “No. That can’t be right.” She began to think about her childhood experiences. She realized that there were details that were fuzzy. She couldn’t say for sure who was at certain places with her. Her heart was pounding. Her mind reeled and she became scared; her head ached. Lucy had grieved her father.

“It’s true. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“You wouldn’t lie to me? You slept with my boyfriend.”

“I never lied to you about that. I know it was wrong, but we never got the chance to talk about anything. You spent all your time at Keith’s house. You ran away like I tried to escape how I felt.”

Lucy did not want to admit that her mother was right. She had spent so much time trying to run away and forget about her mother. She did not even feel upset and her own voice sounded tired to her ears. “What was I supposed to do, Mom?”

Her mother sniffled. “I just felt so alone. You have to understand that.”

Lucy’s chest hurt more than ever

She felt a couple of tears escape. She took a few deep breaths and decided to get a glass of water. On her way to the kitchen, she passed the vanity close to the front door. When Keith’s mother moved out of her house, she put it in her sons’ apartment because she didn’t need it. Her sons didn’t either, but she left it there, complete with angel statues.

Lucy thought back to when her and her parents would squeeze onto the couch every Saturday night when she was young. Her favorite was *The Lion King*. She remembered the scene in *The Lion King* in which Simba looks into a pond and his reflection slowly morphs into the face of his father. As a child Lucy always enjoyed watching this scene, but thinking about it as a twenty-one-year-old, she was only reminded of the striking similarity that she shared with her mother. The thoughts of her attached to her and held on for dear life every time she tried to pry them away from her.

As she looked in the mirror, she could see the ways in which she resembled her mother. The light brown eyes, high cheek bones, long thin neck. From the conversation, Lucy realized

their similarities ran even deeper. “I understand, Mom.” She thought back to the picture of the three of them together before her father died.

She wanted to smash the mirror and break her reflection into so many tiny pieces so that it was unrecognizable. Before she could think, she picked up the angel statue and slammed it against the mirror. She stood there for a moment staring at the mirror which had cracked in such a way that reminded her of the sun rays stemming out from the center. Looking at the statue in her hand, she marveled at the strength it had to smash into a mirror and not get a crack. Lucy saw the damage to the glass and how her reflection had changed. Her face was all disjointed as if the cracks were hers and not those of her reflection. She wondered if her mother really did feel all the things she said she did. A large part of Lucy now wanted her mother back. If they could not be a family as they were before, at least she wouldn't feel so alone, so broken.

## The Animal (Wo)Men

### **Bear (Wo)Man**

Alexis looked at the sky full of stars out her window. As she did every night, she took a dry erase marker and used the stars as connect the dots, drawing shapes on the glass. This night, she searched the sky for a shape and thought that she saw a bear. She took the cap off the marker with her teeth and began to trace the outline of the bear, making sure to accentuate every feature: its large snout, teeth, claws. As she connected the last dot to the first, something on the ground caught her eye. Two people were on the front lawn. One was her mother and the other one was a man she had never seen before. Or had she? He sort of looked like her classmate Sarah's dad, but it was hard to tell from the third floor. Alexis watched as her mother and this man talked, looking over their shoulders every now and then. Then they got close to each other and kissed. She had only seen her mother kiss her father before. Was she allowed to do that? As her mother fell into the kiss, the man sunk his claws into her shirt, almost looking as though he was going to tear it open. Meanwhile, Alexis could see one of her mother's hands latch onto the man's hair. Only after a few moments did she let go and run her hand through his hair, making the action seem more gentle. She saw the man look and then point in the direction of Alexis's window. Before she could close the curtain, her mother spun around. Alexis hit the ground.

"Please, don't let her have seen me. Please, don't let her have seen me," she pleaded in a hushed voice. Then, she heard the front door creak open. Her heart raced. She knew she wasn't supposed to be up there so late at night, but she was always able to get down the stairs unnoticed since her parents were asleep. Now, she had to get to her bed as fast as possible without making a sound. She wished she had worn the slippers she had gotten for Christmas just a few months earlier. Her bare feet padded across the wooden floor as she reached the top of the stairs. She sat

down on the first step and scooted down each remaining stair, not worried about how much the hem of her nightgown rode up. On the third to last step, she stood up, grabbed the wall and staircase, and jumped the last two stairs onto the floor. As she ran to her room, she glanced back at the stairs, proud of herself. The most she had ever jumped was one step.

She could hear her mother's footsteps coming up the stairs. She thought it was funny that she could tell it was her mother and not her father just by the way the footsteps sounded. Alexis wished she could slide as she had done so many other times; she would definitely be there before her mother if she could slide. She ran the last few steps to her room and hung onto her doorframe to swing into her room. She raced to her bed and dove under the covers just as she heard her mother was about to enter Alexis's room. She rolled onto her side so that she was facing the wall across from her door.

Her mother shuffled into the room and sat on the edge of Alexis's bed. She placed her hand on Alexis's arm. "Are you awake, baby?"

Alexis let the option of just pretending to be asleep roll around in her head for a few moments before deciding to roll over. She was still breathing hard from running, but maybe she could hide it better if she acted like she was awake. Before her parents bought her a night light, she used to wake herself up with a yell from nightmares. She would pretend to have just woken up from a nightmare again to explain the breathing. She squirmed and groaned a couple of times and then sprung up, startling her mother who immediately pulled her into a hug. She stroked Alexis's hair and shushed her, telling her it was okay. Alexis could smell a slight odor that clung to her mother's clothes. It smelled a bit like what her father's cologne smelled like, the one he wore on special occasions when he and her mother would go out to dinner. Alexis liked



when her father would put that cologne on and give her a big hug. But it smelled bad now, like it shouldn't be there.

Her mother let go of her, but kept her hands on Alexis's arms. "I thought the night light had taken care of those night mares. What was it about this time?" She stroked Alexis's hair again.

Alexis hadn't prepared for this question. "Uhm...well...I don't remember." She looked at her comforter and tried to focus on tracing the flower patterns.

Her mother was silent, but continued on when Alexis did not say anything else. "Do you know why the lamp was on in the third-floor nook?"

Alexis's eyes grew wide, but she kept her stare on the comforter to hide them. How could she have forgotten about the lamp? She must have been in such a hurry that it slipped her mind.

"Were you up there earlier tonight, Alexis?"

Her mother usually used her nickname, Lexi, unless she was in trouble. Alexis tried her best to force her face to be as straight as possible. She looked at her mother. "Much earlier."

"So, you weren't up there just about five to ten minutes ago?"

Alexis shook her head.

Her mother stared in her eyes for a moment or two, but it felt like an hour to Alexis. "Okay, then. Try to get back to sleep. I love you." She got up and headed to the door.

"Love you too," said Alexis as her mother left. Alexis let out a huge sigh as if she had been holding her breath without realizing it. She lay back down, hoping that the smell of the cologne did not linger on her pajamas or bedsheets.

The next morning, Alexis ambled down stairs for breakfast where her father was scrambling eggs. “Morning, Lexi.”

“Hey, Daddy.” Alexis climbed onto a kitchen chair with a yawn. “What’re we eating?”

“We’re going to have the whole shebang. There’s going to be eggs, toast, bacon, sausage, fruit, and whatever else I can find. I’m making breakfast you and Mommy.”

Alexis almost never saw her father preparing...anything. She remembered when she saw her mother kissing that other man last night and wondered if he knew anything about it. “Hey, Dad?”

He kept his back to her as he continued making eggs. “What’s up?”

“You never make breakfast. Why are you doing it today?”

He paused what he was doing, but seemed to recover quickly. “Doing things for people you love lets them know that you care. You have to let them know that you love them and you never want to lose them.” His shoulders slumped.

Alexis’s mother walked into the kitchen. “Good morning.” She kissed Alexis on the forehead and then headed over to Alexis’s father. He turned around and they kissed each other on the lips.

“Good morning, baby,” he said.

Alexis noticed that her mother’s clothes were different from the ones she was wearing last night. She wondered if her mother had heard any of the conversation that she was having with her father. She hoped her mother didn’t; she didn’t want to get in trouble.

“How did you sleep last night?” Alexis’s mother asked her father.

“Great. Barely woke up.”

Her mother turned to her. “Sleep well, Lexi?”

Alexis felt relieved that her mother was using the nickname. She nodded her head and her mother winked at her. Alexis smiled, believing that she had been let in and trusted with a secret. She didn't understand exactly what was going on and didn't know how to feel towards her father, but she clutched to the feeling of having a connection with her mother that no one could sever.

### **Dog (Wo)Man**

Jasmine had been Alexis's friend for a couple of years and now that they entered into the fifth grade, they played together every day at recess, but this day was different. Only a few minutes before they were scheduled to go outside, Jasmine wrapped her arms around her abdomen and complained to the teacher, Ms. Mulley, that her stomach hurt. As Ms. Mulley wrote up a hall pass, Jasmine turned her head and winked at Alexis. She jerked her head to signal Alexis to come along with her. Alexis liked spending the least amount of time home as possible at home but both of her parents were at work so if she was going to be sent home for being sick, at least she could have some peace and quiet. She got up from her desk while all of her classmates were finishing up an assignment. Jasmine and Alexis were always the first to finish their work. Once she reached Ms. Mulley's desk, Alexis grabbed her stomach too. "Ms. Mulley, my stomach hurts too. Can I go to the clinic?"

Ms. Mulley looked back and forth between the two girls for a few moments. "Are you sure you really feel sick too?"

Without a look to Jasmine, Alexis put her hand to her mouth and made a noise as if she were about to throw up.

“Okay, okay.” Ms. Mulley started writing another hall pass for her, but quit and instead added her name to Jasmine’s. “Just take this one and hurry to the clinic.” Ms. Mulley hated when kids threw up and everyone knew it.

Alexis and Jasmine snickered as they left the room.

“So, what’re we doing?” Alexis asked as they walked down the hall.

Jasmine shrugged her shoulders. “Today is art day and I don’t want to go.”

Each day of the week they had a different activity. Monday was music day. Wednesday was art day. It was actually Alexis’s favorite day. “Are we going home?”

Jasmine shrugged again. “I figured we could walk around and then see how we feel. We have a hall pass after all.” She smiled at Alexis.

Alexis didn’t know what Jasmine’s life was like at home, but she did know that Jasmine was more reckless than she was. Jasmine didn’t have parents fighting all the time like Alexis did, but Alexis never actually saw Jasmine’s parents. Only her grandmother. They couldn’t go outside because the office was right beside the front doors. There was a silence while they walked around their hallway (fourth and fifth grade), the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade hallway, the gymnasium, and the cafeteria. Alexis wondered why Jasmine had brought her along. She was about to ask, but when they reached the library, Jasmine broke the silence.

“Hey, did you hear about Sarah?”

“No. What happened?”

“Her parents are getting divorced.”

Alexis saw Sarah talking to the teacher the day before, but they were alone. “How the heck did you hear that?”

“I had to sit outside of the music room because I was ‘disturbing class’ and I heard them talking farther down the hallway.” It never shocked Alexis to hear that Jasmine got in trouble.

“I’m bored. Let’s go to the clinic and go home.”

Alexis was glad to hear that. Her stomach had actually started hurting since she heard about Sarah’s parents and remembered what she saw a few years ago. She was now sure it was Sarah’s father that she saw kissing her mother that night.

When they reached the clinic, Alexis explained to the nurse that her stomach hurt, sort of like a rock was sitting on the bottom of it. When Jasmine said that her stomach hurt too, the nurse asked them if they knew why. Alexis knew, but she wasn’t going to say anything so she sat down on the padded bench.

Jasmine looked over at Alexis and back at the nurse. “They just started hurting.”

The nurse proceeded to call Jasmine’s grandmother to see if Jasmine could be administered Pepto-Bismol. As she did Jasmine sat next to her and placed her hand on Alexis’s back. “Hey, are you okay?”

Alexis held her stomach. “I just want to go home.”

After the nurse hung up, she walked over to the girls. “Well Jasmine, it seems that your grandmother wants to pick you up. Alexis, I’ll call your mother to see-”

“Can you call my dad?” Alexis cut in immediately.

The nurse proceeded with the call. Alexis looked over at Jasmine who had pulled out a string and was attempting to do a cat’s cradle. She looked at Alexis. “You want to try it?”

Alexis took the string and put it around her fingers. Every time she tried, the string kept getting caught and she ended up making a mess. Jasmine grabbed her wrists. “You’re tangling it all up.” She straightened it out enough to slip the string from Alexis’s fingers.

Alexis looked at the ground. “I’m sorry I’m making such a mess.”

The nurse hung up and explained that Alexis’s father agreed that she should go home. There was a neighbor who looked after her sometimes. She was to go to the neighbor’s house once she was driven home by Jasmine’s grandmother and wait there until he or her mother arrived home. When the three of them made it to Alexis’s house, Alexis headed in the direction of her neighbor’s house and waved while Jasmine and her grandmother left. After they were out of sight, Alexis walked to her own house and used the key under the rock near the door to get in. She opened the door and dropped her backpack right inside. As she did, she heard loud music she had never heard before coming from her parents’ bedroom. No one was supposed to be home.

She tiptoed down the hallway and noticed the door cracked just enough see a sliver of what was happening on the other side. She saw a man lying on the bed, arms over his head, but he didn’t have a shirt on. She didn’t know who this man was, but she knew it was not her dad or Sarah’s. Her mother approached the bed. She was wearing a robe that Alexis had never seen before. She let the robe slide off her shoulders to showcase that she was not wearing anything underneath. Alexis could see the man’s eyes widen and his mouth moving, but the music overshadowed any words that came out of his mouth. Alexis didn’t know what was happening. Her stomach turned and she rushed to the bathroom. Standing over the toilet waiting for something to come out didn’t do anything though. She sat on the edge of the tub next to the toilet and took a deep breath. As she went to take another, it got caught in her throat. A loud noise reached her ears. It sounded like a yell but one that she had never heard before. It sounded like the howl of a dog or wolf. It happened over and over. Alexis slid to the floor of the bathroom, brought her knees to her chest, shut her eyes tight, and covered her ears until it was over.

## Snake (Wo)Man

Alexis sat on her bed, trying to force her lines to stick in her memory; she had trouble memorizing lines even when she was in the second-grade production of *A Christmas Carol*. Against her mother's wishes, Alexis decided to try out for the school's musical, *The Sound of Music*, now that she was in high school. Her mother pretended to be happy for her, but Alexis could tell that her mother wasn't being genuine. She would say that in high school, girls who were in plays never got boyfriends. No matter how many times Alexis told her mother that she didn't care if she had a boyfriend or not, her mother kept saying, "you will care soon." Alexis felt her relationship with her mother becoming more distant. Alexis was not interested in shopping and having sleepovers with her friends, things she was supposed to love according to her mother. Her mother became more like a renter than a mother that Alexis lived with. Even though her father didn't do much more, attempting to connect with her was more his role. He was coming around the house less and less since her parents had seriously been talking about getting a divorce.

When her friends started wearing make-up, Alexis felt left out. It wasn't because they were getting attention from guys, but they seemed to be hanging out with the "popular" girls more and her, less. As soon as Alexis mentioned to her mother that she was thinking about make-up, her mother beamed and immediately took Alexis to the bathroom. Her mother produced an arsenal of eyeshadow, eyeliner, lipstick, brushes, and other products she had never seen before. Even though she had homework to do, Alexis's mother began applying make-up and naming each. She dragged the liquid eyeliner across her lid trying to stay as close to her lashes as possible. Next, she coated dark red lipstick onto her lips. As she contoured by spreading different colors on her face, accentuating some and slimming others down, Alexis began to see another

woman. Her mother was changing herself. Alexis was amazed at the power the makeup had, the power her mother had. While she was not into it as her mother was, as she began covering her own features with foundation and eyeshadow, Alexis saw the appeal. There was a certain sense of power and control that came along with make-up; she liked that.

I call it “the mystery” look,” her mother said. Alexis felt a mix of emotions. She wondered how much her mother was trying to hide. Her mother was a mystery. Alexis had decided last year that she was not going to try to connect with her mother, but something always pulled her back, a string that just wouldn’t break. When they were finished, Alexis’s face hurt from using so many make-up remover wipes between looks.

Alexis tried to follow what her mother was doing, but she was using words and names of make-up that didn’t make sense. Her mother, seeing Alexis’s struggle, said they would try again on the weekend. The high school didn’t allow “crazy” make-up anyway. Alexis’s friends were impressed by the simple daytime look that her mother said would look good for school. Though it didn’t matter much to Alexis at first, she did start getting attention from the boys in her class as well as those a few grades higher. She started to care more as her friends’ conversations began to center around how they were going to sneak out to see their boyfriends over the weekends. Besides make-up, her mother also gave her advice on how to talk to guys. Alexis didn’t pay much attention to her “teachings,” but when James, a senior, began showing interest, her friends demanded that she jump at the chance to date him. Within a few weeks, they were dating. Alexis didn’t pay much attention to her “teachings” though.

Her cellphone ringing interrupted her focus. The screen lit up with James’s name. Her heart skipped; she loved when he called. “Hey, James.”

“Hey, babe.”



Her heart skipped again. She wanted to record him saying those words and store it away forever. It was one of the best sounds she had ever heard. “What’s up?”

“So, Dustin is having a party tomorrow night that I’m thinking about going to. You want to go?”

“Tomorrow night? But that’s opening night of the play. You promised that you would go. I’m going to be really nervous.”

“Aren’t you only in the chorus?”

Alexis wanted to play a larger role and was sure she told James that she didn’t want to talk about that disappointment anymore. He thought she was being overdramatic when she got upset so she took a deep breath to keep her composure and trudged on. “Well, yes, but I still have to be there. Just because I’m part of a group doesn’t mean I can just skip out. Ms. Jacobson says everyone needs to do their best to make up a strong play.”

“Well, that’s not really what I meant.”

“Then what did you-” Alexis stopped, realizing what he was trying to say. “You’re talking about missing the performance and going to the party without me, aren’t you?”

“You know plays aren’t my thing, Lexi.”

At first, she liked him calling her by her nickname, but now she hated him for it. She didn’t want to beg him. She couldn’t, but she felt as though she needed him to be there. “James, please.”

There was a pause.

“How about this? I’ll go and you’ll know I did it just for you. Not because I want to, but because it’s you. Because I’m doing this, then you can do something for me.”

Alexis could guess what he was referring to. He had heard from others at school that he was not one for waiting until marriage. His father was a preacher who taught that abstaining from sex would get people into heaven and James rebelled against this and every other thing that his father preached. Alexis mulled over the what she was supposed to say in this situation. The word “okay” was too submissive, and just saying “no” wouldn’t give her what she wanted. She had to give him an answer. Suddenly, something that her mother said drove itself to the forefront of her mind. Power. It was all about power. “I’ll make it worth your while,” she decided on. She couldn’t tell if that came off as she had intended it, but James seemed to appreciate it.

“That’s what I like to hear.”

The night of the play, Alexis scoured the audience in search for familiar faces, but she found no one she knew. She figured that her parents both thought that the other one would go just like when one of them was supposed to be at the parent-teacher conference. As soon as the play was about to start, she spotted James slink into a seat near the back of the auditorium. She smiled, knowing that at least one person cared enough to come see her. However, while he seemed engaged during the first time she was on stage, her smile faded when she entered onto the stage for the second time and saw that he was staring down. She presumed he was looking at his phone. Every subsequent time she was on stage, he was just as disengaged. At this point, she figured only naked girls dancing onstage would get him to pay attention; the nuns were just too covered up.

After the play was over, Alexis met James right outside the entrance to the auditorium. He gave her a one-armed hug and kissed her on the forehead while his eyes were still glued to the phone. “Good job, babe.”

“Thanks.” Alexis kept her eyes on the tiles and then looked up at him. “Did you like the play?”

He finally shoved his phone in his pocket. “Yeah, it was good.” He snaked his arm around her waist. “So, what do you want to do now?” he asked with a wink.

Oh right. The offer. “How about we get to your car and you’ll see.” She managed what she thought was a seductive smile. She bit her lip just for good measure.

He took her words at face value. She had gotten him hook, line, and sinker. They headed to the car, him practically pulling her. Almost immediately after they both shut their doors, his fingers rubbed up and down her thigh. Before long, he lunged for her face, taking a hold of the back of her head and smashing his lips against hers. It sent a jolt through her body. Her body didn’t feel like hers. She felt scared for the first time since she had been with him. Being that he was much larger than she was, she used the weight of her whole body to push herself on top of him. They continued kissing and she could feel the bulge pressing up against her so much that it was almost painful.

“You feel that? I call it ‘the python’.”

Alexis tried not to laugh. Just as she thought she was going to lose it, there was a knock on the driver’s side window. James tossed her and she fumbled into the passenger seat. James rolled down the window. It was his basketball coach. He straightened up and Alexis could only imagine how wide his eyes were. She averted her eyes so as not to meet the coach’s, but she could see that he was looking between the both of them out of her peripheral vision.

“What the hell are you doing, Madison?” The coach’s booming voice made Alexis jump.

“Nothing, coach. We were just leaving.”

“You better be. This is the last straw. For the past few months, you’ve either got your head up your ass or your tongue in some girl’s mouth. We have to think about the end of the season, son.”

“Yes sir, coach.”

The coach left and James’s attitude did a complete 180. He put the key in the ignition and drove out of the parking lot. That was all right with her seeing as how her mother drove her to school that day and neither of her parents came to the play. Alexis knew that saying something may push her luck, but she felt a surge of power that her mother must have been talking about. She not only got the upper hand earlier but she also got James in trouble with no consequences. “So, we’re all done then, huh?”

He kept staring at the road in front of him. “Yeah.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence. Alexis didn’t know that the coach would have affected him so much. She wanted to have that kind of complete control, but thriving off of the byproduct of the coach’s hold over James was enough for the night. When they arrived at the house. Alexis turned to James. “So, what do you want to do?”

“Whatever you want to.” He looked more angry than hurt now.

Alexis was done with him for the night. She got out, slammed the door and headed inside. She heard her mother talking on the phone in her room, but walked right past it into her own room and shut the door quietly so as not to make her mother come talk to her. She fell onto her bed, processing the new emotions she felt. She smiled thinking about what she could do in the future. She didn’t really care if her relationship with James ended the next day. They had only been together a couple of months anyway. There were so many other people, other people that may not already have someone that has such a hold over them.

## **Shark (Wo)Man**

Her senior year of high school was so filled with catching up on schoolwork after wasting time chasing after boys and dealing with any rumors that were spreading about her, that college applications fell to the wayside. Since her mother had been spending more and more time away from home, Alexis was free to bring boys over. Those boys brought other boys and those boys brought alcohol. She realized that was the best way to find out who her true friends were, even if she did take the hard route. Though she thought they were stick-in-the-muds, at least her new friends helped her not to start every week off with a hangover. Alexis never went to church when invited, she did stay home more on the weekends. Unfortunately, once she realized her old lifestyle was a waste of time, most of the application deadlines had passed. She knew she wanted to get out of town, but the time crunch and money issues were holding her back. By a stroke of luck, she discovered that the community college was still accepting applications. If she waited until next year or even just next semester, she may get stuck in a job around town and settle into something that was comfortable. One of the only pieces of educational advice that her mother ever gave her pertained to the idea that she forwent college and didn't want her daughter to fall into the same trap.

She was glad that she made the decision she did when she met Zachary during her sophomore year. He wasn't the captain of the swim team, but everyone liked and respected him as if he was. She first laid eyes on him when her ~~Her~~ friend from Biology class dragged her to one of the practices; ~~since~~ her brother was on the swim team and drove both of them home every day. Alexis, and most of the other girls she knew, was hooked from the first time that she saw Zachary. Whenever he would get out of the pool, he would shake his dark brown hair in a way that would resemble cologne commercials that would appeal to women, giving them a "your

man can look like this too if you buy this scent” feel. It worked on these college girls. And he knew it. At least he seemed more humble about it than some of his other teammates. He was certainly more humble than the baseball players, although Alexis thought the swimmers had better bodies than any of the baseball players had anyway.

She wasn't surprised when he asked her out when classes commenced after Christmas break. She was always around the pool during the month of November. She leaned against the wall watching as other students who had stayed late left as she waited for Zachary to get done with practice. One guy who looked to be a little older than her was hanging back in the crowd. They locked eyes and he kept his gaze focused on her eyes for a moment too long as a sense of fear crept through her body. She pulled her phone out of her jacket pocket and started scrolling through Facebook. Zachary was bound to be out soon and she could leave. After a few moments, she saw a pair of shoes stop in front of her. She looked up with a smile. “Zach, I'm glad you're here.” Her smile vanished as she realized that it was the other guy from the crowd.

