

A Tight Line of Confusion

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A Tight Line of Confusion

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A warning gust from the approaching nor'caster shoved against the house, which creaked in response. Mom's muffled voice filtered from the closet where she squatted, searching for boots. "Ever since your grandmother retired, she's been almost as much trouble as you." Her voice wavered with the anger from the phone conversation a few minutes earlier, when Grandma had called and demanded that Mom come take care of her during the oncoming blizzard.

I stood a few yards away, listening to Mom's rant, wrapping the string of my hoodie around my finger, counting down the seconds to freedom. This must have been how Washington felt when he was on the verge of expelling the British.

Mom pulled out boots, tugging them on over wool socks, and stood up. "Will, I told you to bring my overnight bag to the car. You're the laziest ass I've ever seen." She pointed at the bag sitting by the door where she had left it, but her eyes remained on me.

I stared back at her. *"I'm lazy? I've been the one putting new batteries in flashlights in case the power goes out while you've been playing on the internet."* I disentangled my finger from the string.

"I don't care what your excuse is for dumping crap all over my living room. When I ask you to do something, do it. Do you understand me?" Her hands were on her hips, and in her winter coat, she looked like a club bouncer, her shoulders as wide as a door.

"Right, my aspiration has always been to sort through batteries to find working ones." *I'd like to take the dead batteries and stuff them down her throat, acid and all.* I leaned against the wall and my shoulder nudged a picture, which fell off its nail and smashed on the hardwood floor, glass skating over the surface. I backed up a few paces, careful not to step on any shards.

"You can't follow directions; you can't even stand up by yourself. You're pathetic. Go pack, you're coming with me. You have two minutes." Her permed hair shook as she spoke.

I was so close to temporary emancipation. I had to get rid of her. "You need to go to Grandma. I'll clean up the glass for you."

"For me. Listen to yourself As if you 're doing me a favor when you cause all my problems. It's times like this that I wish Little Jamie had lived instead of you." She sighed and paused a moment, as if envisioning a world where her kids would fan her and feed her grapes. "Little Jamie would have offered to go to his grandmother's *for me.*"

"Maybe you should ask his three-year-old ghost to go in your place seeing as he's such a saint." As soon as I got Mom to leave I was going to go up to Jamie's preserved bedroom and pull it to pieces.

"Little Jamie never would have talked that way about a dead family member, even if that person were you." She pointed her finger at me as she spoke.

"Jamie never would have lived to be twenty. He told me in a dream that he would have overdosed on coke," I said.

Her eyes bulged. "Are you seeing things again? You've stopped taking your medicine, haven't you? "

"Of course not!" My head and shoulders jolted with the force of the lie. "Get a sense of humor. It was a joke."

"The last thing I need is to have to fix the problems you cause after you've had another one of your hallucinations. Really, you choose the worst times."

I stuck my fists into the pockets of my sweatpants, careful not to shove them in so hard that my pants fell down. "Yeah Mom, I choose when I want to see things that don't exist." She was the insane one, believing that I talked to ghosts in my dreams. "I swear I won't have any delusions if you let me stay here," I said but I almost wanted to have delusions simply to spite her.

I could imagine hallucinating about the Sigma Sigma fraternity bursting in through the French doors with kegs and busloads of cheerleaders and sorority girls. They'd push the furniture out of the way for a dance floor and then Elena would come

and see me dancing with the entire cheerleading squad and she'd remember what she was missing.

"I don't have time to argue about this. I don't know how it became my duty to baby-sit your father's mother, but if I don't get over there, she won't leave me alone until the day she's buried. Of course then she'll live to be one hundred and twenty just to be obnoxious."

Grandma would do that just to be obnoxious, and poor Dad would keep being stuck between the two. He pissed me off most of the time, but even he deserved better than this.

"Don't forget your medicine, and if I even suspect you of doing anything idiotic, I'm sending you and your screwed up mind to an institution."

I could feel the burn of revulsion coloring my cheeks and glowing in my eyes. Mom didn't notice this, though. Just like she hadn't noticed the month of depression I went through when Elena dumped me. I had sat on the couch for thirty days, staring at the TV but always thinking of my girlfriend. Mom walked by me forty times a day and never once did she put a hand on my shoulder, never once did she bring me water or a bite to eat. I had called Elena at every commercial break, hoping she would finally pick up and tell me why she had suddenly cut off all contact.

Now, Mom had completed her monologue so she exited, slamming the door behind her. I listened to her boots stomping down the walkway, and the squeaks of the car door against the background hum of the warming Explorer.

When I could no longer hear the car gliding down the frosted road, I figured it was safe to do what I wanted. I'd have to go destroy Jamie's room soon, but not yet. It was creepy up there with his fire truck blanket still on his bed and his G.I Joes lying in the corner where he had last played with them.

There were plenty of activities I could have engaged in, from getting into the booze, to dancing around in a Halloween costume, to calling random people from the phonebook and inviting them over, but I didn't. I didn't want excitement, and I didn't intend to spend my precious time with schmucks who didn't bother to have unlisted numbers. No, what I did was something Mom almost never permitted me to do. I flopped on the couch, a bag of tortilla chips in one hand, a jar of medium salsa propped in the opposite armpit, with the TV remote in that hand, wandering from channel to channel. Sometimes my fingers paused to watch a plump man putt his tiny Epcot ball into the tenth hole, or relaxed as I listened to a standup comic crack a joke about white girls' asses.

I was switching back to see how Fats was doing on the eleventh hole, when silence and darkness shocked the house. Blue light stopped shining from the TV. In the kitchen, the refrigerator quit droning and the dishwasher abandoned its mission mid-cycle. For once, I could watch TV without Mom interrupting, so of course nature had to get in the way. Mother Nature. Damn it. Without getting up, I peeled the curtain away from the window and looked out at the neighborhood. The streetlights and the neighbors' houses still had lights on. Did everyone have a generator except us?

I lit a Yankee Candle and the "Fresh Cotton" fragrance spread into the cooling air. It was time to start a fire. Too bad I didn't have any marshmallows. I ripped apart the Sunday newspaper and threw it in the fireplace on top of the logs. I lit the kindling and it was soon blazing. I really needed marshmallows.

Armed with a flashlight, I searched through the kitchen cabinets, looking for something I could roast even if they were those chestnuts people always sung about at Christmas. Stuffed in the back of the refrigerator, I found ajar of green olives. I shook the jar, some of the pimentos floated loose from the olives, falling out like bloody intestines. I wondered what roasted olives looked like. I wouldn't eat them, but what did they look like? I closed the refrigerator door and crossed the room to the silverware drawer. Opening it, I shot the flashlight beam into it and squinted until I found a chopstick and pulled it out. I was just about to open the olive jar and harpoon one with my new roasting stick when I heard banging at the door. My initial reaction was that it was Mom. She was back already. She had probably made the whole Grandma story up just to get my hopes up. She'd done stuff like that before, promising me a bike for my twelfth birthday which she couldn't afford because she needed to buy a new headstone for Little Jamie, or saying she'd only check in with me once a week at college, but instead calling everyday.

