

*REQUIEM'S WALTZ,*

A NOVEL ILLUMINATING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN  
INNER- AND OTHER-DIRECTED IDENTITIES

A Senior Honors Thesis

by

ANTONIO CORONEL ELEFANO, JR.

Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs  
& Academic Scholarships  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE  
RESEARCH FELLOWS

April 2002

Group: Art And Literature 1

*REQUIEM'S WALTZ,*

A NOVEL ILLUMINATING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN  
INNER- AND OTHER-DIRECTED IDENTITIES

A Senior Honors Thesis

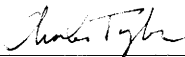
by

ANTONIO CORONEL ELEFANO, JR.

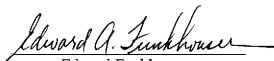
Submitted to the Office of Honors Programs  
& Academic Scholarships  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE  
RESEARCH FELLOWS

Approved as to style and content by:



Charles Taylor  
(Fellows Advisor)



Edward Funkhouser  
(Executive Director)

April 2002

Group: Art and Literature 1

ABSTRACT

*REQUIEM'S WALTZ,*

A NOVEL ILLUMINATING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN  
INNER- AND OTHER-DIRECTED IDENTITIES. (April 2002)

Antonio Coronel Elefano, Jr.  
Department of English  
Texas A&M University

Fellows Advisor: Dr. Charles Taylor  
Department of English

In *The Lonely Crowd*, David Riesman proposes the distinction between inner- and other-directed people. Inner-directed people have core values and are internally driven. Contrast this with the other-directed individual who uses his or her contemporaries—friends and the mass media—as sources for identity—a presentational self drawn from the expectations of whoever is currently watching. I explore this dichotomy in a creative work, a novel entitled *Requiem's Waltz*. In this novel, two protagonists, a woman and her stepson, alternate telling the story; one protagonist is inner-directed; the other is other-directed. And when the third member of the family suddenly dies, the two opposing identity types are forced to find some way to communicate, some way to connect as opposed to merely dancing around one another, dancing to death's song—the requiem's waltz.

# Requiem's Waltz

---

*a novel*

by Antonio *Elefano*

---

for Heather  
for *Amanda*

Part 1

---

## *Chapter 1*

---

I never liked Janet. She was the kind of girl you knew wasn't very popular in high school, the kind who stayed behind in the dorm during Thanksgiving holidays. Her freshman year at Rice she joined thirty-two student organizations in a relentless quest for self-esteem. Her transparency amused me.

She liked me, though, because I was pretty and clever, because I was the kind of girl who was quite popular in high school, the kind who went home to dozens of friends all wanting to catch up. She liked me because she was afraid of me, afraid that one piercing observation through her newfound confidence would cast her spirit back to those awkward, acne-scarred outcasts who lived with their parents and spent the rest of their lives in the shadows of cheerleaders and football players, still reminiscing about the big catch or senior prom.

When she called, I feigned a courteous enthusiasm; when she asked me to lunch, I politely accepted. Being an adult means sitting through lunches with people you don't like; it means laughing at their jokes and finding things like coffee tables and new cheesecake recipes interesting.

I arrived at the restaurant on time. An Italian place in Beaumont, just thirty minutes from home. I waited in the front lobby, my left leg crossed over my right, my left shoe dangling. I had grabbed a menu and was perusing my choices.

"Annie," I heard from beside me.

"Janet," I said, rising to embrace her, "it's so good to see you."

"Have you been waiting long?"

"Just a few minutes." I smiled. "You look great, Janet." She was wearing too much makeup.

"So do you, Annie. So do you."

The restaurant was dimly lit. The orange blaze of the brick oven caught my eye as one of the chefs slid in a portabello mushroom pizza. It was an open kitchen, so you could see it all happen. Despite the heat of the oven and the rush to toss the salads and garnish the plates, the chefs always looked remarkably calm. In all the years I'd eaten there, I couldn't remember a single one breaking a sweat.

We were seated close to the kitchen. There were a couple of college kids eating at the table across. They were laughing. Janet's lipstick was a peculiar shade—a light red, almost orange. Some of it was on her front teeth.

She ordered a Caesar salad and mineral water. I ordered calamari and chicken parmesan. I had seen the dessert tray already. The tiramisu looked good. Janet was wearing a pastel pantsuit, it was ugly.

"You could always eat whatever you wanted, Annie. And look at you—haven't gained a pound since college." She smiled. Janet had gained weight. Her arms jiggled when she reached for the sugar. Her ass was epic.

"Oh, please. You look wonderful yourself, Janet. Have you been going to the gym?" I was being a bitch. But I knew what was coming.

"No, I have a membership, but I never go. Work keeps me so busy." She sipped her water. "I have this new multi-million dollar account." She looked me in the eye and sighed. "It has me so stressed. Well, you can imagine."



No, I couldn't imagine. She knew I couldn't imagine. I had left Rice my junior year. I was a housewife.

"Did you say multi-*million*?" I replied as if I couldn't even count to a million.

"Not exactly my first," she said. "I can't very well count on Charlie to send Patrick to college. Not on his salary. He's a good father, but someone has to bring home the bacon." Janet brought home the bacon. She probably ate it, too. She took another sip of water. "Oh, listen to me. Complain, complain. Tell me about you. I haven't heard from you in so long. Did you get my newsletters?" Janet had sent family newsletters every Christmas. She tried to make it look as if her son wrote them.

"Mommy is working on a 7.6 million dollar account for a major Dallas corporation. Daddy makes the best peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches in the world." At a similar lunch two months before, Sarah Pope, another college acquaintance, informed me that Janet's son was held back to repeat the first grade. The newsletter failed to mention that. I imagined the principal delivering the news to Janet and Charlie. I could see the beads of sweat on Janet's brow. "Can't something be done?" she would say. "Isn't there anything that can be *done* about this?" She would be almost crying. Afterwards, Charlie would have to calm her by feeding her a bakery or a goat.

"Annie," Janet said, "the newsletters? Did you get my newsletters?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, I did." I hadn't sent her a thing, not even a Christmas card. Janet had sent newsletters. Janet was the better friend. "I keep showing Dennis every year. I tell him we need to send our own newsletters, but we never get around to it. Maybe this year."

"Oh, I would love that. I'm the only person I know who sends them. It was Patrick's idea. Such a creative boy." Sarah said that Patrick once ate a box of crayons and had to have his stomach pumped. "So, how's Cass? How's that stepson of yours?"

She had to call him my *stepson*; I had to be reminded that I had no *real* child. She was overstepping now.

"He's fine."

"Is he in college yet?"

"Senior in high school."

"That's such an exciting time. Where does he want to go to college?"

"I don't know," I replied with a shrug.

"You don't know?" she smirked. "Well, that's okay. As long as *he* knows, right?" She laughed. I didn't. She had overstepped, and I wasn't playing anymore. "Do you have any pictures of him?" she asked, grinning like an idiot.

"No, unfortunately I left the photos in my other wallet." I didn't have another wallet, and if I did, it wouldn't have photos of Cass in it. Janet probably had a scrapbook inside her purse. It would stay in the purse. The baby pictures, the family Christmas photo, the birthday party pics—they would stay in the damn purse.

"That's too bad," Janet replied.

I wondered how much force it would take behind my butter knife to kill Janet, to penetrate skin and bone, to drive it through a vital organ.

"How's that husband of yours? How's Dennis?" she asked.

"Fine. Work's a pain, but he's making it. Getting a pot belly." I smiled weakly.

"Oh, my God. Isn't that the worst? I tell Charlie every day at breakfast when he reaches for that extra slice of bacon. I tell him, 'Charlie—if you ever get one of those disgusting pot bellies, I will divorce you so fast your head will spin.' I know I'm horrible, but it's how I feel. I mean—is there anything worse?"

There was a muffled thud as the bottom of my glass hit the tablecloth. "There's a woman in the P.T.A. whose husband hits her whenever he loses his weekly poker game. She would come into the cafeteria wearing sunglasses, and we'd beg her to report him. But she wouldn't. She couldn't. Last week, she had to go to the hospital. Concussion." I glared at Janet, daring her to make some asinine comment, challenging her to laugh the woman in the P.T.A. away.

Drained from lunch, I drove home and went straight to bed. I woke up later than I had intended; Dennis and Cass were already home. My pillow felt moist under my head; I had been drooling.

I sat up, not feeling particularly refreshed from the nap. I was hungry, though. I had eaten plenty for lunch, but I couldn't enjoy it. I needed to start dinner. I needed to go downstairs and make dinner for my family.

"Sweetheart," I heard from the doorway. A rectangular silhouette in the hall light. He walked closer. The suit was too big. The shirt sleeves—too short. Brown belt. Black shoes. My husband was constantly finding new and innovative ways to dress poorly.

"Dennis, you're home."

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m just tired.”

“I ordered a pizza. I hope that’s okay.”

My husband never complained when I failed to make dinner. He just ordered a pizza or Chinese food and didn’t resent it. It was the most remarkable quality about him, and I was thankful for it.

“Sounds great.”

“How was lunch?”

“Fine. Janet sends her regards.”

Dennis smiled. “Well, you can go back to sleep.”

“Is Cass home?”

“Yeah, you need him?”

“No. I just thought maybe he and I could go to the movies tonight.”

“It’s a school night, Annie.”

“He’s a genius, Dennis. Going out one night isn’t going to sully his academic record.”

Dennis was unsure, but he conceded, as he always did when he was unsure.

Cass and I arrived at the front of the Cinemark theater twenty minutes before the movie started. Cass always insisted on being early. He was in a bad mood. I handed him a twenty-dollar bill.

"Here. You want to get the tickets?" The theater was crowded for a Thursday night, but then again, what else was there to do in this godforsaken city? I let Cass wait in line. Sometimes, you just don't feel like waiting in a damn line. There was a slight breeze. I closed my eyes, praying that Janet would show up, holding the hand of her darling dumb-ass of a son. I would introduce the little monkey to my Cass, and Cass would say something clever. He would quote Shakespeare or Milton or Hemingway. And Janet would look embarrassed. And I would smile.

"Sir, you need to calm down," I heard from behind me.

"Let me talk to your supervisor." The voice and tone were all too familiar.

"He's not going to be able to help anything, sir."

"Your *supervisor*. Is it the big word that's throwing you off?"

"Hey, man," someone behind him said. "Just get your ticket, okay?"

"Was I talking to you?" my smart-ass stepson replied. I had reached the front of the line and grabbed his shoulder.

"What the hell is going on?" I pulled him away.

"Did you see what just happened?" he asked.

"What is wrong with you?"

"What?"

"Why do you always have to make a scene?"

"Because—"

"You know what? I don't care. Give me the money. I'll get the tickets."

"But—"

"Give me the money, Cass."

He took the bill out of his pocket and threw it onto the ground.

"Calm down, Cass." But it was too late. He was already stomping back to the car.

I was too tired to deal with him. I was too tired to *explain* for the seven-hundredth time how acting out mini-dramas was an inappropriate way to solve problems. He was sitting in the back seat, his lips pursed, his eyes glaring at the empty passenger seat in front of him. Baby. A case of stunted emotional growth. And *I* was the one Dennis sent to the sanitarium. Cass threw fit after fit, but *I* was the crazy one because I *didn't* cry and bitch and scream. Ten years without losing my temper. Most husbands would have been overjoyed. But not mine. Mine, the psychiatrist. Abnormality in the consistency of my normality. Whatever. Six months before, I checked myself in. Voluntarily. I talked to the damn doctors. And I was fine, wasn't I? Released in two weeks. Must have been a record or something.

"Put on your seatbelt, Cass."

He ignored me.

"Put on your seatbelt."

He wouldn't look at me. I hated him. I hated him more than anyone—more than Janet Scott. I shook my head and turned the ignition. Through the rear-view mirror, I noticed that he was crying. I don't know why, but the tears only made me hate him more.

---

*Chapter 2*

"Classic overachiever," Mr. Krauss, my freshman biology teacher, said gleefully.

"You're clever, Cass, but there are smarter kids, and you need to know that."

But I made all A's. I was the top of my class. What the hell was he talking about?

I pretended as if the remark didn't phase me, but the next year in chemistry, I noticed Robert Riley never had his homework done before coming to school. He would do the problems in the hall after lunch, whipping through chemical equations until he finished the last one, seemingly at the exact moment Mr. Morgan would come up the stairs. Robert made the same grades I did in chemistry, but the work he was doing in fifteen minutes took me hours.

At the end of the semester, Mr. Morgan handed back our final quizzes. Robert, ninety-two. Me, ninety-one. I looked at my paper in disgust.

"What's wrong?" Mr. Morgan asked.

I told him about Mr. Krauss, about how I wasn't really smart, about how I had to work five times as hard as that contemptible genius, Robert Riley.

Mr. Morgan smiled.

"What?" I asked.

"If I don't have to mark the problem wrong on the quiz, what does it matter?"

This didn't do much to comfort me until Robert asked me to proofread his literary analysis for our Honors English class. To be honest, I had started to hate Robert and felt quite certain that he just wanted to flaunt a superior essay he had written in twelve inspired minutes while perched on the toilet.

"Sure, Robert. I'll look over it." English was my best subject, so I took a chance at the risk of losing even more self-esteem.

My eyes widened as I perused the paper. Comma splices. Dangling modifiers. Misuse of the semicolon. And (gasp) a run-on. He was practically illiterate. I was delighted.

From that point on, I didn't care how I got to the top of my class. I was there. And I was smart.

My senior year I took advanced physics. I was working through a projectile word problem in my room. Mary fired a missile at a given initial acceleration, thirty degrees from the ground. I needed to know the projectile's vertical velocity after twenty seconds. I scratched my head. How the hell did Mary get a missile?

I heard a knock on the door, and Annie entered. I never could get used to calling her mom. Sometimes I would on special occasions. Holidays. Her birthday. By my junior year, I addressed her by her first name even on those days. Annie wanted to go to the movies.

"So go," I replied.

"I want you to come too, silly."

I told her I had homework, but she insisted. The physics wasn't due until next week anyway.

"Fasten your seatbelt," she said once we got into the car.

"I know." I fastened the belt and turned on the radio.

"How was school today?"

"Fine."



"Do you have any tests?"

"Not tomorrow."

"Good."

We were silent for a while. I stared out my window. It was November, but the trees were still green. The evenings were cooler than in August, but the afternoons still made you sweat if you stayed out too long. In Southeast Texas, on the border to Louisiana, we have two seasons. Summer and "Jesus, it's cold." The latter only lasts an accumulation of three weeks, generally interspersed around late January, early February.

"So school went okay today?"

"Yes."

"Good." She was going fifteen over the speed limit. "There was a woman today at the cosmetic store. She has a daughter who goes to school with you. Her daughter's just a junior, and she doesn't think you've met her, but she says she's seen you at award ceremonies. The mother, I mean. But I guess the daughter, too. Both of them. Anyway, she said I must be proud to have you for a son."

I smiled weakly and turned the radio up.

"Son of a bitch!" Annie shrieked, honking her horn as she cut off a minivan.

"Five over! You're allowed to go five over!"

I ignored her and returned my attention to the window. Refineries. My entire life looking at refineries. Steel fire-breathing towers shooting local economy-supporting carcinogens into a chemically-altered horizon. Along the drive to Beaumont, there were specific spots on the highway where the industrial odors would hit you. If you didn't adjust your air-conditioning, you were in for at least thirty seconds of solid discomfort.

We arrived at the theater on time.

"You want to get the tickets?" she asked as she put a twenty-dollar bill in my hand.

"Sure."

I got in line while Annie stood back. She had probably gotten the movie idea from one of those damn P.T.A. ladies who had treated her kid to two hours of over-buttered popcorn, overpriced sodas, and mediocre cinema in the name of family bonding.

The person in front of me was Indian. Poor guy was wearing a sweater. I saw a drop of perspiration trickle down his neck. He kept turning around and smiling. I smiled back without showing my teeth.

He reached the front of the line and put his hands in his pockets as he addressed the ticket girl. "Cartoon," he said with a wide grin I could see through the glass's reflection.

"Which show, sir?" she asked.

"I want cartoon."

"Which . . . show . . . sir?" She talked slower and louder. The people behind me were grumbling.

"Cartoon, please," he said softly, the smile leaving his face. Another bead of sweat down his neck.

"Sir," she shot back.

Frightened, he pointed to one of the movies on the board.

Momentarily appeased, the hippopotamus on the other side of the counter returned to a civil tone. "Which showing, sir?"

The man fidgeted.

"What time?"

"Umm . . . six-thirty o'clock, please."

He handed her the money, and she processed the ticket. "Next, please!"

His head down, the man walked into the theater. I looked at my watch. "Sir!" I yelled. But he was already in the door.

"It's seven-thirty," I told the girl at the booth.

"Yes. What show, sir?"

"You sold him a ticket for a six-thirty show."

"That's what he asked for."

"He obviously didn't understand."

"Which show, sir?"

"Can you send someone to get him?"

"I really can't do that."

"Why not?"

"What show do you want to see?"

"You can get him yourself. I don't mind waiting."

"He asked for the six-thirty showing. It's not my fault he didn't speak English."

"He spoke English."

The ticket girl was about my age, so she took certain liberties that an older employee wouldn't have taken. "Six-thirty o'clock, please," she mimicked, attempting an Indian accent. The man behind me started laughing.

I frowned. "You know—I bet that brand of humor knocks them dead at the third-rate bars and Confederate flag-waving trailer parks you frequent, but I'm not so easily amused."

Everyone in line stopped their conversations.

"Sir, you need to calm down."

I asked to speak to her supervisor. The people in line were getting irritated. I felt someone touching my shoulder.

"What the hell is going on?" Annie asked as she pulled me away.

"Did you see what just happened?"

"What is wrong with you?"

"What?"

"Why do you always have to make a scene?"

I wanted to explain that there was a nice Indian man walking into an already darkened theater to watch half a cartoon. "Because—"

"You know what? I don't care. Give me the money. I'll get the tickets."

"But—" Ticket girl was smiling.

"Give me the money, Cass."

I threw the money on the ground and walked back to the car. It's not that I didn't understand that most of the time, it's just easier to let ticket girls suck and move to the next guy in line. But what's easy isn't always right. And you should always try to be right, right? Even if it means taking two minutes to explain to a confused, sweater-wearing immigrant that it's seven-thirty and he'd already missed an hour of the movie.

In the car, I couldn't bear to look at Annie, and she couldn't bear to look at me. The look on the man's face was still with me— that despairing countenance, the sweat on his neck, the nervous smile. I was just trying to be nice. And now I was the one who wasn't being understood. Fine. I'd rather sit in a theater watching the last half of a cartoon than stand with Annie and the rest of those pricks waiting impatiently in line.

The tension from the movie incident carried over to the next morning at breakfast. I took a few sips of orange juice, avoided eye contact with Annie, told my dad goodbye and went to pick up Lindsay next door.

I knocked. The doorbell had been broken for three years. It was windy but warm. The humidity made my skin feel sticky.

Lindsay's mom greeted me with her customary half-smile, half-smirk. She was wearing her favorite sweatshirt. Dark green cotton with the words "The Better Half" embroidered in plaid letters across the center. "Good morning, Cass." She turned around. "Lindsay! Cass is here!"

"I'll be there in a sec!" I heard her say from the back of the house.

"She's running a little late. Come on in."

I heard barking as I entered. "Did you all get a dog?"

Mrs. Durham nodded. "My sister's dog had puppies."

"I hate dogs."

"Really? I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said, 'I'm sorry.' Why are you sorry?"

"It's just an expression, dear." Another half-smile and then she left the room.

Lindsay's mom didn't like me. She didn't *hate* me, but she didn't like me.

I walked to the back of the house where Lindsay's room was. The barking got louder and more frequent.

"No!" Lindsay yelled. She had her finger in the dog's mouth.

"What are you doing?"

"Hey, Cass," she replied. "He swallowed a piece of paper."

"And now you're trying to kill it?"

"I'm trying to get the paper out. Wait. Just a second. There." She pulled a wadded-up post-it note from the animal's throat.

"That's excellent, Lindsay."

"Thank you." She bowed like a magician and grabbed her backpack. "Ready to roll?"

"You want to wash your hands there, champ?"

"Oh." She smiled. "Good idea." She threw her backpack down and ran to the bathroom. There was a stack of underwear on the floor with a blue bra in the mix. The dog was staring at me.

"I'm back!" Lindsay sang, popping back from the hallway. "How rude of me! I haven't introduced you to Ritalin."

"Ritalin?"

"Yeah." She laughed and snorted. "She's a hyper little girl. We love her, but she keeps leaving little surprises in the house. You know any solutions for that?"

"You could put it to sleep." Lindsay's mom was walking down the corridor. I hoped she hadn't heard me, but she had. She frowned and walked back to her bedroom.

"Oh, that's right. You hate dogs," Lindsay said.

"Yes."

"Because you got bit that time."

"Lost a pint of blood."

"You're so full of it."

"A pint."

"It was barely a scratch."

"Needed a transfusion. Needed seven of them."

The dog barked again.

Lindsay picked up her backpack. "Ready to go?"

Lindsay and I had ridden to school together since the second grade. I parked my old Camry between two newer Camrys in my regular spot behind the gym. Ours was the third-richest school district in Texas. We had just passed a bond issue, and within a year, the school would have a new cafeteria, a new gymnasium, and a new library. But the class of 1999 would never see those improvements. We had the misfortune of being there during the construction year. They tore down the cafeteria first, so we were forced to eat in the old gym where they brought in portable ovens and tables. The cafenasium, we called it.

We walked into the school forty-five minutes early.

"Amanda's dating *who*?" Lindsay asked as we walked down the corridor.

"Chris Donavon."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"But he's so—"

"I know."

"I thought she was dating—"

"Broke up."

"When?"

"Last week."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "Got bored, I guess. You know her."

"Hey!" we heard from behind us. We turned around and there was Amanda sprinting to meet us. "Good morning," she greeted with a smile. "I just wanted to let you know that the bitch is coming back."

"Excuse me?"

"Abigail Laigley."

"She's moving back?"

"Yup."

"How do you know?"

"Last night, the stars formed a pentagram in the sky, and newborn babies are crying blood."

"Seriously—"

"My aunt works with her dad. She told me."

"Abby's really coming back?"

"Stop looking excited, Cass. I consider it a personal betrayal."

"Amanda—"

"Don't Amanda me."

Mason, his jeans too big for his waist, saw us through the library window. "Hey, y'all. What's up?" he greeted while adjusting his belt.

"Abigail Laigley is moving back."

"Oh, crap."

"That's enough," I said.

"I need to start thinking of witty comebacks to use against her," Mason said.

"You're actually going to lay in bed at night and think of comebacks?" I asked.



"Well . . . sort of."

"That's excellent. Please stop being my friend."

"How many couples did she break up last time she was here?" Amanda said.

"How many of my boyfriends did that bitch—"

"Enough," Lindsay interrupted. "She hasn't even gotten here yet."

"So, you're on *his* side?" Mason put his hands on his hips to stop his pants from slipping.

"I don't have time for this," I replied as I walked away.

Abigail Laigley. She came at the beginning of our freshman year and left at the end of it. Her parents got a divorce, and she moved with her mother. Now, she was coming back.