His eyes were a piercing blue, demanding the attention of anyone that he was talking to. The thin-rimmed glasses only seemed to accentuate them. His dark hair reminded her of Zachary, except that her boyfriend's hair was much shorter. “You're Alexis, right?”

Alexis moved away from the wall. She wasn't going to be pinned without a quick escape. The fear that she felt was almost equal to the fear that she felt when she was in the car with James. “Yeah.”

“I'm Freddy. We sit near each other in Calculus.”

Alexis never paid attention to the lectures, much less who was sitting in hell with her. Alexis was good at math. She never understood why since both of her parents seemed to barely be able to balance a checkbook. She took a couple steps back “Okay.”

Freddy was obviously noticing the effect that he was having on her. “I’m sorry. I just noticed that you have been receiving good grades on the tests and I need at least a B on the final just to pass. I was hoping that you could help me study. Maybe give me a few tips.”

“Oh okay. Uhm, sure.” Alexis felt all of the fear and dread leave her. She didn’t know this person, but he needed her, not like how she had first felt she needed James.

A smile flashed upon Freddy’s face. “Thanks.” He took out a scrap of paper with a series of numbers written on it.

Did he really already write down his number to give to me? Alexis thought.

“Here’s my number so we can be in contact about when would be a good time for you. You are the one helping me after all.” He handed her the paper.

“I know.” She smiled to herself, taking the number and shoving it into her pocket.

Just as their interaction ended, Zachary pushed the double doors open. He carried his bag full of damp towels and a bathing suit. A Speedo to be precise. Alexis’s friends made fun of her saying that that was the reason that she was with him. How he looked in a Speedo was just too irresistible for her. She never denied or confirmed that to any of them.

His brows furrowed as he looked at Alexis and Freddy. He strode toward the pair and put his arm around Alexis’s shoulders. With one look from Freddy to Alexis, he said, “You ready to go, Lexi?”

She beamed at his touch and his use of her nickname. She always had to look up to him as he was about half a foot taller than she was. “Ready.”

The couple turned to head to the double doors to the outside. As they did, Alexis turned her head and looked over her shoulder at Freddy. He had begun to walk off in the other direction,

but looked over his shoulder as well. He smiled and waved. She gave him a small smile as her and Zachary walked out the doors.

Both of them got into Zach's car. He had begun to pick her up in the morning and drive her either to her house or to his apartment. Alexis was excited because she was going to spend the night at his place. They hadn't spent the night together in weeks. Swimming was taking up more time than she could have ever imagined it would. It started to get on her nerves, but she took the down-time after classes to do homework so she barely had any when she got home. After all, they didn't leave until around 8:00 at night.

"Are you excited for tonight?" Alexis gave Zachary a sly smile. "I told my mom that I was staying at a friend's house since I had an early exam tomorrow. It isn't even time to have exams yet. She bought it without any convincing."

Zachary kept his eyes on the road. "Who was that?"

"What?"

"The guy that you were with."

"Just some guy that needed help with math."

"That's all he needed help with?"

"Of course." She then understood what was happening. "You're jealous, aren't you? Aww, Zach is jealous." She touched his arm playfully, but he pulled away. "Zach, come on."

"Lexi, he wants more than that. How can you not see that?" His voice rose. He hit the wheel for emphasis.

She didn't understand this outburst. "Don't fly off the handle. He just asked for math help and gave me his number to set up a time to study."

"He gave you his number?"



She realized this was not something she should have said. She stayed quiet.

He looked from her to the road a couple times. “If you want to be with him, go ahead. I’ll find someone else to date.” He said this last bit under his breath, but Alexis heard it.

She felt a sharp pang in her chest, so much that she put a hand to her heart. She thought she might cry, but quickly recovered. “Go ahead then,” she yelled. “Take me home. Now.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence and didn’t say anything except “bye” when she slammed the car door shut.

When she got into the house, her mother was sitting on the couch. It surprised Alexis so much that she jumped back and dropped her backpack.

Her mother giggled. “Didn’t mean to scare you, honey.” She paused. “Wait, weren’t you supposed to be at your friend’s house?”

“Didn’t go as planned.” Alexis went into the kitchen and dished up some ice cream. Instead of going to her room as she usually did, something compelled her to sit down on the recliner near the couch. She was silent for a few minutes as she watched whatever reality TV show her mother was viewing. Suddenly the screen went black as her mother turned the TV off. Alexis looked at her mother who was already looking at her.

“Do you want to talk about something?”

Alexis thought about it for a moment and decided that it couldn’t hurt. She recounted everything that happened, changing up the story a bit so as not to expose her lie. When she was done, her mother looked surprised, her brow furrowed. “Sounds like he blew up over nothing. That’s what jealousy will do.”

Alexis thought that whatever she said next would come across as rude since what her mother was saying was painfully obvious. She knew all that. She decided to stay quiet.

Her mother continued. “You know that you can date two people at once. That’s what I would do. Freddy seems like he wants to spend time with you.”

“Mom, that’s cheating. You can’t just date more than one person. I’m committed to Zach.”

Her mother raised her eyebrows and put her hands in the air. “I’m just trying to help you be happy.”

Alexis realized why she didn’t talk to her mother about relationships or anything else for that matter. She walked to her room and shut the door. She flopped on her bed and texted Zachary a simple “Hey.” She waited and waited. He read her message, but would not reply. She thought about what her mother said. She wasn’t going to date both of them, but she could use this situation to her advantage. She texted Freddy. “Let’s get together at 7:00 tomorrow outside the pool area.”

Alexis met up with Freddy the next night. They found a table with benches attached and sat down, opening up their books. “So, what exactly are you confused about?” Alexis asked.

Freddy was turning pages. “I went over some stuff last night and a few things started clicking, but from about two weeks ago to now, I am totally lost.”

Alexis stared at Freddy. “Freddy. That’s quite a bit, you know?” She chuckled and so did he.

“I know, but that’s why I asked the smartest person in the class for help.”

Alexis smiled as a butterfly fluttered in her stomach. She thought that was a weird thing to feel. She shoved it down and they pushed on through the concepts. With each problem that she helped him solve, she felt better and better. Whenever he would say he didn’t understand

something and needed her, it was music to her ears. A few times she pretended that she didn't hear what he said just so that he would repeat that he needed help. Before she knew it, it was 8:00 and the swim team was leaving the pool area. Alexis looked up periodically, trying to catch Zachary's eye. She spotted him coming out of the doors and looking around. She quickly cast her eyes down to the book again. Out of her peripheral vision she could see him walking toward her. She looked at Freddy and laughed as if he said something funny.

"I'm taking you home, aren't I?" Zachary cut in.

Alexis looked up at him. "Can't you see that I'm helping Freddy with math? Just like I said I would do."

"Lexi, come on." He sounded exasperated.

"I'm staying here. Can you leave now?"

He rolled his eyes and left while Alexis and Freddy went back to studying. He smiled at her and she smiled back.

The next day, Lexi awoke to a text from Zach. "Lexi, I'm sorry about what happened. Can't we get back to normal? I'll do whatever you want." A warmth spread through her whole body. "Whatever you want." She texted back. "Of course, babe." For the next few weeks, that is exactly what she got. Wherever she wanted to go and whatever she wanted to do is what they did. She felt as good as she did when Freddy asked for help. Better even. She noticed Freddy hanging around, but she did not really need to talk to him anymore. As the weeks went by, Zachary got tired of "doing her bidding" as he called it, and they broke up. Alexis had begun to grow tired of him anyway. College in general was boring her and she could not wait to leave.

## **Eagle (Wo)Man**

Alexis was feeling the midday slump at work as she refolded the fifteenth “Live Laugh Love” crop top that teenagers had messed up while shopping for summer clothes. Summer was just around the corner and Alexis was dreading it. She had graduated with an arts degree but had been unable to find work. One of the clothing stores in the mall had hired her as a seasonal worker last Christmas and kept her on once it was over. She was grateful for the income especially since she was finally able to move out of her mother’s house.

Alexis looked up at the clock and realized that it was 12:30. Time for lunch. She made her way to the food court and bought some chicken fried rice. Choosing a table that was far from every other table that was already occupied was not an easy task. The mall was packed that day. She sat at a table near a group of teenagers and pulled her notebook out of her purse. Every day at lunch, she took to people watching and sketching what she saw. There were plenty of subjects to practice with that day. She was so focused on getting one of the women’s hair just right that she didn’t notice someone sitting down at the table separating her from the teenagers.

“Wow, you’re good.”

“Huh?” Alexis jumped at the sudden interruption.

“Oh no, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I just saw what you were drawing. You’re talented.”

“Thank you. Four years of college will do that to you, at least you hope.”

“I actually write myself, but I did work with a friend of mine on a children’s book. She did the illustrations; I did the writing.”

She put down her pencil and looked at him. That had been part of her dream when she started drawing, but she couldn't find any position that would allow her to do this, much less one that would give her enough money to live off of. "Really? That sounds great."

"Yeah. This is actually how my friend started. Well, not at the mall, but she would sketch people at the park after work."

Alexis closed her sketchbook. "Do you write full time?"

"Well, I write every day, but I'm sure you know that jobs within the arts community don't actually allow you to buy a mansion." She flashed him a smile that made her feel both excited and at ease. "Do you work here?"

"How did you know?"

He tapped on the left side of his chest and she brought her hand up to the area on her on body and realized she was still wearing her nametag. "Right. Yeah, I do. At Buckle."

"Same here. At the Verizon store." He looked at his watch. "I better be getting back to it. "I'm Matthew, by the way." He held out his hand to her.

"Alexis," she said shaking his hand.

"Would you ever like to hang out sometime?"

Alexis hesitated. "How about lunch tomorrow?"

"It's a date." He smiled as he left.

Alexis smiled as she threw her trash away. She focused on what her brain was telling her and tried to ignore any butterflies she felt. She didn't know who this person was. Despite this, she could not shove down thoughts about him and working on a book with him so much that the rest of the day went by quickly.

The next day, they met up at the food court and each day after that, he walked to Buckle and accompanied her to the food court. They continued this routine for weeks until Alexis accepted his invitation to go to dinner for a real date. When they had lunch together for the second day, she lamented the fact that the food court didn't have any Italian food except a crappy pizza place. When they had their proper first date, he surprised her with a picnic in the park, having made pasta from scratch. From then on, she was hooked. They began officially dating just a week later. Things were good and they even started working on a book together. They had started previous projects, but this one actually seemed to be getting off the ground. There was something to be said about focusing on normal childhood problems and projecting them onto small rabbits and elephants.

Friday was her day off and she was drawing for her and Matthew's project when she thought about her youth and her mother. Alexis hadn't seen her in months and barely talked to her. Her pencil glided across the page as if it had a mind of its own. She thought back to her constellations. She concentrated to dot the page with the shapes she could remember. A bear was coming into focus, just as it had on the window. She sketched a little bird as herself and placed it in her childhood home. She tried drawing her mother, but drawing her as a majestic mother bird didn't seem quite right. Instead, she focused on herself outside her mother's door. Alexis wouldn't understand what was happening on the other side of that door until much later. She imagined how the wives of these other men would have felt when they found out what was going on with her mother. Her pencil drew a dog face, enraged as if being found after being tied up for weeks. She scribbled lines on the page until she composed the face of a gorilla, baring its teeth as if someone entered into its territory and was terrorizing her young. Alexis never talked to her mother about what she saw or even how she felt. She could never explain this weird commitment

she had to her mother for secret keeping. She figured that it had something to do with her father running off. They didn't talk much at all. Her mother was all she had. She was in her mid-twenties and still couldn't explain or express what she was feeling. She only knew that there was a boiling in her stomach, acid bubbling from the bottom of and rising through her whole body. Her fist balled around the pencil and she could hear her breathing quicken.

She was so fixated on the volcano threatening to erupt inside her that she didn't hear Matthew walk through the door. She had unlocked the door when he said he was on his way. She flinched as he put his hand on her shoulder. She dropped the pencil and turned around. "Don't do that." She emphasized each word through clenched teeth.

He threw his hands up. "I'm sorry. I thought you heard me come in." He looked over her shoulder at the pictures. "Woah, what're those?"

She snatched up the papers. "They're nothing. Don't worry about them."

"They are just so different from what I've seen before." He laughed. "They definitely wouldn't work for our project though."

Something seemed to snap. She didn't want to revert back to how she used to act, but the words of her mother reverberated in the back of her head. *You know that you can date two people at once.* The next words just leapt from her mouth before she could reach out and catch them. "Maybe I'll just find someone else then. Someone who will appreciate my work."

"Alexis, what are you talking about?" She had to admit that he didn't use "Lexi." She started hating the nickname and she let him know as soon as he said it the first time.

She stood up from the chair and took a few steps back. She felt a tear roll down her cheek before she could stop it. "Yeah. Yeah." She nodded her head a few times, unsure if she was trying to convince him or herself more. "You heard what I said."

Matthew walked up to her and wrapped his arms around her. A few more tears fell from her eyes and stained Matthew's shirt. He pulled away, but still held onto the tops of her arms. "Alexis. I need you to talk to me. I love you, but if something is going, you need to tell me. You and I are too old to be playing these games. I want to be with you."

Alexis had calmed down, but she was surprised. She felt like she had really let her guard down completely with Matthew....and it was okay. What he said made sense. Tension released in her shoulders and felt tired. She felt like she had been holding her breath, but she didn't know for how long. She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed tightly. She let go and wiped her cheeks. "Can we do a raincheck?"

He lifted her chin so they were looking into each other's eyes. He brushed her cheek with his hand and smiled. "Sure." After he left, she got into her car and headed to her mother's house.

When she arrived, she knocked on the door and her mother answered.

Her eyes widened but so did her smile. "Hey, Lexi. How unexpected. Come on in."

Alexis walked in. She turned to her mother, about to talk about what happened with Matthew, but something stopped her. "I...wanted to grab some stuff from my old room."

"Oh." Her mother looked disappointed. Her sad eyes looked around the room. "Well I'm sure I can find a box around here somewhere." She found an empty box in the back of the pantry and handed it to Alexis. She looked tired. "I'm sure I can find another box if you need it."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm sure this will be fine." Alexis walked down the hallway to her room and starting taking things from her bookshelf and putting them on her bed.

Her mother stood in the doorway. "So....how is everything going?"

"It's fine, thanks."

"Are you seeing anybody?"



Alexis knew they were venturing into dangerous territory. “Yep. Name’s Matthew. He’s great.”

“I’m sure he is. Just make sure to explore. You don’t want to limit your options.”

Alexis picked up a book but hesitated before putting it in the box. “You know, Mom, actually I do.” She placed the book in the box and turned around. “I’ve gotten over your ‘teachings’.”

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Alexis couldn’t help but laugh. “Come on, Mom. I know how important control was for you. Sarah’s dad.”

“You know about that?”

“I saw everything and I felt how you tried to make me the same as you.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me about this?”

“How was I supposed to? I didn’t want to get in trouble. When I figured out what was going on, what was the point of rehashing things again?” She picked up the box and headed out of her room.

Her mother followed. “I felt trapped. I didn’t feel like I had another choice.”

Alexis turned to face her mother. “There was always divorce, Mom. Hell, you did that years later. I know it wasn’t just about feeling trapped.”

“I was afraid I would lose you,” she blurted out. Her glance fell to the floor. “I didn’t want to lose you.”

Alexis stopped and turned around. “What?”

“Look, I made mistakes. A lot of them. You know that. Yes, I cheated on your dad and we stayed in the marriage longer than we should have. I didn’t want you to turn out feeling like I

did. You have to know that.” Alexis had never seen her mother look so desperate. She thought her mother would get down on her knees if she didn’t say something. But her mother continued. “I’m sorry if what I said has caused you to suffer. Please, baby. You are all I have.” She looked like she was about to cry. She wasn’t defending anything she did. She wasn’t blaming Alexis for anything, although Alexis started to believe she should. Her mother didn’t actually force her to do anything. “I love you.”

Alexis walked over to her mother, feeling bad for her for the first time since she had seen her mother kiss another man. She gave her a long one-armed hug. “I love you too.” She walked to the door.

“Alexis, I need you to know that I never tried to control you.”

She fumbled with the door to open it with her free arm. As she smiled, nodded, and walked out the door, she couldn’t quite figure out what she was feeling, but she was glad she finally talked to her mother. She put the box in the back and plopped into the driver’s seat. She looked at the house, unsure how genuine her mother’s apology was. Still she smiled knowing that she was secure in her relationship with Matthew, something she hadn’t felt in years. After returning back her apartment, she tried to put her focus into drawing. Still the conversation with her mother kept sneaking in. She sat down in the chair beside the window as she gazed into the sky. She thought back to her constellations. She concentrated to dot the page with the shapes she could remember. A bear was coming into focus, just as it had on the window when she was younger. She prepared for a barrage of negative thoughts about her mother to hit her, but instead felt a sense of peace as she continued sketching her star animals.

## Land Mines

Sarah's vision zeroed in as she watched each man fell to the ground, one from a head shot, the blood gushing. Another, his body sprawled out on the pavement. As the shooter trudged on, it was as if she wasn't watching from his point of view anymore, but from the perspective of a victim. He came closer, but she could barely see him, a slight crunch of grass was the only sound. Her heart beat fast and she felt trapped as though she couldn't move. A face popped up from a bush, miles away. She went from looking through a scope to staring at a thin barrel pointed toward her. She shut her eyes tight. There was a sudden pain in her leg, but she heard no shot.

"Oops sorry, Sarah."

"What?" Her eyes shot open. She looked over to her sister who was sitting in the chair across from her at Tony's Pizzeria. The two were sitting with their father and Dawn's fiancé.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to kick you." Her sister, Dawn, gave her a quick glance and continued her conversation with their father. "You said you would make an appointment with the doctor when you found out if it ran in the family."

Sarah looked to her right staring at the kid playing "Terminator", begging his dad for more quarters. Her heart rate slowly returned to normal and she let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding in. She usually started tuning out when her sister talked medical. Dawn thought since she was in med school, she knew everything. Sarah could never figure out why Dawn cared so much about their father's health when he obviously did not. He always substituted doctor's visits with doughnuts on the couch.

"Even Robert heard you say you would make an appointment." Dawn pointed to her fiancé across the table. His eyes grew larger and I saw him mouth "Dawn".

*Way to put him on the spot*, Sarah thought. It was funny though how he freaked out when he thought he did something that would make her dad dislike him.

Her dad took no notice of Robert's apparent change in attitude and leaned over the table. "I'll take care of it, okay?" His voice was hushed and had that we-can-talk-about-this-later-at-home tone.

"Will you actually, though?"

Sarah couldn't take it anymore. "Dawn, let it go, will you? We haven't finished dinner yet." She became somewhat tense and thought her eyes mimicked Robert's. A few of the patrons looked in her direction; obviously she was louder than she thought. Staring down at cesspools of grease collected in the pepperonis on her slice of pizza, she lost her appetite.

Dawn turned to her, surprised at her unusual outburst, especially in front of Robert. Sarah liked to keep the peace and, no matter how much Dawn said she didn't like conflict, she never seemed to back down from any. What was Dawn trying to do anyway? Give everyone indigestion at Sarah's favorite pizza place?

Dawn flipped her hair over her shoulder. "I was just asking."

Sarah thanked God that their mother wasn't there.

#

When the family got back home, Dawn and Sarah's mom was lying on the couch wrapped in a blanket. "Hey y'all. How was dinner?" She sat up and turned the volume down on the marathon of old *The Walking Dead* episodes that had been running all day. Sarah thought her mom didn't like watching that alone, especially at night.

Sarah took her jacket off and draped it over the back of the loveseat. “Good except that Dawn almost gave us all indigestion.” She laughed, trying to diffuse some of the anger that she thought was sure to erupt soon.

Their mom looked straight at Dawn. “Indigestion? What’d you do?”

“Oh my goooosh, nothing,” Dawn said. “I was just asking Dad a question.”

Their mother hesitated. “Did you ask about your dad going to the doctor again?”

Dawn was already making her way down the hallway. “I can’t hear you. You’ll have to wait.”

She sighed. “So, Sarah where did y’all go?”

*It’s a good thing Dawn left the room,* Sarah thought. Everyone knew Dawn was being rude, but they were so used to it and frankly Sarah was happy her mom didn’t call after her like usual. “Milano’s.” She sat down near her mom. “Are you feeling any better?”

“It’s just an upset stomach. I don’t know why it’s hurting. I haven’t eaten anything weird lately and I’ve barely eaten today at all. And then yesterday...” She trailed off as Sarah’s mind wandered again. She had heard her mom talk about her ailments, adding on more each year. She refused to go to the doctor unless something got really bad. Uterine Prolapse, that’s the only reason she went to a professional, and even then, she kept pushing back the date to have surgery. Her excuses went from “I will have it after we go on vacation” to “I’ll get it done once the kids are back in school” to anything else that may, or may not, have made sense.

Dawn came back from her room. “How’re you feeling, Mom?”

“I’m feeling about the same as earlier.”

“Do you think you’ll go to the doctor tomorrow?”

“And tell them what? That I have a tummy ache?”

Sarah remembered when her mom asked her something similar after Sarah confessed that it might be good idea for her to see a therapist; she had thought about dying one too many times. “And tell them what?” her mother asked. “That you’re stressed?” The subject was quickly dropped.

Dawn continued on. “Mom, you have stomach problems almost every week.”

Their mom took the blanket off her body. “I’ll be fine. It just takes a day.”

Dawn put her hand to her forehead and let it slowly slide down her face. “Mom,” she sighed, “I just think that you would feel better if you saw someone and made sure you don’t have anything serious.”

“Maybe some time.”

Sarah could never figure out quite what it was about doctors that turned her mother off from seeing them. She imagined it could be that Sarah had been given the wrong medication one time so it took longer for her to recover from an infection. That wasn’t bad enough though. Sarah thought that maybe it was because so many members of her mom’s family had died even though they had gotten treatment from doctors. But when car crashes, gunshots and cancer seem to follow you around like a disease, death doesn’t seem far behind. She could never tell her mom that though even if her mother believed it and was more comfortable with the idea of death; it seemed so crude. *Maybe it’s a good thing that I’m not following in Dawn’s footsteps,* Sarah thought. *Bedside manner doesn’t seem to be my strong suite.*

#

“So, then it got really awkward because I stopped her from talking about it.” Sarah walked toward the clothing section in Target with her friend, Rachael. “I couldn’t stay quiet forever.”

Rachael held up a swimsuit. “Could I pull it off?”

“Have you been listening to anything I’ve been saying?” She snatched the one-piece from Rachael.

“Sarah, of course I have. But talking to your sister is like talking to a brick wall. Much like talking to you sometimes.” She snatched the swimsuit back from Sarah.

Sarah walked over to another rack. “I don’t know.” She looked up and saw a man, his face scrunched up and his hand on his chest. She felt her heart skip a beat. “Rachael.” The man seemed to be struggling. She wanted to look away, but she couldn’t. “Rachael, we have to help him.”

“Help who?” She was looking at another polka dot bikini top. “Where do you think she inherited the talking-to-a-brick-wall gene? Your dad?”

Sarah kept staring at the man. She imagined what would happen if the man fell to the ground. What could she do? Was that not how somebody looked when they were about to have a heart attack. This was the one time she wished she had spent two years studying medicine instead of business. “That man, he-” Just as she began her sentence, she heard the man burp. Sarah let out a sigh of relief. “Never mind.” She put her hand over her heart and felt it skip a beat again. “Let’s go.”

“But we just got here.”

Sarah was already walking to the door.

“Sarah, what’s up? Wait,” Rachael called after her as she ran to catch up.

#

Although she had been told time and time again not to look at medical websites, Sarah couldn’t help it. She did the same thing when her dad told her that her aunt went into the hospital

with double pneumonia; going into the hospital meant it was serious according to *WebMD*. Her fingers hovered above the computer keys on her laptop sitting on her bed. Maybe she could resist this one time. Before she knew it, her fingers flew across the keyboard typing in the letters searching for information about the disease by the only name she knew it, AFib.

“And sometimes you don’t feel any symptoms.”

