THE VANISHING GARDENER

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ABSTRACT

The Vanishing Gardener

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The Vanishing Gardener is a creative dissertation consisting of a contemporary novel of realistic fiction and a critical introduction. The Vanishing Gardener is set in the current time period and told in first-person, present-tense narration by the main character, Lynn Holcomb. Lynn's story is a mother's account of her experience over the course of one school year raising two teen-aged daughters, one who is neurotypical and the other who has Down syndrome.

The fact that Cassie, the older daughter, has Down syndrome is a catalyst for many of the conflicts in the story, but not the central problem. Lynn faces the same challenges that all mothers face: how to be a good mother to each of her children, AND be a good and supportive wife, AND be valuable and effective in her career, AND be a supportive sister, AND maintain some sense of herself as an individual and as a woman in the midst of all of this.

The Vanishing Gardener speaks to all women. It is certainly a mother's story, but even women without children will relate to the female tendency to put the needs of others before her own. Thus The Vanishing Gardener is an interdisciplinary work of fiction in that it is relevant to sociological, psychological, and even anthropological studies on family dynamics and relationships in general, and especially when faced with the challenge of a disabled family member. It also explores gender-related topics in terms of

the concept of motherhood and the feminine tendency to put others before herself and what that tendency does, over time, to a woman's definition of herself as an individual and to her psychological well-being.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgementsvii		
Part I.		
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION		
Critical Introduction		
Works Cited		
Part II.		
THE VANISHING GARDENER		
Chapter One41		
Chapter Two49		
Chapter Three		
Chapter Four65		
Chapter Five		
Chapter Six		
Chapter Seven91		
Chapter Eight		
Chapter Nine		
Chapter Ten		
Chapter Eleven		
Chapter Twelve		
Chapter Thirteen		
Chapter Fourteen		
Chapter Fifteen		

Chapter Sixteen	201
Chapter Seventeen	213
Chapter Eighteen	224
Chapter Nineteen	240
Chapter Twenty	259
Chapter Twenty-One	269
Chapter Twenty-Two	297
Chapter Twenty-Three	312
Chapter Twenty-Four	323
Chapter Twenty-Five	330
Chapter Twenty-Six	349
Chapter Twenty-Seven	362
Chapter Twenty-Eight	376
Chapter Twenty-Nine	406
Chapter Thirty	412
Enilogue Three Vears Later	425

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Critical Introduction

The Vanishing Gardener is a contemporary novel of realistic fiction set in the current time period and told in first-person, present-tense narration by the main character, Lynn Holcomb. Lynn's story is a mother's account of her experience over the course of one school year raising two teen-aged daughters, one who is neuro-typical and the other who has Down syndrome. This novel grew out of an assignment I had in Dr. Bill Gordon's Fiction Workshop course in the Doctor of Letters program at Drew University. I arrived at my idea for the story after listening to a podcast about a mother who was coping with the fact that her daughter with Down syndrome was beginning to realize and to be devastated by the fact that her future was not going to look like her older, typically-abled, sister's future.

I found myself thinking about this specific heartbreak. Of course, the mother has been aware of this reality for years, and she has probably been coping with emotions like grief, and fear and profound disappointment for her younger daughter's sake, but to watch that daughter begin to realize it herself and to experience her own sense of loss in regard to her expectations for her life, would be a fresh wound for the mother. I decided to explore it further by writing about it. For the Fiction Workshop course, I wrote what became the first chapter of *The Vanishing Gardener*.

My story evolved over time so that it is now not so much about one daughter realizing that she is being surpassed by her sister, but about the effects on each of the family members, especially on the mother, of having a child with a disability. I deliberately created my character with Down syndrome as the older of the two sisters in order to highlight the differences between the two daughters even more.

The fact that Cassie, the older child in my story, has Down syndrome is a catalyst for many of the conflicts in the story, but not the central problem. Lynn faces the same challenges that all mothers face: how to be a good mother to each of her children, AND be a good and supportive wife, AND be valuable and effective in her career, AND be a supportive sister, AND maintain some sense of herself as an individual and as a woman in the midst of all of this. This is a mother's story and all mothers, all women, will see some piece of themselves in Lynn's need to do it all, and do it well.

As my story has evolved, several other conflicts have come into play. One of these has to do with how having a sibling with Down syndrome affects a typically-abled child. I also explore the effect that coping with a child's disability has on a marriage.

And, perhaps most importantly, I examine the struggle of any mother to maintain a sense of herself as an autonomous person, valued for herself, and not only defined by those who depend on her.

My story speaks to all women for this reason. It is certainly a mother's story, but even women without children will relate to the female tendency to put the needs of others before her own. *The Vanishing Gardener* is an interdisciplinary work of fiction in that it is relevant to sociological, psychological, and even anthropological studies on family dynamics and relationships in general, and especially when faced with the challenge of a disabled family member. It also explores gender-related topics in terms of the concept of motherhood and the feminine tendency to put others before herself and what that tendency does, over time, to a woman's definition of herself as an individual and to her psychological well-being.

The Art of Storytelling and Inspiration in the Craft of Writing

Several books by writers about the craft of writing have inspired me. The first of these, not the first I read, but the first that really spoke to me was Carolyn See's Making a Literary Life: Advice for Writers and Other Dreamers. It may be See's humor that kept me reading at first, the book is laugh-out-loud funny, but her unique approach to the topic really spoke to me. She does talk about the process and practical things, but she invites imagination. She tells the reader to pretend that she is a writer (50) and to imagine what her whole life would look like. What would she do on a typical day? Who would she spend time with, where would she go? She suggests writing a "charming note" on a regular basis to a variety of personally-admired authors in order to establish a connection and begin to build a "literary life" (41). She encourages would-be writers to find their material right in their own experience and to keep their writing lives private (4). When it comes to finding inspiration See says, "Wake up! Keep waking up! Wake up more and more often!" (15). Her focus on the whole life of a writer, not just their writing process is what appealed to me. It is more than what one does, when one writes, that matters, but how one builds an entire "literary life."

Being a writer is about who you are, not just what you do. And it is important not to take yourself too seriously, or you can paralyze your creativity. Anne Lamott expresses this in one of the most widely-read books about the craft of writing, *Bird by Bird*. Lamott has a fresh, funny, and very human way of talking about writing. She does not make proclamations from a lofty position in an ivory tower just because she is a successfully published writer; she is right down in the muddy trenches with the rest of us trying to navigate through this passion-process and produce something worthy of reading. She

takes the onus of needing to produce perfection off the writer by encouraging us to write "shitty first drafts," a concept that helped me to keep going with the first draft of my novel. She says:

Some of us tend to think that what we do and say and decide to write are cosmically important things. But they're not. If you don't know which way to go, keep it simple. Listen to your broccoli [her euphemism for your intuition]. Maybe it will know what to do. Then, if you've worked in good faith for a couple of hours but cannot hear it today, have some lunch. (115)

Her humor and relaxed manner helped me to stick with it, which, at the end of the day, is what it is all about, just getting the words on the page.

Lamott understands, as does Natalie Golberg who wrote *Writing Down the Bones*, that the most important thing a writer has to do, other than commit to a daily writing practice, is to allow a bit of the ridiculous and some whimsy and humor into her thinking. You have to play a little. This way you free your own creativity by removing limits your inner-critic wants to impose. One piece of advice I was particularly inspired by came out of Goldberg's attending a poetry reading by Russell Edson at the University of Minnesota. She says:

Try sitting at your typewriter and without thinking begin to write Russell Edsontype pieces. This means letting go and allowing the Elm in your front yard to pick itself up and walk over to Iowa. Try for good, strong first sentences. You might want to take the first half of your sentence from a newspaper article and finish the sentence with an ingredient listed in a cookbook. Play around. Dive into absurdity and write. Take chances. (73-4)

Both Lamott and Goldberg are trying to teach us to let go of expectations and constraints and shoulds and should-nots and to have the courage to embrace our own freedom to be creative. I needed to hear advice like that. I needed to let go a little bit. Coincidentally, Lynn, my protagonist, would benefit from the same kind of advice

applied to her expectations of herself as a mother. She too needs to let go a little bit.

Reading these books made me feel like part of a community of writers, rather than someone who was struggling alone.

Anna Quindlen's essay about letting go of perfection called, *Being Perfect* speaks to me as a writer, and also applies to my main character, Lynn as a mother. She says:

Set aside the old traditional notion of female as nurturer and male as leader; set aside, too, the new traditional notion of female as superwoman and male as oppressor. Begin with that most frightening of all things, a clean slate. And then look, every day, at the choices you are making, and when you ask yourself why you are making them, find this answer: Because they are what I want, or wish for. Because they reflect who and what I am. (18)

Like Lamott and Goldberg, Quindlen is also advising shucking off our restraints, this time of societal and political views and roles. The goal is to discover your own essence by writing, and in the process to write something that helps someone else to do the same. In *Living Out Loud*, a collection of Quindlen's *New York Times* based column "Life in the 30's," in an essay titled "At the Beach," I found these words, "Mostly I read and walked for miles at night along the beach, writing bad blank verse and searching endlessly for someone wonderful who would step out of the darkness and change my life. It never crossed my mind that that person could be me" (11).

That right there is what we are all struggling to learn and accept. That we are the architects of our own worlds and that the only person who can transform my life, is me. That is the struggle I was trying to illuminate in *The Vanishing Gardener*, that Lynn is at the causal core of many of the things she is struggling with in her life, and that she will have to transform herself in order to truly find herself and to heal the damage caused by her refusal to let go of her concepts of her role and her need to be perfect.

This central focus of my novel was born out of my current life circumstances. I am a mother and have found motherhood to be profoundly transforming, but my motivation to write began in my childhood when I discovered a love of reading. In *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, Stephen King says, "You cannot hope to sweep someone else away by the force of your writing until it has been done to you" (146). I want to mention a few authors and their books that have swept me away and inspired me to be a writer.

For me, reading is like breathing. I feel at sea when I am between books, and I never stay there for more than a few hours before beginning another book. My desire to write fiction grew out of my love of reading. My drive to create stories has been influenced by a far greater number of works and authors than I can name here, but I would like to mention a few authors who have inspired me to write. Our stories connect us to each other and to our shared human experience and there are some truths that can only be communicated through stories. The stories that contain those truths are the ones that profoundly affect us.

The Vanishing Garden is entirely a work of fiction; yet it expresses some of my truths, things I have taken from my own life experience. Sometimes fiction is more truthful to the human experience than fact. There are deep-seated psychological and emotional truths that can only be expressed in a story. For this reason, I have read, and reread, and listened to, and seen the movie of Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*. I have a friend who, after reading this book, insisted that everyone she knew who had read it, write her an essay explaining which version of the story was the true one. She did not appreciate my answer that *both* were true and that that is what delights me about that novel.

Life of Pi is the perfect illustration of the fact that sometimes fiction contains deeper truths than can ever be reached with only the facts. At the end of the novel when Pi Patel, the titular character, is giving his version of events to investigators he expresses his frustration with their incredulity of his story in this exchange:

"If you stumble at mere believability, what are you living for? Isn't love hard to believe?"

"Mr. Patel-"

"Don't bully me with your politeness! Love is hard to believe, ask any lover. Life is hard to believe, ask any scientist. God is hard to believe, ask any believer. What is your problem with hard to believe?

"We're just being reasonable."

"So am I! I applied my reason at every moment. Reason is excellent for getting food, clothing and shelter. Reason is the very best tool kit. Nothing beats reason for keeping tigers away. But be excessively reasonable and you risk throwing out the universe with the bathwater." (297)

In *Life of Pi*, Martel argues succinctly for the value of a good story and how much richer the truth is when apprehended through a story. Martel understands the suspension of limits and willingness to play a little that Lamott and Goldberg encourage and employs it by writing a fantastic tale. In her 2002 review of Martel's novel, Justine Jordan of *The Guardian* writes, "Despite the extraordinary premise and literary playfulness, one reads *Life of Pi* not so much as an allegory or magical-realist fable, but as an edge-of-seat adventure." My friend who wants the essay explaining what happened is missing that but is a dedicated reader; so I have faith that she will come to eventually see the power, importance, and truth encapsulated in a good story.

I wrote a woman's story. My interest was primarily in the female characters, especially Lynn. I find that I am drawn to female authors and characters. An author I love whose hallmark is that she also writes women's stories is Margaret Atwood. Her novel, *The Robber Bride*, is one of her works that I have returned to repeatedly over the years. I

love that she borrowed the title and plot from a dark fairy tale by the Grimms, and performed some gender-bending magic to make it about modern-day relationships between women instead of about a murderous male villain deep in the forest who is vanquished when his intended bride reveals his crime by telling a story she says is a dream.

Atwood plumbs the depths of female friendship and malice and examines how the two often co-exist. My favorite character in that book is the diminutive, Tony, the book's narrator and a scholarly military historian doing her best to hold her own in a man's field. Atwood describes Tony like this:

On the whole she fares better with the men, if they can work their way past the awkward preliminaries; if they can avoid calling her "little lady," or saying they weren't expecting her to be so feminine, by which they mean short. Though only the most doddering ones do that anymore. If she weren't so tiny, though, she'd never get away with it. If she were six feet tall and built like a blockhouse; if she had hips. Then she'd be threatening, then she'd be an Amazon. It's the incongruity that grants her permission. A breath would blow you away, they beam down at her silently. You wish, thinks Tony, smiling up. Many have blown. (22)

That's the sort of description that makes me love Atwood's work. In just a few sentences, she sums up a common female experience of having to balance being true to oneself with being a threat in a patriarchal world. I love Tony's strength and seriousness.

In *The Robber Bride*, Atwood creates a situation where the reader has to question the reality of the evil Zenia. She uses some magic in her story that leaves one wondering what really happened and provides food for thought that takes one to a much deeper level than the story itself does.

I believe in the power of a story, especially one infused with a little magic, to convey important truths and appreciate a focus on the feminine experience, I am also

drawn to some books in part because of their setting. *The Vanishing Gardener* is set on Cape Cod because it is the place I love most; to write about it was joyful for me. I am a self-proclaimed New Englander even though I was born in the Midwest and have lived in New Jersey for the last twenty years.

I grew up in New England, and my ancestors first arrived on the shores of Massachusetts in the 1600s. Alice Hoffman is an author who, like Atwood and Martel, brushes her story reality with magic, and she writes about New England. She draws on the lore and ghosts and witchiness of the region to touch deep human truths. The region becomes like a character in her novels, so steeped in the mythology and history of New England are they. Her novel, *The Red Garden*, is set in the fictional town of Blackwell, Massachusetts and is comprised of chapters that traverse history in a series of linked vignettes, sometimes incorporating real historical personalities and myths. All of the stories center on a garden that can grow only red plants, and that holds at its center some of the secrets of the human experience. In a chapter about her character, Emily, who turns out to be the famously reclusive poet Emily Dickinson of Amherst, she writes:

She had the feeling that if she went home, she might never get away. She thought of birds caught in nets. There was something inside her, beating against her ribs, urging her to do things she might not otherwise attempt. She had the strongest desire to get lost. (56)

That she "had the strongest desire to get lost," resonates with me. It speaks of that urge for freedom from expectations and constraints with which we all, and maybe particularly women, have to struggle. Perhaps my Lynn Holcomb reflects some of that same desire to get lost. Hoffman beautifully illustrates my beloved New England and its rich history fertile with stories.

A place can have its own voice, just as the characters do. As a reader, I delight in a novel where the author has developed unique voices for each of the characters. A master at doing this well is Barbara Kingsolver. Her novel, *The Poisonwood Bible* was the first one I ever read where each chapter is narrated by a different character. It became possible while reading *The Poisonwood Bible* to know which character was speaking without even reading the character name at the beginning of the chapter, Kingsolver had developed each of them so well.

I had Kingsolver's work in mind when I was developing the voices of characters other than Lynn. Caroline's voice comes out most effectively in her telephone conversations with Lynn throughout the book. I had to devise ways of allowing some of the characters to speak other than in dialogue with Lynn. I created Kristen's inner voice in her diary entries that Lynn reads. Steve's letters allow the reader to hear his voice and to reflect on his past.

My favorite of Kingsolver's novels is called *Prodigal Summer* and it interweaves three different stories taking place in and around a small farming town in Appalachia, and along with delving into human truths, it is washed with ecological commentary. It synthesizes a variety of aspects of voice and place and perspective. The book opens with these lines,

Her body moved with the frankness that comes from solitary habits. But solitude is only a human presumption. Every quiet step is thunder to beetle life underfoot; every choice is a world made new for the chosen. All secrets are witnessed. (1)

Right away the reader is forced to face the interconnectedness of all living things, the web of life that Kingsolver is working so hard to make us acknowledge in this book.

It is a fascinating book that is doing so much more than telling a story. The characters and the place are transformed by their interconnectedness by the end of the novel.

Transformation is an important outcome in *The Vanishing Gardener*. Most importantly, Lynn is forced to transform herself and her perceptions of who she needs to be and what she needs to do in order to be "good". Her drive to do everything right ultimately is her downfall. I became aware only recently of the Australian novelist, Liane Moriarty. I devoured all of her novels over the course of the last six months. I think I was attracted by some similarities I found between her work and my own. She tells wonderfully engaging stories that plumb the feminine experience. In many of her novels, there is a twist or a revelation at the end that stuns not only the reader, but also the other characters, and from this revelation comes the transformation her characters need. Often this involves the character having to let go of a prior misguided belief about herself or her world, just like Lynn.

The first novel I read of Moriarty's I read came to me almost by accident. I had finished the book I had been reading and found a copy of Moriarty's *Big Little Lies* in my classroom. I was aware of the TV series that HBO had recently produced based on the novel and expected it to be lascivious and shallow. I was surprised how quickly I became invested in the story and found much more substance there than I had expected. I became a Moriarty fan and found myself pleasantly enthralled with, and surprised by each of her works. She tackles some sticky topics like domestic abuse, psychological manipulation, sexual assault, and the consequences of lies across generations with an honesty that is important.

I too wrestle with some important and controversial issues in *The Vanishing Gardener*. Lynn's blurring sense of herself, Lynn's toe-dip into an extramarital affair, Caroline's determination to have an abortion, the extremes to which Caroline is willing to go for a man, Kristen's escape into drug and alcohol abuse, Steve's self-sacrifice in order to provide as he thinks he needs to for his family, and the isolation and resentment that follow from it, and Dave's need for connection and support and his willingness to impose himself on and endanger someone else's marriage to find it. I include a Moriarty-esque twist when it turns out that Kristen was planting her diary for Lynn to read all along in a cry for help. Lynn and Steve, in trying to do their very best for their family, in their societally-defined roles, end up robbing themselves, each other, and their children of the best of themselves.

These morally complex situations require a reader, and a writer, to call upon her own empathy. Another enlightening and empowering effect of interacting with stories is that we are invited to try on another person's life for a while, to walk in their shoes. This can only stretch our hearts and build our comprehension of the human experience. I asked myself a number of questions while writing *The Vanishing Gardener* and challenged myself to find some answers throughout the novel's development. One's worldview would have to be extremely limited to think there is only one answer to any question about human motivation and behavior. The conclusions at which I arrived, are uniquely mine at one particular moment in time and experience.

Driving Questions, and Conclusions:

What happens to women's identities when they become mothers?

Motherhood has caused me to lose my own identity and to become, at the same time, more myself than I had ever been before. I have at times felt swallowed up by my various roles. Mothers are often taken for granted. It is expected that they will do the laundry and the dishes and cook dinner and make all the necessary appointments and keep track of everyone's schedule and drive to all of the places the children need to be and that in order to do that, they will put all of their own needs and plans on the back burner.

I wanted to take my character, Lynn, through the same thing, and make it even more intense by giving her a child with a serious and life-long challenge. How much more must a mother have to lose herself when one of her children is disabled? This loss of self creates conflict in me as it does in Lynn because while I do not want to be taken for granted, to have all of those daily chores left for me to do, I also want to do them, and to be generous about doing them and to nurture and care for my family members, and, like Lynn, to control how those things are being done.

I want my efforts to be appreciated, not overlooked. So from time to time, I point out all I do and what I give up to do it. My children have learned to just say "thank you" when I do this. Sometimes they say it spontaneously, which is really nice. But when I remind them what I do, I hate who that makes me. It seems to take the generosity out of my efforts and to diminish them and me in a way, so it is a constant conflict: be ignored and taken for granted, or be shrewish and petty by reminding them how much I do.

I also have to acknowledge my need to control much of what happens in my household, and I think that is another aspect of motherhood that is probably exacerbated when a mother is raising a child with a severe disability. That situation in itself is so out

of her control, that she has to battle for control of every other aspect of her life. When my children were little, I was constantly frustrated by my inability to get anything done. It would take me all day to make the beds. Having the whole house clean all at once was a pipe dream that was about as likely to happen as winning the lottery, and about as high in my goals and aspirations. My world became quite small. I rarely interacted with other adults. Going back to work relieved some of that. I was able to take my focus off my house and my world view grew a little bit.

Going back to work was a relief in a sense. I got to sit down once in a while. I got to eat lunch every day. I got to go to the bathroom alone when I needed to go. Still, like Lynn, I am in a very feminine and nurturing profession. She is a nurse, and I am a Special-Education teacher. Many of the same things expected of mothers are expected of people with those jobs. It just adds a role to the list.

Raising my children is now, and will undoubtedly remain the single greatest accomplishment of my life. Putting those two human beings in this world and having had something to do with their perseverance, their kindness, their noble hearts, their desire to make the world a better place, their desire to do good, their ability to lead, their confidence, their humor, and their selflessness is hands down the best thing, the most worthwhile expenditure of my time and energy, I have ever done or will ever do.

This is the paradox of motherhood. So what if my individual identity gets a bit swallowed by the role at the same time? Lynn also feels the weight of the well-being of the entire family on her shoulders, but would not have it any other way.

Is it the typical or universal feminine experience to lose oneself to the care of others?

There is a societal expectation for women that many women themselves have internalized, to put aside oneself in order to put others first. I do not mean in the context of motherhood, although that is the arena in which it is most obvious, but in any situation. Women are the nurturers, the caregivers. In most families, if there is an adult daughter, she is the one who cares for the elderly and infirm parents in their later years. If there is no daughter, then hopefully a son will step into the role, but in many cases, it is his wife who ends up taking on the bear's share of the caregiving.

How does society cause women to lose identity? How do gender roles play a part in this?

Girls are taught from a very early age that they are supposed to take care of others and to stay in the background. They are supposed to play with baby dolls to practice being nurturing and with Barbie dolls to practice being attractive and ornamental. The saying, "Behind every successful man is a woman" illustrates that women are the supporters, the cheerleaders, the ones who make it possible for men to realize their potential. Boys are taught aggression and forced to assert themselves physically even if it is not in their nature to do so. If they do not, they become targets of male aggression.

Women are taught to allow themselves to be walked over, or better yet, to politely get out of the way. Men and women even take up space differently. Men tend to spread out in a seat, lean back, and put their belongings all over the place. They claim more space as if they are entitled to it. Women take up as little space as possible. We sit with our legs crossed and tightly closed, partly to protect our sexual organs from assault, or to avoid offering an accidental invitation, and partly to take up less space. We have a tendency to cede the armrest. We try harder to be neat and keep our things in our own designated space. We behave as if we have less right to exist. Of course, none of the

things I am saying here is true of every man or of every woman, but there is a pattern that does truly exist.

How much of this phenomenon do women put on themselves?

Much of this behavior is completely unconscious on the part of both men and women, and like the behavior mentioned above, the absorption of gender-based expectations is also something we unconsciously end up perpetuating. It is very important to my story for it to be clear that Lynn herself is creating most of her own conflicts, struggling to define and claim her own identity and trying to find herself in her current life. Her husband is not the antagonist, neither are her kids. There are no villains in her life, but she has many struggles. In some cases against circumstances outside her control, like Cassie's Down syndrome, but in many others, she struggles against circumstances she could change.

She needs to learn to let go of a little bit of control and to share the burden. To insist that the burden be shared. She has willing partners with whom to share it, most especially her husband, Steve, who feels isolated and banished from the inner circle of the family, partially by circumstances of his job and its distance from where they need to live, and partially because Lynn keeps him on the periphery by insisting she has to handle everything on her own in order to be a "good mother."

Are things changing? Is our thinking becoming more progressive?

Yes, they are changing, but slowly. It takes a long time to alter such deeply ingrained societal habits in thinking and behavior. A woman of Lynn's age, her late forties, in our current world is in a unique position to study the change since she was raised in the still deeply patriarchal, but already more progressive decades of the

seventies and eighties and is raising a family in the new millennium. She is at the cusp of the change. She is aware of the discord and unrest that is causing the change and can distinguish it more clearly than her foremothers could, partially because she has so many more opportunities available to her than they had.

Because she has more opportunities in terms of careers and it being acceptable to "have it all," though, she puts even more pressure on herself to be able to be primarily responsible for the home and family care, *and* to have a vibrant and successful career and to do all of it well. The expectations for Lynn's generation of women in the home have lightened very little, while the added expectation that she should be able to, and should want to have a career too, have been added. I am not sure what the mother of the future, my daughter's generation, will look like.

What is the healthiest, most positive way to cope with caring for a disabled family member?

In my many years as a Special Education teacher, I have learned that it is important to be realistic about a disabled person's true ability. This is vital because it can be damaging to limit someone more than they need to be limited, but equally damaging to push expectations on them that only cause frustration and failure. This realism can be challenging for parents to achieve since it often means having to release many deepseated hopes and expectations. The process involves grieving for those lost expectations and can be devastating. It can also be extremely difficult to determine just what a person's true ability level is. That is the most challenging and fascinating part of working with people who have atypical abilities.

Caregivers must allow themselves to take time away from the one needing extra care and do things on a regular basis that is just for them. It is not easy to give oneself permission to do this when one is a caregiver. There can be an ever-present feeling of not doing enough, or that one should be able to do more, or that needing to take care of oneself is selfish.

For parents, it is important to take time away from the children, for the couple to bond and spend stress-free pleasant time together. This can be much harder to accomplish when a child has a disability. On the flip side, some parents of disabled children may be better at doing this and taking a "date night" now and then because they are that much more present to the need to do that than are parents with typically-able children. We all need to allow others to help where they can. There is no need to do all of it alone. What are some ways parents make decisions about how to meet the very different needs of all of their children?

Parents have limited stores of time, energy, and financial resources. They tend to spend most of those things where they perceive the greatest need to be. In the case of a child with disabilities, parents are likely to spend more resources on the disabled child than on the other children in the family. This can cause problems in the relationships of the parents and the typically abled children as it does for Kristen and her parents.

What social challenges do siblings of children with disabilities face?

Siblings are torn between loving and feeling protective of their siblings with disabilities and simultaneously experiencing resentment and anger for the fact that they feel cheated out of parental resources. They may also feel added pressure to be a

caregiver for their siblings, which is not the expected societal sibling relationship, especially when they have to care for an older sibling, as Kristen does.

Is there a form of "survivors' guilt" for siblings?

Yes. I think it would be natural to have a "why them and not me" feeling about the situation. Why was I spared? What do I have to do to be worthy of being the one who can do more? This is another pressure that might be exacerbated by parental expectations for the future all falling on the one child who is typically-abled. It is a great deal for a kid to have on her shoulders.

What happens to a marriage when one or both partners are consumed by the children and their needs, as tends to happen when a child is disabled?

The marriage may not survive. If a fire is deprived of oxygen, it dies. There is no breathing space for a marriage when a parent, or parents are consumed by the needs of their children. Again, as with so many of these issues, this can happen even when there are not disabled children in the family but may be more likely to happen when there are. There may also be tension caused by parents' differing foci in regard to the child's disability. Fathers tend to focus on practical matters like money and the future and to feel the stress of having to financially care for the child for the rest of his life, and then to worry about how to provide for a still-needy child after he dies. Mothers tend to worry about the day to day care of the child and making the best choices for the child's development. These different focus points may also put the two parents at cross-purposes.

The Vanishing Gardener is a character-driven novel, so an in-depth analysis of each of the characters will give a sense of the storyline and the human relationships that

compose it. In the following section, I will explain how I conceived of and developed each of the major characters.

Analysis of the Characters in *The Vanishing Gardener*:

The Holcomb Family:

In creating these characters, it was important to me that no character be the "bad guy". I wanted a real human drama where everyone is doing his or her best to do the right thing and to contribute, but their own needs and faults get in the way and sometimes the very words or actions they intended to be positive have a harmful effect.

I read memoirs, such as Raising Henry: A Memoir of Motherhood, Disability, and Discovery by Rachel Adams; Life as We Know It: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child by Michael Berube; An Uncomplicated Life by Paul Daugherty; Riding the Bus with My Sister: a True Life Journey by Rachel Simon; and The Year My Son and I Were Born by Kathryn Lynard Soper to enhance my understanding of family life with a child who has Down syndrome. Some of these are by mothers, and some by fathers, and one by a sibling. The family member with Down syndrome in each of the memoirs I read is at a different stage of life. Some authors wrote their memoirs while the family member with Down syndrome is still a child, and some when that family member had already grown to adulthood. I wanted to give myself the most complete picture possible of the impact on a family of having a child with Down syndrome.

I am aware of only two contemporary fiction books about families coping with Down syndrome. I had read each of them years ago and read them again recently. One of these is *Jewel*, by Bret Lott which is also a mother's story but there are many differences in terms of the time period, demographics, location, and the fact that the child with Down

syndrome is the youngest of six children. The other is *The Memory Keeper's Daughter* by Kim Edwards. In this story the child with Down syndrome is given away at birth by her father, and her mother is told that she died.

My story is like Jewel in that the focus is on the mother and her need to do her best for her disabled child, to the detriment of the rest of her children and her husband. Jewel is about the mother's efforts to help her child with Down syndrome as much as possible. The difference between the two novels is that *Jewel* is very much about the mother raising only one of her children, while *The Vanishing Gardener* is less about Cassie and more about the effects of Cassie's Down syndrome on her family and each of its members. The Vanishing Gardener also takes place in a modern time period when research and available resources for children with Down syndrome are much more advanced than they were in the 1940s in rural Mississippi, the setting of Jewel. The Vanishing Gardener deals with all of the current concerns of raising and being teenagers, as well as with the "good mother" concept and its effect on Lynn's sense of her own identity. The new world that constant stimulation and social connection and comparison have forced today's teens to navigate is at play in my story as well. Perhaps it is more difficult now than ever to be a "good mother," while there is an even higher expectation for mothers to be consumed by their children than in the past.

The Vanishing Gardener is different from The Memory Keeper's Daughter in that the mother in that novel does not even know she has a child with Down syndrome until that child is grown. This novel is not about the mother and her sense of identity at all. It is about the extreme choices people make when faced with extreme challenges and the consequences of those choices.

The Vanishing Gardener will find a place in a very small category of work in that sense, while also belonging to the much larger pool of mother-centered fiction that already exists. Feminine identity is at the forefront of literary exploration currently as our society and women themselves, become more and more aware of gender roles and the need to break free from them. Since the expectation to nurture and sacrifice oneself exists in our culture even for women who do not have children, my story will have a very broad appeal. Perhaps an interest in this story is not limited to women readers alone. Many men are currently undergoing an awakening of sorts due to the rise of the powerful and assertive modern woman and her refusal to be overlooked or trodden down any more, and are interested in educating themselves on the female experience.

Cassie: The Eldest Daughter, 17 years old, has Down syndrome

Cassie's Down syndrome is the catalyst for many of the conflicts in the story, but not the primary conflict in itself. Cassie is the only character who remains essentially unchanged over the course of the story. Her circumstances evolve, but she herself is static. She is at the core of all of the pressure and tension that cause change in each of the other characters in her family. She forces them to be dynamic just by existing with her particular disability. This is not a novel about raising a child with Down syndrome and about that child's life. This story is about that child's family members.

I purposely chose to make Cassie the older of the two daughters precisely to highlight and exacerbate the emotional turmoil for both girls and their parents when the younger one so clearly surpasses her older sister in independence and ability. I felt like I could write about a child with Down syndrome because I have been a Special Education

teacher in various public high schools for the last 25 years and have had students who have Down syndrome, though I am not a parent of a child with a disability.

I chose Down syndrome for a few reasons. People with Down syndrome can often be among the most high-functioning and independent of all people affected by developmental delays. Cassie can read, write, and do simple math. She is able to attend the local public school, with special support, of course. This is important because I needed Cassie to go to the same school as her sister, Kristen. It was also helpful to me to have her in a typical public school setting since in my career as a Special Educator, I have become very familiar with all the aspects of Public Education, and specifically with how support services for students with special needs work.

There are three types of Down syndrome, Trisomy 21, Translocation Down syndrome, and Mosaic Down syndrome (Jacob et. al. 14). Cassie has Trisomy 21, the most common of the three types. Trisomy 21 occurs at conception when "each cell has three copies of the twenty-first chromosome" (14). Trisomy 21 is recognizable by certain physical characteristics such as: poor muscle tone; flattened facial profile and nose; small head, ears, and mouth; upward slanting eyes, often with an epicanthal fold; and a single, deep crease across the palm of the hand (54).

The recognizable physical characteristics of Down syndrome are among the reasons I chose Down syndrome for Cassie's exceptionality. Cassie does not have to do a thing, or say a word, for others to be aware that she has an intellectual difference. All anyone has to do is look at her to know she is not neuro-typical since her face and body bear the tell-tale characteristics associated with Down syndrome. I was interested in examining what that does to a child, and even more so, to her parents and siblings and

other loved ones in terms of how they relate to her and how they expect the rest of the world to interact with her. Do they feel particularly sensitive, or defensive or protective of her since there is no hiding her exceptionality? People will define her, and make judgments about her before she has a chance to define herself.

There are a number of challenges and other medical issues that often accompany Down syndrome. Among these are a variety of heart defects. "About 15 to 20 percent of children with Down syndrome also have atrioventricular (AV) canal defect" (Boston Children's Hospital). I gave this particular heart defect to Cassie and refer to it in Chapter Two when Lynn is recalling learning of Cassie's diagnosis and some details of her babyhood. When a person has AV canal defect, the blood in their heart flows freely between all four chambers and blood from the lungs can mix with blood from the body. If left untreated, AV canal defect can cause a number of heart and lung problems (Boston Children's Hospital). The treatment is surgery, often performed in the first few months of a baby's life. I added this to Cassie's experience, and to her family's, because it is so common for children with Down syndrome, and because it added yet another layer of stress and trauma to Cassie's beginnings both for her and for her parents.