I was thinking about her between lunch and seventh period when I saw Danny Coy, in a baby blue Polo shirt, walking down the hallway. Danny was our senior class president, student council vice-president, and a raging idiot.

"Cass!" I tried to avoid eye contact, but he had caught my scent.

"Hello, Danny."

"Howdy. And how are you, Cass Kincaid?"

"I'm just fine, Danny Coy."

"Great." He extended his hand for me to shake it. He was always shaking your hand.

"So, man— what's going on?" He put his hand on my shoulder.

"Nothing."

"Man, Cass— I like that shirt you're wearing. It's real sharp."

"Thanks. What's up, Danny?"

"No, really— that shirt— it goes perfect with your pants."

"Are you hitting on me, Danny?"

"What? Oh, my God! No way, man! I was just—"

"I'm just kidding, Danny."

"Oh, I get it." He laughed.

"What do you want, Danny?"

"Well, I have this project for English, and I just don't know what to do. My teacher is so hard. I mean— I know you're taking honors, so that's much harder, but of the non-honors teachers, she's probably the hardest. We have to pick an author and then analyze his life and how his life fits in with his work and stuff. And I have no idea what's going on. And I was thinking since you're so awesome at English that maybe you could help me out."

"Have you done any preliminary work?"

"Well, I've been busy with football practice and all."

"Which author are you doing?"

"See, I don't know. I was thinking about this one guy, but then I thought maybe this other guy, but then I wasn't sure if either of them would be good."

"Who were you thinking about?"

"I don't remember their names. One of them was British, I think."

"Danny, when is this assignment due?"

"Day after tomorrow. I know it's short notice, but you're so smart. I figured with your help, it would only take like half an hour at the most. If you can't, it's no big deal. I'll totally understand."

"Yeah, I don't think so."

"Oh, you don't have time or something?"

"No, I have time."

Danny smiled an uncomfortable smile. "Oh, well—that's cool, man. I totally understand."

"Yeah, you said that already."

He laughed again. "Well, I better get to class."

"Okay." Danny was probably the most popular guy in town and all because he was good-looking and shook people's hands in hallways and remembered their names, first and last. People didn't like Abby because if she didn't want to talk to you, she just didn't talk to you. She was the anti-Danny. And that alone was enough to win my respect.

After the three o'clock bell rang, I walked to my car. Lindsay was waiting. She needed to go to the grocery store, so we stopped before going home.

"What do you need?" I asked.

"Dental floss."

"Didn't you buy dental floss last week?"

She nodded. "The kind that tastes like peppermint, but it keeps shredding and getting stuck in my teeth, so I'm going to get the strong, plain kind to get the minty kind out."

"You're getting dental floss to remove pieces of dental floss?"

"Yes."

"But—"

"Please don't cloud the issue with logic."

It took some time before Lindsay found the right kind of floss.

As we left the store, I remembered the movie theater incident from the night before.

"Well, maybe if you explain it to Annie," Lindsay started, "she would—"

"If she wanted an explanation, she should've listened then. All she cares about is that I made a scene."

"You did make a scene."

"What's wrong with scenes? Scenes are the stories you tell people at parties."

"So you were doing a service really?"

"Local partygoers should be thanking me."

I pulled up next to Lindsay's house. "Want to come in and play with Ritalin?" she asked.

"I hate dogs."

Lindsay smiled. I watched her walk to the front door. She was a pretty girl—svelte with long brown hair and a bright white grin. There would always be a part of me that would have a crush on her, the girl next door who went from the tomboy who embarrassed me in leg wrestling to the lithe princess in a blue silk gown that I took to my junior prom.

She smiled and waved from her front door before going inside.

"How was school?" Annie greeted as I walked in the house.

"Fine," I replied, not looking at her, jogging up the stairs to my room.

### Chapter 3

---

Over the years, I developed strong, lasting relationships with my kitchen appliances. I took the time to familiarize myself with their unique temperaments, and they, in turn, respected me. I knew the ideal spot for milk in the refrigerator so it would last five days past the expiration date. I knew, down to the second, how long to pop the perfect bag of popcorn.

Last week, Dennis got the notion that we needed to install a new dishwasher because the one we had couldn't handle large loads. It could handle large loads. It was a matter of how you arranged the dishes. I asked for a new cutting board instead. Cutting boards are prosaic devices. They can come and go without risk of emotional attachment. I was chopping an onion when I heard Cass's car pull up.

"How was school today?" I asked as he walked in.

"Fine." He looked tired. I didn't want to mention the movie theater incident. He had learned his lesson.

"Are you hungry?" I asked. He was already upstairs.

I climbed the stairs to his room and cracked open the door. "Are you hungry, Cass?"

"No." He was unpacking his backpack.

"Did you have a good day at school?"

"Yes."

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"You seem a little on edge lately."

"I'm fine."

"You always say that."

"How are *you*, Annie?"

"Excuse me?"

"How are you doing, Annie? How are things going with you?"

"I'm great." I smiled at his thoughtfulness. "Everything's perfect. Thank you for asking."

"Perfect?"

"Of course."

He looked disappointed in my answer as he slammed down color-coded notebooks and binders. "Well, I have homework, so if you'll excuse me."

"Did I say something wrong?"

"You didn't say anything." He had a way of squinting his eyes when he spoke that made you feel like a complete imbecile.

"Let me know when you're hungry," I said as I shut the door.

It was my birthday. I wasn't upset that no one remembered. I barely remembered myself. Dennis had been quiet during breakfast. He had a new patient at work. Still—it wasn't like him to forget my birthday.

As for Cass, he had been having a hard time lately. Those teenage years are horrible—hormones and shit. I wasn't surprised that he didn't remember.

When I was a kid, mom always forgot. I'd inform her of her oversight, and she would remind me that we weren't like other families, that my father was an important man in the government, that the world couldn't just stop to accommodate me. I grew up envying the major contributors to the Republican party. Mom and dad had no problems accommodating them.

I went back downstairs and plopped onto the couch. Sitting down gave way to lying down. Resting my eyes turned into a nap.

When I woke up around 5:30, I thought of Janet. In college, I always took naps in the middle of the day. Janet never napped. She couldn't stand the idea of wasting away precious afternoon hours that could be spent in a meeting or socializing in the student center. I wondered what Janet was doing at that moment. I picked up the phone and dialed.

"Hello, may I speak to Janet, please?"

"Mom! Phone!"

"Is this Patrick?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Quick—what's three plus seven?"

"Huh?"

I heard a click and Janet came on. "Hello."

"Hi, Janet. It's Annie."

"Annie! Patrick, sweetie, hang up now." Another click. "How are you doing?"

"Fine. Just fine."

“What can I do you for?” Janet was always doing crazy things like saying “What can I do you for?” instead of “What can I do for you?” She was so witty.

“I was wondering if you wanted to have lunch next week.”

“I’ll have to check my calendar. Which day were you thinking?”

“How about Monday?”

“Hmm . . . Monday, Monday . . . no. Client.”

“Tuesday?”

“I’m having lunch with Alisa Freedman that day. She’s expecting twins.”

“Wow. That’ll hurt. Wednesday?”

“Just a sec.” She made a humming noise as she flipped through her planner.

“It’s looking good. Looking very good. By Jove—I think we’ve done it! Wednesday would be wonderful!”

“Excellent! How about Citrus Café at noon?”

“Alrighty, Aphrodite.” One thing you could say about Mrs. Janet Scott—the woman could rhyme like no one’s business.

“See you then.” I hung up the phone. I had called her. I had initiated contact. I was being a good friend. Sure, I would have to sit through another meal with her, but it was worth it. It was definitely worth it.

I was walking back to the kitchen when I heard Cass upstairs. “There’s something going on outside.”

“What?”

“Check the front yard.”



I went to the front door and opened it. Dennis was on the other side. Green shirt. Black tie. White shoes. It was amazing. "Happy birthday, sweetheart."

"What?" Behind him was a black limousine. "Oh, my God," I gasped. "I thought—"

"You thought I forgot."

"No. I don't know. I didn't expect you to—"

"Why don't you change? We have reservations at Gladstone's."

"My favorite!" I squealed. "What should I wear?"

"Whatever you want."

I kissed him and ran back upstairs. He hadn't forgot. He had anticipated my birthday and planned. I settled on a white silk dress I had worn for one of Cass's award ceremonies. It was a little tight, but it looked fine. I took a few minutes to fix my hair and freshen my makeup. I walked down the stairs and heard Dennis and Cass in the living room.

"What do you mean you're not coming?" Dennis asked.

"I have homework."

"It's her birthday."

"I doubt you'll miss me."

"Please come," I interrupted.

"Honey," Dennis said, looking up at me, "you look beautiful."

"Thanks. Cass, sweetie—it would mean a lot to me."

"I'd like to. But I'm swamped. You all have a nice evening. Happy birthday, Annie," he said as he passed me up the staircase.

Dennis shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Are you ready to go, sweetheart?"

I stepped outside on my husband's arm. Every November, I awaited that first thrilling chill in the air, but winter in Texas was always reluctant to arrive and autumn was seeming suspiciously like a second summer. It was cloudy above. One of the clouds looked like a kid's sneaker. I remembered dating a guy in high school and asking him what he saw in the clouds. "Cotton balls," he would reply after a thoughtful pause. It disturbed me that "cotton balls" had been the result of a thoughtful pause. Sometimes he would spice things up and say "white cotton candy." I dumped him after the sixth cotton-related reply and garnered an unfair reputation for interrogating my boyfriends. "It was like dating the sphinx," he told his friends.

Dennis opened the door for me. The limo smelled as if someone had recently vomited and used citrus-scented fabric cleaner to do a job it was unfit to accomplish. Dennis poured me a glass of champagne.

"How long have you been planning this?"

"About a month. Cass's idea."

"I wish he would've come."

"Me, too."

"It would probably do him good to get out. He's been so stressed lately."

"Really?"

“You haven’t noticed?” I asked.

“He seems normal to me.”

“He has that district writing competition coming up.”

“I don’t know. He seems pretty confident. He’s won the preliminary tournaments.”

“Still—district is a big deal.”

He shrugged. “Maybe.”

He smiled, and I smiled. We had never been happier.

We reached the restaurant on time for our reservation at seven. The walls were sandy-colored with mounted starfish staggered about. There was an aquarium in the waiting area. Inside was something shark-like but smaller. I wondered if it would eat the other fish. The host seated us in a corner booth by the window. I started mixing the pink, blue, and white sugar packets on the table. “This is lovely,” I said.

“You’re lovely,” he replied.

We were silent for a moment. The waiter came and took our drink orders. He gave us a few moments to look over the menu and then we ordered.

We were silent again.

“How was work?” I asked.

“It was fine.”

“How’s your new patient?”

“He’s fine. Good session today.”

“That’s good.”

I took a sip of my iced tea. “Wow—that’s good iced tea.”

“I should’ve ordered that.”

“Why don’t you change your drink?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“No, really, Dennis—change to an iced tea.”

“That’s okay.” He took a sip of his club soda. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

The waiter came with our salads. They used toasted pecans instead of croutons and a mango vinaigrette. We ate our salads, smiling at each other when our eyes accidentally met between swooping motions of our salad forks, tinkling against our plates.

We finished our salads, and the waiter brought the entrees.

“So you had a good session with your new patient?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s great.” I twirled the pasta on my fork. “I called Janet today.”

“Did you?”

“I asked her to lunch.”

“That’s great. How is Janet?” He plopped a fried shrimp into his mouth.

“Great. Really great.”

“How’s her son? Patrick, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Patrick. He’s fine.”

“That’s good.”

The waiter came and refilled my iced tea. “This is wonderful tea,” I told the waiter as he poured.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“It has a fruity flavor.”

“It’s raspberry tea.”

“Is that right?” I laughed. “That explains things.” The waiter smiled.

“Raspberry iced tea. I’ll have to learn how to make that at home,” I said.

“I think you can buy some already-made,” Dennis replied.

“Is that right?” I felt my eyes widen.

So Dennis and I weren’t the best conversationalists. It happens. After ten years of marriage, sometimes you just run out of things to say. There was still something very comfortable about him. And the limo—that was a nice touch. Dennis had made a mixed CD of romantic songs for the ride home. I was appreciative of that; we could just sit and listen and enjoy each other’s company without having to talk so much.

I came home and found on our coffee table a dozen long-stem roses strewn in a circle surrounding a jewelry box. “What is this?”

Cass was coming in from the kitchen. “I didn’t have cash to tip the florist guy, so he cursed at me under his breath.”

I gasped. “I’ll call the florist tomorrow morning.”

“Don’t bother. You should’ve heard what I said to him.”

“Cass—“ Dennis said.

“What?”

“You’re like a twelve-year-old sometimes.”

“Twelve-year-olds lack my vocabulary.” He grinned.

I crouched down and opened the box. “Sapphire earrings!” I screamed as I held one to my ear. “They’re so beautiful!”

“Go to your room, Cass,” Dennis told him. Cass rolled his eyes and ascended the stairs.

“I love them, Dennis.”

“I’m glad, sweetheart.”

I stood up and kissed him. He kissed back, harder than I had anticipated. His hand crawled to my left butt cheek. He squeezed. I started to laugh.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.” I couldn’t stop laughing.

“Is something funny?”

“No.”

His mouth was agape. For a moment, he looked like he had lost his footing on the evolutionary ladder. I laughed harder.

He turned around and walked up the stairs.

“Oh, no. Honey—” I was guffawing like a madwoman. “I don’t know what’s come over me. Please come back.”

“I have to make some calls,” he replied without turning around.

"I'll clean up down here then." I picked up the roses and put them in vases.

There were a few leaves on the carpet. I took out the vacuum cleaner.

"What are you doing?" I hadn't heard Cass come down the stairs.

"What?" I turned the vacuum off.

"Why are you vacuuming in a dress?"

"There were some leaves from the flowers."

"I'll do it."

"I'm almost done. Did you need something?"

"I was going to make a sandwich for lunch tomorrow."

"I'll do that."

"I can do it, Annie."

"Let me. I want to."

He shrugged. "Okay. I have a test to study for anyway. Thanks." He walked back up the stairs.

I finished vacuuming and went into the kitchen. The onion was still on the chopping board. I threw it away and scrubbed the board with a soapy sponge until the smell faded away. I started on the sandwich. Cass liked mayonnaise and mustard and plenty of both. Three slices of ham. American cheese. I sliced the sandwich at a diagonal and put it in a sandwich bag. I looked for some chips in the pantry, but we were out. He needed something to eat with the sandwich. I decided to make potato salad.

I boiled a pot of water and put the potatoes in. I used another pot for the eggs. By the time I had finished making the salad, it was already ten o'clock. I put some in a Tupperware container and put it in the fridge next to the sandwich. I washed the pots and went to bed.

I felt bad for laughing at Dennis. I didn't know why I had done it. He had just taken me off guard. But I was ready now. I was going to kiss him, and he was going to squeeze my ass, and I wasn't going to laugh. If I felt like laughing, I would think of something sad—like starving children or a three-legged puppy. I started laughing again at the image of the three-legged puppy. I shot the puppy in the head and stopped laughing.

I walked into my bedroom. His nightstand lamp was still on, but Dennis was already asleep. I felt even worse. I had been ungrateful to my husband. I had killed an imaginary puppy. I was a bitch.

I stared at myself in the bathroom mirror. I took off my dress and wiped the makeup from my face. I used more makeup than I did in college. Maybe one day I would cake it on like a deranged clown the way Janet did.

I walked back into the bedroom feeling undeserving of the limousine and the flowers and the sapphire earrings I had forgotten downstairs. He had done all of that for me, and I laughed at him. I laughed in his face and didn't follow him upstairs. Any other man would have been angry, would have yelled until I cried. His patience, his equanimity, was one of his finest qualities, a quality that immediately drew me to him.



When Dennis and I had been dating for three months, he took me to Galveston beach. It was the first time I had ever been there, and I have to admit, I was more than a little disappointed when I dipped my toe into the jellyfish-infested milky brown water.

“We’ll come back tonight,” he said. I had no desire to return.

That afternoon, we stopped at a few local shops, saw a rather impressive live butterfly exhibit, then made our way to Dennis’s favorite seafood restaurant, a charming little place overlooking the beach. The sun set as we ate our shrimp cocktail. It was about 9:30 when we made our way back to the water. The sky was filled with stars. He held my hand and we took off our shoes and sat on the damp sand. The water slowly came up our legs and receded back to our feet. It was a little cold but it felt nice. Dennis had this dreamy look in his eye. He made everything around him quiet. Even the rolling water seemed to whisper in his presence. I was still at Rice at the time. Nothing there was quiet. Debates in the coffee shop. Music in the dorm across the hall. Sex in the room above. Dennis, a decade my senior, brought silence into my life. It was only recently that I found myself in desperate need of noise.

I looked over at his side of the room. Dennis’s nightstand had two drawers. I opened the top one as I had done countless times before. Virginia’s picture. I told him to frame it and put it up. I told him I wouldn’t mind. He liked it where it was, though. Sometimes he would sneak a peek before going to bed. When I would ask what he was doing, he’d look embarrassed, as if I had just caught him gawking at some cheap tittie

magazine. "Nothing, sweetie," he would say. "Goodnight." And he would turn off the lamp, turn his back toward me, and fall asleep.

Virginia was his first wife. She died giving birth to Cass. It was stupid of me to be jealous of her. It made me feel small.

If Virginia had lived, things would be different. There would be no disagreements, and Dennis's admirable equanimity would never be tested. Cass wouldn't make scenes at movie theatres. And Dennis would be smoking a cigarette right now instead of sleeping in his dress clothes with a pillow between his legs. From all the stories I had heard, Virginia was perfect. Virginia was perfect, and I was a poor substitute.

When I got pregnant, Dennis said he would support whatever decision I made. We had only been dating half a year. I tried to read him; I tried to figure out what it was he wanted from me. "I think I'm going to have it," I said one day. Dennis's face lit up. I had given the right answer. Dennis proposed marriage soon after that, and the wedding was a small affair at a justice of the peace. Two months after that I miscarried. "It's okay," he told me, trying not to cry. "We'll have another one." I had no intention of going through that humiliation again.

Everything was different then. Without a baby on the way, we were just two people, a few degrees away from strangers, wearing each other's rings. But we wouldn't give up. We refused to fold. We willed ourselves into love; we made it work; we tried not to cry in front of one another; we were happy.

I pulled out Virginia's picture. She was pretty. And she would always be pretty. She'd remain preserved in that drawer for as long as Dennis drew breath. I would grow old; my skin would wrinkle; my breasts would sag, and Virginia would never age. Dennis would open the drawer and see her face and then look at me and see my face, and he wouldn't say a word, but I'd be ashamed, and I'd apologize under my breath for not being her. I would mean it, too. He deserved her.

I took a class on Dante in college. Which circle of hell was reserved for bad mothers and wives, for women who wasted men of equanimity and failed to comprehend their stepsons? I imagined Dante coming to me. He would ask who I was and what I had done. Virgil would explain my sin, and they would walk away—they would forget me and walk away—onward to Satan's shoulder.

"Wake up, Dennis." I was pulling on his arm.

"What's wrong? What time is it?"

"In your building, does that secretary still work there?"

"What?"

"The cute blonde?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Helen, I think. Helen Watson. I remember now. She's very attractive, don't you think?"

"What is this about?" He rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

"Helen Watson. She's young. She likes you. I remember her fawning over you at last year's Christmas party."

"She wasn't fawning."

"It's okay. Why shouldn't she fawn? You're an incredible man, Dennis. I mean—look at today. Why shouldn't she fawn?"

"What's wrong, Annie?"

I took a deep breath. "I want you to know that if you wanted to sleep with her, I would be okay with that."

"What the hell, Annie?" He shot up. His tie, which was dangling loosely around his neck, slid down to the bed. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Helen Watson. She's beautiful, Dennis. You said yourself that she's beautiful."

"Are you accusing—"

"No! No, I would never accuse you. But a while back, when you slept with that Laura girl . . ."

"For Christ's sake, Annie! That was three years ago. I thought—"

"No, no. That's not what this is about." If Dennis hadn't told me about Laura, I never would have known. She was a colleague of Dennis's. A brilliant doctor. Sometimes lectured at U.T. I didn't know why he told me these details. The guilt had been killing him. I could only feel sorry for him as he tearfully admitted his adultery over a bowl of vegetable soup. He expected outrage and got sympathy instead. He thought I was trying to torment him with my understanding. But I wasn't. I just didn't care.

"I just want you to be happy, Dennis."

"I am happy."

"You don't have to say that. You're very sweet to say that, and I love you for saying that, but you don't have to. Helen Watson—she likes you."

"I don't want Helen Watson, Annie."

"But—" The doorbell rang.

"What time is it?" he asked.

I looked at the clock. "Quarter after eleven."

"Who could that be at this hour?" He rushed out of bed, relieved to be leaving me. He got the gun out of his sock drawer and hid it in his pajama pocket.

I moved to the top of the staircase and listened.

I heard Dennis fumbling with the lock. The door opened. "What are you doing here?" he asked. For a moment, I thought it was Helen Watson coming to claim the man I had just relinquished.

"Dr. Kincaid?" A man's voice.

"How did you get my address?"

"Wait a second—"

"No, you wait a second. I cannot have patients coming to my house. This is entirely inappropriate."

"Honey—" I called out.

"Just a moment," Dennis told the man at the door. He walked up the staircase.

"Who is it?" I whispered.

"The new patient I was talking to you about."

“What’s he doing here?”

“He’s about to leave. Go back to bed, Annie.” I didn’t go back to bed. The man’s voice was familiar.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Do not come back here again. Do you understand?”

“I’m looking for Annie.” he said.

“How do you know my wife’s name?”

I walked down the stairs. Dennis’s hand was in his pajama pocket. As the man came to view, my hand jumped to my mouth. I hadn’t seen him in almost eighteen years.

“Annie,” he said.

“T.C.,” I replied. I put my hand on his face, half expecting him to disappear at my touch.

“You know Thomas?” Dennis asked.

Ignoring my husband, I embraced my only brother. “Where have you been?” I asked, my face buried in his shoulder.

“Hell of a happy birthday, huh?” T.C. whispered in my ear.

---

*Chapter 4*

"Come in, Cass," I heard her say.

Both of Lindsay's parents worked on Sunday nights, so Lindsay and I formed a tradition; alternating who bought the food every week, we met in Lindsay's living room for Chinese picnics.

I walked in and put the plastic bags on the floor in front of the two newly upholstered recliners. "I got extra soy sauce for you." The television was the only light in the room. An old black and white movie was playing with the volume down.

Ritalin ran to attack me.

"Put Cerberus away."

"She wants to say hi."

"It's not dead yet?"

"Cass!"

"You told me that breed has a short life span."

"Don't be mean." She pointed her finger at me.

"When am I mean?" She carried the dog to her bedroom and closed the door.

"Happy now?"

"Ecstatic. Did I mention extra soy sauce?"

"Yes, thank you."

From the linen closet, Lindsay pulled out the worn cotton quilt, our picnic blanket. She laid it on the floor as I went to the kitchen to grab the plastic utensils and paper plates from on top of the microwave.