Sarah faintly heard her dad. The door to her room was ajar, but she could just make out snippets of the conversation in the next room, her dad’s voice always louder and therefore easier to make out. She stood up and walked to the door, putting her ear to the small opening.

“Pat got his results back. Same thing as Mom and Dad, AFib.” Do you realize that makes four brothers and one sister now?” He was the youngest in his family save a sister with down syndrome.

“I remember,” her mom said.

“How Dad could’ve been a doctor and all of this family medical history never came up, I’ll never know,” he said.

Sarah heard her mom whisper something. Then she could make out, “What about your mom?”

“Not even her. It’s like they were keeping it from us.”

#

“So since Robert is at work, you get help me plan things.” Dawn had been wanting Sarah to come over to her apartment and look through venues and flowers and music and food; -just thinking about it all made her dizzy and it wasn’t even her wedding. “I can’t wait for you to see the theme I’m thinking about.”



Sarah had only been at the apartment for ten minutes before Dawn had knocked everything off her coffee table to make room for books and catalogues displaying happy couples that, of course, weren't really couples, with titles such as "Planning Your Dream Day". The books, some about the cardiac system, the gastric system, and a book to help study for something called the PANCE exam were strewn about the floor. Trying to walk around the living area was like walking in a minefield, much like talking about aspects of the wedding to their mother.

The engagement ring. BOOM.

The way she was proposed to. BOOM.

Sometimes even the fiancé himself. BOOM!

"Alright so I was thinking about having the wedding at this church, but then I'm not sure if both me and Robert have to be parishioners there or not. What do you think about this setup?" Dawn gave Sarah a picture she found in one of the magazines where everything was white, white flowers, white chairs, even white lights for decorations.

Sarah set the page down on the table. "It's very...white."

Dawn laughed. "Well of course it's going to be more colorful. I just like the layout. My engagement ring isn't even one color." She held up her hand to remind Sarah of the chocolate and white diamonds intertwined on a gold band with a purple stone in the middle.

"Yeah you're right," Sarah responded.

"Okay so here is the list of all the food I was thinking about and here's the music. Oh and of course I'll have to think of something for the dance with Dad too." Dawn handed Sarah two sheets of paper, squinting to make out her sister's chicken scratch.

*At least she has the handwriting of a doctor down,* Sarah thought. She started to feel that dizziness again. She took in and let out a deep breath. “There are a lot of choices already,” she said with a laugh.

“I know, but it just has to be perfect.” It was a little scary to see how much Dawn was turning into their mother. Everything has to be their way and perfect.

*And that puts absolutely no pressure on me,* Sarah thought.

“Hey don’t forget you have to plan the bachelorette party, maid of honor.” Dawn smiled. “That will be *a lot* of fun!”

“Yeah yeah, for sure.” Sarah looked at the lists of food and music again. The words started to blur and run together.

Dawn tilted her head. “You okay? You look a little off.”

Sarah shook her head, which made her vision cloud even more. “Yeah I’m good.” She kept her eyes on the letters. *Come on, Sarah, focus.* Just then she heard Jason Mraz’s voice emitting from Dawn’s phone. It sounded strange and muffled.

“Oh it’s Robert. He must be on break. Be right back.” She got up heading to her room.

Sarah couldn’t remember what she said in response. She leaned her head against a pillow feeling even more dizzy. She could feel herself drifting off. Time seemed to pass slowly though she didn’t know how long she was sitting there.

“Sarah, did you hear me?”

Sarah woke up, not realizing she hadn’t been awake the whole time. She felt her heart skip a couple beats as her sister walked into the living room.

“Getting too overwhelmed?” Dawn asked, seeing Sarah’s head still on the pillow.

Sarah laughed. “Just tired, I guess.” She sat up and picked up the papers that had fallen on the floor.

Dawn eyed her, suspicious. “Well maybe you should rest. We can look at these plans later. We have time.” She sat down on the couch and began closing the catalogues they had opened. Sarah followed suite, constantly looking up, hoping her sister couldn’t hear her heartbeat like she could.

#

Sarah sat on her bed looking over her notes for an upcoming test when her phone rang. It was her dad.

“Hello?” Sarah asked.

“Hey sweetheart. You busy?”

“Just studying. What’s up?”

“Well I finally got the test done like your sister was talking about.”

Sarah held her breath. She didn’t want to hear it. She knew what was coming. He had atrial fibrillation and she had it too. It was inevitable. She’d be on medication and have to change her diet and-

“I don’t have it,” her dad said.

“What?” Sarah asked. “You don’t? Well that’s great news!”

“It is. I know that will take a load of everyone’s mind. And just between us, it’ll get Dawn off my back too.” He laughed.

“That’s for sure,” Sarah agreed. A flush of relief came over her. No more looking up the symptoms and treatments for this heart disease. No more worrying about how hereditary it is. She wouldn’t want to calculate it anyway; she was always bad at math. She forgot

about everything that worried her before. It was as if it vanished. Just then she felt her heart flutter. *No*, she thought. *It's not happening*. Another flutter. Her palms were almost dripping with sweat. *I'm just excited that dad doesn't have it. That's all*. Once more. The pain in her chest was making it hard to breathe. She became so focused on death that her thoughts were spiraling out of control. Just like that she felt trapped again. It was as if each flutter was reins pulling her back. Each one was a reminder.

## Back and Forth

It was the first week of junior year at Meadowbrook High and Dorothy slumped into her seat in the back of her calculus class that started at 8:00 AM. She cursed the people that decided 8:00 AM math classes were a good idea. She thought back to about an hour ago when she begged her mother to stay home from school, but her mother said she had already stayed home with her a lot over the past week and being the only one that was making money in the household, she had to go back to work. “He would want you to get back to school anyway, baby.” Dorothy’s grandfather had been sick for months prior and passed only a week prior. They were close and it wore Dorothy down to help take care of him and get her schoolwork done. Not only did her schoolwork suffer but her relationship did as well. Her boyfriend started picking fights with her because she was not spending enough time with him. No matter how many times she explained that she needed to spend time with family or do homework, it always stressed him out too much and he broke it off. This happened mere days before her grandpa died. She thought that he was different from the other guys she had dated, but he was not. The only thing that kept her going was hanging out with her cousin, Julie.

As she took out her book and spiral notebook, she waited for the misery that was class to start. It was always the same; Mr. Fancher came in and said “good morning” to which almost no one responded, they went over the homework, he taught them a new way to solve problems, asked if anyone had any questions without giving people a chance to respond, and then he gave a new homework assignment. Dorothy didn’t have anyone in that class to talk to so she wasn’t sure if they were suffering as much as she was or not. She was too tired to ask questions even when she brought a second cup of coffee to class, which became a reoccurring thing.

“Okay guys, turn your books to page 55 and we’ll get started.”

Dorothy sighed as she flipped through the pages, wondering when she would use this information. The door near her swung open just as Mr. Fancher was about to write on the whiteboard.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” said the guy. He floated through the aisles with just as much grace as a toddler learning to walk. Dorothy was pretty sure she saw him accidentally hit someone in the face with his backpack. She couldn’t help but snicker. He walked all the way to the front of the room and then to the back again before finding the one available desk next to hers. She wasn’t sure if he was looking for the attention or whether he was just confused.

Mr. Fancher stared at him for a few seconds. Well now that that spectacle is over, what’s your last name, young man?” Mr. Fancher was in his early 70s and refused to call them anything except “young man” and “young woman”.

“Wright. Kaden Wright. I just transferred.” The guy flipped his hair the same way she had seen all the other guys do, the way she had seen Justin Beiber do it.

Mr. Fancher looked to his computer and sat down in his office chair. “Now what’s that email password?”

Dorothy stared at the new guy, feeling as if it was déjà vu. I’ve seen him somewhere, she thought. I just know it. She hadn’t realized how long she had been staring at him when he looked out of the corner of his eye.

“What’s up?” he whispered.

Dorothy blinked a couple times and hoped she didn’t look stupid. “You…just looked familiar,” she whispered back. “I’m Dorothy, by the way.”

Kaden extended his hand to shake Dorothy’s. “Kaden. Nice to meet you.”

“You don’t have to be formal.” Dorothy shook his hand anyway. She felt a tingle in her hand and quickly pulled away.

“Didn’t I say no talking,” Mr. Fancher said. He often thought he said things he didn’t actually say. Dorothy guessed that might be a repercussion of teaching the same subject for thirty years. Dorothy realized that might be the reason she got so confused during class.

“Is he always like this?” Kaden asked, smiling.

“He’s usually worse, but you get used to it. Where did you transfer from?”

“We moved to Kansas from here when I was in sixth grade so we just moved back to be closer to family since my grandparents are real sick. It’s really tough on my parents so I’ve been trying to help out. Not an easy task.” As he spoke a little louder, Dorothy could hear a southern twang in his voice.

She couldn’t help feeling bad for him. She noticed dark circles under his eyes, the same kind she had day in and day out when she was taking care of her grandfather. There was a sudden leap in her heart and she put her hand on her chest to calm it down. Although she did not want to admit it to herself, she forgot that guys her age could be sensitive and care about other people before themselves. “I’m sorry to hear that. I remember when my grandpa was sick and I had to-”

Mr. Fancher walked to the back of the room where Dorothy and Kaden were sitting. He gave Dorothy a quick glare and then turned to Kaden. “Wilson?”

Kaden cleared his throat as Mr. Fancher looked at him. The man could have a pretty intimidating glare for a 70 something year old. “Yes, sir. Wilson Kaden, but I just go by Kaden now.”

“Mhmm.” Mr. Fancher turned around and walked back up to the front. He turned back to the class and looked at Kaden. “Do you have your book?”

“No, sir. It hasn’t arrived yet.”

“Dorothy, share with Kaden today, but get that book in as soon as possible.”

Kaden pushed his desk so fast that the metal scraped the floor with a loud screeching noise and rammed into Dorothy’s desk, spilling the rest of her coffee onto the floor and herself.

“Kaden!” Dorothy shouted. She jumped out of her chair.

“Mr. Wright, you have interrupted this class enough. Go get some paper towels, clean up the mess and sit down,” said Mr. Fancher.

“Yes, sir.” As Kaden walked past Dorothy he whispered, “My sincerest apologies.”

If she still had her coffee, she would have choked on it. Wilson, of course. The boy who cost her the swinging competition when she was younger. Still as clumsy as ever, but hopefully he had matured. Dorothy couldn’t wait to tell Julie.

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Dorothy sat on the swings with her cousin Julie. Recess was the only time they could talk since Julie was a year older and the teachers at Rossville Elementary let the third and fourth graders play together. It was a hot day in April and most kids decided to stay in the shade except for a few boys running around with a football. The pair was able to secure the swings every day this month.

“I bet I can swing higher than you,” Julie challenged.

“You’re on,” Dorothy said. “One. Two-”

“Three.” Julie pushed against the ground as hard as she could, kicking dust into the air as Dorothy did the same. The girls’ blonde hair was whisked around their faces and back again as



they swung. Julie had to pull her legs in closer to the plastic seat when she swung backwards since she was a few inches taller than Dorothy. Dorothy wondered if her height was the reason she always lost the swinging competitions to Julie.

“You better swing faster than that to catch up to me, slow poke,” Dorothy shouted. Her “trash talk” made her feel better about her losing streak and Julie never seemed to mind. Julie was always winning competitions they had whether it was swinging, racing, whose mother could make better cookies. She always felt that Julie had an unfair advantage on that last front though. Dorothy’s mother didn’t have much time for anything since Dorothy’s father left. Sometimes Dorothy resented Julie for having a mom and a dad at home all the time.

Dorothy was sure she would win this time. Her grandmother had bought her bright blue sneakers for her birthday last month and if anything could help her win, it would be those. She was catching more air and she swore she had an inch on her cousin when they went forward. She pushed back as hard as she could and lurched forward. Don’t fail me know, shoes, she thought. Her hand was sweaty, but she gripped the cord tight. She could almost taste the gloating rights (they tasted like chocolate) as she flew as high as she ever had. Suddenly a football hit her hand causing her to let go. The other hand that had also gathered moisture was not strong enough to keep her from falling and she fell to the ground with a thud.

“Dorothy,” Julie shouted. As she came back down, her feet skidded across the dirt, causing more dust to fly through the air, and Dorothy coughed. Julie jumped off the seat and rushed over to Dorothy, kneeling beside her. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Dorothy said. She always had a high tolerance for pain. She broke her pinky when she flipped over during a wheelbarrow race with her sister. Dorothy was only five, but she didn’t cry, even when her finger began to swell up.

Julie lifted up Dorothy's arm and sucked in through her teeth. "That doesn't look good."

Dorothy examined her own arm. Bright red blood ran down her arm from her elbow and winced when she touched the cut.

"Maybe we should get Mr. Crosby." Julie stood up.

"No." Dorothy grabbed Julie's hand to stop her. She wanted to feel brave, but she also remembered how her mother got mad at her last time she hurt herself. Her mother had to miss a whole day of work to take Dorothy to the doctor. Despite this, the pain started to surge in her other arm as well and when she looked at her other elbow, she found it was just as badly hurt, if not worse. Just as she realized it was better to get a teacher, three boys ran toward the girls. They stopped a few feet away, panting. Their shirts were soaked and clung to their bodies while their hair did the same on their foreheads.

"Did you see our ball?" asked the boy in the middle. He looked the sweatiest.

Before Dorothy could answer, Julie piped up. "You mean the one that knocked my cousin off the swing?"

"Yeah," Dorothy chimed in trying to sound tough. "You made me fall." Honestly, she didn't mind the bloody elbows. She was mad that they couldn't finish the competition she would have clearly won.

"My sincerest apologies." The boy paused as if that was his way to play it off that he was sincere. Dorothy had seen him do this before to get out of standing on the fence during recess, a punishment for repeat offenders. "Now have you seen the ball?"

"Go away, Wilson," Julie shouted.

Dorothy knew she could take care of herself if she needed to but was glad Julie was around to have her back.

The group of boys ran off as they heard the pebbles of the playground shuffling, which meant someone was approaching. It was Mr. Crosby. Took you long enough, Dorothy thought. When Mr. Crosby saw Dorothy's injuries, he sent her to the nurse's office. After some Neosporin and bandaging, she was able to go back to class. However, she was still in pain and would be for the next couple of days. Still, Dorothy chuckled the next day as she saw Wilson standing with his face against the fence as she and Julie raced to the swings for a rematch.

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"Are you sure it's him?" Julie asked.

The girls met up at 3:00 after school every day to walk home together. Even after all these years, they remained as close as sisters. This bond became even closer when Dorothy's father started the attempt of integrating himself back into her and her mother's life. Her mother was stressed a lot and didn't have much time for Dorothy.

"Of course, I'm sure," Dorothy said. She counted on her fingers as she listed. "He left after sixth grade. His name is Wilson. He said 'my sincerest apologies'. Those aren't just coincidences."

"He must've changed a lot if you didn't recognize him."

"We haven't seen each other since I was eight years old. Maybe you would've been able to recognize him right off the bat. He was in your class."

"All of his credits must not have transferred for him to be in your class."

"Must be."

Julie stopped. "You're not still bitter about the football fiasco, are you?"

Dorothy scoffed and waved her hand. "I already told you, I was eight. That was so many years ago." She hesitated. "I actually really like him."

Julie stopped and looked at Dorothy in the eye. “Dorothy, you know I love you. I can see what you’re thinking. You need to slow down and really think about this.”

“I didn’t say anything,” Dorothy protested.

“I know that I don’t have to tell you that your last relationship was a shit show even before Grandpa got sick. I just don’t want you to get hurt again.”

“That’s just it, Julie. He helps take care of his grandparents too. He actually cares.”

Julie put her hands on Dorothy’s shoulders. “Listen to me. I know how much Grandpa dying and the break-up hurt you. That’s no reason to jump into something.”

Dorothy did not want to admit that her cousin was probably right.

“Hey. Why don’t you go tell Aunt Martha that you’re going to do your homework at my house tonight? We’ll make pizza and have some cousin time.

They hadn’t made pizza or had real “cousin time” in months. “Let’s do it.” Dorothy smiled. She headed up the driveway to her front door. She doesn’t understand, she thought. Dorothy decided that it was best not to talk to her cousin about it anymore. This was going to be hard. She talked to Julie about everything.

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Over the next few weeks, the thought of Kaden made waking up in the morning not such a chore. He was the reason she now enjoyed going to calculus class. She hoped they would become more than friends. But how could she accomplish this? She realized that Kaden was just as lost as she was in calculus, but she found herself wanting to look like she knew what was going on in front of him. That was it. She would get tutoring from Mr. Fancher after school so she could in turn offer to help Kaden at her house on the weekend. Then they could spend more

time together. Her plan was coming together perfectly. On Friday afternoon, Dorothy went into Mr. Fancher's classroom to ask for help.

"Sure, we can go over whatever you're struggling with," Mr. Fancher said. "I don't get many students coming by after classes are over for the day."

I wonder why, Dorothy thought. "Well, you've seen my quiz grades. I could use a little help."

They sat down at his desk and Dorothy pulled out her book.

"What exactly do you need help with?" Mr. Fancher asked.

"Well...it's sort of...all of this." Dorothy waved her hand over the whole section they had covered this week.

Mr. Fancher gave her that glare. "You should've come to me sooner. Let's get started."

After half an hour of painstakingly long tutoring, Julie showed up at the open door. Dorothy had forgotten she was supposed to spend the night at Julie's to plan for Julie's birthday party next Friday. The pair gave a small wave to each other. Kaden popped up behind her. Dorothy's smile grew bigger and she waved at him too and then Kaden and Julie smiled at each other. Dorothy barely had time to wonder why the two were together before Mr. Fancher interrupted her thoughts.

"Pay attention, Miss Cummings. Maybe you would understand what I'm teaching more if you weren't staring at Mr. Wright the whole time."

At that, Dorothy's face flushed and she wanted to crawl under the desk. She saw Julie cover her mouth as she snickered and she pulled Kaden out of the doorway. Dorothy wanted to leave then, but Mr. Fancher was determined to teach her something. About fifteen minutes later,

she walked out the room with no energy and extra practice problems she had to do for homework over the weekend.

“How was the Fanch man?” Julie threw her arm around Dorothy’s shoulder. That was the nickname people gave him.

“You know, unhelpful as ever.” Dorothy looked around. “Where is Kaden?”

“He just went to his locker. He asked us to wait for him. I told him about the party and he had some good ideas he wanted to share with us.”

“Why was he waiting with you outside?” Dorothy got her hopes up thinking that he was waiting for her.

“I just saw ran into him in the hallway and we were catching up.”

“Oh.” Dorothy tried not to make a big deal out of it, but she felt a small sense of betrayal. “What were you two talking about?”

“Just life in general. School. Family. What’s been happening since we saw each other last.”

She hated the boiling sense of anger that was stirring in her, but she couldn’t help it. “Why did you pull him out of the way when Fancher said I was staring at Kaden?”

“Geez, what’s with the third degree?”

Dorothy quickly changed her tune as Kaden approached.

“Hey Dorothy. Did Mr. Fancher help?”

“Oh...well...I didn’t really need that much help. I just wanted to make sure everything was crystal clear.” She put on a big smile she hoped didn’t show that she was mortified by the situation.

“But I thought-” Julie started. Dorothy shot her a glare and Julie looked at her confused. “I thought math used to be hard for you, but this year it seems easy.” Dorothy nodded and the pair kept walking. “Speaking of it being easy, I would be happy to help you if things are confusing for you, Kaden.”

He chuckled. “Hey, I’m sure I’ll need it. Thanks.” He smiled at her.

It was not a solid date but at least it seemed promising.

All three of them walked to the neighborhood where Dorothy and Julie lived. They kept changing the positions where the three of them were, Dorothy trying to walk next to Kaden as much as possible. They reached Dorothy’s house.

“Do you want to drop your stuff off and grab some pajamas for tonight?” Julie asked.

Dorothy hesitated. “Sure.” She slowly nodded her head. “Are you going to wait for me?”

“Dory, it’s getting cold. I’m just going to take Kaden to the house and we’ll meet you there. He has to be home by 8:00 anyway. We can all eat at my house though. I’m making chicken alfredo.”

Dorothy turned to Kaden. “But I thought you told me last week you didn’t like pasta. Remember we were talking about our favorite restaurants and you said you didn’t like Italian because you don’t like pasta.”

It looked as if Kaden was about to reply when Julie chimed in. “Well he’ll like *my* pasta.”

“O-Okay,” Dorothy said. How could Julie not know a simple thing like that? I know his favorite restaurants, colors, and movies, Dorothy thought. She began running up her driveway before Julie and Kaden even began the short trek to Julie’s house.

The next week, Dorothy and Julie barely hung out after school. Julie didn't wait for Dorothy to tell her mom where she was going or to drop off her stuff. She went ahead to call Kaden. After two days of this, Dorothy was tired of it and stayed home.

Dorothy was in her room getting ready for the party when she saw Julie running up the driveway waving a piece of paper. She heard her name being shouted so Dorothy ran out the door to the driveway. Julie hadn't come by her house in the last few days and, against Dorothy's better judgment, she missed her cousin, her best friend.

"Dorothy, look what I just got in the mail!" Julie ran up to her cousin and handed her the paper.

Dorothy's eyes scanned the sheet; it looked official. The University of Southern California paired with its logo was printed on the top. "We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted." Dorothy looked back up at Julie whose grin turned into a frown when Dorothy did not share her enthusiasm.

"No 'Yay, Julie' or 'Congratulations. I knew you could do it'?"

Dorothy examined the paper and looked up at Julie again. "You never told me you applied. And now you're moving all the way to California?"

"Dory, calm down. I haven't accepted yet."

"But you want to."

"I wish you would stop assuming you know what's going on in my life."

"I wouldn't have to assume if you would tell me things."

Julie paused. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about USC. There's been a lot going on. I thought I told you, but I guess I just told Kaden."

Kaden, Dorothy thought. That's where all the trouble began.



“Will he be there tonight?”

“Yeah, he’s already over there. He actually got accepted to the same college. It’d be so nice. We’d get to stay together.”

“And you’re dating?” Dorothy asked.

Julie sighed and slipped the piece of paper into her back pocket almost as if to try to diffuse the situation; out of sight, out of mind. She put her other hand on Dorothy’s shoulder. “Look, can we talk about this after the party. It starts in half an hour and there’s still so much to do. I’m sorry about everything, but I’ll make it up to you.” She gave Dorothy a one-armed hug and raced back toward her house. “Come over as soon as you’re ready,” she called over her shoulder.

Dorothy went back into her house and contemplated staying home but she knew she would get an earful from Julie if she did. She pulled her brown hair into a ponytail, thinking that would be as good as it would get. As she left the house, she locked the door and headed toward Julie’s house.-

Once she walked into her cousin’s home, she was overwhelmed by the smell of pizza. She thought Julie must’ve ordered at least ten boxes. Along with that, Julie turned the music up as if there were already thirty people chattering and drowning out the music. Dorothy turned the knob

to lower and the volume and Julie came out carrying a bottle of beer and a bottle opener.

“Hey. Have a beer. Relax.” Julie handed her the bottle after popping the top and drifted past her. Dorothy followed her into the kitchen.

“Sup, Dorothy?” came a voice from across the room. Kaden was stacking the pizzas and opening the top box on each stack. “How’s it going?”

Dorothy felt more resentment toward her cousin but was trying her best not to make a scene. “Hey Kaden.”

He moved around the kitchen until he reached Julie who had her back to him opening another bottle. He put his hands on her waist. “Anything else I can do?”

“I think we’re all good, baby. Thank you.” She turned her head and smiled.

Dorothy didn’t need to see if they kissed or not. She already felt sick to her stomach. She took the beer and chugged half of it as she turned up the music and sat down on one of the couches in the living room.

About an hour into the party, Julie and Kaden announced that they both got into Southern California University. Everyone cheered and congratulated the pair, while Dorothy took a few swigs of another beer; it was her fourth.

After Julie had mingled for a while after that, she sat down next to Dorothy with a worn-out sigh. “There’s a lot of people who came, huh?”

“For sure.” Dorothy kept her gaze forward and took another drink of her beer.

“You may want to slow down on those, Dory. I’m going to give you a cup of water.” She stood up.

Dorothy grabbed her hand. “I’m fine.”

Julie sat back down as Dorothy leaned her head on the back of the couch and closed her eyes. “How about I get you a slice of pizza?” Julie asked.