The banging continued and I realized it couldn't have been Mom. She had a key, and if she still couldn't get in for some reason, she'd be waking the neighborhood with her yelling. Maybe it was a salesman, possibly a Jehovah's Witness. But even Jehovah's

Witnesses wouldn't disturb people during the storm. Maybe it was a robber. No, it was probably a motorist who had smashed into a snow bank. So much for my time alone.

The thumping stopped. I heard the metallic scratching as the key worked to unlock the knob. The spare key under the flowerpot! I leaped across the hall into the kitchen, not sure whether I was looking for a hiding place or for a weapon. Seeing the broom leaning in the corner, I grabbed it and flattened myself against the wall, sucking in my breath.

The front door crashed open, banging against the wall.

I wasn't ready to die. I hadn't eaten ice cream in weeks, I hadn't had a date since Elena a year ago, and I probably needed to reconcile with Mom and Dad before I tried to pass the Pearly Gates. Maybe St. Peter would take bribes. Actually, I only needed to reconcile with Dad; God would understand about Mom.

"Martha? Will? Anybody home?" Dad's voice asked. "I had trouble finding my key out there in the snow. My hands are frozen."

What was he doing home? I propped the broom back against the wall and strode around the corner until I could see Dad in the blinking firelight. I moved each leg deliberately, trying so hard to appear natural that I probably looked like I was wearing leg braces as I pulled my feet over the wood floor.

"What are you doing here? You're supposed to be doing business in California."

Dad stared at me through his Petri-dish lenses. "My flight landed a little while ago. The roads are getting bad out there. Wasn't sure I would make it home." He

stretched out his arms, swinging them in front of him. "Glad to be home. It seems like I've been gone for years."

"It seemed like a week to me." I crossed my arms. Maybe he was working with Mom. It was a conspiracy to make me think I could be alone and then to take it all away.

He looked around the room. "The power's out?"

"No, I just thought it would be fun to pretend."

He reached for the light switch but stopped before he touched it, dropping his arm back to his side and blinking at me. "Where's Mom?"

"Grandma's." Maybe he would go visit his mother and leave me alone. I wondered how icy the roads were. What about the runways? Could Dad have really flown in with this blizzard, or was this all in my head. Maybe he was still in California. "Where's your suitcase? Did you leave it in the car?"

"No, no, I left it at the airport. I wanted to get home before the storm really hit. Anyway, Mom's not here?" He seemed surprised. Not *oh shit* surprised, more *\ikeyes!* surprised. Was this Dad being weird or was it all in my head? For a quarter of a second, I wished I had taken my prescription so I could have known the truth. I scrutinized the form standing in front of me. As far as looks went, he appeared to be real, right down to that snowboard-shaped mole by his ear.

"What are you doing home?" My eyes remained on good old snowboard.

He didn't answer, but slipped past me into the living room, and lowered himself onto *my* couch. "Is Mom really gone?" He scanned the room, sweeping his eyes across the curtains, entertainment center, and chairs.

I didn't want to answer him. Maybe he'd leave me alone if I ignored him; maybe he would even dissolve into the air. "No, she's hiding behind the floor lamp." I plopped down next to him.

Dad's head jerked toward the corner and his eyes ran up and down the length of the lamp, taking far too long to realize I was joking. Was he acting so stupid because he was tired from the trip or because he wasn't really sitting next to me? Dad looked the lamp over one more time then turned his head to look straight out in front of him. His shallow breathing made the candle next to him flicker. "There's something we need to discuss." He stared down at his hands. Even in the candlelight, I saw the same expression I had seen years before.

I *was* imagining all this. "I'm reliving the talk we had when I was twelve."

He glanced up, confused, his eyes wide behind his glasses. "No, I'm sure you know plenty by now."

I let out a sigh of relief and let myself relax into the couch cushions.

"I wasn't on a business trip this week."

I'd seen this on TV a million times. "You have a girlfriend?" He took her to California and he had never taken me? The farthest we had ever vacationed was Maine, and I had almost caught hypothermia, as I had self-diagnosed myself since Mom insisted turning blue didn't mean I needed to go to the doctor.

"No, I was at the Holiday Inn alone. I filed for divorce this morning." His sentences ran together as his mouth expelled the words.

I almost jumped off the couch. "What took you so long? Should I get the champagne?" I wasn't sure if we had any bubbly. I wondered if wine would do. Why would this be happening now, when I was off the medication, when he had had twenty years to do it? "So, Dad," (if this is Dad,) "why now?"

"You were the reason I didn't divorce your mother before." He sat slumped next to me as if talking about this was vacuuming up all the energy he had, his shoulders hunching more with each word he spoke. "I had already lost one child after an argument with your mother. I wasn't going to lose you as well."

I knocked him with my elbow, making sure a human form was really sitting there next to me. "What does Jamie have to do with the divorce?"

"She doesn't talk about him all the time because she loves him. It's a warning. Last time I threatened divorce one of my sons drowned. What do you think would happen if I tried it again?"

A shiver shot through my back even as I felt the fire's heat on my face. I poked Dad's arm with my finger, then wrapped my hand around his forearm. "You're here." But how could this be true? Mom was the liar, the exaggerator, and I was the one who hallucinated, but Dad was honest.

"Yes, I'm here just for the night. She'll find out about the divorce tomorrow so I want you to pack lightly and the two of us will be out of here by noon." He stood up. "I've had a lot of sleepless nights lately. I'm going to turn in early."

"You can't go to bed after telling me Mom murdered Jamie. What happened? How did she get away with it?"

"There was no evidence but she drowned him, holding his head under the water, and I wasn't going to provoke her into doing it again. Be ready by noon and I'll tell you everything then."

I jumped up, blocking the doorway. "My mom murdered my brother. He should have had swimmies on. You have to tell me more."

He closed his eyes and his arms hung at his sides like garden hoses that water once gave form to but now were empty and limp. He shook his head only an inch to each side. "We'll talk tomorrow."

I'd never seen him look this worn before so I stepped out of the way and let him go to his room. After so many years, he had finally gotten his freedom but I wondered if the fight had taken away all his strength permanently. I wondered if he'd be able to enjoy his new life.

I heard the thumps and creaking strains as he ascended the stairs. He had only been up there a minute, when he called down to me "Do you mind bringing the battery radio up?" I took it up to him, my tongue burning to ask more questions, but I didn't say a word.

I climbed back downstairs to the living room and shone my flashlight on the cushion where Dad had been sitting. No wrinkles remained in the upholstery and as I ran my palm over the spot, I felt none of his body heat lingering there. Maybe he hadn't been there. Maybe he hadn't told me that Mom killed my brother.

As the light of the candle skipped around the walls and furniture, I was dipping my fingers in the melted wax, when my cell phone rang. I gawked at the number that lit

up, a number I had long since deleted from my phonebook but couldn't delete from my memory.

I did some hyperventilating, and then answered it before the ring tone ended, my palms were so sweaty I fumbled the phone. "Elena?"

"Will, I'm in a bit of trouble right now and I was wondering if you could help me." As usual, she sounded composed.