"Napkins," she said. I went to the kitchen and took a handful.

Lindsay was already opening the white boxes. "Orange chicken!" She started piling it onto her plate.

"Leave me some."

She smiled and moved on to the shrimp fried rice.

"Chopsticks?" she inquired.

"I didn't get any."

"Why not?"

"Chopsticks are stupid."

"I could teach you how to use them."

"Where's Amanda?" I put some orange chicken on my plate. "I got her beef and broccoli."

"Amanda's not coming."

"Why not?"

"Why do you think?"

"Date with Chris?"

"Date with Danny."

"Danny?"

"Got back together two days ago."

"What about Chris?"

"Broke up three days ago."

"That's great," I replied. I put some rice on my plate and then some General Tso's chicken. "The general has outdone himself this time." Lindsay smiled. "Amanda came over last night. She's still upset about Abby."



"When is Abby coming?"

I shrugged. "Should be pretty soon."

"What's in that box?" Lindsay asked.

"Shrimp with pecans and honey."

She opened it and tried a shrimp. "Oh, that's incredible."

From behind me, I heard the front door open and slam shut.

"Why the hell is it so dark in here?" Amanda shrieked as she turned on the main light. She had on a red strapless dress and black sandals.

"Hi, Amanda," Lindsay greeted with a grin. "I thought you had a date with—"

"Don't even mention his name. He's dead to me."

"Are you hungry?" I asked. "I got beef and broccoli."

"I couldn't eat a thing. Too upset." She slammed her purse down on the floor and collapsed on the couch.

Lindsay rolled her eyes.

"He's such a jerk!" Amanda picked up the box of beef and broccoli and ate a piece of beef, picking it up with her hand. Some gravy dribbled down the side of her mouth.

"He's so stupid. Why are men so stupid?" She looked at me.

"I'm not stupid."

"Yes, you are," she said as she put another piece of beef in her mouth. "You're all a bunch of thoughtless, penis-toting, unable to process affection Neanderthals.

Variations here and there, but the core of you remains immutable."

"What did he do this time?" Lindsay asked.

"The son-of-a-shit forgot our anniversary."

"Has it been a year already?" I asked.

"Eleven months."

"People celebrate eleven-month anniversaries?"

"People who love each other do," Amanda shot back. "See what I mean," she said, pointing at me, looking at Lindsay. "Stupid."

I held my hands up in retreat.

"Pass the rice," Amanda ordered.

"You want a fork or something?" I was fairly certain that if I didn't offer she was just going to reach her hand in and shovel the grains into her mouth.

"Yeah, okay," she replied.

Lindsay bit into an egg roll. Amanda tried to pass me the beef and broccoli.

"I got it for you."

"Well, Amanda, cut him some slack," Lindsay cut in. "I mean— it hasn't been a *solid* eleven months." I motioned her to stop, but she ignored me. "You two have been broken up a lot."

"They weren't *official* breakups! Hiatuses."

"Hiatuses where you dated other people."

"Yeah— so?"

"So, that changes things, doesn't it?"

Amanda threw her fork down. "Well, thanks a lot, Lindsay! I came here for support, to have my broken heart mended by my two best friends, and what do I get? Judases." Amanda only used Biblical references to insult people.

"Calm down, Amanda," Lindsay said.

"I will not calm down!" She grabbed her purse and started for the door. "Enjoy your dinner!" She walked back to our blanket and picked up the boxes of beef and broccoli and fried rice."

"Hey!" I said as she picked up the rice.

I was met by a glare that would make an army general soil his trousers.

"Oh. Okay," I said.

She turned around and slammed the front door behind her.

"Well," I said after a moment of silence.

"She'll be okay," Lindsay replied.

"Pass the shrimp, please."

She passed me the box. "Is your uncle still staying with you?"

"Yeah." I wiped my mouth with a napkin.

"Let me get this straight— your dad was seeing him as a patient but he didn't know that your dad and Annie were married?"

"Apparently."

"What's he like?"

"He's . . . interesting. Smart. Always reading. Kind of quiet. I don't know. I've only talked to him a few times."

"Did Annie mention having a brother before?"

"Nope."

"That's strange."

"Annie *is* strange."

"True dat."

"True dat. What are you doing?"

"Adding some flavor to my language. You like?"

"No."

"Fair enough."

"Are you going to stop?"

"No."

"Fair enough."

After we finished eating, we picked up our plates and started to clean up. I was folding our blanket when I heard Lindsay scream from the kitchen, "Cass! What time is it?"

"Ten 'til eight."

"Crap! I forgot—I'm supposed to help with inventory tonight." Lindsay had just gotten a job at the Christian bookstore by the mall. A lot of people got jobs during the holiday season. Christmas was a little more than a month away.

"I can finish up here," I said.

"Will you lock the door?"

"Sure."

I heard fumbling in the kitchen before Lindsay stumbled back into the main room, her purse wrapped over her shoulder, her keys dangling from her index finger. "Thanks, Cass." She gave me a quick hug and ran out the front door to her car. I finished folding the blanket and put it back in the linen closet. I got out the vacuum cleaner and did a quick run through the floor. After one particularly messy picnic involving Peking duck, Mrs. Durham insisted we do a better job cleaning after ourselves. After vacuuming, I surveyed the place to make sure it would meet approval. I went

outside and used the key underneath the peach-colored flower pot to lock the door before heading home.

As I reached the top of the stairs I noticed the guest room door was open. I peeked inside and saw T.C. engrossed in a book. Lanky. Blonde, thinning hair on top. In his mid-thirties I imagined. He was smoking. Pot.

"Finished with your Chinese picnic?" His eyes peered over his book at me. He took one last drag and dropped the joint into an empty vegetable can.

"Yes. Have you eaten? We had some leftovers."

"No, thanks." He scratched his neck and yawned. "Someone called for you while you were gone."

"Who?"

"Girl named Abby."

"Abby Laigley?"

"Sounds right."

"She leave a number?"

"She said to tell you she moved in over the weekend and she'd see you at school tomorrow." His head bobbed as he spoke. Loosely but with rhythm.

"Okay. Thanks."

"You're friends with this girl?"

"Yeah. She used to live here."

"Is she the girl Amanda was complaining about yesterday?"

"You overheard us last night?"

"She was pretty loud."

"Amanda can be a little intense."

"Amanda doesn't like Abby?"

"Amanda *doesn't like* infanticide. Amanda *hates* Abby."

T.C. smiled. "But you like her?"

"Yeah."

"Why is that?"

I shrugged. "I can relate, I guess. I've never been the most popular guy."

"Like magnets," he replied. "Like attracting like."

"Opposite poles attract on a magnet."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

He lowered his head and grinned. "I always sucked at science."

I laughed and took a seat on the bed. "Where did my parents go?"

"Grocery."

"Both of them?"

"I thought that was weird, too." He shrugged and laid his book down.

"What are you reading?" I asked.

"*Richard III*."

"I haven't read that one. I like the comedies— *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Merry Wives of Windsor*."

"You liked *Merry Wives*?"

"I thought it was funny. I like Falstaff."

"I like a good villain—Iago, Tamora, Richard. Those characters are what Shakespeare's all about." He picked up the book from the bed. "Why don't you take this?"

"No. I mean—I'd like to but when you're done."

"Take it now. Books are meant to exchange hands."

"Okay." I smiled. "I'll return it as soon as I finish."

"No rush."

"Thanks." T.C. hadn't shaved since he arrived. He had a tiny tattoo of a phoenix on the left side of his neck. "What exactly are you doing here?" I blurted out. "I mean—I'm glad you came. Annie is happy to have you. But is there a reason for showing up now?"

He smiled. "I haven't seen Annie in a long time."

"Why is that?"

"They haven't told you?"

"I don't get told anything. *You* tell me."

"You know I was your dad's patient?"

"Yes."

"Does that disturb you?"

"Should it?"

He smiled. "Not really."

"Then it doesn't disturb me."

He sighed and swallowed. "I've had a colorful past."

"Give me the highlights."

He laughed. "You're an inquisitive kid."

"So I've been told."

"Annie never told you about me?"

"I don't really know her well."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

He looked away and yawned. "So— Abby Laigley. What does she look like?"

I grinned.

"I see," T.C. said. "Tall?"

"Average height."

"Thin?"

"Yeah, but not emaciated. Toned. She's a cheerleader."

"God. Watch out for those bitches. Is she dumb?"

"Sharp as a tack."

"That's good." He nodded as he looked at his reflection in the window. "You looking forward to seeing her?"

"Yeah."

"When I was in high school, I was always nervous around pretty girls."

"How did you get around it?"

"Well, I was an actor. I just pretended to be someone else—the gentleman caller in *The Glass Menagerie*, someone who didn't read comic books and didn't have to wear the world's most elaborate retainer every night."

"Did that work?"

He thought for a moment. "Not really."

I smiled.

"Cass," my dad said, knocking on the wall behind me, "don't you have homework?"

"I was just talking to—"

"I need to talk to your uncle alone."



"But—"

"Now." I was unaccustomed to my father taking a firm tone. I was about to raise an objection when T.C. lifted his hand for me to stop. I nodded.

"I'll talk to you later, T.C.," I said before I left the room.

The next morning Lindsay and I went to school early to check the Thanksgiving food drive boxes. I pulled into the parking lot—the sun was lazily rousing behind a gray mist emanating from the plants. Mason and Amanda were already by the senior lockers in the B-wing hall.

"Good morning, all," Lindsay greeted.

"What's good about it?" Amanda snapped.

"I want to show you my new walk," Mason said. Mason was a distant cousin of Lindsay's and Amanda's best friend/emotional punching bag. He had on a dress shirt and a sweater vest. There were sweat stains under his arm pits. "Watch." He walked down the hallway for us. "What do you think?"

"Why do you need a new walk?" I asked.

"When I walked before, I always had my head down. That's a sign of low self-esteem."

"You *do* have low self-esteem," Amanda replied.

Lindsay hit her across the arm.

"I know, but maybe if my walk is more confident, Abby will think twice before shooting her mouth off."

"Oh," Lindsay and I replied.

"Crap! I think that's her. I'm going to walk to the other end of the hall, and when she reaches you, I'll walk to you."

"Mason, don't be an idiot," I said.

"No, no. This is how I practiced it."

"You *practiced* it?"

"Shut up." He ran to the other side of the hall.

Abby. A pastel purple blouse and a khaki skirt-- she was attempting to jog but the skirt was impeding her motion. I started toward her and met her halfway, leaving Lindsay and Amanda behind.

We hugged-- she had a tight embrace that would kill if not for a durable rib cage. She had round, childlike, pinchable cheeks. A dark complexion and long brown hair. Brown eyes, witty and alive.

"Welcome back, Abby."

"Thanks, doll." Bright white teeth. "I've missed you."

Amanda and Lindsay approached.

"Lindsay!" Abby startled her with a hug.

"Hey, Abby." Lindsay looked at me as they loosened their embrace.

"Abigail," Amanda greeted coldly.

"Amanda."

Amanda's upper lip curled. "Did they not carry your shirt in a smaller size? I can't quite see the top half of your left lung."

"Oh, Amanda," Abby replied with a smile, "maybe I can come shopping with *you* one day. I've never been to an outlet mall."

Amanda scowled. Mason was walking toward us now. His newly developed self-esteem strut.

"Hello, Abby," he said, lowering his voice an octave. "I see you're wearing purple today." His hands were shaking. "Is that the new color for *whores*?"

"My God," I muttered to myself.

"Hello, Mason," she said, a smile still on her face. "I see you've developed a more effeminate way of walking. It takes a secure man to saunter around like a Miami Beach drag queen. Kudos to you."

Mason's mouth was open as his eyes darted about us. I could tell he was afraid of saying something stupid. "You smell like dog crap." And there it was. "Damn it," he said to himself as he walked away.

Amanda's jaws unhinged. "So Abby—"

"Shut up, Amanda," I shot out.

"Excuse me?"

"She's going to be here a while. Why don't you pace yourself?" I led Abby away, feeling Amanda's glare on my back.

"Are you protecting me, Cass?"

"Hardly. I did it for *her* benefit."

"I didn't expect them to come out of the gates like that."

"I know. It's been years."

"I can't blame them. Three years ago, I was a fourteen-year-old hell-raising bitch."

"And now?"

"I'm a *seventeen*-year-old hell-raising bitch."

I smiled. "I'm glad you're back. School was getting dull."

"We'll have to fix that, won't we?"

## Chapter 5

---

It was overwhelming coming down the stairs in the morning and finding my brother there. He was so calm. As if he didn't know he was changing everything. He was a man now; his fingernails were brittle, his hairline receding. But his eyes—his eyes reminded me of a boy who could wander through a New York museum, gasping at exhibits he had seen twenty times before.

"Can we leave?" I asked. I had just turned fifteen.

"Look," he said. The screaming angel sculpture.

"I've seen it."

"Look again."

"Have they added something new?"

"Don't be a smart-ass."

"I'm hungry."

"It's amazing."

"I've seen it. You've seen it. Feed me."

"It's totally different."

I pointed to the sign on the wall. "*Permanent* collection, T.C. It's the same."

He smiled, and pulled me to the opposite side of the sculpture. "Look over here.

What do you see?"

"The angel's wings."

"What's in the wings?"

"I don't know. Feathers?"

"Look between the feathers."

I drew my head closer. A security man started for me until he saw my head draw back. "Leaves."

"Right. Leaves. Debris."

"Yeah."

"And the title?"

"*Fallen*. The angel's fallen."

"Yeah. But why is he screaming?"

"He's hurt?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. See—I always thought he was a soldier of God, descended into hell, screaming at Lucifer himself. But the leaves. He's not in hell. He's here. On earth. He's screaming at us."

"Oh."

"It's we who have fallen."

"Oh."

"I mean—at least that's what I think."

"Sounds good."

He drew his hands out, palms up, fingers spread. "You have to look at things from different angles. Angles in space and time. Every experience changes us, alters our view of things, you know?"

"Yeah."

“Yeah.” He looked at the angel again and smiled. “You look at it now.”

“What?”

“Tell me what you see. Whatever you want to see. Nothing’s stupid. Nothing’s irrelevant, Annie.”

“Okay.” I stared at it for a moment. “I see . . . a cheeseburger.”

“Annie—“

“With lots of mustard.”

“Annie—“

“And a side of fries. No—onion rings.”

“I get the point.”

It was the beginning of December. Dennis and I had gone to the HEB to get hamburger meat. We never made it inside the store. Dennis hadn’t exactly been receptive to the idea of T.C. staying with us. I insisted he stayed. It turned into a shouting match in the parking lot. “I’m not arguing about this anymore!” Dennis screamed as he got back into the car. “I want that man out of our house.” I got in the car and slammed the door.

When we reached the house, Dennis stormed inside.

“Let me talk to him,” I pleaded from the bottom of the staircase.

“I’ve asked you since the first day he came.”

“He’s my brother.”

“And Cass is our son. After what happened last year—“

“Cass is over it.”

“If he finds out—“

“He won’t.”

“I’m not going to risk that.”

“T.C. is recovered.”

“Cass isn’t.” He looked away for a moment and then back at me. “He’s our son.”

“For Christ’s sake, will you stop saying that? He is not *my* son.” A terrible thing to say, but there it was. Dennis shook his head and kept going up the stairs.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I’m going to talk to your brother.”

“You’ll do no such thing.”

He kept climbing.

“Dennis,” I pleaded. I followed him up. He was about to go inside the guest room. “Dennis!” He ignored me and shot his head inside the door. I heard him knocking against the wall with his knuckle. I couldn’t watch. I went into my room and closed the door. I jumped into bed and covered myself with the comforter, a pillow over my head. Dennis was ruining everything. T.C. would leave again, and life would go back to normal. Saccharine smiles and blueberry pies and P.T.A. meetings and Janet Scott. Windows to clean, clothes to iron, onions to chop, Dennis and Cass. I screamed into the pillow.



"Annie, stop it!" my mother yelled.

"I'm not doing anything," I replied coldly.

"I will not tolerate these fits!" She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me off the bed.

"Stop it!" I shrieked.

"As if I don't have enough to deal with!" She shook me by the shoulders. "This family needs you now more than ever. Don't you be weak, Annie."

"When is T.C. coming home?"

"He's not."

"What?"

"The consequences of his actions."

"It wasn't his fault."

"Then whose was it, Annie? I'd love to hear your perspective."

I glared at her.

"Go downstairs and do your homework. And if you start that crying shit in front of your father, I swear to God, Annie, I will end you."

"Annie." I felt a hand under the covers and on my back. Startled, I turned around. "I couldn't do it," Dennis said.

"What?"

"I couldn't do it." He sat down on the bed next to me and looked out the window. "It wasn't my place."

“Really?”

He nodded.

“Thank you.”

“Cass can never know.”

“He won’t.”

“They’re growing close.”

“Who?”

“Cass and T.C. That has to stop.”

“Well, I don’t see the harm—”

“You wouldn’t, would you?” He looked back down at me. I didn’t know what to say. Dennis stood up and walked toward the door. He turned around, looking as if he had something to add. Apparently deciding against it, he walked out.

The next morning, after Dennis and Cass left, I realized it was time to ask questions I had avoided up to that point.

“How much does Dennis know?”

T.C. took a sip of his coffee. “He knows I spent five years in a mental hospital.”

“Does he know why?”

“Yes.”

I tapped the side of my glass with my fingernail. “Does he know everything?”

“No.” T.C. fidgeted in his chair. A momentary silence. Remembering and forgetting.

"What happened to you, T.C.? After you were released."

"Mom had Larry pick me up from the hospital. I thought we were going home, but he drove me to the airport instead. It was a campaign year. He explained that it was best for me to keep a low profile. It was supposed to be temporary. When we got to the airport, he handed me a ticket to Portugal. One way. Mom never was particularly subtle."

"Portugal?"

"I went to live with Aunt Sally." He took another sip of coffee. "She was kind. Like a mother."

"What then?"

"I traveled around Europe for a few years. Mom and dad sent an allowance. I waited tables at cafes and bars. Learned a few languages." T.C. looked up at me. "I should've written you. I was embarrassed." He paused. "I arrived in New York about a month ago and met with an old friend. I got to Houston two weeks ago and started looking for you. Aunt Janice gave me your address. She said you had gotten married, and she thought you lived somewhere close to Beaumont, but she didn't remember your married name on account of her not being invited to the wedding." I rolled my eyes. "Ending up with Dennis as a psychiatrist was a freak coincidence. I picked him randomly in the phone book."

"Are you still taking your medication?"

"Yes." He took another sip of coffee.

"What exactly did Dennis say yesterday?"

"Nothing much. I could tell he had something on his mind, but he just asked me not to smoke marijuana in the house." T.C. scratched his neck and looked up at me. "Is something wrong, Annie?"

I shook my head. "It's nothing we have to worry about." I refilled T.C.'s coffee.

"Hey," he said, "let's go to a museum."

I shrugged. "Okay."

"How far is the closest one?"

"Houston."

"That's what—a three-hour drive?"

"Two."

He put down his coffee mug. "Let's go today. Let's go right now."

"Right now?"

"You want to stay here all day? Bake a chicken?"

"I like to bake chickens." I grinned. "I'll get my purse."

That day started a string of morning road trips to museums, cathedrals, libraries, and playhouses. The Menil Collection, Miller Outdoor Theatre, the Alley. We would leave after Cass left for school and come back to fix dinner before Dennis came home from work. T.C. brought a fresh voice to the dinner table. He and Cass were getting closer and closer, much to Dennis's chagrin, but I refused to discourage it. I wasn't ashamed of my brother.

I was walking by the guestroom one day when I saw T.C. showing Cass his photos from Europe.

“What is this building?” Cass asked.

“I don’t know.”

“How about this one?”

“Courthouse, I think.”

“This garden. I think I’ve seen it before. What’s it called?”

“I don’t know.”

Cass looked up from the photographs. “You know—there’s this technological innovation that allows one to record information on the backs of photographs. Scientists call it a pen.”

T.C. grinned. “I don’t know because I never knew. Not even a pen would’ve helped me.”

“You never knew the names of the places you saw?”

T.C. shrugged. “I find reality limiting. I just like to see the places and let my imagination fill in the story. For me, the potentiality is always more interesting than the actuality.”

“Cass,” I interrupted, knocking on the door.

“Yeah.”

“I heard a car pull up. I think Abby’s here.”

“Okay.” Cass looked back at T.C. “Can I look at the rest of these later?”

“Of course.” Cass hopped up and ran down the stairs. T.C. was putting the photos back in the envelope. I was grinning at him.

“What?” T.C. asked.

“He likes you.”

“He’s a good kid.”

“He hardly likes anybody.”

“Don’t say that, Annie.”

“I just think it’s really great that you two get along. You’re a lot alike, come to think about it.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

I smiled again. “Dinner will be ready in about a half-hour.”

Dennis went to bed early that night, and T.C. was helping me dry the dishes.

“Cass wasn’t exaggerating about that Abby girl.” T.C. said with a smile. “She’s clever, too.”

“I don’t like her.”

“Why not?”

I put down the dish towel. “Remember Samantha Marsh?”

“Do I,” he replied with another smile.

“You’re grinning now, but she made you feel like crap back in high school.”

“What do you mean?”

“Samantha could get any guy she wanted, and then she treated them like shit.

This Abby is the same way.”

“Have you told Cass?”

“Wouldn’t do any good. He’ll figure her out the hard way.”

“You’re not giving him enough credit.”

“He’s sharp about books and math. But girls—he always goes for the wrong ones.”

“Has he ever been out with that nice girl next door?”

“Lindsay? They went to junior prom together but just as friends.” I shook my head and sighed. “She’s just too perfect for Cass to be interested. I swear—that boy seeks the most difficult roads to happiness. And he never quite gets there.”

“Who does?”

I sighed and returned my attention to drying the glasses.

It was the end of the week. T.C. was driving. We were on our way to see a modern art exhibit by some up-and-coming Nigerian sculptor T.C. had read about in the newspaper. I had fallen asleep in the car when we stopped.

“Are we there?” I asked, yawning.

“Yes.”

I looked out the windshield. “T.C.—”

“Annie—”

“What the hell are we doing here?”

“Don’t get mad.”

“You lied.”

“You wouldn’t have come if I’d told you. I have to see her.”

“Why?”

"I don't want her to go the rest of her life thinking I hate her."

"She's old, T.C. You wouldn't be saving her from that many years."

"She's our mother."

"How can you not hate her?"

"That's enough." He threw his hands up and opened his door. "Are you coming?" he asked.

I folded my arms across my chest.

"Fine. Be a child." He reached over and took the keys out of the ignition.

I had only seen the house twice in seven years—when mom and dad first moved in and two years ago when dad died. There it was—perfectly symmetrical from a front view. Long arched windows. Rocking chairs on the front porch. Mom had planted a garden. The lawn had been freshly mowed.

"T.C.—" When he didn't look back, I got out of the car and followed him.

"T.C.—" He had already rung the doorbell. I thought I was going to throw up.

The door opened.

Her hair, once dark brown, was all white. Despite that, she still had a commanding countenance, a sharp nose and thin, painted eyebrows. Her blue eyes pierced into mine.