Dorothy raised her head and opened her eyes, fixing them across the room on Kaden talking to a couple other guys from school. “Sure, Julie.”

Julie got up from the couch. “I think I will get you that cup of water too.”

Once Julie walked into the kitchen, Dorothy got up with her eyes still on her cousin's boyfriend. Her eyes never left him as she approached him. She got a few inches away from him and he paused his conversation to address her.

"Hey Dorothy. Let me introduce you to my friends..."

His voice trailed off and all the other noises turned into one big mass in Dorothy's head. She could see Kaden's lips still moving, but she didn't care. She grabbed his face and kissed him. She felt him barely pull back as her lips met his, but then he relaxed. She could feel the chill of his beer bottle as it touched the skin on her waist that was exposed when she stood on her tiptoes to wrap her arms around his neck.

Suddenly a hand jerked her off of Kaden. Dorothy opened her eyes and saw Julie standing beside her. "What the hell are you doing?" she shouted. The room was quiet for a moment, save the music as Julie's eyes swung from Dorothy to Kaden. Her eyes welled up, but her lip didn't quiver. "Well? Anyone want to explain?" Kaden was staying quiet. His eyes were downcast except for a smirk he shot Dorothy when Julie wasn't looking.

"My bad, I guess," Dorothy said.

"You want to do this now in front of everyone, Dorothy?" Julie asked. "I said I was sorry I didn't tell you about California. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Kaden."

"You don't even understand."

"I would if you would tell me."

"Forget it." Dorothy wasn't going to budge. She hadn't done anything wrong.

Julie stared at Dorothy. "I'm sorry you can't accept change." Her tone grew harsh.

Dorothy was determined not to let Julie see just how much those words hurt her. “Well...I’m sorry Kaden likes the way I kiss better.” The words tasted bad as they fell from her lips.

Julie’s hurt expression turned stone-faced. “I think you need to leave.”

Dorothy turned and walked out. First the first time, Dorothy realized that Kaden didn’t seem to care who he was kissing. Relationship or not, if a girl wanted to kiss him, he would kiss her back. She was ashamed that the situation had to go that far for her to get a clue. As she walked home, she thought about how well her and Julie worked together when they were young. It was them against the world. Dorothy wasn’t thinking about her grandfather. Dorothy didn’t care about Kaden anymore. She didn’t even care about her father anymore. All she wanted to do was swing with Julie again on a hot April day.

## Webs of Lies and Portals to Hell

Patricia Booker thought that she had overcome her desire to coax people to get what she wanted when she saw Harry across the other side of the church at choir practice. She couldn't help but notice all the similarities between them, brown hair, tall, slim, nicely dressed. He even looked to be around 25, four years her senior. Patricia's mother had caught onto her conning ways when she saw her trying to sell her broken toys that she had "fixed" with rubber bands and gum to kids in the neighborhood. "I should have nipped the problem in the bud. I just thought you had an eye for business and marketing." Once Patricia had her baby three years earlier, she wanted to be able to give her child a more stable lifestyle and her mother was more than happy to introduce Jesus into her life. Apparently, if He could turn a tax collector into a disciple, He could turn a con woman into a churchgoer.

As she eyed Harry from across the room, she liked the laid-back look he exuded. He would be a nice addition to the stuffy rule followers in the rows ahead of her. To her surprise, he sat beside her. As they talked before choir practice started, Patricia felt something in her chest that she hadn't felt since she first met her child's father. She tried to push it down as much as possible. There was a small sense of relief among the overwhelming anxiety that she may let too much of her personal life slip. As soon as she found out that he was a doctor, a switch flipped in her brain and she felt as though she could feel a rewiring happening.

To her surprise she did not fight this feeling. She welcomed it like a warm hug. She looked to her mother and child sitting in the third pew, her mother beaming at her "changed" daughter. Her own daughter was sitting in her mother's lap enthralled with the stained-glass window to her left. Her mother told her grandchild to look to Patricia, and when she did, she smiled brightly. Patricia gave a small wave and forced herself to think about her baby and

what was best for her. As the choir finished “Amazing Grace” Patricia wondered how divine intervention worked and if it could help her. The choir director dismissed the group and Patricia rushed to her mother and child.

“You ready to go, Robin?”

Her daughter nodded and wrapped her fingers around three of Patricia’s. As they were headed to the double doors at the entrance of the church, Patricia looked over her shoulder. As she made eye contact with Harry and he flashed her a smile, she knew her fate was sealed; she was going to be with him for years to come.

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“How’s the house coming along?” Patricia’s mother, Debbie, had just finished washing dishes from lunch.

“Mom, you know how it’s going. It’s the same as it was last time we talked. Leaky roof, crappy electricity, poor insulation, portal to Hell in the basement. The usual.” Patricia sat on a window seat and watched her daughter bounce up and down on the trampoline in the back yard.

“Things were never this bad when Jon was around.”

Patricia spun around. “Are you seriously saying that you would have rather me stayed married to him and have him put me and Robin in danger just to have financial security?”

Debbie wouldn’t meet her daughter’s eyes as she dried dishes. “Of course not, sweetheart. I’m just saying that it was easier when he was around. You’re still a child at twenty-one.”

Patricia sucked in a breath through her teeth and ran her hand through her hair as she turned back toward her daughter outside the window. Looking at Robin always seemed to calm her down. Robin’s full head of hair matched Patricia’s; she resented that fact only when she

would have to comb through all the tangles after Robin jumped on the trampoline. Patricia wished she had remembered to braid the girl's hair. So many other features reminded her of her ex-husband though, especially her eyes. She resented that fact more than she would like to admit.-

Jon had been out of Patricia's life for a year now and she wanted to believe that he didn't exist anymore. She decided that leaving a man before he went to jail was better than staying with someone and being forced to act like a poor victim to the news stations who swooped in like vultures on stories that had the potential to boost their ratings as long as they could sensationalize it enough. Jon never really wanted a child anyway so there was no need for her to have contact with him; she could raise Robin on her own anyway. She already loathed the headlines. *Con-man Causes Chaos* and *Con Jon*. The journalists in the small town of Saulsbury, Tennessee were never very creative. But Jon was creative, too creative for his own good. She was hurt by what he had done. Plus, he kept everything from her. She was in the dark to every trick he pulled, every person he swindled. When she found out what all he had done, she saw all of the close calls that he got into. She began thinking of how he could have done things better and not leave a trace. She could do better. These thoughts worried her.

“Are you listening to me, Trish?”

“Yes, I heard you, Mom.” She continued staring out the window.

“Well I just hate seeing my grandbaby lacking.”

The anger Patricia had tried to suppress came boiling up and the steam had to be released. She turned to face her mother. “Lacking? You really believe I would let my baby go without? She always has food and clothes and more love than she could ever ask for. Don't tell me that I can't provide for my own child.”

Debbie's eyes widened, but she quickly recovered and went back to drying.

Patricia walked toward her mom. "You really do think I was better off with Jon, don't you?"

"Don't say crazy things like that. Of course I don't feel that way. The man was a low life."

Patricia stopped. "Then what? You think I'm a bad mother?" She looked at her mother, but she didn't answer. "I guess I have my answer."

Debbie finally met Patricia's eyes. "Trisha-".

Just then, the rumbling sound from the sliding door traveled to the kitchen and soon Robin was running to Patricia.

"Momma, I love the trampoline. It's so fun. Can we get one, pleeeaaase?" She made her puppy dog eyes that she had been practicing for the last year.

Patricia looked to her mother before crouching down next to her daughter. "We can't get it right now, baby." She felt a pain in her chest knowing that what her mother thought had a ring of truth to it. "But you have your jump rope at home. You barely play with that anymore."

"It's not as fun as the trampoline." Robin frowned as she looked longingly out the window. Suddenly, her face lit up and she turned back to her mother. "Can I stay here for a while?"

"Of course you-" Debbie started

"Grandma can't take care of you," Patricia said, cutting Debbie off. She knew that her mother could take care of her child just as well if not better than she could, but how could she lose control of her child? She lost a husband already. That was all she was willing to lose. She scooped Robin up and placed her on her hip. "Plus, all of your toys are back home."



Debbie tried to step in her way to prevent her from leaving the house, but Patricia didn't want to hear anything else from her mother. "Well at least let me say goodbye to my sweet baby." Patricia handed Robin over to Debbie. "Bye, sweetheart. Grandma loves you." She gave Robin a kiss. "You're always welcome here." She looked at Patricia. "Anytime."

Patricia grabbed Robin and headed out the door with a short goodbye to her mother.

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"I'm so grateful that we're together. Everyone in this town seems to think I'm doing something wrong. I don't understand it." Patricia watched as Harry spun spaghetti around on his fork. Patricia and Harry had been going out for a few months and she was elated to not have to worry about lies. They were taking things slow, which Patricia welcomed. "And those same people will take it upon themselves to 'make my life easier'. I'm not a damsel in distress. People just don't get that."

Harry looked back at her, putting his fork down and crossing his arms on the table. His eyes exhibited the same stare that she had seen from so many people, a cross between 'Let me help you' and 'I'm better than you'.

Patricia back away from him slightly. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I know you said that you didn't need help so I didn't say anything. But I was having a long talk with the Lord."

"Oh God." Patricia rolled her eyes.

"Yes, God! Have you been praying to Him too?"

Patricia tried to hold back her laughter. "What did you two talk about?"

He scooted to the edge of his seat and his eyes were wide. "There are fundraisers and church auctions. We can even help taking care of Robin." He spoke as though he were a six-

year-old begging his parents for a firetruck that he really wanted. *It's got lights and a siren and everything.*

Patricia fought between making a scene in the restaurant or kindly telling him to fuck off and walking out. There was a pain in her chest, but she couldn't admit to herself that it was her heart hurting. At that point, she didn't feel like a girlfriend anymore. "Have you even been listening to me at all? She stood up. "If I didn't want my mother doing anything, why would I want you to step in? Am I just a charity case to you?" Making a scene it is.

Harry stood up, trying to calm her down. "You know that I love you. I want to help you in any way I can. Emotionally, physically, financially. Trisha, you're hurting and the community can help."

"Oh, thank you for letting me know that. I wasn't aware." Patricia walked out of the restaurant and let the cold air move through her body as she breathed in and out. A thought then occurred to her that she hadn't thought of in a long time. If everyone saw her as the victim, why was she going to keep fighting it; it was tiring. But she wasn't going to let other people have all the control.

"Trisha, please talk to me." Harry came running to her side. "I'm sorry for what I said back there."

Patricia turned around with as genuine a smile as she mustered. "You know, really it's okay.

She began thinking back to her ex-husband's actions. Stealing from her and her family. Constantly changing his name. But when Patricia found out that he had been with more than one woman outside of their marriage, she felt more hurt by that than anything else. She was just one in a long line of depriving people of money, love, a real man. Something inside her switched and

she wanted to undo all the progress she had made. She could feel old intentions creeping up, and there was only a thin thread holding them back, a thread easily broken. And it was about to break.

Over the next few months, she asked Harry for money. A little here, a little there. Some for food for a cat she didn't have, some for her mother's surgery that never happened. She tried to space them out, but she got so caught up in a web of her own lies that she began to forget what was true and what wasn't. And Harry knew it. Whenever he would ask, about the cat or about her mother, she lied. She had become pretty good at that. She realized that it wasn't even so much about the money. She enjoyed being able to have power. It made her feel like she actually had control over something. Either in his naivete or his overly optimistic attitude, he still wanted to help her.

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Patricia felt a burning sensation in her stomach that she knew wasn't from the triple cheeseburger donut she got from the food truck next to the Ferris wheel. She tried to stay as close to Harry as possible, but she couldn't imagine that he didn't feel the heat she felt was radiating from her body. She remembered feeling the heat from his body flowing to hers as they lay together only weeks earlier. The heat traveled through her body, swirling around in her chest making her feel safe. She couldn't imagine that again. They each sat down on a bench and placed their drinks in front of them. Although she hated the noise, Patricia moved her straw up and down through the plastic lid to fill the silence. Should she talk first? She should. But what would she talk about? The nice weather? How she felt like she might throw up? At least she felt remorse and she could put her mind at ease about being a psychopath. She might have issues, but she knew she wasn't a psychopath.

“Are you enjoying yourself? What was your favorite part?” Harry maneuvered his head to catch Patricia’s gaze.

She looked up, desperately trying to tear herself away from her own thoughts. “I loved seeing the bearded lady,” Patricia blurted.

Harry furrowed his eyebrows and stared at her for a minute. “We didn’t see a bearded lady...I don’t think people are put on display at all anymore. That’s pretty screwed up, don’t you think?”

Patricia realized that she had not been paying attention during their walk through the carnival and said the first thing that she had just said the first thing that popped into her head. “Right, right.” She began playing with her straw again.

“You don’t have to lie to me. I can help you out. I would help you out.”

“Right, right.” She looked up at Harry, but the attraction she felt for him was almost nonexistent. After searching his eyes, she realized that she was vulnerable; she lost control. Maybe it was time to move on and cut her loses, just like Jon did. Patricia had tried to push her ex-husband out of her mind, but memories came barreling to the front of her brain. She remembered weekend “business” trips and “fishing trips to the lake”. As she later realized, he was just conning more people. She knew she could never be like Jon. Sex with strangers was part of his manipulation; she could never stoop to that level. She would make a terrible con artist.

But then she had a thought. Maybe she needed that “trip”. Maybe she needed someone else new, someone who didn’t know who she was. She couldn’t forget the thrill she felt when she had first successfully made Harry believe her.

Her eyes panned the surrounding area. There were so many people, so many men. Could she do this again? Could she get even more than a little money here and there? That sickening

feeling rose in her chest again until she realized the cheeseburger donut may have been partly to blame. She ran to the trashcan and made it just in time to coat the trash bag with all the fried food she had tasted that night.

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Patricia lay in her bed and stared up at the ceiling. For a moment she thought about how she wouldn't mind if the ceiling caved in surrounding her in rubble. The debris couldn't make my chest feel heavier than it already does, she thought. She wondered if Jon ever felt any remorse.

"Mommy?" came a meek voice from the door. Robin inched closer to Patricia's side of the bed.

As Patricia sat up, her bones creaked and felt achy, bones that hadn't creaked or felt achy before. "What's up, baby?"

Robin's feet scuttled to the foot of the bed and she flung her Barbie doll onto the bed by the hair. She went under the covers and burrowed her way to where her mother was sitting. Patricia thought she looked like a character from a horror movie she watched when she was only a bit older than Robin. She vowed to never let her daughter see that movie. Robin popped her head out from under the blankets and scooted until she was against Patricia.

As she put her arm around her daughter, Patricia noticed a folded-up paper in Robin's hand. "What have you got there?"

Robin unfolded the paper and handed it to her mother. "Isn't that the most beautiful dress?"

Patricia studied the picture. The model was sporting a burgundy one-shouldered dress. It hugged her abdomen and cascaded down to the floor, fabric sprawled out all around the bottom.

A ribbon was tied at the waist and the ends were lost in the folds of the dress. It wasn't the most beautiful dress she had ever seen, but it looked nice. She wanted to be able to afford it, but money had been tight since Jon went to jail. They had a comfortable life so Patricia never saw the need to work before. Her mind had been reeling from her recent interaction with Harry and was convinced that she had to get a job, any job. "Where did you find this?"

"Magazine. Do you like it?"

"Very pretty, sweetheart."

"Then I will buy it for you."

Patricia chuckled. "I think it's a little too expensive."

Robin beamed. "Maybe Grandma will help me." Her smile faded. "When are we going back to Grandma's?"

Patricia realized that it had been over four months since they had visited her mother. She hated seeing Robin upset, but she forced a smile. "Grandma isn't feeling well so we have to wait until she feels better."

"She's sick? We have to see her."

"Robin, later." Patricia stood up from the bed.

Robin got on her hands and knees and crawled toward her mother. "When?"

Patricia spun around. "Robin, we are not going over there, so drop it."

Robin fell back onto her knees and stared at the comforter.

Patricia sighed. She plopped on the bed and pulled Robin close. "I'm sorry, baby. Mommy shouldn't have shouted at you." She used Robin's hand to trace the flowers knitted into the comforter. Red roses. Jon would bring her red roses when he returned from every weekend trip. She realized that there may always be something that made her think of Jon, but Robin

was the only one that mattered. Patricia had to do whatever she could to take care of her. They had to get out. “You know what? I think I will buy that red dress.”

Robin turned to Patricia, eyes wide. “You mean it?”

“Absolutely. And how would you like to go on an adventure?”

## What We Do for Money

Robin Booker had never thought of taking over someone else's life. But of course, she never thought she would be forced to take a receptionist job at an orthopedic office in the small town of Brighton, Tennessee right out of college. Be a journalism major they said. There are tons of possibilities they said. But when her mother got sick, she was forced to move back home from Florida.

At the end of the day on Friday, Dr. Wilson, one of the three doctors in that office, was putting her coat on near the front of the office. "Got any big weekend plans?"

"I'll be going to a concert with some friends tomorrow, but that's about it. What about you?"

"Well I will be spending the weekend with the fiancé," Dr. Wilson said flashing her engagement ring. They had already been engaged for a few months, but she did that every time she mentioned her fiancé.

The first time Robin met her boss' fiancé, Eddie, she thought he was stuck up. She thought that all physical therapists were supposed to have good bedside manner, but he was the exception. Maybe he was more humble when he began physical therapy for Dr. Wilson's mother. Also, it always unsettled her when Dr. Wilson would point out physical or personality trait similarities between her and him. She was nothing like him. He grew up in this town, but had been away for several years. Still he acted as though he knew everything about the community. He had the typical rich boy attitude. He never squandered the chance to show off his gold watches and new sports cars. Robin never knew quite how he had so much money, but whenever she asked her boss about it, Dr. Wilson never claimed to know either, but she didn't mind. As a doctor, Robin thought her boss would be smarter about who she dated. Despite this,



he made her boss happy and Robin knew that he had a charming side, a sort of car salesman charming. Dr. Wilson must love him; she didn't need his money. Being the same age as Eddie to the day, Dr. Wilson thought they were a perfect match. Dr. Wilson compared their relationship to Prince Harry and Meghan. Dr. Wilson wasn't quite royalty, but she was well known in the town. The only "royalty" her boss could claim was that her father was "the king of car sales" at the local dealership. Robin enjoyed those commercials when she was younger. The trumpet fanfare always made her stop gliding her Hot Wheels across the couch and stare at the TV. She also wanted his hat. Now, she couldn't believe he still dressed up and shot commercials. People will do anything for money, she thought.

The next Monday, Robin walked into Ms. Dr. Wilson's office. Papers were strewn about her desk and she constantly shuffled different stacks. Robin took a couple steps back, thinking it best to come back later. As soon as she placed her right foot behind her left, the floor made a noise Robin imagined a mouse would emit when stepped on. Robin winced, realizing she managed to put pressure on the one area of the floor that always creaked, the area she wished over and over again that her boss could fix.

Dr. Wilson's gaze shot up to Robin. A small smile crossed her face. "Robin."

"I'm sorry. I can come back later." Robin shuffled backwards again.

"No, no. Come in." Dr. Wilson ran her hand through her hair. Robin had noticed a few gray hairs slip through Dr. Wilson's fingers. Dr. Wilson was only ten years Robin's senior, but she looked much older in that moment. "What can I do for you?"

"I just needed you to sign these documents." Robin tried to search for an empty space to place them; but handed them to Dr. Wilson when she couldn't.

Her boss took the papers and glanced at the text. "What do we have here?"

Robin scanned the strewn papers. She had always thought of her boss as an organized person until now. There were papers entitled “catering”, “florists”, “photographers”, etc. She couldn’t imagine having different pages for each category; the options were limited if Dr. Wilson was only employing local businesses. She looked at the catering list again. Well’s Kitchen. She recognized that name. It was a pretty small restaurant and had only been in business four years. Her mother loved to go there with her.

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“Will you hurry up? I want to get there before Margery and her husband. She always takes the table closest to the chalkboard menu. She knows that’s my favorite spot.”

Robin had only been home for two days during summer break when her mother began pushing her to check out all the places she had found while Robin was in college. “Okay, Mama.” Robin laughed. She applied gold mixed with purple eyeshadow. Her roommate had said the mixture would be perfect not only to make Robin’s brown eyes pop, but also go well with her light brown hair.

Her mother walked into the bathroom where Robin was. “You don’t need all that make-up. It’s Well’s Kitchen. There’s nobody to impress. The only men you’ll see there will be too old or too country for you.”

“You only say that because I wouldn’t date Bobbie Howler in high school. He had a whole other mess of problems than being “too country””. Robin continued with her eyeliner.

“Well his dad seemed nice.”

“Weren’t you just talking about how those men would be too old for me?”

“His dad wouldn’t be for you; he’d be for me.” Robin’s mom gave Robin a nudge to look at herself in the mirror. She flipped her head upside down, combed through the soft natural curls

with her fingers, and flipped her head back over. From underneath Robin could see splotches of gray at the roots where her mom had missed while coloring her hair. Her mom looked at herself in the mirror. “Yep. Perfect every time.”

“Very nice.” Robin put all the make-up back into her bag.

“Finally. Now let’s go. Remember what I said about Margery.” Margery and Robin’s mother had been in competition since they were young. Baking contests, grades in school, and even boyfriends.

“Yes, Mama. I remember.”

They got into the car and made the ten-minute drive down the road. It was never crowded so they were able to get seated and order their food quickly. Robin went to the bathroom as she had always been a stickler about germs. As she opened the door to leave, she saw her mother talking to a man Robin thought looked a lot like Eddie. They seemed rather friendly as he touched her arm and even sat down beside her in the booth. Robin couldn’t think how the two would know each other. Right when Robin was about to get to the table, the man left and was out the door. As Robin sat down again, she asked her mother, “Who was that?”

“Who was who?” Her mother acted like no one had been there. Robin never thought of her mother as a good liar, but if Robin hadn’t seen the man, she would have believed that her mother actually didn’t know what Robin was talking about.

“There was a man here at the table, Mom. I saw him.”

“Oh, *that* person. Just an old friend of mine. I don’t even remember his name; we knew each other a long time ago.”

Robin couldn’t tell if her mother was being serious or not. She felt like she should be able to trust her. Her mother was all she had after her father died. “Was it Eddie?”

Her mother waved her hand. “Robin, honey. You know I get tired easily these days. I don’t want to talk about it. Can we just go home?”

“Mom, we just got here.”

Her mother had already started walking to the door so Robin cancelled the order and walked out to drive them back home.

When they made it back and approached the front door of the house, they passed by a small table where they always tossed the mail. Robin usually never looked at the table; her mom separated any mail that was hers. As she passed though, she glanced at the table. She picked up an envelope. “University of Tennessee Medical Center? Mom, what is this?”

Robin’s mom snatched it. “Now I don’t go through your mail, do I?”

“All the time so that you can separate mine from yours.”

Robin’s mom cracked a smile. “Okay smarty pants. It’s...just something for my eyes. You know how much they have been bothering me lately.”

Robin spotted her mom’s eye glasses on the table. “Even with your glasses?”

“Mhm.” Robin’s mom watched the floor, never meeting Robin’s eyes.

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As soon as Robin walked in through the front door after work, she heard her mother calling her. “Coming, Mom.” She tossed her purse on the couch and walked into the kitchen. She poured a cup of water and grabbed the bottle of Advil. Robin had grown accustomed to her mom asking for these things. Her mom never wanted to keep capsules beside her bed at night for fear that she might wake up and take more than she needed. Robin begged her mother to go to more doctor appointments. She was always so tired. Robin had thought it was just old age, maybe arthritis setting in.

As Robin entered her mom's bedroom, she could see her struggling to get up under the blanket. Her grunts made her seem at least twenty years older than she was. Robin set the bottle of pills and cup of water on the bedside table. "How are you feeling today?"

"Same as always." She pulled up on the sheets to cover more of her body. "Pass me the pills, won't you?"

"Yes, Mama." Robin sighed and handed her both items. As she watched the small green capsules cascade in her mother's trembling hand, Robin hated her job as the person who monitored the number of pills her mother ingested at any given time.

Her mother let out a small sigh after swallowing. The muscles in her face relaxed and she sank back into the mattress. She handed the cup back to Robin. "How was work?"

"Nothing new. Eddie came into the office today."

"Eddie?"

"Dr. Wilson's fiancé."

"The rich boy?"

