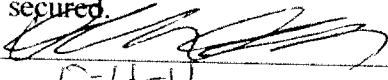


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PLANES, TRAINS, AND AUTOMOBILES:
STORIES INSPIRED BY PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

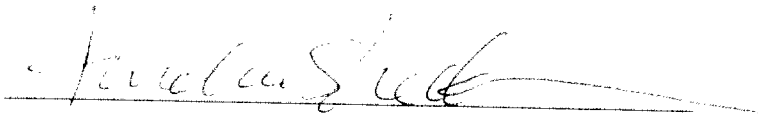
By
CHELSEA HANNA COHEN

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree
With Honors in
Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

MAY 2011

Approved by:

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Aurelie Sheehan', written over a horizontal line.

Professor Aurelie Sheehan
Director of Creative Writing

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This thesis contains four short stories, each inspired by a different means of public transportation – car, airplane, bus, and train. Each story also focuses on a person at a different time in his or her life. One is about a young child, one about a woman in her twenties, one about a middle-aged man, and one about an older man. Due to this, each story portrays a unique perspective on certain aspects of life.

Montana, Missouri, Alabama

There are three streets in my neighborhood that are named after states. If you're driving down here from the city, you'll see Montana Street first, then Missouri Street just south of that, and then finally you'll see Alabama Street. Those are the only three in the entire neighborhood, and maybe even the entire city, but I don't think I've seen enough of the city to say whether or not that's the case. It's the one thing that I've always thought was kinda weird about my neighborhood. I don't know why whoever designed it chose those three states, or why there are only three in the first place. It's just one of those things that crawls around in my head when there's something else I'm supposed to be doing.

I asked my mom about it once, and she told me that the developers of our neighborhood ended up with three unnamed streets once they finished building and thought it would be nice to name them after states because some of them had been in the military. She said they put the names of all fifty states into a hat and then picked three, and that's how come we have Montana, Missouri, and Alabama. But when she was talking, she had this little smile on her face, the kind where just one corner of her mouth was pulled up and you almost couldn't tell it was there. And that's the same kind of look she had when she used to tell me things like that she had eyes in the back of her head and that the car wouldn't start unless my seatbelt was buckled. So I don't know how much I believe her, but it was nice of her to try and give me a reason.

I even tried to go to the library once and figure it out, but I just got stuck looking through a bunch of old books that didn't even make sense to me. I did find out that our city was named after an Indian tribe, though, and I guess that's kind of cool, but there was nothing to tell me why Montana, Missouri, and Alabama. I've got a feeling it's just going to be one of those things that I never figure out the truth behind.

Every Wednesday, my mom lets me walk home from school because I stay after for band rehearsal and she doesn't have time to come get me before she has to leave for work. It's not too far of a walk, but my friend Jeanine always walks with me anyway. We memorized the streets we have to pass, and now we've turned it into this song we sing on the way home in order to pass the time. Clear Canyon, Mariposa, Lagoon Drive, Little Leaf, and of course, Montana, Missouri, Alabama. My house is on High Hills, which is the one after Alabama, and Jeanine's is on Grove, which is the one after that. So it's really not that far of a walk at all, but my mom still doesn't want me walking by myself. Except sometimes I think it would be nice not to walk with Jeanine. She's got this habit of talking too much, and sometimes her voice gets all nasally, especially when she's talking about boys. "Cindy," she'll say, "we need to find you a boyfriend!" and the last part of that sentence will go up so high that I swear my ears can't even hear it. Even when I tell her that we're only twelve and I don't need a boyfriend yet, she'll just keep talking on and on about it until I start repeating the streets in my head just to drown her out. Montana. Missouri. Alabama. Home.

Today's Wednesday, so I'm walking home with Jeanine again. We actually make it all the way to Mariposa before she starts talking. I think that's a new record.

"Cindy," she says, "I think I've got a problem."

Problems aren't usually what Jeanine likes to talk about. She told me once that talking about unhappy things gave her headaches, so she didn't like to do it often.

"Yeah?" I say back.

"Yeah. I got this note from Billy today." She stops walking for a second and digs through her bag, pulling out a crumpled piece of paper. She smooths it out on her leg and hands it to me. There's a drawing of what I think is a heart on top, but the lines are so crooked that it might not

be. Underneath the heart-thing, it says “Do u like me?,” or at least I’m pretty sure that’s what it says, but Billy Snyder’s gotten a C in handwriting for the past three years so I could always be wrong. Then there’s two boxes, one with “Yes” written by it and one with “No” written by it.

“Well, what’s the problem?” I ask Jeanine. “Do you like him or not?”

She wrinkles her nose. “I dunno. I’ve never really thought about it. But Steve told me last week that he liked me too, and I don’t know who I like more. That’s the problem.”

I sigh. I don’t think Jeanine’s problems are like the rest of the world’s problems. She keeps talking, telling me about the good things and the bad things about each of them and why she should or shouldn’t go out with each of them, but I stop listening. My mom tells me I’m too young to date, and I think I agree with her. It just sounds so complicated. I don’t think boys want to date me anyway. No one’s ever written me a note like that or told me anything like that. I guess Jeanine’s just the type of person boys like. She’s got really pretty blonde hair that curls without her having to do anything to it, and my hair is this really light shade of brown and just kind of hangs there, no matter what I try and make it do. Jeanine’s also like six inches taller than me, and this show I saw on TV once said that only tall girls could model, and models are supposed to be the prettiest people. She also has breasts, which I think boys like. I don’t really have any yet. My mom says I’ll get them soon, though.

We cross Missouri, and Jeanine is still talking. After three years of knowing Jeanine, I’ve gotten pretty good at pretending I’m listening. She turns to me.

“So what do you think I should do?”

I shrug. “You know I’m not good with things like this. Do whatever you think is best.”

“But I don’t know what’d be best. That’s the problem. You’re my friend, Cindy. You’re supposed to help me with these kinds of things.”

We leave Alabama behind, and thankfully I can get away from Jeanine now. I tell her I'll see her tomorrow and turn onto my street. I think my street is really pretty. Nearly all of the houses have trees lining their yards, and everyone keeps their lawn nice and neat. My favorite house is the one two doors down from mine. They have this fountain that always has the clearest water I've ever seen flowing, and I've even seen birds on it sometimes, like what happens in the movies. Every time I walk by it, it makes me want to have a yard like that someday.

My house is near the middle of the street, so I get to see a lot of the pretty houses on my street every day. I use my key to unlock the door. My mom's probably already left for work. She's usually gone by the time I get home on Wednesdays, which means I have the house to myself. I had a dad once, but he left a few years ago. My mom doesn't really talk about it much, so I don't know why. I asked one time, but she told me I wasn't ready for that information. I guess that's one of those things I'll get when I'm older, like breasts.

When I turn my key and open the door, though, I can hear footsteps. "Mom?" I call.

The footsteps pause. "In the kitchen, Cindy," I hear her reply.

I drop my backpack by the front door, kick off my shoes, and walk through the front hall to the door at the end. My mom leans against the stove. Her hands are clasped in front of her, and her hair is up in a ponytail. My mom never wears her hair in a ponytail, and she doesn't like me to, either. She says women look best with their hair down.

"Do you not have to work tonight?" I ask her.