"Hi, mom," T.C. said.

"My goodness!" she yelled out, locking us in an awkward embrace.

"What the hell, mom?" We pulled away.



She smiled and laughed. "Come inside," she said. "I just baked an angel food cake. It's for the church bake sale, but I can bake another one."

We walked in. The house was a miniature version of our old house in New Jersey. The same paintings on the wall. The same photographs. Same lamps. Same couches. One notable object missing.

"Where's the piano?" I asked.

"The what?"

"Piano. Where's the piano?"

"In the attic."

"Can I see it?"

"Later, dear. Have some angel food cake."

"I don't want angel food cake."

Mom laughed. She wasn't senile. She looked lucid to me as she handed me a plate of cake.

"And what shall you have to drink? Milk?"

"That's fine," T.C. replied.

"I'll have a scotch."

"Annie, it's before noon."

I shrugged.

"I'll get you milk. It was always your favorite with sweet things." I never liked milk.

She went to the kitchen.

"Stop it," T.C. said to me.

"I just want to see the piano." Atticus Finch, the cat mom had gotten after dad died, was rubbing up against my leg. It was a fat, spoiled little bastard. I kicked it away. Confused, it scurried back toward the foyer.

The kitchen door swung open. "I hope whole milk's okay," she said, holding two tall glasses.

"That's great, mom."

"Thank you, T.C." She smiled. "You've grown into such a handsome man."

He smiled.

"Annie, you haven't touched your cake."

"Not hungry."

"You look thin. Please have a slice of cake."

"I don't want any."

"You're like the woman on the T.V. movie I just watched. She was a . . . what do you call it? Where you throw up on purpose? Anorexic?"

"Bulimic."

"Excuse me?"

"You've got Alzheimer's now, mom?"

"Annie—"

"You know very well the difference between an anorexic and a bulimic," I said.

"I didn't realize this was such a sensitive—"

"Oh, shut up!"

“Annie,” T.C. interjected.

“You, too. Are you seriously going to buy this helpless mom shit?”

“What are you talking about?” she said.

I approached my mother. My face within an inch of hers. “I refuse to feel sorry for you.” She didn’t move. Her eyes set into mine.

“Annie—” T.C. said more firmly.

“Where the hell is my piano?” I asked, ignoring him.

“The attic. Are you deaf?” she replied through clenched teeth.

I took the staircase up, passing the second floor to the attic. There was one window from which the sun revealed a mist of dust and a spider’s web. A few old paintings. My old dresser with the drawers missing. My piano in the corner. I ran my finger along the top.

Bach, Chopin, Clementi, Mozart—they had all joined me on this once-magnificent instrument that hadn’t been played since I had left it.

I sat on the bench and remembered my first recital. I was seven years old. Mom had bought me a new dress. All of dad’s friends were there. I wasn’t nervous. I was never nervous at the piano; the notes just flowed from my hands.

I ran my fingers across the keyboard, playing a few scales. I lifted my hands, but one note lingered. I checked to make sure nothing was on the sustaining pedal, but it was only one note. G below middle C.

The attic was hot. December wasn’t supposed to be this damn hot. My head started to hurt. I suddenly became aware of my own heartbeat. G below middle C.

I couldn't breathe. I was sweating. I wanted to scream, but I couldn't. I fell from the bench, grabbing a box on my way down. Christmas ornaments shattering around my head.

Footsteps. "Annie! Annie! Oh, my God."

When I saw T.C.'s face, I was able to breathe again. I still felt hot, and I was shaking. The note still lingering. G below middle C. G below middle C.

T.C. carried me down to the couch in the living room.

Mom wanted to call a doctor, but I just wanted to leave.

"You just got here," mom said. "At the very least, you should stay and rest."

"I want to go." I looked over at T.C. A momentary silence.

"Another time, mom," he said.

"When?"

"Soon—I promise."

T.C. moved to pick me up, but I motioned him away and walked to the door. As it shut behind me, I sighed in relief and walked to the car.

T.C. drove home, and I fell asleep. I awakened feeling the air conditioner blowing on my neck.

T.C. looked over at me. "Hi."

"Hi."

"Feeling okay?"

"Much."

T.C. turned the radio off. "Did you do it on purpose, Annie?"

“What?”

“Did you do it just so we would leave?”

“What? Of course not!”

He was silent.

“How dare you!”

“I’m sorry,” he replied.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“Not about that. The way you acted today—as if she was for real.”

“Annie—”

“Is that what they teach in therapy? To act like a helpless child?”

“Enough, Annie!” His eyes flared. “You’re a piece of work, you know that? *I* was the one who spent five years in a mental institution. *I* was the one who got exiled to another country. I’ve spent so much time trying to move on from that place in my life. And I can’t do it until I face her. Until I finally sit down and talk to her.”

“She doesn’t deserve it.”

“Are you even listening?”

“Don’t you be weak, T.C.”

We were silent until we reached the house. I walked in before him and slammed the door. I heard it creak open behind me. I went upstairs. T.C. followed.

“Annie,” I heard him say.

The door to Dennis's office was open. I looked inside. Cass was sitting at Dennis's desk.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Annie, listen to me." I heard my brother say from behind me.

Cass glared at me and then at T.C. Cass picked up what he was reading, put it in a folder, stood up, and threw it on the floor. I looked at the tab on the top. "Thomas Christian Kierkan."

"You read his file?" I gasped.

Cass didn't reply. He was staring at T.C.

"Cass," T.C. said.

"Cass," I started, "you had no right—"

"Shut up, Annie," he replied, his jaw steely, his eyes fixed on my brother.

---

*Chapter 6*

Ready Writing—an extemporaneous essay contest. Put in a room, given a quote as a springboard for thought, you write an insightful, developed essay in two hours. No preparation necessary. I liked watching my competitors sweat it out because they didn't understand the topic. I liked finishing my paper with thirty minutes to spare. I liked winning. I placed a death grip on one of the few controllable areas of my life. Work hard. Be better than everyone else in the room. Reap the rewards. As a teenager, barraged with so many uncontrollables, I appreciated simplicity. Sometimes, though, I felt like a walking transcript.

Abigail, without knowing it, managed to validate every decision I had made in school. Equally unafraid to control the controllables, she made ambition look unusually good. She made power pretty. She made pretty power.

"Danny Coy's been hitting on me," she informed me as we were muddling through our physics problems on the living room table.

"You're kidding."

"Isn't he dating Amanda?"

"Broke up again." I looked up from my work. "Why? Interested?"

"God, no. He's dim."

I nodded.

"What about you, Cass? What's your love life been like?"

"Non-existent." I threw my pencil down. "I give up. The last three are impossible."

"I agree."

"How far did you get?"

"I stopped working fifteen minutes ago."

"What?"

"I've been drawing a goat." She made one last stroke of her pencil and showed me the drawing.

"Why a goat?"

"I like goats."

One of the straps of Abby's dress was falling off her shoulder. "There's a guy from Dillingham who's been calling me." She adjusted the strap.

"Oh, really."

"Brad. You remember Brad."

"You dated him awhile. I remember."

"What do you think I should do?"

"I don't know."

"You said you remembered him."

"Vaguely."

"He's a good-looking guy."

"You've seen him recently?"

"We met for coffee. Just coffee. But he wants to take me out to dinner."

"Dinner would be a date."

"Exactly," she nodded. "Brad's a little dim, too. But there's potential. When I met him at the coffee shop, he was reading a book."

"He's literate?"



"Don't be nasty," she smiled. "He was reading poetry. Emily Dickinson. I was impressed." The strap on the opposite shoulder fell. She adjusted it. "I'm going to New York this summer. Hotel just three blocks from Broadway."

"You still want to be an actress?"

"Of course," she beamed. "My dad's a little worried. Not exactly the safest career prospect."

"Caution is a virtue of the dull."

I heard Annie and T.C. pull in the garage. They walked in the door with groceries.

"There's my little district champion," Annie said. "I'm making your favorite for dinner today-- grilled filets and garlic mashed potatoes."

"Great. Is it okay if Abby stays for dinner again?"

"Of course."

I motioned Abby to go upstairs and followed her up.

"I try to avoid conversations with Annie," I said as I closed my door.

"I don't think she likes me."

"Annie likes everybody. It's the foundation of her superficial charm."

The doorbell rang.

"Are you going to get that?" Abby asked.

"Let Annie." I started rifling through my papers, looking for the third draft of a short story I was writing.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Abby and I said at the same time.

Amanda walked in. "I didn't mean to interrupt," she said, looking at a grinning Abby. "Cass, I wanted to know if I could borrow your copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. I'm writing my research paper on it."

"Sure," I replied. I found it on my bookshelf.

"So Amanda," Abigail said, "I saw you today."

"We go to the same school, Abby. At some point, seeing me should fail to surprise you."

"Before school in front of the gym. You were waiting for your boyfriend."

Amanda fidgeted. "Did his mom drop him off late?"

"His mom was dropping him off?" I said.

"Well—" Amanda started.

"Mitch Driver," Abby said. "My sister's grade."

"You're dating a freshman?"

"He's about to turn sixteen," Amanda replied crisply. "He had to repeat a couple of grades."

"Oh, I didn't realize he was young *and* stupid."

Abby laughed.

"Fine. Whatever," Amanda said as she stormed out the door.

"Wait— your book," I said, laughing. "I'm just kidding, Amanda."

"I'll get my own copy." I heard her stomp down the stairs and slam the front door shut.

Having Abigail home was invigorating, but life in general was still exhausting. Ready writing didn't require any preparation, but advanced honors physics did. Staying

at the top of my class meant taking every honors course I could, an honors "A" being worth a full grade point more than a normal "A." My typical day consisted of a meeting one hour before school started, a full day of classes, another meeting after school, and then heading home to prepare for the next day's meetings or to do homework with Abby after which I'd have dinner followed by three to four hours more of homework. Drained, I'd go to sleep around ten, having earned the right to wake up at five-thirty the next morning to do it all again.

"I'm so tired lately," I told Lindsay the next day on the car ride home from school. It had been raining all day. It was slightly chilly out, so a light coat wasn't out of the question.

"Is that right?" she replied lazily.

"Even my lymph nodes are tired. Where exactly are my lymph nodes, Lindsay?"

"Cass, don't complain to me about tiredness, okay?"

"What?"

"We're all tired. We all have too much to do and not enough time to do it. If you're going to whine, choose a more interesting grievance."

She looked away and out her window. I turned the radio off.

"I'm sorry," she said, still looking out the window.

"What is wrong with you lately?" I asked.

"Nothing . . ." Her voice trailed off. "I'm going to be late for work," she practically whispered, unable to look me in the eye.

I dropped Lindsay off around four, and Abby arrived at my house. Her hair was damp from the slow drizzle still lingering outside. She was wearing shorts and a t-shirt

and no makeup. Some girls take off their makeup and look embalmed, but Abby still managed to stun you.

"Chris Green asked me out today," Abby said as we snacked on pretzels and grape juice.

"That's quite a collection you're building."

She grinned. "He's so dense. And his right eye. Wanders."

I laughed. "It does not."

"Watch it next time."

I smiled.

"Tricia Grant sat with me at lunch today," Abby said. "I hate it when fat people complain about their fatness. I mean—really. Why doesn't she remove the cheeseburger from her mouth and take a jog?" She took a sip of her grape juice. "And I'm supposed to feel sorry for her? I'm supposed to soothe her and tell her she looks fine. I wanted to puke all over her size seventeen shoes."

"You're cruelly funny today."

"Just enough to keep me from being dull. God, I would hate to be dull. How do Mason and Amanda do it?"

"Those are my friends."

"Sorry." She crunched on a pretzel. "What are you doing for Christmas, Cass?"

"I don't know."

"My mom wants me to spend Christmas with her."

"What does your dad say?"

"He wants me to stay here, but he'll be okay if I go to California."

"Then you should go. It's only a couple of weeks."

"Yeah." She was looking around the room. "Do you want to come with me?"

The question took me off-guard. "Maybe. I've never been to California. I'll have to check with my dad."

"So you *want* to go."

"Well—" I hesitated. "We'll see, okay?"

Her hopes were already set. To be honest, so were mine.

"So, what's with this T.C. guy?" she asked. "He stares at me when I come over for dinner."

"It's nothing you should worry about." I shrugged. "I don't know. I like T.C. He's interesting."

"You still don't know why he was seeing your dad?"

"No."

"Curious?"

"Of course." I finished my last gulp of grape juice. I was about to put the bottle away, but I offered it to Abby first.

"I've still got some." She spun her finger around the circumference of the glass.

"Your dad has a home office upstairs, doesn't he?"

"Yeah."

"Does he keep files up there?"

I frowned. "No, Abby."

"Oh, come on."

"No."

"Everyone knows but you. Annie knows. Your dad knows. You deserve to know."

"I can't."

"No one will know that you know."

"His file is confidential."

She sighed. "Alright."

"I don't even know if he'd have T.C.'s file up there."

"I said alright." She finished her juice. "But I know you're dying to know, and I don't see the harm."

I rinsed my glass in the sink. "Are you staying for dinner?"

"Can't. Daddy wants me home tonight. Family time." She put her glass in the sink. "I better shove off, doll. Can I borrow an umbrella?"

When she left, I went upstairs to study in my room. The office door was open. It was rarely open.

My dad kept a clean office, everything arranged neatly at ninety-degree angles. The file cabinet was behind his desk. I expected it to be locked. Most file cabinets have locks. I opened an unlocked drawer. I heard a noise downstairs. I closed the drawer, ran out of the room, and peeked down the stairs. No one. I slowly walked back in.

Abby was right— what harm would it do? I liked T.C. I just wanted to understand him better. Maybe I could help him. Maybe he could help me. Maybe we could help each other. I opened the file cabinet that contained the "K's." T.C.'s was a relatively light file. I put it on dad's desk. Just a quick glance. I took a deep breath and opened it.

My heart was racing as I absorbed the words. I read it. I didn't believe it. I read it again. I felt my heart sink. I read it again. I thought I would be sick. I read it again.

"What are you doing?" I looked up, and there was Annie.

"Annie, listen to me." T.C. said from behind her.

I put the papers I was reading back in the file and slammed the whole mess to the floor.

A blur of words as they realized what I now knew.

"You're a rapist."

"Cass—" Annie interrupted.

"Shut up. You're a rapist. Eighteen years old. You raped a girl."

He looked away.

"She was fourteen, for Christ's sake!" I screamed.

Silence.

"You went to a mental hospital. You didn't go to jail."

Annie looked away. T.C.'s eyes were on the ground.

"Your dad was a senator."

"Cass, you don't understand," Annie said.

"I understand that senators' sons don't go to prison."

No one responded.

"I trusted you," I said.

"Cass," Annie interjected.

"My oldest friend, Lindsay—a year ago, she almost got raped. Remember that, Annie?"

Annie's eyes lifted to mine; she said nothing.

I turned to T.C. "She went to a party. There was drinking, so she asked to leave. She didn't have a car, and the friend that brought her was loaded. So this guy Joey offered to bring her home. Nice, quiet guy from school. He sat with us at lunch

sometimes. He took her home, but he said he needed to use the bathroom, so she let him in." I paused.

"It was Sunday night. Lindsay's parents work on Sunday nights, so she was alone. When he got out of the bathroom, he grabbed her. Tried to take off her shirt, but she pushed him away. The asshole hit her across the face." I felt a tear roll down my cheek. "She hit him on the head with a picture frame and ran to her room. She didn't have a lock for her door, so she pushed a chair under the doorknob and grabbed the phone. She called me crying. But I only heard about five seconds worth. He had opened the door and pulled the phone out of the jack. I ran down the stairs shouting for help and my dad and you—" I looked at Annie, "you followed me."

"We reached her front door and heard her screaming. The door was locked. We knocked and shouted and said the police were coming, but Lindsay was still screaming. Finally, I went to the back door and slammed it open. He was on top of her. His pants half-off. Lindsay's shirt torn. My dad and I wrestled the son of a bitch to the ground. Dad broke his nose. He should've broken his neck."

"Cass—" T.C. started again.

"Lindsay has nightmares. She wakes up sweating and feels his arm pushing on her neck. The girl you raped—do you think she has nightmares, too?"

"That's not fair," he replied. "You have no—"

"No what? No right?"

I saw a tear roll down his cheek.

"Don't expect me to feel sorry for *you*."

"I should've told you myself," he said.



"Cass," Annie said softly and deliberately, "what happened to Lindsay was horrible. But what T.C. did . . . that was a long time ago."

"Elegant argument, Annie."

"Cass—"

"Rot in hell," I replied, pushing them aside, walking out of the office and into my room. I slammed the door and melted into a corner, my face buried into my knees, my fists pressed against the carpet.

*Chapter 7*

---

The year was 1983. The rain made swirling waves on the glass as I waited by the window. It was winter. The sky was brown and gray, like rancid chocolate.

I heard my mother yelling at the new cook in the kitchen. When she was done, I heard her footsteps coming toward me, but I didn't turn around. She knew what I was waiting for.

Hours and hours I waited. The rain didn't let up. No one approached me. No one told me anything. I lost feeling in my feet and pressed my head against the glass. It was getting late. I felt my dad's hand on my shoulder.

"Annie," he said.

I turned around.

"You should eat something," he said.

I looked at his shoes. Newly shined.

He pulled my chin up. In a gentle voice, "He's not coming, Annie."

I nodded and walked away. I had figured it out hours ago but had remained on watch, if for no other reason than to infuriate my mother. He might as well have told me my brother was dead.

I didn't ask questions. I climbed the stairs to my room, feeling hope leak out of my heels with each step.

\* \* \*

It was over. T.C. announced over fried chicken and butternut squash that he was leaving. He was going back to New York to stay with a friend. Cass didn't look up from his food. Dennis had the audacity to smile.

Letting T.C. stay was the last act of penance for Dennis's adultery. He had bought me random gifts and ordered pizzas on days I was too lazy to cook. I had told him several times that he was forgiven, but the guilt could never leave him. It weighed down his eyes until the flesh below was the color of bruises. But letting T.C. stay—that was a real sacrifice. That was something I needed that he gave with only one condition. Cass could never know. Now, I had wounded his only son, and he was absolved, for I, too, had failed him.

I drove T.C. to the airport so that I could lose him all over again. My trembling hand on the steering wheel. Hope again leaking out of my heels and onto the accelerator.

We arrived at the airport an hour early. I wanted to spend that hour telling him the thoughts that had been running through my mind. I wanted to tell him what a horrible wife and mother I was. I wanted to tell him about Janet Scott. I wanted to tell him about my record-breaking two weeks in the sanitarium. I *needed* to tell him. But I didn't. There were too many words fighting in my head. Nothing out of my mouth. We ate chicken sandwiches in one of the little restaurants that lined the terminal. He barely spoke. I barely listened. Merciless time moving forward until it was too late.

“You’re late,” my mother said. It was Thanksgiving dinner. Reagan just elected president. My entire family at the table, and my mother scolding me.

I tried to explain. “We were watching a movie, and—“

“Your Aunt Janice drove three and a half hours from Hartford to be with us this morning. And look at her—waiting on you.” Aunt Janice nodded her head in agreement.

“I’m sorry, mom. I’m sorry, Aunt Janice.”

“You’re always sorry.” My mother never could just leave it be. My family was staring at me. “You’re always—“

“I got suspended from school last week,” T.C. blurted out.

“What?” my mother shrieked.

“Got caught smoking pot in the bathroom,” he said with a grin. “Could you pass the yams?” Everyone at the table moved their attention to my brother. I shook my head and smiled. He was grounded for a year.

“I’m going to come back. You know that, right?” he said as his plane started boarding. Terminal C-3, Hobby Airport.

“What?” I looked up at him. “Yeah, I know,” I replied.

“Things need to settle with Dennis and Cass.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want you to be upset.”

“Couldn’t you stay another week?”

“Annie—“

“No, I know. It’s okay.”

He palmed the top of my head just like he did when we were kids. “I love you, Annie.”

I smiled and gave him a hug. He took his bag, flung it over his back, and walked in the gate. He turned around and smiled; I smiled back. I wasn’t good at goodbyes. I watched him until a family of six blocked my view. With their carry-on suitcases and over-stuffed backpacks, they stole away my brother’s last footsteps. I walked away, the taste of ketchup in my mouth. I only made it a few feet before I felt numb all over.

Standing still in the dizzying traffic of the terminal, I let my eyes wander. Families going on vacation. Businesspeople with cell phones attached to their faces rushing to reach their connections to New York, Los Angeles, Chicago. Lovers reuniting. Lovers saying goodbye. And then there was me. I looked around to see if anyone was watching me, if anyone was wondering what I was doing, what I was feeling.

I saw a payphone and sprinted towards it. I dialed the number.

“Janet Scott’s office,” the secretary rang out.

Janet was free for the early afternoon. A late lunch at the Mingle Suites in Beaumont. She looked forward to it, she said.

Now, I had something to do. Just like the other people in the airport, I had somewhere to go and someone who wanted to see me. I rushed to my car and bolted out of the parking lot. I headed toward Main Street to see Rice University, where I had first

met Janet. I had wanted a school far from home. Far from mom. And it was a pretty campus. The huge brick fence, covered in ivy, lined with trees. But Rice didn't suit me. Texas didn't suit me. Humidity, petroleum plants, rodeos. But I stayed. Away from New Jersey. Away from mom. Rice University—the lesser of two evils. But upon my father's retirement, mom and dad moved to Houston. To be closer to me, they said. To punish me, I thought.

So now I sped down I-10, away from Houston, away from the lesser and the greater evils. I arrived early to the Mingle Suites. I looked in the restaurant to make sure I didn't have to make a reservation. It was fairly empty, so I just walked back to the lobby. A grand piano there. Black and shiny. I walked toward it and pressed a couple of keys.

The concierge came and peeked over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It's a nice piano."

"The owner bought it a week ago. He thought it would make the place look classier, but he's too cheap to pay someone to play it. I've been dying to hear it played."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Please. There's hardly anyone here. I love piano music."

"Well—"

"Go ahead." He pulled the bench out.

"Maybe just one piece," I replied.

He smiled as I took my place on the bench.

Chopin's "Prelude in B Minor." The treble—minor chords chiming softly, a muffled melancholy percussion. The bass carrying the melody—slow and wispy, like a ghost, pervasive and haunting. The thirteenth measure—a broken major chord, a moment of hope, a crescendo, and as quickly as it comes, it fades away, the chord played again like an echo. Back to the slow, flowing melody, the melancholy minor chords. In the end, the melody ceases; the muffled chords continue, listless and crying before the silence. I lifted my hands from the keyboard, my foot from the sustaining pedal.

The concierge was clapping. I had forgotten he was there. "Bravo," he said.

"The owner should hire *you*."

I smiled.

"One more song," he said.

I looked around. A small group had gathered in the lobby to watch.

"One more piece." My hands took their position. I wanted to show them what I could do.

Chopin again. "Prelude in G Minor." Bass carrying the melody once more, but not softly, not sadly. *Molto agitato*. My left hand—thunderous octaves coming down like Thor's hammer. My right hand responding with dissonant screams. Over and over. Thunder and screaming. Fast and furious until the middle section—thunder and screams coming together, building and building into a beautiful chaos of fury and minor chords. And then—like the beginning again. The screams lift higher and higher. Terror and anticipation. Silence. Three gothic bolts. Hold, hold, and lift.