"That's the one." She always appreciated that her mom took her side when talking about everyone at the office, even if it was only because her mother had never met any of them.

"He gave her a little box-"

"Don't tell me it was an engagement ring? He proposed to her in her office?"

"No." Robin chuckled. "It was just a Pandora charm."

"Oh. But he sounds like the kind of man who would do that though, right? Propose where everyone can see. Show-off." She laughed at her own joke, but as she did, a coughing fit ensued. Robin helped her sit up, just as one of the doctors instructed her to do. *Don't let her stay lying down.* She rubbed her hand between her mom's shoulder blades. *Gently rub. Don't pat or*

*hit*. When the coughing started to die down, Robin handed her mother the cup of water again. As her mother drank the water, the mantra in Robin's head kept repeating, *three small sips, breathe, three small sips, breathe*. No matter how many times the coughing episodes occurred, Robin never got used to them. She was always afraid it would be the last one. She stayed up more than half the night worrying about it.

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Lunch with Eddie. There was no string of three words that Robin hated in the English language more. Dr. Wilson invited Robin; she wanted her and Eddie to get along better. Robin couldn't figure out why. She figured that she better go as not to upset her boss and get fired. Dr. Wilson drove herself and Robin to Olympic Steakhouse. Her job wasn't ideal but it was a job. She was still exhausted from the long night. No matter how hard she tried, her thoughts kept drifting off to how awkward it would be when half the lunch was taken over by wedding planning and Dr. Wilson and Eddie saying how much they loved each other.

They parked and spotted Eddie through the window as they approached the front door. Dr. Wilson and Eddie smiled at each other as they made eye contact. And it starts, thought Robin. Once they reached Eddie's table, he kissed Dr. Wilson on the cheek. "Hey, darlin'," she said.

Eddie pulled out Dr. Wilson's chair for her and pushed it up to the table as she sat down. "How are my favorite girls?"

Favorite girls? Robin thought. "What's my name?" If you don't even know someone's name, they can't be your favorite person. Robin couldn't figure out why it bothered her so much.

Both of her lunch companions looked at her with their brows furrowed.

Eddie must have realized the question was meant for him. “What did you say?”

Robin said it slower this time, leaving a pause between each word. “What is my name?”

Eddie’s face contorted but landed on an amused look. “Oh, don’t tell me. It starts with an R.” He stroked an invisible beard. “Rebecca.”

“Robin,” she said louder than she intended. “It’s a bird.” She flapped her arms. “How can you not remember that?” Robin wanted to ask him about his conversation with her mother, but didn’t want to bring it up in front of Dr. Wilson. Her anger was building and about to boil over though. She had a suspicion that Eddie was talking to her mother in a romantic way. If she was wrong though and brought it up in front of her boss, it may put her job in jeopardy.

Dr. Wilson looked between the two of them. Robin knew Dr. Wilson didn’t like conflict, but it had just gone on too long. Dr. Wilson put her hands out on front of both Eddie and Robin. “Okay, guys. Calm down. You’re causing a scene.”

Robin looked around, but no one was looking in the direction of their table, much less any of them individually. She knew Dr. Wilson would say anything to defuse a situation. Robin looked from Dr. Wilson to Eddie and slumped into her chair. It felt good to call Eddie out, but she couldn’t live with her victory for long.

Even if she wasn’t causing a scene, Robin didn’t need to worry about him not knowing her name. She didn’t want to stay at the same company for much longer. It paid well enough to help cover bills, but she needed more if she was ever going to have enough to set aside for her mom to see a specialized doctor. While many of her friends were planning a dream wedding, she was planning a dream “vacation” to a hospital. She often thought about coming into a large sum of money, telling her mom they were going to another state far away to a fancy hospital that

could run millions of tests. Robin would even settle for a diagnosis if not a cure. You use Advil when you have a headache, Robin thought, not when you have to lie in bed all day because every fiber of your body aches.

Robin tried her best to think of something else to say. Her boss was running her hands through her hair again. Though Robin didn't think she could care less, she asked, "So Eddie, what made you want to become a physical therapist?" As the words left her mouth, she realized how odd it was that she had never heard the story before. Eddie loved talking about himself.

A grin spread across his face so wide Robin thought the sides of his mouth were going to reach his eyes. "What an insightful question! I'm so glad you asked."

Robin forced a smile as Eddie began what she thought was going to be a long-winded story.

"Well it all started when..."

His voice trailed off as Robin perused the menu. She was grateful that it wasn't an expensive restaurant since everyone paid their own way. She figured she would get one of the least expensive things on the menu anyway. Salads and soups were her best option. The budget for the week kept swirling in her head. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead in her hand.

"Everything all right?" came Dr. Wilson's voice.

Robin's head shot up. "Oh, I'm fine, thanks."

Eddie looked at her for a minute and continued with his story. "So anyway, I thought this woman was really in trouble so I decided to spend more time with her and help her out financially. Her sob stories kept getting more elaborate though and I could see through them like that." He snapped his fingers. "I think she realized that I was catching on because she began making up outrageous Latin names for sicknesses."



“You poor thing. You got swindled out of all of that money.” Dr. Wilson stroked his arm.

“Well I thought I loved her.” He was quiet for a moment. “Plus, I’m a sucker for a damsel in distress. But now business is booming and I know I’ve found the perfect girl.” He smiled at his fiancé who smiled back.

“Well I’m going to the restroom before the waitress comes.” Dr. Wilson left.

Eddie looked at Robin with a smile. “So, did you like my story?”

She kept her eyes glued to the menu. “Riveting,” Robin responded.

“You know I like you.”

Robin looked at the table for a few seconds and then back at him, her brow furrowed.

“I’m sorry?”

“You have potential. If you ever leave the orthopedic office, I may snatch you up to work with me. I have a few side gigs that could help you make some good money. You would be perfect.” He chuckled, but Robin stared blankly.

Robin was worried to ask what the ‘side gigs’ were. It did make her feeling about him seem validated. She hesitated. “Thank you, I guess.”

“Sherry tells me all about your work ethic. You get everything done so fast.”

Robin was relieved to see her boss walking toward her. “That’s me.”

Dr. Wilson came back before Robin could say anything more. “I presume you two found something to talk about while I was gone?”

“Just business,” said Eddie.

Robin looked to Dr. Wilson, then to Eddie, then back at Dr. Wilson. “Just business.”

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That night was cold so Robin brought a large comforter into her mother's room and covered them both with the blanket. Robin always loved this comforter. It was the last gift that her father bought her before he left. Although her mother had tried to convince her to throw it out (*It's trash just like him*), she treasured it. Her mother would just have to live with it.

“So, then he tells this cock and bull story about a woman who swindled him out of money.”

“Well how do you know it's a lie. It might be true.”

It was odd to hear her mother disagree with her. Robin had taken care of her for what seemed like years.

For the rest of the night, she kept thinking about that story. While she was lying in her own bed to go to sleep, she replayed the conversation and thought how nice it would be to have all that money. That “swindler” must have been a pretty good actress, she thought. If Eddie was even telling the truth. She had her doubts. All it takes is being a schmoozer. I could do that. She shook her head, trying to erase that crazy thought. She opened her laptop and typed in “how to be charming” as a joke. “7 Ways to Charm The Pants Off Of Everyone, All The Time”. What a ridiculous title. Robin laughed and closed out of the tab. As soon as she put her computer on her desk and lied down, she heard her mother coughing.

“Robin.” Her mother always stretched out the “i” when calling her.

Robin sat up and sighed. She loved her mother, but she wanted so much for her to feel better. She thought for a moment and then opened her laptop again and made one small adjustment to her previous search. How to charm people out of their money. She also looked at Eddie's Facebook page that displayed an old picture of him with who Robin presumed was the woman who took his money. She studied the woman's burgundy one-shouldered dress and the

way she posted in his page. Whatever it takes. Then she thought she remembered that dress. It was like the one she had put in a bag to give away when she helped her mother clean out her closet. There were tons of nice old dresses that Robin couldn't fit. She was sure it was the same dress. She stared at the picture for a long time, not believing what she saw. If her mother was lying about Eddie, what else was she lying about?

“Robin,” her mother called louder.

“Coming, Mama.”

## Bikinis, Flowers, and a Load of Bullshit

Grace Peters was twelve when her father started spending more time at his autobody shop than he did sending cars careening down the Hot Wheels track with her. It was summertime in Memphis, Tennessee and Grace was sweating just watching the weatherman describe the heat wave moving through the city. “It’s gonna be a hot one.” That was the way he always signed off right after a little banter between him and the news casters, each of them talking about getting ice cream with their children and going to a lake house for the weekend. Grace always wished her parents would buy a house on the lake like her friend Jessica’s parents.

Grace visited Jessica when her parents had a fourth of July party the previous summer. As soon as they pulled up in their jeep, Grace jumped out the back and began running up to her friend when she turned around to tell her parents to hurry up. Her father draped his arm around her mother’s shoulders and she plastered a smile on her face that Grace had never seen before. It was different from the smile she had on when they sang to the radio when they were alone in the car. She looked at Grace’s father for only a moment. They floated past Grace. They broke from each other as they saw different groups of people they knew. Neither seemed phased by the sudden separation. Grace’s eyes jumped from mother to father wondering why neither of them were making sure that she was also with friends. Her focus quickly shifted as a group of three friends surrounded her, one being Jessica.

“Grace, come on. We’ve been waiting for you forever.” Jessica took Grace’s hand and led her to the tire swing down by the lake. One by one, the friends took their shorts and tank tops off to reveal their swimsuits underneath. They were all going to swing in the tire and then let go as they were over the lake so they could flop into the water. As soon as she was about to

leave the house with her parents, Grace had forgotten to put her bathing suit on under her clothes so she ran back into the house to grab it per her mother's instructions as she said they didn't have time for her to change.

Grace began to head back to the car.

"Where are you going?" Jessica called out.

"Start without me. I need to change."

"Hurry up."

Grace ran to the car, snatched her bathing suit, and snaked around the party goers that had moved inside the house to avoid the heat. On her way to the bathroom, she spotted her father standing close to a woman she thought she recognized from school. The woman giggled as she tossed her bleached blond hair over her shoulder. A gold infinity bracelet she wore on her wrist caught the sunlight shining a glare in to Grace's eyes. She waved to her father, trying to get his attention, but his eyes were glued to the woman. Grace walked over to the pair and she was happy that both of them acknowledged her, but Grace wanted more attention. "I like your bracelet." Grace pointed to the gold chain.

"Thank you, sweetheart. That's what happens when your husband messes up big time." She laughed and flipped her hair again.

Grace's father smiled, but looked uncomfortable that she said that in front of Grace. He walked off saying that he was going to get something to drink. But as Grace walked away, her father sauntered back over to the woman. Grace thought of this woman as if she were an anchor and her father a ship, never to far from each other and always finding their way back to one another. Grace walked back over to the pair, and after the three of them engaged in small talk for a few minutes, her father left again, but Grace didn't. She found herself following this

woman around the kitchen and living room area. She couldn't decide if she wanted her father's attention or if she didn't want that other woman to have it more. She figured that if there were enough people around that it wouldn't be evident that she was attached to this woman. She didn't really care if it was evident though. She looked around for her father, but didn't see him. What she did see was Jessica outside. Jessica looked around and then the girls made eye contact. Grace heard a muffled 'come on' through the window. Grace had forgotten about the tire swing entirely. She gave her friend a thumbs up. With one last scan of the room, she made a beeline for the bathroom.

As soon as made it, she was excited to slip on her tankini. It wasn't quite a bikini, but this was the first bathing suit her mother let her wear that wasn't a one-piece. She felt so grown up. She admired the blue flowers that spotted the top and bottom of her suit. She posed like one of the models in a picture she saw wearing a bikini in Target when she went shopping. She moved her brown waves to one side and placed one hand on the back of her head while the other was placed on her hip. She leaned against the wall pretending they were rocks. She was disappointed in how silly she looked. Nevertheless, she was excited to show her tankini off to all her "one-piecer" friends. As she was about to leave, she heard two women talking outside.

"Poor Annie. Do you think she suspects anything?"

"How could she not. Jason is so blatant." Grace heard the woman take a sip from her drink.

Grace recognized those names as her parents'. Grace was so excited to see her parent's beaming at the work she had done. She hoped her mom and dad would replace her nine-year-old art with her ten-year-old spelling test for which she received an "A" on the refrigerator.

"You know what I heard?"

“What?” The woman sounded so excited as if continuing life depended on hearing this bit of information.

“I heard that he claimed that his shop has started being open on Saturdays.”

The other woman scoffed. “Wow. What a load of bullshit.”

Grace didn’t know what that last word meant, but she recognized it as one of the “naughty words” her mother told her was impolite to say after Grace repeated the word when her father said it. She wanted to sound like him. Grace knew about her father working Saturdays. Neither her nor her mother liked it, but she was told to stop complaining about it. It wasn’t what that woman said. It was the truth. He was going to make more money. They didn’t understand. Grace was about to go out and tell them they didn’t know what they were talking about when she heard them say something about seeing another woman they knew and then heard them walk away.

Grace looked back in the mirror. Being grown up meant she had to deal with grown up talk and she didn’t want that. She wished she could go back to a one-piece bathing suit if it meant she didn’t have to remember those words. They were already etched into her memory.

That was the last time the three of them went anywhere together.

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Grace lounged in the large golden chair that sat in the corner of the living room reading her favorite book. Although every book seemed to become her favorite by the time she finished with the first chapter. Grace’s father walked through the front door after being away for the weekend. He fumbled with a massive bouquet of yellow roses. He walked over to Grace’s mother and handed her the mass of flowers but not before taking one out. Grace looked up. Her eyes widened and a smile grew on her face as her father walked over to her. She noticed that

he was wearing the white button-down long sleeve shirt that he never used other than his Sunday best. Suddenly she remembered that they hadn't been to church for the past three weeks. She wondered why, but she wasn't complaining; she never found the service interesting anyway.

He crouched down and held the flower out to her. "It's easy to remember what flowers to get when your two favorite girls have the same favorite flower." She tossed the book on the floor as if it wasn't her favorite book at all. It was as if the book were one of the little green army men he tried to give her to play with. She didn't like them at all.

"Dad!" She wrapped her arms around his neck. As she did, she studied her mother. Her mother looked over at the pair with a weak smile as she cut the stems one by one. She was only in her early 30's but she looked much older, almost like her mother, Grace's grandmother. Some of the enthusiasm that Grace felt when her dad walked in subsided as she watched her mother. Grace pulled away from the hug and delicately took the flower, checking for thorns and making sure not to jostle it around too much as a petal could fall off. "Dad, where did you go this weekend?"

He looked at Grace, then at her mother, then back at Grace. "I went to visit a friend like I told your mother."

"Business trip." Her mother turned the water on full blast.

"What?" Her father turned around to face her.

Her mother held a vase under the faucet and watched the water cascade before she responded. "You said you were on a business trip." Her eyes stayed focused on the water.

His brow furrowed for only a second and then he turned back to Grace. "Well, I'm home now." He gave her a big smile.



Grace opened her mouth to protest, but she remembered being scolded for saying anything negative pertaining to his job. She closed her mouth and tried her best to focus on each petal of the rose, counting them one by one. The velvet feeling reminded her of her mother's favorite purse. Grace offered to carry it every time she went out with her mother. She didn't think her mother thought she was anything other than helpful and she liked that.

Her father stood up with a grunt and walked over to her mother. He pulled something out of his pocket, a red box about the size of his palm, and gave it to her. She opened it up and a weak smile crept across her face again. She took the piece of jewelry out and wrapped it around her wrist. Grace's eyes widened and her heart began to beat fast. It looked just like the gold bracelet that the woman was wearing at the party. "It's lovely," her mother said.

Her father turned to Grace. "What do you think, Gracie?"

"Did you do something?"

Her dad chuckled. "What are you talking about?"

"That bracelet. It's like the one she was wearing."

His eyes widened a bit. "Gracie, I'm tired. I need to go change." He walked to the other end of the house.

"But, dad-". He was already in his and her mother's bedroom. Grace couldn't help but notice that he didn't have any luggage.

She missed church.

All of a sudden, her mother began walking toward her bedroom, but hesitated after a few steps and looked back at Grace. "Gracie, why don't you put your flower in the vase with the rest of them? Just cut the stem at an angle."

"Can you help me?" Grace didn't want her mother to leave her alone. Not yet.

“Gracie, I’m very tired.”

Grace noticed that her mother was tired a lot lately. “Please.”

Her mother walked back over to the sink and motioned Grace over with her hand. Once Grace made it to the sink, she reached underneath and pulled out the stool that she used to help her mother wash dishes as she was shorter than most girls her age. Her mother handed her the scissors and showed her where and how to cut the stem by using two fingers as scissors. Grace cut it. She looked at the vase overflowing with leaves and petals. As she tried to fit her flower in, she heard a snuffle escape from her mother.

“Good job, baby.” Grace’s mother kissed her on the top of her head and again walked toward her bedroom, leaving Grace still stuffing the flower in. Grace looked under all the foliage and found the vase she had made in art class just before school ended. Nothing was smooth, but it was relatively a container, more like a square. It was painted a couple different shades of blue since she ran out of paint halfway through and her flowers looked more like pink blobs. She blamed the kiln even though she took a brush to the vase after it was out of the kiln and cooled. Though it looked like a mess, her parents said it was perfect nonetheless. In that moment, Grace was glad her father brought home such a large bouquet.

Grace heard a shout and then a door shut. She knew that meant that there was something being talked about that she wasn’t supposed to hear. So naturally, she was going to try her best to find out what was going on. She made sure to tiptoe down the hallway. She could never sneak up on her mother because she always “slapped her bare feet on the floor” according to her mother. Once she reached the door, she pressed her ear right up to it and vowed that she would keep her ear stuck there just how the peanut butter stuck to the roof of her mouth with every peanut butter and jelly sandwich she ate each day for lunch. Unfortunately, her parents quieted

down after closing the door. Grace sat there for what felt like half an hour to her. She was about to go to her room when she heard her own name.

“What about our daughter?” She could more clearly hear her father’s voice.

“Gracie needs you too.”

“I love her and you know that.”

“So, it’s just me you don’t love?”

There was a long pause.

“Annie, I guess I just keep thinking about the incident.”

“How many times do I have to tell you those were all rumors?” This time it was her mother that raised her voice.

“My cousin saw you with him.”

“Your alcoholic cousin? The cousin who tried to sleep with me?”

She heard her father shush her mother. Grace heard her name again, but their speech became hushed. She had heard all she wanted to hear anyway. Not knowing if she was sure she understood everything that just happened, she didn’t know how to feel. She ran to her room down the hall not worrying if her parents heard her slapping feet. She shut her door and splayed out on her bed. Her confusion and fear came out as tears. She rolled over on her side causing the tears from her right eye to roll over her nose and tickle her cheek. As she wiped the tears from her face, she saw the tankini hanging out of her drawer. “You.” She walked over and snatched it. “You did this.” She threw it in the trash and stomped back over to her bed. Maybe she wasn’t grown up enough. The trouble with her parents started while she was at the party. She blamed the suit because if she thought to much about it, she would blame herself. But she was drawn back to the bathing suit and didn’t know why. She grabbed to suit out of the trash and hovered it

over her drawer before she threw it back in the trash can. She repeated this ritual two more times until there was a knock on her door. She threw it on the floor of her closet and glared at it before opening her door.

Her father stood in front of her. “Can I come in?”

She opened the door all the way and stood aside to let him in. As he sat on her bed, she noticed a box in his hands. Her father took the lid off the box and pulled out a small toy car. “I saw this over the weekend and thought you might like to have it. Remember when we used to play with your Hot Wheels? That was fun, right? Here, take this. I’ll grab the track. Now where did you put it?” He handed Grace the car as he looked around the room.

Grace watched him for a few seconds. He seemed frantic. What was he trying to do, she wondered. Why was he in her room trying to play with her now? She ran her fingers along the flame decal on one side and the “Hot Wheels” decal on the hood of the car. She then traced the black stripe that ran from the hood all the way to the back of the car. She remembered the time that she painted stripes on the family car. Her parents were upset, but she couldn’t help but notice the humor behind her father’s eyes.

“Why is this lying on the floor? Don’t you want it?”

Grace looked up to find her father holding up the top part of her tankini. She thought she would have dealt with the bathing suit before anyone found out about her fit.

“You have to take care of it. Ah, here it is.” He pulled the race track from the back of her closet. “Let’s get this set up.” The orange tracks curved this way and that with one loop at the end so that if you pushed a car with enough force, it would go careening off the track and collide with anything that came in its path. He pulled the box filled with cars from the closet as well.

Grace stood there and watched as her father put together tracks that had become disconnected. Normally she would have been on the floor right next to him, but now she was hesitant. She forced down the urge to push the track back into the closet and her father out of her room. Her father looked awkward as he sent the first car flying down the track. It hit the wall with a thud and he struggled to move the track further away from the wall without messing it up. Grace knelt down on the other side and reconnected a piece of track to stop the chaotic anxiety growing in her chest if nothing else. She let one car fall down the track, but with no force, the car didn't make it around the loop. Her father gave the car a push and it continued around the loop and fell off the end. She picked up the new car and let it hover at the top of the track for a moment.

“Go ahead. Let her rip.” Her father made the car noises he used to when they used to play together every day after he came home from work. A sense of relief and calm seemed to wash over him. She smiled almost involuntarily. Grace pushed the car down the track and watched it fly. After she sent a few cars flying into the wall, she felt better. But there was still something holding her back from the joy she used to feel playing like this.

“Dad? That was the same bracelet that lady had at the party, wasn't it?”

He sighed. “Aren't you happy with the car that I bought for you?”

She was silent.

He walked over and hugged her. “I love you and I need you to always know that.”

Grace put her arms around him but not tightly as she used to. A wall had gone up and she didn't know if it could ever be broken through.

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A few months later, Grace's mother caught pneumonia and stayed in bed for most of the day the first day and her father took off work to take care of both Grace and her mother. Though Grace was worried for her mother, her father seemed overly concerned and brought her every little thing that she needed. No matter he did, Grace kept thinking about that conversation she overheard, what her mother said. *So, it's just me you don't love?* Grace was sure that her father was doing something with another woman, but there was something inside her that didn't want him to leave. Like her mother believed he was leaving her.

After a few days of this, the care tapered off and Grace was forced to get her things like water and blankets. One day when Grace brought her mother a glass of water, she asked, "Mom, when is Dad coming back? Coming back to stay?" It seemed to Grace that he had become like a visitor in their own home.

Her mother let out a loud cough. "I don't know, baby. I really don't." She coughed again and drank almost half the glass of water.

Don't you even care, she thought. She realized her thoughts had come out of her mouth when her mother stared at her. Grace didn't want to be in the room anymore. "I love you and your father. Both of you take good care of me when I can't take care of myself. I may be sick, but that doesn't mean that I don't care." She curled up in her blanket. Looking at her mother like that, Grace couldn't imagine her mother cheating on her father.

Days later, Grace's mother was feeling better and Grace was finally able to take a break. Grace's father went to said he was going to work on another Saturday, but when he pulled into the driveway Sunday morning, he brought tools and bags full of dirt. Grace's mother stepped out to survey his loot. Grace peeked through the blinds in the window and wished she could read lips

at that moment. She saw a smile come across her mother's face and she almost ran into the house. Grace's heart pounded as her mother came through the door.

"Momma, what's going on?"

"Your father is building a garden."

Grace thought from all the excitement that it had to be something bigger than that. "A garden?"

Grace was not good at hiding her emotions and her mother could read what she was thinking. "He'll plant yellow roses."

Grace's mood changed quickly. "Yellow roses!" She ran to her mother and gave her a hug. Then she bolted out the door to find her father.

Her father saw her coming out the door as he was unloading a bag of dirt from the bed of his truck. "Hey Gracie."

"Yellow roses?" She approached him looking up at him, smiling.

"This is the part where you say 'hey, Dad. It's so good to see you.'" He scooped her up.

"Hey, Dad. Yellow roses?"

He chuckled. "Yes, baby. We're going to have big bushes filled with yellow roses in the garden. We can't just have yellow roses though. We should have some diversity."

"I guess so."

"Well I have to start on this garden."

"No problem. I'll just help you with the garden."

His smile faded. "Actually, I need to do this by myself." He set Grace down again.