One effect of having a child who has to undergo open-heart surgery as an infant that may not be at the forefront of one's mind unless she has experienced it is how difficult it is to properly hold a baby after the rib cage has been cracked open, and the heart operated on. It can cause further damage to the healing process, not to mention pain and distress to pick up the child with an under-the-armpit hold, which is usually used for lifting the baby into our out of car seats or high chairs or cribs. This way of picking up the baby cannot be done after open-heart surgery. So there is another practical challenge

plus the more nuanced layer of being afraid to hurt one's child just by caring for her and feeling awkward holding her infant, which is a key component to bonding with her.

Another area of basic nurturing and bonding that is often negatively affected is that of trying to feed a child with Down syndrome. According to Jacobs and Sikora, breastfeeding may be a challenge due to low muscle tone and sleepiness. They make it difficult for a baby with Down syndrome to latch on and suck hard enough. The mother should pump right after birth to keep her milk supply up, but nurses do not always think to offer this. She may need to supplement with pumped milk and formula, fed with a syringe until the baby can breastfeed independently (85-6). I know from experience that it is a challenge to get breastfeeding working properly when there are no additional obstacles to its success other than the learning curve existing because both child and mother are new to it.

This challenge with feeding is one that Lynn recalls in Chapter Two of *The Vanishing Gardener*. A mother who is struggling to nourish her child cannot help but to feel failure on a very basic level. AV canal defect can make breastfeeding even harder. Some doctors tell mothers they cannot exclusively breastfeed in that situation (87). This may be a profound disappointment if the mother had intended to breastfeed, and may also be a further loss of bonding opportunity for mother and child.

Beyond the breastfeeding stage, there can still be difficulties feeding a child with Down syndrome. Laryngomalacia is a softening of the tissue in the voice box and is more common in children with Down syndrome. Symptoms include: feeding difficulties, poor weight gain, regurgitation of food, choking on food, gastroesophageal reflux, chest or neck retractions, cyanosis (turning blue), and apnea (93). These are symptoms that

Cassie had as a young child, and explain why Lynn had so much trouble just feeding Cassie at first.

Lynn thinks about and remembers the moment she found out that Cassie has

Down syndrome. I describe her memories and feelings about that in Chapter Two of *The Vanishing Gardener*. When an infant is diagnosed at birth, like Cassie was, there are a few physical characteristics present which make the doctors suspect Down syndrome.

These include low muscle tone and the palmar crease mentioned earlier. The doctor will order a karyotype of the baby's genetic code gained from a sample of the baby's blood in order to confirm a diagnosis. It can take several weeks to get the results of the karyotype, and at best takes four or five days. Newborns with Down syndrome usually present with many of the symptoms of a premature birth like difficulty with body temperature regulation, and maintaining oxygen levels. Most will be referred to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit.

I tried to capture what it would have been like for Lynn and Steve to hear the doctor's suspicions right after their daughter's birth, then to have to wait for confirmation of the genetic testing, and to be discharged from the hospital without their baby while she remains in the NICU. "The emotions of a new diagnosis, paired with postpartum hormones, can make for a challenging time. There are few words to describe the moment you as a patient, are discharged and leave the hospital without your baby" (Jordan et.al. 70).

My firstborn lost too much weight after birth before my breastmilk had come in, and as a result was running a fever and was mildly dehydrated. There was a possibility that I would have to leave the hospital without my baby, and it was one of the most

upsetting and traumatic moments of my life. I was not going to do it. If they had kicked me out of my hospital room, I would have remained in a waiting room until my baby could come home with me. I was fortunate that the hospital was not overcrowded, so I was allowed to stay in the relative comfort of my hospital room, and they were able to hydrate my son and reduce his fever in a matter of hours with bottle feeding, and we took him home. I can hardly stand to imagine what the scenario would have been like for parents like Lynn and Steve.

The trauma for Lynn and Steve at Cassie's birth, caused not just by her diagnosis, but by so many challenges right away in taking the most basic level care of her, juxtaposed with their joy at the arrival of their firstborn child, and all the confusion caused by the mixture of fear, frustration, love, and joy, set the stage years before the events in *The Vanishing Gardener* for much of the conflict experienced by the Holcomb family throughout this one, pivotal school year when Cassie is 17 and Kristen is 14 and 15.

Finally, a word about Cassie's name. She is named loosely, by me, not by her parents, for the Cassandra of Greek mythology who was cursed to utter accurate prophecies, but never to be believed. My Cassie does not make prophecies, but she is able, in that endearingly remarkable way of many people with intellectual limitations, to get to the emotional truth of a situation. Her worldview is refreshingly simple, unencumbered by the gravitas and nuance with which so many of us wind up driving ourselves crazy, and thus her acts of loving-kindness and exceptional forgiveness are a balm to the others in her family, especially to her mother. So it is not that her prophecies go unheeded so much as that her insight is often the sharpest of all of her family

members' and perhaps she is the least expected to be able to provide that. I saw a parallel there to poor Cassandra the cursed mythological seer in that ability and that is how Cassie got her name.

Steve: Lynn's husband, Cassie's and Kristen's Father

In the first draft of my novel, Steve was an underdeveloped character. I did him, and all fathers a disservice in that. He was the character with which I was the least familiar. I am or have been, a mother, a teacher, a daughter, a sister, like my other characters. I could not draw on any direct personal experience in order to create Steve. I realized my need to find out more about who Steve was and spent some time researching fathers' approaches to dealing with having a disabled child. I read several memoirs by fathers of children with Down syndrome, as well as scholarly articles that studied fathers' typical reactions to having a disabled child.

Research shows that fathers of children with Down syndrome tend to focus their worry on the future and on very practical concerns such as finances, and the responsibility of possibly supporting this child for the rest of his life. According to Garry Hornby in his research on fathers of children with Down syndrome, "the stress experienced by fathers was found to be negatively correlated with their educational level and with their perceived level of financial adequacy" (245). As long as the father feels financially capable of meeting the child's needs, his stress level about having a disabled child is lessened. This contrasts with the mother's need to be a "good mother" and the two may find themselves in conflict because of differing priorities about how best to serve as parents.

Finding the necessary resources for a child with Down syndrome is another challenge. Reichman states, "[I]t is all too common to hear of families relocating, when they are able, to areas with school districts that offer better services for their children" (681). I set the novel on Cape Cod in Massachusetts for several reasons. One, because Cape Cod is my most beloved place. My parents retired there, which gives me ample opportunity to visit. It was especially enjoyable for me to use it as my setting. And two, because despite the fact that Cape Cod is a wonderful place for retired people to live, there are economic hardships to living there during one's working years. There is very little industry on the Cape, which limits the kinds of jobs available. However, the Cape Cod schools have an excellent reputation and are a realistic choice for a family in search of the best possible support services for their child. By settling my fictional family there, I was able to create one of the sources of conflict and friction within the family that research shows to be a common one for families with a disabled child.

The Holcomb family lives on Cape Cod because it has the best services in the public schools for Cassie and because Lynn grew up there, but Steve is not able to have the sort of corporate job that he needs to have in order to financially provide for his family, especially in light of Cassie's medical needs, any closer than Boston. So he makes the commute daily from the "Upper Cape," or section closest to the mainland, into Boston and back. As a result, Steve leaves early every morning and comes home late every night. He also travels frequently as part of his job. So Lynn is dealing with all of the parenting and household demands on her own much of the time, and Steve is away from his family more than he would like to be. Both Steve and Lynn are isolated and battling loneliness, and their lifestyle choice, to live so far from Steve's job, may provide

Cassie with better support services, but it has some lasting negative impacts on their marriage and on their children, especially Kristen.

N.E. Reichman and colleagues found in their research that another marital stress at play is that parents of children with disabilities tend to be less socially connected than typical parents due to the difficulty finding appropriate child care (680). This is one of the problems my characters face. Not only is it difficult to find appropriate, affordable child-care, but Lynn also refuses to put much effort into finding it, feeling that she should be home with her children and that no one else is capable of taking proper care of Cassie. This frustrates Steve and increases his feeling of isolation and the tension in the marriage.

Steve has a close relationship with his younger daughter, Kristen. They share a love of soccer. Their bond evolved naturally out of Lynn's being mostly consumed by Cassie's needs. Steve tries to be available to Kristen since he sees that Lynn is not as available to her as Kristen needs her mother to be, but due to his having to be away from the family so much of the time, it is not enough ultimately to keep Kristen healthy and whole during her vulnerable teen-aged years.

Kristen: the younger daughter, ages 14 and 15

Kristen feels overlooked because of her mother's focus on Cassie, the child with Down syndrome. Her father is rarely home and is mostly focused on her success on the soccer field when he is with her since that is a passion he shares. She is a teenager and beginning to really notice and resent the attention her sister gets. She loves Cassie and tries to support her as well as she can, but she is also harboring a great deal of anger and a feeling of having been cheated. According to Reichman, "having a disabled child may also affect parents' allocation of time and financial resources to their healthy and

unhealthy children, their parenting practices, their expectations of healthy siblings in terms of achievement, responsibility, and short-and-long-term contributions to the household, and the sibling's health and development" (680).

I intentionally made Cassie, the one with Down syndrome, the older sister in part to examine what it would be like in the family for all members, including the two girls, to realize that Kristen, the younger sibling is beginning to surpass Cassie in many ways, not just intellectual capacity; and also to create a character, Kristen, who has never not had a disabled sibling. Cassie's Down syndrome was part of this family before Kristen was even born. There is little research on the impact on a younger sibling of having an older sibling with Down syndrome. This may be due to the likelihood of many parents not to have any more children after having a child with Down syndrome. In most of the material I have read, the child with Down syndrome is the youngest in the family. One study I read claimed that while most siblings of people with Down syndrome viewed their experience with their sibling as more positive than negative, "[s]ome brothers and sisters felt embarrassed by their siblings, which is not altogether an atypical finding for any sibling. Those younger brothers and sisters who did feel embarrassed more likely had older siblings with DS" (Skotko et.al. 2357). This fits with Kristen's experience of being Cassie's younger sister. She loves Cassie, and is protective of her, but also somewhat embarrassed by her as an immature teenager herself.

Kristen is expected to help manage Cassie, which puts a strange dynamic into the family where the younger child feels responsible for the well-being of the older one to a certain extent. This goes against the typical natural order of sibling relationships and

causes some upset. Kristen is also beginning to experience some negative feedback and actual bullying and harassment among her own peers because of her sister.

The pressures of being a teenager, starting high school, and trying to find her own place in her world and among her peers, coupled with the dynamics of her home life eventually prove to be too much for Kristen and she starts down the road to substance abuse and addiction in order to escape. This then adds to the demands on both Lynn and Steve and the tension in their marriage. The climax of the book revolves around the discovery of Kristen's problem with drugs and alcohol, and the breaking point in her parents' marriage which both come to a head at almost the same time.

Lynn, the mother, and wife

This story is Lynn's story more than anyone else's. She is the center of the Holcomb family and the first-person narrator of the novel. She tells the story in present-tense, real-time. I made that choice in order to zoom in close on Lynn. Her reactions and thoughts are real and immediate, not contemplated and revised. I want the reader to feel like s/he is experiencing Lynn's life right along with Lynn. The reader only knows what Lynn knows, and can only be inside her head. This posed some challenges while writing since I needed to occasionally give a glimpse of another character's inner workings. Most of the time I accomplished this through dialogue, but on a couple of occasions, I employed Kristen's diary that Lynn reads, and a couple of different written letters from Steve that help to illustrate those two characters' development.

I was interested in exploring the social construct of motherhood and feminine identity with this story. I want Lynn to be a character who expects of herself that she would be all things to each family member. She needs to be a "good mother," and ends

up losing her sense of her own individual identity because she begins to only exist in relation to others as a mother, a wife, a sister, an employee, a nurse.

I gave Lynn a career as a school nurse for several reasons. I want her to have to be nurturing and caring in her professional life as well as in her home life. Many mothers with disabled children do not work outside the home, but I wanted to increase the pressure that Lynn feels in trying to do it all, a pressure to which I think many women can relate. She is a school nurse in the same district where her daughters are students, but not at the same school. Lynn is at the middle school that both girls attended previously. This gives her the same hours and vacations as her daughters and allows her to be there for them when they are home while helping to support the family financially when they are at school. It also makes things even more difficult when Kristen begins to have trouble and ends up suspended after a violent incident in school. The fact that the school system is both Lynn's employer and, in her view, failing to protect her daughter, adds drama to the situation.

Another demand on Lynn's time is her relationship with her sister, Caroline. Caroline's purpose as a character is to add another layer of pressure to Lynn and to serve as a window through which the reader can glimpse who Lynn was once, long before she held any of her present roles. On the surface, Caroline lives a life Lynn thinks she envies from afar, but she would not have chosen it for herself. Caroline has risen up the corporate ladder, is single, and lives a luxurious life in a Boston high-rise. She travels frequently to exotic places and has an active social life. She has done well financially and can afford to enjoy life's finer offerings, with no constraining responsibilities.

At the beginning of the story, we learn that Caroline is pregnant at age 42, and planning to have the baby. It later comes out that she had tricked the baby's father by making him think she was using birth control because she was feeling the tick of her biological clock and had decided at the eleventh hour that she wanted to be a mother. She expects her boyfriend to be overjoyed by the news and secretly hopes he will want to marry her eventually, but that is not at all what happens. He is furious, and he demands that she terminate the pregnancy and he breaks up with Caroline only to propose to another woman mere weeks later. Caroline falls apart and leans heavily on Lynn for support through all of this. She drags Lynn on an emotional roller coaster that causes Lynn to be even less available to her family, especially to Kristen and Steve. This is yet another cycle of tension where Lynn's attempt to carry out her nurturing and caregiving roles actually robs some of the people closest to her of her nurturing and care, and she loses sight of herself as a distinct individual even further.

The construct of Motherhood is uniquely woven together with feminine identity. There is an assumption that an adult woman without children, even if, or maybe *especially if* that is her own choice, is somehow lacking. According to Sophia Brock, "Gayle Letherby argues, all women, regardless of whether they are mothers or not, live their lives against a 'background of personal and cultural assumptions that all women are or want to be mothers'" (20). There is a sense of something mysterious or not quite right about a childless, married, adult woman. The assumption is that she is either deficient because she is physically unable to reproduce, or because she is able to ignore that most basic and "natural" female drive to have children. It may be that this societal perception

is responsible for the astounding growth in recent decades in the development of medical treatments for infertility. A childless woman is seen as less than. She is not fully female.

Brock also asserts that motherhood is more essential to female identity than is marital status or career (21). It follows then, that a woman's own perceptions of herself as a "good mother" are inextricably entwined with her sense of self. Every woman has an internal concept of what it means to be a "good mother." Terry Arendell finds that "influencing women's particular mothering actions are their beliefs about family, individuality, the nature of childhood, and the nature of their child" (195). The first three of these influences are established throughout a girl's life and become so ingrained in her psyche that she may not even recognize that they were formed by external messages. According to Heisler and Ellis, most "mothers identified their reasons for displaying 'good mother' behaviors as self-motivated without mention of pressure from outside forces" (29). Women have internalized societal pressures not only to be mothers but also to be "good mothers."

A "good mother" is one, in short, who is entirely self-sacrificing and puts the needs of her family members ahead of her own. By doing this, she will often experience a blurring of the lines that define her. "Adrienne Rich describes the role of mother as one in which a woman sacrifices herself and her desires for the sake of a child: a mother undergoes so many unexpected and unanticipated changes and feelings that she risks losing her sense of self," explains Brock, discussing her research (21). My main character, Lynn, is struggling with this loss of herself, although she has not yet gained the insight to distinguish that as the source of her conflict. This phenomenon of motherhood being essential to, while simultaneously swallowing, a woman's sense of self is the

inspiration for my title, *The Vanishing Gardener*. Lynn is an avid gardener and the nurturing of plants is an apt metaphor for motherhood.

Lynn dances with the idea of an affair when she is reunited with a man who had been a friend of Caroline when they were growing up and who always had a crush on Lynn. She meets him again when they enroll their daughters at the same modified art class for young people with developmental disabilities. Dave also has a daughter with Down syndrome, Marisa. Marisa is his only child, and he and Marisa's mother are newly divorced, the core reason for the failure of their marriage being Dave's ex-wife's inability to cope with Marisa's exceptionality. Dave needs help and a feminine guide when issues arise from Marisa's beginning to go through puberty, and like she is for everyone else who needs her, Lynn is there for him. She realizes that Dave has romantic feelings for her when he shows her a beautiful drawing he had done of her when she was a teenager. She is struck by how he saw her then and wonders what ever happened to the adventurous and slightly wild girl she used to be.

Steve eventually becomes fully aware of Lynn's flirtation with Dave, which causes their already strained relationship to crumble further. At their lowest point, Lynn and Steve are living separately and Kristen is in rehab for her addictions. Lynn destroys her garden in a fit of frustration and despair just before reaching this low point, then is heartbroken at having lost what she had cultivated and nurtured for so long.

Ultimately, with the help of therapy and several paradigm shifts, this family does begin to recover and rebuild. The story ends in a hopeful epilogue three years later. I want to show human resilience and the ability to reach a point, despite the best of intentions by all involved, where it seems like there can be no return, but have these

strong people begin to rise above their conflicts and start again with a new outlook. It is meant to be a metaphor also that the story takes place over nine months, the period of human gestation. Caroline's pregnancy over the course of the story helps to highlight that timeline as significant.

Conclusion:

The Vanishing Gardener is a story of feminine identity, and its fading and resurgence in the context of a mother's experience. Lynn Holcomb has given herself up to her nurturing and caretaking roles and lost herself. In the course of the story, she begins to find herself again and to redefine who she is by letting go of some of the control and expectation she has placed on herself because of what society has taught her she is supposed to be.

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THE VANISHING GARDENER

Chapter One

I gasp and snatch my hand away from the rosebush, smacking my other hand across my mouth in a failed attempt to hold in the string of surprising expletives that bursts from my lips. Colorful language that I usually avoid using has been popping out of my mouth unexpectedly more and more often lately. It's like I have no control over it. I don't realize what I'm going to say until it's out there for the world to hear.

I examine the bead of blood blooming on the soft pad of my thumb, then gently suck it away, glancing around, thumb still in mouth, to make sure neither of my children is within hearing distance. I'm alone except for my next-door-neighbor, Evelyn Andrews, who's just heading out to walk her dog, Muffin. I'm sure she hasn't heard me. I wave and give up on pruning the rose bushes. Instead, I concentrate on planting the last few Tulip and Daffodil bulbs I just purchased, then water the mums. On the way inside, I cut a few of the blooming Resurrection Lilies and Autumn Crocuses that are making my flower beds a riot of pink and purple. I want to put some in a vase on the kitchen table. I pick up the gardening gloves I should be wearing and head back into the house.

In the kitchen, I stand at the sink snipping the stems of the just-cut flowers under running water. Kristen, my 14-year-old daughter, comes into the kitchen in her soccer uniform. Her long brown hair is in a high ponytail, and her slender, athletic arms and legs are still tan from the summer. "I'm ready to go, Mom. Come on," she orders as she breezes past me on her way to the fridge. She pulls out a Gatorade and whirls over to the pantry to grab a granola bar.

"Now?" I ask, looking at the clock over the stove. "It's 2:00. What time's the game?"

"It's at 3:00, but we have to be there forty-five minutes early. I told you that this morning!"

I can almost hear her eyes rolling as she says this. I sigh and wash my hands after plopping the flowers unceremoniously into a water-filled vase. I'll have to arrange them later.

"Where's Cassie?" I ask.

"In her room drawing cats," Kristen answers. "I *tried* to get her moving, but failed miserably," she says dramatically as she grabs her soccer bag, sticks her feet into her cleats half-way without bothering to untie them first, and clomps out the door to the garage. "I'll meet you in the car. Hurry up. Please."

Frazzled, I climb the stairs in search of my 17-year-old. "Cassie?" I remind myself to keep any urgency out of my voice. "What are you doing, honey?" Cassie is lying on her stomach on her bed with her feet waving in the air, wearing her Oscar the Grouch socks. She has some paper propped on a hardcover book in front of her and is carefully putting the whiskers on a cat she's drawn. It looks like a snowman--a smaller circle perched on top of a larger one, with triangular ears and an S-like tail. The rest of the paper is covered with brightly colored stickers of shiny metallic rainbows, clouds, stars and happy faces. On the floor next to the bed is a sloppy pile of dropped paper. Each sheet covered with other renditions of the same theme---cats and stickers.

"Hi Mom," she chirps. "Do you like my cat?" Taylor Swift's "Wildest Dreams" plays softly from her iPod on the nightstand.

"Oh yes, let me see," I lean over her to get a closer look, consciously ignoring the pile of dirty clothes on the floor next to the hamper and the fact that her bed is still unmade at 2:00 in the afternoon. If I bring it up I might have a tantrum on my hands, and there's no time for that. "This is a very good cat," I say instead. "I can tell you've been practicing... Cassie?" She looks up at me. "Kristen has a soccer game and it's time to go now," I tell her. She looks back down at her drawing.

"Can't I just stay here with Dad?" she asks. She hates to go to Kristen's games. She finds them boring. She played Kiddie soccer for a few years when she was younger, but couldn't continue. She just didn't have enough strength in her legs and feet for all the running and kicking, not to mention her lack of coordination. It frustrated her. I know it bugs her that Kristen still plays.

"Dad's at Home Depot. He's coming straight to the game from there, so you have to come with me now."

"Can I bring some paper and stickers with me?" she asks.

"Sure, honey. But we have to hurry. Kristen's already in the car." My jaw tightens. I need Cassie to move faster but have to keep her calm. If she digs in her heels, that'll only make Kristen more late.

"Okay, Mom," Cassie says standing up obligingly. She carefully gathers her drawings from the floor. A process that takes so long I wanted to scream, but I don't. "I just want to hang these up first," she says heading over to the bulletin board hanging over her desk. The board is groaning with all of the artwork already tacked to it.

"Cassie," I say too harshly, "you have to do that later. Let's find your shoes now and I'll help you with your hair." That does it. Cassie glares at me and clutches her

drawings to her chest. I can see the scar on her chest peeking out over the top of her vneck t-shirt. The sight of it always reminds me of how close we came to losing her when
she was born.

Cassie stares at me with her cheeks puffed out in fury. This has the potential to become a full-blown tantrum. "Don't rush me!" Cassie demands, her eyes flashing. She stares at me with her feet firmly planted, her hands gathering into fists. Many people have a hard time understanding Cassie's slightly garbled speech. Not me. I understand every word she says. I take a deep breath and keep my tone calm.

"If you hang them up later we'll stop at Dairy Queen after the game," I tell her hating myself for using food to bribe her even as I'm saying it. It works. Cassie's expression changes and she smiles as she drops the papers. Just then the car horn blares from the driveway and we both jump. Kristen is getting impatient.

Cassie stands placidly in front of the mirror while I quickly gather her light brown hair into a ponytail at the base of her neck. Most of the time when I look at her, I just see Cassie, my daughter. But once in a while I see her as other people must see her. Her wide trusting smile, her slightly slanted blue eyes, her lack of muscle tone and tendency toward chubbiness. Her awkward, clumsy walk. Her slow pace. They know before they ever meet her, before they ever speak to her. She doesn't even have a chance to be thought of as a typical teenager.

In these moments I'm so ashamed of the teenager I once was who would switch lines in the supermarket if someone like Cassie was bagging the groceries on that lane. It breaks my heart to think of people treating my daughter like that. I grab her hand and hurry her out of her room, down the stairs, and out to the car.

Kristen fumes all the way to the game. She's silent, but her anger is a tangible presence. Cassie, usually fairly in-tune with her sister's emotional state, seems immune-which makes me suspicious. I think she knows exactly why Kristen's mad. By the time we arrive at the field, Kristen's ten minutes late.

"I can't believe this!" Kristen screams at me as she gets out of the car. "Now the coach won't let me start in the first half!" She slams the door and runs to meet her team where they're warming up on the sideline of the field. I sigh and lay my head back against the headrest. After a moment I turn around to look at Cassie in the back seat. She looks back at me and shrugs dramatically with her hands in the air, palms up, mouth twisted to one side as if to say, "Don't ask me what's wrong with her. I have nothing to do with it."

We get our camp chairs out of the back of the car, each of us carrying her own, which is a little hard for Cassie since she's also juggling paper, a pencil, and stickers. I decide to let her figure it out, rather than taking some of it for her. We walked slowly to the spectators' side of the field.

"Hi," I say plopping down in my chair next to my friend, Amy, while Cassie struggles to set hers up next to me.

"Oh, hi, Lynn. Hi, Cassie," Amy says, looking up.

"Hi, Mrs. Galloway," Cassie says politely. I watch her for another moment, then stand to help her with her chair.

"Kristen's in a foul mood because we're so late," I tell Amy.

"Oh, it's the age, I think. It seems like no matter what I do lately, Bella is not satisfied, and she lets me know in no uncertain terms. It's only going to get worse."

"Yeah." I watch Kristen warm up and feel proud of her strength and ability. She maneuvers so easily through the warm-up exercises. Cassie's humming contentedly to herself as she draws yet another cat on the pad of paper she brought with her. I finally feel my shoulders relax a bit. I hadn't even realized I was clenching them up near my ears.

Steve arrives just as the game starts and comes over to kiss Cassie and me. Then he wanders closer to the sidelines to cheer loudly for Kristen's team. I don't even bother to keep a chair in the car for him anymore because he never sits down. He walks the sidelines shouting encouragement and challenging the refs. Kristen has come a long way since she started. After four years on the travel team, she's one of the better players. Steve is proud of her skill.

The game is a good one, close competition. The score at the half is two to three. Kristen's team is behind, but could easily catch up and even win if they play well in the second half. Half-time is about ten minutes long, and I asked Cassie, as usual, if she needs to use the bathroom. There's just enough time to take her at the half and not miss any of the game. She doesn't even look up from her drawing. She just puts the flourish on another cat's tail and picks up her stickers while shaking her head no.

"Are you sure?" I persist.

"Mom," she gives me a stormy look. "I think I know if I have to go or not." To avoid a scene I give up and wander over to chat with some of the other moms. In the second half Kristen's team catches up quickly with an early goal, then the score stays tied until there are only two minutes left in the game. That's when Cassie finally looks up and says that she has to go to the bathroom. Of course. I should've known this would happen.

"Really? Right now?" I know I sound exasperated. "The game is almost over. I asked you at half-time if you had to go. Why didn't you go then?"

"I didn't have to go then," Cassie states.

"It was only about a half an hour ago. You cannot have to go that bad. Can you wait a couple of minutes?"

Cassie shakes her head and stands up. "No. I have to go really bad. Now." The soccer field is in one of the town parks and there are low brick buildings with bathroom facilities in several locations. The closest one of these is all the way back to the parking lot, across it to the other side, then through the playground. Cassie's 17 years old and I suppose I'll eventually have to let her go to the bathroom by herself in a public place, but I'm nervous to let her cross the parking lot. She doesn't always look around carefully enough, and people drive like maniacs through there.

And, if that's not enough of a worry, I'm terrified that some creep will be hanging around the playground or the bathroom waiting for a victim. I'm sure that Cassie would seem like an easy target. This kind of thing gives me nightmares.

"Okay," I say, standing up. "Let's go." I catch Steve's eye and motion to him that we're going to the bathroom. He gives me a "Right now?!" look, then nods when I indicated Cassie. We make our way slowly to the bathroom hand in hand. Cassie still has a habit of grabbing my hand when we walk together, especially when we are crossing a street or a parking lot. I have to admit I think it's kind of sweet. I know she's really too old to continue to do this, but I find it comforting to know that I'm keeping her safe, that she's right here with me. So I really haven't tried very hard to break her of the habit. We

get to the bathroom without incident. I decide I might as well use the toilet too as long as I'm there. We finish up, wash our hands, and head back to the soccer field.

When we get there I see quickly that I've missed the end of the game. I look around for Steve and Kristen and find them easily. Kristen's in a huddle of her teammates. I watch as they hoist her onto their shoulders and carry her around laughing and cheering. Gail's husband, Greg, who coaches the team, is shaking hands with Steve. They both laugh and pat each other on the back.

Kristen laughs and tries not to fall as her friends dance her around. The team they had just beaten walks slowly toward the parking lot, heads down, soccer bags and water bottles dangling from the ends of their arms. Their parents follow in a similar state of dejection. I feel sorry for them for a moment, then look back at Kristen just as she looks up and meets my eye.

I give her a huge smile and a thumbs up. I watch her take in the sight of Cassie and me standing at the edge of the parking lot holding hands, not at our seats. I see that she knows that we were coming from the bathroom, that we did not see her make the winning goal. Her face falls and my heart wrenches as she turns her face away from me.

"Fuck," I whisper, not loud enough, I hope, for Cassie to hear me. I cut my eyes at her without turning my head. No reaction. I'm safe.

I take a deep breath like so many I have breathed before, and push that visceral ache down deep into my belly. I'll save it and examine it later. I give Cassie's hand a squeeze, plaster a smile on my face, and we walk over to join the team in celebration.

Chapter Two

Later that night, once the girls are settled in their own rooms, I pour myself a glass of wine and flop into the well-cushioned wicker rocking chair on the covered patio out back. I light the candles in all three hurricane lamps and wish it was cold enough to justify a fire in the fire pit. I have a need for coziness, to be wrapped in a blanket. But it's early September and still too warm, even at night. I don't turn on the ceiling fan, despite the heat. I don't want to feel the air moving on my skin.

I think about how Steve and I had hoped for a baby for a long time before Cassie was born. In hindsight, it really wasn't that long, just short of a year of trying before we were pregnant, much less time than it takes for some couples to conceive, but at the time it seemed like forever. Perhaps when it's your first baby, it's the fear that you may never be able to have a child that makes you feel that way.

Taking another sip of the wine and swirling it around in my mouth I wonder how they come up with the tasting notes for various wines. I can never quite taste the hint of coffee, blackberry, or chocolate that they promise. Chocolate would go well with this wine. I consider going to the kitchen to see if any of my stash of dark chocolate is left but don't want to leave the porch. Steve's in the living room watching the game. I decide to preserve my solitude and forego the chocolate.

I remember holding Cassie just after she was born. I had never felt such love for anything in my life. Cassie was so beautiful. She had just a light fuzz of blond hair on her sweet little head, and seemed to fall asleep immediately after the doctor coaxed a cry from her. I snuggled her close and gazed at her sweet face. I was so enthralled that I had almost no awareness of the nurses and the doctor bustling about around me. Even Steve's

presence, I recall him trying to hug us both awkwardly from the side of the bed, registered only on the periphery of my consciousness. After far too short a time the doctor was there gently prying the baby from my arms telling me that I could have my daughter back very soon, but that they had some routine tests to run. My daughter. How amazing it was to hear those words.

Suddenly I was alone in the room, all the bustling over. I had sent Steve with the doctor and the baby. It was bizarre to find myself sitting alone in an unfamiliar room mere moments after giving birth for the first time. Where was the trumpet fanfare and the skies opening to admit a chorus of angels from heaven to glory in the birth of my child? I had started to laugh at the surreality of the situation. After a few moments a nurse returned and set about cleaning me up and preparing me to move to the hospital room where I would stay for the next couple of days.

"How long will it be before I can hold my baby again?" I asked the nurse.

"Oh, these tests only take a little longer than all the routine procedures. I think you'll have her back within the hour," replied the nurse avoiding my eyes. I felt the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

"What do you mean tests? What are they doing other than the routine procedures?" I could hear the note of panic in my voice. "Isn't she okay?"

"I'm sure she's fine," said the nurse looking nervous. "The doctor just had a few concerns and wanted to run some extra tests, that's all. It's nothing to be worried about."

"But why would he be concerned? She looked perfect to me." Then I realized I had not taken the time to examine every inch of her. Maybe she was missing some

fingers or toes or something. Oh God! Why hadn't I checked? Just then Steve came back into the room. He sat down next to my bed and took my hand.

"What's going on, Steve? The nurse said that they had to run some tests. What's wrong with our baby?" I was verging on hysteria by that time. Even in memory, I can still feel the panic I felt then.

"I'm not sure," he said, obviously trying to seem nonchalant. "The doctor said something about her having low muscle tone and an upward slant to her eyes when I asked. He also said something about a crease on her palms, but I don't know what he was talking about. He wouldn't let me stay while they did the tests."

It turned out that the doctor suspected from the baby's appearance that she might have a genetic defect. He was running a karyotype of her DNA using a drop of her blood. It seemed like forever before he returned and spoke to us, but it was less than an hour in truth. "I have something to tell you about your baby," he told us. "I think she may have Down syndrome. I've taken some blood from her heel and am sending it out to be tested. Then we'll know for sure."

I remember how it felt like the ground beneath my hospital bed had given way. I didn't hear anything the doctor said after that. There was something about the possible heart and respiratory problems that they could test for in non-invasive ways, and that most of these potential complications could be cleared up with surgery. I missed all of that, but understood it all slowly over the next few months as it truly sank in that my perfect baby was far from perfect.

It took four days to receive the results of the genetic testing. Cassie was struggling to regulate her breathing and body temperature, so she had to stay in the NICU and we

had to go home. Leaving her in the hospital and going home was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. Thinking back on that I wonder how I survived it. The worry. The not-knowing. Not for the first time, I ask myself what I would have done if I had known about Cassie's Down syndrome before she was born. Now, after having been her mother for so many years I know I would choose to have her, but what would I have done back then if I had known? Thinking about this gives me chills. I'd like to think that I would've had her anyway and loved her unconditionally because that's who I am, right? But deep down I am not sure. I had had all of the routine testing done during pregnancy, but nothing indicated that our baby might have Down Syndrome. I've always been grateful for that because I am not sure what I would have done with that information.

I listen for a few minutes to make sure Steve is still watching the game. I can hear the TV in the family room. It's the season opener for the Patriots, and Steve is a die-hard fan. They're playing the Steelers, I think. I light a cigarette and inhale deeply. Now, with the benefit of years of experience, I realize that my situation is far from tragic. It just requires a shift in expectations. It's just not what I expected and planned for. It's possible to live very happily, but one has to adjust. I can't imagine life without Cassie just as she is.