The small crowd applauded wildly. I was sweating from the effort. Molto agitato really took it out of you. I smiled.

“Again,” one man pleaded.

“No, no.” I held my palm out. “Thank you.” I stood up, took a bow, and walked to the restaurant. Even as I looked through the menu, I could still hear their applause.

My piano teacher once told me that I lost myself in music, but she was wrong. Every time I sat at that keyboard, I *found* myself.

Janet arrived on time. We sat at a small booth by the bar.

“How have you been?” she asked me.

“My brother left today.”

“That’s too bad. Why didn’t he stay for Christmas?”

“Dennis and Cass wanted him to leave.”

“Why?”

“He raped a girl when he was a teenager.” I didn’t even think before saying it.

“What?” she gasped. She took a sip of water and swallowed deliberately, a vein suddenly popping out of her neck. She looked around the place. “I like how they’ve rearranged the seats,” she said, breaking a momentary silence.

“What?”

“The seats. I like how they’ve rearranged them.”

I shrugged.

“Work today was a killer. New client is worth millions, but I don’t know if it’s worth the ulcers I’ll be getting.” She laughed.



“Why do you do that?”

“Excuse me.”

Molto agitato. “Why do you brag in my face about richer-than-God clients and laugh and laugh as if it’s all real cute?”

“Annie—“ she replied, her right hand over her heart, “I was just making conversation.”

“You always do it. Million-dollar clients. Patrick this and Patrick that. Newsletter every Christmas.”

“I didn’t realize it offended you.”

“You sit there on the other side of the booth and prattle on about the wonder that is you. Well, I’m sorry. I can no longer sustain the look of awe,” I blazed. “And you know what the saddest part is?”

She was looking down at her water, avoiding eye contact. “What, Annie?” she replied.

“You’re probably my best friend.”

Startled, she lifted her head and looked at me.

I had forgotten how liberating anger could feel. I stormed out of the hotel, got in my car and turned the ignition. I cut off seven people on the way home. Five over the speed limit. I ran a stop sign. Ten over the speed limit. I almost missed my exit. Thirty over the speed limit. I pulled into my driveway. Cass’s car was there. Abby’s, too. He had such shitty taste in girls. I didn’t want to see them. I pulled out of the driveway and

drove away. I darted back onto the highway and scared the hell out of some elderly drivers and a few nice-looking families, trapped in oh-so-convenient minivans.

I drove and drove in circles, exiting highway 69, turning around and going back on. I thought about Dennis. Poor Dennis. What a joke he was. The psychiatrist who couldn't figure out his own wife and kid. I laughed. And then I stopped. Such exquisite guilt. I didn't love my husband.

Our family—a well-orchestrated symphony of disconnected instruments. Come in and see the great Kincaids. Stay for dinner. Stay for coffee. Stay the night in our always-ready guestroom. Stay a week if you like. But don't stay for too long. It's too exhausting if you stay for too long. I can't keep the damn smile on my face for too long.

Dennis and I—we had tried to love each other. But I saw myself through my brother's eyes. I saw my family. And I knew that he knew. It was all a show.

And for whose benefit? Cass's? We couldn't keep blaming Cass. We had screwed him up a long time ago. No, we put on the show because we didn't know what else to do. We were too lazy, too unimaginative to live different lives.

“Son of a bitch!” I honked as I slammed the brakes. The guy in front needed to be introduced to his accelerator. I would've passed but the car in the left lane was going just as slowly. I honked again, but they persisted in a little chain of vehicular ineptitude. I saw the Dowlen exit to my right, so I took it. I wished life could be that easy. When things got frustrating, you could just exit.

I pulled to the side of the road and thought to myself, why couldn't it be that easy? Why couldn't I just exit? Ninety-two percent of marriages ended in divorce, right? Why not mine?

I put the car back in drive and started home. I was resolved now. A long, overdue exit. It wouldn't be easy, but it was better than staying on a road you weren't meant for. Dennis and I had already wasted too many years in honor of a baby never born. I couldn't waste another year, another day. I had lived too long under the muffled melancholy percussion. It was time for G minor. Time for thunder and screams.

"Dennis, I want a divorce," I rehearsed in the car. I tried stressing each word to test the variations.

I pulled in the driveway and into the garage. Abby's car was gone. Cass's, too. Dennis wasn't home yet. I walked into the house. There was a piece of paper on the dining room table.

Dad,

Left with Abby to California. Used money from my savings  
for the ticket. Will be back Christmas Eve.

Cass

Dennis had said no. He had made it clear. Cass was furious, but I didn't expect this. Dennis would be livid. I thought for a moment that I should postpone leaving him.

No, I thought to myself. The time was now. If Cass could leave, so could I. Dennis was a strong guy—he could handle it, and if he couldn't, that wasn't my problem anymore. I went upstairs to pack.

I would stay at the Mingle Suites. I had some money saved. And maybe the owner would hire me like the concierge said, and I could make some cash that way. A few months later, I would surprise T.C. in New York. I would stay with him until I found a place of my own. It was all coming together. I packed faster.

The doorbell rang. I thought about not answering, but it rang again and then again.

I ran downstairs and opened the door. It was Hannah, Lindsay's mother.

"Annie." She was having trouble breathing.

"What's wrong? Did something happen to Lindsay?"

"No . . ." she struggled for air, "Dennis."

"He's at work, but he should be back shortly. I'll tell him you stopped by." I didn't mean to be rude, but I had packing to do. I started to shut the door, but she stopped it with her arm.

"No, Annie. Your phone. Is it off the hook?"

I looked behind me and saw the portable phone on the couch, the little red light on. "Look at that. Cass must have left it on. Were you trying to call?"

"My sister—she works in the E.R. She was trying to call, but it was busy, so she called me."

"Why?"

“Annie,” she walked in the door, “please sit down.”

“Why was your sister trying to call?”

“I was in the front yard when Dennis came home.”

“Dennis came home?”

“Did you see the note?”

I nodded. “Cass went to California.”

“Dennis was going to the airport to see if he could stop him.” She was looking at the ceiling. “Are you sure you don’t want to sit?”

“Keep going, Hannah.”

She took a deep breath. “He was mad, Annie. I’ve never seen him so mad. And then my sister called—“ She paused. “Dennis got in an accident. He ran an intersection and got hit from the side.”

She looked at my face. I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to look.

“Which intersection?” I asked.

“Uh . . . corner of First and Derby.”

“The four-way stop?”

“I think so.”

“I always thought they should put a light there.”

Hannah was coming in for an embrace. I motioned her away.

“Maybe now they’ll put a light there,” I continued.

“Do you want me to drive you to the hospital?” she asked.

“He’s not dead?” For some reason, I was sure he was dead.

“No, Annie. He’s in surgery right now.”

“How long will that take?”

“I don’t know.”

I walked to the dining room table and picked up the note. “Cass didn’t even leave a phone number.” I shook my head. “What does Lindsay think of Abigail?”

Hannah was staring at me.

“I can’t blame him, though. If I had a choice between staying here and going to California, I’d choose California,” I continued.

“Annie—“

“Ever been to California, Hannah?”

“No.”

“I went with my dad once.”

Hannah forced a smile.

“You should go. Take Lindsay. She’d like it.”

“We can take my car.”

“I should call Janet first.”

“Is Janet a relative?”

“My best friend. I was rude today. I should apologize.”

“I’m sure it can wait.”

“I was pretty rude.”

“Annie, we should go to the hospital.”

“How’s Lindsay doing? She just gets prettier and prettier. I always mean to tell you, but I forget. You raised a wonderful daughter.”

“Thank you, but—“

“Would you like some tea? I bought raspberry-flavored tea the other day.

Dennis took me to Gladstone’s for my birthday, and they had this tea—“

“Annie,” she interrupted, “we need to go to the hospital.” She had her hands on my shoulders and was staring into my eyes.

I stood there, looking at her, my heart beating a muffled melancholy percussion.

I spoke at almost a whisper, “Couldn’t we stay here a little longer?””

---

*Chapter 8*

Los Angeles in winter. A coastal haven. Lush natural greenery and a perpetually moderate climate strangled by cement snakes overrun by parasitic sports cars and sports utility vehicles and sports fans with cell phones, polluting air and airwaves indiscriminately. It was as if the citizens of L.A. had passed an ordinance to collectively slap God in the face. Edie, Abby's mother, picked us up at LAX airport and drove us to her house in Glendale, just outside of Los Angeles. The traffic—intense. People didn't *wave* in and out of lanes. They jerked. Quickly. Angrily.

It was an hour before we reached the house. Edie's street tilted at an angle with the perpendicular road. There were mountains in the horizon. I felt the sun on my face.

"You can take Stephanie's room," Edie told me once we were inside. Stephanie, Abby's younger sister, had decided to stay with their dad. "And you can call your parents anytime. Day or night." Edie had a nasal Italian accent.

"Thanks," I replied as I entered my room. The walls were pink and there was a stuffed teddy bear dressed as an elf at the head of the bed.

"Feel free to take that crap off," I heard Abby say behind me. "Make yourself comfortable."

"I will. Thanks." I put down my suitcase and sat on the bed. The bear, full of cotton and curiosity, stared at me. I felt guilty, leaving home the way I did. But I was still furious about T.C. And when I asked about California, dad just said no. There was no discussion. I deserved at least a discussion. The elven bear was unmoved by that argument. Dad said he wanted me home for Christmas, so technically, I wasn't defying



him. I would be home for Christmas. I would spend three days with Abby and then take a plane home. Everybody won. I stuffed the bear into the closet.

I called home soon after that, but I got the machine. I left a message to let dad and Annie know I was alright and left it at that. I didn't leave a phone number. I was there already and wanted to enjoy myself.

"I hope you two are hungry," I heard Edie say. "Francesca is cooking up a freaking feast." Francesca was Abby's grandmother.

I washed up in the bathroom, and soon we were in the car again. Francesca's house was just a few blocks from the beach. It was small and peach-colored with a gate in front. As we pulled into the driveway, Francesca stampeded out the front door, arms open. "Where is my Abigail? Look at you. Look at this beauty." She pinched Abby's cheek. "And who is this dashing young gentleman?"

"This is my friend, Cass."

"Cass. What an unusual name." She pinched my cheek. Francesca's accent was more pronounced than Edie's. Her clothes—simple, frumpy, grandmotherly, reeking of vinegar. Her gray hair was tied in a bun.

"Come inside. I've been cooking since dawn." She was tall and unusually energetic for a woman her age. "Here. Sit down," she ordered.

"This is a nice couch," Edie said. "Is it new?"

"You like it? Benjamin's second to youngest— he vomited all over the old one, the little shit. So I gave it away."

"You gave away the old couch?"

"There was throw-up all over it."

"Jesus, ma— you ever heard of disinfectant?"

"Oh, you." She flicked her hand and went into the kitchen. She came back with a plate. "Here, you two. Some bruschetta."

"Oh, I forgot," Edie said. "I fried up some calamari. It's in the car."

"You didn't overcook it, did you?" Francesca asked.

"You haven't even seen it, and you're criticizing."

"Last time, it was rubbery."

"I put them in the fryer until they were golden brown—like you said."

"Your oil— it has to be hot. How many times do I have to tell you? The oil has to be hot."

"It was hot, ma."

"How hot?"

"Hot. Enough. The calamari is getting cold." Edie went out the front door to get the platter.

"You like manicotti?" Francesca asked me as I took a bite of the bruschetta.

"I love manicotti."

"Good boy." She went back to the kitchen.

"This is incredibly good," I whispered to Abby.

Edie came back in and put the platter in front of us.

"Did you make a sauce?" Francesca asked.

"I put some lemon wedges on the plate."

"What about some marinara or something?"

"I like it with a little lemon."

"Just lemon?"

"Yeah."

"And you serve that? To people?"

"Yes, ma."

"I have some extra sauce from the manicotti. I'll put it in a bowl."

"Whatever." She threw her hands up and squeezed some lemon on the crispy fried squid. "You like lemon, don't you, Cass?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good boy."

Francesca came back with a bowl of red sauce. "So, Abigail— Mrs. Debussy at the florist was telling me about her daughter, Josie. She's going to med school in the fall."

"That's nice," Abby replied.

"I have a picture of her in my purse. She's a beautiful girl. Long black hair.

Dark eyes. Like a movie star, that one. You want to see the picture?"

"What the hell, ma? You trying to set them up on a date or something?" Edie said.

"A young girl should keep her options open."

"Grandma!" Abby shrieked.

"What? You're a homophobic?"

"Homophobic, ma. And no, she is not homophobic. She's straight. What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Oh— and you two know everything. Mrs. Debussy says Josie didn't come out of the cellar until she was well into college."

"The closet, ma."

"What?"

"The *closet*. Wine comes out of cellars. Lesbians come out of closets."

"Cellars. Closets. As if either makes sense."

"I don't like you setting up Abby with lesbians."

"She's seventeen years old. What does she know if she's gay or not?"

"I'm not gay," Abby said.

"Look at this picture is all I'm asking. See if it stirs something, you know?"

"That's enough, ma' Christ"

Abby's mother and grandmother were both sweet in a psychotic sort of way. The meal was incredible. Caesar salad, slices of French bread with garlic butter spread on top, manicotti, veal parmesan, grilled chicken stuffed with prosciutto and mozzarella. I was too full for dessert. I watched everyone else eat and listened to Edie and Francesca bicker.

I fell asleep on the car ride back. When we arrived at the house, Edie went straight to bed. Abby and I went to the kitchen for a glass of water before going to sleep.

"Your family," I grinned. "Top-notch entertainment."

"Never a dull moment." She ran her hand up and down her glass.

"Something wrong?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You seemed quiet today."

"I don't know. I wish Francesca would get off her back."

"Your mother?"

"Yes."

"I think Edie can handle it."

She looked up at me as if she were about to say something.

"What is it, Abby?"

"I don't want to get into it."

I brought my face closer to hers. "What's wrong?"

She took a deep breath. A moment of silence. "My mother. Has these episodes."

"She seems fine."

"She gets depressed." Abby looked down at her hands. "On Prozac for three years but she forgets sometimes." She got up and looked to make sure Edie hadn't gotten out of bed. "I had to leave California. These depressions— you have no idea— days, weeks, months sometimes. It was exhausting. I mean— it was hard enough dealing with *my* life, but having to worry about her and what she might do— I just couldn't handle it."

"So you feel guilty?"

"How could I not feel guilty?"

"You have no reason, Abby."

She was looking away from me, running her hand through her hair. "She tried to kill herself." I put my glass on the table. "I came home and found her in the bathtub. The water was red, her wrists cut up."

"My God."

"I called grandma and waited for the ambulance. Stephanie kept trying to get past me to see what was going on. I've never been so scared."

"When was this?"

"A year ago. That's when dad really pushed us to come back to Texas."

"I'm sorry, Abby."

"When mom made it, I was relieved. But at the same time, I was angry with her for putting me and Steph through that."

"That's understandable."

"She's my mother. You're supposed to take care of your mother."

"You're seventeen years old. It's supposed to be the other way around."

She gulped down her water. "You're lucky to have Annie. You know that?" I didn't respond. She looked me in the eye. "I like control, you know? I like being in school and feeling like I'm the shit. Lets me know that I'm not like her, that I'm not going to be to my family what she's been to me." Her eyes were welling up. "I had to leave."

"I would have done the same thing."

She nodded without looking. "I have to go to bed." She stood up suddenly.

"Abby—"

"Goodnight, Cass," she said walking away, hiding her eyes.

The next day, I wasn't sure what to expect. I went into the dining room; Abby was already there, smiling, back to her gregarious self.

After a breakfast of eggs, bacon, and toast, Abby went to her room to retrieve something. She came back with a package wrapped in shiny paper with a red bow on top.

"What's this?"

"Christmas gift."

"It's not Christmas yet."

"Details, dear."

"I haven't wrapped yours yet."

"It's not Christmas yet."

"Okay, what did I just—"

"Just open the damn box."

I untied the bow and ripped the paper. The rustle of gift tissue and inside—a red toy truck. I smiled.

“I remember you said when you were little, you were labeled the smart one in your family and got the crappiest toys,” Abby said.

“Crossword puzzles and quiz games. I was five. Who the hell gives a five-year-old—”

“It’s been over a decade, sweetie. Move on or medicate.”

I grinned as I inspected the interior. “Can I play with it?”

“Of course.”

“You won’t think I’m weird?”

“The ship’s already sailed on that one, doll.”

I smiled.

“Thank you, Abby,” I said, running my truck across the floor. It felt smooth and cold in my hand. “Abby—” Leather interior and a tiny stick shift. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“But—”

“You’re here to enjoy yourself. I didn’t mean to put my problems on you.”

“What are you talking about? Your problems are my problems.”

“That’s very sweet, but—”

“Why do you think I’m here, Abby?”

She paused. “What do you mean? You said you’ve always wanted to see California.”

“I don’t give a shit about California.”

“Well, then . . .”

"Your problems aren't going to scare me away, Abigail. I mean—I took a plane. I'm here."

"Cass, what are you trying to say?"

I paused for a moment. "I'm just saying that . . ." I felt my throat closing up and returned my attention to the truck. "I don't know. I want to be the kind of person you can cry in front of without feeling like you owe me an apology. That's all."

She wrapped her arms around me and put her head on my shoulder.

"I mean it, Abby," I said, putting my palm on her head.

We had lunch at a little bistro in Beverly Hills. Women in pantsuits with poodles. Sunglasses on an overcast day. We people-watched as we devoured our salmon and caviar pizzas. After lunch, Abby took me to a mall to shop for Christmas presents. Edie was tired, so the outing ended up being just Abby and me.

"How can you be a Republican?" I asked her.

"How can you be a Democrat? Bunch of tree-hugging, tax-happy—"

"Give it a break, you rifle-toting, money-hungry—"

"Oh, that's right. Because we hate poor people. The homeless drive us crazy.

When you're not watching, we beat them with clubs of gold."

I smiled. "We should never talk politics."

Abby nodded. "So, who do you have left to buy for?" We had been shopping for two hours.

"Just Annie."

"Okay. What do you think she needs?"

"A personality."



"Be serious."

"Snow globe."

Abby frowned. "Maybe a nice skirt. What's Annie's waist size?"

"I don't look at her waist. There could be a tentacle down there for all I know."

"What kinds of things does she like?"

"Everything. She's the easiest person in the world to shop for. I could put dog crap in a plastic bag, and she'd show it off at the next P.T.A. meeting."

"Perfume. What about perfume?"

"Whatever."

We went into a department store and bought a bottle. The lady at the counter even wrapped it for us.

Passing the shoe department, I noticed a balding, middle-aged man staring at Abby. I smiled at him. He noticed me and looked away.

I laughed.

"What? What is it?" Abby asked.

"That man was staring at you," I replied.

She turned to look at him; he averted his eyes clumsily.

"How do you do that, Abby?"

"Do what?"

"Make men make asses of themselves."

"Men don't need me to do that."

"True, but they do it more often in your general vicinity."

She shrugged and smiled. It was a remarkable thing to be beautiful, I thought. And for her to shrug it off as if it were nothing.

It was odd to see her rattled the day before, to see her lips tremble and her eyes lowered. Whether she was watching a movie or insulting a waiter or sharing a meal, Abby always presented herself in crisp, confident colors; for a moment, the image went blurry, quivering in its frame, for the first time showing an uncertain, vulnerable center behind the gleaming white grin.

Abby was no saint, but there was more to her than others cared to realize. When she was a freshman, she was one of the few students who ever stood up for Tim Varner, the school's most socially inept denizen. Pimply faced, with an unfortunate, donkey-like laugh, a lanky frame, and a concave chest, he was also cursed with an inexplicably large amount of self-esteem. He would join conversations he wasn't invited to and sit at lunch tables he wasn't welcome at. He would sit and smile and speak, ignoring annoyed glances and the occasional articulated rudeness.

Danny Coy and a few of his football buddies started in on Tim one day during lunch. Danny had been having some trouble in his math class and Tim offered to help. Ordinarily, Danny would never tarnish his image with an unkind word, but he was peculiarly irritated, his grades being a sensitive issue, and Tim being unpopular enough so that Danny could actually enhance his image through a few well-placed insults.

Danny and his retinue were having a field day, utilizing their limited range of derogatory wit. Pimple jokes got them started. "Faggot" was what they worked up to.

Abigail, tray in hand, rose from her seat and approached.

"Hey, Abby," Danny greeted bashfully. "I heard you got all A's for the semester. Congratulations." Danny had a bit of a crush on her.

"Thanks, Danny. But didn't *you* win a watermelon eating contest last Saturday? Congratulations to you, my friend."

He blushed. "I got third."

"Well, you'd hate to peak so early in life." She smiled. "Hey guys— how about leaving Tim alone?"

Danny grinned unctuously. "We're just having some fun here." He gave Tim a light punch in the shoulder.

"He was just offering to help."

"I don't need help."

She smiled. "I heard about your last report card. Someone should put a flag on the back of your bike."

Danny smiled. Because he didn't understand the insult. He was sure it was an insult—I could see the rusted wheels turning in his close-to-atrophied mind.

"I don't ride a bike," he finally replied.

Abby shook her head and led Tim out of the cafeteria.

"Bitch," the cafeteria room moaned. Abby had no special hatred for Danny. She had nothing to gain by sticking up for Tim. She had just done it because it was right.

This knowledge was what made me smile when store clerks smiled at Abby. They just saw a pretty girl. But they had no idea.

The next day we went sightseeing with Edie as our guide. That night, we saw a comedy at a local theatre. Abby seemed more at ease about her mother. Edie had been seeing a psychiatrist and felt comfortable telling us about it. Abby seemed genuinely impressed, and the fear she had been carrying gradually dissipated until the smile on her face matched the feelings inside. I enjoyed spending the time with her, but I was feeling guiltier about leaving home.

The next day, I gave Abby her Christmas presents, a hardback collection of Robert Frost poems and a sterling silver picture frame. After she opened her gifts, she and Edie took me to the airport. I thanked them for everything and boarded my plane, anxious to get home for Christmas Eve despite the fact that I knew I would be greeted by an angry father and an irritated Annie.

I was nervous on the plane. I fumbled the opening of my complimentary peanuts, shooting them across the aisle and onto other people's laps.

"I'm sure he didn't spill it on purpose," my father said. I was seven when my dad married Annie. It was our first Christmas as a family.

Annie had bought a new dress for the occasion. She had draped it on a dining room chair. She wasn't going to wear it anymore. On account of the big grape juice stain.

"It was an accident," my dad told Annie. I didn't ask for a mother. Dad and I had been doing fine just as we were. This woman in my house was practically a stranger. She laughed weird, and she smelled funny. Worse than that, dad had to use labels on the gifts under the tree. They used to be all mine. Now I had to share my Christmas tree. I had to share my Christmas.

I pouted and moaned all through Christmas Eve until dad, grabbing me by the sleeve, took me into his room. For the first and only time in my life, I saw him cry.

"Cass— you have to stop this."

"Stop what?"

"Acting like this. You have to stop."