Her shoulders go up as she takes in a deep breath, and as she lets it out, I watch as it blows a stray piece of her hair upwards.

"Cindy, there's something I have to tell you. Can you please sit at the table?"

I sit in the chair closest to where I am, forgetting that it's the one with the broken leg that wobbles every time you sit on it. It shakes underneath me, but I decide it doesn't matter right now and stay there anyway. "What's going on?"

My mom sits down across from me and takes my hand in hers, something she hasn't done in years. "Cindy, I don't know how to tell you this, so I'm just going to say it. I lost my job. The office has been going through some financial problems lately, and the janitorial staff was the first to go. I got the call this morning."

I start to move around in my seat, but that makes me worried the chair is going to fall out from underneath me, so I stop. "What does that mean?"

My mom looks like she's about to cry, and that scares me, because I don't ever remember seeing that happen before. "We can't keep the house, Cindy. I'm already behind a couple months on the payments, and without money coming in, we'll be evicted."

I blink. "Evicted?"

"Cindy, we have to move."

"Can't you just get another job?"

"It's not that easy, I'm afraid. It's really hard to get a job these days, Cindy. I could get one tomorrow, but it could be weeks or even months." My mom buries her head in her hands. "I can't take the chance that I won't have one soon. I'm sorry, Cindy. I wish there was another way."

"But we can move back here, right? As soon as you get money?"

"That's not how it works, Cindy. They'll give the house to someone else."

I don't know how to respond to this, so I stare behind my mom's head, trying to think of something to say. I look at the walls, the pictures, and then I see the pantry door.

Even though I can't see it, I know that on the other side of the pantry door are a bunch of notches where my mom records my height every few months. If we don't come back here, I won't see those notches again. If I don't see those notches again, I won't remember how big I was, and then I'll forget all sorts of other things. This is home. It always has been. It can't just stop being home.

My mom must be able to tell that I'm not okay, because she squeezes my hand tighter. A tear falls from the corner of her eye, and I can feel my eyes getting wet, too, but I try and hold it in. If I cry, she'll just feel worse.

"There's more, Cindy."

More? What more could there be?

"I called your grandparents today, and they've agreed to let us move back in with them. Just for a little bit, until I can find a job again."

I frown. "Grandma and Grandpa live really far away."

My mom rubs her thumb over mine. "It's only a three hour drive, honey. It won't be that bad."

"But how will I get to school? Will you drive me? We'd have to leave at four in the morning to get there on time."

"Cindy, there are schools where Grandma and Grandpa live, too."

I sit straight up. "But I don't want to go to one of those schools. I like it here. I have friends here."

"You can make new friends, honey. You're a wonderful girl, and people will love you no matter where you are."

"But I don't want new friends."

There are more and more tears coming out of my mom's eyes, and I suddenly realize that the same is true for mine.

"Cindy, I'm so sorry. But this is the way it has to be. For now, at least."

I don't say anything. I can't even think about not going to my school anymore, about not being in my house anymore. No more Jeanine. No more Billy Snyder, or Josh chasing me around the playground at lunch, or helping Sarah with her math homework. No more Montana, Missouri, Alabama. As soon as I think about Montana, Missouri, Alabama, that's all I can think about. I get this feeling that if I leave, I'll never figure it out. I know I probably wouldn't have figured it out anyway, but moving away would just feel so final, like I was closing the door on it forever.

"Cindy?" My mom's voice pulls me away from Montana, Missouri, Alabama. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I don't want to go." I mean to say it in my normal voice, but it doesn't come out louder than a whisper.

"I know. I don't want to either. But we have to." My mom stands, pulling me up with her and hugging me tightly. "It'll be okay, Cindy, I promise. We'll get through this together."

My mom drives me to school the next day like usual, but today doesn't feel like usual at all. I don't really want to tell anyone yet, so I try and make myself look and act as normal as possible. Jeanine's really good at figuring out when something's wrong, though, and so I don't even make it two minutes before she's asking me what's the matter.

"I'm fine, Jeanine," I tell her.

She puts her hands on her hips and scowls at me. “I know that’s not true, Cindy. Stop lying to me.”

“I’m telling the truth, I promise.”

“Cindy, you can trust me.”

“Really, I’m fine.” I try and change the subject. “How are Billy and Steve?”

Jeanine immediately brightens. “I think I decided I like Billy. He called me last night, and my mom let me talk to him for a half hour.”

I thought changing the subject would help, but as Jeanine goes on and on, all I can think is how she’s worried about something like this when my whole life is going to change.

I think Jeanine can actually tell that I’m not really listening to her because she stops talking and looks at me.

“I do wish you’d tell me what’s wrong.”

I chew on my lip. “I told you. It’s nothing.”

The bell rings for class, so I start to head for the door. Jeanine puts out her arm to stop me.

“You know you really can trust me, right, Cindy? You can talk to me about anything.”

I can feel my eyes start to water again. “I know, Jeanine.” I brush past her before she can see me start to cry.

In first period, my math teacher yells at me because I wasn’t paying attention to the questions he was asking. I want to tell him it’s because I was trying to memorize all the math posters on the wall in case my new school doesn’t have them and I’m supposed to just know things like metric conversions and the first thousand digits of pi, but I don’t. I just apologize and try to pay attention to him, but my mind keeps wandering off. I don’t know exactly when we’re

moving, but I know it's soon. For all I know, this could be the last Thursday I ever spend in this classroom.

I manage to get through second and third period without being yelled at again, but then it's lunch time, which means I have to deal with Jeanine. She tries to corner me while I'm in the lunch line, but thankfully the cafeteria monitor thinks she's trying to cut and tells her off. As Jeanine walks off, she motions for me to meet her at a table in the corner once I have my food. But I don't. I take my tray and sneak out the back door of the cafeteria, escaping outside. I find a nice, shady tree and sit down, leaning against it as I eat my food. It's nice and quiet out here right now. The only sounds I can really hear are a bird chirping and the air conditioning units, but those are far away, so I just hear a gentle buzzing. I look around my school. How can my mom just expect me to leave this?

I finish my lunch pretty quickly, so I get up and throw my trash away, but I don't want to go back to the cafeteria. I spend the rest of the lunch hour walking around our campus. I've seen it all before, but everything looks different today. Even the rosebushes don't look as happy as they usually do. I hear the bell ring, so I head back towards my science class. At least Jeanine's not in this one with me.

The last half of the day seems to go by a lot quicker than the first half did, and finally I'm standing on the curb, waiting for my mom to pick me up. I hope she gets here before Jeanine finds me. I know I'll have to tell her eventually, but I just don't want to do it right now. I see my mom's red car pull into the parking lot and pick up my backpack, ready to go home. As my mom pulls up, she rolls down the window.

"Honey, have you seen Jeanine? Her mother's running a little late, so we're giving her a ride home today."

Great. At least maybe she won't try and talk to me about it if my mom's in the car with us.

I turn around and look for Jeanine. She's standing next to a bush, talking to Steve and laughing. I thought she liked Billy Snyder, but she looks really happy about what Steve is telling her. I catch her eye and wave at her. She looks surprised, and I guess I don't blame her, but she comes over anyway.

"Are you finally ready to tell me what's going on, Cindy?"

I ignore her question. "We're giving you a ride home today."

She smiles. "Okay. I have some news for you."