I felt so overwhelmed and inadequate when Cassie was a newborn. She had a hard time sucking and as hard as I tried, I had to give up on nursing her, and she couldn't suck hard enough to get my milk flowing. Even bottle feeding was hard, she couldn't coordinate her sucking and swallowing and breathe effectively and she would end up choking, or milk would come out of her nose.

I felt like such a failure in so many ways for a long time. I knew that Down Syndrome was caused by a chromosomal mutation and that neither parent was at fault, but I felt constantly like something I had done, or not done was the reason that I had a baby like Cassie. And then the fact that I couldn't nurse her was devastating too. It really felt like a personal failure despite what I was learning about babies with Down syndromethey have low muscle tone and a unique shape to their palates and a smaller mouth size all of which make nursing and feeding in general, a challenge. None of that logic could make me feel better for failing at the most basic function of motherhood. I was unable to feed my child.

I spent so much time crying and feeling guilty and inadequate that Steve started to really worry. His way of handling it had been to try to take a firm hand with me. He wanted me to pull myself together and just do whatever needed to be done, to figure it out without all the hysterics. He had a lot of anger. I had a lot of sadness. We did not talk to each other enough at the time. I realize that now. Back then, it seemed like all we did was talk, and we'd always end up yelling or crying. We were grieving, I realize that now. No one had died, but we had to let go of our expectations for parenthood would be, and for what our daughter's life would look like.

I lean my head back in the old chair and look up at the stars. Then I hear Steve in the kitchen. I quickly stub out my cigarette and drop the butt into an empty soda can one of the girls have left out there. I fan the air. Steve doesn't know I started smoking again a few months ago. I don't do it often, but when I get stressed I find it relaxes me.

Steve pokes his head out through the French doors. "Mind if I join you?" he asks. I wish he wouldn't. I just want to sit here and not have to talk. But I smile at him anyway, and gesture to the other rocking chair.

"No, come on out," I tell him, still looking at the stars. "I'm trying to find the Big Dipper. Aren't you going to watch the football game?" He gives me a long look before answering. He probably smells the smoke. Sigh.

"I'll catch the last quarter. The game's not close. We're getting crushed." He sits on the rocker with a glass of wine in his hand.

"You're drinking wine?" I ask, surprised.

"Yeah." He looks up at me from under his long eyelashes like a little boy caught with a cookie. "You left the bottle on the counter and the label looked interesting. I thought I'd try it."

I laugh. "Any noise from upstairs?" I ask him.

"Not so far," he says settling back on the couch and looking up at the sky.

"Thank God. We're due for a peaceful night." Cassie often has trouble falling asleep and tends to call for us numerous times before she finally settles down. Once she's asleep she'll stay asleep until morning, unlike Kristen, who's prone to nightmares and often calls out in the night. Sometimes Kristen lets out a yell that jolts me from my bed and I'm halfway down the hall to her room before I fully realize I'm moving. It always takes a while to wake her up when this happens, and then to soothe her enough for her to go back to sleep. I usually wind up so rattled that I can't get back to sleep myself for a long time. It doesn't happen every night, of course. Only once every few months at this point. When she was little it was more frequent.

"The stars are gorgeous tonight," says Steve.

"Yeah. I was just noticing that too." Steve takes my hand and I squeeze his fingers without shifting my gaze.

"Great game, but a rough afternoon," he says.

"Yeah. Was she okay? I suppose I should have talked to her about it, but she seemed so cheerful I didn't want to bring it up and ruin that happy mood." Kristen had ridden home from the game in Steve's car, Cassie in mine. Then we'd been busy with dinner and other things.

"She was upset, but she does understand. It's hard for her."

"I know it is, but I don't know what to do about it. These things happen. She seemed happy enough at Dairy Queen. I'm glad she wasn't mad at Cassie. She even let her taste her Blizzard."

"You really need to find a way to keep your attention on Kristen when you're at her games."

"What could I have done?" I hear my voice rising into a falsetto and getting louder. "She had to pee. Should I have let her wet her pants?"

"No," he pauses and I know immediately that something I won't like is coming.

"Maybe we should ask Mrs. Andrews to stay with Cassie next time Kristen has a game,"

Steve looks at my face as he says this, watching for my reaction. Yep. I don't like it. I realize eventually that my mouth is hanging open and clamp it shut.

"I hate the idea of leaving Cassie out of family activities," I finally say.

"Not family activities, Kristen's games. She doesn't like to go to them anyway. Everyone will be happy," says Steve. "Was this Kristen's idea?"

"Not exactly," Steve tells me. "She made a comment like 'Why does she have to come anyway?' not really thinking there was any other option, and I said, 'Maybe she doesn't.' and her eyes lit up."

"But I don't know if that's a good way to start doing things. What's next? Cassie can't come to Kristen's graduation because she might have to use the bathroom at the wrong moment? Or Kristen's wedding? I don't want to leave her out of our life because she's inconvenient," I pull my hand out of Steve's grasp and turn to face him full-on.

"Of course not," Steve's voice is soft, "But maybe on those kinds of occasions someone else could handle Cassie's needs so you can focus on Kristen."

"You've really given this a lot of thought!" I shout. I flop back in my chair, defeated. "I knew it was a problem, but I didn't realize it was such a big thing as this."

Steve grabs both my hands this time and turns me to face him. He looks into my eyes. "It's just that there are times when you need to be able to focus on Kristen, and not worry about Cassie. Up until recently, their needs have been pretty compatible and you've been able to take care of them both without much of a problem. But things are changing. Kristen's not a little kid anymore. She needs to be recognized for her accomplishments."

Accomplishments that Cassie would never have, I realize. I feel close to tears.

"I don't know," I tell him. "I have to think about it. What if something goes wrong?"

"What could go wrong? She loves Mrs. Andrews. They'll have a great time, and you won't miss any more winning goals." He gets up and heads back into the house. "I'm just going to watch the rest of the game, then head to bed."

Once he's back inside, I light another cigarette.

I think about Evelyn Andrews. She's a sweet woman, and she genuinely likes our girls. I love the way she interacts with Cassie, talking to her and engaging her, but what if Cassie has one of her tantrums? I remind myself that Evelyn raised four children herself. She must have some experience with tantrums. Maybe she *could* handle it. I wonder if she would mind being asked. She'd probably be delighted. She's always asking if she can help in some way. I think maybe I'll call her in the morning and see if she's available the following Saturday during Kristen's game.

Chapter Three

The next morning Steve is inside watching a morning news program and the girls haven't come down yet. I'm out on the porch with my coffee and the Sunday paper, giving myself an hour to relax before I head back out to finish what I want to get done today in the garden. I need to divide the Daylilies, Hostas, and Peonies and do some clean-up in the flower beds so that I can add to the compost. Cape Cod weather is milder than it is further inland, but I want to be prepared in case of an early frost before the end of the month.

The phone rings and Steve yells, "Lynn! It's your sister." The caller ID shows up on the TV screen. I head inside and pick up the phone in the kitchen on the 4th ring, carrying it back out to the patio with me.

"Hey, Caroline, what's up?"

"Oh, thank God you're home!" She's practically breathless. "I thought I was going to have to leave a message, and I really want to talk to you."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I have some very exciting news. Guess."

I hate that sort of thing. "Ummm. You got promoted." I pick up the paper again and turn to the crossword with the phone tucked between my ear and my shoulder.

"No--much bigger than that. Guess again."

"You're moving to Japan." Caroline is a Director with Liberty Mutual in Boston. She's often jetting around the world on business trips, and it seems like a big move is always pending but never happens.

"No! I'm pregnant!!"

I drop the phone and accidentally knock over my coffee cup with my bare foot that I'd propped on the edge of the glass coffee table. Ignoring the coffee mug, I scramble under the wicker couch to grab the phone.

"What!" I practically scream. Caroline laughs, delighted with my reaction.

"I knew you'd never guess."

"Oh my God!! Are we happy about this?" My voice has gotten very loud. I just can't believe it. Since we were kids my little sister has always sworn that she would never have children. Not to mention the fact that she is 42 years old and single. She's not even dating anyone that I'm aware of. "How did it happen?" I ask like a moron.

"I think you know how it happened," Caroline says, still laughing. "And yes, we're happy about this, believe it or not. At least *I* am and I hope you can be too."

"But you never wanted kids!"

"I know. I didn't. But I've been thinking about it a lot lately and I've changed my mind. I'm thrilled--and also terrified."

"Who's the father? I didn't even think you had a boyfriend."

"His name is Patrick. He works in our New York office. I have to travel there a lot, and sometimes he ends up here. We became friends and one thing led to another. We've been a bit more than friends for about six months now."

"How come you never said anything? He's not married or something is he?"

Caroline had a boyfriend a few years back who turned out to be married. She was

devastated when she found out--not that she wanted to marry the guy herself, mind you.

She's always been very vocal about what an outdated institution marriage is. She just

didn't want to be anyone's 'other woman'. "Have you told him yet about the baby? Are you getting married now too?"

"Whoa, slow down there. One big step at a time. No. I haven't told him yet. I actually just found out yesterday. I was late, so I peed on a stick and it came back positive. I couldn't believe it, so I went to CVS and bought three more tests. They all came out positive. I've been bursting to tell you but I wanted to wait until this morning so you would actually have five minutes to talk to me. Can you believe it? I'm going to have a baby! I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow. Once the doctor confirms everything and checks me out I'll tell Patrick."

"Oh my God, you're 42!" I blurt. "That makes this a high-risk pregnancy. You'll have to quit smoking." Caroline and I had taken up smoking together when we were teenagers, mostly as a way to drive our mother crazy. "You have to stop drinking too," I tell her.

"I know that. I actually quit smoking a couple of months ago. Patrick doesn't like it. He said it grossed him out. So I quit."

"Wow. That's not the Caroline I know. Have you gone soft in your old age letting some man push you around?"

"I really like him."

"I guess so. That's a good thing given the circumstances. How do you think he'll feel about the baby?"

"I'm not sure. I'm pretty sure he likes kids. He has a nephew he talks about a lot."

"Do you think you'll get married?"

"I don't know. I sort of hope so and hate myself for feeling that way. It's so conventional. We'll see. No rush."

"Oh no, don't rush. You can have one of those trendy weddings where your own kid is the flower girl. That's very in."

"No need for sarcasm. I was hoping I could count on you to be supportive."

"Oh Caroline, I *am* supportive." Suddenly I'm very tired. "I just want you to think about what you're getting into. Motherhood is no small undertaking. And to try to do it alone, at your age, it's not going to be easy."

"I know. I know it's not easy, but I want to do it. The fact that I'm alone, at least at the moment, is why it's so important to me to have your help. Lynn, I can't imagine a better role model than you. You're a wonderful mother. Will you help me figure it out?"

"Of course I will," I tell her. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good. I'm more tired than usual, but that's the only thing I've noticed so far. Oh, and my boobs are sore."

I laugh. "Yes, that was one of the first signs for me too. So, no nausea or anything like that? You're not throwing up?"

"Nope. Not yet anyway. It's still very early."

"Well good. I'm glad to hear it. Maybe you'll have an easier time of it than I did.

Call me tomorrow after you see the doctor."

"Okay. Thank you, Lynn, for being positive about it. I know I really surprised you."

"You might not want to tell too many people about this until after the first trimester, just in case."

"My sister, always the optimist. That's why I love you."

"I love you too, Sis."

I hang up the phone. My head is spinning. I just can't believe it. I'm dying to tell Steve. Caroline is going to be a mother! That's something I never thought would happen. Motherhood is at odds with her whole lifestyle.

She lives in a high-rise apartment in Boston and works crazy hours. She goes out most nights with friends or dates, or God knows who. She travels all the time, if not for work, then on vacations all over the world to places with crystal clear water and white sandy beaches and frothy drinks made with pineapple and coconut. She works out at a gym and takes great pride in her athlete's body. Pregnancy and motherhood are going to turn her whole world on its head.

I can't concentrate on the crossword now, so I decide to go wake the girls up before they sleep the day away. As I get to the top of the stairs I can hear their voices. I tiptoe on the thick carpet to just outside Cassie's door. The door is open just a crack and I peek in quickly trying not to be seen. Cassie is sitting up in her bed, her hair rumpled, one shoulder peeking out of the t-shirt she slept in. She still has that just-woken-up look, a little disoriented, eyes puffy. Kristen is sprawled across the foot of Cassie's bed in her Marvel Comic pajamas, and wearing a cape that she won at a carnival years ago. It's purple and has a big lightning bolt on the back. I smile seeing her. Kristen often has some odd sort of costume on. I find that so endearing as she gets older. It's like a secret side of her that only her family would know about.

Kristen is looking through Cassie's cat pictures from the day before. I start to open the door to ask them if they're ready for breakfast. I'm planning to make pancakes

when they come down.

"These are really good, Cass," Kristen says. I stop myself and step back. I want to listen for a minute. Luckily they haven't seen me. An enormous smile spreads across Cassie's face. "You really think so?" she asks.

"Yeah. I especially like this one," says Kristen holding up one of the cat and sticker drawings that looks almost identical to all the others as far as I can tell. "The cat's tail looks really cool in this one," says Kristen. "You made it curve almost like a letter S."

"That's what I was trying to do," says Cassie, delighted.

"Now that you are getting so good at drawing cats, do you want me to show you how to do a bunny? It's almost the same. Just the ears and tail are different."

"Sure, that would be great," says Cassie.

I watch as Kristen crawls up in the bed to sit against the headboard next to Cassie. She has Cassie's drawing pad and a pencil. Cassie is intent on watching Kristen's pencil as she moves it on the paper, explaining as she goes. "It starts out just like the cat," she says. "You put a big circle, then a smaller circle on top." Cassie's nodding as she watches. "Then you give it bunny ears instead of cat ears," she makes a "whoop" sound effect as she draws the longer ears that makes Cassie smile. "And the tail is a little cotton ball instead of an 'S,' like this," she draws saying "Fuzzy, fuzzy, fuzzy," as she makes squiggles to represent the tail. Cassie laughs out loud. "You can do the eyes and nose and whiskers the same way you do with the cat," Kristen says, finishing the drawing.

"Do it again," says Cassie, flapping her hands in the air as if she's going to clap them together and give Kristen a round of applause. "Now you try it." Kristen hands the pad and pencil to her sister. Cassie talks her way through the drawing, making the same sounds that Kristen had made. Kristen watches her and corrects her a few times. She tells her to do it again at least four times and each time Cassie complies immediately with no complaints.

Finally, Kristen says, "There, perfect. You just drew a perfect bunny. Look at that." Cassie admires her work then turns to hug Kristen. I hear her say, "I love you, Krissy." Kristen returns the hug and I have to flatten myself a little more against the wall in the hallway because Kristen is facing the door directly. Just before I move so they're out of view, I see Kristen rubbing Cassie's back just the way I always do to both girls when I hug them. Kristen's eyes are closed and she's smiling. I'm overwhelmed with love and gratitude for both of them and feel a catch in my throat.

I turn then, leaving the girls to themselves and continue down the hall to my bedroom to get dressed. Watching Kristen and Cassie being so sweet to each other like that reminds me of how close Caroline and I were growing up. We haven't been as close as adults as I always thought we would be. Just too busy I guess. Maybe her becoming a mother will bond us together more strongly again.

Chapter Four

The following Saturday afternoon I drop Cassie off with Mrs. Andrews and head to Kristen's game. I don't know what she thought of being left behind. She seemed a little confused, but also happy not to have to go. I'm still kind of uncomfortable with the arrangement. I don't want Cassie to feel dumped off somewhere, or unwanted. I spend the whole game worrying about this and wondering if anything's going wrong, but manage to look attentive to the game. Of course, Kristen doesn't make a winning goal in the last second of this game this time. She does make a couple of nice ones, however, and I dutifully cheer my head off. She looks pleased. I guess that's what matters. I check my phone a thousand times just to make sure I haven't missed a text or a call from Mrs. Andrews.

After the game, I send Steve next door to bring Cassie home. I know if I go myself I'll probably ask too many questions about how it went and risk insulting Evelyn. He's gone for a while. Finally, they both come into the kitchen where I'm stir-frying chicken and vegetables for dinner.

"Hi Honey!" I go to Cassie and hug her. "How did it go?"

"It's great. I got to make chocolate chip cookies." Cassie says.

"Wow! All by yourself?"

"Mrs. Andrews helped but I did most of it. I brought some home." She hands me a plastic container full of cookies. "And, even better, I got to play with Muffin!" She looks at Kristen who's just come downstairs from changing her clothes as she says this.

"No fair!" Kristen says with a teasing smile. "I want to play with Muffin."

Cassie's smile grows. "Guess what, Cassie? We won our game!"

"Great! Did you get any goals?"

"Yep. Two. Want to go watch TV before dinner?" They walk off together into the family room.

Steve grabs me around the waist while I'm at the stove. I squeal in surprise.

"That wasn't so bad, now was it?" he asks.

I decide to play dumb. "What, the heart attack you just gave me?"

"No, leaving Cassie with Mrs. Andrews. She had a great time."

"Yeah, it sounds like she did," I admit.

"And Kristen was so glad to have your full attention. I think she was showing off a bit for you. She did some fancier footwork than she usually tries during games."

I pretend to know what he's talking about and smile. "You think that was for my benefit?"

"I do. So what do you think?"

"About her footwork? It was great. Very impressive."

"No. Is this something we can keep doing? I think it worked out well for everyone."

"I guess it did. As long as Mrs. Andrews is available and willing, I guess we can keep doing this, if you're willing to risk it.

"What do you mean?"

"Pretty soon Kristen'll want to quit soccer so she can hang out with Mrs. Andrews and bake cookies and play with Muffin."

"Well...," says Steve, "I had an idea that might make that possible."

"What are you talking about?"

"What if we went out one night when we don't have somewhere else we have to be? We could go out for dinner. Just the two of us."

I put down my spatula and turn to face him. "Like a date?"

"It's been a long time,"

"That really would be fun. Do you think Mrs. Andrews could handle them both?"

"Why not. They're fairly independent. She would only need to make sure they eat dinner and don't kill each other. They could probably even stay home alone, but that seems like a big responsibility to put on Kristen at her age."

"Oh no. I don't want to do that to her. What if Cassie has a tantrum or digs her heels in about something and Kristen can't get her to budge?"

"Right. They're both more likely to listen to Mrs. Andrews than to each other, even if only to be polite. And they like her so much. Maybe she could come over here and stay with them so they could go to bed. She could even bring Muffin over."

"Okay. I'll check the calendar for a free night and see if she's available."

"How about tomorrow?" Steve asks.

"That's awfully short notice, don't you think?"

"Actually, I already spoke to Mrs. Andrews when I picked up Cassie from her house. She said she'd love to have them both any time, and she's free tomorrow. I think she likes the company."

"You already spoke to her?" I'm stunned. "What if I had said no?"

"I really hoped you wouldn't. But if worse came to worse I would just tell her we'd do it another time."

"I suppose you already have dinner reservations." I joke.

"As a matter of fact I do," he answers with a self-satisfied smile.

"What's gotten into you? The last time you went to this much trouble to make plans for us was the night you proposed."

"Oh come on. I'm not that bad," he says. I just look at him. "You seem like you're under some stress lately," he says, "and I thought maybe having a little fun might help."

"I do? I didn't realize I seemed stressed. Well, anyway, a date would be nice. I guess tomorrow is as good a time as any. Where will we go?"

Chapter Five

Steve and I go for a walk on the beach Sunday afternoon. There is nothing like the beach in mid-September when all the summer crowds are gone and the weather is still gorgeous. We walk for a long time, then just sit right down in the sand and talk while we look out at the rolling waves. I silently count how many times I see a seal poke its head up and look at us. They are such funny creatures, like sea-puppies. Then we go for dinner at our favorite seafood

place. It's nice. After dinner, we stop in for drinks at another restaurant with an ocean view. The moon is bright and rises early. I love the path of light it casts on the water.

We get home late and both girls are already asleep. Who cares if it's a work night and we'll be tired tomorrow? It was really nice. We both agree that we need to start doing this more often. Evelyn Andrews is a Godsend. She and Muffin leave as soon as we get home claiming that they need their beauty sleep. Steve and I go to bed ourselves, but it's a while before we go to sleep.

On Monday, while I'm at work, I get a call from Sandy, the school nurse at the high school. She calls every so often when she has a question about the health history of one of the freshmen and is calling me to see what my experience was with that student at the middle school. There are only six school nurses in our school district, so we are all pretty familiar and friendly with each other. I can tell that she's having a hard time with what she has to say. She spends a few minutes making small talk, how's everything going, that sort of thing then starts to repeat herself. Finally, I have to stop her.

"Sandy, what's going on? Is everything okay?"

"Lynn, I have Cassie in my office," she tells me.

"What is it this time?" I ask. Cassie likes Sandy and goes to her office with some, often imaginary, ailment once every couple of weeks whenever she wants to get out of what's going on in her class. Sandy's very kind to her and always lets her hang out for a few minutes before sending her back to class once she has figured out that Cassie is scamming. Every so often Sandy gives me a call to let me know what Cassie's been up to if she has been doing it fairly often, that way I can check with Cassie's teacher to see what's going on there and address the real issue. It's usually not a big deal.

"Well....," Sandy's hesitant and I feel my shoulders tense. Oh God, is something really wrong? Is she hurt? Is it her heart? Sandy continues, "Cassie came in this morning and was complaining of pain in her lower back. I asked her if she had done something physical in the last day or two that was different than usual--thinking it could be a pulled muscle or something. She said she didn't think so and pointed to a very specific spot on her lower back with one finger, so I had her lift her shirt a little so I could take a look and she has a pretty serious wound that I am a little concerned about. Are you aware of it? Do you know how it happened? I asked Cassie what happened, but she said she doesn't know."

"She has a wound? I don't know anything about that. She hasn't said anything at home."

"It looks like a bite mark. Her skin's broken only very slightly in a couple of spots. But I'm sure it's quite painful. It doesn't look like a human bite, it's an animal of some kind I think, maybe a dog bite."

"Oh my God! How could something like that have happened? And she says she doesn't know how she got it?" It must've been Muffin, but Cassie would've told me about that, wouldn't she? Wouldn't Mrs. Andrews?

"Well, that's what she says," said Sandy, "but I suspect she is not being quite truthful. She hasn't perfected her poker face, so it's easy to tell when she is bluffing. I put a topical cream on it that should relieve the pain a bit and hopefully kill any bacteria gathering there. I think you should pick her up and take her to a doctor just to be safe. She may need a rabies shot and that has to be done as soon as possible. That is unless you can confirm that the dog that bit her is immunized against Rabies. Maybe you'll have more luck getting out of her what happened."

"Okay, thanks for calling, Sandy. I'll make a doctor's appointment now." I hang up and dial the pediatrician. She can't see us until 4:30, so I call Sandy back and tell her to send Cassie back to class. After school, I take a look at the bite. It looks like a painful bruise, and the skin is slightly broken in one or two places. I don't think it looks infected, thank God. I ask Cassie about it. She says it happened the day before while Steve and I were out, that something bit her, but she doesn't know what. I can't get her to tell me anything more than that. I'm beginning to wonder if it wasn't Muffin after all. I ask Kristen about it.

"It wasn't a big deal, I don't know why Cassie always has to make such a federal case about everything," is her response.

"Kristen, her skin was broken, it could become infected. I need to get her to the doctor this afternoon to check it out, and maybe get a Rabies shot. I think that's a big

enough deal," I say. Cassie gasps and her face crumples at the word "shot." I could kick myself for saying it. She starts to cry.

Kristen talks over her. Ignoring the tears. "Oh. I didn't think her skin was broken.

I thought it was just a little nip," she says.

"Kristen. What happened? Tell me what bit Cassie!" I'm running out of patience.

"It was Muffin," she says. "We didn't want you to find out because we thought you wouldn't let us play with Muffin anymore and we really like him. He's so cute."

"Muffin bit Cassie? Yesterday while we were out? Does Mrs. Andrews know about this?" my voice is rising higher and higher. Cassie forgets her fear of getting a shot and stops crying to listen to where this will go.

"No. We didn't tell her either because we knew she would tell you. It was just an accident. Muffin didn't mean to. He was just over-excited. Please don't say we can't play with him anymore," she pleads.

"You'd better tell me what happened, at least I'm 99 percent sure Muffin has had all his immunizations, so we don't have to worry unless the bite gets infected," I say.

Cassie's wide eyes turn on me. "I'm infected?" she asks looking terrified.

"It'll be okay as long as we get the right medicine from the doctor." Cassie starts to cry.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I don't want to die," she says.

"You won't die, Cassie. But we do have to go to the doctor. I have an appointment for you at 4:30."

"But Grandpa died," she says, still crying. Steve's father had passed away two years ago after contracting sepsis in the hospital while recovering from a fairly low-risk surgical procedure. We explained to the girls by saying he had gotten an infection.

"If you have an infection, and you may not, it won't be the same kind that Grandpa had," I tell her. "I'm sure that with medicine, you'll be fine. But it's a good thing you went to the nurse and told her about the bite so we know to take you to the doctor. When you get hurt, you should always tell me or Dad about it. Now, come and sit down here, Cassie. I want the two of you to tell me what happened with Muffin before we go to the doctor."

"We were playing in the yard with Muffin, running through the sprinkler," begins Kristen, "Muffin was chasing us and it was fun to see if we could get him to run through the sprinkler too."

"Where was Mrs. Andrews?" I ask.

"She'd been outside on the deck watching us. She wasn't too thrilled about how wet Muffin was getting but said it was okay because he was obviously having a great time with us. She went inside before it happened. I guess to the bathroom. Poor Cassie. She was just trying to play with Muffin. She loves him. We were picking up the sprinkler and squirting Muffin with it. He was going nuts. He loves the water. He kept trying to drink it as we sprayed it at him. He looked so funny with his lips pulled back and his tongue flicking. He looked like he was trying to bite the stream of water, and his eyes were wild--open so wide you could see the whites."

Cassie giggles listening to this dramatic retelling. Kristen continues.

"Once we put the sprinkler down, he was running around like crazy and barking. It was hysterical. I am actually surprised that Mrs. Andrews didn't make us stop. We must've been pretty noisy. Cassie was laughing so hard I thought she would pee her pants."

At this Cassie lets out a little squeal and giggles even harder. She flaps her hands a few times.

Kristen went on, "She kept running through the sprinkler in all her clothes, not caring that she was soaked, trying to get Muffin to follow her. He was racing around and around in circles barking like a lunatic. Finally, he did follow Cassie through the sprinkler. I don't think she expected him to be so close on her heels. She screamed and ran faster, then she tripped trying to hop over the sprinkler and she fell almost on top of him. Muffin jumped out of the way at the last second, then lunged at Cassie and bit her on the back. It happened so fast that I didn't even realize that Muffin had bitten Cassie until she started screaming. I saw him do it but didn't really get it that he had actually bitten her if that makes any sense. Even after she screamed I still thought it was just a little nip--nothing to worry about.

Cassie is nodding along as she listens to this account.

"He just jumped on me and bit me before I knew it!" she adds. "It really hurt."

"Oh Honey, I'm sure it did. Did you cry?" I ask. Cassie nods.

"Did she ever!" exclaims Kristen. "She started howling and crying. Mrs. Andrews came running."

"Then how did she end up not knowing about the bite?" I ask.

"Cassie was so upset that she had a hard time telling her what happened. She couldn't get the words out. I think she was still trying to understand it herself," Kristen says. "So I told Mrs. Andrews everything except the dog bite. I told her Cassie must've hurt herself really bad when she fell--which she did actually. Her knees were skinned and stuff. So Mrs. Andrews brought Cassie inside and had her sit down and when she went to get some Bacitracin and band-aids I told Cassie not to tell about Muffin biting her or we wouldn't be allowed to play with him anymore. She agreed."

Cassie nods again, "I was mad at Muffin, but I didn't want to not ever play with him. He didn't mean to, I think. Really, Muffin is my friend."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right. Muffin is your friend. He just got too worked up. You have to be careful when you play with a dog. And you always have to tell about any kind of animal bite because it might have to be looked at by a doctor. Okay, Cassie?" She nods. "Kristen, you were wrong to tell Cassie not to tell," I tell her.

"I know. I'm sorry. I didn't think it was a big deal," she answers. "Will we ever be allowed to play with Muffin again?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say. "We'll deal with that later after we see what the doctor has to say."

We see the doctor and she says that we will have to watch the site of the bite until it heals to make sure there's no new redness or heat developing around it--signs of infection. She prescribes an antibacterial cream to be applied several times a day, but there's no need for stitches. Cassie does get a rabies shot, however, even though I tried to assure the doctor that I'm confident that Muffin is up to date with his immunizations.

Mrs. Andrews is horrified when I tell her what happened. She starts yelling at Muffin in the background while she's still on the phone with me, "Muffin, you bad dog!!! You are a very naughty dog!" In between scoldings, she apologizes about a hundred times to me. I feel a little sorry for the poor woman.

"It'll be okay, Mrs. Andrews, um Evelyn," I tell her. "Luckily it wasn't a serious bite. We just have to watch for signs of infection."

"Oh, I'm glad about that. I am so sorry. I never thought Muffin would do anything like that. The girls play with him all the time!" she says.

"I think that he was just over excited," I tell her. "From now on though, I really think one of us needs to be present when the girls are with Muffin. So we can calm things down before he gets too frenzied. They would be heart-broken if I told them they couldn't play with Muffin anymore, so I don't want to do that because I don't think Muffin was being mean, but you or I or Steve needs to be watching. Okay?"

"Yes, of course. I won't take my eyes off them for a minute whenever they are together. I'm kind of surprised that Cassie still wants to play with him at all," she says.

"Me too, to tell you the truth. She does love Muffin, but Kristen is definitely influencing her in this." I say.

"Well, sisters can be very convincing. Again, I'm so sorry about what happened."
We say our goodbyes and hang up the phone. Steve comes in to sit with me. He's just
come down from kissing the girls good night.

"Exciting day, huh?" he says plopping onto the couch across from me. "Cassie seems okay. She keeps trying to twist around to look at her bandage. She's kind of proud of it, I think."

"Probably. Now she has a good story and a potential scar to go with it. Wait'll she gets to school tomorrow and regales her class with the tale--now that the gig is up and she can talk about it, of course," I say.

"Yeah. What's up with that? I didn't know Kristen had such power over her--to get her to keep quiet. To tell you the truth, I didn't know Cassie could do that. She is usually so straightforward and honest. If she does try to lie or not tell about something, it's always so obvious, how did we not know about it?"

"We weren't here," I remind him. "By the time we got home last night she was in bed and this morning we were so busy rushing around to get out the door, she didn't have to do anything--just not bring it up. She didn't make it all the way through the school day without it coming out. She wound up in the nurse's office. I'm sure she was bursting to tell someone about it."

"What did Mrs. Andrews say about it?" Steve asks.

"Oh, she was very apologetic. I'm sure she feels awful. I think she was afraid we'd never speak to her again. I have to admit I am a little bit angry about it. Not so much that it happened, but that she didn't know. That bothers me. I don't think I'll be asking her to babysit again any time soon."

Steve is silent for a moment, then he says, "We'll have to find someone else then."

"We'll see," I leave it at that for now. I'm not so sure we'll be using a babysitter again.

Chapter Six

"Hi Honey," I say to Cassie when she wanders into the kitchen the following Saturday morning, "Did you have a good night's sleep?"

She nods, still looking pretty sleepy even though she's been watching TV for at least an hour.

"Are you ready for breakfast?"

Another nod.

"You have art class in about an hour, so we need to start getting ready," I tell her.

Cassie has always loved to draw and it's good for her eye-hand coordination to do it. The occupational therapist at her school suggested an art program for children with special needs about three years ago, and we've been going ever since, every Saturday. It's run out of an old barn on the teacher's property.

I make Cassie an English muffin with butter and apricot jelly, her favorite, and some scrambled eggs. I cut a grapefruit half for myself and spread my own English muffin with peanut butter, *my* favorite. Steve and Kristen are still watching TV, they'll have to fend for themselves later. Cassie sits at the table and waits for her breakfast which only takes a few minutes.

"How's your back today?" I ask her. She raises one eyebrow and looks at me, waiting. She's been working on this very-teenaged expression for a while and I want to laugh each time she does it. I smile, but hold back the giggle. "The spot where Muffin bit you?" She reaches her hand around behind her and touches the spot under her shirt, all the while maintaining the raised eyebrow, and pushing out her lower lip with focus on checking her wound.

"It's okay," she finally pronounces, relaxing her face and body and watching me for my reaction.

"Does it still hurt?" I ask. She thinks about this for a moment.

"Not really. I forgot about it," she tells me. "That's good, right?"

"Yes, that's a good sign," I say. "It must be healing. I'll check it and change your bandage again after breakfast."

"Okay," she puts her head down on her arms and gazes at me while I finish up with the food. She's quiet for a few moments, and then, "I can't ever play with Muffin again."

"Who told you that?" I ask.

"I can't. Muffin hurts me." She looks so sad I put the butter knife down and walk over to give her a hug. We'd been over this several times in the last few days, but Cassie needs to go through it again.

"Muffin hurt you once, but I think it was an accident," I say. I put one finger under her chin and lift her eyes to meet mine. "I don't think he'll hurt you again."

"He didn't mean to?" she asks.

"No. It sounds like he just got too excited and thought it was part of the game. I'm sure he's sorry. Mrs. Andrews said she was sorry too," I say as I stand up to finish making breakfast.

"Mrs. Andrews is Muffin's mom," says Cassie.

"Yes. She feels very bad about Muffin biting you," I say. Cassie's lower lip pushes out again as she thinks about this.

"Yes. It was bad that Muffin hurt me. Very bad," she says.

"It wasn't all Muffin's fault," I tell her. She looks at me again, mouth slightly open, eyes wide. "It was partially your fault and partially Kristen's fault too," I say.

Cassie still looks shocked.

"My fault?" she says with disbelief.

"Yes, you and Kristen got Muffin all riled up having him chase you around and around and he got carried away and bit you when he caught you like you were a rabbit he was hunting for dinner." At this idea Cassie dissolves into giggles.

"I'm a rabbit," she says.

"Yes. That's how Muffin thinks. He's an animal. His instinct is to hunt. He wasn't being mean, he made a mistake."