"By yourself? But why?" Grace could feel her excitement leaving her body as if someone was sucking it out and using it for their own enjoyment, leaving Grace feeling empty. She felt

torn; she desperately wanted to help in the garden to be with her father, but also didn't want to have anything to do with him.

“I'm sure your mom could use help in the kitchen making lunch. Why don't you help her? You don't want to get all dirty before lunch anyway.”

“Yes, I do. Why can't I help?”

He turned back to the bags and started unloading one. “How about I let you help when I start planting the yellow roses?”

Grace wasn't satisfied, but she complied. She walked back into the house with her head down.

Weeks passed and Grace was never asked to help with the garden even when she begged. It was even more pointless to ask her father to play with her since he was in the garden almost every chance he got. Her father would still go out some weekends. He never said exactly where he was going, but as long as he came home with supplies in tow, her mother seemed satisfied. One day after being turned away for offering to help in the garden, she ran to her room and yanked her copy of *The Secret Garden* off her bookshelf. She flipped through it and then looked at the cover. “Yeah, right.” She let it fall from her hand and it would have hit the bottom of the trash can if it had been able to permeate all the used tissues. This was one thing she knew she wouldn't retrieve from her trash can. She picked up the bathing suit from her floor, washed it and put it in her drawer planning to use it as soon as she could.

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As Grace continued through high school, she began spending less and less time at home, trading in her Hot Wheels for hot summer days at the lake house with her friends. Whenever she came home, she saw the garden being made little by little, but she had stopped asking about it,



stopped caring. Once she saw the walls being erected, it was easier to believe the phrase “out of sight, out of mind.” With college just around the corner, she spent most days with friends, despite protests from her mother. Her mother was getting sick again and the doctors couldn’t figure out why. They had done multiple tests and as soon as the results of one test came back, she was moving onto another one. She hated that she had started resenting her mother because she always had to take care of her. Why her mother never seemed to talk to her father about him leaving, Grace didn’t know. The relationship with both of her parents was on the path of completely deteriorating.

It was late July when Jessica invited Grace to spend one last weekend at the lake house as Jessica was leaving to get settled in an apartment in California where she would be starting college. Grace gathered up her bag filled with towels, clothes, and sunscreen. She took one last glance in the mirror. Her bright pink bikini shown clearly through the white mesh cover up. As she walked through the living room to walk out the door, she tapped on the sunglasses already sliding from the top of her head so they fell on the bridge of her nose. “I’m heading to Jessica’s,” Grace called out.

Her mother’s voice traveled from the back of the house. “Hold on a minute.”

Grace stopped, waiting with her fingers wrapped around the door handle.

Her mother came down the hallway. “I wanted to talk to you for a-” She paused, giving her daughter a once over and sighed. “I do wish you would wear something else. You might as well not be wearing a cover-up at all. You’re fooling yourself if you think that’s covering up anything.”

“Is there a caboose to this train of thought?”

Her mother walked over to the window and gazed out. “I want us all to do something as a family before you head off to college.”

Grace had trouble picturing the last time they ate dinner as a family. “As a family?”

Her mother turned back to her. “I know that we’ve grown apart, but I’m trying to make things better. Can’t you just try?”

Just then, Grace got a text from Jessica. *You on the way?* Grace began to text back.

“Grace, are you listening?”

Still looking at her phone, she responded absentmindedly. “Trying. Family. Got it.”

“Grace, I’m serious.”

Grace looked up. “Mom, I heard you. I’ll think about it. See you later.” She opened up the door.

“You can’t always run away from your problems, you know?”

Grace stopped and looked at the ground. “What?”

“You can’t run away. You have to face problems eventually. If you’re looking for things to be easy, that ship has sailed a long time ago.”

Grace never talked to her mother or father about what happened. She had never wanted to. She had also never heard her mother be so blunt. She couldn’t bring herself to close the door and look at her mother.

“You’re eighteen now, Grace. Act like it.”

“Maybe I’ll start acting like it when you realize that calling us a family is a joke.”

“Why won’t you try?”

“Why won’t you acknowledge what is happening?”

Grace's mother rubbed her temples and shuffled to one of the chairs at the table. She patted the chair next to her and Grace sat down with a sigh. "Grace, I'm not expecting you to understand everything. But I am sick. I don't know what's wrong with me. The only thing that I do know is that I have you and your father. I can't lose either one of you but especially you. And it's killing me that I am."

Grace didn't want to lose her parents either, but she had stopped trying to be close to either of them a long time ago. She made up her mind about what her father did. Hearing her mother say this though, brought her back to when she was a little kid. Suddenly she wanted a hug, to be told it was all okay. A hug from both of her parents. She knew that wasn't going to happen with her father, but she scooted her chair as close to her mother's as she could and wrapped her arms around her mother's neck. Her mother wanted Grace to go with her friends, but they agreed to have dinner when she got back.

When she got outside, she looked to the garden. Something drew her there even though she knew Jessica was waiting. Grace dropped her bag and fumbled through the areas of overgrown grass to see a makeshift door made of mismatched wood. She struggled between opening the door and wanting to smash it. Finally, she peeked in.

## Yellow Roses

Justine Harris was ten when her mother took her to visit her grandfather. Her mother said they had visited before but Justine barely remembered it. Justine's last surviving grandparent other than her grandfather had just died, and even though her mother didn't talk about her father much, she said Justine should get to know him. Her grandfather took her to the place he called the "secret garden" when she visited during the last week of summer. It was supposed to be a magical place according to him. He took her hand in his and guided her to an area that she had never seen before. It was about a ten-minute walk through the field behind the house. As soon as they arrived, Justine saw clusters of dark green vines rising about seven feet off the ground. She thought they were floating. As her grandfather guided her toward the vines, he let go of her hand and nudged her to go closer. She hesitantly took a few steps forward. She reached out her hand, but quickly drew it back. If these plants were floating, she didn't want to disturb them. The whole thing might come crashing down.

Justine expected to smell the perfume of the flowers just behind the door, but she did not smell anything. All she heard was crinkling as the wind blew. She didn't want to go inside. Apprehension washed over her.

She looked back to her grandfather. "Go on," he said waving his hand toward the vines. She shut her eyes tight and reached out again. She barely grazed a few of the leaves. Nothing happened.

She slowly opened her eyes. As her hand passed over the other leaves, they tickled her fingers and she giggled. Her hand stopped on one particular cluster. She grabbed onto and pulled, but the vines wouldn't budge. They were so entangled with each other. Justine remembered

hearing the phrase “fruit of the vine” at church and wondered how anything could grow in all this mess. Although it was a mess, she thought it was pretty.

She jumped back as Grandpa placed his hand on her back. “There’s more to see inside,” he said. There was a twinkle in his eye when he smiled wide. Justine grabbed his hand again. It felt safe. “You have to find the clearing shaped like a star. It’s real small so maybe you can find it faster than I can being so close to the ground and all. That will be the door that leads into the garden.”

Justine ran her other hand along the vines, only getting snared by the tangle once. A bright blue bird sang as it flew over the wall. She thought the bird’s feathers matched the color of the dress on her Raggedy Ann doll at home. Both of them looked up and Grandpa let go of her hand as he cupped both of his hands on either side of his mouth. While moving his hand back and forth he made a whistling noise that sounded just like the bird’s. The bird came back to perch atop the wall and called back.

Justine tried her hardest to imitate her grandfather. She quickly realized that she was unable to see the shape of Grandpa’s mouth while he made the whistling noise. Nevertheless, she put her hands to her mouth and blew while moving her hands. The only noise she created sounded like the propeller of a helicopter taking off.

Grandpa looked down at her and laughed. “Let’s find that door, huh?”

After only a minute, Justine found the star-shaped clearing in the vines. “Grandpa, it’s here!” She traced the outline while Grandpa knelt down next to her.

“Well, open her up. But remember, this is magical. We have to be quiet so as not to scare any of the critters that might be lurking about.”

Justine nodded in excitement and pushed the vines near the clearing and grabbed onto the smooth round handle, soon realizing she needed both hands to turn it. As she turned, she gave the metal door a push and it swung up with a creaking noise. “Shhh, door. Be quiet,” she whispered.

Grandpa gave her a nudge and she began her trek through the tall grass that grew at the opening. Suddenly the space opened into a clearing where she saw a large tree with a swing made of ropes and a wooden board that hung from a branch. The ropes were frayed. Justine didn't think it looked safe. As her eyes scanned the area, all her anticipation left her body as if someone had reached inside her and pulled it out. It was replaced with awe, but not like the awe she felt when her mother bought her a lamp that shone lights on the ceiling of her bedroom to look like the night sky. She had imagined beautiful flowers populating the ground, but instead-brown weeds covered the ground, some still stood while others had given up and were lying in the dirt. The trunk of the tree where the swing hung had bark chipped away and the roots peeked through the dirt that Justine imagined was trying its best to keep the tree standing.-

She eyed something large in the back. As she walked toward it, it grew from the brush and she saw a kneeling angel statue with one arm draped over a rock while the other was bent with her head nestled in the crook. Justine wondered if the angel was crying because the garden was so messy. “It's okay, angel. Don't cry.” Justine ran her hand over the wavy hair, first down the statue's back and then down the hair cascading over the draped arm. The angel was white but the paint had been chipped in several places and a brown rust color showed through.

“She used to be a beauty.” Grandpa had walked up behind Justine without her noticing. He stepped beside her and put his hand on the back of the statue. “I guess she hasn’t aged too well.”

Justine looked at Grandpa’s eyes. She didn’t see a twinkle anymore. He looked as if someone had taken that piece of him and thrown it away like a piece of garbage. “Grandpa?”

He finally took his eyes off the statue and looked at Justine. A small smile grew. “We had this made when Nana passed away. Remember when we saw her in the coffin and she looked like she was sleeping?”

Justine recalled how Grandpa walked her up to the front of the church and she saw Nana’s face only. It was unsettling for Justine to see someone just lying there. Justine tried her best to wrap her head around the facts about death that were presented to her by her mother.

*Sometimes people have to go away*

*When will she be back*

*She can’t come back*

*Why*

*She had to go to Heaven*

*But she promised to help me with my science project*

*.....I’ll help you.*

Justine ended up doing the project by herself.

“I remember.” She hesitated. This time was the only memories that she had of both of her grandparents. She was so young when it happened. Her moth insisted that they stayed the night with him at his house for the night, but after that she didn’t say anything else about visiting. “Grandpa, this place doesn’t seem magical to me.”

He looked around scratching the back of his head. His hair was white and always kept short. Sometimes Justine would rub the top of his head for good luck. He sucked in through his teeth. “I guess you’re right. This was Nana’s garden and I wasn’t able to keep up with it after she passed. I thought if I put this statue here, it would help me to get this placed straightened up.”

“But the angel isn’t happy. You need a happy one.”

“Maybe you’re right. This garden needs some happiness. How would you like to help me fix it up? Make it magical.”

Justine jumped at the idea of magic. “Let’s do it.”

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For the next week, Justine helped Grandpa pull up weeds. They would have contests to see who could gather the most. At the end of the day they would compare their piles; neither of them was very big. Justine’s hands weren’t rough or strong enough to pull many and Grandpa had to continually stop to massage his hands from arthritis. They would toss all the weeds into a wheelbarrow to get rid of outside the garden. Sometimes Justine would ride in the wheelbarrow and Grandpa would dump her out with the weeds. Then he would put her back inside and wheel her back to the house. Justine loved this. She loved all the time she got to spend in the garden. It was her escape.

“You’re starting school tomorrow, aren’t you, hon’?”

Justine fell backward with a thud from pulling a weed too hard. “Got you.” She looked at it triumphantly and threw it on her pile. Then she looked at her grandfather. “Grandpa, don’t say that. If you say it, then that makes it true.” She yanked on another weed, but caught herself before she fell back.



Grandpa laughed. “It’s still true even if we don’t say it. You can still come here after school.”

Justine pulled two weeds at once. I’m getting good at this, she thought. “That’s true. But how about we try not saying it anymore and see who’s right.” School took her away from the garden.

The school day came and went. Justine had already instructed her mother the night before that she needed to go back to Grandpa’s house after school let out. “There’s work to be done, Mom,” she said as she jumped in the car.

“If you have to keep working in the garden, at least wear these play clothes I brought you.” Her mother handed Justine the pair of shorts and t-shirt she wore to play in the leaf piles last fall. “Make sure you wear those. I’m serious, Justine.”

“Mhm.” She took the clothes and tossed them to the other side of the car.

Once they got to the house, Justine jumped out of the car leaving her backpack and change of clothes in the car.

“Justine, come here,” her mother called. She held the clothes out of the window. Justine trudged back. “I need to run errands, but I’ll be back to pick you up later.”

“Right, right.” Justine grabbed the clothes and ran up the ramp to the door. Her grandfather came out and scooped her up.

“Hi, sweetie.” He quickly put her back down and grabbed his back. He waved to Justine’s mother, his daughter, but she held a cold stare with him. The smile he had from seeing Justine faded into a frown and Justine saw the same look in his eyes as she had seen back in the garden when he stared at the statue. He looked forlorn as Justine’s mother drove away. “Well should we

get back to work?” His stare was still focused ahead of him. This was what he always said when she arrived except this time, he didn’t sound excited; there was no inflection in his voice.

Justine looked from him to the empty driveway and back at him. She wanted the smile to creep across his face again. She thought that if she stared at him long enough, maybe she could will the smile, like a magic trick. As she concentrated, the grip on her clothes became loose and she dropped them on the ramp with a soft thump.

Grandpa broke from his trance. “Let’s go, hon.” He took Justine’s hand in his and they walked down the ramp over the crumpled shirt and shorts. “Start walking. I have to tie my bootlaces again so I’m going to sit inside. Be right back out.” Justine walked to where her mother parked and saw water droplets from the exhaust pipe darkening the concrete. She sat down and crossed her legs. She put her finger in one of the wet spots and rubbed the water between her fingers. She suddenly didn’t feel like going into the garden today. But as her grandfather came out, he grabbed her hand. As they walked toward the garden, Justine gave one more look back to where her mother’s car had been.

“Grandpa, why is Mom so angry? Why won’t she come to the garden with us?”

“Well, your mom has a lot going on. She is busy working and trying to take care of you all by herself.”

Justine felt a pain in her chest and stopped walking. “So, it’s my fault?”

Her grandfather knelt down next to her with some difficulty. He grunted a few times. When he got to the ground, he took both of Justine’s hands in his. “Your mother loves you very much. She wanted to have a child since before she got married. Her dream was to raise a baby with her husband. Unfortunately, she lost both your father and her mother around the same time. She cared for you so much that she was determined to take care of you by herself. She just gets

stressed because she wants what's best for you." He smiled. Justine could see the hurt in his eyes. He managed to get up by himself. Justine tried to help him, but she was too small to make much of a difference. "Come on. Let's get some work done before she gets back."

Justine was unsure if that was true. She had never felt like a burden until now. "Grandpa, can I stay here for a while?"

"You are. We'll be in the garden until your mother comes back."

"No, I mean for longer. I don't think Mom likes me coming here very much, but I don't want to stop."

"Oh honey." He bent over to hug her. "Don't worry about that. We'll see each other and work in the garden. I promise." He let go.

Justine wasn't certain how to feel, but she knew she was worried. Knowing that the garden would make her feel better though, she ran to meet her grandfather who had already started walking there.

After working, the two of them made it back to the driveway as Justine's mother pulled up. When her mother saw Justine's dirty uniform, Justine could see her mother trying to hold in her anger as she stepped out of the car. It was the same technique she used when she found Justine sneaking cookies before dinner. *What did I tell you about...* Justine began to think that was her mother's favorite phrase. "Just look at your clothes."

Justine looked down the front of her jumper. It would not have been so bad except for the fact that it had rained the night before turning harmless dirt into destructive mud. Whereas dirt would usually be sprinkled all over her clothes, mud was splattered. Brown spots decorated the front and back of her uniform. She thought back to what her grandfather said. "Mom, I'm sorry. I don't mean to stress-"

“What happened to the clothes I gave you?” Justine’s mother looked over toward the ramp and saw the crumpled clothes. “Are those-”. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Are those your clothes on the ramp?”

Justine didn’t know her mother would be so upset. She looked up at her grandfather for help.

“Grace, we can wash the clothes here. Justine can wear one of my big shirts like when she used to sleep over.” There was not much conviction in his voice, but Justine knew she could do no better.

Justine’s mother opened her eyes, but did not make eye contact with Justine’s grandfather. “Dad, I can take care of my child. I told her to change clothes and she didn’t. And I see you didn’t think it was necessary for her to change before going into that mess.”

That mess? Justine thought. Not anymore. It’s starting to look magical. She was about to suggest that her mom come look at the garden when she spoke up again.

“Honestly, I don’t see why you don’t just call someone to clean that place up or better yet, just bulldoze it already. You think Mom would want that place anymore?” Her voice was getting louder and Justine was getting scared. She could see the lines in her mom’s forehead deepening, something she had been seeing a lot of lately.

Justine tried her best to seem confident. She swallowed spit. It tasted bad going down the back of her throat. “Hey, I look like the cows. All covered with spots.” Justine looked at her mother and grandfather. Her mouth was set in a wide smile, but soon faded as it was evident that she was being ignored. She felt an overwhelming urge to be taken care of, to be hugged in that moment. Seeing as that was not going to happen, she squeezed in the small space between the adults and walked up the ramp to grab her wrinkled clothes. She didn’t want to wear them

anyway, but she wished she had if it could diffuse what was happening. Once she picked up her clothes, she headed to her mom's car. She was surprised how easy it was to be able to float around the adults without them noticing.

She could hear snippets of the conversation as she passed. She heard her mom talking about Nana again. There was talk about her death and more on the garden. She just heard her grandfather saying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry". She looked over at him, but his shoulders were slumped. The lines in his forehead deepened too, but not in the way they did on her mother. He looked sad, defeated. She didn't want to see it unfold anymore. She could have sworn she heard her name, but decided she had to get in the car. In there, she couldn't cause any more trouble.

She opened her door but couldn't bear to see to see her grandfather that way when he tried to make her feel better earlier. Even though she felt that she would be better off in the car, she tip-toed toward her mother and grandfather, hiding behind anything she could on her way. She contorted her body to best hide herself behind a birdbath a few feet away from them.

"You can't keep acting like that garden was a place for her," her mother said.

"It was, Grace. You know that. Your mother loved flowers."

"You think I don't remember? I may have only been about Justine's age when Mom fell sick, but I remember everything, Dad. I remember getting her medicine, cooking dinner, trying to figure out homework on my own. All that because you were in the garden. I HATE that garden and that you thought that that was where you were needed."

Her mother and grandfather stood there staring at each other. Both of them looked like they could cry and her mother even wiped her cheek quickly before continuing. "Look I have to

get Justine home. I have laundry to do, dinner to cook, and I have to help Justine with her math homework.”

At that, Justine rushed back to the car. She brushed the back of her jumper and brought back mud on her hand. She knew her mom would be more upset if the backseat was stained with mud. She learned that the hard way. Her mom always kept a blanket in the trunk just in case. Justine had seen her mom open the trunk enough times that she knew which button to push. She snatched the blanket and smoothed it out so that it covered both the back and the bottom of the seat, and sat down. There she waited. She didn't want to close the trunk or her door for fear of them looking her way. She only wanted to escape, just like she felt she could in the garden. Her mother got into the car in the next minute. She slumped in her seat, closing her eyes and taking a few deep breaths. Eventually, she turned to look at Justine. “I'm sorry. Thank you for waiting in the car. You didn't need to hear all that.” Her mother turned back around and started the car. Justine wanted to shrink, feeling worse than ever. She would have to find a way to escape on her own.

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Over the next month, Justine limited her visits to the secret garden to once a week. Even though she wanted to be there, she wasn't as insistent that her mother take her back. She had tried to stay on her best behavior. The face her mother made when she was mad at her grandfather was etched into her memory. Every time she thought about it, she would shake her head until she got dizzy. She imagined the image shattering into tiny pieces and laying scattered at the bottom of her brain, puzzle pieces that refused to fuse back together. Still her desires to escape were still there. She felt that it grew even more when Grandparent's Day rolled around at school. The teacher wanted everyone to make cards, but Justine didn't know what to do. Her

mother didn't want her to see her grandfather, but she didn't have any grandparents left. She tried her best to write something sweet, but she just felt sad. She peeked at the cards that her friends were making and tried to copy them. The end result was just a piece of construction paper that read "Happy Grandparent's Day. I love you." with a big red heart.

Her mother thought she should be involved with things after school. "Have you thought about playing soccer?"

Justine had found her fear of her mother quickly morphing into anger, quicker than she had wanted. She almost scared herself. Justine's teachers made her classmates work out arguments as soon as they happened. She saw Darren Thompson, the class bully, be defeated by Ms. Becker's "talk it out" method many times. Was it that much harder for adults? "Well a few of my friends are signing up, but I don't think I'd like it."

Her mother was making a sandwich to put into Justine's lunch bag. "Well you never know until you try."

"Do I have to?"

"Sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do."

"Like talking to people you don't like?" She wished she hadn't said that as it left her mouth.

Her mother looked at her out of the corner of her eye. She hesitated. "Yes, like that."

Maybe her mom didn't catch that Justine was talking about her grandfather. She was relieved. "So, when are you going to talk to Grandpa?" Justine didn't know where that came from. She looked to both sides and behind her to make sure someone had not stolen her voice and said something she couldn't.

Her mother folded over the top of Justine's lunch bag and sighed. "This is grown-up stuff."

"But I like the garden. The secret garden."

Her mother grabbed Justine's backpack and shoved the lunch bag inside. "Do you want me to call your grandfather so he can pick you up from school? You'll be in charge of your math homework. He won't know how to help you."

Justine thought about it for a moment. She thought about spending all day in the garden, forgetting about everything. But she already felt the magic of the garden fading, being blown away by the wind because of what her mother said. She stared at the table painted with yellow roses in front of her and swirled the crumbs, the remnants of her breakfast, around. "I'll come home."

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Justine had been missing her grandfather and the garden for weeks. It seemed that, to her mother, her grandfather didn't exist. She tried not to make life any harder on her mother, but on Justine's eleventh birthday, she begged her mother to drive her to visit her grandfather. Justine wanted to see him, but his arthritis was hurting him too much for him to drive to see her. As they walked up the ramp, Justine and her mother glanced at each other as if knowing what the other person was thinking. Justine rang the doorbell and her mother knocked after a minute of not hearing footsteps. Another minute passed and just as Justine's mom knocked again, the sound of a key turning in a lock reached their ears.

Grandpa opened the door. "Do you know how long it takes an old man with arthritis to open the door? You have to be patient."

"Hey, Grandpa." Justine gave him a hug.



“Hey, Dad,” Justine’s mom said while she passed him. She set down the pan of ravioli she was carrying on the table and grabbed some plates and glasses from the cabinet while Justine sat down at the table with Grandpa.

“How’s my favorite granddaughter doing on her birthday?”

“It’s been great. I got a cupcake at lunch, but I had to sit with Darren Thompson while the class sang “Happy Birthday” because it was his birthday too.” Justine stuck out her tongue.

“Well I bet Darren Thompson isn’t going to get a big surprise like you are.”

“A big surprise? Can I know now?” Justine propped herself onto her knees in her chair.

“After dinner. It’ll be our “secret”.” He made air quotes around the last word.

Justine figured that he meant the secret garden, but she had no idea how it looked now. She hadn’t been in months and had only seen her grandfather a few times. During dinner, she didn’t have to worry much about being too distracted by the surprise since she had to talk most of the time. She became the link between people who should be closer to each other than she was to them. She found it hard to include both of them in the conversation sometimes. Most of the stories she told were stories her mother already heard. Her mom never stopped or interrupted her stories though and Justine was grateful for that. Justine’s whole world was school and there was only so much she could say. There was a long silence while Justine finished her last two ravioli. Usually she would not have minded that. She could stay in an awkward silence for an hour if she had to; it didn’t faze her. But that day it was killing her. She wanted to break it but didn’t know how.

“Who’s ready for cake?” her mother finally chimed in.

Justine let out a sigh of relief.

“I am,” her grandfather said.

Her mother took her plate from the table and grabbed the cake.

Justine looked at her grandfather as if to say, *you said after dinner.*

“Just one slice of cake.”

Justine had never eaten a slice of cake so fast in her life. She felt like a vacuum. She tapped her foot while she waited for the other two to be done. Once they were, Justine shot up from her chair and grabbed all the plates and haphazardly put them in the dishwasher. “Grandpa and I are going outside.” To her surprise, she didn’t hit much resistance from her mother.