I tried to steady my voice to match hers, but it still sounded shrill. "What's wrong?" I imagined myself as a superhero saving a damsel in distress.

"My car is stuck in a snow bank by your house. Can I come over to get out of the storm?"

I wanted to say she couldn't. I should have made her suffer. But what if something happened to her? I decided I should go out, get her, and bring her to safety, like Superman would do. "Of course you can come over."

"Thanks. I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Be careful." I hung up. "Be careful," I repeated, mimicking myself. I had sounded like a dork.

I shouted up to Dad, "Elena is going to drop by to get out of the storm."

He didn't answer. Whether he was asleep, didn't care, or didn't exist, I couldn't tell. I had more important things to attend to.

Equipped with two flashlights, I went up to my room and dug through my closet, looking for the green sweater Elena liked so much, which I had stuffed away after our breakup. I traded my sweats for jeans, ripping off one pair of pants and pulling on the

other as fast as I could to keep out the cold air. Then I shuffled around the house, waiting and wondering if I looked more like a leprechaun or a grasshopper. Hopefully Elena would think I looked sane.

Looking around the room to see if it was fit for company, I noticed that the portrait over the fireplace was crooked, so I pushed it until it was straight and Jamie's giant face was staring at me. I glanced at all the photos hanging in the room, making sure no others needed adjusting. All of them were of Jamie, from hospital pictures up to the three-year-old. I was only in one, since I was giving him a piggyback and it would have been too hard to cut me out of it. I put my finger on the photo next to my brother's face, smudging my fingerprint on the glass frame. How did he die?

I shook my head to get the thoughts off my mind. I yelled to Dad again. "Elena might not be able to find the house in the dark. I'd better go out and wait for her."

He still didn't answer me.

"If you turn out to be real, we're going to have to get your hearing checked." I said, neatening a pile of old mail on my way to the closet.

I pulled on my winter gear, prepared to face the storm. There was no need to heave the door open; the blustery weather swung the wood on its hinges. Gripping my flashlight, I stepped out into the tempest. My cheeks, warm with excitement, fended off the air's frosty bite. I stumbled through the waves of snow, striving toward the end of the driveway, following the single flashlight beam, splattered in miniature pearly stars.

I didn't know how much time had passed but it was more than the ten minutes Elena had promised. The frigidity of the night attacked my body, licking each pore of

exposed skin and weaving through the treads and layers of clothes. The cold began to creep between the seams of my gloves and coat, nibbling at my wrists. I had imagined the phone call. This delusion thing was getting dangerous. I could have been frostbitten and disfigured for life.

Suddenly I saw the shadow of her form emerging through the cloud of snow. I ran up to her and ushered her inside. Watching her as we tugged off layers of wet clothing, I couldn't help but think we were still keeping on far too many. She shook snowflakes from her dark hair, and I noticed the cold air had reddened her nose, bringing out the roses in her cheeks.

I showed Elena into the living room, handed her a blanket, and poured her a glass of water.

"Thanks so much for letting me come over. Is this a new couch?" she asked, taking the glass from me.

I ran my hand over the fabric. "No, it's just got a slipcover on it."

"Oh, well it looks nice." She looked around the room. "You've got a pretty big fire going."

"Yep." I stared into the fire, the flames twisted among themselves, fusing together then separating.

Elena didn't say anything.

I picked at my fingernails, scraping into the rough edge of my thumbnail, noticing Elena unfolding and refolding her hands on her lap in silence.

"So how have you been? I haven't talked to you in so long." Elena said.

"It's been so long because you wouldn't pick up any of my calls to even officially dump me."

"I did what was best for you. I was afraid for you." She stared down at her knees.

"I was scared too, damn it. I was talking to empty chairs and shaking hands with the air." I had to keep my lips from spitting as I spoke.

Elena placed her hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged it off.

"You think you can just show up and try to make small talk without even an apology?" I slapped the couch next to me.

She looked at me now. "An apology? I was helping you."

"You ignored me for a year and got all my friends to disown me. I don't think that's very helpful."

"You know that wasn't my choice." She folded her hands on her tiny lap.

"What do you mean? Was an ogre keeping you from answering your phone?" I crossed my arms over my chest. Yep, definitely looked like a leprechaun, hopefully a mean one.

"Come on, Will, you should be glad I didn't pick up your phone calls. Look how much you've improved. You aren't imagining things anymore are you?"

I ignored the last question, not sure of its answer. "You're kind of missing a piece in your logic. Explain to me exactly how my girlfriend and best friend ignoring me when I needed her most cured me."

She looked like I had hurled her off balance. "Your mother never told you."

Yeah, Mom and I have nice little chats all the time; she tells me everything over tea and scones. "Told me what?" I felt my eyebrows fuse into a V over my nose.

The light of realization reached her eyes. "The day after you left school, your mother called me. She said communicating with you would be dangerous, that you'd hurt yourself and reject treatment if you had any reminders of college life."

"She lied! I needed reminders of a place where I was happy. I needed you." My voice cracked.

"We thought it was for your good, Will. Then one day your mother called me. I almost screamed with excitement when she said you were better and you would call me or call any of your friends if you wanted to talk. But you never called us."

"I'd given up by then." I knocked my toes against the coffee table a few times as I thought through this information. I felt a smile coming to my face. "So you aren't afraid of me and you don't hate me."

Here Elena sat in the same spot that Dad had forty-five minutes earlier. Was it possible that both could tell me life changing news? What could she answer that I didn't know? "Where was our first kiss?"

She smiled. "Outside the dining hall after lunch one day. It was the day after Greg introduced us."

I had forgotten this but now it all came back. If I was making Elena up, I wouldn't have known the answer. She must have been the real Elena. "My mother's plan didn't work. We can be together again."

She combed her fingers through her hair, directing her eyes away from me.

I wanted to hold her head and force her to look at me. "We can get back together, right? She didn't tell you I was gay or anything, did she?"

"She said you'd met someone else and were in love. She said I should give up on you and move on." She combed faster. "So I moved on, Will. I'm moving into an apartment with my new boyfriend in May."

I stood up, struggling not to smash everything in sight. She could have been moving in with me, but Mom had spoiled that chance. She had let another guy have my Elena. We would have gotten married one day and now we never would. I had to get back at Mom, but how? She had nothing I could ruin. She was already losing her husband and she didn't have any friends.

I was wondering how to sabotage her job as a secretary or thinking about setting the house on fire, when I heard a voice outside. I couldn't quite make out the words, but the tone was Mom's. "Did you hear that?" I asked.

"I didn't hear anything." Elena looked at me in that way she had when I first began hallucinating.

"My mother's here." I jumped up, arms flailing everywhere, lips twisting from a Grinch-like grin, to a tight line of confusion, to an ellipse of horror. What was I going to do? My mind sprinted from thought to thought, and I realized the first thing I had to do was hide Elena. I had barely stuffed her in the utility closet and run to the front door when Mom pushed it open and dropped her bag with a thump.

Shit, I forgot to hide Elena's coat and shoes.