I open the door and climb into the passenger seat, and Jeanine gets in behind me. My mom makes sure we've both buckled our seatbelts before pulling away from the curb.

"How are you doing, Jeanine?" my mom asks.

I can see Jeanine smile wider in the rearview mirror. "I'm doing great, Ms. Sanders. I just found out some great news for Cindy, too."

I turn and look at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Steve just told me he doesn't like me anymore because he likes you."

A boy likes me? I can feel myself start to smile for the first time since yesterday. Even though I've never really thought of Steve that way and I don't want to date him, it's still nice to know that someone likes me.

I look over at my mom, but she's not smiling like I am. When I look at her hands on the steering wheel, her knuckles have turned white.

"I'm so sorry we have to move, Cindy," she says. "I'm sorry you won't have a chance with this boy."

Jeanine, of course, hears this.

“Cindy, you’re moving? When? Where?”

My mom looks at me. “You hadn’t told her? I’m sorry, Cindy.”

I sigh. “It’s okay, mom.” I look at Jeanine in the mirror again. “We’re moving in with my grandparents. I don’t know when.”

“Next weekend,” my mom says.

“No wonder you were so sad today,” Jeanine says. “Why didn’t you just tell me?”

I look out the window as we pass Alabama.

“I don’t know.”

There’s silence for a couple more minutes as we turn onto Grove. My mom pulls up to Jeanine’s house, and Jeanine starts to get out of the car.

“Can we please talk about this tomorrow, Cindy?”

I shrug. “I guess.”

Jeanine smiles at me. “Good. I’ll see you then.” She shuts the door and walks up her driveway. My mom waits until she can tell that Jeanine is safely inside, then she pulls away and heads back to our house. Neither of us talks until we pull into our garage.

“I love you so much, Cindy,” my mom says as I open my door.

I pause. “I know. I love you, too.”

Usually I have a snack when I get home, but today I’m not hungry at all, so I head right to my room. I sit down at my desk and take my math book out of my backpack. I open it to the day’s assignment and start to work on it, but suddenly I just get really tired. A quick nap won’t hurt, I think, and so I close the book, lay down on my bed, and close my eyes. Only for a little bit.

When I open my eyes again, it's dark outside. I check the clock next to bed. 2:17AM. I slept for a lot longer than I meant to. There's a note next to my clock that wasn't there before, so I pick it up and read it.

"Cindy," the note says. "When I came to get you for dinner, you were sleeping so peacefully that I didn't want to wake you. If you're hungry when you wake up, there are sandwiches for you in the fridge. Love, Mom."

I don't realize how hungry I am until I finish reading the note and my stomach lets out this big growl, so I get out of bed and head to the kitchen. I open the fridge to find two turkey sandwiches, my favorite. As I sit down at the table to eat them, I start thinking about Steve. He's definitely a nice boy, not one of the loud ones who always like to be mean to girls. And I guess he's kind of cute. And he's really smart – he got a 100% on our last math test. If I was going to date someone, I guess Steve wouldn't be such a bad choice. And he likes me. A boy likes me. I start smiling again just thinking about it before I remember that it won't even matter after next weekend. I've read about long-distance relationships, but I don't think they really work well when you're twelve.

I finish my sandwiches, but now I don't know what to do. I'm not tired at all, so I decide to take a walk. I know my mom wouldn't be happy about me walking around outside in the middle of the night, but I think I'll be okay. I won't go far.

I open my front door quietly and leave, making sure to take the spare key under the mat with me in case I get locked out. It's really nice out tonight, not too cold, so I don't even need a jacket. I walk towards Alabama, Missouri, Montana. Maybe if I ask the signs nicely, they'll tell me why.

I get past Alabama just fine, but when I get to Missouri, I notice something weird. The street sign is kinda tilted downwards a little, like someone hit it and knocked it loose. I walk up to it so I can look at it a little closer. I don't know what happened to it, but it looks like it could fall off at any second. I don't remember it looking like this when we drove past it this afternoon, but I guess I wasn't paying that close attention to it.

All of a sudden, this crazy idea pops into my head. I wonder if I could get the sign all the way loose and take it off. I could take it with me to Grandma and Grandpa's, and then I could keep part of Montana, Missouri, Alabama with me. And it would remind me to figure out the reason for their names someday.

I look at it closer. The street signs in our neighborhood aren't anything fancy, just a piece of metal attached to a piece of wood. I don't think it would be too hard to get this one, especially since it already looks broken. The problem is that I'm too short, so I start looking around for something I can stand on. It's dark, but I can make out that there's a big rock a few feet away, so I push and pull it until it's underneath the sign. It's a lot harder than it looks, and I'm already out of breath by the time I can get it in the right spot. But I'm not giving up now.

I put one foot on the rock, testing whether it's safe enough for me to stand on. It doesn't wobble, and it feels more stable than my kitchen chair, so I slowly step onto it with both feet. I rock back and forth a little to make sure I won't fall, but I think it'll be okay. I'm now at just the right height to reach the part of the sign that's hanging down, so I grab it and pull. I can feel it move a little, so I pull harder and harder. Just a little bit more, I think, and I'll have it. I pull with all of my strength, and finally it comes loose.

I fall backwards off the rock, but at least I'm holding the sign. I don't think I'm seriously hurt, but I lie there for a minute or two just to make sure. My back hurts a little, but I don't feel

anything bleeding, and my head doesn't hurt. Once I can finally catch my breath, I stand up and look at what I'm holding.

"Missouri Street," the sign reads in its fancy letters. I hug it tightly. It's mine now.

All of a sudden, I hear this noise in the bushes. It's probably just a cat, but it spooks me enough that I take off back towards my house. As I run, I can hear our street song in my steps. Clear Canyon, Mariposa, Lagoon Drive, Little Leaf. Montana, Missouri, Alabama. I don't want to leave my neighborhood, or Jeanine, or Steve. But at least now I can take a part of it with me.

Flying

When I was six, my older brother convinced me I could fly. The way he explained it made a ton of sense to me at the time, and he was five years older than me, so I believed him when he told me that humans were just like birds and that if I flapped my arms hard enough, I could fly through the air like they did. He took me onto the roof of our patio by climbing through our parents' bedroom window and then told me to go ahead and take off. I jumped, moved my arms really fast, and, well, you can probably guess the rest. Luckily, I landed in the pool, and that was Luke's defense when our mom yelled at him for trying to kill me.

"Sam wouldn't have died," he told her. "I made sure she'd land in the pool."

After about a half hour more of her yelling things like, "What would have happened if she'd missed the pool?" and things involving complicated physics about bodies hitting the water, my mom sent Luke to his room without any dinner – a huge punishment for my food-inhaling brother. I tried to sneak him up a sandwich a few hours later, but Mom caught me putting the jelly away and yelled some more about why I would want to help Luke when he could have gotten me seriously injured. He's my big brother, I told her. That's what you do for your big brother.

Fourteen years later and I still have to come to Luke's rescue, I think as I wait in the car outside the police department. I take one last drag on my cigarette before dropping it out the driver's side window, tapping my fingers on the windowsill in impatience. I made Mike go in and get Luke. Last time I was in that police station, the guy at the front desk kept leering at me, and it creeped me out. I have no idea whether or not he even still works there, but better safe than sorry.