"Because he thought I was a rabbit!" Cassie crows with delight as I put her breakfast down in front of her. I ruffle her hair then sit down across from her to eat. Kristen trails sleepily into the kitchen with a throw blanket from the couch sloppily wrapped around her waist and dragging on the floor.

"I wish you wouldn't drag that blanket around the floor like that," I say. She ignores me and continues toward the fridge.

"What's for breakfast?" she says opening it and peering inside.

"You'll have to make your own," I say. "I've got to get dressed and take Cassie to Art class." Kristen straightens up and blinks at me a few times. "What?! I'm sorry I didn't make you breakfast. I thought you were going to hang out in front of the TV for a while longer." Without a word she turns back to the fridge.

"Krissy, guess what!" Cassie says. Kristen doesn't answer. "Krissy! Krissy! Guess what!"

I'm about to order Kristen to answer when she finally mumbles, "What?"

"I'm a rabbit!" Cassie tells her, delighted. "That's why Muffin bited me." Kristen looks at Cassie for a moment with one eyebrow raised in her own well-practiced adolescent sneer, and Cassie, still all smiles says, "It's your fault too!"

"What's my fault?" asks Kristen.

"That Muffin bited me!" says Cassie.

"It is not my fault that Muffin bit you!" Kristen screams at her. The smile slides off of Cassie's face, and her features crumble within seconds to her about-to-cry face. I jump in.

"Oh, Cassie, don't cry, Honey." I should know by now that those words pretty much guarantee that the person to whom they are spoken will now, without fail, cry. She does, with a big, wailing sob. Steve comes into the kitchen with a questioning look on his face. I ignore him and look at Kristen as she turns back to the refrigerator muttering about how it was not her fault. "Kristen!" I bark at her. She jumps a little, then recovers her teen-aged nonchalance and turns slowly to face me. She stares at me, mouth twisted in defiance, arms tightly wound together across her chest, left hip thrust out to the side. "Apologize to your sister." I tell her.

"No." she says. Just like that. She looks right at me and says no.

"Kristen, I told Cassie that it was both her fault and your fault as well as Muffin's fault because you two got him so riled up. I was trying to make her understand that Muffin was following his instinct, not just being mean. I don't want her to be afraid of Muffin, but I do want her to be careful around him. That's why she said that to you. No

one thinks it was solely your fault. Now apologize to her for screaming like that." I struggle to keep my voice calm. I want to slap her impudent little face.

"Sorry I yelled," Kristen spits, "but it was not my fault." Cassie stops wailing long enough to hear what Kristen says, then starts right up again.

"That's enough, Cassie." The day has just begun and already I'm exhausted.

"Come on, let's go get dressed. It's almost time to leave for Art." We leave the kitchen and head upstairs. I can hear Steve and Kristen talking and rifling through the fridge and pantry in the kitchen below. Cassie sniffles all the way up the stairs. I pat her back. "It's okay. Kristen loves you. She just doesn't want to be blamed for what happened with Muffin."

"But it's her fault," Cassie whines. "You said so."

"I also said it was your fault, Cassie. Do you remember that part?" She stops at the top of the stairs, head hanging. She nods slowly. Her lower lip protrudes slightly. "Do you understand why Muffin bit you?"

"He thought I was a bunny," she whimpers.

"Because you were running like a bunny. He thought he was supposed to catch you, like he was hunting." She stands still, head still hanging, no reaction to what I said. "He wasn't mad at you. You just can't make him think he is hunting." Still no reaction. "Do you understand?" Finally another slow nod. "Okay good." I take her hand and lead her into her room. She sits on the bed while I lay out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt and hoodie for her to wear to Art. "You get dressed, and so will I. Then we'll be ready to go. Okay?"

"Okay ... Mom?"

"What?"

"I don't like to be a bunny. It hurts."

"Right, Honey. You be Cassie, not a bunny."

"Okay."

I take a deep breath when I get to my own room and realize that I've been holding my breath for a while. That happens to me a lot. I don't even realize that I've barely been breathing until I start up again. I have to remind myself to breathe.

Kristen has been quick to snap at all of us lately, but especially Cassie. And Cassie bursts into tears when she is startled, or feels unliked, or has any negative emotion directed at her. So she's been in tears a lot lately. Kristen's only 14. I'm beginning to dread the full onslaught of teenage hormones. She'll probably be impossible to live with. I remember not being sure whether I wanted to be a kid or a grown up, and vacillating between the two like a see-saw.

Dressed, I go back to Cassie's room to help her with her hair.

"Where's your smock?" I ask her.

"I don't know."

"I think it might still be in the laundry room. I had to wash it after you did your painting last weekend."

We find the smock and head out the door. I kiss Kristen and Steve goodbye,
Cassie kisses Steve and deliberately skips Kristen. She doesn't seem to notice. They're
eating cereal and sausage. My stomach lurches just thinking about the combo.

"We'll be back by 1:30," I tell them. "Kristen, make sure you get your homework done this morning before your game." She answers with a sort of assenting grunt, her mouth full of sausage.

"Welcome, Everyone!" Miss Kathy always greets all of us like we've arrived for a grand ball at her country estate, which, in a sense, I guess we have. She has a beautiful property with acres of former farmland that is now acres of beautiful gardens and forests. Her house is gorgeous, and has a view of Little Pleasant Bay, but truly, it's the barn/ art studio that I love most. It's a quaint, old fashioned, red barn with two stories and from the outside that's all it looks like it is.

Inside, they've remodeled it so that there is some storage for tractors and snow blowers and the like, then the rest of the main floor is a large party room complete with a wet bar and big-screen TV hanging on the wall with some couches facing it, and a fireplace. They can have a huge party without anyone ever setting foot in their actual house. The upstairs is a game room for the kids with another TV and some couches, and a pool table, ping pong table, and foosball table not to mention some full size old-school arcade games like Pacman and Space Invaders and a couple of pinball machines.

She welcomes us all into the barn. The party room is set up with three long tables in a U shape so each of the students has plenty of room to work and his or her mom or dad can sit with them comfortably, and Miss Kathy circulates in the inside of the U flitting from one pair to the next as needed.

Today we're making sculptures out of recycled materials which we'll then cover with Papier Mache at another session, and finally paint. Miss Kathy holds up her own

creation as an example. It's sort of a crazy looking giraffe sort of thing, not exactly shaped like a giraffe, but that's what it reminds me of. She's painted it orange with details in a deep purply-blue. I like it. It's cheerful.

I'm sure she could've made something much more complex, but she made this weird giraffe-ish thing to show that anything goes. It doesn't have to be something real, it can be completely imaginary. Imagination is one of the skills Miss Kathy works hard to develop in this class. It's hard for many of these students to imagine things.

Cassie wants to make a bunny, of course. No surprise there. So we get to work collecting items from the various boxes of recycled milk containers, egg cartons, water bottles, plastic lids, wire hangers that can be bent, newspaper etc. We tape things together with masking tape as we go. It doesn't matter what our structure looks like since we'll be putting papier mache over the whole thing eventually. I try to let Cassie figure out what to use to make a bunny shape. She struggles with it and starts to become frustrated, so I have to help her.

We end up with a plastic bottle for the body, which I figure we can soften and fatten with some newspaper layers, a ball of newspaper covered in masking tape for the head, cut-out cardboard paws, and ears fashioned from bent wire hangers. I'm rather proud of the result, to be honest. A new student, a 12 year old named Marisa who also has Down Syndrome, comes over to admire our work.

"What is it?" she asks.

"It's a bunny, Stupid. Can't you tell?" says Cassie.

"Cassie!" I snap. "Don't call names!" I see Marisa's eyes widen with surprise when Cassie calls her "Stupid," then settle into hurt. It breaks my heart. "Look, you've

made Marisa feel bad. You're being mean!" Both girls dissolve into sobs. I look around for Marisa's mom, and see that it's her dad who's her. He's making his way over to our spot at the table.

"What's going on?" he asks me.

"She said I'm stupid!" shouts Marisa. Her father looks at me. His eyes searching mine for confirmation. I nod.

"She did say that," I tell him. "I'm so sorry." Cassie's crying has gotten louder and she has dramatically thrown herself into her chair and is resting her head on her folded arms on the table. Even Marisa looks confused at this reaction, since she's the injured party. Everyone in the room is looking at us by then.

"Marisa, Cassie had a fight with her sister just before we came," I try to explain.

"I think she's still upset about that, and that's why she was mean to you. She doesn't really think you're stupid, and she shouldn't have said that."

I turn and put my hand on Cassie's shoulder, a little firmly, to try to get her to cut the dramatics and look up. She doesn't. "Cassie. You need to apologize to Marisa. You hurt her feelings." I tell her, shaking her a little. She doesn't budge. Finally I turn back to Marisa and her dad. "Marisa, I'm sorry about what Cassie said. When she calms down she'll apologize to you." I'm grateful when Marisa's father nods and tries to steer her back to their spot at the table.

Cassie is disrupting the whole class. I'm not sure what to do. I look at Miss Kathy, and she comes right over.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper to her. "We're ruining the whole class."

"It's fine," she says, glancing at Cassie. "She'll calm down soon. Come over here I want to show you something." She leads me away to the other end of the room out of Cassie's hearing and conducts an elaborate performance for Cassie's benefit, of showing me some paintings completed by students in an adult class she teaches. They are spectacular.

"I think she'll stop when she no longer has your attention," she whispers to me.

"Let's see how that works." I try to look at the paintings and ignore my sobbing child,
and the stares of all of the other students and parents in the room. I'm less uncomfortable
than I might've been in another setting. This isn't the first time we've had a grand display
of emotion in this class, and it's not always, not even usually, Cassie. All the kids are
somewhat prone to this sort of thing depending on their personalities, and some of the
parents can be a little on edge too. I've seen misunderstandings between adults in this
room that got a little loud. The paintings Miss Kathy is showing me really are impressive.
I focus on them, and sure enough, Cassie's wailing ebbs to a series of loud sniffles and
occasional deep sighs.

"Who's in this class?" I ask, indicating the paintings. "Are they all professional artists?"

Kathy laughs, "Oh no. Painting is a hobby for most of them.

"Really? Because these are amazing." I'm holding up a painting depicting an old man sitting by a campfire bent over a piece of wood, carving it with a whittling knife.

The scenery around him is dark, but looks like a forest. There are some other figures around the fire, but they're blurry. Only the old man can be clearly seen and he's been

rendered in such detail that I almost think I can see him breathe. "This was done by a regular person?" I ask.

Kathy laughs again. "I don't know what that means, but yes. I suppose the person who did that is 'regular'. He's here now, actually. Marisa's dad, Dave, painted that one."

I look up to see Dave watching me admire his painting. He's back at his spot at the table with Marisa, who's continually looking over at Cassie with concern. I wonder if he heard what I said. "This is excellent," I call to him, holding up his work. "You're very talented."

Cassie stops sniffling and raises her head and looks at me with a puzzled expression. Dave seems embarrassed. His eyes quickly scan the room, then he thanks me quietly. I smile at him and think in that moment that he looks very familiar. I thank Miss Kathy for the distraction, then head back over to Cassie.

We finish building her bunny in relative peace except for the moment when one of the wire hangers we're using to form the ears slips from Cassie's grasp and springs up and scratches my cheek just under my left eye.

"Goddammit!" I sort of yell. Everyone looks up at me in surprise, including

Cassie. I see disapproval on several of the parents' faces. How many more ways would I

find during this one class to draw everyone's attention? "I'm sorry," I mumble. "It's been
a rough morning." It's silly, but I could've cried just then. I excuse myself and go to the
bathroom babbling something about needing to look at my eye. Once I get there I sit
down on the closed toilet lid and take several deep breaths until I feel like I can maintain
control of myself. All I need now is to start bawling like my daughter had.

When I come out Cassie has finished the ears with Miss Kathy's help and everyone is cleaning up. I join the bustle and begin picking up garbage from the table and floor. Once people are beginning to leave I look around for Marisa and her dad.

"Come on," I say to Cassie. "It's time to tell Marisa that you're sorry."

"I said something mean," says Cassie. "It hurt Marisa's feelings."

"That's right. Now you tell her you're sorry and that will help her to feel better."

To my relief, Cassie trots right over to Marisa. I follow on her heels. I want to be sure that I can hear what she says.

"I'm sorry, Marisa. I hurt your feelings. I was mean. You're not stupid."

Marisa looks at her shoes, but I can see a smile spreading across her face.

"Tell Cassie it's alright," prompts Dave.

"It's alright," Marisa parrots. She looks up at Cassie and smiles. Then the two girls hug each other. I look at Dave.

"If only it were always so easy," I say.

He smiles. "So, I've been wanting to ask you. Do you remember me?"

I stare at him. I can feel the warmth of a blush rising up my neck.

"You look familiar, but I'm sorry, I don't."

"We went to high school together. I was friends with your sister, Caroline. Dave Reback?"

The name clicks in my memory. "Oh yes! I do remember you. You used to drive a Jeep with Tweety Bird on the spare tire cover right?" Now it's Dave's turn to blush.

"Actually it was a winking smiley face with the caption, 'Girls Gotta Have Their Toys Too'. The Jeep was my sister's. I don't know why I never took that thing off. I thought it was funny at the time."

I laugh. "Right. That was it. It *was* funny. Well, it's nice to see you again. What a coincidence." Cassie and Marisa are standing next to each other, arms still draped across each other's necks, gaping at us with amazement. Dave just nods, not saying anything. "So, it was nice to see you," I repeat like a fool. "You really are a talented artist. I wish I could paint like that."

"You should come to the adult class some time. It's a really nice group."

"Oh, I can't even draw a stick figure that looks like anything," I say.

"I'm sure that's not true. Just think about it." says Dave.

"Okay I will." I grab Cassie's hand and wave back at Dave and Marisa as I lead her to the car. An art class might be fun.

Chapter Seven

On Monday, Steve leaves for a business trip to Seattle. I've always wanted to see the Puget Sound area of Washington State. I've seen pictures. It's absolutely beautiful. I'm always a little jealous when Steve travels. He gets to eat at nice restaurants, and entertain clients, and take fun day trips. I know he's working, but sometimes just the idea of being alone in a hotel room for a night or two sounds like heaven to me. He'll be home again late Friday night.

The girls and I settle in after dinner for a "girls' night" movie even though it's a school night. A little break in the routine once in a while never hurts. We watch "High School Musical" even though we've all seen it about a million times. Cassie and Kristen sing along to every song and moon over Zac Efron. I fight to stay awake.

I finally get to bed around 11:00, once the girls are settled and I've packed lunches for the next day. Around 2:00 Kristen screams. I jump out of bed and twist my ankle tripping over the book I left on the floor and hop around for a moment whispering "Fuck, fuck," skidding in my socks on the wood floors as I scramble down the hall to her bedroom, I nearly wipe out when she lets out another blood-curdling howl.

I should be used to this by now. It happens every now and then, and yet every time it does, my heart beats so hard I'm afraid I'll have a cardiac arrest or something. I go into my own mama-bear version of the fight or flight response. I get to her room and she's twisted in her covers and fighting like mad to free herself, and still screaming. The crazy thing is that she's sound asleep and I know I am going to have a hell of a time waking her up.

I start with the soothing voice thing, "Kristen, it's Mom. Everything is okay." She can answer without being awake.

"No, it's not!" she yells.

"Yes, you're dreaming. It's just a dream. You're safe in your room. I'm here, Honey."

She replies with some indistinct mumbling and another scream. All the while I am trying to contain her arms and legs so I don't get kicked or punched while trying to untangle her from her sheets. The thing that always freaks me out the most when she does this is that usually her eyes are open, but she's not awake. It's so weird, and it doesn't help that it's always the middle of the night when everything is twice as spooky as it would be in the day time.

I keep looking toward the door as I struggle to calm her down, expecting Cassie to be standing there, terrified. Sometimes she wakes up during these episodes and gets so scared that she starts crying and screaming herself, then we have a real madhouse on our hands. It takes Steve and me both to handle that. It requires one-to-one combat so to speak. Then in the morning Cassie remembers the whole thing and can't stop talking about it, and Kristen doesn't even know it happened except for what we tell her.

Finally I get Kristen free of her sheets and sit down on her bed to attempt to get her sort of into my lap. I manage to get her into a kind of ball, knees to chest, arms tightly crossed over her stomach, butt in my lap, and head on my right shoulder. I wrap my arms around her shins and her back and hold her as tightly as I can. That's the secret. If I can get her into a tight, contained position with my arms around her so she can feel me and smell me, satisfying a primeval need she has for comfort, she will eventually begin to

calm down. When she was little, this was much easier, although it didn't seem like it then. Now she's almost as big as I am, so it'd be almost comical if it wasn't so stressful.

I rock a little from side to side and sort of hum to her. Her screams begin to subside to a whimper. Thank God. And Cassie is still sleeping by some miracle, so if I can keep Kristen from starting up again, there may be an end to this in sight. Now that things are a little calmer I start to notice a throbbing in my ankle. It takes me a minute to remember that I twisted it getting out of bed. I try to lean forward to see if it's swollen without dropping Kristen. She starts to moan loudly, so I give up. Holding her like this is killing my back, but there is nothing to do but wait it out. She will eventually settle back into peaceful sleep, but it can take a while. If I try too soon to put her back to bed, she'll start up again.

It took me years to realize that when this happens she is not awake at all. I used to try to get her to tell me what she was afraid of, what she was dreaming about. That would just make her angry and she would insist that she was not dreaming. It just made everything take longer. She never remembers the episode at all in the morning, which is infuriating. I have always wanted to know what goes on in her head during these night terrors. When she was really little I would be stumped trying to figure out what she had in her experience at all that could be scary enough for her brain to concoct such scary dreams.

I try not to think about my ankle or my increasingly aching back, and just rock and hum and rock and hum. I concentrate on being grateful that Cassie slept through it. The whole scenario is so confusing and frightening for her when she doesn't, that sometimes she has nightmares of her own afterwards, usually about something bad

happening to Kristen, like being hit by a train or falling into a river and being swept away. I've tried to explain that Kristen is asleep and not aware of what is happening, but Cassie can't understand that since Kristen is often talking and looking right at us with open eyes.

Finally, Kristen seems to relax a bit and her breathing is more regular. With a sigh of relief I slowly lay her head back on her pillow and begin to ease myself out from under her legs. Just as I get her covers pulled up over her, she thrashes once and starts to whimper. Shit. It's not over yet. I can't take sitting like that anymore or wrestling her into my lap again. I would just climb in bed with her but her twin bed is really too small for both of us. I have an idea.

"Kristen, it's okay. It's Mommy. Come with me. We are going to my bed now. It's safe there." I hope she'll walk with me. There is no way I can carry her. She does.

"Okay, Mommy," she says in a little girl voice, and she takes my hand and stands up. She walks with me down the hall, which is a damn good thing because I find that I can't put much weight on my ankle at all. I limp along holding onto the wall and praying that she'll continue to comply. We make it to my room and I get her into bed and crawl in next to her wrapping my arms around her and praying she'll relax and sleep peacefully. I would really like to examine my ankle and take some Advil, but I don't dare turn on the light or leave her to go to the medicine cabinet, so it'll have to wait. I look at the clock. It's after 3:00. I sigh. I have to get up for work in two and a half hours. Shit. My left arm is wedged under Kristen's neck and I have my right leg thrown over her legs and my right arm across her shoulders. I move my left ankle, the hurt one, as far from her as possible. She's breathing in my face, so I crane my head back to gain fresh air.

Uncomfortable, but it will have to do. At least I am lying down and this doesn't hurt my back. Eventually we both sleep.

"Hey!!!"

I open my eyes with a start and am immediately aware of a wicked cramp in my neck. It begins to spasm as I try to figure out what is going on. Rubbing it I sit up. My left shoulder and hip ache from my laying on them in one position for hours. Kristen is starfished on three quarters of the bed, and she has all the covers. Cassie is standing in the doorway looking furious.

"You had a slumber party without me!" she yells.

Kristen opens her eyes and looks around.

"What am I doing in your room, Mom?" she asks.

"Night terror." I croak still trying to relax the muscles in my neck.

"Oh," she says. I see her thinking about this, trying to remember. "Was it bad?"

My alarm goes off just then. I stand up to turn it off and fall down. My ankle. The pain is excruciating. It's swollen to three times the size of the other one. Cassie looks at me on the floor and yells something else about a slumber party that she missed.

"Shut up, Cassie," Kristen says. "We didn't have a slumber party. Mom, are you okay?" She peers over the edge of the bed at me.

"I think I sprained my ankle. I twisted it last night trying to get to you."

Her head disappears. "I'm sorry," she says meekly.

"Mom! Kristen told me to shut up!" Cassie yells.

"Yes. Go get dressed for school. I put your outfit out last night."

"But MOM!"

"GO!" Cassie looks stunned. She stands there with her mouth open for a moment then turns on her heel and leaves. I hear her door slam a few seconds later. "Kristen, get me three Advil and the Ace bandage from the medicine cabinet in my bathroom," I whisper. She does, and she thinks to bring me some water. "Thanks."

I wrap my ankle and swallow the pills. Kristen stands there watching me. "I'm really sorry, Mom."

"I know, Honey. It's not your fault. Do you remember anything this time? What were you dreaming about?"

She shakes her head. I remember being cold, that's about it. My throat hurts a little. Did I scream a lot?" I nod. "Did Cassie wake up?"

"No, thank God. Can you go check on her? I've got all I can do to get myself ready for work at the moment."

"Do you think you should go to work? Maybe you need to go to a doctor for your ankle."

"I'm sure it'll be fine. I'll keep it wrapped and try not to walk around too much.

I've got a set of crutches in my office that I can use if I need to."

"Okay," she shrugs, "if you're sure you're alright." She leaves, hopefully to check on what Cassie is doing. I am definitely not alright. I sit there for a while trying to decide what to do. Realizing that it's too late to call in sick, I drag myself off the floor and hop into the bathroom. I don't have a seat in my shower so I make due with a sponge bath while sitting on the lid of the toilet. My biggest problem is shoes. I settle on a pair of flip flops I only wear to the beach. Luckily it isn't too cold outside yet. They look awful, but there's plenty of room to accommodate my swollen foot and ankle.

Getting downstairs is tricky. I end up sitting down and kind of sliding down on my butt. No one is in the kitchen yet. I manage to make some coffee and pour myself some cereal and sit down with my ankle up on another chair nestled against an ice pack. Kristen comes into the kitchen dressed and ready for school.

"Where's Cassie?" I ask her.

"I don't know. Still getting dressed, I guess."

"Didn't you check on her like I asked?"

"Oops, I forgot. I'll go check on her now." She runs up the stairs. Sometimes I don't know why I bother to speak at all. Thank God for my coffee. It tastes really good this morning.

"Oh my God! You are going to get it! MOM!" Kristen yells. I want to put my head down and cry.

"What?"

"Cassie is still in her pajamas and she is writing on her wall with a Sharpie!"

"WHAT!? CASSANDRA! GET DOWN HERE NOW!"

"NO!" yells Cassie. I can hear wrestling. Kristen must be trying to force Cassie down the stairs. I limp into the foyer so I can see them. I have to kind of hop, and hold onto the closet door once I get there. Kristen is in the hall pulling on Cassie's arm and Cassie is using all her weight to resist. They are like a tight rubber band about to slingshot one or both of them into a painful landing, possibly down the stairs.

"STOP!" I yell. "You're going to get hurt!" Kristen lets Cassie go. I hear a dull thump as Cassie probably falls, most likely onto her bed.

"Hey!" she yells.

"Cassie, get dressed right now or no TV for a week!"

"I don't know what to wear," she whines.

"I laid out your clothes last night. It's the pink striped shirt and your jeans. Bring down your brush and a ponytail holder, and don't forget to brush your teeth."

"Aren't you going to do anything to her for what she did to her wall?" Kristen asks coming down the stairs. Cassie stands in her doorway waiting to hear what I'll say.

"Right now we have to get out the door. I'll deal with that later. There's no way I'm coming back up the stairs now that I'm down." Cassie sticks out her tongue at the back of Kristen's head from the upstairs hallway and disappears into her room. She comes into the kitchen dressed about twenty minutes later. I stick a protein bar and a banana in her hand and tell her to get in the car. We are running late.

"What about my breakfast?" she wails.

"There's no time now. You'll have to eat that in the car."

"You should think about that before you go writing on your wall," adds Kristen.

"Shut up!" yells Cassie.

I limp out the door and get in the car. If they aren't in it with me in two minutes I am going to lay on the horn. They aren't, so I do. That does it.

"Mom! You'll wake up the whole neighborhood!" Kristen says as she jumps into the front seat. Cassie barely has her door closed in the back before I start pulling out.

"Then hurry up so I don't have to!"

I'm ten minutes late for work and there are already two students in my office when I get there. Eleanor is dealing with them. She stops what she's doing when she sees me hop-limping to my desk.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Twisted my ankle. I think I sprained it." I make it to my desk and sit down.

"Let me take a look when I finish here." she says securing a band aid on a boy's finger. I sit there like an idiot and watch her. She takes a doctor's note from the girl who is waiting and examines it, then sends her to class. Then she gets up and discreetly pulls a pair of pants from under her desk. She knocks on the bathroom door. It opens a crack and a hand reaches out to take the pants.

"Susan ripped her pants open again, this time at the bus stop when she bent over to pick up her things. I already sewed them up," she tells me as she comes over and kneels down to look at my ankle.

"When is her mother going to realize she needs a bigger size?" I ask. "Poor kid. How embarrassing. OUCH!"

"Ooh. Sorry." Eleanor had removed my Ace bandage and was gently touching the swollen area. I can't believe the pain. And it looks all bruised. "I think this might be broken," she says. "You might even have torn some ligaments."

"Oh Fuck!" Just then Susan comes out of the bathroom. She looks at me funny. I feel my face turn red. Eleanor jumps up.

"All set, Dear? Let me give you a pass to class." She bundles Susan out the door in a hurry. I put my face in my hands. When we're alone Eleanor looks at me.

"Lynn, what's going on?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that. I had a really rough night and an awful morning and I'm sleep deprived and in pain. Do you think she heard me?"

"I doubt it," she says, but her face says otherwise.

I find out at 4:00 that afternoon. Just as I am getting ready to leave I get a call from Susan's mother. I apologize and explain over and over again that my inappropriate outburst was not directed at Susan, and yes it was inappropriate and it won't happen again, I was just very upset etcetera, etcetera. All I want to do is yell at her to buy her kid some pants that fit her rear end for God's sake! It's all I can do to convince her not to file a formal complaint. I'm still not entirely sure she won't. I shouldn't have come in today. After I hang up the phone I go into the bathroom and sob.

When I come out, Eleanor is sitting at my desk.

"I thought you'd gone home," I say.

"I forgot my keys."

"Oh." I wipe my face feeling like I'm under a microscope and grab the crutches I've been hobbling around with all day. "I'm going to take these home tonight. I signed them out to myself." I tell her.

"Lynn, can I do anything?"

"No. I'm fine. I got a call from Susan's mother. It turns out Susan heard what I said."

"Oh no. What did she say?"

"She wanted to file a complaint, but I think I talked her out of it. I'm sorry. I'll be better tomorrow." I limp out of the office with my bag slung across my back.

"At least let me carry your bag. I'm going to the parking lot too."

"Okay. Thanks."

"You really should get an x-ray on your ankle."

"Yeah." I know she's right. "If it's no better tomorrow I will." I really don't want the hassle of the emergency room, or figuring out what to do with the girls. Maybe I'll take off tomorrow and have it x-rayed while they're at school.

I drag myself upstairs when I get home to see what Cassie did to her room. She wrote "Shut up Kristen!" three times on her pink walls with a red Sharpie. On my phone I google how to remove Sharpie from a wall then locate some rubbing alcohol, hair spray, hand sanitizer, and nail polish remover. I sit on Cassie's bed giving instructions to her while she tries removing the writing with various solutions on an old rag. Finally the nail polish remover does the trick--or maybe it's the combo of all the things she tries. She cries the whole time like her heart is breaking, but I stand my ground, or rather sit her bed, and won't leave or let her have dinner or do anything else until she cleans it. When she finally finishes we are both exhausted.

Caroline calls that night to tell me about an internal ultrasound they had done because of her age. Everything seemed to be just fine at this point, and it was only one baby. The older the mother, the more likely twins are, so they wanted to check..

"That's good. Imagine twins. That would really rock your world. Now you have to tell the father."

"Yeah. I'm going to tell him this weekend. He's coming up for a few days. I want to tell him in person. I'm thinking of dinner at the Top of the Hub. We'll have a romantic meal, with champagne, and I'll bring up the subject subtly to warm him up to it then I'll tell him over dessert."

"Why don't you have a singing minstrel pop out of a Ficus tree wearing nothing but a diaper? He could sing, 'Take Good Care of My Baby' then he could get down on one knee and whip a diamond ring out of his ass and you could be engaged too."

"Why are you being a bitch?"

"I'm sorry. I've had a hell of a day." I tell her about the night before, and my ankle, and the Susan incident.

"Oh shit. I'm sorry. That's rough. Can I do anything?"

"No. Tomorrow will be better. It always is after a day like this."

"Please see a doctor tomorrow about your ankle."

"I will. Goodnight. Love you."

"Love you too."

I hang up and pour myself a whiskey. Wine will not suffice after this day. I take it out to the porch, hobbling on one crutch, and light a cigarette. I finally start to relax a little. It occurs to me that it's almost 10 pm and I haven't heard from Steve yet today. I try to call his cell. He usually calls in the evening when he's away. No answer. For him it's only 7:00, so he may be out having dinner at a nice restaurant somewhere fun with a bunch of other adults. I pour a second whiskey and wait for him to call. When I finish it he still hasn't, so I just text him good night, turn off my phone and go to bed.

Chapter Eight

At the end of the week, I'm on the phone with Caroline again, "Steve came home last night. I guess his trip was successful. They gained a new contract, but he didn't see much more than the inside of several conference rooms and a few nice restaurants. I would've extended the trip by a few days to do some sightseeing, but I'm glad he didn't."

"How's your ankle?" Caroline asks.

"The doctor said it's sprained but not broken. He gave me a boot to wear. I'm supposed to take it easy for a couple of weeks."

"There go your plans to run a marathon."

"Ha ha. So tonight's the big night. Do you have reservations at Top of the Hub?"

"Yes. I'm really nervous. I hope Patrick is happy about the news."

"Me too honey. Call me tomorrow and let me know how it went."

"Okay. Bye. I love you."

"I love you too." I hang up the phone and turn around to find Kristen standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Who was that?"

"Aunt Caroline."

"What's her big night tonight?"

"None of your business."

"Mom!" she whines, "No one ever tells me anything!"

"Count yourself lucky then. Sometimes life is easier when you don't know what's going on."

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing. What are your plans this weekend?"

"Well...since you asked, I was wondering if I could have a couple of friends sleep over tonight."

"Oh," I'm surprised. Kristen doesn't often want to have friends over. "Well, yes. I guess you can. We don't have any plans tonight. Let's just check with Dad first and see what he has in mind for the weekend."

"Yay, thank you! I already mentioned it to Dad this morning. He said it was okay as long as you said it was. I'll go call the girls."

"Okay, just a minute. How many girls are we talking about?"

"Four if everyone can come."

"Oh. Who?"

"Liana, Haley, Chloe, and Ella."

"Who's Chloe? I don't think I know her." The other three have been soccer teammates of Kristen for years.

"I just met her at school. She just moved here from North Carolina."

"Oh. That's nice. Does she know the other girls? Will she be comfortable?"

"Yes," she rolls her eyes, "We all eat lunch together. Can I go call them now, before they make other plans?"

"Okay. Go."

I sit down to finish my coffee and make a list of junk food to have on hand for Kristen and her friends. I figure we can order pizza for dinner and I can make my famous pancakes for them in the morning. I guess they can all sleep in the family room.

"Make sure you tell them to bring sleeping bags!" I yell up the stairs to Kristen.

"I have a sleeping bag," says Cassie wandering into the kitchen from the family room rubbing at her eyes. "Are we going camping?"

"No. Kristen is having some friends sleep over." I tell her.

"Oooh. Can I have some friends over too?" she asks.

"Not tonight honey. This is Kristen's thing."

"Can I sleep over with them?" she asks looking hopeful.

"Well, you'll be here, of course, but I think you can hang out with me and Dad.

We'll leave Kristen and her friends alone."

"What are they going to do?"

"I don't know. Maybe watch a movie or something."

"I love movies." she whines.

"I promise we'll have fun too. Okay?"

"Okay," she says. "What will we do?"

"We'll think of something." Steve walks in just then.

"Dad, guess what! We're having a party tonight!" Cassie shouts throwing herself at him for a hug.

"A party! What's the occasion?" he looks at me.

"Kristen has friends!" Cassie crows.

Steve laughs. "Well that is cause for celebration." He grabs Cassie's hands and waltzes her around the kitchen and they both sing, "Kristen has friends, Kristen has friends" over and over. Of course Kristen returns just then and witnesses this.

"What are you doing?" she asks them.

"We are rejoicing in your friends," Steve tells her.

"Whatever. You are so weird." More eye-rolling. "Mom, can I talk to you for a minute? Alone?"

"Sure," I tell her. "Just give me a second to finish this list before I forget what I'm doing. I had some ideas for food for tonight. Is everyone coming?"

"I hope so. I texted everybody and I've heard back from everyone but Haley.

They're all in so far."

"Oh, so your slumber party plans worked out then?" Steve asks her.

"Dad, no one calls it a slumber party any more. We're just gonna hang out."

"My bad," says Steve.

"Ugh. Dad, how many times do I have to tell you not to try to talk like a teenager? It's so lame."

"Sorry." Steve smiles at me.

"Mom? Can we talk now? Please?" Kristen asks.

"Okay, okay." I follow her out onto the deck. She makes sure the heavy slider is closed before speaking.

"Mom. I really don't want Cassie to be around when I'm with my friends tonight, okay?"

I want to be surprised, but I'm not really. "Well, she'll be here, of course. Where else would she go?"

"Duh, Mom. I know she'll be here, I just don't want her to be hanging out with us. I want to just be normal and have fun, okay?"

I wonder if she can see on my face how much those words hurt. But I understand.

I do. No one wants her sister hanging around when she's with her friends. This is

perfectly normal, right?

"Don't worry. Dad and I will keep Cassie busy and out of your hair."

"Thanks Mom. Maybe she could hang out in her room or something."