"What are you doing with the lights off?" She flipped the switch inside the door.

I shone the flashlight in her face. Maybe if I blinded her she wouldn't see Elena's things. "The power's but."

With her gloved hand she covered her eyes, the only part of her face not wrapped in a scarf. "Get that thing out of my face. The power can't be out. Everyone else has electricity." She began unwrapping herself from her winter layers. A film of snow covered her from her hat to her shoes, which she hadn't bothered to take off before coming into the living room. Her distaste for me remained in her eyes, but she didn't mention Elena's clothes. Maybe she hadn't seen them in the dark.

"You were supposed to be gone all night, not just a couple of hours." I had to stay calm until I could think of the perfect revenge.

Having hung everything up, Mom heaved a deep sigh, as if hearing my voice was enough to exhaust her. "The car's stuck in a ditch; I just walked through a blizzard and I can't even come home to a house with lights. How difficult do you have to make my life?" She marched past me. "Bring the flashlight over here."

I followed her to the utility closet. She put her hand on the doorknob. She might have missed Elena's shoes and coat, but there was no way she wasn't going to see Elena herself.

"Mom, wait. I'll fix the fuses or whatever. You should go warm up by the fire."

She turned back to me with her nose wrinkled. "Who are you? What are you up to?"

"I was trying to be nice."

"You're trying to be Little Jamie and you never will be." She pulled open the closet, but Elena wasn't there. Where had she gone? Mom grabbed the flashlight out of my hand, and pointing at the small gray door, opened the breaker box. She flipped the breaker switch and the lights came on, along with the sound of the TV in the other room. With the flashlight still in hand, she spun around and crossed her arms. "Did you turn it off?"

"Yeah, Mom, I voluntarily turned off the power."

"It's a damn good thing the car went off the road and I came back. Who knows what you would have done next." She retraced her steps to the living room and turned off the TV. She picked up the candle from the coffee table, and without blowing it out, sat it on the mantle and sank into the recliner. "Why do I hear music coming from my room? You know not to go in there. Do I have to put a lock on the door?"

The tune was so soft I could barely hear it. "I would never listen to country music."

"Then who's listening to it? My pillows? What were you doing in my room?"

I didn't want Mom to know that Dad was home but I didn't see a way for her not to notice. Dad would just have to make up his own excuse for coming home early. "All I did was to bring the radio up to Dad. I didn't go through your drawers or closet."

She sat up straight. "Repeat that. What did you do with the radio?"

"Oh yeah, Dad came back from his trip. I guess I should have told you before."

"Your father came home tonight?"

"How hard is it to understand? He came home, go look if you don't believe me."

She jumped out of her chair "Listen to me. Your father is dead. He's been dead six years. He can't be upstairs."

"He's up there. I just saw him."

She ran into the bathroom. Hearing her open the medicine cabinet, I sprinted into the bathroom after her and watched her pull out my medication, pouring it on in her hand, and counting the pills.

"Give those to me." I grabbed her wrist and pulled it toward me.

"You stopped taking them again. I should have known." She tried to push a pill into my mouth but I kept it closed and returned to the living room, which was supposed to be mine and mine alone until the next day when Dad and I would leave. Mom came into the room after me. "You have to take your medicine. He died in a car accident in California. He's not here."

"No, we thought he was in California but guess what he's really been doing?" I felt a smile cover my face. It was so big it almost hurt.

"He can't be doing anything. He's dead. I wish he were alive. Taking care of you by myself is too hard. I have to work overtime to pay for your psychiatrist, I come home never knowing what to expect, and everyday I have to do it without your father." She was almost in tears.

"If you want his help, go upstairs. Why don't you understand? He's here in the house." My knees bounced as I tried to explain past the frustration of her not understanding me.

"Now take the medicine. What else have you been imagining? You didn't call Elena again, did you? You need to think clearly, Will. She has a restraining order out against you."

"She's the one who called me. She's the one who came to me."

"You think she's here too? I'm exhausted. Every moment there's a new problem. I can't do this anymore. I'm going to have to send you away to where they can monitor you."

"You've done enough to me, lying to Elena and blackmailing Dad. You've destroyed my life. You're not sending me anywhere."

"You think I want to do this? I've already lost a son to you and husband and now I'm losing you too. Will, you're too much for me. It's killing me." She pushed the medicine toward my mouth again. "Take this and go up to your room." She took keys out of her pocket. She was going to cage me in my room. She couldn't. I still had to be Elena's host. I still had to be packed by noon. I still had to have my revenge. I pushed Mom back away from me and she fell against the mantle. I nearly passed her, when Mom flapped her arms, and jerked her head at every angle. Fire sprouted from her hair, originating from the candle she had put up on the shelf.

I couldn't keep my eyes off the human torch thrashing before me. Mom's brown curls sputtered into black crisps. She beat at them with her hands. Her mouth hung open, but no noise escaped. The fire spread, consuming more of her hair, spreading toward her ears and forehead, eating at her torso and leaping higher with each passing second. She

screached as her hair illuminated the room like a sudden sunrise attacking a calm night.

The smell stung my nose.

"I'd like to help you, but I'm sure you wouldn't like me thinking you were real. I'll just wait for my prescription to kick in in a few hours to see if you're a hallucination. Have fun waiting til then."

Her mouth moved but still there were no words as she collapsed into a ball in front of the fireplace.

I felt a hand on my shoulder, and looked behind me to see Elena and a few steps back stood Dad. Neither looked at the other, only focusing on me. Their eyes carried the same expression, urging me on to solve all my problems with a single move.

I turned back to Mom, and without hesitation pushed her into the fire, holding her there with my socked foot. She raised her eyes and looked through the flames at me, just as thirteen years ago Jamie had looked through the water at me, pleading for me to let him up.

A Light Shadow

I forced a spoonful of the pig foot soup into my mouth and ignoring my gag reflex, swallowed it. The spoon clattered against the edge and bottom of the bowl when I dropped it back into the chunky brown liquid, the same shade of brown as Kyle's thick hair, the same color mine would have been if I hadn't bleached it blonde. "It tastes just as gross as it sounds." I pushed the bowl away from me, sliding it over the battered table, staring my half-brother straight in his coffee eyes.

He shrugged his shoulders, the shirt clenching the muscles as they contracted. His lips twitched and he opened his mouth, only to close it again.

"I tried it, ok? Mom never made me do more than try something." If he wanted to eat that stuff, fine, but why would he try to make a seventeen-year-old girl suffer too?

"Abby, I don't care if you eat it, but please don't scratch my table." He petted the tabletop as if it was a cat.

I looked down at the scars on the elderly wood, crisscrossing each other like a game of *Pick Up Sticks*. "It was totally scratched before." I ran my finger over the surface, the maroon of my nail shouting out against the faded pine.

"I know all its scratches, and you made a new one. See that one that's about a foot into the table and leads right up to the soup bowl, it wasn't there before."

I focused back on the marks. It would be impossible even to count them all. He couldn't possibly know each one, could he? Why was he criticizing me anyway? Hadn't I been through enough lately with Mom and Dad in prison for bribery, and having to move in with this half-brother I hardly knew?