It feels like it's been hours, but the clock on the dashboard tells me it's only been about twenty minutes when I see Mike and Luke walking down the steps. Luke is gesturing wildly with

his hands, and I'm sure he's protesting his innocence or coming up with some story as to why it wasn't his fault. Mike's shaking his head, pretending like he believes what Luke is telling him, but Mike and I have been around Luke long enough to know better.

They reach the car, and Mike leans in through the driver side window to give me a kiss on the cheek. "Sorry it took so long, ladybug," Mike says.

Ladybug is the name he started calling me when we met on the playground in fourth grade. I was wearing a red shirt with black polka dots and was kind of angry because I didn't even know who he was, but we became friends eventually, then more than friends once we got into high school. Mike's been there with me for all of Luke's little mishaps with the law, from the time he got caught with a bag of pot when he was a junior in high school to the time he "accidentally" walked out of a Walgreens with a bottle of Jack under his arm and I had to sit in my room and listen to my mother cry about what she had done wrong and Mike snuck in my window and watched TV with me so we could drown out the noise. He's been there for me every time Luke hasn't.

"Sam," Luke says as he climbs into the front seat. "Sam, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to –"

"Save it," I say. "I've heard it before."

"Can we not go straight home? I need some time to think about what to say to Mom."

Luke used to live on his own, but he moved back in once he stopped being able to afford it. He's got a part-time job waiting tables at a restaurant down the street, and he's been saving up to get a place of his own. He'll probably lose that job now.

"We're going straight home, Luke." I turn the car back on.

"Sam? Are you mad at me, Sam?" God, he still sounds drunk.

“I’m not mad, Luke.” And it’s true. I’m not. Just disappointed, although I guess I should be used to it by now.

No one really speaks much on the car ride home, except for a half-hearted attempt by Mike to sing along to the radio. When we pull into the driveway, Mom is waiting by the front door.

“What is it this time, Luke?” she calls as he gets out of my car.

He fidgets. “I hit a guy. But look, it wasn’t my fault. He said some things, I said some things, it just kind of happened. And I don’t think he’ll press charges.”

Before Mike and I started dating, I was seeing this guy named Freddy. One time, we were arguing and Freddy lost control and hit me. When Luke saw my black eye, he forced me to tell him how it happened. Freddy was in the hospital for two days when Luke got through with him, but Freddy didn’t press charges or turn Luke in either because Luke threatened to tell the police what he’d done to me, which Freddy thought would jeopardize his college scholarship. That’s still not the only time Luke’s used violence to try and prove a point, but somehow he always manages to get out of trouble anyway.

Mom stands there for a second, arms crossed, before she finally exhales. “Come in. I’ll make you some food.”

Mike has to work soon, so he takes off with a promise to call me tomorrow. As Luke eats, I head up to my room to work on homework. I’ve been taking classes part-time at the community college when I can afford them so hopefully someday I can get out of here. I put in my headphones to help me focus and start reading.

My music’s up so loud that I don’t hear Luke knocking at the door, so I nearly jump off my bed when I look up and he’s standing in front of me.

“What is it?” I ask, pulling one headphone out of my ear.

“Can we talk?” He sits down in my desk chair, not quite looking at me.

“Are you sober?”

“Yes, Sam. I’m sober.” He starts playing with his wrist strap, unbuckling it and bucking it again.

“Seriously, are you mad at me?” Luke asks. “I said I was sorry.”

Unbuckle. Buckle.

I sigh and put down my pencil. “Luke, I’m not mad. I just don’t get it, you know?”

Luke shrugs. “What is there to get? I’m a screw-up. You should know that by now, little sister.”

“Luke. You don’t have to be.”

Luke laughs. “Life is what it is. I’ve tried not to be. It never works out.”

I blow my bangs out of my face. “I’m just getting tired of rescuing you, Luke.”

Unbuckle. Buckle. But Luke doesn’t respond.

He sits there for a long time without saying anything, just looking up at the ceiling. I’ve begun to think he’s fallen asleep when he speaks.

“Remember that girl who kept picking on you when you were like ten? Tia something or other?”

“Tia Thomas?”

“Yeah, her.”

“What about her?”

“Remember how I got her off your back?”

I smile at the memory. Luke had come over to the junior high after his high school let out

and cornered Tia on the playground, threatening to beat her up if she ever so much as looked at me the wrong way again. Luckily, none of the teachers had been around at that point to see what was going on, and when Tia tattled to the principal, Luke just shrugged it off as her making up lies to get to me. A lot of the teachers knew how she treated me, and it had turned into one big game of “he said, she said” until everyone just gave up trying to figure out what happened. Luke’s plan worked, though. Tia never spoke to me again.

“Yeah, I do.”

“That’s how it should be, Sam. I should be protecting you, not the other way around.”

He pauses. “I’m sorry.”

This time, I believe him.

When Mike calls me the next morning, it pulls me out of the middle of a dream where I’m flying after a burglar to catch him and protect Luke, who’s waiting and watching from our front window. It’s a dream I’ve had on and off since I was six, since Luke told me I could fly. I usually have it after one of Luke’s incidents, so I guess it’s fitting to have it now.

“Hey, Mike.”

“Hey. Did I wake you?”

I yawn. “Yeah, but it’s okay. I need to get up. I have to work soon.”

“How’s Luke?”

“He’s Luke.”

“Ah. Makes sense. What time do you get off work?”

“Supposed to be three, but I’ll probably be there until at least five.”

“Okay. I’ll order a pizza so you can deliver it. Sound good?”

“Only if you give me a good tip.”

Mike laughs. “Here’s a tip. Bring me my food, woman.”

“Oh? See if I deliver it now.”

“You know I’m kidding. I’ll let you get ready for work now. See you soon.”

I get out of bed and pull on my black pants and uncomfortable polyester shirt, finishing the look with my nametag. Being a pizza delivery girl isn’t glamorous, but it does bring in some decent money, and they’re really flexible about working around my classes.

Luke’s in the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal when I come downstairs. “Good news,” he says. “They’re letting me keep my job.”

“Really? I thought they had like a no tolerance policy for being involved with the police.”

“My boss is chill. She said as long as it doesn’t happen again, I’m good.”

“Good,” I say. “I’m glad.”

The drive to work literally takes me about a minute. It’s only a couple of buildings away from where Luke works. He walks to work every day, and I would if I didn’t actually need my car to do my job.

My shift starts uneventfully enough, but when I get back from a delivery and see a huge line of people coming out of the door, I know things are about to get crazy.

“What in the world?” I say out loud as I get out of my car. I don’t think I’ve ever seen this many people in the store at once, much less on a freaking Monday afternoon. I slide my way past the line of people to find my incredibly frantic manager and two other employees who’ve arrived since I left running around trying to get everything done.

“What is going on?” I ask.

My manager looks surprised. “Did I forget to tell you? Today’s the first day of our buy one, get one free deal.”

Yeah. You forgot to tell me.

“Awesome,” I mutter. “Today’ll be fun.”

Luckily, the occasional delivery still comes in, so I don’t actually have to deal with the giant throng of customers that much. Mike keeps his promise to order a pizza, and when I get back to the store with a \$20 tip from him in my pocket, I notice that Luke is among the slightly smaller crowd.

“Hey,” I say as I go up to him. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m on my lunch break and I figured I’d stop by and get some wings, say hi.”