"Now listen. She doesn't have to be with you, but she's not going to be banished to her room just because you are having some friends over, got it? We aren't going to hide her away or anything like that so if that's a problem, then let's just forget the whole thing!"

"Geez, Mom. Chill. I didn't mean anything like that. I just want to hang out with my friends, without her is all."

"Fine." I turn and begin limping back into the house. I had left the single crutch
I've been using leaning on the kitchen table.

"Mom?"

"What?" I keep my back to her.

"Thank you. I love you."

"I love you too." I say and open the door still not looking at her.

At about 6:00 Kristen's friends begin to arrive. Steve has taken Cassie out to play miniature golf and to pick up something fun just for the three of us for dessert later.

I've known Haley, Ella, and Liana for years and invite their moms in for a glass of wine before they leave, but Chloe is new to me. I am surprised when I see her. She is very tall, and very thin and very tan. Her hair is long and incredibly blonde and she has

gigantic brown eyes and enormous boobs which are hard to miss since her bright pink t-shirt dips and hugs in such a way as to fully emphasize them. I find myself wondering if she could possibly have already had plastic surgery at age 14 or 15.

She's wearing make-up, impeccably applied, heavy on the eyeliner. Her nails are painted a bright neon pink and she has on soft black yoga pants--tight in all the right places, and a matching hoodie zip-up jacket with rhinestones sewn in patterns on the sleeves, and it turns out, down the legs of her pants as well.

She looks so different from Kristen's other friends, all sporting ponytails and soccer shorts and well-worn t-shirts, that I stand there like an idiot with my mouth open staring at her when she arrives at my door.

"Hello, Mrs. Holcomb. I'm Chloe. It's nice to meet you," she says with perfect manners, extending one hand. I slam my mouth shut and can feel my face turning red as I take her hand.

"Nice to meet you too, Chloe. Come on in. Is your mom with you? Would she like to come in for a minute?" I look past her toward the driveway.

"My dad, actually, he just dropped me off." I see a silver Mercedes pulling out.

"Oh, okay. Well, come on in." Just then Kristen and the other girls appear in the foyer.

"Hey Chloe! We're about to order pizza. What do you like on it?" Kristen asks her.

"Hi," Chloe looks almost shy. "Whatever y'all like is fine, as long as it's not meat." she says. They disappear to the family room scooping Chloe into their midst.

I return to the porch and the other moms and plop back down on the wicker rocker reaching for my wine.

"Lynn, who does Kristen have for History this year?" asks Jen, Liana's mom.

"I can't remember his name," I tell her. "Mr. DeAngelo or something. Apparently he's very young and good-looking. He's new this year. Fresh out of college, I think."

"That's him!" Jen says and they all laugh.

"What are you talking about?" I ask.

"Oh, all the girls have a huge crush on the poor guy. His name is Mr. DeMartino." says Deb, Haley's mom.

"That's it," I say. "DeMartino."

"Has Kristen been talking about him? It's all I hear about from Haley," Deb says.

"I'm beginning to wonder if she even goes to any of her other classes."

"Not too much," I tell her. "She said her history teacher was 'hot' on the first day of school, but that's all I've heard I think."

"God, remember those days of having a crush on your teacher?" says Melissa, Ella's mom. "I was in love with my English teacher junior year. He would stand on a desk to read poetry to us. Sometimes he made us get up and stand on our desks too. He was so great. Mr. Dickens. Can you believe I had an English teacher named Dickens?" We all laugh.

"Well let's hope they actually learn something in History this year and don't spend all their time daydreaming about going to the prom with him or something," says Jen.

"Maybe they'll try harder on their homework to impress him." says Melissa, "So, was that Chloe at the door? I take it her mom isn't coming in to join us?"

"Right. Her dad dropped her off. Never even got out of the car, so I didn't meet him," I tell them. "Have any of you met Chloe?" I try to sound neutral, but I know my eyes are open a little too wide.

"No, why?" says Jen.

"I have," says Deb. "I met her when I picked Haley up after her Forensics club meeting a couple of weeks ago." She smiles at me knowingly. "What did you think of her?"

"Well, I hope I didn't make her uncomfortable," I say. "I was just so surprised, is all. I think I kind of stared at her. She's a little different, isn't she?"

"You're making me want to sneak in there and spy on the girls just to get a peek at her," says Melissa. "What, does she have pierced eyelids or something?"

I laugh. "No. She's very...glamorous, wouldn't you say, Deb?"

"Yes, that's a good word for it. I would just say she looks like a Barbie doll." says Deb.

"Oh, that type." says Melissa. "Is she a cheerleader too?"

"Who knows," I say, "She's very polite. I just never thought Kristen, or your girls, cared much about looks and beauty tips and fashion and all that, and this is a girl who obviously does. I'm just surprised they ended up becoming friends, I guess. Maybe we are entering a new phase. After all they're high schoolers now."

"Is there an age limit on how young you can have plastic surgery?" asks Deb.

"I thought the same thing!" I say.

"Oh, now you are being terrible," says Jen. "That's ridiculous."

"Wait'll you see her," says Deb.

"Shh," I say. I can hear footsteps in the kitchen, and I point holding a finger to my lips.

Kristen comes out on the porch. "Mom, we're ready to order the pizza. Can I use your credit card?"

"Just write down what you want and I'll order it. I have to get some for Dad and Cassie and me too."

"Okay," she twirls back into the kitchen.

"Well, I'd better get going," says Deb.

"Me too," say Jen and Melissa. They all stand up and head into the kitchen.

The girls are all standing at the counter and Kristen is filling glasses with ice and lemonade. I walk the ladies to the door.

"Well, have a good time," says Jen once we're in the foyer and out of the girls' sight. She looks at me meaningfully with her eyes wide. She silently mouths the word, 'Wow'. Then says out loud, "I'll see you tomorrow morning around 11:00."

"Sounds good. Have a good night," I say, then silently mouth, 'I know'.

"You too!" Deb mimes big boobs with her hands in front of her chest and Melissa hits her playfully, starting to laugh.

"Stop!" she whispers. "Bye Lynn. See you tomorrow." They giggle on their way down the walk. I shut the door on them quickly and head in to order the pizza.

Later on the girls decide to watch *The Princess Bride*, a choice which relieves me. I was afraid I would have to be totally 'uncool' about several inappropriate movie choices. I make them popcorn and break out the brownies I baked earlier. Steve and I have Cassie in the kitchen playing Monopoly. The two of them brought home red velvet cupcakes from the bakery for us to have for dessert. Cassie is wolfing hers down like a starving tiger.

"Slow down, Cassie. You're going to choke." I tell her.

"No'm not." she says with her mouth full, frosting on her cheeks.

"It's your turn," I tell her. "But go to the sink first and wash your hands. I don't want you to get the game all sticky. She stands up and looks like she is about to wipe her hands on her shirt.

"No!" I yell, pointing to the sink. She jumps, and heads to the sink.

"Excuse me, but could I please have a glass of water?" Chloe is standing in the doorway. Her pajamas consist of a white spaghetti strapped tank top, and some very short shorts that look like striped t-shirt material. I can't help but glance at Steve to see his reaction. He is studying his newly acquired B & O Railroad card with great concentration.

Cassie is at the sink, and smiles widely, her mouth still somewhat full of red velvet cupcake. "I'll get one for you!" she offers. Opening the cupboard for a glass.

"Cassie," I keep my voice soft, "Wash your hands first, then get Chloe some water." I smile at Chloe.

"Oh, that's okay. I can get it myself," Chloe says. "I already have a glass." She heads toward the sink. Cassie moves aside to let her fill her glass from the filtered water

spout. Then she pats Chloe on the back with her still-cupcaked hand, smiling up into her face trying to get a smile in return. Chloe doesn't look at her.

"Oh dear," I say. "Cassie, you got cupcake on Chloe's shirt. Chloe, why don't you change and let me wash that out for you. I'm sorry."

"Sorry," mumbles Cassie, head down now.

Chloe stretches around to see a smudge on the back of her shirt. "Okay, thank you Mrs. Holcomb." She goes to get the shirt she had on earlier, then changes in the bathroom and brings back the white tank top. Luckily I am able to get out the pinkish stain with a little laundry soap and some manual scrubbing. I throw the shirt in the dryer. It won't take long.

We continue our game. Kristen and her friends are quoting every single line from the movie. We keep hearing them shout, "Inconceivable!" and "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!"

"There are a lot of opportunities for a good drinking game with that movie," says Steve.

"Yeah, let's hope we have a few years before they try that." I say.

"Inconceivable!" yells Cassie. She knows the movie too, and I know she is dying to join the girls.

I pat her arm, "It's your turn, honey."

"Chloe's pretty," says Cassie rolling the dice. I won't be surprised if Cassie starts trying to put on makeup after tonight. "I got Atlantic Avenue!"

"Sorry, I already own it. You owe me \$22.00." says Steve.

Cassie scowls at him and looks down at her money. Steve helps her count out the right number of tens, fives, and ones. Her twenties are already gone. She pays him and stands up.

Just then my phone buzzes and I look at the text. It's from Caroline: "Patrick cancelled. Will have to come up with a plan B to tell him now. Going to bed early. Talk tomorrow." Oh Shit. That sucks. Poor Caroline.

"Be right back." Cassie says.

"Where are you going?" I ask

"To get my sleeping bag. I'm sleeping downstairs tonight." She says trying for nonchalance. As if I might think she just felt like sleeping downstairs for a change of scenery.

"No, Cassie, you're not. We talked about this. You are going to sleep upstairs in your own bed. Now sit down and watch me rake in the big bucks. I'll show you how it's done." I say rolling the dice.

She sits then giggles a little whispering "big bucks."

We play for a while then Cassie says she has to go to the bathroom.

Steve and I wait for her. I tell him about Caroline's text. "Hmm. That's weird.

Did she say why?"

"No, just that he cancelled. I guess I'll find out more tomorrow."

"Yeah. So, Chloe seems...mature."

"Ya think? She's 14 going on 25!"

"Hmm. Where did you say she's from?"

"North Carolina. She's a Southern Belle."

"I guess so. I wonder what she and Kristen talk about."

"That's what I keep wondering about. I can't imagine they have much in common."

"MOM!!!!" Kristen screams from the family room. "YOU PROMISED!"

I jump up and run in there. Apparently Cassie came out of the bathroom and snuck unseen through the dining room, out to the foyer, and through the living room to get to the girls in the family room from the other side. She is standing up in front of the TV miming along with the scene on the screen. She yells, right along with Billy Crystal, "Have fun storming the castle!" Kristens friends are laughing at her performance. She's actually pretty funny, but Kristen is not laughing.

"You promised you'd keep her out of here!" she screams at me.

"Alright, alright. Calm down. It's not a big deal. Cassie, come with me. We have to finish our game."

"No!" Cassie yells. "I'm the Dead Pirate Roberts!" She drops to the floor and rolls towards the girls lounging on their sleeping bags pretending to be falling down a hill. "Aaaaas, Yoooou Wiiiiiish!" she yells trying to make her voice fade a little on each word.

"Ow!" shouts Haley. "You crushed my foot."

Cassie sits up and smiles right in Chloe's face, much too close. "I'm the Dead Pirate Roberts" she says.

Chloe backs up a bit and whispers, "It's the 'dread' pirate, not the 'dead' pirate."

"She always says it that way," says Kristen, "Mom, please! She hurt Haley and she's creeping Chloe out."

Steve comes into the room. "Cassie, let's go. Now." he says firmly.

Cassie's face falls. She continues to watch Chloe. Chloe backs up a bit more and turns to examine Haley's foot.

"Cassie, now," I say. "You can have another cupcake if you come now."

Cassie gets up and walks slowly toward me and Steve turning every few steps to watch Chloe. Now all the girls are bent over Haley's foot.

"Are you okay, Haley?" I ask.

"I'm fine," she mumbles.

Cassie and I turn to head back to the kitchen. No sooner are we through the door than I hear, "Frickin' retard." Cassie's head whips up and she looks into my eyes, shocked. I look at Steve, he tries to grab my arm but I pull away and stomp back into the family room.

"Haley Foster! Did I just hear you call my daughter a 'fricking retard'?" I yell at her.

All the girls look up at me standing over them. Haley doesn't answer me but turns bright red.

"Mom!" Kristen gasps.

"Be quiet." I tell her. "Haley, I can't believe after all the years you've been coming over here you would say something like that about Cassie! I am going to call your mother right now and have her pick you up. I will not have that kind of language in this house." I march back to the kitchen.

I am actually shaking I am so upset. Steve and Cassie are not there. He must've taken her upstairs. I pick up the phone and dial Deb's number. She and I are good friends and I hate to have that ruined, but I know this is the right thing to do.

"Deb, It's Lynn. I'm sorry to call so late."

"Oh God, what's wrong? Is Haley okay?"

"She's fine. I'm calling because I'd like you to come and pick her up."

"Okay, why? Did something happen?"

"She called Cassie a 'retard'." I blurted. Even as I hear the words come out of my mouth I feel like a tattling middle-schooler. I fight not to cry. I lose, and I stand there blubbering into the phone.

"Oh...I'm so sorry," says Deb.

"Maybe I'm overreacting," I sniff, "but I hope you understand that I can't have people saying things like that about my child in her own house!"

"Of course. I understand. I'll be right over." She hangs up. I grab a tissue and turn around to find Kristen standing there, tears streaming down her face.

"Well, I hope you're happy now!" she yells. "You're acting like such a psycho that everyone is texting their moms to come and pick them up! No one wants to stay here, and it's all your fault!"

"My fault?"

"Yes!" She runs up the stairs and I hear her door slam.

I stay in the kitchen and Kristen's friends stay in the family room until one by one their parents arrive at the door to pick them up. It is agonizing to face all of them. I apologize over and over as they leave. Finally I am alone. Steve comes back downstairs.

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"Cassie's asleep." he says. "It took a while, but she finally calmed down."
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I just stare at him. I can feel the tears starting up again.

"Come on. Let's go to bed," he says walking toward the stairs. "I'll check on Kristen. You can talk to her in the morning."

I watch him go, and crave a cigarette. I head out to the porch.

[&]quot;Okay." I say.

[&]quot;Where is everyone?" he asks.

[&]quot;They all went home. Kristen hates me."

[&]quot;Wow."

[&]quot;Apparently I'm such a psycho that no one wanted to stay."

[&]quot;You went a bit Mama-bear on Haley."

[&]quot;Well, do you think we should allow someone to say things like that?"

[&]quot;No, but you might've let Kristen handle it."

[&]quot;Kristen? She wouldn't have done anything."

[&]quot;Well, we'll never know now, will we?"

Chapter Nine

Of course I can't sleep that night. I finally doze off around 4 AM, but am awake again by 6:30 because I have to go to the bathroom. I decide to just get up. I head downstairs and clean up the kitchen from the night before since I never did that. Even the Monopoly game is still on the table, half-played. What will I say to Kristen? This is the question that's been plaguing me. How can I make things right? Do I need to make things right? Am I in the wrong?

I sit down and try to read the paper just to calm my nerves. About a half-hour later, Cassie comes into the kitchen. Before I can even say hello to her she says, "Haley called me 'freaking retard'". I want to put my head down and cry. Sometimes Cassie seems to forget about things that have bothered her, after a night's sleep. Not this time. I go over and give her a hug.

"She was angry, honey. People sometimes say mean things when they're angry."

"Angry at me?"

"You rolled on her foot and hurt her when you were being the Dread Pirate Roberts."

"Oh," Cassie looked down. I could see her trying to remember doing that. "I didn't mean to."

"I know that, Cassie, and Haley knows it too, but it still hurt and she was upset."

"I thought Haley was my friend."

What was I supposed to say to that? She is your friend, but doesn't hesitate to call you a nasty name when you screw up? How would Cassie comprehend that? She was

never your friend. She just tolerates you because you're Kristen's sister? That would hurt worse.

"Haley's a person, Cassie. People make mistakes." I say avoiding the friend question all-together.

"Is she still my friend?" Cassie asks.

Crap. "I think that's up to you." I tell her. "You have to decide whether to forgive her for what she said that hurt your feelings."

"What's 'forgive'."

"If you forgive Haley you will let it go and move on. If you don't forgive her you will continue to be mad at her."

"If I'm mad at her we can't be friends."

"Probably not."

"I want to be friends so I will forgive her."

Oh. If only we all could see things this way. The world would be a much more loving place. My heart is not as big as my daughter's. It will take a lot more for me to forgive Haley for what she said. I say nothing, just give Cassie another hug.

"Why are you crying, Mom?" She wipes an escaped tear from my cheek as we pull apart.

"Oh, I didn't sleep very well and I always get emotional when I'm tired." I tell her standing up to refill my coffee. "Is Kristen up yet?"

"I don't know," she says. "I heard music in her room."

She's up, then. Just not coming downstairs.

"Hey," says Cassie, "Where'd the girls go? I thought they were sleeping in sleeping bags."

"They all went home last night."

"Why?"

"They just decided they didn't want to sleep over."

"Oh." She is understandably confused, but doesn't ask any more questions about it. After a moment I exhale and realize I've been holding my breath again.

I get Cassie some cereal.

"How'd you sleep?" Steve asks coming into the kitchen and heading for the coffee pot. He plants a kiss on my forehead on his way by.

"Not well," I tell him. He takes his coffee to the table, kisses Cassie on the cheek and sits down.

"Hi Dad." she says.

"Hi Cassiopeia." he says.

Cassie smiles, "Daaad," she says affecting a very dramatic eye roll. She loves it when he calls her that. Steve has taught her to recognize several constellations.

"Kristen's not up yet?" Steve asks.

Cassiopeia is her favorite next to the Big Dipper.

"No," I tell him. "I'm going up there to talk to her." As I start out of the room I hear Steve say, "You might want to wait for her to come to you." I hear him, but I can't wait. I need to get this conversation or confrontation or whatever it's going to be over with. I can't even think about anything else.

Kristen's door is closed. I turn the knob. It's locked. I knock. "Kristen?" I can hear her ipod playing over its speaker. No answer. "Kristen, I hear your music. I know you're up." I knock a few more times.

"Go away," she growls.

"Kristen you can't stay in there forever. We have to talk about this." No answer. I knock some more. Finally I give up. I can always take the hinges off the door. She has a soccer game this afternoon. She'll come out for that. I decide to take a shower.

About an hour later, the phone rings. Steve answers it and after a few moments he hands it to me. "It's for you," he says. I mouth "Who is it?" but he just puts the phone to my ear and waits for me to say hello. Then he leaves the room.

"Hi, Mrs. Holcomb, It's Haley."

"Hello, Haley." My stomach turns.

"I wanted to apologize for what I said. I didn't mean it."

"Thank you for apologizing." I say. I'm certainly not going to say it's alright.

"Okay. I just wanted you to know I'm sorry. Is Kristen there?"

"She's not available right now." I tell her, "Besides there's someone else you really should speak to."

"Who?" Haley asks.

"Cassie. You owe her an apology. She heard what you said."

There is silence for a moment. "Oh, I didn't realize she heard me." Haley sounds so dejected that I almost feel sorry for her. "Okay, may I please speak to Cassie then?"

"Absolutely." I tell her. I call Cassie to the phone. She is excited and a little nervous. She is not used to talking on the phone. "It's Haley," I tell her. "She called to apologize to you for what she said. Cassie's face lights up. She grabs the phone.

"Hi, Haley!" she gushes.

I watch as Cassie listens to whatever Haley says in apology. My heart warms watching her face. She's more thrilled to have received a phone call from a girl she knows than anything else.

"That's okay, Haley. We're still friends 'cause I forgived you." Cassie says with a smile. I step quickly into the laundry room so she won't read anything on my face. I hear Cassie hang up. She comes to find me. I'm pulling a load of forgotten clothes out of the dryer.

"Haley said 'Sorry'," she tells me. "We're still friends."

"That's good, Honey."

Kristen stays in her room until she has to leave for her game.

She doesn't say one word to me, despite my attempts to talk to her. I follow her around while she grabs something to eat before she leaves. She ignores me, then walks out the door and sits in the car, not even checking to see who is going to take her.

I know it's selfish, and probably the wrong move at the moment, but I get Steve to take her and stay for the game so that I won't have to go and see the moms and girls from last night. I just feel so fragile today. Steve knows exactly what I'm doing, but doesn't push me.

Staying home only makes me feel worse. I'm a coward. I crawl back into my bed and try to nap. No good. Finally I get up and decide to do some laundry. Maybe if I'm productive I'll feel a bit better.

I go into Kristen's room to collect her dirty clothes. Her bed is a jumble of sheets and blankets, so I decide to strip it and wash the sheets today too. I yank back her covers and something falls out onto the floor. It's the journal she got for Christmas a couple of years ago. It's a cloth-covered book filled with lined pages. The cloth has a print of holly leaves and berries on it. She was experimenting with poetry writing that year. I don't think she ever wrote in the book after the first few months she had it.

I start to put the book in the drawer of her nightstand where she usually keeps it.

Then it occurs to me that she may have been writing in it this morning. Of course I'm tempted to read it, but I won't. That would be wrong. I'm not that mom. I respect my kids' privacy.

Bullshit. She won't talk to me. I need to know what she's thinking about what happened last night. I sit down on her bed and open the book. I flip toward the back looking for the most recent entry. It's several pages long. In Kristen's neat, round handwriting it says:

"Well she's done it again. I don't know why I'm surprised. This time not only has she proven that she only cares about Cassie, but she probably lost me all my friends in the process. I try to be normal for five minutes and have a few friends sleep over, and Crazy Tiger Mom has to scare them all away. They'll probably never speak to me again.

What the hell am I supposed to do now????!!! I have no friends and it was hard enough to make them in the first place. No one ever wants to come over here because they're afraid of Cassie like her Down syndrome is fucking contagious or something. They are so stupid! I hate them! I hate her more. Why does she always have to do shit like this?

So Haley called Cassie a 'retard' so what? People say crap like that all the time. That was no reason to lose it on her. I would've told Haley to shut up if Bat-Shit Crazy Mom hadn't come flying in screaming at her. At least I think I would've. Haley's an asshole. She knows better than to say something like that about Cassie. To tell the truth I am kinda shocked she said that, to be honest. I've never heard Haley say anything like that before. It didn't sound like her at all to say that.

I wonder what Chloe thought of all of it. She probably thinks I'm a loser. I've never had a friend like her before. She might've gotten me in with the popular crowd. Now she'll probably never speak to me again. The rest of them have known for years that my mom's crazy. They just kinda know that's how it is. They know my mom doesn't care about me, only about Cassie.

I should walk in front of a car or something and end up in a wheelchair so that my mom would notice me too. Since she's only interested in you if you have a disability. How could she ruin my life like that without even thinking about it? Now they'll all probably bond over what a loony my mother is and what a retard my sister is. Bunch of bitches. They'll talk about it and laugh behind my back. It wouldn't be the first time. Why do I have to have a crazy mother on top of everything else?

I wish I could just leave this family."

There are some blotches in the ink where tears had fallen on the page. I honestly don't know which of them are mine and which are Kristen's. The floodgates are open now. I can't hold it in any more. My breath catches in my throat and comes out as a strangled sob.

Cassie hears me and comes in to see what's wrong. *Shit*. "I'm okay, honey. My ankle hurts and I'm really tired." I tell her. "What are you doing in your room?"

"I was playing on my ipad," she says, her eyes wide.

"I'm really okay," I tell her. "Don't worry about me. Go back to your ipad."

She goes.

I lay the journal on Kristen's night stand, finish stripping her bed, and start a load of laundry. I can't stop the tears that keep coming all the while I do this. Then I hear the garage door open. They're back.

I can't let them see me so upset. I limp into my bathroom and shut the door. After a minute I turn on the shower to buy some time to get myself together. Hopefully they won't wonder why I need so many showers in one day. I wasn't going to get in, but then, what the hell. Maybe it's a good way to cry in privacy.

I stay in for a long time. My poor baby. I knew that being Cassie's sister was hard on Kristen. At least I knew that in my head, but I didn't really know I guess. I had no idea she felt like it was hard to make friends. She had always seemed so independent and self-sufficient and all the time she felt ignored. Oh God. I just stand under the shower and let the hot water beat on my back and head while I cry. There is a knock on the door.

"Lynn?" Steve yells.

"I'm in the shower" I yell back trying to sound normal. I may never come out.

"Okay, just wanted to tell you we're home. They won."

Great.

"Good. Be out soon." I tell him.

I stay there for a very long time.

Okay Lynn, get your shit together and knock this off. You've fucked up and you've got to make things right. Stop blubbering and figure out what to do.

My mind reels. How do I help Kristen make friends? After coming up with several ridiculous ideas like, I'll just go explain to the girls and ask them to continue being Kristen's friend. Or, let's try again and have everyone come back over next

weekend. I finally get it. I can't fix the friend situation, at least that's not what I need to focus on. I need to make sure Kristen feels special and taken care of. That's really where I've failed.

I stand up and grab the soap. It feels good to hit on a way to take action. I will plan a special mother-daughter day with Kristen for next weekend. She loves to go into Boston. We'll go for the day and visit the Museum of Science. It'll just be her and me. Cassie can have a special day with Steve. I will show Kristen how much I love her.

Before leaving the bathroom I check my face for signs of crying. Not too bad.

Even so, I dab on some eye-cream as an extra measure against puffiness and I take a deep breath and re-enter the world.

I find Kristen on the deck. She has a cold glass of lemonade and a couple of the brownies from last night on a plate. She has her headphones on and her foot bounces to the beat as she lounges on the wicker sofa, as always, she's staring at her phone. It looks like winning the soccer game has improved her mood. When I step into her field of view she jumps, remembers to scowl, and looks away from me.

"Kristen."

No answer.

I unplug her headphones from her ipod. She glares.

"Congratulations on winning your game."

"Thanks." she mumbles.

"I want to talk to you."

"What if I don't want to talk to you?" she says swinging her feet to the floor and starting to stand up.

"That's just too bad." I tell her standing up and blocking her from leaving. "Sit down."

She doesn't move. She just stares me in the eyes willing me to back down. I don't.

"Sit," I tell her one more time. She does.

"Kristen, I'm sorry that I've caused you trouble with your friends."

She rolls her eyes. "No you're not. You'd do it again in a minute. All you care about is protecting your precious Cassie."

"I do care about protecting Cassie," I tell her. "But I also care about you."

"Yeah right." she refuses to look at me. I gently take her chin and turn her face so she can see my eyes.

"I do care about you."

She rolls her eyes and the corners of her mouth turn down like she might cry.

"Kristen, I think I was right to be upset about what Haley said." She tries to pull away. I continue quickly, "But I think I may have handled it wrong." She looks at me again. "Dad says I should've let you handle it. I think maybe he's right." Her face crumples a little. She takes a deep breath. "Sometimes I'm too quick to intervene. I'm sorry."

"I would've told Haley to shut up," she says.

"Next time I'll do my best to give you the chance."

"Well you don't have to worry about next time. None of them are ever going to speak to me again."

"I don't know about that." I tell her. "Haley called this morning and apologized to me and to Cassie. She asked to speak to you, but you hadn't come out of your room." Her eyes lit up.

"She did?"

"Yep."

"She didn't act as weird at the soccer game as I thought she would, but I did pretty much avoid her and Ella and Liana."

"Maybe things won't be as bad as you think." I tell her. "I'll help make it better if I can. You might have to help me figure out how to help." She finally smiles. "In the meantime, how would you like to have a girls day next weekend?"

"Girls' Day?" She asks.

"How would you like to spend the day in Boston next Saturday?" I ask her.

"Cassie too?"

"Nope. Just you and me. Cassie can stay with Dad."

"Wow, you really do feel bad."

I laugh. "Yes, I do. But I would also really like to spend more time with you, just the two of us."

"You would?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay, Boston would be fun."

"Let's plan on it then." I pat her leg and stand up.

"Mom?" she says as I open the slider. I turn to look at her. "Thank you for apologizing."

I smile at her and head inside.

We have a nice time the following Saturday at the Museum of Science. The highlights are the Butterfly Garden and the IMAX movie *National Park Adventure*. We decide to stay late and see the *Pink Floyd: Dark Side of the Moon Laser Show* after dinner.

Caroline meets us for dinner at the Riverview Cafe in the museum. Kristen is obviously enjoying being out alone with her mom and her aunt. She has always had stars in her eyes for Aunt Caroline with her glamorous lifestyle.

"So, Kristen, can you keep a secret?" Caroline asks her.

"Yes!" Kristen says. "I love secrets. Tell me."

"Okay. I'm going to have a baby!!" Caroline squeals.

Kristen looks shocked then looks at me. "Did you know?" she asks.

"Yes," I tell her, glaring at Caroline. "I am surprised Aunt Caroline decided to tell you so early, without even talking to me about it."

"Why do I need to talk to you? It's my news." Caroline says with a shrug. Kristen beams at her.

"Does that mean you're getting married?" Kristen asks. "Can I be in your wedding?"

"Why is that everyone's first question?" Caroline asks. "I don't know about getting married, but if I do, you can be a bridesmaid."

"Yay!"

"Now Kristen, this is a secret. Don't tell Cassie about it yet."

"Really? Don't tell Cassie?" Kristen looks at me.

"Just for now," says Caroline. "It's early yet and if something goes wrong it would be hard for Cassie to understand. Better just not to tell her until after the first trimester.

"Okay," says Kristen. I won't tell.

Before we leave the table Kristen excuses herself to go to the restroom. I revel in a moment of guilty gratitude that I don't have to get up and go with her.

"Why did you do that?" I ask Caroline as soon as Kristen leaves.

"What?"

"Tell her that you're pregnant!"

"Why not? It's happy news."

"But you haven't got anything figured out yet. Wouldn't it have been better to wait to tell my kids until you knew what was going to happen?"

"Are you worried that I'm setting a bad example?" she asks.

"No!" Maybe I am. "But they're just kids"

"I didn't tell your 'kids.' I told one of them. The one who needs to feel special right now. Isn't letting her in on a happy secret a good way to make her feel special?"

"But you haven't even told the father yet!"

"So? I will as soon as I see him in person. Don't worry everything will be fine."

"Still I wish you'd waited to tell Kristen. She idolizes you."

"Ah. And you're afraid she might decide to follow in my footsteps and run out and get pregnant herself?"

"No, that's ridiculous. I just..."

"That's right. That is ridiculous. Now stop being such an old-fashioned-granny-mother hen."

"Well I wish you hadn't told her not to tell Cassie. I hate to feel like we're excluding her."

"So now you wish I had told your kids?"

"No. Let's just drop it." I said. I could see Kristen making her way back to the table.

"Mom," she says as she sits down, "thank you for spending this day with me. I'm really having a good time. And thank you, Aunt Caroline, for telling me your news. I can't wait to have a baby cousin."

Caroline looks at me and smiles.

Chapter Ten

Thursday night I'm finishing the kitchen clean-up and looking forward to a rare chance to watch TV before bed when the doorbell rings. It is unusual for someone to show up unannounced. I look at Steve, who is sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by bills. "Who do you think that is?"

"I have no idea," he says standing up and heading to the door. I follow him. He looks through the peephole, then pulls the door open as he says, "It's your sister."

Caroline is standing on the doorstep, arms wrapped tightly around herself, tears running down her face, her mascara ghoulishly smeared. She's not even wearing a coat, despite the cold October evening. I push past Steve.

"Caroline! What happened?" I ask while simultaneously pulling her by the hand into the house and craning to see if her car is in the driveway. "Did you drive like that?"

"Yes," she sniffs. "I'm sorry. I honestly can't believe I am acting like this, but I can't stop. I didn't know where else to go. Can I stay here tonight?" I notice that she has a small overnight bag with her. It looks empty. I take it from her hand and lead her up the stairs to the guest room.

"Of course you can. Now tell me what's going on." I glance at the girls who are both standing in the foyer watching us wide-eyed. Caroline continues to sniff and wipe at her eyes with her free hand.

"Hi, Aunt Caroline!" Cassie waves at us as we climb the stairs.

"Hi, Honey," says Caroline softly. Kristen says nothing, the look on her face confirms for me that her imagination must be dancing around the same scenarios that mine is right now. *Did something happen to the baby?*

I hear Steve ushering the girls back into the kitchen, "Come on ladies, let's give them a chance to talk."

I pull Caroline into the guest room, drop her bag, and sit her down on the bed.

"Have you actually got anything in there?" I ask pointing to the bag. Now that we're alone I find I'm a little nervous to hear why Caroline is so upset. She nods.

"Just a change of underwear and a toothbrush. I took off kind of in a hurry. I just couldn't stay there."

"At your apartment? Why? What happened?"

"Patrick doesn't want the baby. He wants me to have an abortion, and he doesn't want to see me anymore."

"Oh Honey, I'm sorry." I sit down heavily next to her and put my arms around her. She lays her head on my shoulder and we just sit for a few minutes. "So tell me everything," I finally say. Caroline lifts her head and sniffs.

"Okay, so Patrick is in Boston this week on business. He didn't tell me he would be here, just showed up at my apartment and surprised me. He was cooking dinner for us when I got home.

"He was in your apartment without you?"

"Yeah, I gave him a key a few months ago. So since he was here, I decided I'd better tell him about the baby. That's all I could think about once I saw him. He handed me a glass of wine, then noticed that I wasn't drinking it. He asked what was wrong and I just blurted out, 'I'm pregnant.'

That's not at all how I envisioned telling him. We were supposed to be on a romantic Fall stroll somewhere beautiful, and talking about the future and then we would

sit down on some pretty little bench and I would tell him we were going to be parents and he would be ecstatic and for the rest of our lives that little bench would be a special place for us. God, that sounds so stupid. What is wrong with me?" She starts crying again. I rub her back.

"Okay, so what did he say when you told him?"

"He stood still staring at me with the most horrible look on his face, then he put down the spoon he was using to sauté shrimp. He did everything with this hideous calm. I felt myself becoming more and more terrified. Finally he said, 'How did this happen, Caroline?' What a dumb thing to say! And to say it like that, like he's my father and I'm some naughty little girl.

I tried to ignore how much he was scaring me and act like everything was okay. I sashayed over to him and played with his tie, being all flirty, and I said, 'I think you know'. He grabbed my hand, really hard and pulled it off his tie, and pushed me away pretty roughly. He said, 'I thought you had an IUD.'