"Who cares about one more mark?" I said. The table was probably older than he was, and he was almost thirty. I stood up and went to the cabinets, opening them and shuffling through their insides. "What can I eat?" I asked turning back to my brother.

"There's some pasta up there, but like I said before, there's nothing like pork foot soup to boost thiamine and vitamin B12 levels. I have tons of books on this kind of stuff up in my library, I mean, up in your room. I guess that's not my library anymore." He said, leaning over his soup bowl.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm kind of busy unpacking. I don't have time to read."

A crease crinkled between his eyebrows. "You're probably tired. You should take some food up and rest in your room. Or maybe you should finish settling in up in your room."

"I'm not a five-year-old. You can't send me to my room," but I didn't want to stay at the table with him. "I have stuff to do." Dashing up the stairs, I heard Kyle muttering to himself as he clinked dishes in the sink.

I lay in my bed, which was pushed up against bookshelves. *Health, self-improvement*, and *nature* books lined the perimeter of the room. It was tiny, much smaller than my room back home. The bookcases sticking out of the walls made it even tighter, until the space left in the center of the room was the size of my old walk-in closet, or maybe the size of my bathroom. Not that it mattered now that I had to walk downstairs to use the bathroom and I had to share it with Kyle. Still, I could have been happy if I had had to live in a tiny apartment back home with a coffin for a bedroom. At least I'd be with people who ate real food and didn't care if I scratched an old piece of junk table. At least I'd have my friends, my cat, and my parents.

I could still call my friends. None had picked up any of the other times I called, but maybe they would this time. Maybe they had forgiven me for being the daughter of people who ripped off their city. I wanted to tell them that Mom and Dad had messed up, that they were still the good people they had always been, the dorky parents who baked cookies for the neighborhood and who attended PTA meetings. They just got mixed up in some bad stuff with some bad people. Mom probably had no idea she was involved in something illegal and Dad, well, he knew, but he just was trying to make money to take care of us.

I grasped my cell phone and scrolled through my phonebook, wondering who I should call, who was the most likely person to answer. I called Rachel, who had been

one of my closest friends, but she didn't pick up. I called an acquaintance, Jen, who I didn't really like but who I had never heard utter a mean word, but she either didn't hear her phone or was ignoring me. She was probably ignoring me. The bookshelves around me blurred as tears filled my eyes and clung to my mascara, making my lashes stick together. It wasn't enough that my parents were in jail and I had to live with a jerk who hated me for no reason, but my friends abandoning me on top of that was too much.

The next morning, I woke up soon after Kyle had left for work as a risk assessor for State Farm Insurance. I lounged on the couch with the TV on, looking through the Classifieds in the *Harrisburg Times*. I'd never had a job before, but I had to save money for college, now that Dad and Mom had used my fund for a lawyer, not that it had helped any. If Kyle was a good brother, he would have paid for my tuition.

I looked up, concentrating on the math going through my head, figuring out how many dollars an hour and how many hours I should work. I saw a light shadow in the corner of ceiling, and stood up to look closer. When I saw that it was a spider web at least a yard across and covered in dust that must have built up over years, I jumped back, squealing.

I ran to the kitchen and ruffled through rows of bottles and cleaning supplies under the sink until I found rubber gloves, then grabbed the broom, ready to invade the habitat in the corner. I stood as far back as I could, holding the end of the broomstick, and reaching my arms out toward the web, whacking at it six times until I couldn't see it anymore, and then I swept over the corner a few more times, just to be safe. With my

weapon outstretched in front of me, I marched to the door to drop the broom outside, when I saw another web, this time near the floor. After wiping away that one as well, I looked over the living room, at the chipped coasters that covered the coffee table like square puzzle pieces, the spotless white rug, Kyle's Bachelor's and Master's degree diplomas on the wall, and the beige curtains ironed until the creases were as sharp as knives, but I didn't see anymore insect nets. I poked behind the TV, and found one. Two hung in the kitchen as well, along with a few in the hallway and even a couple in my own room, or rather, Kyle's library. Through the morning, I tracked down and destroyed them.

In the afternoon, I took a long shower, but still felt the tingle of bugs' legs crawling over me. To get out of the apartment, I went job hunting. I got lucky in the fourth business I tried, a diner. The owner, a middle-age woman with orange eyebrows drawn on, told me she needed someone to start immediately, and that I could come to work the next day.

I returned home only a little while before I heard Kyle's car cruise into the driveway at 5:15. As soon as he came in, he took off his shoes, put them in the closet, and looked up at the ceiling. He leaned his head against the closet door. Finally, he turned toward me where I stood behind him in the living room, his fingernails stabbing his palms.

"Look," he said, trying to control his voice. "I don't mind sharing the apartment with you, but please don't tear it apart."

"I'm not tearing it apart; I got rid of nasty bugs for you."

"Those 'bugs' were there for a reason. Don't you know that flies are going to carry the next Plague?" He stared at me a moment and then continued. "If flies carry deadly diseases I, I mean we, you and I, wanted to keep spiders around to kill the flies." He looked up at the ceiling where his pets had been.

I felt my eyes burning. "You could have just told me about the spiders. I wouldn't have done it if you'd just told me. Mom always told me stuff like that."

He came closer to me and put his hand on my shoulder. I flinched, expecting him to place a homeless arachnid on me. "I can't tell you everything to do and not to do. The list would go on forever: use two feet to walk, don't put scissors in your eye. Just use common sense from now on." His lips pushed into a smile. "Just think through things a little more and you'll go far in life." He patted my shoulder. "The good news is that I haven't heard any accounts of a Plague breakout. Maybe I'll buy flypaper just to make sure."

"Bugs do not belong inside. It just isn't right." I stomped my foot.

"You'll thank me when the Plague comes and you don't catch it." He turned on a floor lamp then moved toward the windows as he talked, closing one layer of curtains at a time, until he had pulled four sheets over each pane. The only light in the room was the yellow orb shining from the lamp, bouncing off the sparse surroundings.

"Do all the extra curtains keep us safe from the Plague too?" The question popped out of my mouth before I knew I had asked it.

He adjusted the edges of the cloth. "No, no. They're for burglars. Once it gets dark out, people can see right into my house." He didn't need all those curtains; his personality alone was enough to keep away robbers.

Luckily, I had acted early and gotten a job right away. There was no way I could live with this screwball for years until the state of Illinois released my parents or until I collected enough money for college. Maybe I couldn't get enough money for college yet, but I could get a job and save up for my own apartment so that I could move out on November fourteenth, my eighteenth birthday.

The next day at work, a girl, Alicia, trained me. The job was a lot of running around and smiling, but it wasn't too difficult. She taught me the secrets of the trade: don't talk to Wendy, the owner, if she has her hands in her pockets; it means she is in a bad mood; don't spit in the food if you're mad at customers, spit in their drinks; and use the men's bathroom, sometimes the women's doesn't flush.

Between the lunch and dinner rushes, we had time to talk. "You have an accent; you aren't from Pennsylvania, are you?" She didn't look at me, but rested her elbows on the counter and leaned on them, facing the door.