“Well, hi. Sorry, I’ve got to go work.” I walk back behind the counter and start taking customers’ orders. Things are progressing pretty much as normal when these two older guys, one redhead, one blond, walk up to my register. They look like they’re in maybe their mid twenties, and I swear I can already smell alcohol on their breath even though it’s one in the afternoon.

The redhead leans his arms on the counter. “Hey there, pretty girl.”

“Hello,” I say. “How can I help you today?” Gotta stay professional.

The blond laughs. “Where should we start?” His eyes travel downward and land on my chest. Great.

I look around for my manager, but he’s off in the back making pizzas. I’ll just have to deal with them.

“Would you like to hear about our specials?” I ask.

“I think we’ve got all the specials we need right here.” And then, unbelievably, the blond actually reaches down and grabs my chest. I jerk backwards. “Excuse you?” I say

“Hey,” I suddenly hear. “You guys creeping on my sister?”

Luke.

“Luke, it’s okay. I can handle it.”

I turn back to the two guys. “Please either place an order or leave. I have other customers I need to help.” The crowd behind these two is growing impatient, and one of the other employees has finally shown up to help me.

“You going to make us?” the redhead says, curling his lip.

“No, but I am.” Luke grabs his jacket and shoves him.

“Luke, please don’t. It’s not worth it.” Is he really going to do this again, right after I bailed him out of jail for nearly the exact same thing? I haven’t even finished speaking before Luke pulls his arm back and slugs the guy in the face.

I guess Luke will never learn.

The redhead’s buddy has now jumped in to defend his friend, and Luke shoves him to the ground. My manager comes running from the back, trying to pull them apart. The crowd has mostly dispersed by now, but there are a couple people hanging around to watch the fight. The redhead picks himself up from off the ground and swings a fist at Luke, but Luke dodges it. He doesn’t, however, dodge the blond’s fist as it hits him in the stomach. Luke doubles over, and I try to get to him, but my manager holds me back even as he yells for them to stop. “Call 911,” he tells the other employee, and she picks up the phone and dials.

The three of them separate for a minute, breathing heavily, and that’s when my manager tries to get to Luke. “Come on, man,” he says. “Let’s just calm down.” He grabs Luke’s shoulder.

I don't know if it's Luke's instincts or reflexes kicking in or if he actually thinks my manager is going to hurt him, but Luke whips around and pushes him hard, pushes him away. As I watch, my manager falls to the ground, hitting his head on the counter on the way down.

He doesn't move once he's on the ground, and I can see a small puddle of red leaking out from underneath his head.

"Shit," the redhead says. "Shit, let's get out of here." The two of them take off as I start to hear the sirens.

Luke is pale next to me. "I didn't mean to, Sam."

"I know, Luke. I know."

"I was just trying to protect you."

"I can protect myself. You have to stop trying to protect me, Luke. You have to stop."

When the cops and ambulance get here, we try and explain what happened, tell them that it wasn't Luke's fault. But all they see is my manager knocked out on the ground and bleeding and Luke still at the scene, so they handcuff him and take him away anyway. My manager comes to as they load him into the ambulance, and they tell me he'll be okay, which is good, both for him and for Luke.

We shut down the store for the rest of the day, and I go home to wait for Luke's phone call yet again.

It comes a few hours later, just as Mike texts me to let me know he's on his way over for his usual emotional support. "Sam?" Luke says. "Sam, you can come get me now."

I open my mouth to say that I'll be right there, that Mike and I will be on our way soon. But what comes out instead is, "I can't."

I'm only surprised for a second that I hear myself say that. Then I realize that no, I can't. I can't do this anymore. I can't rescue him. Not again.

"What?" he says.

"I can't, Luke. I'm sorry, I can't."

"What do you mean you can't?"

"I'm so sorry, Luke. I just can't do this anymore. I can't keep doing this."

"I was protecting you, Sam." He sounds so confused. "I was just protecting you."

"I'm sorry," I say again. I hang up the phone.

And then it's just like Luke said, just like he told me I could do all those years ago, and I'm flying. The weights, Luke's weights, have been dropped from my arms and I am free. I spin around and around in the middle of the room, enjoying how effortlessly my body moves, imagining that I really am flying, flying away from here, from everything. I smile. I don't have to do this anymore. I don't have to be responsible for him. I can let him make his own choices, like he should let me make my own.

And then I hit the pool, the fact that Luke is my brother.

I stop spinning. What have I done?

It's about that point that Mike comes into my room and sees me standing there, dazed.

"Sam? You okay?"

And then I'm crying and Mike is hugging me and I'm telling him about what an awful sister I am.

"Come on," he says. "Let's go." He half-carries me out to his car and puts me in the passenger seat.

Around the time I was eight, Luke decided he wanted to run away from home. He packed a backpack full of granola bars and his Power Rangers and walked out the front door. When I begged our mom to stop him, she told me not to worry, that he'd be back soon enough. I cried and cried, because Luke ran away because Mom yelled at him for playing too rough with me while we were wrestling and I felt like it was all my fault. I had never before felt like I'd let Luke down that much, like I should have told him to stop or not cried when he twisted my arm. Until now, it was still the worst I'd ever felt about the relationship between us, and I hadn't even really done anything wrong.

Mike tries to talk to me on the way to the police station, but I don't respond. He pulls into the parking lot and turns off the car. "Are you coming?"

I look up at the police station. "Yeah. I'm coming."

Mike takes my hand as we walk up the steps, and I grip it tightly. What if Luke doesn't want to see me, doesn't want to talk to me ever again? I wouldn't blame him.

The first thing I do when we get through the doors is check the front desk, and luckily the creeper cop isn't working. I stand there while Mike talks to the officer at the front desk and tries to figure out what's going on, but I'm not really listening to their conversation. Finally, Mike thanks him for his help and pulls me to the side.

"Are they bringing Luke out?" I ask.

Mike sighs. "No, Sam. They're not. It's serious this time. He put a guy in the hospital a day after being arrested for punching another guy. They're not just going to let him go. They're charging him with assault."

"But it wasn't his fault. Did you tell them it wasn't his fault?"

"That's for him to do now, Sam."

“Can I see him at least?”

“Yeah. The officer said we could go back and talk to him.”

“Okay. I want to see him.”

The officer leads us down the hallway until we get to a row of cells at the back of the building. Luke’s is the only one that’s occupied. They’ll probably transfer him to the real jail soon.

Luke looks up as we come down the hallway, and I can tell he’s surprised to see me.

“Sam?” he says. “I thought you weren’t coming.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t know why I said that.”

Luke half-smiles. “Yes, you do.”

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out, so I close it again.

Mike takes over. “Sorry this happened, man. Sam told me what went down.”

“I shouldn’t have gotten involved,” Luke says. “I was just trying to protect her.” He looks at me again, but I drop my eyes.

“Thanks for that,” Mike says. “But I think she can protect herself.”

An awkward silence falls over the three of us.

“I’m sorry.” I say it again, louder this time.

“You already said that,” Luke says.

More silence. Then, finally, Luke again.

“Why did you come?”

I walk up to the bars, walk up to him, despite the fact that the officer told me not to.

“You’re my big brother,” I say. “That’s what you do for your big brother.”

I reach through the bars and grab his hand, and we lock eyes, we're both falling, and we both need the other to keep us from hitting the ground.