"But Daddy—"

"She is my wife, and she is your stepmother."

"But," now I started crying, "I didn't ask for her. I didn't get a choice. And now she's changing everything."

He wiped his eyes and looked into mine.

"I wish you would've known your mother. If you had, you would know what a huge hole she left in my life. You would know how much I need someone right now."

"You have me."

His tears streamed down quicker. "I know." He smiled. "And the only thing better than having one person to love is having two." He paused for a moment to compose himself. "But you know what? Annie hasn't changed *everything*, Cass. You will always be the most important person in my life. Always." He put his hands on my shoulder.

"But you're going to have to let her into your life. You're going to have to try. Can you do that?"

I looked down. "I guess."

"Thank you, Cass." He pulled my head into his chest.

"I'll *always* be the most important?" I sniffled into his sweater.

He nodded. "Without a doubt."

When I finally reached Houston Intercontinental, I went out to the parking area, got in my car, and started the drive back. I reached my house around nine o'clock at night. I pulled up the emergency brake. My driveway was set at an angle to the street. Once, I neglected the emergency brake, and my car slid down the driveway, crossing the street, tapping the car on the opposite side of the road.

I got out of the car and took my suitcase and a bag of Christmas gifts out of the trunk. I slowly walked to my front door. It had grown colder while I was gone. I shivered and put my suitcase down in front of the door. I wasn't ready to face them yet. Grabbing a package from my gift bag, I walked to Lindsay's house.

I rang the doorbell. Lindsay, in a red velvet dress, opened the door.

"Merry Christmas!" I greeted with a smile.

She was silent.

"Don't be like that. I'm sorry I left without telling you, but it was a pretty quick decision. Don't be mad. I got you a gift from California." I handed her the box.

She stared at me for a moment.

"Lindsay," I said.

She put her arms around me.

"Lindsay, what's wrong?"

"Cass. I..." She began sobbing into my shoulder.

"What's wrong, Lindsay?"

She was trembling. "I'm so sorry." She squeezed tighter. She was crying so much she was having trouble breathing.

"Lindsay, calm down." She loosened her grip, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Whatever it is, it'll be okay."

Her forehead knotted into a frown. "You don't know."

"Don't know what?"

She started crying again.

"Lindsay?"

She set her hands on my arms and took a deep breath. Mr. and Mrs. Durham were behind her now, staring at me with paper plates piled with cookies in their hands. Lindsay's face took on a new look, a stern, stony glance that terrified me. "Cass," she said, shaking her head, "you don't understand."

---

Part 2



Chapter 9

---

March 2, 1999

Dear T.C.,

To answer your first question, yes. I'm fine. This hasn't been the easiest time, but I'm making it. I miss Dennis tremendously of course, but it's been over two months now. This is a new stage in my life. I'm even thinking about getting a job.

To answer your second question, no, I am not just sitting around the house all day. In fact, tomorrow I'm having lunch with an old friend at my favorite restaurant. So see—things are beginning to settle down. Thank you for your concern, though. Let me know what you're up to in New York.

Yours,

Annie

I hadn't been to Gladstone's since my birthday. The host seated us at a table by the restroom. A portly old man donning an un-tucked T-shirt and reeking of nicotine squeezed against my chair on his way to the facilities. I could feel the stiff hair on his stomach bristle against the back of my neck. I scooted my chair up. They had changed the menu. The stuffed flounder had been replaced by a grilled mahi-mahi. I had liked the flounder but was excited about the prospect of mahi-mahi. It was a conflict.

"I was surprised when you called," Janet said.

"We didn't exactly leave things on a good note."

"I've forgotten all about that."

"Really?"

She nodded. "In the past."

"You forgive me?"

"Of course."

"Just because Dennis died?"

"Annie—please."

"I'm sorry. That was weird. I'm trying not to say such weird things anymore. I want you to be comfortable, Janet. You are comfortable, aren't you?"

"I'm fine." She smiled. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Are you thirsty?" I asked.

"What?"

"They have the best raspberry iced tea here. I tried making it at home, but it's not the same. Good but not as good."

I signaled for the waiter, and we ordered two iced teas.

"It is good," Janet said after taking her first sip.

"I knew you'd like it."

We were silent.

"How's work going? Any big clients?" I asked.

"Work's fine."

Silence again.

"How about Patrick? How's the little guy doing?"

"He's fine, too."

She took a long sip of tea.

I stared at her for a moment and shook my head. "I thought you said everything was okay, Janet."

"What?"

"You said you'd forgiven me."

"I have."

"So, tell me about Patrick and your new clients. You can even show me the pictures in your purse if you like."

"Pictures in my purse?"

"I just want things back the way they were."

Janet looked both confused and bloated. "I'm sorry," she replied.

"Damn it!" I slammed my glass onto the table. "I said I'd look at the damn pictures, but I'm not going to fucking beg!"

Janet stood up.

"Where the hell are you going?" I asked.

"I don't know what to say to you."

"Sit down, Janet."

"I can only imagine the grief you're feeling."

"Get your fat ass back into that seat."

"I'll call you later, Annie."

She walked away. The people at the surrounding tables were staring. I smiled and went back to my refreshing glass of tea.

March 13, 1999

Dear T.C.,

Cass did it! He's the state champion in writing! Of course, I'm not surprised. I knew he could do it. It's remarkable, isn't it? Despite the difficulties he's been through this year, he still pulled it off. I couldn't be prouder of him.

As for me, I have my own bit of good news. I got a job! That's right—I, Annie Kincaid, am now a member of the working class. I play the piano at the Mingle Suites. I work in the evenings when the dinner crowd arrives. The pay isn't great, but at least I get to do something I love. Well, I need to get ready for work, so I better close. Write back soon!

Yours,

Annie

I didn't have to work. Dennis's father was an architect and his mother was a surgeon. His inheritance became mine and Cass's. But everyone at the funeral told me to keep busy. It made sense.

Mr. Buchanan, my boss, bought a book of modern love songs he wanted played. He thought the guests would appreciate more recognizable melodies. He was right. Sometimes, the guests would sing along. I hated it when they sang along.

At the end of each hour, I was allowed a ten-minute break. As I finished my last piece for the eight to nine hour, I noticed Hannah Durham standing by the window.

"Hannah, what are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Cass."

"What about him?"

"He had dinner with us again."

"I'm sorry about that. Since I started working, I'm not able to be there evenings. I've been cooking during the day, but Cass has a thing about reheated food. I'm sorry if he's been inconveniencing you."

"It's no inconvenience."

"Then what is it?"

"Well . . . I'm concerned about him."

"Did he tell you he won state in writing?"

"Lindsay mentioned it. You must be proud."

"I am. Believe me. After everything he's been through. It's amazing."

"Well, Annie . . ."

"What is it?"

Hannah looked down at her hands, clasped as if in prayer. "It's just . . . he just doesn't seem to be getting over it very well, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?"

"He just seems . . . lost. Do you notice it? He has this look on his face. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

I paused for a moment. "Yes," I nodded, "I think I do. To be honest, I've also been a little concerned."

"Okay. I just wasn't sure. Because I know you've been working a lot."

"Yeah, of course. Thanks for coming to talk, though."

"Okay." She turned to walk away but turned back around. "You know, Annie, we love him so much. Especially Lindsay. He's been through so much. I mean—you, too. You've both been through so much."

"Of course. I appreciate your concern. I'll work it out with Cass."

"Okay." She looked at my piano. "You play wonderfully."

March 15, 1999

Dear T.C.,

The school is having a special award ceremony this Friday for the academic competitors. I'm very excited. I bought a new dress yesterday and took off from work. It's going to be odd, being there without Dennis, but I'm so proud of Cass.

Speaking of Cass, I've set up an appointment with Dr. Young, a colleague of Dennis's. I think Cass could use some extra help getting through the school year. Don't worry, though—I'm sure he'll be fine. I'm glad to hear you're back on the dating scene. Tell me more about this woman you're seeing. She sounds so exotic.

Yours,

Annie

The front door slamming and Cass's footsteps. I was in the kitchen, getting a snack before work. "I'm not going back there, Annie."

"Cass, we talked about this."

"I'm not crazy."

"No one is saying you're crazy. But you've been through a very traumatic experience, and—"

"I'm fine, Annie."

“You have this look on your face that says otherwise.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Cass—this isn’t up for discussion. You will see Dr. Young until I say otherwise.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else . . . I’ll ground you.”

“Excuse me?”

“You won’t be able to see Abby or Lindsay or anyone. You’ll go to school, you’ll come home, and that’s it. And I’ll cut off your allowance.”

“You can’t do that.”

“Watch me.” I hated talking to him like this, but he left me no choice. “It’s just twice a week, and after a month or so, we can reevaluate things.”

Cass’s face had another look on it—I didn’t think this was the one Hannah was talking about. “I hate you, Annie.”

If he had stomped away, it wouldn’t have been so bad. But he just stood there, perfectly composed, illustrating with every muscle in his body his steadfast disdain. I always knew how he felt about me. But hearing the words out of his mouth stung in an unexpected way.



March 19, 1999

Dear T.C.,

Today's the big day! Cass's award ceremony. Cass is being his normal self, acting like it's some big hassle. But I'm thrilled for him.

I'm sorry about Nikki. It's her loss. If she can't realize what a wonderful guy you are, she doesn't deserve you. I'm thinking of visiting this summer if that would be okay. I miss you so much.

Yours,

Annie

"Let's do this again," I said, pointing at my glass. The bartender obliged. The Mingle Suites had a nice bar just off the lobby where I played. I got a discount since I worked there.

"Annie," I heard from behind me.

"Mr. Buchanan. Hi, there."

"Aren't you off tonight?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, I am." I was a little drunk.

"What are you doing here?"

"Having a little cocktail." I smiled. "Care to join me?"

"Why not?" Mr. Buchanan had a good square face, broad shoulders, and dark hair. He liked to wear suits, but he never wore a tie.

"I thought you were taking your son to dinner today. Wasn't there some award ceremony?"

"Oh, yeah. Today was the big day."

"How'd it go?"

I laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"My son—you hand him an award. He goes ape-shit on you." I laughed.

"I've never seen anything so awful. I mean—he was bad before his dad died, but—"

"His dad died?"

"Yeah—Dennis."

"Your husband?"

"My husband. Where have you been?"

"I didn't know your husband died."

"Christmas. Punctured lung."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I didn't even like him that much."

"I think you've had enough, Annie," he replied, looking at the glass in my hand.

"Actually, I was just getting started."

"Annie—"

"My son hates me."

"I'm sure he doesn't hate you."

"Yes, he does. But I don't blame him. I hate him, too." I took a sip of scotch. "I'm not allowed to say it, though," I said shaking my head. "Hardly fair."

"You don't mean that."

"What the hell do you know about it?"

He looked down for a moment and then back at me. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," I said. I laid my head on the bar. "I'm just tired. I've been trying so hard. These past three months."

"I can imagine."

"I haven't even cried."

"That's a good thing."

"Widows are supposed to cry." I looked down at my glass. "Not even at the funeral." I finished off my drink.

"It's hard for some people."

"I think it would help if I could manage a few tears. I'd feel like less of a bitch, you know?"

"You're not a bitch."

"I'm horrible."

He put his hand on mine. "Anyone who plays the piano as beautifully as you can't be that bad."

I smiled. "Thanks, Mr. Buchanan."

"Call me Greg."

## Chapter 10

Crystals hung from the ceiling. Catching the artificial light, they looked like shards of a shattered rainbow. Ebony African sculptures stood on slender pedestals staggered around the room. Dr. Young, the most eccentric of my father's friends, stood by the window. He looked like he was in his late-thirties. I remembered when he came to dad's New Year's Eve parties. Always with a different beautiful woman. I failed to see what the women saw in him. Dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and denim shorts, he seemed to be going for a Bohemian look, but he just looked like an idiot.

"You look like an idiot," I said, breaking a half-hour of silence.

"I appreciate your frankness," he replied.

"No, actually, you don't."

He smiled. "Well, at least you're talking earlier in the session. We have a solid fifteen minutes left."

"Count it as a professional victory."

"Are you always sarcastic?"

"Don't bore me, Doctor. If I have to sit here twice a week, be remotely interesting or put in a bar."

"It's not my job to entertain you, Cass. I'm here to help you."

"Bullshit," I said to myself, though loud enough for him to hear.

"Last time, we talked about Abigail. Do you want to continue telling me about her?"

"Nothing more to tell. Her mother's crazy. Abby's dealing with it."

"How would you characterize your relationship with her?"

"She's my best friend."

"So you have a unique affection for her?"

"I suppose."

"Last time, you made a lot of parallels between Abigail's personality and your own. You're both ambitious, outspoken, confident."

"Yeah?"

"I just think it's interesting that you place such an importance on being with someone who is similar to you. A lot of people might find those similarities threatening. That's why a lot of 'best friends' are composed of complementary as opposed to overlapping personalities."

"Are you calling me a narcissist, Dr. Young?"

He grinned. "It's interesting that you came up with that interpretation."

"In liking her I like myself?"

"A possibility. What do you think?"

I shrugged.

"Let's talk about the other significant friend in your life, Lindsay. You've known Lindsay for longer. You two are obviously very close as well. Do you think it's possible Lindsay might feel threatened by your friendship with Abigail?"

"Absolutely not."

"How can you say that with such certainty?"

"You don't know Lindsay. The girl doesn't have a petty bone in her body. She's practically a saint."

"A saint?"

"Patron saint of dogs."

He stared at me.

"What?" I asked.

"Sometimes, exaggeration demonstrates an unusual respect. But you're a critical writer, more language-savvy than the average person. Yet you chose to exaggerate. Why?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"It just seems your admiration for Lindsay is more or less removed from yourself. That by exaggerating her good qualities you're distancing yourself from her."

"Even if that's true, why would I do that?"

He shrugged. "I can't answer that."

"Can you prescribe a pill for it?" I asked.

He laughed. "I'm sorry. We have to be serious." For the first time since I sat down, I smiled. "But I'm afraid our time has expired."

"Okay." I stood up and stretched, admiring the broken rainbow hanging from the ceiling. I walked toward the door.

"Annie tells me you have an award ceremony tomorrow," Dr. Young said.

I turned around. With a roll of my eyes, "Yeah."

"Not looking forward to it?"

"How could I not look forward to it? It's Great Big Plastic Trophy Day."

"You find it silly?"

"I just don't think it's important in the grand scheme of things."

"I understand."

I was almost out the door.

"Cass—"

I turned around again. "Yes?"

"Maybe next time we can talk about your father."

I looked at my shoes.

"Cass—"

I nodded. "We'll see."

"Congratulations on your award."

I nodded again and shut the door behind me.

The collar of my dress shirt had been over-starched. It felt rough against my neck. I had tied my tie too tightly.

"Your award's up next," Mason said. He was seated to my left. Abby had been sitting to my right, but she had left a few minutes ago. I didn't know where she had gone.

I was the first academic state champion my school had had in seven years. People from the local newspapers were there to take pictures; it was a day to brag, to show off that a rich school full of rich kids was better than a school equipped with metal detectors at each entrance.

The clapping ended for someone I hadn't been paying attention to. From offstage right, Abigail walked to the podium.

"What is she doing?" I asked Mason.

He smiled. "Just watch."

"Good evening," Abby said. "When I met Cass Kincaid, four years ago, he was smart-mouthed, arrogant, and rude. I liked him immediately."

Uncomfortable laughter from the crowd.



"As many of you know, this hasn't been the easiest year for him. But despite difficulties, he has still managed to use his extraordinary talent and garner for this school a state championship." Abigail looked straight at me. "Cass, you are that rare person whose hard work and dedication refuse to be dampened by any circumstance. You've been both a role model and a friend to me, and I appreciate you more than words can express." She returned her eyes to the general audience. A dramatic pause. "So, without further ado, I present this year's state champion in writing, Cass Kincaid." Applause as I stood up. Applause as I walked to the stage.

"Thanks for that, Abby," I said as I embraced her.

"I meant every word," she replied. The principal came out and handed me my golden (not gold) trophy. The crowd was standing up now. I saw Annie seated in the parents' section of the auditorium.

I stood there a moment, attempting to smile. The applause dissipated. I put the trophy on the floor and brought my mouth to the microphone. I felt myself swallow.

"Thank you." I took a slip of paper out of my front pocket and looked into the audience. Lindsay, Amanda, and Mason in the front row. I started my speech. "This award means a great deal to . . ." Abby was in the wings, watching. A clingy black dress and a remarkable grin. "It means a great . . ." I felt hot, as if someone had shone a light on my face. "This award . . ." The crowd went blurry. My heart was racing.

I felt the paper slip through my fingers and onto the floor. I closed my eyes. "What the hell . . ." I said to myself, but the microphone picked it up. The crowd was silent. I opened my eyes. I felt dizzy and started breathing through my mouth. "If you want to know the truth, it was easy." I brought my mouth closer to the microphone.

"You people don't even know what you're talking about." I looked down at Lindsay. Wrapped in a flower print dress. "Not even you."

I looked across at Abby. "I'm your role model? God— why? Is it because of trophies like this?" I picked it up. "It's a piece of shit, but I'll buy you one if it means that much." I threw the trophy on the floor.

The principal was onstage now, urging me away. "No, shut up! She needs to know, or she'll end up just the same. Alone. At the top. All that work to validate a cliché." I glanced back at Abby. "She deserves to be warned. We have to be fair." I looked out into the crowd. Lindsay was standing up, pleading with her eyes.

"I'm not making sense, am I?" The principal approached again. This time, I turned my shoulder, stormed past him and off the stage. I went through the side entrance of the auditorium and out of the building. I bumped into a car in the parking lot. The alarm started blaring. "Damn it!" I kicked the tire and kept walking.

"Cass!" I heard from behind me.

I kept walking.

"Cass!" She was walking faster. I felt her hand on my back.

"Abby," I said, my lip trembling.

"What is it?"

"I . . ." I didn't know what to say. I looked up into the sky and screamed. Abby didn't budge.

I saw Lindsay coming out of the auditorium exit. She stood there a moment, looking at us. She turned around and went back inside.

I looked at Abigail. "There are harder things, Abby. More important things."

The alarm persisted.

"Like what, Cass? What's more important?"

I took a breath. "Being . . . real, Abby. Being a part of something. A family. A relationship. You think you have all the time in the world with somebody, but . . . you know what? That's shit. Everyone says that. That's not it."

"Then what?"

I looked her in the eye, my eyes welling up. "It's the thought that even if he had lived another fifty years, it wouldn't have mattered. Because I wouldn't have let it matter. I would've just kept him on the fringes of my life. School and contests are so easy—just a straight line. You keep pushing down the line because it's all you. It's all up to you. But families require all sorts of . . . connections, you know? It means slowing down when you want to speed up. It means listening." I looked Abby in the eye. "I can't tell you the last time my father was happy, the last time he laughed. I can't tell you because I didn't pay attention."

"Cass—"

"Don't feel sorry for me," I replied sharply. "We are just alike, Abby—never forget that. We are harsh and unforgiving to people who are too ignorant to help themselves, and right now, I deserve no pity. I'd rather you stare me down for the fool I am than be a hypocrite. Be consistent. For God's sake, be consistent."

She shook her head.

"It's okay if you don't know what to say." I put my hand against her cheek.

She nodded and put her arms around me. Feeling weak in my ankles, I started to sink, but she caught me and pulled me down to sit. She lowered my head gently onto her leg, petting me like a cat.

## Chapter 11

---

All even-numbered rooms on the third floor of the Mingle Suites have the same painting of a sad clown, his lower lip drooping, his eyes tearing up. I stared at it, knowing enough about art to know that this was crap.

When I was eleven, mom took me to see the clowns after I told her about my uncle who wasn't an uncle and what he had done. I promised not to tell dad. The beginning of secrets. The circus—my reward. Give and take—that was what mom knew. I'll scratch your back; he'll scratch your . . .

I shuddered as I slithered out of the thin cotton sheets.

The air conditioning was on high. I buttoned my shirt and went to the bathroom to wash my face. Mr. Buchanan was still asleep. It was two o'clock in the morning. I had a headache.

I flirted with the idea of spending the night but decided against it. Too complicated.

"Annie," I heard him say.

I turned around. My purse was already on my shoulder.

"Mr. Buchanan."

"Greg."

"Of course. Greg. Did I wake you?" I whispered.

"You're leaving?"

"I have to. Cass."

"Oh, right. Right." He smiled a sleepy smile. "You coming to work tomorrow?"

I mean, today? This evening?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." He put a pillow over his head.

"Greg," I said.

"Yeah," he replied, his voice muffled through the pillow.

"Maybe today we could go to dinner or something?"

A momentary pause. "Sure. I'll call you."

I nodded. His face still under the pillow. "I'll see you later."

I quietly opened and shut the door behind me. There was a tray with a half-eaten fruit plate and a couple of champagne glasses laid out in front of the opposite door. I smiled, took the elevator to the lobby, and walked to my car.

I slept in that morning until awakened by the clang of pots and pans. Cass making breakfast. I was hungry, but I didn't want to face him.

Breakfast was T.C.'s favorite meal to cook. Once, mom and dad went to New York for a weekend so it was just T.C. and me. I came to the kitchen, still a little drowsy but roused by the sound of pancakes on the griddle.

"Good morning!" T.C. beamed as he added a new cake to the stack. He topped my stack off with some crushed pecans and a pat of butter. "The syrup is in the pantry," he said with a smile.

I was ten at the time; he had just turned sixteen. "What's gotten into you?" I asked.

He smiled and kissed me on the cheek. He hadn't shaved yet, and the stubble gave a slight sting. I rubbed my cheek.

"I'm in love, Annie."

"With who?"

"Her name is Melissa, and she's absolutely perfect."

"Is she the girl with the big boobs?"

"Annie—"

"I want boobs like hers."

"Annie—"

"I keep pulling on them, but—"

"Annie! That's enough." He frowned. "Don't be gauche."

"I'm not being 'gauche.'" Melissa was his first love. His first kiss. A few months later, his first heartbreak. The breakup was messy. She had fallen in love with T.C.'s best friend, a sturdy-jawed Brazilian exchange student named Thiago.

T.C. stopped making breakfast. His grades started to fall. Mom forced him to quit theatre. Two loves lost. His grades fell even further. He found out they were engaged. He started spending more time in his room, developing affinities for Anton Chekhov, Oscar Wilde, and heroin. The drugs didn't bother me. He was still my brother, and he still kissed me goodnight before I went to bed. But his personality lost

its crispness, and he became vague. He wasn't living up to his potential, my parents said. And because of that, they loved him less. I loved him the same, though.

I thought about writing him another letter, but I was too tired. I yawned, pulled the comforter over my head, and went back to sleep.

When I finally made my way down, around noon, Cass was gone. I wasn't worried. In fact, I was a little relieved. I made a sandwich for lunch. Bacon and lettuce with mayonnaise on wheat. We were out of tomatoes. I noticed a note on the counter.

Annie,

Your mom called. Said she's sick and needs to see you.

Meeting Abby for lunch. Be back late.

Cass

Pithiness was one of Cass's chief virtues.