'It must've slipped out of position or something.' I told him. I know it sounds lame. He must've thought so too. He walked out of the kitchen and of course I followed him. He was putting on his coat and picking up his things. 'You lied to me,' he said. 'You said this would never happen.' I told him it was a happy accident. I told him it must be meant to be. I told him I thought he would be happy about it.

He said, 'What on Earth made you think I would be happy about it? Get rid of it. I will be happy to pay for an abortion. And we're finished. I'm going to catch the first flight back to New York and I'll have myself taken off the Boston account. You won't

have to worry about running into me at work.' And he left.' I couldn't stand to stay there so I threw some things in a bag and came here."

Caroline had sobbed progressively harder as she told her story. I made a quick trip to the bathroom to grab a box of Kleenex.

"Wow," I said when I got back. My mind was reeling. "I'm sorry." We sat for a few minutes while Caroline tried to calm down. When she seemed more in control I said, "It's too bad you can't have a glass of wine. I could sure go for one right now. Or maybe something even stronger."

"What the hell?" said Caroline. "I'm going to terminate the pregnancy anyway."

"What!" I kind of yelled. I was back on my feet and pacing around the room.

"Yeah, I've decided the whole was a dumb idea. I thought I could handle whatever happens, but obviously I can't. I don't know what I was thinking."

"What do you mean it was a dumb idea?" I was still a little loud. "I thought it just happened. It wasn't 'an idea'." Caroline looked at me for a moment.

"I don't have an IUD, Lynn."

I stare at her, then plunk back down on the bed.

"So you lied to him?"

"Yep."

"Why?"

"Because I'm an idiot. I knew he liked our lifestyle and that he didn't think he wanted kids, but I guess I felt that damned biological clock ticking. I realized that if I didn't have a baby soon I would miss my chance altogether. I told myself that if it happened, then it was meant to be, and if not then it wasn't. It happened."

"Didn't it ever occur to you that it was wrong to trick your lover into becoming a father?"

Caroline stares at me.

"It's not like I was trying. I wasn't keeping track of my ovulation cycle or anything like that, and I don't get to see him all that often. I was just letting the chips fall without trying to prevent anything. I wasn't tricking him."

"Yes, you were. You let him believe that you had birth control taken care of."

"I thought he would be happy. That he would realize that he really wanted to be a father. He loves little kids."

I can't help rolling my eyes. "What?" asks Caroline, "He does."

"I thought you were so much more sophisticated than I could ever be, and here you are thinking like a middle schooler, 'I want him to want what I want, so he will.' It's ridiculous."

"Well I was wrong. I screwed up. Now I have to fix it. I can't lose him, Lynn."

"I think it's a little late for that."

"I'm serious about getting an abortion. Will you come with me? I know I can't do it alone."

My stomach flips. "Why do you need to do that? You are a successful woman.

You can afford to raise a child well on your own. You're not some kid with no resources.

You can do this. I'll help you."

"I really can't. I realize that now. Not alone, I can't do it." There is a hard shininess in her eyes that frightens me.

"Let's not talk about this anymore right now. I'm going downstairs to make us some tea. You'll stay here tonight and get some rest. Things will look better in the morning. Why don't you let them know that you'll be working at home tomorrow? You can do that, right? Stay for the weekend. We'll sort all of this out."

"Okay, but I won't change my mind."

We'll see about that. I head to the kitchen in a daze to make some tea. I don't even care about the tea, I just have to get out of that conversation. It is surreal to me that this is even happening.

Of course, when I get to the kitchen everyone wants to know what's wrong with Caroline. "Oh, she had some trouble with someone at work. It just really got to her. She's going to stay here for a few days."

"Is that really what it is?" Kristen asks.

"Of course." I tell her and quickly turn my back to face the sink and fill the tea kettle. "It's a school night. Is your homework done?"

"I still have to finish my Math," Kristen tells me.

"Then go do that now." I am grateful when I hear her get up and leave the kitchen.

"My homework is done," says Cassie gleefully. She didn't have any. "I'm going to talk to Aunt Caroline."

"No!" I'm too loud again. Steve looks up at me. Cassie looks stunned. I master my voice, "It's just that it's getting late, Honey, and Aunt Caroline doesn't feel well.

Why don't you just go ahead and take your shower. You can talk to her tomorrow."

"Okay," she says subdued. I fuss with the tea things unnecessarily to avoid Steve's inevitable questions. All I can think about is getting a chance to sneak out to the deck for a cigarette. I hear Cassie upstairs, probably outside the guest room door, yelling, "I have to take a shower now, Aunt Caroline. We'll talk tomorrow." I hear a murmur that must be Caroline answering. She probably wonders what Cassie has to talk to her about.

"So, your conversation got a little loud," says Steve.

I whirl to face him. "Oh God, you guys couldn't hear us, could you?"

"Nothing substantial, just things like 'What!' and 'What do you mean?'

"Oh thank God." I slumped into a chair at the table with him.

"What's going on, Lynn?"

"The baby's father doesn't want it. Caroline's distraught. He broke up with her."

"Damn. I hate to say it, but I sort of saw something like this coming when he stood her up for the Top of the Hub."

"Apparently she didn't. She thought he'd be happy and they'd waltz off into the sunset, the perfect little family. Which is ridiculous since it sounds like he was pretty clear all along that he didn't want kids."

"Hmm." I can see him thinking about this, but thankfully, he doesn't ask for any further details. "So what now?" he asks instead.

"She says she wants to have an abortion."

"Wow," says Steve. "That's...just, wow."

"Yeah, I know. she wants me to go with her." The tea kettle whistles and I get up to make the tea. "I think she's moving too fast. Up until a couple of hours ago, she was

thrilled to be expecting. I don't want her to make a decision like that without careful thought. I want her to stay here for a few days. She should not be alone right now."

"Of course not. Do whatever you need to do. I have a couple of things to do for work. I may be up for a while. I'll let you get back to her." He points toward the upstairs. He is opening his laptop as I head up with two mugs of tea. Great. I may not get a chance to sneak out for a smoke after all.

When I get back to the guest room, Caroline is in the bed. She has washed her face and is wearing a t-shirt I recognize.

"Is that mine?" I ask handing her a mug.

"Yeah. I hope you don't mind. I forgot to bring anything to sleep in. All I have are the clothes I was wearing." She points to the rumpled business suit and blouse lying neatly on the chair in the corner. Her high heels are placed neatly under it.

"No, that's fine. You certainly can't wear that stuff all weekend. Mi closet es tu closet. Have you eaten anything?"

"No, but I don't think I could. I left that shrimp right there on the stove. That'll smell wonderful when I get home."

"Ugh. I hope you turned off the stove."

"I did."

"Okay then. Goodnight. I'll see you tomorrow. Do you want me to stay home from work with you?" It had just occurred to me that I would need to call in now if she did.

"No, I'll be alright. I have my computer with me, it's in the car. I can work from here, as you suggested. Hopefully that will keep my mind off things. I appreciate you letting me stay. I already feel better, being away from my life for now."

"Okay, then I will see you tomorrow afternoon. I don't expect you to be up by the time we leave in the morning."

"Okay, goodnight." She looks like she already half asleep. Had she taken something?

I check in with Cassie, who is in the shower, to see if she needs help washing her hair. She says she's done it already, and I don't have the energy to insist on inspecting her work like I usually do. Kristen's bedroom door is shut. I can hear her talking-probably on FaceTime with a friend. I don't like that at this time of night, and can only hope that her math is done, but I don't interfere. I can hear Steve moving about in the kitchen and I'm not proud of this, but I decide to take advantage of the moment.

I go into my bathroom open the cabinet under the sink and reach to the bottom of a box of tampons, one place I know Steve would never look. I pull out a crumpled, very old pack of cigarettes. This is not the stash I usually pull from. This is only for emergencies. The pack is mostly full, but the cigarettes are a bit crushed, probably a result of my throwing my hairdryer in on top of the tampon box on a daily basis.

Oh well. They'll do. I attempt to straighten one out a bit and light it with a match from a book stowed in the same box. I lean as far as I can out the bathroom window, head and shoulders completely out, and I take a deep drag. Ahhhh. I can feel my whole body relax just a little bit. I manage one more puff before the slider to the deck opens just below me and Steve steps out on the deck. He's on his cell phone. What is he doing out

there tonight in this cold? I quickly pull myself back inside and drop the cigarette in the toilet. I shut the window as quietly as I can. I do not see him look up, so I am pretty sure he didn't see me, but he can probably smell the smoke. Goddammit.

I throw my clothes in the hamper, flush the evidence, spray the room with air freshener, and climb into my bed. I am utterly exhausted.

When Steve comes in after midnight I pretend to be sleeping. I hear him sniff and realize he is smelling my hair--does he just like my smell, or is he checking for proof of bad behavior? I tense up. He settles down on his side of the bed.

"I know you're not asleep." he whispers.

I don't answer for a moment, then I say. "Yes I am." I can see his tiny smile in the light from the clock.

"Lynn, you promised you'd quit smoking."

"I know. But I'm stressed and it helps."

"Is that worth dying of lung cancer for? We all need you to stay healthy." I'm silent.

After a few minutes he rolls away from me.

I lie awake for hours.

When I arrive home from work the next day Caroline is at the kitchen table pounding away on her laptop. She is full of energy. Almost maniacal.

"Hi, how was your day?" She says jumping up to hug me. "I got a lot done. I also made an appointment," she is talking very fast.

"An appointment?"

"At a clinic. For Saturday, so you can come with me. You won't have to miss work."

"This Saturday? Tomorrow?"

"Yes. No sense waiting." Her eyes are shining.

"Oh Caroline, can't you take a little longer to think about this? I am afraid you will regret it. You're rushing. This is an enormous decision. You will live with it for the rest of your life."

"No. I'm sure. I'll tell Patrick as soon as it's done."

"Honey, you can't possibly think that terminating your pregnancy will win Patrick back. If that's why you're doing this, then forget it. Patrick is gone. This baby and this decision is entirely yours. He's gone." I can see her eyes welling up as I speak. "I'm sorry, Caroline, but it's the truth. You have to face that. You can't make this decision based on Patrick."

"Well we'll just see," she says swiping at her eyes and her nose in one movement.

I go upstairs to change and end up sitting on my bed for a long time. I am overwhelmed by so much emotion I have to try to sort out what I'm actually feeling. I'm very worried about the way that Caroline is thinking. She thinks she is going to win Patrick back by getting rid of the baby. I've never known her to be willing to go to any kind of extreme over a man. This is not healthy.

I go outside to spread fertilizer on the bulbs I planted. I had planned to do this tomorrow and to get a start on raking the leaves, but now it seems I'll be busy tomorrow. I realize that ever since learning that Caroline was pregnant, I've been worrying about her ability to be a mother. *Am I relieved that now she is not going to be?* I think that's it, and

I feel awful about that. And yet choosing to terminate the pregnancy is such an enormous decision. I don't think that'll be easy for her either, especially since I really do believe she wants to be a mother. In any case it's not my decision. It's hers, no matter what her reasons are. I just hope it's what she really wants. When I go back inside, she's still typing furiously.

"Okay, what time tomorrow?" I ask her.

"10:00 am," she says.

"I'll see if Steve can take Cassie to Art class."

"Oh good. So you'll come with me then?"

"Of course I will. I would never let you go through this alone. Are you absolutely sure it's what you want?"

"Yes." She doesn't say any more than that, just looks back down at her computer screen.

Chapter Eleven

Saturday is a bright, crisp October morning, just beautiful. I wish it was raining. That would feel more appropriate. I would much rather be spending the day in my garden. I need to bring in the potted plants I have on the deck. Cassie is excited to have Steve take her to Art class. The girls think that I am taking Aunt Caroline to a regular old doctor's appointment. I can't eat breakfast. What we are about to do feels so huge, I can't eat. I just drink coffee until I am visibly shaking. I'm not sure if it's because of the coffee.

Caroline is perky and overly cheerful. She whirls around the kitchen helping herself to an orange, and an English muffin. She chatters away with Cassie about her latest art project and tells Kristen she will try to catch her game that afternoon. I roll my eyes. What does she think she's doing? Going in for a flu shot? Her eyes have that too bright, too shiny look to them that has been worrying me. I wonder again if she is taking something, or if she is losing it somehow. It's appropriate for her to be a bit overwrought this morning, I guess. I am suddenly overwhelmed with sympathy for her and have to leave the kitchen before I start crying. God. I am crying all the time lately. I've got to get a grip.

All too soon it is time for us to leave. We are silent on the way to the clinic. I keep looking sideways at Caroline's profile as I drive. Is she okay? I reach over and grab her hand. She squeezes so hard it hurts just as we roll to a stop at a red light. I turn to her.

"Caroline. Look at me." She does, and I feel my heart jump a little at the look in her eyes. There is so much pain there. "I have one thing to say. I will support you no matter what, but I want you to be sure that you are doing this because you think it's the

right decision, not because he told you to or because you think this will win him back." I stare at her and she stares back at me looking like she is going to cry. The light changes and I don't move. The car behind me honks. "Caroline?" She nods once quickly and looks straight ahead again pulling her hand from mine. I drive on.

We are silent for the rest of the drive and in the waiting room. What more is there to say? They call Caroline into the exam room and there is nothing I can do. They won't let me come with her. I have to just sit and wait. I squeeze her hand one more time. She walks like she is going to the gallows. I can't help it. Once she's gone, I have tears running down my face while I sit there. At least I managed not to do that before she went in.

I have no idea what to expect. Will she be okay? How will she feel physically? Emotionally? What will we have to deal with? How long does this even take? Not long, it turns out. She comes out sobbing about twenty minutes after she went in. I jump up and go to hug her. She throws herself in my arms and continues to cry.

"It's alright," I tell her. "It'll be alright."

"Lynn. Lynn." She keeps saying my name. "You'll have to help me."

"I will, Honey. I will. Sssh." I rub her back.

"I didn't do it," she whispers.

I step back, my hands still on her shoulders, and look carefully at her face.

"What?"

"I didn't do it. I couldn't. I want this baby."

I have to sit down. "Wow. Okay, okay good. This is good." I start to cry too. The nurse brings us a box of tissues. Luckily we are the only people in the tiny waiting room at the moment. "What made you change your mind?" I ask.

"They had to go through a whole interview with me before the procedure and I just sat there sobbing. The point was to make sure I understood what I was doing and that I really wanted to go through with it. I guess I just realized I didn't. I think I was doing it for Patrick. I want to have a baby. I've wanted one for a long time. Oh Lynn. I'm scared. How am I going to do this alone?"

I hug her again, "Oh Caroline, you won't have to do it alone. You'll be just fine. I'll help you." We rock back and forth clinging to each other for a long time. Finally we pull apart. "Okay, then. Let's go get some lunch somewhere, what do you think?" Suddenly I'm starving.

When we get home Caroline is exhausted and goes up to the guest room to take a nap. I flop onto the couch. "How'd it go?" Steve asks.

"She decided not to do it," I tell him.

"Did you manage to talk her out of it?" he asks.

I just stare at him for a moment. Did I? "I don't know," I finally say. "I wasn't trying to, exactly. I just told her to be sure she was doing what was right for her and not doing it for Patrick. She said they did an interview with her beforehand and during it she realized she wanted the baby."

"That sounds reasonable. That must be standard procedure. They must have to make sure you are psychologically okay before going ahead with something so big."

"Yeah, I guess."

"You must feel better at any rate."

"I think I do. After all, there's no reason she can't take care of a baby right?"

"Nope. She'll be fine."

"Right. She'll be fine. How was art class?"

"It was fun. We made things out of pipe cleaners today. Cassie is very proud of her tree. I made an elephant."

"An elephant? Way to start with something simple."

"It's not bad. I'll show it to you," he leaves to go get it from the kitchen and comes back." We can put it on the mantle," he tells me smiling. He is holding something that in an abstract way, with a bit of imagination, might be considered to resemble an elephant. I laugh as he sets it on the mantle."

"I met your new friend," Steve says with his back to me.

"Who's my new friend?" I'm puzzled.

"Dave," he says turning around. "I think he has a crush on you."

"What?" I can feel my face turning red. "What are you talking about?"

"He wanted to know where you were. Seemed really disappointed that you weren't there."

"Oh. He's just some guy who used to hang out with Caroline in high school. His daughter has Downs too." I said stupidly. Of course Steve would know that.

"Yeah," he says and sits back down. "So, what happens now?" he asks with a nod toward the upstairs and Caroline.

"I'm not sure," I tell him. "I guess we'll have to see how she feels when she gets up. Ideally she would go home tomorrow and go back to work on Monday."

"Maybe you should go with her and help her settle back in. You could come back tomorrow night, just go for the day."

"Yeah. I probably should. I'm kind of nervous to leave her alone."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She just seems so fragile. I've never seen her like this before. She's always been so strong."

"Maybe the strong thing is an act."

"Maybe."

Caroline sleeps for hours and then wakes up and has dinner with us. She looks very tired, but tries weakly to smile and be "normal" for the girls' sake. She does mention that she plans to go home tomorrow. After dinner she goes right back to bed.

I go back to Boston with Caroline on Sunday morning. We drive separately so I can come back home Tuesday. I have Monday off for Columbus Day, and plan to take a personal day on Tuesday. When we walk into her apartment we are hit with a wall of putrid stench. The shrimp. I never knew something could smell so awful. Caroline has to make a dash for the bathroom to throw up. I remember having that acute sense of smell and gag reflex during my pregnancies too.

I immediately open all the windows in the apartment and turn on the ceiling fan. I dump the shrimp, skillet and all, into a garbage bag and tossed it immediately into the

garbage chute in the corridor. She can afford a new skillet. I'm not about to try to clean that one out. I find some Lysol under the kitchen sink and walk around the apartment spraying it everywhere. Now it smells like rotting shrimp on a pine tree coupled with that hospital-like antiseptic smell all the Lysol-scents have.

Caroline comes out of the bathroom and catches me waving one of her throw blankets out the window. She starts to laugh.

"You look like Enjolras waving that red flag in *Les Mis*. What are you doing? Signaling for help?"

I laugh and pull the blanket back in. "No, I'm just trying to air things out. Why don't we go for a little walk and leave the windows open? Maybe when we get back it'll smell a little better."

"Okay," she shrugs.

We spend about an hour wandering in a park near her apartment. She stops to watch a young mother pushing her kid on a swing. The kid is yelling, "Higher! I want to go higher!"

"I guess that'll be me soon," she says.

"Yeah, it's fun. You'll see." I watch her face. She looks hopeful. A good sign.

"Do you want to sit down here for a while?" I ask. I figure it might do her some good to watch the kids on the playground longer.

"Nah. Let's go get coffee," she says. So much for that.

"Okay," I say, "decaf for you of course."

"Of course, Mother," she says...

When we get back it does smell slightly better, well, a little less-bad anyway. It's also freezing. I set about closing the windows and looking around for some scented candles we can light. Caroline notices the blinking light on her answering machine.

"Maybe it's Patrick!" she says, pushing the play button.

It's a telemarketer telling her she won a free cruise. She sighs and flings herself into a chair.

"Caroline, he's not going to call. The sooner you accept that and move on, the better you'll feel. You don't need him. You're a powerful, independent woman. Embrace that."

"But I love him," she whines.

"Well, I don't think he loves you, I tell her, and honestly I'm not sure you love him either. It doesn't sound like your relationship was all that healthy. I think you'll eventually feel like you're better off this way."

"Fuck you, Lynn! Stay the hell out of my life."

I laugh, relieved. "Now you are starting to sound like yourself. And for the record, I'll never stay out of your life. You're stuck with me." I put my arms around her and squeeze.

After a moment, she hugs me back. "Well I guess that's one thing to be thankful for," she says tearing up a bit. We just stand there for a minute, holding each other.

Finally I pull away. "Come on, let's go out for some dinner. It stinks too much to eat in here." I stand up and hope she'll follow my lead. I'm not sure if she will. I go to the closet and grab my coat. When I turn around again, she is following me.

Chapter Twelve

We're both pretty exhausted when we get back from dinner, so we go to bed early. We went to Legal Seafood for dinner, which was a little ironic given that we were driven out of the apartment by the smell of shrimp, but that's what Caroline said she wanted--a big bowl of their chowder. We were able to walk since it is only a few blocks from her building. We both ended up having the chowder, then I had the grilled Mediterranean salmon and she had the crab cakes. I had two glasses of wine. Caroline chatted away about the future and the baby as if everything was great. She did not mention Patrick a single time.

Caroline's guest room is amazingly comfortable. I lay there thinking about the quick transformation Caroline made. It's a little eerie, and I think I would be nervous except that the way she was acting now is her; she was acting like herself. I drift off and I sleep better than I can remember sleeping in a very long time, which is weird because I usually have trouble sleeping for the first few nights in a bed that is not my own.

Caroline decides that she is going to go into work in the morning, which is a good sign. Since she seems to have rediscovered her usual independent and capable frame of mind I change my own plans too. I'll leave for home after she leaves for work on Monday morning, rather than waiting until Tuesday. We make tentative plans for her to come for the weekend again if she feels like it.

I have a cup of coffee with her before she leaves for work. I want to make sure she still seems to be alright. She seems very much herself, though a little subdued. That's to be expected, I think. She's been on such an emotional roller coaster the last few days. I feel confident that she is going to be fine. We kiss each other goodbye. After she leaves,

I check my phone and the screen lights up with text messages that I missed. All from Kristen. All from Sunday afternoon and evening. I realize that I never even called to say good-night last night. I can't believe it didn't occur to me to do that.

I open the texting app and begin to scroll through her messages: "Mom-call me now!" "Mom-it's me again, please call" "Mom, why aren't you responding?" "Please Mom!"

My heart flips in my chest. It's already after 8:00 am--she will be in school now, assuming she went to school. I call the house number quickly to see if anyone is at home. No answer. They are all out for the day. I tell myself it can't be too much of an emergency, or I would have heard from Steve too. There are no messages at all from him or from Cassie. I will myself to breathe normally.

I decide to leave right after the morning rush hour. I should be home in time to text her during her lunch time and see what's going on. After a second cup of coffee and an English muffin with peanut butter on it--pretty much all the food I can find in Caroline's kitchen, I'm ready to leave. Once again Kristen needed me and I wasn't there. How could I have missed all of her texts? I check my phone again and switch it off of vibrate mode, so that I won't miss any other messages or calls. I guess I was so involved with Caroline last night that I never even took my phone out of my purse.

I walk in my front door at 11:30 pm and text Kristen right away. While I wait for her to respond, I make a quick circuit of the house to see if I can find any signs of disaster. Nothing is amiss. Everything looks perfectly ordinary, right down to the pile of dirty dishes in the sink since I wasn't here to wash them. The girls won't be home for

another three and a half hours. I'm relieved to have the house to myself for a little while. I put my jacket back on and head out to the deck for a smoke. It's delicious.

After my cigarette I start cleaning up the kitchen, and make myself a sandwich. There's not too much else that needs to be done, other than some laundry. So I put a load in the washer and read the paper while I eat and try to remember the last time I read the paper. All of the news is depressing, so I go outside to rake the leaves in the backyard and add them to the compost. I can't stop thinking about what Kristen might have needed. She didn'tt answer the text I sent her at lunchtime. Probably out of anger at me. There's no way she didn't see it. She looks at her phone at least once a minute as far as I can tell.

An image of Kristen's diary pops into my head while I'm raking. I look at my watch. I still have over an hour before they get home. Do I dare to read it again? Is it right? No. It's not right, but I don't care. Maybe I can find out what's going on, and maybe more than she is likely to tell me, especially since she is probably pissed at me at the moment, rightly so, I think. What's one more sin on my conscience? I'm already the worst mother ever. I finish up raking the section I'm working on, put the rake in the shed and head up to her room.

I expect to have to search a bit for her journal this time, but I guess she wasn't too worried about anyone seeing it. It's sitting on her nightstand. I actually take out my phone and snap a picture of it's position so that I can put it back exactly right after I snoop. I'm a natural criminal, I think. I sit on her desk chair to read so she won't detect my butt-print in her bed covers. Sure enough she's been writing...

Things have gotten worse. Now even Liana and Haley aren't speaking to me. I guess they believe the crap Chloe's been saying. She's been telling everyone that I ratted her out to Ms. Henshaw for cheating on the math

test. I didn't! I didn't even know she cheated. She had to take a zero on the test and told everyone it was my fault. She said I had to point the finger at her so that no one would know that really I copied off of her, not the other way around, since I am a retard like my sister and couldn't handle taking the test legit.

She keeps putting memes on Instagram--all pictures of me with a rat tail or me photo shopped to have an enormous mouth, or worst of all, a picture of Cassie with my name on it. People keep calling Cassie "Kristen" at school and she doesn't have any idea why they do that. Luckily she doesn't mind. She doesn't know they're being mean. She just thinks that have us mixed up, which makes sense to her.

It's gotten to the point that I eat lunch in the girls' bathroom, in a stall, just so I don't have to see anyone. Chloe apparently told all my friends to watch out for me because I'll eventually throw them under the bus, and then she made up a whole bunch of bad shit about them that she said I told her!!! First of all, I never told her anything about any of them. I would never do that! But they don't believe me. They think she's all glamorous and beautiful and popular and of course all the boys are drooling over her. She can say anything she wants and they'll all believe her.

What did I ever do to her to deserve any of this? I thought we were friends. Even after that shit at the sleepover at my house she still seemed like we were cool, then all of a sudden in the last week or so, bam!!!! She is such a bitch!

There is a several-line break after this, then; My fucking mother won't even respond to my texts. FML. I sit there for quite a while trying to figure out what FML might mean, and end up googling it. "Fuck My Life". Oh God. She must've wanted to talk about this. This has been going on for the last week or so? I had no idea. She never said anything. She didn't even act like anything was wrong. Why did she wait until I was in Boston to decide to talk to me about it? Maybe she talked to Steve last night and he

helped her figure out how to handle it. I hope so. I hope she isn't still dealing with this all by herself.

Shaking I get out my phone and check the photograph, then put the diary back exactly the way I found it. It occurs to me that I could look at her Instagram account and see what's been going on there. I used to check it all the time. One of the conditions of her even having an account was that she had to allow me to follow her on it so I could see what was going on. Things seemed to be very appropriate, so I hadn't looked in a long time. I log into it. I scroll through everyone Kristen is following, click on Chloe's profile picture, and get a notification that her account is private. I can't see what she's posted without following her and having her accept me as a follower. So I scroll through Kristen's feed quickly, but don't see anything that tells me more. She doesn't post very often. There are only a few pictures on her feed.

I think about going back outside to rake some more. I need a physical activity to help me think. I check the clock. School will be out in about 15 minutes. If I leave right now, I can surprise the girls and pick them up from school. Forget the leaves, that's what I'll do. I'll pick them up and then take them to Starbucks for decaf pumpkin lattes. That'll be fun, a treat they won't expect. Then I'll make sure to arrange some alone time to talk to Kristen. I grab my purse and get in the car after sending a quick text to both Kristen and Cassie, "I'm coming to pick you up. Don't get on the bus." I hope they both see it before I get there. Just to be safe, I text Cassie's aide as well.

I see Cassie first. She's at the head of the crowd with her aide. The aide is with her in some of her classes, and helps her find her bus in the afternoon. They have obviously seen my text, they're both looking at each of the cars in the line. I see the aide

ask her something and guess that it's something like, "Do you see your mom's car?", because Cassie shakes her head in response. I give one quick honk, roll down the passenger side window and wave while yelling out, "Cassie! Over here!". She and the aide see me then and Cassie picks up her pace, galloping awkwardly to the car. She has a huge smile on her face and waves as she approaches yelling "Hi Mom!!"

Behind her I see Kristen emerge from the school. She notices Cassie right away and stops for a moment watching her. I unlock the door and tell Cassie to climb in. She jumps happily into the front seat and gives me a kiss. I can't help enjoying how happy she is to see me. I quickly thank her aide and look again at Kristen. She is still standing stock still as if she is trying to decide whether or not to come over to the car. It occurs to me then that it might've been better just to pick up Kristen and to let Cassie take the bus home. I push that thought aside reminding myself that If I had done that we couldn't go to Starbuck's because we'd have to rush home to meet Cassie's bus, and it would've been weird to just pick Kristen up. I watch Kristen for a moment, then finally catch her eye and give her a "come-on" gesture. She shrugs and walks over to the car, opens the backdoor, and gets in.

"Hi, Honey!" I say too cheerfully. "I came back early!"

"So I see," she says.

"Who wants Starbucks?" I practically yell.

"Not me," says Kristen.

"I do! I do!" Cassie shouts bouncing up and down in her seat with her hand raised.

I glance at Kristen. She rolls her eyes and turns to look out the window. Shit. I was stupid to think that going out for a treat would make Kristen feel better.

"Well, I guess we can skip it if you don't want to go," I say to Kristen.

"Whatever," she says without looking at me.

"Noooo!" Cassie wails. "I want a punkin' latte!" I sigh.

"Okay, Starbucks it is," I say. As I'm pulling out of the school lot, I see Chloe crossing to her mother's car. I imagine stepping on the gas and hitting her. I tighten my grip on the wheel. I pass her mother's car and have to force myself not to drive by really slowly giving an evil glare and maybe the finger. That would only hurt Kristen more.

Starbucks is on the way home so we just go through the drive through. Cassie gets a decaf Pumpkin Latte. Kristen gets nothing and won't even answer me when I ask her again if she wants something. On the drive home, Cassie happily chatters about her day which is a blessing because there is a very palpable silence coming from the back seat.

"How did everything go last night while I was gone?" I ask. In the rearview mirror I see Kristen turn to look at me. She stares into my eyes in the mirror, but says nothing.

"It was great!" says Cassie. "Dad made tacos. Yum."

"Tacos! That's fun." I say, tearing my eyes away from Kristen's and focusing on the road. "What else did you do?"

"We watched two *Ice Road Truckers*," Cassie said. Steve and Cassie love that show.

"All three of you?"

"No, just me and Dad. Kristen go-ed to her room." I glance at Kristen again. She is back to being enthralled by the scenery outside. I see that she has put her earbuds in her ears.

When we get home I send Cassie up to her room to do her homework. She doesn't really have any, so I keep some work books in her room and assign her a couple of pages each night. She likes to do homework while Kristen does homework, and it's good for her to practice the reading and life-skills math, like working with money, that she's working on in school. I tell her to do three Language Arts pages, then play her money game on her ipad for at least 30 minutes. That should keep her busy for long enough for me to talk alone with Kristen. She skips happily to the stairs. Kristen starts up right behind her.

"Kristen." She turns to look at me. "Can we talk?"

"Not now, I have homework," she says.

"You can do your homework later," I tell her. "You don't have anywhere else you have to go tonight. Let's talk now." She stares at me. She looks so sad, and so angry all at the same time. I want to just give her a big hug. I feel my eyes welling. "Kristen, I'm so sorry."

"For what?" She still hasn't moved from the bottom step. Her expression hasn't changed. When did my baby become such a hard ass?

"I just saw your text messages this morning. I'm sorry I didn't respond. I was busy with Aunt Caroline and didn't even look at my phone."

"I guess that's better than purposely ignoring me," she says.

"I would never ignore you," I tell her. "Come in the family room now and tell me what's going on."

"It's nothing," she says. "I'm all set now." She looks like she is going to cry.

"Kristen. You come in the family room right this minute and talk to me." Luckily that does it and she turns and follows me. *Okay*, I coach myself. *Now she'll tell you about it. Be careful not to let on that you know more than she says. Think of good advice to give her. What the hell is good advice in this situation?*

She sits on the couch and I sit next to her close enough to put my arm around her when I need to.

"So, tell me. Why did you send me all those texts? Is everything okay? Did you get the text I sent you at lunchtime?"

"Yeah, I got it."

"Why didn't you answer?" She looks at me.

"Really, Mom?"

"Right. I guess I deserved it."

"So is Aunt Caroline okay? What was wrong with her."

I sigh, and can't see any reason not to tell her at least some of the story. "So, you know how Aunt Caroline is going to have a baby?" She nods. "Well, her boyfriend, the baby's father doesn't want it. He broke up with her."

"Whoa," she says, thinking about this. "No wonder she was so upset."

"Yeah."

"So he's just abandoning her and the baby? What an as---jerk."

"Yeah." I say. I don't tell her that he was duped into the situation in the first place. What's the point? He's gone, and Caroline is ours forever.

"So what's she gonna do?"

"She's going to carry on. She'll get over it eventually."

"She'll be a single mother."

"Yeah. That's rough. But she can do it. We'll be there for her, won't we?" Kristen nods. "So tell me about last night."

"It seems silly now that I made such a big deal about it, but I just really wanted to talk to you. My period started."

"What! You got your first period?" This is the last thing I expected her to tell me. "Oh Honey! I'm sorry I wasn't here. What did you do?"

"I just put a pad in my underpants and tried to act normal. It feels so weird, like you've got a bean bag in there. It even makes me walk funny. I'm sure everyone can tell."

I laughed. "I remember thinking the same thing. I promise you they can't. I had no idea until you told me and I've been looking at you for the last hour. Did you tell Dad?"

"God no! Why would I do that? How embarrassing! Don't you tell him either!"

"Oh, come on. He knows it's a thing. It's a milestone. He should know you've had a milestone. How about if I make him promise not to talk to you or anyone else about it? Then you won't have to be embarrassed."

"Did you tell him when Cassie got it?"

"Of course. Don't you remember that? It was quite an ordeal." It had been so hard for Cassie to understand what was happening to her. We had to talk about it quite a lot to help her process it and to remember what to do to take care of herself. It was the main topic in the household for the entire week each of the first few times it happened.

Unfortunately, she got it one month, then not again for another three months, so after that much time we had to sort of start all over again helping her comprehend it.

Then she went through some anxiety for several months anticipating it coming all the time when she wasn't having it. It was a blessing when her cycle started to settle into a more regular pattern. Now I keep a calendar in her room that we check every night so she has some warning within a few days of when it's likely to start. She knows how to change her pad herself now and her cramps aren't too bad, easily handled with Advil. So it's finally not too big of a deal.

"I told Cassie about mine last night."

"You did?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah. I really wanted to talk to you about it, but you weren't available, so I ended up telling her.

"What did she say?"

"She was really sweet. She hugged me and patted my back and told me it would be okay. Then she wrote it down on her calendar and she offered to help me put on a pad."

"Wow," I marveled. "She's quite the capable big sister."

"I told her I didn't need any help with the pad, but she really did make me feel better."