“Okay.” And okay was all she said.

Justine could see the progression of her grandfather’s arthritis as they descended the ramp. He used to only trail her by a couple steps, but this time she was already at the bottom when he started down. She felt guilt envelope her like a blanket and the weight of it slowed her next few steps. “Grandpa, we don’t have to go today. Let’s save it for another time.”

“Why do you think I brought this big walking stick? Let’s go.”

Once they hit the grassy area, Justine reached out and took her grandfather’s hand. She felt like she needed to protect him, take care of him. They reached the wall and Justine was the one to find the opening as always. She grabbed the handle and swung the door open. As she entered, she felt like a stranger. Even though she felt like that, there was also a sense of relief. She was finally back where she felt she belonged. Her muscles were relaxed and things felt as though they were falling into place again. There were weeds that were sprouting up where she had pulled them before, but the bush around the angel statue was cleared and it seemed there had been an attempt to clean and repaint the angel. There was only one cleared path leading to it. They walked up to the statue.

“I tried to make her look real pretty again,” her grandfather said behind her.

“I see.” Justine ran her hand down the angel’s hair again, letting her fingers rise and fall with the waves. As Justine looked down, she noticed the base was surrounded by flowers, bright yellow roses. She bent down and plucked one from the dirt. She turned to her grandfather.

“Yellow roses?”

“Your grandma’s favorite.” He looked down at the cluster. “And your mother’s.”

Justine rubbed one of the petals between her fingers. The velvet touch reminded her of the velvet purse Nana had given to Justine’s mother just before she died. She also thought about her best friend who plucked a daisy from the playground and with each petal she pulled said, “he loves me, he loves me not.” Justine could never pull the petals of this rose though or any roses from the garden.

Grandpa pulled a rose from the ground. “I know your mama doesn’t like to think about this place.” He paused for a long moment. “She thinks Nana would still be alive if it wasn’t for this garden. Your grandmother was just so sick. I was focused on the garden. In my mind, I was determined it would help. She was in the house and when I came back after weeding, I knew something was wrong. She was barely moving or breathing. I called the ambulance, but the EMTs couldn’t do much. It was too late.” His voice broke at the end.

Justine had never heard the story before and she didn’t know what to say or do. She could feel her heart pounding and her grip tightened so much on the petal that she pulled it off, and she let it float to the ground. Eventually she sat by the flowers letting everything sink in. Her grandfather came over to her and leaned against the statue.

Justine looked at her grandfather and then back at the roses. “Grandpa?”

“Hmm?”

“Can I ask Mom if she will come down here?”

Grandpa smiled. "I would love that."

## Holding On

Sandra Coleridge struggled to keep a tight grip on the steering wheel as her hands grew moist with sweat. No matter how many times she wiped them on her pants, they always became sweaty again as she neared her mother's house in Tennessee. She had not driven to her house since her daughter Katlynn was just a year old. Recently, her mother had been calling her more often, her anxiety growing. Sandra knew that something happened in her mother's past that she never talked about, something that could never let her mind and body completely settle. The last time she called, there was something in her mother's voice that made Sandra believe something was really wrong. Sandra looked in the rearview mirror to see Katlynn, now six, sitting in her booster seat, eyes glued to an episode of *SpongeBob* playing from Sandra's phone.

"Katlynn, not so close, baby. You'll hurt your eyes."

Katlynn moved the phone a few inches away from her face. Sandra knew it would probably be right back where it was again before the episode was over. She slid a Disney CD into the player. As if another child inhabited her body, Katlynn was instantly singing and dancing to the music. Sandra wasn't sure where her phone was until the sun hit it and a glare emanated from the back seat, hurting Sandra's eyes when she looked back in the rearview mirror.

"Can you hand the phone to me, Katlynn?" Katlynn did as she was asked. Sandra glanced at the phone, but there were no messages from her mother. This woman always wanted to be sure of everything, Sandra thought. Why hasn't she asked where I am or why I am taking so long. Her mother was what some would call critical, but Sandra was being reminded again and again that it was for her own good.

“You’re only nineteen years old, just starting college. Don’t you think, child?”

Sandra had just entered the living room where her mother was waiting for her on the couch holding a positive pregnancy test. Sandra knew she couldn’t keep it a secret for long, but she thought she had buried it under enough tissues. Her parents let her stay in their house so she could save money during college as long as she focused on her studies. And that was what she planned to do until she met Steven during English Comp 101.

He wasn’t conventionally attractive with his adult acne and cowlick. Plus, he always smelled faintly of weed almost every class period. She knew that smell by heart since that was the drug of choice of her mother’s good friend whom Sandra spent a lot of time with when she was young. There was something about him that intrigued Sandra, and all it took was one late night of working on a school project that led her into his arms. He was content with taking her behind the History section, but she said she was a “classy lady.” They ended up in the back of his beat-up pick-up truck. They ended up with a C on the project.

Sandra became confident in her sneaking abilities after she had smuggled Steven into the house one night while her parents were asleep and got him out before they woke up. Her victory was short lived though. The condom was found only a couple of weeks after they had been hooking up. After a night of drinking lead the pair back to her parent’s house while they were out of town, they hurried up to her bedroom. Sandra’s drunk logic lead her to the conclusion that if her mother found the condom the first time, they should not use one this time. She felt so confident in herself until the next morning while she rested her head on the toilet bowl. She could swear she heard Steven lighting a joint, but she was too sick to check or care.

Sandra rolled into her mother's driveway, taking in the sights that she had been able to escape for so long. The house always looked pristine. As soon as there were a couple cracks in the paint, the whole house would be covered in a coat of paint, always white. One weed in the garden and it would have to be pulled up immediately. A large porch wrapped around the front of the house and if you split the house down the middle, there would be matching halves. It seemed to Sandra to be a typical Southern home and was a pain to keep up appearances. She thought going up north would be better, but the furthest she got was Kentucky, clinging onto whatever she could to make the studio apartment home as stable as possible for Katlynn.

As Sandra and Katlynn walked up to the porch, Sandra wondered if her mother would remember that they were visiting that day. Her heart started pounding. Her mother didn't know the real reason that she was visiting this time. Of course Sandra cared that her mother was struggling, but Katlynn began asking more about her father recently. This was about the age that Sandra began asking her mother about who her father was. Her mother never gave her any clear answers and Sandra never wanted to do that to her daughter. Unfortunately, the father of Katlynn was content pretending he never had a child. There were only so many times she could contact him before she grew weary of just hearing his voice on his voicemail message.

Her mother always seemed flighty, even when Sandra was a child. It was as if her mind was constantly on more than one thing at a time. Over the years, whatever was plaguing her mind must have caught up with her because she began to deteriorate physically. The two were always close until Sandra got pregnant. There were times that her mother seemed to loathe the baby that was growing in Sandra. Other times she seemed jealous, but her mother always deflected when Sandra tried to talk to her about it.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

No answer.

*Knock. Knock, knock.*

No answer.

A sense of dread that felt like a million gas bubbles passed through her stomach and burned in her esophagus. Just as she was about to try to relieve the pressure by burping, she swallowed hard. As the feeling got closer to mouth, she thought she might vomit instead. She knocked once more. “Mother, Katlynn and I are here.”

Almost as soon as the words left her mouth, the door swung open. “Sandra. Katlynn. Come on in.” Sandra’s mother looked haggard in a way that was clear she was trying to hide it. Make-up was caked on her face and her hair, usually down, was pulled back tight with stray hairs poking out here and there. She always complained about her frizzy, unruly hair. Sandra was thankful she didn’t inherit that trait from her mother. Her smile, though trying to be genuine, appeared forced. “Please, come sit. I’m sure you had a long journey.”

The three sat down in the living room, Sandra sitting with her daughter while her mother sat on the opposite couch facing them. Sandra scanned the room and it was not as she remembered. Things were not immaculate as they were when she left. The whole room looked disheveled. Old mail was slayed out on the end table and dirty dishes were left on the coffee table.

“Everything going okay, Mom?”

“Of course. Why would you ask?”

Sandra didn’t want to offend her mother. They had disagreements, but she always thought her mother was a loving, caring woman. It wasn’t her mother’s fault Sandra got pregnant at 19 after all. As Sandra peered into the kitchen, she eyed the dusty floor. There were still traces



of cat hair. Her cat had died months ago. Sandra was reprimanded harshly if one fork was left in the sink when it was her night to do the dishes. Once a week turned into four nights and a week turned into every night of the week. They had a dishwasher, but Sandra never saw it run. She asked her mother why, but she never got a clear answer. When Sandra watched TV as a child, she always saw parents saying phrases like “because I told you so,” but Sandra’s mother always told her she needed to know how to do things like that so she wouldn’t be a burden on society when she grew up. Sandra learned from an early age that things ran smoothly as long as she did what she was told and she didn’t ask questions.

“How’re you feeling?”

Her mother tried smoothing her hair. “How is my little Katlynn?” She looked right at Sandra’s daughter with a toothy grin.

Sandra opened her mouth to ask her a question again; but looked to her daughter instead. Her daughter returned her look, but Sandra motioned for her to answer the question.

Katlynn looked back at her grandmother; but scooted back into the couch. “I’m good.” Sandra noticed Katlynn’s chin inching closer to her chest.

“How is she doing in school?” Sandra’s mother now looked straight at her.

“She is only in Kindergarten, Mom.”

Her mother looked pleased. “So, what is she doing?”

“Well you know what kids do in Kindergarten. Learning new words with her letter workbooks and counting. What can you count up to now, baby?”

Katlynn had moved closer to Sandra than she had realized. Katlynn wrapped her arms around Sandra’s and didn’t take her eyes off Sandra’s mother. “Thirty.”

“You only know up to thirty?” Sandra’s mother’s eyes darted from Sandra to Katlynn. They eventually landed on Sandra. “You don’t use flashcards with her. Don’t you remember when we went over number cards over and over? It’s never too early to start. You don’t want her to become a burden to society, do you?”

Sandra was growing tired of the questions. “Mother, she is a smart girl.” She could feel a ball of anger growing bigger and hotter in her chest. Her hands kept balling up and releasing involuntarily. She brushed back her daughter’s hair as gently as she could. “Katlynn, why don’t you go play with the cat in Grandma’s room?”

“Okay.” A large smile grew across her face and she ran down the hallway.

Sandra tried to keep her voice hushed. “Mom, we need to talk.”

Her mother’s face contorted, and Sandra couldn’t tell what she was thinking.

“What is it?”

Sandra took a deep breath in and spit it out. “I want to talk about my father again.”

Her mother sighed, but not before her eyes widened and it looked like something got caught in her throat. She recovered quickly. “Sandra, we have been over this. I don’t know who he is, okay?”

“Mom, I’m trying to help Katlynn. She has started asking about her father and it would break her heart if she knew that her father didn’t care about her.”

“You’re giving her enough love, aren’t you?”

Sandra didn’t understand what her mother was trying to say. “Of course, I love Katlynn. She’s everything to me. What do you mean?”

“Well I loved you enough. Still you questioned about your father.”

Sandra understood what was going on. “Mom, I’m not trying to say you didn’t love me. Is it a crime to want to know who my father is?”

Her mother’s eyes widened again, but she was good at quickly regaining her composure as if she had been practicing it for years. “Who said anything about it being a crime?”

Sandra was not surprised to realize she was getting nowhere; that was normal. Something was different this time. Something was unraveling that Sandra was desperately trying to keep together. A thought crept into her mind. “Mom,” she hesitated, “was he abusive? Did something happen?”

Her mother squirmed but just stared through the floor. “No.” And that was all she said. No.

“Mom, please-”

“What do you want me to say, Sandra?” her mother yelled.

Sandra was taken aback. She had not heard her mother yell since she was young.

After her mother had finished homeschooling her for the day, her mother, though hesitant, let Sandra go outside to play since she had been so good recently. A mother and daughter were passing by. As soon as Sandra waved, the other young girl and the mother walked over. Almost as quickly as that happened, Sandra’s mother rushed to her side.

“Sandra, what have I told you about talking to strangers?” Her mother grabbed her.

The other mother and daughter backed away a couple steps. The mother spoke. “I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to bother you. We are just new in the area and wanted to look around, meet the locals.”

“My daughter and I are not interested.”

The mother looked concerned as she grabbed her daughter's hand and began walking away, occasionally looking back.

“Are you okay, baby? I have told you a million times before that people are dangerous.” Her mother knelt down and held Sandra tight. It felt more possessive than protective. “You know I love you, right?”

Sandra felt wrong to be scared of her own mother. Still she had to force her arms to wrap around her mother's neck. “I love you too.”

They moved soon after that.

Sandra's mother slumped in her chair, looking exhausted. “I need to get a drink of water.” She pushed herself up from the couch with some trouble.

Sandra took a few deep breaths in and out, while looking around the room searching for something to focus on instead of what she was feeling. She eyed a box on the ground near her feet. Only a sliver of it stuck out from under the couch. As she slid it out she noticed her name on the side. She smiled as she pulled out a onesie. Hard to believe I fit in this, she thought. The tag caught her eye. A name was printed. “Williams.” I've heard of writing the last name of a child on the tag inside clothing, but this isn't even my last name, she thought. Why would this name be in here? As she riffled through the rest of the box, she came across a slip of newspaper. As she took it out to read it, Katlynn tugged on her sleeve. She had come back into the room without Sandra noticing. She looked down at her daughter and put an arm around her. “You okay? What's going on?”

“I want to go home.”

Sandra noticed all the cheerful nature was draining from her daughter. She looked as though she was getting sick. She haphazardly dropped the newspaper clipping on her purse to feel her daughter's forehead. It wasn't hot, but she looked pale.

Her mother came back into the room. "Mother, I don't think Katlynn is feeling well. Maybe we should-"

"Well what did you do while I was gone?" Sandra's mother interrupted.

Sandra took a deep breath. The time away from her mother had done something to her. She loved her mother, but the accusations were getting under her skin. "I can take care of my daughter. You know kids can get sick suddenly. You don't always know what's wrong."

"You're still so young and, how should I say, inexperienced with childcare." She sipped water from her glass.

"Okay. We need to go." Sandra snatched up her purse and as soon as Sandra stood up, Katlynn grabbed her hand. While they headed to the door, Sandra only looked back once. Her mother was still sitting down, but something in her eyes made her linger in the house longer than expected. Sorrow? Longing? But she spoke no words. Sandra walked out the front door, daughter in tow, feeling empty.

She held tight to Katlynn's hand, feeling as though this was an unfamiliar place. As they walked further, Sandra was not sure she recognized where they were. Her grip on her daughter's hand loosened as she forced herself to concentrate. She was sure she had walked these streets for years. Why was she uncertain? Because she was so focused, she almost didn't feel Katlynn's hand slip through her own. Katlynn began running off.

"Katlynn," Sandra yelled after her daughter.

“I saw something sparkle.”

Katlynn ran faster than she ever remembered her daughter running before obviously feeling better. Moments passed by and Sandra realized just how many trees surrounded them. Split seconds turned into seconds that turned into minutes. Sandra lost sight of Katlynn. A sense of panic rose in her as she had not felt before. Her heart became heavier with each passing moment, acting like an anchor to slow her down right at the moment when she needed to run. She walked into the wooded area she was sure Katlynn had entered. As she spun around, she tripped on a root that had sprung up through the Earth. Sandra screamed, half from surprise and half from the pain.

Small footsteps approached. Suddenly a tiny face was floating right above Sandra.

“Mama, what happened?”

“I’m okay, baby.” Sandra pushed against ground, thankful that it hadn’t rained in a few weeks. Falling into mud would have just made this trip worse.

“You’re okay. You’re okay.” Katlynn patted her hand on her mother’s back. Sandra used this tactic with Katlynn when she was younger and now it seemed that was Katlynn’s response to anyone who may be in pain. She never grew out of it like Sandra thought she would.

After getting herself to her feet, Sandra hugged Katlynn, thankful that she was all right. Soon after that though, she pulled herself away. “Katlynn, you can’t run away like that. You could have been lost.” She was lost even for the briefest time, but Sandra didn’t want to admit that to herself. She prided herself in being a good mother though she knew she could never be as good as her own mother. Every little victory counted, even if the truth was stretched.

Quite ignoring any admonishment, Katlynn took her mother’s hand in her own. “Come. See what I found.”

Sandra gripped her daughter's hand as though, if she didn't hold on tight enough, Katlynn would float away with the wind. The pair soon came to a clearing. In the middle was a playground, run down and rusted. A slide about five feet high had chipped paint and didn't look completely stable. There were three animals, if they could even be called animals, attached to large springs stuck in the ground. Sandra believed she could make out a duck, a rabbit, and some sort of bird, but the features were deformed in some way or another. There was a small merry-go-round off to the side, and if you looked at it from a certain angle, it didn't look round at all. Something didn't look right about the monkey bars, but Sandra couldn't put her finger on it until she counted the bars; they were spaced so few and far apart that Sandra concluded that there had to be more when it was first built. The final piece of equipment was a swing set in the middle. It was the only thing that was shiny and crisp in color. The chains shone as the sunlight bounced off of them and the seats of the swings were not worn down at all. It was as if the playground was being remodeled one piece at a time, Sandra thought, but there were no signs or roped off areas to indicate that was the case.

As Sandra surveyed the area, Katlynn had already run back to the playground.

"Baby, come back. It's not safe here." Sandra was still surveying the playground, looking around in a sort of wonderment. She felt a tinge of *deja vu*, but was certain she had never come here to play. Her mother didn't like her to go out much. She rifled in her purse for her phone and her hand hit the newspaper clipping. She hadn't realized it had fallen in. As she skimmed the article, she saw the name Williams. Her eyes scanned back up to the headline, "Baby Snatched from Playground." As she paid more attention to the writing, things began sticking out to her. The date was 25 years ago. The playground at the same location they were at now.

A sickening feeling hit her and her head became dizzy. She hadn't felt like this since she had been pregnant with Katlynn. A rickety bench sat over to the side. Sandra didn't know if it would hold her weight, but she didn't want to have another encounter with the ground today. She studied the equipment displayed before her, concentrating her blurry vision on each piece to search for Katlynn. She eventually spied her, trying in vain to force the duck to rock back and forth.

"Katie, get off that. Come here." Sandra's voice sounded as though she was just getting over a sore throat. Her pleas were sounding less convincing by the word. Her eyes closed and she leaned back so her head was against the back of the bench.

Thoughts swirled in her head. Is that why I was homeschooled? Is that why I was barely allowed out? Is that why we moved around so much? God, she even dyed my hair! She felt as if she thought about it any longer, her mind would explode, the thoughts bursting from her head. As soon as her sight and hearing were returning to normal, she ran to Katlynn and picked her up. "We have to go now."

"Mommy what's happening?" Katlynn's eyes were wide.

"We need to back to Grandma's." They weren't far from the house, but Sandra ran quicker than she thought she ever could carrying Katlynn. As soon as they arrived on the lawn, she set Katlynn down and raced to the door. She rapped on the door and called out to her mother, but there was no answer. She moved to the side of the house and looked in the window to find her mother lying on the floor. Panic washed over her again as she called 911.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"My mother is inside her home unconscious." Sandra tried to stay as calm as possible. She wanted her mother...this woman to be all right. Everything she thought she knew was a lie,



but she had to help, even if the only reason was to get answers. And in her mind that was the only reason.

## Unravel

This was the third time in the past two weeks Julia Henderson stormed out of the house she shared with her husband, David, and his parents. No matter how many times she told David that his parents asking her when she was going to have a baby bothered her, he told her to just brush it off. “They won’t be here much longer,” he would say. With every day that passed, his words meant less and less. His parents’ house was being fumigated and Julia was the one that offered them to stay over. His mother always commented on how she loved that they were able to live out in the country. Julia didn’t really even consider it the country, but any place where the houses aren’t smacked up against each other and where “squirrels can frolic” was the countryside according to her.

Julia could at least take comfort in the fact that it was not her own mother who that was staying with them. Most of the time she was more concerned with Julia having a child than her mother-in-law was. It wasn’t that Julia was opposed to having a baby, but David wanted to be a father more than she wanted to be a mother. In fact, they had conceived a child. She was terrified of what this would mean for her five-year plan, but as the days passed, she got more used to the idea of swapping pantsuits for spit up blankets. Around the time that they were going to tell their parents, she began having pain in both her back and abdomen. The night she woke up with searing pain in her stomach, she knew something was wrong and David flew down the road leading to the hospital. When they got back home, Julia made David promise that he wouldn’t tell their parents about the lost baby. He looked at her, broken. She believed he didn’t have the energy to argue, but it was clear that he wanted to say something. After lying in bed with him for a few moments, she walked into the living room and tried sleeping on the couch. The pain in her abdomen still came in waves. It was hard to process that the life that had been growing inside of

her for the past three months had just vanished, taking with it hope and joy. She eventually passed out holding her stomach.

It had been close to a month since it happened and things didn't seem to be getting better. As Julia walked past the houses in the neighborhood she broke into a jog, not sure exactly where she was going. After jogging for a few minutes, she settled on the railroad track outside the neighborhood. Even though the train made her late for work sometimes, it reminded her of the tracks her and her sister, Jackie, used to walk on when they were kids and their mother was at work, so she loved them. Since their father was never a big part of their lives, their mother worked a lot and the sisters stayed extremely close. People were surprised at how attached they stayed to each other throughout the years. She began walking along the tracks intertwined with country roads and nestled between trees. As she walked on top of the steel beams, arms outstretched like she did when she was a child, she lost her balance. Before she realized what had happened, she tumbled to the ground, twisting her ankle in the process.

Her whole body hit the ground with a thud. "Crap." Remembering that she didn't need to curb her speech for the arrival of the baby anymore as David told her, she shouted, "Fuck." Julia and her sister had fallen and hurt themselves on the tracks before, but that was fifteen years ago. Everything hurt more than she thought it should. Realizing that she had left the house without her phone and could not call anyone to help her hobble home, she laid down on the wooden paneling of the tracks and rested her head on the steel beam, cradling it with her hands. She buried her feet into the ground between the horizontal beams connecting the steel to the ground. She was surprised they still fit as she would do that when she was younger. As she looked up at the sky, she thought about how much she didn't want to go home. All that waited for her there was an indifferent husband, a bitching mother-in-law, and a father in law that was drinking all

her beer. She closed her eyes, wondering how long it would take anyone to come looking for her, if they would come looking for her at all. As that thought tossed and turned in her brain, the sound of the train whistle reached her ears. As the sound pierced through the cold air, she knew that she only had a couple of minutes before the train reached where she was lying. She pulled her right foot out easily, but the left one was stuck between the beams.

“Of course. I hurt my left ankle and that’s the one that gets stuck.” She tried to use both hands to gently lift and maneuver her foot out, but the beams held tightly to her shoe. Her fingers untied the laces as fast as possible. The train whistle sounded again and her heart started beating faster until she felt as though it was pulsing through her whole body. She began screaming for help, but to no avail. No one was close enough to hear her.

She began wiggling her foot inside her shoe, trying to wriggle it out. Despite this, her foot would not budge. The pain she felt from the fall was subsiding as with each breath she felt a wave of panic wash over and crash into her. Unsure of what to do, she began digging at the dirt beneath her foot as if that could give the shoe room to pop out of the beams through the bottom. It had not rained for weeks and the ground was tough. She frantically searched for something that could break the earth and located a rock just within reach. She banged it against the ground with more force than she realized she had in her. As she did, she thought about how there was no place she would rather be than at home with David, his parents, and her baby. As soon as this thought crept in, she felt weighted down. She yearned to need someone, for someone to need her.

She threw the rock aside as the whistle blew for a third time. The story about the little boy being hit by a train last year crossed her mind and she thought she could connect her thoughts to his. Her fingers clawed at the ground, determined to remove the dirt. She hated many

things at the moment, but most of all she hated the dirt. She heard the dinging of the alarm as the arms lowered down the road. Her arms grew tired, but if she was ever going to make it out alive, she had to continue. She wiggled her foot every few seconds, shooting pain through her whole leg. The rock she had thrown began to tumble and bounce off the ground as she felt the vibration of the steel beams and wood panels beneath her. Her hands never stopped moving but her eyes darted to the right where she saw the light from the front of the train come into view.