After eating my sandwich, I called mom. She was doing her will, she said—a prospect too intriguing to pass up. It was 12:30. I was getting used to the two-hour drive to Houston. I decided that I could make my way there and be home in time for work at 6:00. I left a note for Cass telling him where I'd be.

It was a nice drive up. Not too many morons on the highway. I felt unusually energetic as I pulled into her driveway.

I rang the doorbell, but no one answered. I rang it again and then again. The door creaked open.

"Annie," she said in a feeble voice. The veins on her forehead looked blue and hard. Her hair was a tangle of curls, lying on her head like a disheveled nest.

"I was about to leave."

"It takes me a little longer to get around."

"You look awful."

She nodded. "Can we go inside?"

I followed her in. The house was messier than before. Photo albums and newspaper clippings strewn across the coffee table. Throw pillows on the floor. A semi-folded American flag draped over the couch. Papers everywhere.

"What happened here?" I asked.

She shrugged and carefully sat down on the couch, moving the flag to allow herself space. I sat across from her in the recliner.

"I heard about Dennis," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't even know Dennis."

"He was your husband."

"Well, he's dead now."

She shook her head and attempted another smile. "I always knew you'd turn into one terrific bitch."



"I learned from the best."

She grasped on to her side and doubled over.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Nothing." The grimace left her face. "T.C. has been writing me. He seems well."

"Yes, he does. So, what exactly is wrong with you, mom? I have work."

"It's Saturday."

"I work Saturdays. You're ill?"

"Yes."

"With what? Cancer?"

"Yes."

"I figured. What kind?"

"Intestinal."

"That's a pretty bad one, huh?"

"Yes."

"They have you on radiation or something?"

"I've decided not to treat it."

I shook my head. "Yeah, mom—that sounds like the smart way to go."

"I'm old, Annie. No one cares about me anymore."

"That's sad."

"That's enough. I didn't ask you here to fight."

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. “So, you’re making a will. I’m surprised. I didn’t think you’d leave me any money.”

“I’m not.”

I smiled. “Well, thank God for that.”

“Your cousin Greta. She’s running for the New Jersey House.”

“Greta?”

“She called me a few days ago. I always saw something special in her. She’s a rare one. Not like you. She’s going to bring the Kierkan name back where it belongs.”

“What about T.C.? Aren’t you leaving him anything?”

“Do you know how much a decent campaign costs?”

“So nothing.” I shook my head. “You’re not leaving him anything.”

She pursed her lips. “If there’s anything here you want, you can take it. The furniture. The art. Whatever.”

“Such generosity.”

“Take what you like. I don’t have much time left.”

“How dramatic.”

She refused to look me in the eye. “I’ll be in my room if you need me.” She pulled herself up and walked out.

I stood up and started pacing. Mom had me come all that way to get nothing. I laughed. If she was trying to hurt me, it hadn’t worked. I had come for one reason—to see her tremble. Her entire life—turning the strong into the weak, manipulating and

maneuvering to accommodate her agenda. Dad had the title on his office door. Dad had the Capitol Building seat. But no one knew how to work family values like mom did. Elise Kierkan, the real Senator from New Jersey.

But now—now, she was withering into nothing, succumbing to time, a force even more relentless than she. She had gotten away with everything until now. Now, she was sick and alone and dying. And it was enough for me.

I walked to the front door. I put my hand on the doorknob when I remembered something. I walked to mom's room and opened the door.

"Mom."

Atticus was asleep on her stomach. She propped her head against the headboard.

"Found something you want?"

"The piano. I want the piano."

"Take it," she replied.

"I'm going to call someone to move it. I'll let you know when they're supposed to arrive."

"Whatever."

"The piano—that's all I want."

"And that's all you'll get," she said with a smile.

I closed the door and left the house.

When I arrived home, I checked the machine to see if Greg had called. He hadn't. I wasn't hungry anyway. Cass wasn't home. I had time for a little nap, so I

crawled upstairs and collapsed into bed. It seemed bigger now. I was used to Dennis taking more than his share of the covers. That wasn't a problem anymore. I opened the top drawer of his nightstand. He was with Virginia now.

I heard the front door opening. I had expected Cass to come home later. I thought I might go down since I hadn't seen him all day. That thought eventually passed.

The next thing I remembered was my alarm going off at 5:15. It wasn't a particularly refreshing nap. I got out of bed and went to the bathroom to brush my teeth and put on makeup. When I was ready, I went into the hallway but before going downstairs, I noticed the office door was open. I hadn't gone in since Dennis died. I peeked in and there was Cass. Sitting in the corner of the room, his back against the wall, he was crying, but it wasn't a crying I was accustomed to. It was sad rather than petulant, muffled rather than shrieked, soft and controlled, the way an adult cries. He had a framed picture of our family clutched to his chest. I wondered how many times he had done this, if this was some anomalous instant or a nightly routine. I found it oddly touching that after all the fits and fights, he suddenly knew how to cry like a man.

But it's an embarrassing thing to cry. It's a thing to be done alone, with the door shut, not halfway, not three-quarters of the way, but all the way, with the door locked. I felt awful, watching his shoulders shake as his grip tightened on the frame.

I closed the door quietly and tiptoed down the stairs.

Work was going smoothly until some tone-deaf soprano decided to sing along to "The Way You Look Tonight." She was just getting started, too. The hotel restaurant had an unusually long wait that night. I went back to playing classical pieces until she removed herself from my piano.

At the end of my shift, I got up to leave. Seeing Greg for the first time that night, I walked toward him.

"Hey, stranger," I greeted.

"What?"

"I thought we were having dinner today."

"Oh, right. Sorry about that." He looked around. "Hey," he whispered in my ear, "do you want to come up with me?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah."

I nodded and suddenly felt his hand on my back.

We took the elevator up to the honeymoon suite. It was the most expensive room in the hotel and was almost always vacant. As soon as he shut the door behind me, he started to unbutton my shirt.

"Hey, come on now." I laughed. "Can't we have a drink or something?"

"Yeah, sure." He desisted with my shirt and walked to the mini-bar. He grabbed a few tiny bottles and handed them to me.

"A glass?" I said. He went to the bathroom and got one of those paper cups one uses for rinsing.

I put some rum in and took a sip.

He sat down on the bed and watched me. "You look beautiful tonight," he said.

I smiled. "You're sweet." I took another sip. "So, how was your day?"

"Awful. So many things to do here. That's why I couldn't call you for dinner."

"I understand."

"How was your day?"

"Nothing special." I shrugged. "I don't know. It seems that lately—"

He lunged from the bed. His hand was on my thigh, and his tongue was in my mouth. I couldn't finish my sentence.

"Wait a second," I managed to say, pushing him away.

I shook my head and momentarily drew back, playfully delaying the inevitable. I finished off the rum and put the empty cup on the nightstand. Greg, more hesitantly this time, wrapped his hands around my waist. I smiled as I laid him onto the bed with one gentle push and unbuttoned the rest of my shirt.

## Chapter 12

"A piano?" Dr. Young had half a cinnamon roll in his mouth.

"Yes."

"When did it arrive?"

"Couple days ago."

"How did she get it?"

"Her mom."

"I thought she didn't speak to her mother."

"She's apparently very ill."

"That must be hard on her . . ." he swallowed, "and you as well."

"Never met the woman."

"Your grandmother?"

"My step-grandmother is the one subject that makes Annie uncomfortable."

Dr. Young took a sip of milk. "Are you sure it doesn't bother you that I eat?"

"I don't care."

"Okay." He took another sip. "So how have you been doing?"

"Fine, I guess."

"Ever since your award day, you've been feeling lethargic. Has that gotten better since last session?"

"I don't know."

"You seem lethargic now."

I sighed and put my head in my hands.

"How's Abigail doing?"

"Fine. Dating that Brad guy."

"Tell me about Brad."

I shrugged. "Salt of the earth. Grew up on a farm. Raised hogs or heifers or something that eats its own shit."

"You think he's not good enough for Abigail?"

"What does it matter what I think?"

"How does her dating Brad make you feel?"

"Indifferent."

He put his milk on the table. "I'm not convinced."

I shook my head and sighed. "It's hard to be Abby's friend sometimes."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know what I mean. She's Abby. She does that to you. She's still her charming self, and you can't imagine not being around her, but after a while, you start feeling like hell."

"When is it that you start 'feeling like hell'?"

"I don't know." I looked up at the ceiling. "Sometimes, she says she's going to call, but she doesn't." I looked away from him. "She stood me up for lunch a couple days ago." Another pause. "I barely saw her last week. She insists nothing's wrong, but . . . I don't know. Sometimes, she gets this bored look on her face."

"How does that look make you feel?"

"Giddy with delight."

"Seriously."

I shook my head. "Scared."

"Why scared?"



I looked up at the shattered rainbow. "Because I need her. And that's a horrible thing—to need someone. You can't control people. They come and they go. Interesting and interested one moment. And then not."

Dr. Young stared for a moment. "Do you think loving Abby has somehow softened losing your father?"

"What?"

"Do you think loving Abby—"

"I never said I loved Abby."

A furled brow. "You're right. I'm sorry." Cinnamon glaze lined his lower lip.

"People use the word *love* too liberally. It's become a pleasantry. As if assertion could replace feeling. Suddenly someone you "love" forgets to say it, and you find yourself heartbroken. Victim of a poor linguistic choice."

"I misspoke. I'm sorry."

"You don't screw around with love. That's supposed to be the most important thing, right? It has to mean something. Of all things, *that* has to mean something."

We were silent.

"How are you handling your grief, Cass?"

"I'm thinking of developing a cocaine habit."

"Cass, you have to take this seriously."

"I don't want to talk anymore."

"Cass—"

"I'm tired." I stood up.

"We still have time left in the session."

"Have another cinnamon roll."

When I got home, I saw Abby's car in the driveway. I walked into the house.

Annie was playing the piano and Abby was singing. They stopped as I came in.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"You didn't tell me she played the piano."

"Abby, Annie plays the piano."

"How was your day?" Annie asked.

"Hoot and a holler."

"I'll leave you two alone," Annie replied. Annie was getting better about leaving the room when she wasn't wanted.

"Are you okay?" Abby said as soon as we heard Annie's bedroom door shut.

"What are you doing here?"

"I had to get out of my house. Stephanie's being a little terror."

"Why?"

"She's sick."

"Again?"

"The girl has the weakest immune system in the Western hemisphere. She belongs in a bubble."

I smiled.

"I have some news to tell you, but first, you've got to hear what Brad did last night."

"What did Brad do last night?"

"He actually said that he could picture us— get this— *married* someday."

"He said that?"

"Yes."

"Are we happy about this?"

"We're conflicted."

"Okay."

"I mean— it was a nice thing to say."

"Of course."

"But it's also a little scary because marriage—" she rolled her eyes, "give me a break."

"Right."

"But mostly it's a good thing, I think."

"Definitely."

"I've dated so many guys, and they all turned out to be such asses, but this one—I really think I could keep this one."

"Terrific, Abby."

"It really is. I mean— my acting career comes first of course, but if this wonderful guy wants to wait around for me, who am I to stop him?"

"Very sensible of you."

"Are you okay, Cass?"

"Yes."

"Because you don't seem it."

"I'm tired."

"You like Brad, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Because I want you two to like each other."

"No problems on my end."

"Brad likes you, too. He thinks you're smart."

"I am smart."

"You are smart." She hugged me. "I'm so happy," she said.

I smiled.

She loosened her embrace. "What?"

"Nothing."

"There's something."

"There's nothing."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Abby, is there a magic number for asking the same question you're aspiring to?"

She had a blank expression on her face. "I should've called before I came."

"Whatever. I don't care."

Abby frowned. She hadn't come over in over a week. And I was supposed to be excited. I couldn't manage it. "Well, I'll call you later, Cass." She was horrible at calling later. For her, "I'll call you later" was the same as "goodbye" without attached expectations. Another poor linguistic choice.

"Wait, Abby—"

"What?"

"The news you wanted to tell me?"

"It's nothing. I'll see you tomorrow." She shut the front door and left.

I went upstairs to my room and started looking through old computer files. I found a folder called "Ninth-grade Poetry." I double-clicked. One gem in particular stood out.

Dreamscape

Am I alone?  
 Whisper in my ear  
 Deliver me from fear  
 One reassuring glance is all I ask

Be my light  
 at my darkest hour  
 Be my eyes  
 when I am lost  
 Be my strength  
 when I am weary  
 Be my angel  
 when faith has left me

Never leave my side  
 and I will never leave yours  
 Never be cruel  
 and only kindness shall leave my lips  
 Never doubt by dedication

We'll escape our ambitions and expectations  
 We'll leave behind all pain and disappointment  
 Our dreams will equip us  
 with gossamer wings  
 With love

even mortals can fly

--Cass Prescott

Deep down, within all of us, lies a crappy poem. But behind every crappy poem lies something true. And even if that truth is expressed poorly, it's there. Loneliness and a nervous hope. It plagued me three years ago. It plagued me now. Abigail was not my dreamscape. Ambition and expectation were fuel for Abby. For me, they were love's substitutes, used to make me feel special when no person could. I felt like writing another crappy poem, but, by the grace of God, I resisted.

The next day, I finished my homework earlier than usual. I went into the hallway toward Dad's office. I reached for the doorknob but stopped myself. I had been going in every day since the funeral. I needed to remember him. What little I had—I needed to keep.

I walked into the office, but something was different. I needed to talk to him now. I needed him to be closer.

I went down the stairs, passed Annie in the kitchen, and got into my car. I took a deep breath and turned the ignition.

My father was angry when he died. I had defied him. And he would be alive if I hadn't. The thought reached into my belly, twisting my stomach, constricting the little food I had eaten that day. It wasn't fair. Your teenage years you're allowed to be a complete ass because you get the subsequent years to finish growing up, to miss your family, to realize that your parents weren't so bad after all. And then, as an adult, you can thank them. You can know how much they did for you. By the time I would know that, it would be too late, and the wisdom that would have enabled me to finally be friends with my father would be wasted. A bitter enlightenment. One among many.

Oakwood cemetery had a circular path you could drive through. The sun would be down in thirty minutes. I parked my car. I could see dad's grave over a small rise. There was somebody already there.

"Lindsay," I said, recognizing her as I approached. She was wearing her spring running attire. Her hair was in a ponytail.

"Cass, hi." Lindsay had been the perfect friend through the days following my father's funeral. Loyal, supportive, understanding. As she had always been. But something was different about her. It had started before my dad died. The vivacity I

had counted on for so long had dampened. She said it was just stress, so I didn't worry at first. But the stress never seemed to lift, and it was making lines on her face. I didn't understand it. So I just tried to ignore it.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I was taking a jog and thought I'd stop by."

"Do you come often?"

She shrugged. "Every once and a while." She wiped the sweat off her brow. "I'm sorry. I look awful."

"You look fine, Lindsay."

"I still can't believe he's gone." She put her hands in her pockets and shifted her weight on her heels. "Your dad was the greatest." She looked down at the stone. "You didn't know this, but after what happened with Joey, I went to your father four times a week for therapy."

"What?"

"He refused to take any money for it. Said we were family, and you can't charge family."

"You went to therapy?"

"I was almost raped, Cass."

"I know. I just— for how long?"

"A few months."

"*Months?*"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want you to worry."

"Lindsay—"

"Cass, I didn't want you to worry. I just needed to talk through it, you know?"

"You never said anything."

"You were so upset yourself. You took it harder than I did."

"But Lindsay . . ."

She put her hand on my arm. "You feeling okay?"

I had come to talk to my dad. But I didn't know what to say. I was just mad.

Mad that Lindsay was almost raped. Mad that my dad was gone. Mad that any sense of worldly justice had been dissolved. How much could one person lose? Lindsay's spirit. Abby's attention. Dad's life. There one moment. Then gone. It was like some cruel rite of passage. But what was I entering into? What could possibly be worth this excruciating threshold? I was so afraid that there would be nothing to show for it in the end, nothing to look forward to but more great big plastic trophies.

I felt Lindsay's arm wrap around my waist. "What is it, Cass?"

My face tightened up. Her arm held tighter.

"I don't think I believe in God anymore," I managed to say.

She looked at me, puzzled for a moment, oscillating between pity and disappointment. She held me tighter, trying to ignore what I had just said, liking me a little less for having said it.



Chapter 13

---

His head on the pillow, Greg watched as I put my shoes on.

“I want you to come over to the house and meet Cass,” I said, leaning against the bed.

“What?”

“Dinner. My house. You can meet my son.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Because he’s my son and you’re my . . . whatever you want to call it.”

He frowned. “What do you call it?”

“I don’t know. Boyfriend? That’s a little adolescent for me, but okay.

Boyfriend.”

He sat up, his back against the wall. “Annie, did you want us to see each other . . . exclusively?”

I scratched my neck. “Have you been seeing someone else?”

“No.”

“But you want to?”

“I didn’t say that, but—“

“This has been going on for almost three weeks. I thought . . . I don’t know . . . I thought that meant something.”

“It did. It does. I mean . . . we’re two lonely people helping each other out.”

“Helping each other out?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t change a spare tire, Greg.”

“Calm down, Annie.”

“You calm down.” I grabbed my purse.

“Wait a second,” I heard him say as I walked to the door. “Can’t we talk about this?”

I slammed the door behind me. It was almost three in the morning. I stomped onto the elevator. What the hell was I thinking?—sleeping with my boss. I reached the ground floor and went to my car. I wondered what Dennis would think about it. I got into my car and started driving. I wondered what Virginia would think about it. I changed the radio station. I wondered what Cass would think about it. I sped all the way home. I was going to crash one day, the way I drove. I was going to crash one day, just like Dennis. I pulled into the driveway and went inside.

The next morning, I felt sick. Cass had already left for school. It was raining a little. The beautiful part about living in a town where no one cares about you is that no one cares if you sleep with your boss. No one gossips behind your back. I didn’t have to explain myself to anybody. The bad part is I couldn’t tell anybody even if I wanted to. When I was in high school, I had all sorts of friends. When I was in college, I made new ones and kept the old. But when I quit college, everyone else moved in different directions while my life stalled, caught inside the family photograph with the cheesy smile and the ugly merlot blouse Dennis had given me our first Christmas.

I looked at the clock. It was noon. Lunch time. But I wasn't hungry. How many times had I fixed myself a sandwich just because it was lunch time? Since when did a clock dictate what I did? Screw that.

I laid on my stomach. That was supposed to be a bad position for sleeping, but what the hell? I was feeling rebellious. I laid there. My stomach started hurting after an hour, so I switched to my side.

Mom would be dead soon. I wondered how I'd handle that. That wasn't an interesting thought, so I thought about T.C. coming down for the funeral. It would be good to see him again. I had missed him. He was the one person I could always count on. Until he got carted off to the mental institution. I started to remember it all—my childhood, dad, mom, Uncle Dan . . . No. No. I wasn't living in the past. I was dying in the past.

I needed a glass of tea, but I was too lazy to get out of bed. I went back to sleep. When I woke up again, it was four-fifteen in the afternoon.

I heard voices downstairs. Cass's and a girl's. Was it Abby? Abby wasn't so bad after all. She was a good singer. I didn't mind playing the piano for her singing. I still didn't like her with Cass, though. She was going to hurt him. Maybe she already had. She was the type who didn't know when she hurt other people. And he was the type who showed his hurt to everyone but the person hurting him. I was surprised that I could make that observation. I felt maternal. I checked to make sure there wasn't milk spilling out of my nipples. All dry. I sighed. And then I laughed. And then I sighed again. And then I went back to sleep.

I woke up. It was seven-thirty. I should've been at work. Screw Greg. Oh wait—I had. I laughed again, but then I started to feel like crap. I heard voices again downstairs. The girl was laughing. I heard a snort. Not Abby. Lindsay. I smiled. Lindsay hadn't been coming over as much lately. I liked Lindsay. All moms, even bad ones like me, want their sons to meet a slew of Lindsays and as few Abbys as possible. Lindsays are more reliable; they never forget birthdays; they snort when they laugh, a remnant of a more awkward time in their lives. Abbys are no-doubt flashier, but they're fickle and sometimes cruel. They laugh perfectly. They smile perfectly. But you can never be at ease with an Abby. And you can never love an Abby. They'll punish you for that. With a perfect little grin on their perfect little faces, they'll beat the shit out of you every time.

Lindsay laughed again. She snorted again. I laughed. I wanted to go downstairs and hug her and ask her to come over everyday to protect Cass from the Abbys of the world. God knows I couldn't protect him. I was one of them. I shuddered at the thought. I was an Abby. Had been all my life until recently. Until Greg. I never had control of Greg. Maybe he was an Abby, too. A male Abby. An Abe . . . or Abner . . . or . . . shit, I was losing my mind. I went back to sleep.

Thirty minutes later, I woke up. My body was confused as hell. My mother would be dead soon. I got out of bed and went into the hallway. The office door was cracked open again. I looked inside. Cass was there again. Crying like a man again.

I was about to shut the door completely when suddenly, that maternal instinct started kicking in again. The general rule through the years was to avoid any

confrontation with Cass. But now seemed like an exception. I could comfort him—the way a mother comforts a child, the way Hannah would comfort Lindsay, *not* the way my mother comforted me. I opened the door.

He didn't seem to notice.

"Cass," I said softly.

He was trying to hide his face. "Leave me alone."

"Cass, it's okay." I knelt down beside him. "It'll be fine." I didn't know where the words were coming from. I somehow knew what I was supposed to say.

He looked up at me. His eyes red. A tear trickling down his cheek. It was moving so slowly—just like in the movies. I brought my hand to his face and wiped the tear off.

Cass slapped me away. "What are you doing?" He stood up suddenly.

"I was just . . ." He was frowning and breathing heavily. "I just hate to see you sad," I said.

"Was I making you uncomfortable?"

"That's not what I meant."

His lip curled, his teeth clenched, "Through all of this, Annie, you've maintained an extraordinary indifference I've actually grown to appreciate. Please don't abandon your one strength now when I need it the most."

I looked down.

Cass continued, "I've spent the past few months apologizing every time I get sad. Well, I do not apologize for crying when I'm sad. I do not apologize for missing my

father so much I want to scream. I do not apologize—not to you, not to Dr. Young, not to anyone.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to be sorry. I want you to know.”

“Know what?”

His eyes rolled up. “Do you have any idea what it feels like to carry around something so huge it makes you . . . tired? I mean—I know you lost your husband, but that hasn’t seemed to phase you, so I’m wondering if anything ever has.” He looked down and shook his head. “That sounded horrible. I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. I’m not trying to be a smart-ass, I swear. I just don’t understand, Annie.”

I could tell by his eyes that he wasn’t trying to hurt me. For so long, I had taken those invasive stares as adolescent insolence, but I was wrong. He was just trying to know me. I looked at him and nodded, suddenly knowing what I had to say. “Come with me,” I said.

“What?”

“Follow me.”

He followed me down the stairs. I walked to the piano and sat at the bench. He stood beside me and watched.

“Listen to this.” I played a scale. G below middle C lingered. “Do you hear that?”

“Yeah. Is it broken?”

“I broke it.”

“Well . . . shame on you.”

“No, listen.” I played it again. “I was playing so hard on the keyboard one day, I split the string. I was playing so hard.”