Paris

When I got the news that my dad had died, I uprooted my wife and five-year-old daughter and moved back to Pennsylvania to take care of the bed and breakfast he and my mom had operated for years. I put an Eiffel Tower in every room on the bedside table next to the phone. It was the only thing I added or subtracted from the decorations and furniture. It just seemed kind of sacrilegious to change anything else. After all, the bed and breakfast was their baby. It was what he would have wanted.

Me, I always wanted to live in Paris. It's what Jane and I were saving up for before we got the news. It's where we spent our honeymoon, and we absolutely fell in love with it. Putting the Eiffel Towers in the rooms reminded me that one day, maybe I can get there again. I like to think that they give our guests ideas of grand adventures that they can plan, too.

That was in July. Now it's November.

Mikaela, our daughter, sits at the desk next to me, working on her math homework. Even though she's only in kindergarten, she's already learning things like addition and subtraction. Times have changed since I was in kindergarten, when all we learned was how to make friends and how to color between the lines. They've even started learning how to write.

The sun rose two hours ago, but Jane's still sleeping. Our three families from the previous night eat their breakfast in our dining room while I eat the same meal at the front desk preparing to check them out. Our chef, a friend of my parents since they were in college, also made sure Mikaela got her favorite breakfast – chocolate chip pancakes.

At my feet is Buster, the old greyhound Jane and I adopted from the pound not long after we were married. His head rests on his paws – old age hasn't been kind to him, and now his legs quiver every time he tries to walk across the room.

In the dining room, the baby belonging to a couple in their twenties starts to scream, and I wince. Ever since Mikaela went through her terrible twos, I haven't been able to stand screaming children. Dealing with it coming from your own child is one thing. Dealing with it coming from someone else's is something else entirely.

I can see the family from where I sit, and I watch as the mother tries unsuccessfully to make her daughter (at least I assume, judging from its pink cap, that it's a daughter) stop crying. I'm about to go intervene, try a trick or two that Mikaela taught me, when I notice that Mikaela is approaching the table herself, crayons and paper in hand. She shows the baby her drawing, and the baby claps her hands and reaches out for it. Mikaela gives it to her as I rush over to the table.

"Sorry if my daughter was bothering you," I say.

The wife smiles at me. "No bother at all. I think Jessica likes that drawing." Indeed, the baby has stopped crying.

"You've got a smart one on your hands there," the husband says to me.

I pat Mikaela on the head, smiling. "Gets it all from her father."

"Says you," I hear from behind me. Turning, I see Jane walking down the stairs, tying a sash around her dress.

"Good morning, sunshine." Mikaela and I walk back over to the front desk to meet Jane, and I kiss her on the cheek.

She yawns. "Morning, Stan. Morning, Mikaela."

"Mom, can I go play outside?" Mikaela asks.

Jane walks over to Mikaela's desk. "What are you working on?"

"Math homework. It's almost done."

"Well, when it's all done, then you can go play outside."

Mikaela scowls, but I can tell it was the answer she was expecting. “Fine.”

“Excuse me,” a voice says from behind me. It’s the man with the young baby. “We’re ready to check out.”

Buster has gotten used to living here. He sees the young family in front of me with their bags and immediately struggles to his feet, wagging his tail. He knows that inevitably after I have finished checking these people out, the front door will open and he’ll get to wander around the yard until I get tired of watching him and call him back in.

After I check them out, I walk the family to the door with Buster close behind us. As I open the door to usher them out, Buster pushes past and runs out, barking and chasing a squirrel across the yard.

The young couple promises to stop by the next time they drive this way, and I smile and wave goodbye as they drive off. While the dust clears, I realize that Buster’s barking has stopped. “Buster?” I call. He doesn’t answer, which is very unlike him.

“Buster. Come here, boy.” I whistle, trying to lure him out of wherever he’s hiding, but still nothing.

Finally, I hear a low whimper coming from the direction of the woods. I walk toward it and realize soon enough that it’s definitely Buster. When I get to him, he’s lying at the bottom of a small ravine. His leg is twisted in a very unnatural looking position, and I can tell he’s in pain.

Carefully, I make my way down the embankment and get to Buster. I reach out to pet him, and he shies away from me, still whimpering.

“Okay, Buster. Let’s go,” I whisper to him. I can’t take him inside. I don’t want Mikaela to see him like this. Gently, I reach down to pick him up. When I slide my hand under his body, he yelps, but I keep going. I get him fully in my arms and carefully lift him off the ground. He’s

a lot lighter than I remember him being. I climb out of the ravine and carry him to my truck, setting him in the back. I wince as I catch sight of his leg again and pet him before getting in the car to drive him to the nearest vet.

“We’re going to have to put him down, Jane.”

I can feel the receptionist pitying me from across the room, so I focus on the posters in front of me. Anatomy of a dog. Anatomy of a cat. How to keep your cat safe from fleas.

“There’s nothing they can do?” Jane’s voice catches.

I sit in one of the ugly, uncomfortable yellow plastic chairs. “The vet says with his age he’d be in pain for the rest of his life. It’s the best option.”

“He’s sure? He’s absolutely sure?”

“Yes, Jane. He’s sure.”

There’s silence on the other end of the phone for a good minute before Jane says, “Okay. Okay.”

“I’m sorry you won’t get to say goodbye, Jane. You and Mikaela both. I don’t know how we’re going to tell her.”

I can hear Jane’s sigh through the phone. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Okay. I’m going to go now. I’ll stay with Buster the whole time.”

“Tell him goodbye for me. Tell him I love him.”

“I will.”

As I drive home, I try and come up with ways to break the news to Mikaela. She still doesn’t completely understand what death means. Jane and I tried to explain it to her when my father died, but she didn’t understand why Grandpa couldn’t just wake up from laying in his

coffin. We decided not to press the subject further, to wait until she was older. It was a bit easier then – she wasn't around her grandfather every day and so she doesn't notice much that he's not there now, but she will definitely wonder where Buster is.

When I get home, Jane greets me at the front door. If I didn't know her, I wouldn't have known that she had been crying, but her stiff upper lip and the slight tinge to her eyes tell me otherwise.

"It was quick, Jane. He didn't feel anything."

She takes a deep breath. "I know. I just can't believe he's gone."

"Me neither. How did Mikaela take it?"

Jane's eyes suddenly fixate on something just above my head. I turn and look, but there's nothing there.

"I didn't exactly tell her he was put to sleep."

I frown. "What did you tell her, then?"

At that moment, Mikaela runs into the room. "Daddy, why did you send Buster to live in Paris?"

"What?"

"Mommy said you put Buster on a plane and sent him to Paris. She said he would be happier there."

Mikaela turns and looks at Jane as she says this, so I am free to look at Jane and mouth the word "Paris?" She looks at me helplessly and shrugs.

I kneel down to Mikaela's level. Time to improvise. "Honey, sometimes when dogs get old, you have to do something that's best for them, even if you don't want to. There's a dog kennel in Paris where old dogs can go and live happily. That's where I sent Buster."

Mikaela suddenly perks up. “Can we go visit him?”

I take her hands in mine. “No, honey. Seeing us again would just make him sad. You just have to remember that he’s in Paris having the time of his life. I hear this kennel makes dog biscuits in almost a hundred different flavors.”

She looks at me. “But I miss him.”