"No, a little south of Chicago," I said, spinning my stool in circles.

Alicia turned to look at me, pushing her long, dark hair out of the way. "So what are you doing in Pennsylvania? Your family move?"

"No, my parents are working in Paris for a year. I was supposed to go with them but it didn't work out so I moved in here with my brother."

"What happened? Why couldn't you go?"

I paused a moment but couldn't come up with an excuse. "It's really disappointing. I don't like talking about it. Hey, have you ever seen *Benny and Joon!*? This dinner reminds me of the one in the movie."

"You've seen *Benny and Joon!* I love that movie." Alicia said.

"We should watch it sometime." There was nothing like a good Johnny Depp movie to help keep my mind distracted. "What are you doing tomorrow night?"

"Nothing planned. After work, we can get some tapioca pudding like they have in the movie, and then watch it. Where do you live?"

I gnawed on my fingernail. I never bit my nails. "Oh, I was hoping we could watch it at your house. My brother is like, he's like weird and stuff." I plucked a leaf of nail polish off my tongue.

"My house is pretty busy and noisy. My whole family lives there."

I hesitated. "I guess we can do it at my brother's apartment." Maybe I could ask him to stay out of the way.

"What do you mean that he's weird? What does he do?"

I told her about the food he cooked, about the spiders, about the curtains, and about his lifeless apartment.

On my way home that night, I went grocery shopping, having given up trying to eat the foods Kyle cooked. As I expected, Kyle was already home, as I could see not only by the car in the driveway, but also by the drawn curtains.

Inside, Kyle sat in the armchair, watching the *Discovery Channel* and looking through a heap of M&Ms, not even lifting his head when I walked in. I hadn't thought

that he ate anything that wasn't stuffed with vitamins. The red chocolates bumped against each other as he pushed a cluster of them toward the middle of the table. He said, "The red dye in them causes cancer." He spoke loudly as if he was talking to me, but he never made eye contact, I wasn't even sure if he knew I was there. I was about to sneak past him and hide in my room with my purchases, when he looked up at me and surveyed the plastic bags hanging from my hands.

I shrugged and the bags crinkled. "I've been eating the red ones my whole life and I haven't gotten cancer." Dropping my purse and groceries against the wall, I walked to the table and reached over it to the other end where the rejected M&Ms lay, scooped them up in one hand, and closed my hand around the first course of my dinner.

As I brought my hand close to my mouth and dropped a few onto my tongue, a couple fell from my pinky's grip to the floor. I bent down to retrieve them and Kyle jumped up, saying, "I just vacuumed yesterday and now I have to do it again. Can't you be more careful?"

"I'm not that messy. Besides, you just watched me get them up off the floor. You don't have to vacuum." *Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm.* I let the chocolate melt against the inside of my cheek.

Kyle took the vacuum out of the closet and keeping his back toward me, drove the white Dirt Devil back and forth over the carpet.

I reached for the vacuum to clean up my huge mess myself, but he just pushed my hand away and continued to do damage control, driving the vacuum like it was a tank.

I threw the dirty M&Ms back on the carpet, seeing as the rug was already such a disaster with microscopic chips of M&Ms.

Tugging my groceries after me, I trudged to the kitchen, opened the child safety lock on a cabinet, and stuffed the food inside. Hungry, I poured Special K I had just bought into a bowl and swirled in some milk as the vacuum turned off. I carried the bowl back toward the living room, intending to hide in my room until I got hungry again or had to go to the bathroom.

This time when I walked through the living room, Kyle was wrapping up the Dirt Devil's cord. He glared at me. "Are you trying to drive me crazy?"

"I'm being careful. I won't spill the cereal." *I'm not a four year old. I know how not to splash milk.*

"That's not what I meant. Do you see something wrong in this room?" He asked.

I looked over the area: the cream-colored curtains taunt across the windows, the blank walls, the damaged coasters. "What did I do now? You want me to put the vacuum away for you, is that it?"

"That's not what I'm talking about either."

"Then what are you talking about? What is your problem with me now? Nothing is ever good enough for you."

"Your bag is on the floor. One of us is going to trip on it. Do you know the rate of broken bones from tripping?" he asked.

I didn't think even hospitals knew the rate for broken bones from tripping. "I'm sorry. It'll never happen again." I could feel my eyes squinting, but I kept my arm steady so I didn't drip my snack as I bent down and clenched the purse under my arm.

I stepped up onto the first stair when I heard the sizzling of an aerosol can. I looked back over at my brother, kneeling on the carpet and squirting it with Lysol. / *have to get out of here.* I climbed to my room, ready to lock myself in, not even caring as droplets of milk and disintegrated Special K splashed on the carpet, leaving a trail of wet circles and ovals.

The smell of fried food filled the diner as I ran back behind the counter to brew a new pot of coffee for the late lunch arrivals. I heard Alicia come in the back door and greet Phil, the cook and then Wendy. She peeked out at me from the kitchen, tying her apron around her waist. "Hey, Abby. "Your brother do anything else crazy?"

I grabbed a nearby rag and wiped up the coffee grounds I had spilled on the counter. "Every time he talks, he gets worse. I just want to smack him whenever he opens his mouth. He treats me like I'm messed up because I'm not paranoid about red M&Ms and tripping."

"He sounds like a funny guy. I can't wait to meet him."

I huffed but didn't say anything. It all sounded amusing but there was nothing funny about actually having to live with Kyle. The coffee finished brewing and I brought

the pot over to the customers, shining a big smile as I filled their mugs. Every smile meant tips and every tip brought me closer to freedom.

After my shift, I came back to the apartment and dropped onto the couch, the scent of Lysol jumped into the air when I plopped down into the cushions. The blue tint of the TV lit up the whole room as I nudged off my shoes and massaged my feet, feeling the blood starting to circulate again. The *Discovery Channel* flashed at me as explorers hunted the arctic for the missing half of a leaf fossil.

I grabbed the remote, switched to MTV, and shoved it back onto the coffee table. As I massaged my foot, my fingers moved to the music and I swayed, until I heard Kyle stepping into the living room from the kitchen. What did he want now? He sat down next to me, reached for the remote, and muted the music. I looked over at him, annoyed after not being able to have a few minutes of peace after my long day.

"I don't mind if you watch TV, but when you're done, could you put the remote back?"

"I do. I always put it back on the table."

He bobbed his head. "Yes, but you don't put it where it belongs on the table. See, it lines up with this left lower corner. The three green coasters go up the side here, and the remote lays on top of them, okay?" He placed the remote on the green tiles and then nudged it with his finger until it was straight. "Like that."

I waited for him to get up and go back into the kitchen, but instead, he picked the remote up that he had just put down, and switched back to the *Discover Channel*.

"I was watching that." I said over the voice of the Dutch scientist on TV and sat up straight.

"Then you can find something else to do because *I'm* here, in *my* apartment, watching *my* TV while / cook *our* dinner."