“Annie—“

“Listen.” She played it again. “Mom would get so furious if I threw a tantrum in words. But a tantrum on the piano—that was art.” Cass sat down in front of me.

“I split the string. I was so upset. I split the string. It was when T.C. went away.”

Cass crossed his arms. “When he raped that girl?”

“No. I mean—yes. But you don’t understand.”

“Then explain.”

“I have to begin at the beginning.”

How long had it been since I had been at the beginning? I closed my eyes. It was always with me. Pieces of memory I never let coalesce.

“Uncle Dan,” I managed to mutter.

“Uncle Dan?”

“Not a real uncle. My dad’s political advisor. His closest friend. Mom called him a genius—said he was the reason dad made the Senate. We called him Uncle Dan.” I couldn’t believe I was doing this. “I was just a little girl, Cass. He came into my room one day, and I was sleeping. But I woke up. I was eleven years old.”

Cass’s eyes widened. “He molested you?”

"I didn't know what to do. My parents loved him so much. I was afraid they wouldn't believe me. I had trouble believing it myself. I woke up the next morning, and he was gone. A bad dream, I thought. But he came back a few nights later." I looked down at the piano. "A few nights after that. Again and again." I looked at Cass. "One night, I finally told mom."

"What did she do?"

"She said that Uncle Dan's wife had just died, and he was sad. That I should remember how much he had done for our family. She said that as long as it was just *touching* and nothing else that I shouldn't say anything to anybody. That if I did, daddy wouldn't be a Senator anymore."

I saw a fly buzzing around the piano. It landed on one of the white keys. I motioned it away with my hand. "He would come into my room, and I'd just lie there and try not to cry. He never said a word, but I would feel his hand."

"After a while, during a really rigorous campaign, he stopped coming to my room. I thought it was over, but after a few weeks, he came back again. I'd hear footsteps and then he'd come inside and close the door. And he'd lock the door. Daddy worked late a lot. Uncle Dan would know when Daddy worked late."

"How long did this go on?"

"Almost half a year."

"Half a year?!"

"I stopped crying after the third month. I just went numb. Mom said it was okay if it was just touching."



“What happened to end it?”

“He forgot to lock the door.”

“Someone found you?”

“T.C. He walked in and started screaming. Mom couldn't ignore the screaming.”

“What did she do?”

“She apologized to Uncle Dan. She stood there and said ‘I'm sorry’ to that sack of shit. I was paralyzed in my bed. Pajamas and panties down to my knees. I watched. Didn't make a noise. As if I wasn't even there. Uncle Dan left.”

I took a breath. “My nightmare was over. T.C.'s just beginning. Mom threatened to send him to military school and me to boarding school if he breathed a word. For his silence, he could rejoin theatre. But mom was always wary of him after that. He had power over her. She wanted it back. One night, T.C. gave it back.

“He was on a date with this girl. Pretty girl from another town. They drank. Smoked a few joints. Had sex in her bedroom with her parents just two doors away. T.C. thought she was a senior just like him. She looked it.”

“But she wasn't.”

“She was fourteen.”

“So . . . she consented?”

I nodded. “Statutory rape. Her parents found out a week later. She hung herself in the basement. Charges were about to be pressed, but mom stopped it. The queen of damage control. Gave them a bucket of money and sent T.C. to a mental institution to

deal with the guilt and the grief and the drugs. The publicity was bad, but not as bad as a trial. It was quick. It needed to be quick.”

Cass was silent.

“T.C. made a huge mistake. No one denies that. But between mom’s manipulations and what he saw being done to me—all of that should give the situation some . . . texture, you know? He’s not an evil person. I hated that you thought that about him. And he’s sorry for what he’s done. I want to visit him soon. I want you to come with me. I want you to try to know him again. My mom is going to be dead soon, so he’ll come. She has intestinal cancer, so he’ll be here.”

“Annie—“

“She’ll be dead soon.”

“Annie—“

“I’ll be dead soon,” I said. I was falling from the bench. Cass grabbed me and put my head on his shoulder.

“I did have something, didn’t I?” I asked. “I had something I had been carrying around. You didn’t think I did, but I did.”

“Yes, you did, Annie.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about killing myself.”

Cass was crying again. “Please don’t say that, Annie.”

“I’ve been having a hard time crying,” I replied.

“It’s okay.”

“I feel like a bitch all the time.”

"You're not a bitch."

"Maybe I should see Dr. Young if you're through with him."

"We could go together."

"I slept with my boss."

"What?"

"I thought he loved me, but he doesn't."

"It's okay, Annie."

"I feel like a fool." Cass was trembling.

"It's okay," he said.

I could still hear the G below middle C.

---

Chapter 14

It's odd and somewhat disconcerting to realize that an entire part of one's existence consists of a string of habits—tricks for shifting dinner conversation from pressing issues to safer, more inane fare, ways of smiling to cover a broken heart. One does not realize the danger in it. He calls it safe. He calls it home. And he never invests anything in it but his part in the choreography.

My father was dead. Annie and I had avoided the topic for months, neither one of us truly trusting the other, both of us realizing that the single, tenuous thread linking our lives had suddenly been plucked. We were like two strangers, trying our best never to touch the other, dancing, almost in a trance, to death's song. I cried too much. And she never did. And together, we achieved what from a distance might seem like a perfect balance.

For years, I had distanced myself from Annie, who seemed like nothing more than a machine of facades. What a bittersweet relief to realize a person behind the masks. A relief because one never wants to believe a person could be so dreadfully superficial. Bittersweet because behind the mask was not a woman at all but a scared child, quivering under her covers.

It had been two weeks since Annie told me the horrors of her childhood. And I still remembered how still she felt in my arms. Not a single tremble, not one stray tear. I did not know what to tell her, how to soothe her. I could only listen, but perhaps that was enough to break the cycle of bad habits. Perhaps that mere pause, that significant silence, was enough to halt the exhausting spins and bows. The dance could finally end, and we could build a brave new home where dancing wasn't allowed, where one could stumble without trepidation, where one could wipe a tear from the other's face without

arousing suspicion. It would all be new. And though difficult, it would have the distinct advantage of being real.

She had taken the day off from work and cooked dinner. She laid the green beans and roasted chicken on the table.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"It's good."

I put a green bean in my mouth and placed a napkin on my lap. "Did you love my father, Annie?"

She spit out the water she was drinking. "Cass—"

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you asking that now?"

"There's never going to be an appropriate time to ask that."

She wiped her mouth. "I guess you're right."

"So . . . ?"

"I think so." She scratched her neck. "I'm sorry. That's the best I can do. I was very fond of him, and he was a good man. There were times. Times I truly believed I loved him. It's hard, though, sometimes. To know."

"But how could you marry someone if you didn't know for sure?"

"After I decided to have the baby, it seemed right. Sometimes, you get caught up in what you think you *should* do."

"Do you miss him ever?"

She nodded. "I do. We shared this house for almost ten years. It wasn't always the greatest romance. But when you're with someone for that long, when you wake up beside them everyday, it's disorienting when they're suddenly not there."

"Do you regret marrying him?"

"I don't know. I really can't know any other path than the one I picked."

I nodded and went back to my food.

"You know—he was very proud of you, Cass."

"Really?"

"He didn't know how to handle you half the time, but that didn't matter because he knew you could handle yourself."

"I always thought I was just a pain in his ass."

"You were," she replied with a grin. "But he was proud of the pain in his ass."

"Well, that's good." I smiled.

"So, what about you? How's Abby doing? I haven't seen her in a while."

"I haven't seen her much, either. She's been busy." I shrugged. "I don't know. I don't care."

"Yes, you do."

"What?"

"You may be mad at her right now, but I know you care about that girl."

It was the first insightful comment Annie had ever made about one of my friends.

"I guess so. I mean, yes. Of course I do. She's just hard to deal with sometimes."

"But you deal with her anyway. Why is that?"

The doorbell rang. Thankfully, "I'll get it." I walked to the foyer and opened the door. "Lindsay." A gray polo shirt and jeans.

"We need to go."

"Where?"

"Abby's leaving."

"What?"

"The news Abby had the day she came to your house—she's moving again. Back to California. I found out yesterday, and she told me not to tell you, but I thought you should know."

"Why is she going back to California?"

"All I know is that Stephanie's staying here, but she's going back. She didn't want you to know. She said you were mad at her."

"She wasn't going to say goodbye?" I rolled my eyes. "Why am I not surprised?"

"She's on her way to the airport. We can catch her before her flight leaves."

"She obviously doesn't want to see me."

"Of course she wants to see you."

I stood there a moment as Lindsay tapped her foot, waiting for my pride to subside.

I stuck my head back in the house. "Annie, I need to go."

"Why?"

"Abby's leaving."

"For how long?"

"For good, I think."

A slight pause. "Then yes— you should go."

Five minutes later we were on the highway. Lindsay started coughing.

"What is it?"

"I have something in my throat."

"What?"

"Cornbread dressing and black-eyed peas for dinner. Something went down the wrong pipe, and it's just been stuck there."

"For how long?"

"Couple hours."

"Oh, my God."

"I tried drinking a bunch of water, but it didn't help."

"It's just been stuck there?"

"Yeah."

"Does it hurt?"

"A little."

"I'm sorry."

"I thought about sticking my finger in there, but I really hate throwing up." She started coughing again. "I have a thing about throwing up."

I started laughing.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry." I couldn't stop laughing.

"This is funny to you?" she smiled.

"Of course not."

"You're a sick man, Cass Kincaid."

I pinched myself in the leg and smiled. She laughed, unable to suppress a snort.

"There it is," I said.

"There's what?" She snorted again.

"You. Laughing. It's good to hear."

"What do you mean?"



"I don't know. You're so tired lately. Ever since you got that job at the bookstore. I'm just glad to see some of the old you."

She stopped smiling and put her attention back on the road.

"Did I say something?" I asked.

She sighed. "Cass, what do you want me to do? Quit my job?"

"If that's what you want to do."

"I can't quit!"

"Why not? You never had a job before."

"I never had to think about paying for college before."

"Oh," I looked over at her. Working out of necessity was a foreign concept to me.

"Of course."

"It's easy for you. You've got the money already. Plus, you're the valedictorian. You'll get scholarships."

"You will, too, Lindsay."

"It won't be enough." She sighed. "I have to work. And yeah—between work and school, I get tired. So tired I just can't keep up with you anymore. I miss going to the park and hanging out at coffee shops and having Chinese picnics just as much as you do."

I looked over at her. "It'll be okay." My voice was soft with uncertainty. "I'll pay off. And you can come with me to college. Just like we always said."

She shook her head. "That's not going to happen, Cass."

"Why not?"

"I'm working minimum wage. That's not enough to pay for the colleges you want to go to."

"Then I'll go to a different college."

"Don't be stupid."

"Lindsay—"

"Cass, enough, okay." A tear trickled down her cheek. "It's hard enough knowing I can't go where I want to go. I don't think I could handle knowing I kept you from where you were supposed to be."

I put my hand on her shoulder. Her eyes were still on the road. "It's okay, Lindsay." I pressed my head against her arm. "We'll talk about it, okay?"

She wiped the tears from her eyes and composed herself. "Not now." She patted my head without looking at it. "Abigail's leaving."

We reached the airport and sprinted inside.

"I'll just wait at this little newsstand," Lindsay said.

I nodded and looked on one of the television screens that had the gate numbers and places of destination.

It took me ten minutes to reach her gate. I saw Stephanie and Abby's dad sitting down. "Am I too late?"

"Cass," Abby's dad said. "No, she just went to get a snack."

"Okay."

"Cass," I heard from behind me. I turned around and there was Abby, holding the biggest bag of pretzels I had ever seen in my life.

"You hungry?" I asked.

"I like pretzels."

I looked her in the eye, scowling. "So you were just going to leave without saying goodbye?"

"I was going to write a letter."

"How Victorian of you."

Abby's eyes narrowed. "Dad, why don't you and Steph get something to eat?" Mr. Laigley took his cue and his youngest daughter away.

"Asshole 'til the end, huh?" she said once they were no longer in hearing distance.

"You're one to talk."

"Why did you even come?"

"I wanted to say goodbye."

"Then say it."

I stood there a moment. Crossed arms and set jaw. "Why didn't you tell me you were leaving?"

"I didn't think you'd care if I left."

"Of course I care, you idiot."

She frowned.

"Why are you leaving, Abigail?"

"Because—" She dropped a pretzel onto the floor and stared at it for a moment. Her eyes still on the pretzel, "Because after everything I've seen you go through, I realized I have to go home and give my mom another chance."

Edie hadn't occurred to me as a motivation. I was thinking it was an audition for a crappy teen movie. Or perhaps another guy. I attempted a smile. "Oh." I nodded. "That's good."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I fidgeted. "I'm even kind of proud of you."

"Thanks."

Abby was wearing a teal spaghetti-strap dress. "You look pretty," I told her.

"Thanks. You look like shit."

"I was in kind of a hurry."

"How did you find out I was leaving?"

"Lindsay."

"*She* told you?"

"She drove me."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

She put a pretzel in her mouth. "I don't think Lindsay likes me very much," she said, her mouth still full.

"Do you really care?"

She thought for a moment. "Actually, yeah." She swallowed and smiled. "That's surprising, isn't it? Lindsay's nice. And she doesn't like me. A lot of people don't like me."

"A lot of people *do* like you."

"Crushes don't count. It's a lesser kind of liking."

"A lot of people don't like me either."

"That's why we like each other, right? Because no one else will." She grinned.

"If you can't join 'em, beat 'em." You always used to say that."

I laughed. "I did."

She smiled. "Pretzel?" she offered.

I waved the bag off. "Are you going to visit sometime soon?" I asked.

"Maybe at the end of the summer."

"Okay." I looked down at her shoes. "I'm sorry I wasn't too nice these past few weeks."

"You've had a lot on your mind."

"I know, but still."

"It's okay." She put her hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eye. "I'll write you all the time from California."

"No, you won't."

She grinned.

"It's okay. Just call me when you're in town," I said.

"We'll do lunch."

"Promise?"

"I promise, Cass."

Abby's dad came back. Stephanie was carrying a chili cheese dog behind him.

"Abby, I think they're boarding your plane now."

She nodded. "I better get going then." She folded up the pretzel bag and pressed her thumb against my chin. "Wish me a good trip, okay?"

"Have a good trip."

She hugged me and then her family and then started walking.

I needed to mean it. It would be the first time I would say it to anyone other than Annie or dad. It couldn't just be a pleasantry. It was the most important thing.

"I love you, Abby." I tried making it sound less significant than it was, but my nerves betrayed me, and to my ears, it sounded like the loudest thing ever uttered.

She turned around. Her carry-on bag swung around her chest. "I love me, too," she replied with a grin.

I laughed. She ran back and kissed me on the cheek the way a five-year-old kisses a puppy. "Goodbye, Cassie," she said. She turned around and walked into the gate. It was hard being with her sometimes. But it was harder saying goodbye.

Abby's spit still on my cheek, I waved to Mr. Laigley and Stephanie and made my way back to the newsstand.

Lindsay was browsing through a magazine. I tapped her on the shoulder. "Hey."

"Hey," she replied, turning around. My eyes were welling up. She hugged me. Tighter than anyone ever had. "It'll be okay," she whispered in my ear as she slid her arm against my back. The sides of our heads pressed against each other, we wove our way through the terminal and out of the airport.

## Chapter 15

---

It was the beginning of May, more than four months after Dennis's death and exactly two weeks after my mother's. The school year was coming to a close, and with it, Cass's high school career.

"Annie, she doesn't want a corsage."

"Every girl wants a corsage. It's her senior prom."

"I asked her."

"She's being nice."

"You think?"

"A fresh flower one. When I went to prom, I had a nice fresh flower one."

"I'll ask again."

"Don't. It's Lindsay. She'll say the same thing. Just buy the corsage."

"I don't know what kind to get."

"I'll go to the florist with you."

"Okay." He smiled. "Thanks."

Cass was trying on a tuxedo. The saleslady came into the dressing area and saw us in front of the mirror.

"Oh, my goodness. That looks absolutely fabulous," she said.

"Really?" Cass asked.

"Definitely."

"Annie?"

"You look great. Lindsay's going to be swept off her feet."

“For the last time,” Cass replied with a scowl, “we are going as friends. There will be no sweeping of feet.”

I sighed. “A mother can dream, can’t she?”

He smiled. “Okay,” he said, adjusting his tie in the mirror. “This one then.”

“Excellent,” the saleslady replied.

The car was hot from being out in the sun. It wasn’t even summer yet.

“Could you turn on the air conditioner?” Cass asked.

“Sure.” I turned it on high.

Cass turned down the radio. “I think I’ve decided which college I want to go to.”

“Which one?”

“Duke. A professor came to speak to us a few weeks ago. They have a strong liberal arts program. The only thing is—the cost.”

“Dennis set aside a college fund, Cass. And if that’s not enough, we’ll take out a loan.”

“I don’t want you to be in debt because of me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ve worked hard. You go where you want to go.”

He grinned. “I’ll send the confirmation notice this afternoon.”

“Excellent.”

Cass opened and closed the glove compartment. A nervous habit. “Annie?” he asked.

“Yes?”



“Why did you quit college?” I was getting used to questions like these. Difficult questions with important answers.

I sighed.

“Was it because you were pregnant?”

“Actually, I quit before I knew I was pregnant.”

“Then why?”

After a pause, “Well, my first two years, I came home a lot, at least once a month. But my junior year, I got really busy and stayed until Thanksgiving break.”

“Then what?”

“I went home. And my dad opened the front door, and this is going to sound stupid, but . . . his hair was gray.”

“Was it not gray before?”

I shook my head. “Dark brown the last time I’d seen it. Then, all of a sudden—gray. My father had gotten old, and I hadn’t even noticed. It’s like—you go along, never realizing that every day changes things ever so slowly, and then you stop for a second and everything’s different. Your best friend from high school is getting married and your favorite local restaurant is closing and your dad’s hair is graying, and you didn’t notice because you were writing a thirty-page paper on the finer points of Baroque and Classical.”

Cass shook his head. “Sounds scary.”

“It was.” I stopped at a stop sign and looked him in the eye. “But I made a mistake, Cass. No matter how hard you try, you just can’t hold the past together. You

can't stop your father's hair from graying. And it's important that you write papers on the finer points of Baroque and Classical. You've got to move forward. Do you know what I mean?" I went through the intersection.

"I think I do."

I pulled up to the house.

"You know—I'm going to come back to visit as much as I can," he said.

"You better."

"And I'll call at least once a week. You know I'll do that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I know." I smiled.

May 1, 1999

Dear T.C.,

Today Cass and I went shopping for a tuxedo. He looked so handsome. I'll send you pictures.

I wish you could've stayed here longer. It was a good service, I thought. I know that there were things you wanted to talk to her about before she died. I'm really sorry you didn't get that chance.

I thought about when you were here last, when we went to mom's house, and I said those horrible things to you. I want to apologize for that. I know now what you were trying to do. And I'm ashamed that I stopped you from doing it.

Cass and I have been seeing Dr. Young. He's helping us, I think. It's odd talking about everything—mom, you, my childhood. I guess there's still a part of me that's the Senator's daughter, shaking hands with strangers and smiling for the camera. There were times I felt like a living advertisement. And I hated it but at the same time I feared anything else, anything different.

But things are changing now. And I'm not afraid. I've been given a new beginning, and so has Cass. He's decided on Duke for college.

I'm kind of sad, though. I feel as if I'm just getting to know him, and he's leaving. Today, after we finished shopping and I went to my room, I actually started crying. I was so glad to discover the well hadn't dried up after all. I'm going to miss him, but he needs to see the world now, to see all that he can be—as corny as that sounds. I suppose it's my time to do the same.

Well, I'm sorry this letter has dragged on so long. It's just what I've been thinking today. I miss you, T.C. I hope you're doing well up there. Write back soon.

Yours with love,

Annie

## Chapter 16

"I don't want a limo," Lindsay said. We were sitting in the living room watching television. Lindsay didn't frown often, so I relished the sight.

"Well, I want one."

"It's too expensive, Cass. I don't want you spending all that money."

"It's our senior prom."

"It's just me, Cass."

"What does that mean? You think you're not important enough for a limo?"

"You know what I mean."

"Lindsay," I put my hands on her shoulders, "I couldn't be more thrilled to be going with you. I wasn't sure you'd say yes."

She smiled. "What'd you think I'd say?"

"I was afraid somebody had already asked you."

She fidgeted. "Actually, somebody did."

"Who?"

"Blake Brown."

"Blake Brown?"

"Yes."

"The guy you've had a crush on since the second grade?"

"Yes."

"Lindsay!"

"What?"

"Why didn't you say yes?"

She shrugged. "I was holding out for a better offer."

I felt light in my stomach. Like a roller coaster's first drop. "You're incredible, you know that?"

"I just want to have fun at my senior prom. You and I always have fun together, don't we?"

"Yeah, we do."

She smiled. "Well, I have to get to work. I'll see you tomorrow."

"It's Sunday. We have a Chinese picnic today."

"Cass," she said, "I'd like to, but by the time I could get home, my dinner break would be over."

"Then I'll bring the food to you. We can eat in the break room. That would be okay, wouldn't it?"

"I only have a thirty minute break."

"We won't chew."

She grinned. "Okay then. Six o'clock."

"I'll be there," I replied. I still felt a flutter in my stomach as I looked at her.

Quietly remarkable Lindsay.

I walked her out and went back inside.

Annie was coming downstairs. "Lindsay leave already?"

"You just missed her. What have you been doing?"

"Writing a letter to T.C."

I smiled. "I enjoyed seeing him last week."

"He enjoyed seeing you, too."

"So, what are you doing now?"

"I have some time before work. I was going to play the piano for a little bit if you don't mind the noise."

"Not at all."

I sat on the couch as she walked to the bench. She had an envelope in her hand. She put it on the little music ledge and started to play. I didn't know what she was playing. Her head bobbed up and down as the music got louder and softer. She was getting really into it when all of a sudden, I heard a wrong note. She stumbled through a bit. A few more wrong notes. And then she stopped.

"I'm sorry," she said, scratching her head. "That's never happened before. I normally play it perfectly."

"It's okay, Annie."

"Strange, though. I've played it a thousand times. I never mess up."

"It's okay."

She looked at me. "You're right." She looked back down at the keyboard. "I should teach you how to play one day."

"I'd like that."

A week before, she had gotten the lingering note fixed. Her parents wanted to fix it years ago when she first did it, but she wouldn't let them. It was her way of preserving some remnant of what she had suffered. We all scream in different ways. Some of us, with our mouths. Some of us, with one note on a piano. It must have been a relief for someone to finally hear her cry.

It should be noted that life with Annie wasn't suddenly perfect. There were still awkward times when we weren't sure what to say to one another. But there was less of an effort to cover up those moments. I think that helped us realize that no one could live a

flawless life, that not every wound could heal completely, that we would just have to move forward— imperfect, scarred, and maybe even a little scared. I wasn't sure how things would be in the future, if this newfound peace between us would last. But at the very least, we knew how to hear the other one scream. We knew how to tell the truth. If not the end, it was a beginning. And though not perfect, we had the distinct advantage of being real.