I pull her in for a hug. “I know. I miss him too. Now, how about you go clean your room?”

“I don’t want to clean my room,” she says.

“I know. But you need to,” I tell her. “When that was my room, I kept it nice and neat.”

Mikaela grumbles some more but eventually skulks off to do her chores, leaving me alone with Jane.

“You told her we sent Buster to Paris? Why on earth would you tell her that?”

“I don’t know. I just kind of panicked. I didn’t want to tell her he was dead,” she furiously whispers.

“You know I don’t feel comfortable lying to her,” I say.

“I know. I just didn’t want to hurt her. We’ll tell her the truth when she’s older. I’m sorry. It just came out.”

I run a hand through my hair. “It’ll be okay, I guess. We just have to hope she doesn’t keep asking to visit him.”

“Come on,” Jane says, taking my hand. “Help me make dinner.”

I don't sleep much that night. I've never been good at lying or keeping secrets, and I worry about letting Mikaela know that we've lied to her. Finally, the sun rises, and I get out of bed, careful not to wake Jane.

I walk down the hallway. We didn't have any guests last night, which isn't unusual for a Sunday night. When I get to Mikaela's door, I knock to wake her up. "Mikaela? Time to get up, honey. You need to start getting ready for school."

There's no answer, so I knock harder. Sometimes waking up Mikaela takes an amount of noise equivalent to a hurricane.

"Mikaela? Come on. Time to get out of bed."

Still nothing, so I crack open her door. "Mikaela. Let's go."

As the door opens wider, I have the heart-stopping realization that she is not in her bed.

"Mikaela? Where are you?" I check her closet, under her bed, behind the curtains, in her bathroom. Nothing.

I take a second to just stand there, breathe, and think. Where could she be? I'm about to go check the kitchen, see if Jack has seen her, when a piece of paper on her bed catches my eye.

I walk over and pick it up. In her kindergartner scrawl, she has written "gon to paris to se buster b bak sun."

As I stand there holding that piece of paper, I can't even think about what to do. The bed and breakfast is surrounded by hundreds of acres of woods. She could be anywhere. There's a reason we don't let her play in the woods without us watching her. I don't even know when she left so I don't know how far she could have gotten. How had I not heard her leave?

I go back to my bedroom. "Jane," I say, nudging her. "Jane, you have to wake up. Mikaela's missing."

She rolls over, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “What do you mean Mikaela’s missing? Where did she go?”

I show her the note. “Paris.”

As Jane reads the note, her eyes widen. “Oh my god. Stan. She could be anywhere.”

“I know. Let’s go. We have to find her.”

The police chief of the small town, Chief McCarthy, was a good friend of my parents, so when I call him and tell him Mikaela is missing, he immediately offers to come help with a couple of his deputies and their dogs. I make Jane stay at the Woodlands and wait for them to show up while I go searching in the woods.

On any other day, I would think about how here is such a beautiful place to live and how the trees could have come out of a picture. But today, all I see are dangers, places where Mikaela could have climbed and hurt herself, places where some animal could have dragged her away and out of sight.

“Mikaela!” I call out, over and over again. “Mikaela, are you out here? Where are you?”

No response.

I’ve been out here for what feels like days but in reality is only a couple hours when I cross paths with one of the deputies. He asks me where I’ve searched, and I point out the areas I’ve covered. His dog strains against his leash, reminding me of Buster and when I would take him out for a run.

“What do you think the chances of finding her are?” I ask the deputy.

“I’d say they’re pretty good. Little kids who run away often get bored and realize they actually just want to be home, so they come back on their own. That might be a little harder for Mikaela with these woods, but with us all looking for her, we’re bound to come across her.”

I don't know if he's telling me the truth or just trying to make me feel better, but I thank him for it anyway.

I don't realize how much time has passed until the sky starts to darken and the air starts to cool. I am set on continuing to search for Mikaela, however. I can't even handle thinking about her out here, alone, cold, hungry, and tired. If she can't go inside to warm up and eat something, neither will I.

I see a flashlight coming towards me. As it nears, I realize it's Chief McCarthy.

"Any sign of her?" I ask him, even though I already know the answer.

"Nope," he says. "We'll keep looking in the morning, but for now we need you to come back to your bed and breakfast with us."

"No," I tell him. "I'm not leaving until I find her."

"Look, son," he says. "You haven't eaten anything all day. It's going to get very cold very quickly. You'll be in no shape to find your daughter if you can't take care of yourself. I promise we'll go back out as soon as the sun rises again. But you can't keep your daughter safe if you can't keep yourself safe."

"I know you're right, but I can't just go sit at home and do nothing while my daughter suffers out here."

"How about we go make up some posters to give to people around town? We can also call nearby hospitals or police stations, just in case."

"Okay. Okay. Let's go."

On our way back to the bed and breakfast, I make sure to shine his flashlight in every tree and under every pile of leaves as we pass, just in case.

When we get back, Jane immediately jumps up and hugs me. “I shouldn’t have lied to her,” she whispers. “I should have just told her the truth.”

I wrap my arms around her. “It’s not your fault. You couldn’t have known she was going to do this. You were just trying to spare her feelings. It’ll be okay. We’ll find her.”

“What if it’s not okay, Stan? What if she’s gone?”

“We’ll deal with that when the time comes. For now, we have to believe we’ll find her. I know it’ll be okay.”

Jane suddenly pulls away and looks at me, her eyes red. “Don’t lie to me, Stan. Don’t tell me you know it’s going to be okay. Isn’t that what got us into this mess?”

She sits down at a table to work on fliers, her back to me. Without speaking, I join her.

Jane, Chief McCarthy, one of his deputies, and I start to work on making fliers and calling different places around the town to see if she’s turned up anywhere. We’ve been at it for about an hour when the police chief’s phone rings.

He picks it up. “Hello?” Jane and I watch as he listens to the person on the other end of the phone. Suddenly, he breaks into a huge grin.

“That’s great, Steve. Really great. I’ll let them know.”

He hangs up and turns to us. “They found her.”

Never in my life have I felt so relieved. Jane cries out and grabs my arm. “Is she okay?” she asks. “Where was she? Is she hurt?”

“She’s fine. Just a little shaken up and hungry,” he says. “She apparently was never in the woods at all. Walked down the road for a while and ended up at a farm a ways north of here. According to the deputy, she said she was trying to find a ride to Paris. The family who lived there got her name and called the station. Steve’s on his way to get her now.”

“Thank God,” Jane whispers. “Thank God.”

When the deputy reaches our house with Mikaela, Jane and I are both waiting outside for her. The deputy opens the car door and she runs straight toward us. We hug her tightly to us.

“Mikaela, what were you thinking?” I ask her. “You know better than that.”

She starts to cry. “I just wanted to go visit Buster. I thought you and mom would follow me because you want to live there and then we could just live there with Buster instead.”

“Mikaela, honey, you can’t ever do that again. We were worried sick about you because we love you and don’t want anything to hurt you.”

She sniffles. “Can I have something to eat?”

“Come on, honey,” Jane says. “I’ll take you inside and get you some food.” She takes Mikaela’s hand. “I’m sorry,” Jane whispers to me.

I nod. “Me too. I love you.”

Jane smiles at me. “I love you, too. Come with us.”