"Why do you have to be so mean to me? This place and you are all I have. My friends don't like me anymore; I'm in stupid Pennsylvania, and my parents are in jail. Why can't you just be nice to me? Why do you have to make everything harder when I already have the worst life in the whole world?"

He stood up, resting the remote back on the green coasters. "Don't even try to make me feel sorry for you. You've had it made, and if you ask me, after all your father did to my mother and me, he deserves a lot worse than going to jail for a bribery charge."

"You shut up! Don't talk about my dad that way. He left your mother because she was crazy. He sent you money so don't you blame your sad life on him."

"He sent enough money for food. What about how he ruined my mom's health, how he turned her into an alcoholic? You think it's hard to be seventeen and living in someone else's apartment? Why don't you try being thirteen and having to take care of your mom? You think about that and tell me if you still think you have the worst life in the world."

His voice was so loud I was sure the neighbors could hear every word.

"If you want to compare yourself to the rest of the world, go ahead, go out there. If I were you, I wouldn't put up with having to live in this apartment for free, getting food

for free. No, no, I'd leave to go find an easier life out on the streets." He pointed to the door with his whole arm.

"You're just jealous that our dad loved my mom and stayed with her. You're just jealous that we had a real family and we had money. You're just jealous. You're happy Dad's in jail not because you think he deserves it, but because you don't want me to have what you didn't have. And you didn't have it because your mother drove Dad away."

His voice became quieter, calmer. "I'm angry he cheated on my mom with your mom, but I'm not jealous that he actually took care of his second kid. If I were envious of you, you wouldn't be living in my library, kid." He walked back to the kitchen.

He thought he had won the argument but he hadn't. He had lied. How dare he say that Dad and Mom had an affair while Dad was still married to the crazy woman? Kyle was jealous and he was a liar. He was a jealous liar. I stomped up to my room and slammed the door, determined to stay there until Alicia came. I had to change that plan though, when a few minutes later she called to say she couldn't come over because she had a flat tire. As my only friend, I needed Alicia so I snuck downstairs, past Kyle, and out to my car to pick her up.

When I pulled up to the address Alicia had given me, I thought I had the wrong house. It was a two-story saltbox surrounded by cars. They sat in the driveway, they crowded the street, and they choked the front yard. This house had a party going on. It wasn't Alicia's. I was about to turn around in the driveway across the street and go to the end of the road to read the street sign and see where I was, when Alicia stepped out of the saltbox and waved at me from under the yellow loop of the outside light. *I guess she is*

having a party. I parked down the road at the first open place on the curb, and waited for her to hike over.

"I saw the headlights and knew it was you. You've got those funny bluish ones."

"Are you sure you want to leave the party?" I asked, though I had already unlocked the car doors.

She looked confused for a moment. "Oh, the cars, there's no party. It's just my family. I already told you that my house is chaotic." She opened the door and hopped into the passenger's seat. On the seven-minute ride back to Kyle's apartment, I told Alicia about Kyle's lies and accusations, almost forgetting that it all began because of the TV remote.

I was glad I had never gotten around to telling my brother that I was having company over. While a day earlier I had wanted to shield Alicia from some of Kyle's oddities, I now wanted her to see him completely as he was. I wanted her to know how dire my situation was and I wanted Kyle to make a fool of himself in front of someone other than me.

I parked; we climbed out of the car, and went into the apartment. Kyle was still on the couch where I had left him, still watching the arctic leaf fossil hunt. His eyes flashed toward me as we walked in, then turned to Alicia.

"You didn't tell me someone was coming over." Kyle stood up, crossed the room, and shook my friend's hand.

I introduced the two as quickly as I could and tried to shoo Alicia up the stairs to my room, but she hung back.

"Oh, you're watching the *Discovery Channell* Don't you love all the adventures they go on and all the history they try to uncover?" Alicia asked.

Kyle smiled in response, showing all his teeth. I'd never seen that big of a smile on his face before.

Alicia smiled back and continued with a tone of excitement. "Cool, it's one of the artic ones. Those are my favorite." She cocked her ear toward the TV. "They're looking for fossils in the artic. How amazing is that?"

"*Benny andJoon* was nominated for a Golden Globe. That's pretty amazing." I took Alicia by the arm and tried to lead her away from my brother but she slipped herself out of my grip.

Kyle sat back down at the far end of the couch, leaving enough room for Alicia and me to join him.

She sat down next to him, crossing her legs, getting comfortable but always keeping her eyes glued to the TV.

"Kyle's clearly busy here," I said. "We can go watch the movie on my computer in my room. It's a long movie. We should get it started."

She turned her head to me, looking as if she had forgotten I was there. "Do you think we could watch it another time?" Before I could answer, her eyes were back following the movements of the Dutch scientists over the tundra.

I lowered myself into the chair, crossing my arms over my chest and covering my face with a scowl. When the show finally ended, after what felt like a month, Kyle and

Alicia discussed science stuff, history stuff, and exploration stuff. Then the conversation moved to more personal things like Kyle's apartment.

"I love how clean you keep this place. I live with nine other people plus visiting girlfriends and boyfriends. It's impossible to keep the place looking like anything other than a disaster." She let herself sink deeper into the couch. "I've never been in such a quiet, peaceful house before. Everything has its place; there are no crumbs... This is my dream home."

No, this is boring. This is a place with no personality.

Alicia yawned and looked at her watch. "Eleven-thirty. I can't believe it's so late. I feel like I just got here. Would you mind taking me home, Abby?"

Why do I have to take Kyle's new best friend home? "Sure."

We all stood up. "It was nice to meet you," Alicia said to Kyle.

"Yes, just think, if Abby didn't have to move here, we never would have met."

Alicia picked her purse off the table and hung it on her arm. "I guess some good things can come from missing a trip to Paris."

"Paris? Were you supposed to go to Paris?" he asked his new friend.

I pulled Alicia toward the door and said, "you just never know how things will turn out." Still holding her arm, I stretched to reach the doorknob, but couldn't reach.

"No, I mean Abby going to Paris with her parents."

Kyle looked confused. "Her parents are in prison." •

"Kyle!" My face heated up and I knew it was red.

"Prison?" Alicia twisted her neck to look at me.

I looked at Kyle but he just stood there watching Alicia and me.

"My parents are in jail over a huge mistake. It should be figured out soon and they'll be released" I said. "I didn't want you to judge me."

She bit her bottom lip. "You should have told me the truth."

I told her I would take her home, so she and Kyle said goodbye and the two of us went out to the car.

We drove in silence half the way. "I can't believe you lied to me. I wouldn't have judged you."

"I gripped the steering wheel so hard my fingers ached. "What does it matter? It's not like you're a good friend anyway. The second you got the chance you took Kyle's side."

"Kyle's side? Since when does watching a show with both of you mean I'm taking a side?"

Low hanging tree branches rubbed against the side of the car. "I told you all that stuff about him, about how crazy he is and you still just acted like he was a normal person. We were going to watch a movie and you chose him over me."

"Come on, everyone has something weird about them. I think you're too hard on him. You've been telling me every single thing he's done wrong, but you never mention what you do and you never talk about the good things about him." She pulled at her seatbelt. "Did you ever think about what this is all like for him? He's suddenly got a teenage girl who he doesn't know living in his house."