"That's great," I said. "Do you have cramps? Do you need some Advil?"

"They're really not too bad. At least not yet."

"So this will last about a week...," I start.

"Mom, I know all that. I just wanted to tell you." I stop and I smile and I hug her and of course, a few tears escape my eyes. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm just emotional. You're my baby and you're growing up." And I missed an important moment for you. And you still haven't told me about the stuff happening to you at school. And now I really don't know what to do.

"Yeah. I'm growing up," she says smiling at me.

I wipe away the tear that has escaped onto my cheek. "How's everything else? Everything okay at school?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I'm glad Aunt Caroline is doing better. I'm going to go start my homework."

"Okay, Honey," I say helplessly. "How about Coconut-Lime Chicken for dinner?" Why do I keep thinking that eating food she likes will fix everything?

"Sure." She forces a smile and leaves the room. As soon as she's gone I sneak outside for a smoke.

Chapter Thirteen

The next night, we're all sitting at the table eating a rare dinner together on a night when Kristen does not have soccer practice. The season is coming to an end and she only has three games left, unless they make it to the championships.

"So, how was everyone's day?" Steve asks?

"Bad," says Cassie with scowl on her face.

"Why? What happened?" asks Steve."

"Ms. O'Brien got mad at me."

"She did?" I ask. I'm surprised that Eileen O'Brien hasn't said anything to me. She usually does if there's any problem with Cassie.

"Yeah. I was in'propriate."

"Inappropriate?"

"Yeah," she looks down at her plate. She usually tells a story in greater detail than anyone really wants to know, but "yeah" is all we get this time.

"What'd you do?" Kristen asks, clearly enjoying this. Cassie looks up and glares at her. "Geez!", says Kristen, "What'd I do?"

"It's all your fault."

"How could it possibly be my fault? I wasn't even there." Kristen rolls her eyes and puts another bite in her mouth.

"I told them 'bout how you got your period," Cassie says. Kristen chokes on her food. Steve starts patting her on the back. She grabs her water and takes a gulp and, after a few moments, the coughing subsides.

"What!" she screams hoarsely once she's recovered, a thin line of water dribbling from the corner of her mouth. "Can't you ever just mind your own business?"

Cassie looks surprised by her reaction. "I told them 'bout it. It was my 'What's Up?' today."

Each day in Cassie's classroom, Ms. O'Brien has each of the students share something that is going on in their lives. She calls that time "What's Up?" She does it to help them practice social skills, and public speaking skills. They love it because they can all busybody in on each other's lives. I suspect that there's social cache in Cassie's class for having the most outrageous news. She probably figured she had hit the jackpot this time.

"Oh boy," says Steve.

"So, why did Ms. O'Brien get mad?" I ask. I agree that what Cassie shared was a bit too personal, but don't really see any reason for anger. Kristen looks at me, hands in the air by her ears, palms up and eyes wide.

"WTF, Mom."

"Hey! Watch your mouth," I tell her.

"Madison started cryin' and Ms. O'Brien said I couldn't say stuff like that no more. I 'on't know why *not*," says Cassie.

"Cassie that was a very personal thing to tell to your class. And it wasn't your news to tell. Remember we talked about only sharing your news?" Steve tells her.

We'd had to have that conversation several times. This is not the first time Cassie shared personal details about one of us. I had asked Eileen O'Brien at one point to do away with the "What's Up?" segment of the day, but she insisted that incidents like that

were useful in helping the students learn to make good decisions about what is and isn't appropriate to say. All five of the students in Cassie's class struggle with this, so Ms.

O'Brien must have enough dirt on all their families by now to blackmail them anytime by threatening to print some choice items in the local newspaper or worse, post them on Facebook.

"Why did Madison start crying?" I ask.

"Geez, Mom, that's what you're worried about?"

"I'm just trying to understand what happened."

Kristen rolls her eyes.

"She cried 'cuz she got hers too an' she *hates* it. I told her it would all be okay, but she went to the nurse, an' went home. Ms. O'Brien said I can't upset Madison."

There's a moment when no one says anything, then Cassie adds, "Madison cries a *lot*."

"You're gonna cry a lot when I get through with you," says Kristen, "learn to mind your own business, or I'll never tell you anything again!" Kristen gets up and storms up to her room. From the top of the stairs she yells, "Now the whole damn school is going to know!"

"Hey! Language!" yells Steve after her just as her bedroom door slams.

"I'm not going to survive her teen hood," I say. Cassie looks alarmed. "It's just an expression, honey. Of course I'll survive...somehow."

"She's never gonna talk to me again," says Cassie putting down her fork and starting to cry.

"Yes, she will." I say wearily. "She'll get over it. She just doesn't think she will. Someday she'll remember this as a funny story." "Yeah," says Steve, "you can talk about it at family reunions, it'll be a real hoot."

He stands up and starts clearing the table."

"A funny story?" asks Cassie looking perplexed.

"Yes, honey, most funny stories aren't really very funny when they actually happen, only later."

"But you have to stop telling about Kristen, or anyone but yourself, when you do 'What's Up?'," Steve says from the sink.

"Right," I echo. "No more stories about Kristen, got it?"

Neither of the girls finishes her dinner. I send Cassie up to take her shower. Steve scrapes and rinses the dishes and puts them in the dishwasher, then heads into the family room. I hear the T.V. come on too loud. I sigh and finish eating, trying to enjoy it despite the mood in the room. It makes me so mad that we can't even get through a meal lately without some kind of drama. I feel sorry for myself for a moment thinking about how hard I try to put a nice meal on the table that we can all enjoy, and how often something like this happens to ruin it. When I'm done eating, I get up and start washing the pots and pans I used and wiping down the counters. My life feels like an endless chain of teen angst and mundane chores. I wish I had something fun to look forward to. Something just for me for a change.

I stare at my reflection in the window over the sink and stick my tongue out at myself, twisting my mouth from side to side. "What would be fun?" I ask it. It doesn't have any good ideas. When I finish I wander into the family room and sit down.

"What're you watching?" I ask Steve.

"I don't know. Just flipping channels. There's nothing much on." *Then why don't you turn the damned thing off?* I think but don't say. My eye is caught by the goofy elephant that Steve made when he took Cassie to art class. It's still on the mantle looking almost embarrassed to find itself on such prominent display. I feel a little jealous that he got to do that. I never think to try any of the projects in class, just to help Cassie. I guess I could though. That might be fun. I remember the adult class on Wednesday nights that Dave mentioned. It's Tuesday now.

"I'm going to go to the Adult Art class at Miss Kathy's tomorrow," I blurt out before I know I've decided to go.

"Okay," Steve shrugs. "What time is the class?"

"I don't know. I'll check the website. I think it starts at 7:00. I'll try it. It should be fun." I sound like I'm trying to talk myself into it.

"Great idea. Just let me know what the girls have going on."

I figure I'll just show up at the class and talk to Miss Kathy afterwards about signing up for a 10-week session. I kind of want to try it first and see what it's like. When I walk in Dave waves to me right away and points to the empty seat next to him. I smile and walk over.

"I saved it for you." he says.

"How'd you know I was coming?"

"I didn't. I just hoped you would."

I look at him quickly and turn away. I can feel a warm blush rising on my neck and cheeks. I wonder if he's been saving me a seat every Wednesday since the time we first talked about it. I decide not to ask him. I don't want to know.

The lesson that night is about drawing with charcoal, specifically trying to utilize one-point perspective to give dimension to the figures in the piece. I am fascinated by how easy Kathy makes it look. Within a few minutes, talking all the while, she has sketched out a scene inside a room and utilized a vanishing point and guidelines to help her achieve a 3-dimensional picture. She lectures and draws for about 15 minutes, then answers questions for anyone who has one. I can't even think what to ask, that's how out of my depth I feel. Then the rest of the two hours is for us to work on our own pieces while she flits from one person to the next exclaiming over their work and offering some suggestions.

I just sit there for a few minutes trying to think of something to draw. I have several pieces of charcoal in front of me of various shapes and sizes. Maybe I should ask what each of them is used for. Instead, I just watch Dave for a minute. He picks up a thick piece of charcoal and sweeps it across the paper with such confidence, leaving big, thick black lines in its wake. I don't think it looks like much, but then he puts in the vanishing point with a pencil and sketches some very faint, straight lines shooting out from it like rays.

Using those lines to guide him he begins to draw with a smaller piece of charcoal. After a few minutes I can see a scene beginning to emerge of a field with children playing in it. Some are playing baseball, some jumping rope, some picking flowers. There is a playful little puppy too. It looks like a scene from a children's book.

He uses the guidelines to make the children in the foreground a little taller in proportion to those further back. I'm amazed at the result.

"You're really talented," I say.

"Thanks," he says, not stopping or looking up. I watch for a few more moments, then he gets up to get something from a shelf. I look around the room. Everyone is working away. I look at my paper. I'd better start trying to do something.

I start with the pencil and put a point about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way up the page, then use a ruler to draw diagonals out from it toward the bottom edge of the page. I feel pretty good about that, but then I'm sort of stuck. I start drawing straight horizontal lines between two of the rays and as I go further up the page space them closer and closer together. It kind of looks like railroad tracks, so I decide that is what I will draw.

Dave has come back with some pastels of all different colors. He begins to color in his scene. The children are all like little black silhouettes with old fashioned clothing on. I almost expect to see one of them playing with a hoop and stick or riding an old-timey penny-farthing bicycle while wearing a boater with a ribbon floating behind him. I look back at my railroad and decide that I will just draw the tracks in some kind of landscape. No way am I planning to attempt to draw a train.

I boldly darken in the tracks with some of the charcoal and find it feels really nice to draw with, but turns my fingers black. I must've pushed my hair out of my face a few times because when I use the bathroom at the end of the class, there is a big black smudge on my forehead. I return to my drawing and admire it, sort of. It's obvious what it is, which is a point in my favor. It's a long railroad track to nowhere running through a field of childishly drawn wildflowers.

After class Dave asks if I'd like to grab a cup of coffee with him and some of the other people in the class. We got out a little early so it's only 8:30. What the hell, I think. I'm trying to have a little fun right?

We all meet up at a Starbucks about a mile away. I sit next to Dave at a table and he introduces me to Jean and Robert, who are a couple. They've been coming to this Wednesday night class for several years, and going for coffee afterwards. Dave's been joining them for the last few months.

"How did you and Dave meet?" Jean asks me.

I explain about the Saturday morning art class, and our daughters, then remember to mention that we actually both grew up in town and knew each other way back when.

"Well, it's lucky you found each other again," says Robert with a warm smile. It strikes me as an odd thing to say, but I just nod.

We all discuss the night's class for a while and I learn that Dave has submitted some paintings to an art show at a local gallery.

"That's so exciting! I tell him. Maybe you'll be discovered."

He blushes. "I don't know if I'm *that* good, but it is an opportunity to sell a few pieces, maybe get my name out there a bit.

"So what'd you think?" Dave asks me as we walk out to the parking lot later, after saying goodnight to Jean and Robert.

"Oh, it was great. There are so many talented people there. It was fun to watch.

You really get into a zone when you're working, don't you."

"Yeah. I guess so. It's almost like meditating, I guess. That's what I like about painting, or creating art of any kind really."

"I'm not so sure that what I created was art, but it was fun playing around."

"So you think you'll come again?"

"Yeah, I guess I will. I'll have to see how everything went at home tonight while I was out." Saying that reminds me to look at my phone. I'm paranoid about missing any more texts from home while I'm not there. Nothing. I put the phone away and smile at Dave self-consciously. "It seems like every time I'm away for a moment lately there's some kind of drama--teenaged girls you know."

"Yeah. How many kids do you have? Besides Cassie, I mean."

"Just two. Total. I have a 14 year old daughter as well. Kristen."

"Yeah, that probably makes for a lot of drama. I only have Marisa and I can't figure her out half the time. It doesn't help that she has trouble expressing herself. Or that her mother is out of the picture."

"Oh. Are you divorced?"

"In the process. My wife just couldn't handle dealing with Marisa. She moved out two years ago and now we're making it legal. She's not even fighting me for custody."

"Wow." My mouth is hanging open. I don't even know what to say. "I guess it's good that you don't have to have that battle. How do you feel about it?"

"Oh, I'm thrilled to have her. I couldn't love her more, you know? I don't know. I guess all of her issues were just more than Tracy could take."

"That must be hard on Marisa."

"Yeah. But she doesn't know why we've split, that it had anything to do with her, I mean."

"Does she still see her mother?"

"Oh yeah. She moved into an apartment nearby. Didn't fight me for the house either, so there's that. She sees Marisa about every weekend for one day. The rest of the time she's with me."

"That's an unusual arrangement."

"Yeah, but it's what Tracy wanted. It's actually easier on me in a way. She doesn't have to pay any child support or anything, so I can make all of the decisions in regard to Marisa without worrying about whether Tracy is on board. The only thing I can't do is move more than an hour's drive away from Tracy, so she can still have regular visits. I feel sorry for her really," he says sadly. "Marisa's a great kid and Tracy's missing out."

"How is Marisa doing with all this?"

"Better than I had expected her to, actually. They say kids are extremely resilient.

I guess it's not that different for her than it was before. I've really always been her primary caregiver. Since she was born. We got a puppy recently. That seems to help too.

How can she be sad with an adorable puppy around? I had forgotten what a hell of a lot of work they are though."

I look again at my phone. It's after 10:00.

"I really should get going," I say.

"Me too."

"Where are you parked?" I ask him, looking around.

"Back there, near the entrance," he says, pointing.

"Oh. You're such a gentleman to walk me to my chariot," I say.

"Well, we can't have you being absconded with by hoodlums," he smiles.

"Oh no. And there is no shortage of hoodlums in this sleepy Cape Cod town.

Hey, do you remember hanging out on North Beach after hours when we were kids? I remember one night down there when we had the usual bonfire going, illegally, of course. My sister had one too many beers and decided to go for a swim. Were you there?"

"Which time? Caroline did things like that a lot."

"Yeah," I say, still thinking about it. "I was scared to death she'd drown. I went screaming into the waves right behind her trying to get her to stop. She was fine and I was mad as hell that I'd ruined my new top by getting it wet. It was silk or something."

"I do remember that. I was there. We all thought it was hysterical how mad you were. You pounded a beer and smoked like ten cigarettes after that. One right after the other," he laughs.

"Fabulous. That's a great thing to remember. I still smoke, by the way. My husband thinks I quit like everyone with any brains, but I didn't. It keeps me sane."

"This art class is what keeps me sane."

"Yeah. Well, thanks for letting me know about it. I had a lot of fun."

"I hope you come again."

"We'll see," I say climbing into my car and shutting the door. I roll down the window. "Drive safe and have a good night. By the way, who stays with Marisa while you're here?"

"She sleeps over at my mother's on Wednesdays so I can do this. She has special time with Grandma. They both love it."

"Nice. That's great. You need to have some kind of a break. Well, goodnight."

When I get home everyone is asleep. Even Steve. I think about sneaking a cigarette, but decide I don't need one. I can't remember the last time I was the last one home.

Chapter Fourteen

I can't stop thinking about art class. I'm tired after my late night, but it feels so good to have gone out alone for a few hours. When I get home from work there are three messages on the answering machine, two are from Caroline. It's unusual for her to call me during the week, so I figure something's up.

"Lynn, call me. I'm at home," is the first message. "Please call me," is the second.

Why would she be at home on a Thursday afternoon? I dial her number dreading what

I'm going to hear. The phone barely completes two rings before she picks up.

"Hi," I say, "What's going on?"

"Oh Lynn, I don't know what to do. I just can't believe it." She sounds like she's been drinking.

"Caroline, are you drinking? You can't do that. You're pregnant."

"I only had a little. It won't hurt it."

"Caroline..."

"Lynn, he's getting married."

"Who is?"

"Patrick."

"What? To who? How is that possible? He just ended things with you."

"Obviously I wasn't the only woman he was seeing," she sobs. "I should call her up and make sure she knows about me. There are probably others too. I should put it on Facebook and see who knows someone who knows someone he's been fucking."

"Wow" is all I can come up with. My mind is spinning. Caroline just cries on the other

end. Finally, I realize that I'll have to say something. "Caroline, pull yourself together. It's over anyway for you two. And you should really be glad now that you're rid of him. Imagine if you had married him and then found out about all this. Good riddance."

"Yeah, except now I'm having his kid and I'm all alone, and he'll be off starting a whole new life with someone else!"

"How did you find out about all this anyway?"

"From people at work who know him. I overheard it. This is going to be so embarrassing. A few people at work know we were involved, or suspect it anyway, I wasn't as careful as I should've been about keeping it private. When they realize I'm knocked up I'll be a laughing stock."

"Maybe it's just a rumor. Maybe it's not even true. Why don't you come for the weekend and get away from your life for a few days."

"Okay, that'd be nice. I'll come tomorrow after work."

We hang up and I just sit there stunned for a few minutes. This is like a scenario in a soap opera. I guess I knew there were guys like that out there, but this is unbelievable. And how did Caroline get snowed by him? She's never gotten so completely wrapped up in a guy before, not so that she couldn't see who he really was. What will I say to her this weekend that will be any sort of comfort at all? I don't even know where to begin.

"Maybe she *should* call the other woman and tell her about the baby," I mumble.

The poor woman should probably know what she is getting into.

"What baby?" I jump and cry out and see that Cassie is sitting quietly in the recliner in the corner. How did she get in here without my noticing her? Cassie sits there and laughs, delighted at my surprise.

"What baby?" she asks again through her laughter.

"Baby? I didn't say anything about a baby." I say to her

"Yes, you said, 'Maybe she should tell her about the baby."

"I did?" I must've been thinking out loud.

"You talked to Aunt Caroline. Does she got a baby?"

"Um, yes, sort of. Aunt Caroline is going to be a mommy. She's going to have a baby." Oh Lord. I hadn't planned to tell Cassie until things are more settled for Caroline. Oh well, she would find out eventually, and there's no guarantee that Caroline will be off her rollercoaster anytime soon.

"Wooo hooo! I love babies. Can I hold her?"

"I guess so. If you're careful. It could be a boy, you know. It might not be a 'her.'" Cassie looks perplexed for a moment, then grins.

"That's okay. Boy babies are cute too."

Caroline arrives in time for dinner on Friday. As soon as she walks in the door Cassie crows, "Mommy says I can hold your baby if I'm careful." Caroline, Steve, and Kristen, all shoot me surprised looks. Kristen narrows her eyes at me and I can see she's hurt not to be the only kid in the know. I feel a momentary pang, but I really can't worry about that now. They all seem to be waiting for an explanation.

"She heard me on the phone with you yesterday," I tell Caroline, ushering her into the kitchen. "Come on. Dinner's ready."

"Where's the baby?" Cassie asks.

"Not born yet." Kristen spits as she stomps into the kitchen. Cassie stands there looking confused. Kristen leaves her hanging for a moment, then gives in and explains.

"It takes a while for babies to grow in their mommy's tummy before they're born.

Remember last year when baby Noah was growing in Mrs. Cooper's tummy? Remember how big her tummy got? Then baby Noah came out and was born." Cassie's eyes are huge.

"Baby Noah came out of Mrs. Cooper's tummy?" We'd been through this several times when Noah was born. Cassie loves it when we run into him and his mom when they walked by our house. She always runs over to coo at the baby in his carriage.

"Yes, Cassie. You know that." I tell her. We talked about it all, remember?

"So there's a baby in Aunt Caroline's tummy?"

"Yes."

Cassie beams.

"Why isn't it big? Her tummy looks normal-size."

"The baby's still very tiny. In a few months her tummy will look big."

"When will the baby come out?"

"In June," answers Caroline. "Around the time school gets out for summer."

"Two great things--school's out and a new baby!"

"That's right," I say. "Now sit down at the table." Cassie slides into her chair, never taking her eyes off of Caroline's middle as if afraid she might miss something if she isn't vigilant.

"How'd you get the baby in there?" Cassie asks Caroline. Kristen giggles into her water glass. Caroline looks panicked. She looks from me to Steve like she's watching a tennis match. It's really pretty funny.

"We'll talk about that later." I say firmly. Then, to distract her, "I went to art class with Miss Kathy the other night, remember?" I take Cassie's plate and begin to spoon some rice pilaf onto it. My ploy works.

"Oh yeah. What'd you make?" she asks.

"A drawing of a railroad track," I tell her. "I'll show it to you after dinner."

"A railroad track?" Cassie thinks about this. "Why?"

"It seemed like the easiest thing to draw. We learned how to make things look like they are disappearing into the distance."

"Ooh, I want to do that too," says Cassie.

"I'll show you how later," I tell her.

"Okay." She shrugs and begins to eat.

I'm woken from a sound sleep by a scream. It's Kristen. I jump up with my heart pounding, like always, and grope for the light. Steve is already on his feet.

"You were up late, I'll get her," he tells me and heads out into the hall. I lay back down and close my eyes. Caroline and I talked until after midnight and I am exhausted.

The screaming continues, if possible, it gets louder. I can hear Steve murmuring, trying to

settle Kristen down. I lay still for a moment, then can't stand it. I'm sure I can calm her better than he can.

I pad down the hall to Kristen's room. She is thrashing in Steve's arms and screaming. Her bed looks like it's been torn apart by wolves. Steve is trying, and failing, to physically contain Kristen and calm her down.

"Here, I'll do it." I say.

"I've got it." Steve barks at me, refusing to let me get near. "You go back to bed." Shocked, I stand there helplessly for a moment trying to understand his reaction. Caroline appears in the doorway of the guest bedroom looking terrified.

"What's wrong?" she asks me.

"Kristen's having a night terror. This may go on for a while. She's having a bad dream and it's impossible to wake her up when this happens. We have to just try to keep her from hurting herself and wait for it to pass.

"Holy shit," she says. "That's awful! I knew she had nightmares, but not that it was like this! Can't you just wake her up?"

I take her arm and steer her back to the guest room. "No. That doesn't work. She can talk and respond without actually waking up. It's pretty freaky. It's been happening since she was a toddler. The doctor says it just happens to some kids. Usually they grow out of it by age 10 or so. For some reason Kristen hasn't yet. Come on. I'll sit with you until it's over. Neither one of us will be able to sleep anyway," I tell her. I sit down on the edge of her bed. "Steve's got her and doesn't seem to want my help even though I'm more used to handling this than he is."

"What about Cassie?"

"Hopefully she won't wake up. The last few times this happened, Cassie didn't wake up at all."

"I wonder what could be going on in Kristen's mind that makes her scream like that," Caroline says.

"So do I. I always try to think of what she's experienced that is terrible enough to do this to her."

"Seriously though, how can you stand it? I feel like I'm going to crawl out of my skin. It's like we need to call an exorcist."

"Oh. That's helpful, thanks."

"You know what I mean."

"We just have to wait it out. You do what you have to do, you know?"

"God, do you think it's genetic? Is there a chance my kid'll do this too? I don't think I could handle that."

"Of course you could. You can handle whatever you have to handle, end of story, that's part of being a parent."

"I wish I felt as sure of that as you do."

It's hard not to go in there. Kristen is screaming louder now. Being with Caroline is making me hyper-aware of how bizarre this must seem. That's irritating and makes me feel defensive. Kristen lets out a piercing scream and I'm on my feet again. I can't stand to just sit here. Before I can leave the room, Cassie materializes in the doorway. Her hair is all tangled and she is rubbing her eyes. She stands there for a moment looking at us like she doesn't recognize us.

"What's wrong with Kristen?" she finally asks.

"She's having a very bad dream," I say." Daddy is with her."

"Sounds like he's hurting her, or eating her up like the big, bad wolf." says Cassie looking teary and scared and climbing up on the bed with us. So much for going back into Kristen's room now, I sit back down on the bed and put my arm around Cassie.

"No, he's taking care of her. She'll be alright soon." To Caroline I say, "These episodes never last as long anymore as they did when she was little. That gives me some hope that she's growing out of them. She has been having a lot of them lately, however."

Caroline has her head in her hands like she's got a splitting headache. I can't help rolling my eyes. For God's sake, such theatrics! Cassie regards her curiously.

"How can you stand this?" Caroline moans. "I'm never going to be able to handle being a mother. I need my sleep!"

I can't help but laugh. "Well you can forget about sleep, at least at first, but it gets better. Most of the time it's better, anyway." Cassie has bent over to put her face close to Caroline's stomach.

"Are you sure there's a baby in there?" she asks. "I can't tell." She pokes

Caroline's stomach with her finger. Caroline jumps and yanks her hands down from her

face clonking Cassie in the head in the process. Cassie startles and looks up at me with a

look of shocked hurt, then screws up her face and starts to cry in earnest.

"Oh Lord, help me." Caroline pleads.

"Pull yourself together." I snap at her. I pull Cassie to me. "Cassie, that's enough. You're not hurt, just surprised. You surprised Aunt Caroline when you poked her. She didn't mean to hurt you." Cassie looks up at Caroline with a tear-stained face to see if this is, in fact, true. I have to prod Caroline and nod at Cassie to get her to confirm it.

"Oh Cassie, of course I didn't mean to hurt you. You just made me jump, that's all. I didn't mean to hit your head. I'm sorry." She pulls Cassie away from me into a hug and Cassie wraps her arms around her aunt and pats her back. Kristen's screaming seems a little slower and softer, but maybe that is just wishful thinking.

"So, now can you tell me how you got the baby in there?" Cassie murmurs into Caroline's shoulder. Caroline locks her eyes on mine, silently pleading for me to help her. It's not like we've never explained the birds and bees to Cassie before, she is 17 after all, of course we have. She just can't remember it because the whole concept is so bizarre to her. I nod at Caroline and mouth, "Go ahead, tell her." Caroline's eyes get even wider if possible. Cassie gazes up at her, waiting.

"Well, Cassie, when two people,...a man and a woman, love each other very much..." She trails off and I see one tear trail down her cheek. She looks at me pleadingly again. I just give her a smile and a thumbs up.

Kristen is finally beginning to quiet a little. Thank God. I sigh loudly with relief. "Well, sometimes they want to be very very close to each other and they hug each other really tight, without any clothes on so there is nothing between them." Another tear slides from her eye down her cheek. Cassie jumps in.

"And they make a baby."

"Yes...yes, that's right." More tears from Caroline, probably hoping that this is the end of it.

"Because his penis goes in her 'gina!" sings out Cassie, having just connected the scenario to the earlier conversations we've had with her. Caroline pulls back and stares at her with her mouth open then begins to laugh.

"Yes, Cassie, that's right. You've got it," I tell her.

"So who's the man you and him love each other very much and make a baby?" I cringe inside. Caroline just sits for a moment. I decide to jump in.

"Aunt Caroline and a man loved each other very much but he went away."

"So he's gone?"

"Yes. He's gone."

"But why if they loved each other very much? Isn't that always?"

"Well, sometimes two people want different things, even if they love each other, and they can't stay together because then they won't be happy." Cassie looks amazed by this idea.

"What different things do you want?" This brings a fresh wave of tears from Caroline. "Why you cryin'?" asks Cassie as I hand Caroline a box of tissues from the dresser.

"I'm just sad that it has to be that way, I guess. But I'm also happy, you know why?" says Caroline quickly, obviously trying to change the subject.

"Why?" she asks.

"Well, because you and I had such a nice talk, and because Kristen is finished with her nightmare." We all notice Steve standing in the doorway then. He looks at us for a moment, then shakes his head turns and walks back to our bedroom.

"What's wrong with him?" asks Caroline.

"I'm not sure," I tell her. "I think he's annoyed that we're all up."

"How could we be sleeping with all that going on?" Caroline asks.

"He usually manages to go back to sleep when I get up with Kristen. Okay,
Cassie, let's get Aunt Caroline tucked in and go back to bed."

"G'night Aunt Caroline," sings Cassie as she waltzes out of the room.

"Goodnight Cassie."

"See, you'll be a fine mother," I whisper, giving Caroline's hand a pat as I leave. She shrugs and smiles and a few more tears escape.

On her way by Kristen's room, Cassie stops and peeks in. I do the same. She is fast asleep, and tucked back under her covers. Somehow Steve managed to remake her bed and get her back in it all while holding her and talking to her. I bend over and kiss Kristen gently, then Cassie does the same, not quite as gently. I grab her hand and pull her away.

"Don't wake her up," I whisper putting my forefinger against my lips in the "shh" sign. Cassie nods dramatically and tiptoes with a bit of a wobble out of Kristen's room and back to her own.

I tuck her in and go back to bed.

"Why didn't you go back to sleep? I was trying to help you out," Steve says as soon as I climb into bed. I prop myself up on one elbow and just look at him.

"I couldn't possibly have gone back to sleep with Kristen screaming like that.

Besides, she woke up Caroline and Cassie." He doesn't say anything. "You did a great job settling Kristen, by the way. I can't believe you managed to put her bed back together."

"Thanks," he says and turns his back to me. I lay awake for a long time staring at the ceiling. I keep seeing, in my mind, my drawing of the train tracks stretching out of sight.

Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, since Caroline is there, Steve takes Cassie to art class. When he gets home he tells me that Dave asked him where I was.

"Oh, what'd you tell him?" I ask.

"I said your sister is visiting, what else?" He heads out to the garage to work on the lawn mower that always seems to need fixing.

"Who's Dave?" asks Caroline.

"You know him," I say. "He was part of your posse back in high school when you and your friends were hanging out on the beach having bonfires all the time. His daughter also has Down syndrome and she's in Cassie's art class.

"Dave Reback!?" she asks, "God, I haven't seen him in years. Old Wavy Davy.

We called him that since he was always surfing. Even when we were down on the beach at night we couldn't keep that guy out of the water. It's a wonder he never drowned. He would get on his surfboard after way too many beers. He could hardly stand on land, but he could still surf." She smiles and shakes her head. "What's he doing these days?"

"He's going through a divorce for one thing. It seems that he's raising his daughter more or less alone, with some help from his mother who still lives in the house where he grew up. He says his wife couldn't handle their daughter because of her Down syndrome."

"Wow, that's rough. Does he only have one kid?"

"Yeah, just Marisa. She's 12."

"I wonder if he still surfs," Caroline muses.

"I don't know about that, but he is quite a talented artist." I tell her about the painting of the old man by the fire.

"Yeah, he was always artistic in high school too. He wasn't much of a student, except in art class. He was always drawing, or at the beach, sometimes both."

I'm antsy to change the subject and just then, as if on cue, Kristen wanders sleepily into the kitchen.

"Well, look who's here! Good morning! Did you sleep well?" asks Caroline.

Kristen looks at her for a moment, trying to decipher her overly cheery tone.

"Alright I guess. I'm still really tired, and my throat hurts."

"I'll bet it does," says Caroline. Kristen looks at me with a 'what's up with her?' expression.

"You had another night terror last night," I tell her.

"I did?" Kristen looks amazed.

"I can't believe you don't remember," Caroline says. "You practically shrieked the house down. I'm surprised the neighbors didn't call the police."

"Caroline," I reprimand her. Kristen's shoulders rise so high they practically cover her ears. She looks like a turtle trying to pull her head into her shell.

"Oh. Sorry," Kristen says quietly.

"It's okay, Honey. You can't help it," I tell her glaring at Caroline, who finally has the sense to look chagrined.

"Um, yeah. Sorry for teasing you," she says to Kristen. "I'm sure the neighbors didn't hear a thing." She looks at me for approval.

"Do you want some scrambled eggs, Kristen? I was just about to make some for us."

"Sure," she says. "I'll be back in a minute." She heads quickly back up the stairs.

"Why are you trying to make her feel bad about it?" I ask Caroline. "She can't help it."

"I know. I'm sorry." She looks down into her coffee cup. I didn't mean to make her feel bad. I can't believe she really doesn't remember it."

"She really doesn't."

"That must be bizarre, like a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde thing." I just give her a cold stare. "Sorry," she mumbles.

"She's been having a hard time lately and I wonder if that has anything to do with the more-frequent night terrors."

"What do you mean a hard time?"

"With her friends. Some of them are being mean to her."

"She told you this? That's unusual at her age."

"Not exactly," I say.

"Then how do you know?" Just as she asks this I hear Kristen's step on the stairs.

"Shh. I'll tell you later," I whisper as I scoop scrambled eggs onto three plates.

We spend the rest of the day doing all the usual Saturday things: errands, yard work, laundry. Caroline helps me in the garden. I prune the hybrid tea roses and spread winter mulch around them, then wrap the shrubs with burlap to keep them warmer during the winter while Caroline pulls up the rest of the annuals and adds them to the compost.

Kristen has a soccer game in the afternoon and Caroline comes to it with us and cheers loudly for Kristen the entire time. She makes quite a spectacle of herself. I know she's trying to make up for her comments at breakfast, but I can tell Kristen is embarrassed. She is very purposefully ignoring us completely.

Steve is walking the sideline as usual and also seems to be trying to distance himself from any association with Caroline. Cassie, on the other hand, is watching her aunt with fascination and begins to imitate her. She has just discovered a new form of entertainment for herself at soccer games. She puts down her drawing pad and jumps up next to Caroline and adds her own shouts to her aunt's "Go Kristen, Go!" "You can do it!" "Get it in the goal." After a while I tell them both to sit down because they are distracting the refs. Reluctantly they both sit. They continue to cheer, but tone it down a bit.

Later that afternoon, my cell phone rings and it's Dave. My stomach does a flip as I read the caller ID.

"Hello?"

"Um, hi Lynn, it's Dave, from the art class?"

"Yes, hi." Why on earth is he calling me?

"So, uh, I missed you in art class today."

"Yes, my husband mentioned that you asked him about me. Caroline is here for the weekend and I didn't want to leave her."

"Yeah, that's what he said."

There is a long pause when I can't think of what to say next. I wonder if he wants to see Caroline while she's in town, but don't really feel like hosting some kind of reunion. Finally he goes on.

"So I just wanted to make sure that your not coming to class wasn't because of anything I did Wednesday night." I'm stunned.

"You didn't do anything bad Wednesday night." I can't think of what he might be referring to.

"Okay, I just wanted to make sure. It was bothering me. You'll be there this Wednesday right?"

"I'm planning on it."

"Okay, good. I'll see you then. Bye." He hangs up. I feel like I'm on an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. What the hell was that?

Sunday morning, while she is packing to leave and we are alone, I tell Caroline about Dave's call.

"So, what happened Wednesday night?" she asks looking excited for some juicy gossip.