She gave one final tug and pried her foot free. As she rolled to the grass beside the track, she heard the train whir past her. She kept her body glued to the ground until the train had completely passed. Her heart was still beating rapidly, demanding to be set free from her body. Her whole body shook and her chest hurt as if something heavy was sitting on it. She thought she was going to cry, but instead she let out a scream. A loud, shrill scream. She was glad that no one was nearby to hear it. She couldn't tell if it was a delayed reaction or the release of intense emotion or a combination of both. She felt her body relax and she slowly stood up. As she started walking back to her house, her entire body ached.

She could not bear to go back to her house and explain her cuts and apparent sore body. She hated people pitying her. She could take care of herself. She did not need anyone else's help. David had talked to her many times about telling his parents about the baby. It was getting harder for him to keep the secret, especially since they were all living under one roof now. He also talked to her about speaking with a therapist, but Julia was resigned to the fact that she was fine. She couldn't feel herself slipping as David said she was. That is, she didn't feel that until a few days ago. As she was close to her house, she decided that taking the car would be her best option; she wasn't going to get far without it. She snuck into the house and thanked God that her purse was on a hook just inside the door. After driving around for about ten minutes, she

turned into the parking lot of St. Jude Park all of a sudden as if her hands had a mind of their own. Once there, she felt a sense of relief that she wasn't sure from where it came or why

Any thoughts of responsibilities or going back to deal with David and his parents were quickly fleeting. And she let them fade completely. She strolled up the walkway to the entrance to the park. As she passed by the evergreens and willows that populated the grounds, an odd combination of trees she often thought, she sat on the bench closest to the playground. It was a rather large area complete with jungle gym and monkey bars, horse, elephant and duck spring riders, and four swings. It was a chilly Monday morning, one of the coldest of the year. It being December, Julia hoped that the biting cold air was going to let up for the rest of the year. If she couldn't start out the new year with her issues resolved, she at least hoped that she wouldn't freeze her ass off walking the few feet from her front door to her car. It being so cold, she didn't expect to find many people there. The only life she saw was a frazzled mother of four who looked as though she was trying to use the park to give her some time off of having to entertain them. Maybe she just wanted to use the cold air to tire them out like her mother used to do with her and her sister when they were young. The children seemed to range in age from about four to seven with one baby in a stroller. Julia watched as two kids swung across the monkey bars while the third scooped and dumped bucket after bucket of sand. She occasionally glanced over at the mother who didn't seem to notice her presence. The mother used her foot to roll the baby back and forth while she read what Julia could swear was *50 Shades of Grey*. Julia had turned up her nose to the book because her mother had. But she didn't want to care what her mother thought anymore. Ever since Jackie had her baby, Julia wanted that same treatment from her mother. All she got was crap.

Trying to shove those memories down, she thought about David. When they first got married, Julia would wake up to make him breakfast with eggs, bacon, and toast, the whole shebang. Recently after they lost the baby, breakfast turned into coffee, coffee turned into staying in bed and only waking up when David kissed her on the forehead. Now, she didn't even remember noticing a kiss on the forehead. She wondered if she was too exhausted to wake up to such a light peck or if he didn't kiss her anymore, if he didn't love her anymore. She forced herself to shove those feelings down and leave the bed. The emotions and thoughts she shoved down felt more like boulders someone had demanded her to swallow. Her stomach hurt.

Julia was yanked from her thoughts by a blood curdling scream. She looked over to the children and saw that one of the boys who were on the monkey bars had jumped down and was sitting beside his sister playing with the sand. She was balling her eyes out as if someone had smacked her. She soon learned that wasn't far from the truth. She had stood up, and once she did, her brother kicked her in the arm. He was shushing her while he put his hand on her shoulder, rapidly glancing from their mother to his sister. This spectacle lasted for a minute or two before the woman looked up from her book. As soon as she saw what was happening, she looked as though all of her energy was stolen from her and transferred into the boy who was still on the monkey bars. He was going back and forth faster now, oblivious to what was occurring below him like his mother had been before. The mother sighed and leaned her head back to look up at the sky. When she brought her gaze back to the children, she shouted, "Ryan, be nice to your sister." At her scream, the baby awoke and started crying.

"Mom, it was her fault. She stood up when I was swinging," the boy shouted back.

With a sigh, the mother picked up the baby from the stroller. She held the child so that its head rested on her shoulder, its face turned from hers. "I don't want to hear it, Ryan. Your dad

is going to deal with you when he gets home if you keep acting up.” She bounced the baby, shushing it as the boy had done to his sister. Julia looked back toward the boy who let out an exasperated sigh and went to sit on one of the swings. He barely moved, rather he kicked at the mulch that covered the ground. From this interaction, Julia guessed that this was the way his mother often dealt with him. She felt bad for him, especially knowing that she couldn’t do anything to keep it from happening again.

Julia tried her best to focus on whatever else she could. When she looked off in the distance, something caught her eye. It looked like some kind of large ribbon blowing in the wind. It was in the woods that surrounded the playground. Not the safest place, she realized, but she had to step away from the playground. She figured there was only a small chance that there would be a masked killer lurking in the woods just wanting on a weak and unsuspecting woman to venture into his territory. As she encroached on the entrance to the wooded area, she peered back over her shoulder at the woman, hoping to catch her eye in case something happened in the woods. Julia did not catch the woman’s eye. She figured she had ventured too far from the playground to be noticed. She began to wade through the brush, as tall grass and weeds grazed the lower part of her legs. Whatever caught her eye was further in the woods than she realized. She was too interested in what was blowing in the wind to turn back now so she pushed on. As she went deeper, she missed the grass and weeds as sticks now nipped at her legs, causing scratches and tiny cuts to appear.

She finally spotted what she had been looking for at the top of a hill. Filled with energy and curiosity, she sprinted up. When she reached the peak, she saw a large teddy bear mostly hidden behind branches. Tied around its neck was a bright red ribbon. At first, she thought that it may have belonged to a child who had wandered into the woods and left it. She looked at the



ground near it and realized that it did belong to a child. There was a white wooden cross and a framed photograph of a little girl who could not have been more than six or seven years old. She wore pigtails and a tie-dye t-shirt with denim shorts. She was beaming as she held a small black puppy in her arms. Tucked under the bottom right corner of the frame was a smaller picture of two girls with their arms around each other. The shorter one was the same girl from the larger picture. They looked so similar, but as one looked older than the other, Julia assumed it was the girl's sister. Julia knelt down and ran her fingers across the ornate silver frame. She thought it odd that someone would use such a fancy frame out in the woods where it could be easily damaged, but this was someone's child. People will do anything for their children. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away. Instead she focused on the picture of the sisters. She figured this was one of the few times that they got along so well and someone just had to snap a picture. She thought back to the children on the playground. That's how children usually act, Julia thought. She liked to think that her relationship with her sister was loving at the start. Julia still considered her sister a friend, but they had grown apart; she discovered that was how most relationships played out.

She was surprised that she had been staring at the shrine so long and never thought about why it was here or what happened. As she tried to think back to any news story she had heard about a little girl who had died, she reminded her own lost baby.

"I think we need to do something for the baby." David walked into the bedroom where Julia was lying down. He had just come home from work a few days after they found out about the loss of their baby.

Julia rolled over to face him and sat up. As she did, a pain shot through her abdomen. She winced, but was too tired to care. She had found that she had been more fatigued than usual for the past few days. “What are you talking about?”

David sat on the bed next to her and put his hand on her back between her shoulder blades, drawing small circles. “I think that maybe saying goodbye, like really saying goodbye, would help.”

Julia believed she was coping well enough. She was just tired, in pain, and tired of being in pain. “Help who? You or me?”

“Both of us.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. “You think I need help?”

He let his hand drop to the bed. “Why does this always have to turn into a fight? One day you are lying in bed and I think we are on the same page about how we’re feeling and the next, you are being a hard-ass to me and everyone else.” He had gotten up from the bed and was pacing. “I used to be able to read you like a book and now I don’t understand what is going on with you.”

Julia couldn’t really dispute what he was saying nor that his anger was misplaced, though she believed he was going a bit over the top. She felt upset. She felt angry, sad, a mixture of five emotions at once, but how was she supposed to express that. She wasn’t even certain she wanted a baby in the first place. She couldn’t figure out which emotion to let show at that moment so she just looked at the ground and said, “Okay.”

“Okay, what? Talk to me, Jules.” David sat beside her again.

“Okay, let’s do it. You think we should say goodbye properly, then let’s do it.” She looked at David and his features had softened. He brought Julia into a hug and she hugged him back.

He changed out of his dress shirt and slacks and into a t-shirt and blue jeans. He took a couple of small pieces of wood from the supply of wood by the fireplace (he insisted they have real wood) and hurried into the garage. Julia followed close behind like a lost puppy, unsure of what to do exactly. David sanded the wood and then nailed the two pieces together to form a cross. He headed out to the back yard, not paying much mind to Julia; she followed anyway. Once they reached a small patch of trees, David used a screwdriver to soften the ground and burrow a small hole. He then hammered the cross into the ground. Once he was done, he looked up and seemed surprised that Julia was there. “Sorry. Didn’t see you there.”

I have been here the whole time, Julia thought.

David put his arm around Julia’s waist. “‘Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’ Matthew 19:14.” David had always been more religious than Julia, but she had to admit that she did find comfort in believing that there was a Heaven where her lost loved ones were. “We miss you, baby.” David sat cross-legged next to the cross and Julia followed. She wasn’t sure what to say. She had never been good at speeches. That’s why she was surprised that she was asked to give the eulogy at her grandmother’s funeral. She totally blew it then and couldn’t muster the courage to try again now. She just kissed her hand and touched it to the cross where the wood pieces met. David smiled at her and she leaned into him, letting her whole weight fall into him. He wavered at first, not expected to support her whole body, but he wrapped his arms around her and they sat there for a few minutes.

David stood up and helped Julia to her feet. He pulled her into a hug. “How do you feel?”

Julia knew he felt better, but she could not honestly say that she felt any different. Even though he couldn't see her face, she felt compelled to force a weak smile. “Better,” she lied. They broke from the hug and David gave her a small, simple smile. He took her hand and led her back into the house. She wasn't sure they were ever going to “be on the same page” again.

She stared at the picture of the little girl for a few more moments. An unsettling feeling arose in her stomach and she felt as if she might throw up. She picked herself up off the ground and walked a few feet away to take some deep breaths. When she did, she noticed that the grave or shrine, whatever it was, was not alone. There were about ten other graves in close proximity with similar decorations. Each had a white cross. Each had a framed photograph. She looked around to see if there were any names attached to the pictures. Maybe some of the people were related. Of the few names she saw, she found no identical last names. After walking around, she saw a small sign that read “To remember those lost but never forgotten”. Then it came to her. The tornado. There had been so many tornado watches in that time frame that some people did not want to believe anything would happen. Julia did want to admit that anything was wrong with her baby when she started feeling the pains in her chest, but she did. Lives senselessly lost. She felt stupid for not realizing it sooner. Eleven people: men, women, children, it didn't matter. The family's must have gotten together to make one small memorial after the victims were each buried at the cemeteries.

The sickening feeling started to return, more than ever. This time, she did throw up. She got as far away from the shrines as possible before her insides spilled out. She felt relief from

emotions so strong that had seemed to be boiling up inside of her. She left the small memorial area without a single glance back. The taste was too overwhelming. She found the park restroom, rinsed her mouth out with water, and cleaned up her shirt as best as she could. When she looked in the mirror something had changed from earlier that morning, but she couldn't put her finger on it. It was as if something had left her. After staring at her reflection for a full minute, she just concluded that something had left her. It was in the form of vomit. Chalking it up to just that, she left the bathroom and headed to the nearest bench to sit until she felt better. She felt something metal as she leaned back. She turned around and saw a small plaque that read "Donated by the Dudley Family" surrounded by black flower designs. Family, she thought. She wasn't able to keep her family together, not like her mother would have wanted. Her mother came from a big family and always wanted a large family of her own. Due to complications from her last pregnancy, Julia, it would have been highly dangerous for her to try to have another child. Julia figured this was why her mother favored Jackie. Jackie did not give her mother any trouble. Jackie provided children.

Julia found a spot where a few spots where the wood was chipping. She picked at those until the wood came off in a chunk. Thinking about her mother made her pick at the bench even more. She scraped and peeled back wood more rapidly as if she was trying to dismantle the whole bench, the family, piece by piece. She flinched as a surge of pain ran through her whole hand. In the fury, she had somehow managed to get a splinter in her palm. It was large enough that she was able to pull it out with minimal effort. Only a red mark remained. Julia heard a cry nearby. She was not surprised when she looked up and saw that it came from one of the children that she had seen playing earlier. This time, she could see that the youngest boy was bleeding from his head, not a gash, but deep enough to ooze. Julia put her hand to her head. She felt bad

for all of those children. How did women like that produce four children and she lost her only child? She did not even want children at the start, but she was having trouble thinking that those children may not be getting the attention they need from one person that should be providing so much of it.

Just as that thought entered into her head, she saw the woman get up from her bench to head toward her children. This time, the mother abandoned her book. And her baby. Julia wandered over to the bench where the mother had been sitting. As she glanced over at the baby in its stroller, something washed over her and she felt herself let go. She cried for the first time since the miscarriage. Once that happened, it was as if everything started falling apart. The baby was so small. Too small to be at the park, Julia thought. There was a small patch of light brown hair on the top of its head and it is was wearing a small white coat with a matching white hat. A pink pacifier was in its mouth. It looked like a sleeping angel. She never believed people when they would say that babies and children were like angels when they slept, but this one was. A perfect little angel. She even let herself realize how much she wanted to hold a baby that was hers. She looked up at the mother who was looking between all three children and seemed to be shouting; they were too far away for Julia to hear.

Without giving it much thought, Julia picked up the baby in her arms. She began to cry even more. This baby was filling a hole in her that she didn't realize could be mended. Everything that was broken and dark was starting to look brighter. She could have a better relationship with her mother now. There would be another baby for the big family that her mother wanted. Her and David would go back to being the happy couple that they were when they were first married. Plus, his parents would stop asking when she would have a baby. It would be right there for them to love and care for. Her mother could even move into the house.

Her sister too. Why not? They could be one big happy family. The thoughts of the memorial area and her own lost child washed over her. The world was such a horrible place. There was so much death. She knew that if she had a child, she could protect it, never let anything happen to it. If she had this baby, she would certainly be able to take better care of it than the biological mother could. No harm would come to it. It could, it would have a wonderful life. She glanced back at the woman. Julia's next thought made her glad that her and the mother had not made eye contact previously.

Julia hugged the baby tighter and walked away from the park in the direction of her car. A sharp wind whipped her face so she unzipped her coat and clutched the baby closer to her and covered it with the left side of the coat. She did not hear any screams or cries for help from the family yet, but a slight fear washed over her. Her pace quickened. *Just get to the car. You only have to make it to the car.* Her worry turned into dread as a shout pierced her ears. She kept repeating the mantra over and over until she thought she was shouting it. She was only a few feet away from her vehicle. Her fingers fumbled with the car keys in her pocket. She could feel her whole hand moisten as she tried to grip the key. Just as she made it to the car her finger hit the unlock button. She clambered into the car, all the while trying to keep the baby safe. She had only babysat her sister's child a handful of times. The fact that she had no car seat to put her baby in hit her like a train. She had almost wished that that train had hit her when she was stuck on the tracks. Her mind snapped back to the mother and Julia immediately tried her best to buckle both of her and the baby into the driver's seat, the baby sort of haphazardly sitting on her lap. The tires screeched as she sped out of her parking spot. Not sure where to go, she began the route home.

Upon reaching her neighborhood, she remembered that both of David's parents would still be there. There was no way that she could find any refuge there. But it was Monday morning! They always helped at the local food drive at the start of the week. David's father retired early and his mother decided to be a stay-at-home mother as soon as she held David for the first time in the hospital. Not knowing exactly how long they would be gone, she grabbed the baby and rushed into the house. The first bag she saw was what she grabbed as she rested the baby on the bed. Through everything, the baby had barely woken up. Julia looked into the baby's eyes, barely open. Perfect, she thought and smiled. She grabbed all the clean clothes she could find and stuffed them into the bag as quickly as she could. As she pulled everything out of the closet, she spotted a car seat. She thought David was crazy when he bought it so early on in the pregnancy. Now, she thanked David for his overenthusiasm and for not returning it to the store when she suggested it. She snatched the car seat and zipped her overflowing bag as much as she could. As delicately as she could, she put the baby in the car seat. Bringing everything out to the car at the same time would be essential. She put the straps of the bag over her shoulder and picked up the car seat.

As she headed out the door, she saw the framed picture of her and David on their wedding day. Both of them stood under an arch filled with colorful flowers. Julia wanted it to look like a rainbow. She didn't have many specific requests for the wedding, but this was one she said she *had* to have. The hairdresser had curled her long hair and put a white and gold headband that resembled leaves and berries on her head. Her dress was off-white with beading at the top and it flowed down to the floor with a long train. In the picture, David is dipping her, and her right leg is sticking straight out. She is holding the bouquet over her head and backwards. Both of them are looking at the camera and laughing. This was Julia's favorite



picture. David let her put that one out instead of the one that he thought was best, the traditional one of the two of them holding hands right after the ceremony occurred. He thought it would look better on the table right inside the front door. He really did care about her and what she wanted. She had a fleeting thought that she could make everything work and it would be all right. She shoved the idea out of her head and opened the front to leave. As she did, she quickly turned around and took the photo. She found herself using almost as much care placing the photo in the car as she did the baby. Realizing that she had never mastered the technique of strapping the baby into the car seat nor strapping the car seat into car, she tried to dig up what little information she could remember about how it worked. She pulled straps, where she thought the straps should go, as tight as she could without hurting the baby. She remembered that time was not on her side. Her parents-in-law may be home in mere minutes. Plus, she had neighbors. Retired neighbors. She hastily finished up and slid into the driver's seat and pulled out of the driveway.

Julia knew that she had to buy baby food, and diapers, and clothes, and everything else a baby might need. She wanted to kick herself in the head for how slow the realization was coming to her about how much work this was going to take. How much she was going to be forced to leave behind. There was no way that she could bring the baby home to David. He was desperate for a baby of his own, but even he would not go to these lengths. No one else knew that they had had a miscarriage except her and David. She could possibly pass it off as her own to his family and her own. Only if David was out of the way. She ruminated on that thought for longer than she was comfortable admitting, even to herself. But babies take nine months to develop. After deliberating on everything that she was giving up, she cursed David. She cursed both of their families. She cursed herself.

She could not have a marriage.

She could not have her parents.

She could not have a stable life.

But she could have a baby.

That last thought calmed her racing mind and she realized she had been crying. She let that settling feeling flow over her. It had begun to get dark already. Julia could not tell exactly how long she had been driving, but she was getting tired. It had been hours. She came across what looked like a small town and saw a grocery store. She was torn. She knew she had to buy items to sustain this life she now claimed as her own, but at the same time she did not know what kind of news coverage there might be, if any. Were there any cameras at the park? She couldn't remember. She never had any reason to look. The baby let out a small cry from the back seat. Julia parked in a spot far away from the entrance to the store and hopped into the back seat. She brushed the hair on the baby's head with her fingers and touched it on the cheek. The skin was so soft, so fragile. She picked up the baby and bounced it on her shoulder. What was she going to do? She put the baby back in the car seat and made haste through the store which was not an easy task. She did not know what all she needed. Questions were bouncing around in her head like the ball in a pinball machine. Did anyone see her take the child? Had the real mother gotten a better look at Julia than she originally thought? What were news stations saying? What if--

“You need some help, hon?” A voice with a country twang came from behind her.

Julia spun around to find a woman, Edith, according to her name tag, who looked to be in her sixties wearing a vest. “What?” Julia brought the car seat closer to her.

“Do you need any help? You seem lost.” She looked down at the baby. “What a precious little baby. How old is she?”

Julia's heart pounded. She had to think on her feet otherwise Edith might know she was not the baby's biological mother. "Five months." Five was her favorite number. She tried to make her smile as genuine as possible.

Edith bought it. "How cute. She'll be going through clothes so fast. Although I'm sure you already know that." She smiled.

Julia knew babies grew fast. She didn't need this woman stating the obvious.

"Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?" Julia spat. It came out harsher than she wanted it to. "I'm sorry." She turned around and started walking in the other direction. She hurried through the baby aisle, carrying as much stuff as she thought she could; she didn't know when they would stop next. She needed to go faster; people were looking at her, judging her. They could not have recognized her...could they? Unsure of what to do, she threw everything in the car and started driving again, stopping occasionally to feed and change the baby.

This went on for a few days until she could not drive anymore. She happened upon a small motel and decided this would be her best option. It was going on 10:00 and she was exhausted as she was sure the baby was. At each visitor center and Walmart they stopped at, she felt worse for the child. This was no life for a baby, but she knew in her heart that her baby was better off with her. The hanging wooden sign outside just said "The Inn" in fancy letters. It looked like it had been there for many years. It wasn't the Ritz, but it didn't look more like a cockroach hotel than one for paying guests. She carried her baby and her bag inside. She didn't give much care as to how she looked. The grimmer she looked, maybe the more pity the person giving out keys would take on her. This was the one time she wanted pity. The woman at the desk was in her fifties, heavy set with salt and pepper hair.

When she looked at Julia, her eyes held a balance between disgust and concern. At that point, she wished she had taken a moment to see how she looked.

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

“I just need a place to stay for a couple nights.”

“Alright. That’ll be \$100. You’ll be in room 305. I’ll walk you there.”

Julia reached for her credit card, but thought better of it as it would have her name on it. She managed to find the cash in her purse. She counted out the bills, praying that the woman did not suspect anything. Once they got to the room, the woman opened it up and let them in. “Enjoy your stay.” She smiled and Julia managed a smile back.

Julia splashed water on her face first and then tried her best to wash the baby, her arms and legs flailing. It started crying louder than she had ever heard before. She shushed the baby and tried to go as fast as possible. Once it was over, she feed the baby with formula she had bought just before deciding to stay at the motel. After that, she laid the baby on the bed next to her. As she brushed her fingers along its head, she remembered a lullaby from the Disney movie *Lady and the Tramp* that her mother used to sing to her and Jackie when they were young. She tried to conjure up all the words, but she could only remember a few. “La la lu. La la lu. My little star sweeper,” she sang. The baby seemed to enjoy it and soon fell fast asleep.

Julia looked at herself in the mirror for the first time in weeks. Dread washed over her as she realized that she had not changed her look at all since the day at the park. Rummaging through her purse, she found nail scissors and began cutting her hair. Only small chunks could be cut at a time and Julia fully understood how hard this would be. She also came to the conclusion that more clothes would be needed for both her and the baby if they were ever going to be truly safe. Her hair looked choppy, but at least it was different.

Julia flopped on the bed and stared at the ceiling and cried. She let herself really cry for the second time since the abduction. She decided that she hated that word. Rescued. She liked that one. Still in the back of her mind, she knew she didn't know what she was doing. She could hear her mother now. She'd think, *not only can you not take care of a child, you can't even keep one*. Her mother didn't matter now though. All that mattered was this baby. Her baby. And she was going to do whatever she had to do to protect it.

"Six years old already?" Edna asked. Julia and Edna had become good friends. Julia kept asking to stay at the motel and it seemed that Edna got tiny glimpses into her life each time. "You see a lot being at the front desk of a small-town motel," she used to say. Eventually Edna offered her a job to work at the motel. That way she would have a room, income, and be able to spend more time with her child. Julia jumped at this offer.

"Six already." Julia placed six candles on a cake. It was small, but it was perfect. Just like her baby. She didn't know exactly when to celebrate her child's birthday, but she was going to make it as enjoyable as possible. "Hard to believe, isn't it?" She smiled at Edna. She loved Edna. This woman had become like a mother to her. In fact, she did call her mother sometimes. Edna was always so happy to see both Julia and her child. She felt bad for not telling Edna the truth about where she came from, but no one could know. Plus, she had a happy life. Her old life had to be left behind. She also knew that she couldn't stay at The Inn for much longer. She had planned to move around just to be safe. She was sure the missing baby report had been on the news. She tried to stay away from the news as much as possible. She bought a new cell phone. She put the picture of her and David in the back of the closet; she pulled it out to

look sometimes when she was alone. She missed her family, but she had to do whatever she could to keep her baby and her new life.

“Sandra, come into the kitchen to blow out your candles,” Julia shouted.