“In a minute,” I say. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Jane takes Mikaela inside, and as I watch them walk away, all I can think about is how close I thought I had come to losing her, to losing everything. All I can think about is how lucky I am that she was okay. After a few minutes, I follow them into the bed and breakfast.

Maybe we’ll find the time to make that trip to Paris after all.

Annabelle

And still the train rumbled on, singing its rhyme in the clicking of the wheels against the tracks. He stared out the window, a bundle of rags with eyes watching the scenery, the train stations go by. His hands, grizzled, gnarled, gripping his ticket just in case the conductor came, reminded him of Annabelle and the way her slender fingers contrasted with his stubby ones, darkened and spotted from many years in the sun. Years ago, when Annabelle was still healthy enough to get around on her own, they used to go out on the front porch late at night, sit on their porch swing and rock back and forth, back and forth. He did most of the rocking – Annabelle's feet didn't quite reach all the way to the wooden planks of the porch. But they would sit there, looking at the stars, his rough fingers intertwined with her immaculate ones, her head on his shoulder, his arm around her waist. It could have been yesterday, but it wasn't. It was a very long time ago.

“Sir?”

He coughed, air rumbling up from the bottom of his lungs, attacking his throat on the way up. He tore his gaze from the window, turned his head slowly to see the train attendant, a young man, wheeling a restaurant cart. He tried to answer him, but another cough wracked through his system. As he wheezed, he saw the look the man was giving him. He saw the pity mixed with disgust in his eyes, but he waited there, patiently, for him to stop. And once he could finally breathe again, once his lungs paused their assault on his body, he saw him straighten, take a step backwards, as if waiting for something worse to happen next.

“Sorry,” he said, and his voice was different than in his memories, and even though he knew that made sense, it still gave him a momentary jolt of surprise.

The attendant smiled, but he could tell there was nothing behind it.

“It’s alright, sir. Just wanted to ask if you wanted something to drink.”

“Water, please.”

The man took out a bottle and poured it over ice, handing it to him. He noticed that his fingers gripped the cup as little as possible, probably hoping to keep their fingers from touching. He took it from him as gingerly as he held it, careful not to make the attendant uncomfortable. “Thank you.”

He expected the man to walk away, but instead he stayed, turning slightly. “And for you, ma’am?”

He turned his creaky neck forward, and then he saw something he hadn’t noticed before. A young woman, sitting directly across from him. He studied her face, watched as she talked to the train attendant, listened as she asked for a soda. She reminded him of Annabelle, the way her blond hair fell straight to her shoulders before devolving into a tangle of curls. He used to brush Annabelle’s hair every night, even though he knew she went back and did it again after he was done. He couldn’t get out all the knots – Annabelle winced in pain when the hairs pulled against her scalp, and he felt too bad to keep trying. And this girl’s hair looked the same. He wondered if she had someone to brush it out for her.

The train attendant continued on his way, and the girl’s gaze turned toward him. He couldn’t look away fast enough. She caught him staring.

A couple of uncomfortable moments passed between them. He waited for her to speak, to admonish him, to ask him to stop, but she didn't speak, didn't look away, either. He was the first to open his mouth.

"You remind me of my wife," he whispered. He wasn't sure she heard him, but then he saw her smile.

"Thank you," she said.

He didn't reply, turning himself back to the window instead. The train was speeding through dust, miles and miles of dust, dust as far as he could see. He watched streams of dust rise and form themselves into a funnel, ripping across the ground, headed toward the train, and then smashing themselves against the window, scattering themselves again as though they'd never been together. His head nodded forward, and his eyes started to close. Maybe it was time to sleep again.

"What was she like?"

He pulled his head up from its lowered position, forced his eyes open until he was looking at the girl again, the expression on her face a mixture of curiosity and something else, something he couldn't quite figure out. "Who?"

"Your wife." The girl looked away, shy now, as color rose in her cheeks. "Sorry. I don't mean to pry. I was just curious."

"Annabelle. Her name was Annabelle."

"Pretty name," she said.

“Just like Annabelle,” he said.

“You must have loved her very much,” she said softly.

“I still do.”

Silence fell over the car again, but it didn’t last long.

“Tell me about her,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

She gestured out the window. “It’s a long train ride. Why not?”

“What do you want to know?”

“Tell me one of your favorite memories.”

And so he began to talk, and once he started talking, the words were a waterfall out of his mouth and into her ears.

“This one time I remember,” he said, “Annabelle went to the chicken coop out back. She wanted eggs to make me breakfast. She was holding a basket when she walked out the door. The basket was white. There was a yellow flower on the handle.”

He paused to clear his throat as the words came rumbling up.

“There was a blue jewel in the middle of the flower. I remember because it matched her eyes perfectly.

“Not even two minutes had gone by before I heard this noise outside. Loud crashes, loud squawking. When I went to see what was happening, I saw Annabelle furiously batting chickens

away from her, trying to get them back in the chicken coop. I ran out, helped her get everything under control. When I asked her what happened, she said she'd accidentally knocked over the cages with her basket. She was almost crying, and she threw the basket against the wall of the house. The flower fell off, and I picked it up, brushed back her hair, and put the flower behind her ear. 'It's okay,' I told her. 'It's not important.' She left the basket there by the house, but she kept the flower. It stayed on her dresser, mixed in with her beauty products. When she died, I put it in her hair."

And then he told her about the first time he met Annabelle, at a local dance. She had been dancing with another boy, her dress spinning out around her as she laughed, and he remembered that laugh, remembered the way her mouth had been shaped. After the song ended, he cut in, asked her to dance, and they danced for the rest of the night without stopping. That, he told her, was when he knew they would end up together. And still he kept talking, telling story after story until he could hardly remember how many he had told, only stopping when his throat got so dry his mouth could no longer function and he collapsed into a fit of coughing. The girl waited for him to stop, tapping her fingers against her leg like she was impatient to ask him something. It wasn't long after the coughing subsided and he got it under control that she spoke up again.

"How long ago did she die?"

He squinted, trying to remember how long it had been. "Last year."

"Did you have any children?" There was something different about her voice when she asked this question.

"Three. Billy, Sammy, and Julia."

“Did they have children?”

He felt the train shudder to a stop, its wheels grinding against the metal of the tracks. He looked at his ticket, then out the window. This was his stop.

“Julia did. Three girls.”

Something was wiggling in the back of his brain, but he couldn’t make it come out.

He started to get up. The girl quickly rose as well.

“Here, let me help you. This is my stop, too.”

She gently took him by the elbow and led him off the train. Who was he meeting here? He wasn’t sure, but she seemed to know as she guided him toward a group of people.

“Here we are, Mom,” she said.

“Hi, sweetie,” the mother said. Then she turned to him. “Dad? It’s me, Julia. Do you recognize me?”

He didn’t, but he didn’t want to tell her that. Julia was still a child, wasn’t she?

“What does he remember?” the woman who was Julia asked.

“Not much. He didn’t recognize me. He thinks Grandma Annabelle died last year. We talked a lot about her. I wish I could have met her.”

How long had Annabelle been dead? He couldn’t remember.

Around him, people kept talking, but he stopped listening, focusing inward instead, trying to remember, trying to figure everything out. Behind him, he heard the train leave the station,

and in their wheels, he heard Annabelle's name one last time. He thought he might remember, but as soon as he did, the thought was gone with the train.