"Well he's trying his best to get rid of me: cooking meals I can't eat, not letting me watch TV, and hogging my only friend." I turned on the air conditioner, letting the cool air swirl into my face.

"Then why did he let you come at all if he just wants you out?"

I still felt too hot. "He's my only relative. He had to take me."

"You could have gone to a foster home," Alicia said.

"No, he's torturing me to get back at Dad. That's got to be what he's doing."

After dropping her off, I sped off down the road. I didn't drive back to Kyle's. Instead, I wandered at high speed through the city. When I got back, Kyle was no longer downstairs. I slammed the door when I came in, stomped up the stairs, went into my room, and slammed that door too.

I was glad the next day at work was Alicia's day off. I had nothing more to say to her until she apologized. After work, when I pulled into the driveway next to Kyle's car, I saw that Alicia's car was there as well. So she was ready to apologize. She could have called me or come to the diner instead of coming here. I took my time getting out of the car and walking to the house. When I opened the door, I had expected to see Alicia in the living room, but instead, I heard her giggle coming from the kitchen. I followed the sound and found her and Kyle sitting at the table, sipping out of mugs. The both greeted me when I came in, but neither said, "I'm sorry."

When I saw this, I turned right around, stamped off to Kyle's library, and turned up my music until the walls vibrated with the bass.

Soon there was a knock at my door. Before I could say or do anything, it opened and Alicia stepped into my room. She looked around at the bookcases and then at me where I lay in my bed. "Is something wrong?"

I sat up and smoothed the back of my hair. "I told you last night that I don't want you being friends with my brother. He's crazy and it isn't fair that he stole you from me.

"He didn't steal me, Abby, and you know what? He might not be as crazy as you think."

"He eats pig's feet. He likes spiders. He makes stuff up about my dad. He's crazy and he's taking his anger toward Dad out on me." I crossed my arms over my chest.

She let out a deep breath. "Have you even talked to him about your father? Did it ever occur to you that he might be justified in being pissed off?"

"Oh, shut up. I don't know what Kyle told you while the two of you have been having the nice little chat in the kitchen, but it's all a lie. My dad is a good man. I've lived with him for seventeen years. I think I know him a little better than you." I walked pasted her, turned off the light, and went downstairs. If those two were gossiping in the kitchen, then I could watch TV. Alicia followed me downstairs without another word and returned to the kitchen while I spread out on the couch and began flipping through the channels.

I'd only just begun to feel comfortable, when someone knocked on the outside door. I rolled off the couch and opened it, to find my father standing on the welcome mat.

I jumped at him, wrapping my arms around his bony torso and he hugged me back. "How did you get here?" I asked, savoring the feeling of his cotton shirt against my skin.

He didn't answer me, only held me tighter.

Finally, we pulled ourselves apart and I looked past him, out into the dim yard. "Where's Mom?" I turned my attention back to him. The wrinkles on his forehead and the white hairs on his head had doubled since I had last seen him, and his lips that once were so full and which both Kyle and I had inherited, were thin lines, pulled tight toward his cheeks.

Dad stepped inside and sat down on the couch just as Kyle came out of the kitchen.

"What are you doing here?" Kyle asked.

I sat down next to Dad and he shifted and turned his head to look at his son. "It's so good to see you. So good to see both of my children together."

Kyle leaned against the wall. "Don't call me your child. I asked you what you were doing here, in my house and I want an answer."

I lifted my eyebrows at my brother but he didn't look at me. "Kyle, stop it. Dad just got here. Give him a minute to breathe."

"I came to see you two, of course. What else would I do as soon as I got out?"

"Where's Mom?" I asked. "Is she on the way or can we meet her somewhere?"

She probably didn't want to meet her husband's other kid.

"Could you get me some water, dear? I haven't had a drink in hours."

I stood up and ran to the kitchen. Alicia was standing just inside the doorway, listening to everything.

"You should go home," I told her. "This is a really important time for our family."

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I think you should be careful. That man has not been a good father to Kyle and you don't know what he'll do to hurt you." Her voice was a whisper.

"Kyle is a different story. My dad loves me."

"Just keep in mind that he just came out of jail. He has nothing right now. You should ask him what he wants. He did not come here only to see you. And where's your mother? Why isn't she here? Something is wrong with all of this. Don't let your anger at Kyle and me get in the way."

I filled a glass of water and took it back out to Dad, not even looking at Kyle as I passed him. I handed Dad the glass and once again asked, "Where's Mom?"

He took a couple of gulps and then sipped on it for what seemed like a full minute. "My lawyer, Parker, got me out of prison, but your mother's going to be in there for a very long time.

For a moment, I thought I saw a smirk playing on his lips, but it must have been an expression of sadness.

"Parker?" Kyle asked. "James Parker? The guy who helped you sneak out of paying alimony and helped you get the house and everything else when you left my mother?"

"I don't know what your mother told you, son, but I hardly think that the settlement was unfair."

"I was old enough to remember it. I know all the tricks you played and all the lies you told." Kyle came closer to Dad and I thought he would hit him.

I was almost in tears. "Mom's still in jail?"

"Parker did a good job getting me out. One parent is better than none, right?"

"But Mom didn't know what she was doing. Why couldn't Parker get her out?"

Kyle shifted his weight. "How convenient that another wife ended in a desperate situation while you're just fine."

"I don't think you should be calling me just fine. I've lost an entire lifestyle and I have no money."

"Maybe Kyle will let us borrow money to get Mom out," I said, looking to Kyle.

"No, no, no, your mother isn't getting out. But if Kyle is willing to help us, he'll let me move in here until I get back on my feet." He smiled at his son.

"There's no way you're staying here. I don't know what you've done to Abby's mother, but you are not welcome in my apartment."

"He's our dad," I said. "We have to help him." Even as I spoke those words, I was beginning to doubt Dad. Alicia had warned me that he wanted something and now

he admitted that he was looking for a place to stay, and there was something wrong with the fact that Dad was walking free and poor, ignorant Mom was still a criminal.

"No," Kyle answered. "He's not really a dad for me. I don't have to help him but you are my sister and I will help you."

He wanted to help me? Maybe he didn 't hate me after all.

"Do you mind getting me another glass of water?" Dad handed me the glass.

"Did you get out of prison today?" I asked, not quite ready to get him his water yet.

"No, no, it was four days ago. I was in Vermont until today."

Kyle's face turned red. "You went to Vermont when you left *my* mother. What's up there? Why did you have to go there before seeing Abby?"

Dad only shrugged his shoulders and looked smug on the couch, propping his feet up on the coffee table and paying no attention to the coasters.

My brother looked at me. "He's already ruined both of our mothers; I'm not going to let him hurt my little sister, too."

Little sister. I'd never been a *little sister* before.

"Abby, don't listen to him," Dad said. "Maybe I have special ways of getting myself out of trouble, but you need me."

"No," I said. He should have used his special ways to help his wife and therefore to help the whole family. "You need me but I don't need you. I have Kyle."