"Well, he invited me to the adult art class and I went, then I went out for coffee afterwards with him and some of the other people from the class." I told her about him walking me to my car and hanging around talking for a while.

"Did he try to kiss you or something?"

"No, nothing even close to that. We just talked. For quite a while, I guess. We were talking about memories from high school and stuff, that's all."

"Lynn, you'd better be careful," she said.

"Of what?" I put on my best naive face, but I had been thinking the same thing. Her reaction confirmed it.

"He's totally into you."

"What? No, he's not. Why would he be into an old bag like me?"

"Um, you're hardly an old bag. You're gorgeous. Now that I think of it, Dave had a huge crush on you back in the day. Whenever you deigned to hang out with us at the beach he acted like an idiot trying to impress you all night. Don't you remember?"

"Kind of, not really." I guess I was aware of a crush back then, but I never took much notice of the poor guy. I thought I was so much more sophisticated than my little sister and her friends. I do remember him trying to get me to come for a walk with him while the others hung out by the fire. I wouldn't go.

"The more I think about it the more likely it seems," says Caroline. "Think about it, he's going through a divorce, he's sad and lonely, he's trying to handle a daughter with Down Syndrome, and along you come--a crush from his past who is still looking good and you are handling a daughter with the same disability as his, and handling it quite well, I might add. He can't help being hot for you."

"You really think so?" I giggled. It had been a long time since I had thought of myself as the object of anyone's crush. It made me feel young and carefree again. "Well, I guess I'd better stay away from him then."

"I think you'd better," said Caroline. "You don't need to make any more messes for yourself than you've already got." I look up quickly, stunned by that comment, and immediately see her apology on her face. "I'm sorry, that didn't come out right," she said.

"Maybe I'll just go to the art class, and not go out anywhere afterwards from now on. That should be safe, right?" She looked skeptical.

"I don't know. That may still be playing with a bit of fire."

"Well, I'm not taking Cassie out of her art class, so I'll end up seeing him there anyway. Why should I give up something I enjoy? I think it'll be fine." I hadn't realized until that moment that the art class was 'something I enjoyed' so much. Hmm. I dismiss my thoughts and determinedly change the subject to Kristen's soccer game, another win.

"So, how do you know about Kristen's friends?" Caroline asks. "You said you'd tell me later."

I had kind of hoped she'd forgotten about that.

"Well, I read her diary."

"You what!" Caroline screams. "I can't believe you would do that, especially after all those years of Mom doing that to us. How could you do that to her?"

"Keep your voice down," I hiss. "It was laying out in plain sight and I knew something was going on with her. I felt it was my duty to find out what."

"Bullshit, it was your duty. You're a snoop, just like Mom. I can't believe it."

"Well, it wasn't exactly my proudest moment, but at least now I have a little insight." I wish I hadn't told her.

"So, what did it say?"

"Oh, not above a little snooping by proxy are you? You wouldn't snoop, but you want to know what I found out when I did, huh?"

"Shut up, and tell me what it said. You obviously want to or you wouldn't have brought it up in the first place." I toss the brush I had been about to put in her bag onto the bed and sit down.

"I guess her friends are being pretty mean, mostly about Cassie. It sounds like Kristen is torn between sticking up for her sister, and trying to have a social life."

Caroline sits down heavily next to me.

"That's really rough," she says. "Poor kid."

"Yeah." I can feel tears starting up. "I don't know what to do. I can't talk to her about it, because she hasn't actually told me about any of it. I guess there is some bullying-type stuff going on on social media too. I want to call up her friends and their mothers and let them have it, but that won't do Kristen any good." I feel a tear slip down my cheek. "Anyway, I think that's why the night terrors have been coming more often lately. She's really having a hard time."

Caroline puts her arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. "And here I am being a jerk this morning about her screaming. Poor kid. Maybe I could talk to her." I look at her.

"You? What would you say?"

"I don't know. Maybe I could tell some story about kids picking on me when I was in school and see if I can get her to open up, then we could talk about it." I wasn't sure about this. Caroline might not be the best person for Kristen to get advice from.

"If she does, how would you tell her to handle it?"

"I'll think of something. At least it'll open a door for her to talk about it."

"I don't know." I feel very unsure about this. I definitely shouldn't have told Caroline. "So what's your plan going forward?" I ask, to change the subject.

"My plan?"

"How are you going to cope with the whole Patrick thing?"

"I just have to carry on, I guess," she looks sad. "I'll just hold my head up and carry on," she says with a bit more resolve. "I have to forget about him as best I can." She's saying all the right things, still it'll be easier said than done.

"What about when the pregnancy starts to show?" I ask.

"I've been thinking about that. I think the best thing to do is just to celebrate it.

I'm going to have a baby, which is something I want. I will start to tell people at work
about it once I pass the first trimester. I'll act like I planned to do the whole thing alone
from the start. I think if my attitude is positive, then it'll be received that way."

"Good for you. I think you're right."

"Will you help me stay positive when I slip?" she asks.

"Of course I will," I say, hugging her. Then I have an idea. "How about a baby shower?"

"What?"

"Well, of course, we'll need to have one for you. You'll need all sorts of equipment and clothes and stuff for the baby. What better way to begin celebrating your pregnancy than to start planning a shower? It'll be fun! We can have it here, or maybe at a restaurant. What do you think?"

"I think that sounds fabulous," she says reaching over to hug me. "Thank you.

That will be fun to plan for. I'll have a great time researching all the stuff I'll need and registering for it. I feel better already."

I go back to the art class Wednesday night despite wondering if it's really a good idea. Now that Caroline reminded me of his crush when we were teenagers I keep remembering more and more things from back then. Like the time Dave was doing donuts with his Jeep on the ice in the empty beach parking lot one night when I went out with Caroline and her friends to see if there were ice formations in the bay. He kept shouting for me to get in with him, that it was really fun. I stayed on the other side of the lot, embarrassed that he was singling me out like that. I think I said something cutting at the time about his being an immature loser.

That was a really cold winter and the bay water froze in these crazy ways, big chunks all pushed up against each other. Someone installed a colored spot light on the beach to shine changing colored light on the ice formations. I never found out who did that. I always assumed it was the town, but I'm really not sure.

I feel little butterflies in my stomach when I see that Dave has saved me a seat again. Tonight we are learning about using shading to add dimension to a drawing. I try very hard to concentrate on Kathy's instructions, and not on Steve's face or the location of his hands. I have to silently reprimand myself to stop looking for signs that he's flirting. I am terrified that he might say something suggestive, and at the same time I kind of hope he does. A little flirting is harmless fun. He gives me a warm hello, then focuses on Kathy and her instructions for the night's project.

He's absorbed in his drawing, like last time. I watch him for a while and don't think he even notices that I'm looking. This is a fairly beginner-level class so I kind of wonder why he's even here. He certainly doesn't need these basic skill lessons. He's already perfected the techniques we are learning.

I envy his level of concentration. I don't ever seem to be able to get into that zone, not even when I'm gardening, which I always tell myself is meditative. It's not really. It's just another outlet for my nervous energy. I do manage to relax a bit. He is obviously not focused on me. I expect to feel disappointment, but I don't really. It's better this way. I go to work on my own very rudimentary drawing of a vase, and try to make it look three-dimensional, but only succeed in kind of an art-deco effect.

I'm ready for it when Dave invites me to go for coffee. I tell him that I have an early meeting tomorrow and have to get home. He looks disappointed.

"I was wondering," he begins and I feel myself brace for another invitation, "if we could get Marisa and Cassie together some time," he finishes, and I am stunned momentarily. This is not what I had expected.

"Oh," I say like an idiot. "Yes! That would be wonderful!" I am far too enthused and cringe inside as I hear myself. Dave looks a little surprised at how loud my voice has gotten.

"It's just that, Marisa doesn't have many friends, and I thought she and Cassie might...get along. Maybe we could take them bowling or something after art class on Saturday."

"Yes, that's a great idea. Cassie would like that." I manage to say in a more normal tone of voice. "It's a date." Oh God! Great word choice.

I talk to myself all the way home about how this is perfectly fine and it's about Cassie and Marisa, that's all. I have myself just about convinced by the time I pull in the driveway.

Cassie is thrilled with the idea when I tell her about it the next morning. She rarely has social plans and has been noticing lately when Kristen does things with friends and she doesn't. It's no surprise when the first thing Cassie says when Kristen comes into the kitchen is, "Guess what! I'm going bowling with my best friend, Marisa!"

"That's great," Kristen tell her. "I didn't know you had a best friend. Who's Marisa?"

"From my art class. We're gonna go bowling."

"So you said," Kristen looks to me for confirmation of this news.

"Yes, Marisa's dad and I are going to take the girl's bowling after their art class on Saturday. It'll be fun," I tell her.

"Marisa's dad?" asks Kristen, "that's kind of weird."

"Well Marisa lives with her dad," I say. "Her parents are getting a divorce and I don't think her mother is around all that much. He and I knew each other back when we were in high school. He's from this area."

"Oh, an old high school boyfriend?" Kristen says in a sing-song teasing way.

"No!" I say a little too fast. "He was actually a friend of Aunt Caroline. I barely knew him."

"Oh, okay." I see Kristen's eyes roll. I've been totally lame again I guess. "How old is Marisa?"

"She's twelve," I say.

"Isn't she a little young for Cassie?"

"She's younger, but I think that'll be fine. We just thought they'd enjoy a bowling outing."

"Okay," she shrugs.

"Hurry up and finish your breakfast. We can't be late this morning. There's an early meeting I have to go to." I can't believe I'm squirming under my child's gaze rather than the other way around. Maybe this bowling plan was a mistake, but I can't cancel now. Cassie is so excited.

"Yeah, I'm older, so I'll be better at bowling," Cassie is telling Kristen.

"You can hope," Kristen says.

Chapter Sixteen

Saturday is absolutely gorgeous, a crisp, cool, sunny day. Spending the afternoon in a dark bowling alley is the last thing I feel like doing. Maybe I should just cancel. Steve wasn't that thrilled that we'd be going with Marisa and her dad rather than her mom when I told him about it. I tell myself I have to go, Cassie doesn't get that many social opportunities. It'll be good for her.

"Do you want me to go instead? I'm sure he and I would find plenty of things to talk about," Steve offers.

"No, that's okay," I tell him. "I'd better go. What if the girls need to use the bathroom and that sort of thing? It'll be better to have a mom there to help with that." He shrugged.

"I guess so, if you really think they'd require that much help." I knew he was skeptical, but also that he wouldn't argue too much. The last thing he'd want is to be stuck there trying to manage some sort of personal need for one of the girls.

When we get to the bowling alley it takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the gloom after the bright sun outside. After a few minutes I spot Dave and Marisa in Lane Four. I wave and usher Cassie up to the counter to get shoes and pay for our game. I try to ignore the butterflies in my stomach. It's just bowling, for God's sake. We walk over to join Dave and Marisa.

"Have you ever noticed that all bowling alleys have the same smell?" I ask Dave.

"It's kind of a combination of sweaty feet and floor polish."

"Yeah, you're right, minus one ingredient, cigarette smoke. Every bowling alley I was ever in before they made them smoke-free was full of a visible haze of smoke. It seemed like if you bowled, you had to smoke too."

"Yeah," I sigh and mumble so the girls won't hear, "I kind of miss those days."

Dave laughs.

It takes us a while to help the girls change their shoes and find bowling balls of an appropriate weight to use. The place has a rule that only children under 11 years old can have gutter-bumpers, we ask for an exception and luckily the manager allows them for us once he sees Marisa and Cassie. Without them, the whole experience would've been pretty frustrating.

Once we get organized, we really have fun. Thanks to the bumpers, the girls knock down pins with every turn. My own game is greatly improved by the bumpers as well. I develop a strategy better suited to pool, where I manage to score a few strikes by bouncing the ball off the bumpers and thus hitting the center pin.

I am just winding up to execute another dazzling feat with my bowling ball when I hear Cassie behind me say to Marisa, "So, did you get your period yet?" in a very loud, trying-to-sound-sophisticated voice. My ball drops from my hands with a thunk and rolls so slowly into the gutter bumper that it bounces off and just stops about halfway down the lane.

I turn around in time to see Dave's face flame red. I don't know what it is about menstruation that makes men get so nervous and embarrassed. The man's a father, for God's sake, he must have some comprehension of basic female biology. "Cassie!" I call to her. She looks up, surprised by my tone. I lower my voice and walk over to the three

of them. "Remember we talked about how periods are personal business and we don't talk about that in public?"

"I just wanted to know if Marisa knew about it," Cassie says.

"I know," I say glancing at Dave who is attempting to compose himself, "but that's Marisa's personal business. It's not for you to know."

"What's period?" asks Marisa.

I look up at Dave, surprised. He shrugs. "I'm not sure if Tracy ever talked to her about it," he says apologetically. I glance at Marisa who is watching us with an expectant expression, her brow slightly furrowed. Finally she marches right up to Cassie and demands again, "What's period?"

"Well," Cassie answers, obviously avoiding my gaze, "it's when you bleed from here." She points to her crotch. Marisa looks horrified and immediately looks at her father for confirmation of this. Dave looks helpless. I decide I'd better step in.

"Come sit over here, Marisa. I'll explain it to you." She comes to sit down next to me and Cassie sits right down on her other side patting her arm, the consummate confidant. Dave doesn't seem to know what he should do, whether he should sit or just excuse himself for a while. "You'd better sit down too," I tell him. "Chances are that Marisa will need to have this talk more than once. It's a difficult concept to grasp."

"Yeah, it's really weird," Cassie tells him. Dave starts to answer her, then just closes his mouth and pulls up a chair.

"So Marisa," I begin. "You know that babies grow in their mommy's tummy, right?" I find myself glancing at Dave hoping she already knows at least this much. He nods at me.

"Yes," says Marisa hesitantly. She is probably wondering what that has to do with anything.

"Well, when a girl is growing up and her body becomes ready for her to be a mommy someday, her period starts. That's when the lining of her uterus, where the baby grows, has to be cleaned out every month so a fresh lining can be made." Marisa nods, eyes wide and mouth open. I tell Dave, "I have a book that I'll lend you. It's a lot easier to understand this when you have some pictures to help." He nods.

"So, the lining is mostly made of blood, and once each month the lining, or blood comes out through a woman's vagina," I point at my crotch. We were always careful to teach Cassie and Kristen the proper names for their body parts, but I have no idea if Marisa has any concept of what I'm talking about.

"Like peeing?" Marisa asks.

"No, it's not like peeing." Cassie jumps in. This is a concept we'd gone over numerous times with her. She really didn't get it until her period began and she experienced it. "'Cause you can't control it," she tells Marisa, shaking her head emphatically.

"Can't control it?" Marisa is mystified. "Where does it go?"

"You wear a pad," Cassie tells her helpfully. Marisa just looks from her to me.

"I'll bring one to art class to show you next week," I tell her. You put it inside your underpants and it catches the blood so it doesn't mess up your clothes. You change it whenever you go to the bathroom.

"Like a diaper," Marissa says.

"Sort of, but not really," Cassie tells her.

"An important thing to know is that it only lasts for about a week. Then it goes away until it happens again the next month," I say.

Dave jumps in. "That's like once each time the moon is full." I just look at him. "She has a hard time with measurements of time, so I like to use things she can see to help. We look at the moon every night to see what phase it's in."

"Yeah," says Marisa. "Last night it was a waxing crescent."

"Wow," I say genuinely impressed. "That's a great way to think of it. So a month is how long it is from full moon to full moon. You'll eventually have your period once each month."

"And it hurts," Cassie adds helpfully. Marisa looks like she is going to cry. "But not down there," Cassie tells her with a comforting tone.

"You might feel some cramps, like an ache just below your belly button," I point to Marisa's abdomen. "But it's not that bad, and you can take medicine to make it feel better if it is too uncomfortable."

"I don't want to do a period," Marisa says. "I'm not going to."

"Oh yes you are!" Cassie tells her.

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you..."

"Cassie, that's enough. Let Marisa get used to the idea. Don't you remember you felt the same way?" Cassie shrugs and crosses her arms over her chest. "Why don't we get back to bowling? That's enough about this for now."

We end up eventually having to get an attendant to come get my stalled bowling ball so we can continue to play. Marisa is the first one up. "It's my turn," she crows grabbing her purple bowling ball that is just a bit too heavy for her. She insisted on using it because of the color and Dave decided it wasn't worth a fight.

"Thank you," he whispers to me as he heads back over to man the scoreboard.

"You're welcome. Marisa could start her period any time. A lot of girls already have it by her age."

"I'll be sure to talk to her about it some more. It will probably take a number of conversations to sink in. I don't know why I haven't thought to bring it up before now."

"It's not exactly on your radar, I guess."

When we've finished bowling, we take the girls for a slice of pizza and a soda.

They want to sit in their own booth, separate from us, so Dave and I sit at a table nearby.

Dave orders a beer. I'll be asleep by mid afternoon if I have a drink now so I stick with

Coke. We each have a slice of pizza too.

"I really appreciate your talk with Marisa earlier," Dave says.

"It's the least I could do after Cassie brought it up," I say rolling my eyes. "I never know what she's going to say, so I have to be ready for anything. But, I suppose it's a good thing. Marisa needs to know about this stuff."

"Yeah, I'll have to do a better job anticipating what will come up for her. I just think of her as a little girl still I guess. I have to face the fact that she's growing up whether I like it or not."

"Well, I'm happy to help. I've already been through most of that with both of my girls, so I can give sound advice I hope."

"So, how's Caroline?" Dave asks, clearly finished with the current subject. "You mentioned that she was visiting last weekend."

"She's going through a lot right now, but I think she'll be fine in the long run."

"Oh, really. What's going on?"

"Well, I guess it's okay to tell you. She's pregnant."

"Oh that's great! I didn't even know she was married. I've really lost touch with most of my friends from high school."

"She's not. That's part of what she's going through. She was seeing a guy for a while and when he found out she was pregnant, he did a runner."

"Oh, that's rough." Dave shakes his head and takes a sip of his beer.

"Yeah, but she'll be okay. She wants the baby. I think her biological clock suddenly went into overdrive. She's done well for herself, so she'll have no trouble supporting a child. Her lifestyle is going to change, but that may be okay too."

"It's hard to handle a kid all by yourself."

"I'll be there to support her."

"She's lucky to have you."

I smile and turn quickly away, feeling my face warm a little, to check on the girls at their table. They are chatting away happily munching on their pizza. I can't hear what they are talking about, but they seem to be doing fine. "They seem to get along well," I say to Dave turning back to face him and hoping my face isn't red anymore.

"Yeah. It's nice. I thought they would hit it off--despite the rocky start they got off to."

I remember the first time the two girls met at art class and both ended up crying.

"I'm really glad it's worked out this way," Dave says, smiling at me and holding eye contact just a moment too long.

"I need to use the ladies' room," I say. I walk quickly away from the table toward the back of the pizza parlor. What is going on? Is he actually flirting or am I just imagining it? I shouldn't have come. This is too weird, like a date. Does he even care about Marisa and Cassie being friends, or was this all a ploy to spend time with me? Hold your horses, Lynn. A bit of a runaway ego, don't you think? Get over yourself and calm down. This is all perfectly fine.

I splash some water on my face in the bathroom to hopefully remove some of the heat burning my cheeks. After a few minutes I return to the table intending to say it's time for us to leave.

Dave stands up when he sees me coming. "We've really got to get going," he says as soon as I approach.

"Oh, okay. We need to get going too." We both go over to the girls' table and tell them it's time to leave.

"Nooo," Marisa whines. "We're having fun."

"We'll get together again," Dave tells her. "Come on." He helps Marisa get her coat on.

Cassie stands up and looks at me. "Why don't we have them over for dinner tonight?" she asks.

"Well, I think they're busy," I say quickly. "We'll do something another time."

The four of us walk out to the parking lot and say our goodbyes and head home. By that time I'm pretty sure I was just being foolish worrying that Dave was flirting with me. How silly, just like a middle schooler. Why on Earth would he be flirting with me? When we get home Steve is mowing the lawn. He stops the mower when we pull in and comes over to the car. "You were certainly gone for a long time," he says looking at me. "Did you have a good time?" he asks Cassie.

"Yeah. I'm awesome at bowling, then we got to go for pizza!"

"Pizza, huh? That sounds great. I'm glad you had a good time."

Cassie trots up the front walk and into the house calling over her shoulder, "I'm going in to watch T.V.," as she waves to us.

"Wow, sounds like that was good for Cassie. Maybe you should do it more often." I look up at him quickly, but don't see anything sarcastic in his face.

"Yeah. The girls had a great time. They let us use the gutter bumpers, thank God.

That made it more fun all around. I ended up explaining menstruation to Marisa."

"What? How did that come up?"

"Cassie brought it up of course and Marisa didn't seem to know anything yet, so I jumped in. I don't think her mother has talked about that with her yet."

"And you said her mother is out of the picture, right?"

"Yes, so I guess Dave will have to figure these things out going forward."

"I don't envy him that. I bet he was glad to have you there."

I watch his face and nod. He walks back over to the mower and starts it up. When I get inside I check on Kristen who is doing her homework, then I decide to spend some time in the garden. There are a million weeds that need pulling.

Later that evening, just as I am finishing up the dinner dishes, the phone rings. I catch my breath as my heart jumps into my throat. What if it's Dave again?

"Mom, Aunt Caroline's on the phone," Kristen yells.

My breath comes out in a rush. "Okay," I call to her picking up the extension in the kitchen.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi, what's wrong with you? You sound all breathless."

"I do not. Nothing's wrong with me. I'm doing the dishes."

"Oh. Exciting. I wanted to talk to you about registering for baby gear. Do you have time to go with me soon? I have no idea what I need."

"Yeah, that'd be fun. I'm not sure I'll be an expert anymore since baby paraphernalia changes so much and it's been a while, but I'm sure the basics are still the basics. You know all you really need is the car seat and some clothes--everything else is a bonus except the diapers, of course."

"I'm sure that's true, but I want my baby to have all the comforts and it's all a bit overwhelming. I've been looking online a little bit."

"Okay, how about next weekend?"

"Perfect. Can you come into Boston? I think we'll have more selection."

"I have to check what's going on and see if Steve can manage without me, but I'll try."

"Okay, let me know. So what did you do today?"

"Well, Steve worked on the yard and Kristen did homework while Cassie and I went bowling with Dave and his daughter, Marisa.

"With Dave, huh?"

"Yeah. He thought it would be fun to get the girls together. He asked about you while we were eating pizza."

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"He did?"
       "Yep. Wanted to know how you were doing."
       "What'd you tell him?"
       "I told him you were hiding from the mob in the witness protection program and
you had a whole new fake identity and everything."
       "Ha ha. What did you really tell him?"
       "I told him you're going to have a baby."
       "You did?"
       "Of course. That's the big news in your life right?"
       "What did he say?"
       "He sends his congratulations."
       "What else did you talk about?"
       "Nothing much just this and that. I think he was glad to have me there to field
some uncomfortable questions since Cassie asked Marisa about her period."
       "Oh no, she did not."
       "Oh yes, she did."
       "That kid kills me," Caroline laughs.
       "So I gave the 6th grade health class presentation on puberty on the spot."
       "Complete with diagrams?"
       "No, I promised those for next time."
       "Next time, huh? Are you getting together again?"
       "Probably, we told the girls we would. They got along really well. I think you
were wrong, by the way. I don't think he's after me like you said he was."
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"Then you're not as smart as you look. I've got to go. There's a call on the other line. We'll talk next weekend. Love you. Bye."

Chapter Seventeen

A couple of weeks later, on a Sunday afternoon, I am just coming in from putting anti-desiccant on the evergreens and covering the compost heap with plastic for the winter when the phone rings. It's Dave. I had stopped thinking every phone call might be him once I realized how silly I was being that weekend when we took the girls bowling, so I am truly surprised.

"Dave! Hi, what's up?" I look around quickly to see if anyone in my family is in earshot. "How's Marisa?"

"She's fine, thanks. Actually I was calling to ask for a little help with her."

"Oh, what's wrong? Is she sick or something?"

"No, she's just been asking a lot of questions ever since our conversation at the bowling alley and I'm afraid that I'm not doing a very good job of answering them. You mentioned that you had a book that might help?"

"Oh, yes. I do. I can bring it to Art Class next week for you."

"Thank you, but I was wondering if you could come over some time today, and bring the book if you don't mind. I feel like I've already made things really hard for Marisa to understand and I don't want to screw it up any further. You explained everything so clearly to Marisa, and I'm having a hard time doing the same. She keeps coming up with questions I don't know how to answer. It's all she wants to talk about. We both could really use your help."

"Okay, I have to go out and do some errands later, I can stop by on my way home."

"That would be wonderful. Thank you so much."

"No problem, just give me the address."

"It's 7 Queen Anne's Way."

"Okay, I'll see you around 3:00 then."

"Okay, see you then. Thank you!"

I hang up the phone and just sit for a minute, then I look down at myself and realize I need to shower and change clothes before I go out.

Dave opens the door before I ring the bell. He must've been watching for me. He leads me into the living room.

"Can I get you something to drink? Water, coffee, iced tea ...wine?"

"Wine?"

"Ha, probably too early for that, just thought I'd offer," Dave looks embarrassed.

"I'll have some iced tea. That sounds great."

"Okay, I'll be right back."

While he's in the kitchen I look around the living room at the family pictures on the mantle. There's one of Dave and his parents and siblings on a family ski vacation somewhere. He is a teenager in the photo and looks just like I remember him from when he was hanging around with Caroline back then. He was really pretty cute. I'm not sure why I never noticed it then. Dave comes back into the living room and hands me a glass of iced tea, he has a glass for himself as well.

"I put some Sauvignon Blanc in the fridge just in case you change your mind," he says.

"Oh, okay," I can't help laughing a little and it makes me sound nervous. I can't tell whether or not he is serious about the wine. "Where's Marisa?" I ask thinking maybe we'd better just get started.

"My mom took her to the hairdresser, another thing I am not too great at. She knows what to tell them to do to her hair. I don't have a clue."

"Oh," I can't hide my surprise. "I thought the whole point was for me to talk to her some more."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I guess I wasn't clear. I was hoping you could help *me* a bit so that I can do a better job explaining things when she asks questions."

I just look at him for a moment feeling a bit uncomfortable. "I thought you wanted me to talk to both of you." Then something occurs to me. "Can't your mother help with all of this?"

"Yeah, you'd think so, but she's almost as uncomfortable about all of it as I am. My sister says she got most of her information from her friends, not our mom. All Mom told her was that she'd better not get pregnant. I'm not sure if she would even be able to explain it the way you do."

I must've given him a funny look because he hurried on to say, "I did ask her to, and she got so weird about it that I thought she might make an even bigger mess of it than I already have. Apparently no one ever really explained it to her and when it first happened to her she thought she was dying. That really freaked me out. I don't want Marisa to think anything like that."

"Oh, of course not. That's awful. I've heard that story before. It always makes me mad. Apparently it was so taboo to talk about that lots of mothers have avoided telling their daughters anything."

"I even bought a book myself," Dave tells me, "and it helped, but Marisa keeps wanting to know what it feels like. She's a bit stuck on what Cassie told her about it being painful and I think she's really kind of scared. I don't know what to do about that. I can't speak from any experience. That's why I called you."

"Well, that makes sense, I guess. I probably should talk directly to Marisa about it at some point, however."

Dave looks chagrined. "Yeah, you're right. Now this idea seems really stupid. I just wanted to be able to be the one who really handles this with her as much as possible. I guess I'm trying too hard to be both father and mother for her. I don't want to need someone else to explain things to her. It's probably just ego on my part."

Now I'm chagrined. I am an idiot for thinking this was weird in any way, that he has any ulterior motive. "Well, I think Marisa is very lucky to have a dad like you." He beams at me and I look away quickly and rummage in my bag for the book I brought.

"So here's the book. It's the one I used with both my girls. It explains about girls' and boys' puberty, and goes on to cover sex and STDs and even same-sex couples." I feel myself blush a little bit and that makes me mad. I'm a nurse for God's sake. This sort of conversation is standard procedure.

Dave sort of stares at me. "I never thought about telling her about sex," he says. "It's not really anything she'll have to worry about do you think?"

"I think you will have to explain it to her. Just because she has Down Syndrome does not mean that she won't develop sexually. She will have desires and urges just like anyone else and needs to have some understanding of that."

Dave rubs vigorously at his face. "I guess there's a lot I need to face. I need a bit of a reality check."

"People with Down Syndrome can and do sometimes grow up to have sexual relationships, even marriage."

Dave looks up from his hands, "I'm really not ready to deal with that."

"Yeah. No one ever is. It's a weird thing to think about, let alone talk about, even for a neurotypical child, let alone a child with Down's. One thing at a time. I'll leave the book with you. What I recommend is that you read it all the way through yourself, then read the relevant sections with Marisa when she asks questions. Eventually, once you've covered everything, you can let her look through the book herself, which might raise more questions, but that's a good thing."

"If you say so," Dave takes the book from me and flips through it giving a cursory glance to its pictures and subject headings. "Thank you. I appreciate this. As far as Marisa's questions about how it feels, you know cramps and such, I think you're right. It's silly to have you tell me. Do you have time to stick around until they get back? It shouldn't be too long now. Maybe you can talk to her then. I'll listen so I can repeat what you tell her when she needs it."

I look at the time. It's only 3:30, there's no reason I have to be anywhere right away. "Sure," I tell Dave. His relieved smile is endearing.

We change the subject then and Dave ends up telling me all about the dissolution of his marriage. It's more recent than I realized and it's obvious that he really needs to talk about it. After a while he says, "How about that glass of wine? I could kind of use a drink after talking so much about Tracy."

I laugh. What would be the harm? It would be nice. "Okay," I say, getting up to follow him to the kitchen for the wine, then out onto the deck. It's a glorious afternoon, unseasonably warm. The sun is slanting at that angle where everything seems just a bit brighter and there is a cool breeze, perfect sweater weather. We sit down in comfortable deck chairs with poufy cushions on them and sip our wine.

"Did I ever tell you I had a huge crush on you in high school?" Dave says suddenly. I swallow my mouthful of wine carefully, and look at him not sure what to make of this announcement.

"Um, no. You never told me. But Caroline did."

"She did? Oh God, how embarrassing," he grins like he was more thrilled than embarrassed by the idea. "I guess it was pretty obvious."

"I guess it was, but I never picked up on it," I tell him. "Not back then, but
Caroline pointed out how you were always showing off when I was around. I guess I just
thought you always acted like that. I didn't know it was for my benefit."

"Oh, it definitely was. Remember that time we had a bonfire on the beach at night and I decided I had to go for a midnight swim? I ran down the beach and into the dark waves hoping like hell that you would follow me, like you followed Caroline that time.

You didn't though. I had all these fantasies about us kissing as we bobbed in the waves."

"I do remember that. I thought you were crazy."

"I was young and stupid, and probably pretty drunk. I can't see how you resisted me, really," he laughs.

"Well, it was pretty difficult. I had to practice immense self-control, of course. I didn't think it would be right to take advantage of you, being an older and more sophisticated woman and all."

"Right, you were already in college by then and I was going into my senior year of high school. I was working the laid back surfer-boy thing for all it was worth, but I was clearly not all that laid back. Every time you hung out with us, I acted like a complete idiot trying to get you to notice me."

"I do remember you doing donuts with your Jeep in the parking lot at the beach when we had all gone down there to see the ice formations in the bay. Was that for my benefit?"

"Absolutely. Weren't you stunned by my daring and my skills behind the wheel?

"Oh yes, I was positively swooning!" I tease. "That's why it looked like I wasn't really reacting. I was using all of my energy just to remain conscious."

Dave leans back in his chair and laughs out loud. He really has a great smile, a dimple on one cheek. His hair is still just a bit too long, reminiscent of the shaggy surfer look he apparently worked so hard to cultivate. I smile watching him laugh and find myself giggling a bit too.

"Were you an artist back then, like you are now?" I ask him.

"Sort of, I've always liked to mess around in a sketchbook. I never showed anything to anyone then, though. I just did it for myself. Drawing has always helped me calm down and think."

"Too bad you kept it to yourself. If I'd seen your talent back then, I might not have been able to resist you," I tell him.

"Damn! Now you tell me," he smiles, and looks a bit sheepish.

"I really got into the art thing more seriously after Marisa was born. Taking painting classes helped me to cope and gave me a creative outlet. It was a form of therapy in a way. Then when she was old enough, I started taking her to classes too. It's kind of our thing now."

"That's really nice," I smile thinking about what a sweet man he is.

Suddenly he jumps up. "Hey, my mom kept my old sketchbooks. I have them in my closet in a box. I'll go grab one and we can look at it for old time's sake."

"Okay, that'll be fun," I say.

He's back in about two minutes. "Here's one. Let's see what's in it." He opens the book and starts to turn pages kind of quickly as if he's looking for something.

"Hey, slow down. Let me look." I take the book from him and slowly turn the pages. He watches me intently and seems pretty nervous. I am amazed by the detail in the drawings. There are several drawings of cars that look futuristic and some that are flying. "DeLorean had nothing on you," I joke.

He smiles. "Yeah, I was pretty into cars too."

The next few pages are a number of pictures of a shaggy mutt sitting still, running on the beach, carrying a stick. "Oh, your dog! I remember him. He was so sweet. What was his name?"

"Bandit," Dave looks a little sad. "I still think he was the best dog that ever lived.

He was so full of joy."

I turn the page and catch my breath. I have to turn the sketch book the long way to look at it because it's a two page spread. It's a drawing of a beautiful young woman, and it's in color, unlike the others which were pencil drawings. Her hair is flowing and bountiful and just a little bit messy. A few errant strands fall across her forehead. There is movement in her hair as if a breeze is lifting it. It's colored several shades of auburn and russet and there is a crown of daisies on her head, delicately woven into her hair. She's turned just slightly to the side and the lines of her neck are long and supple. Her eyes are closed. The angle of her head is slightly downturned making her look just a little bit sad. Her shoulders are bare and her skin is the color of honey. She looks sun-kissed. She is wearing an old fashioned off-the-shoulder poet's blouse. It's pure white which contrasts with the background, the ocean on a clear day, waves crashing behind her. She is shown only from the waist up. I can't stop looking at her. I am so drawn in. I can feel her emotions. She is portrayed so beautifully.

Dave is staring at me. "That's you," he says softly after a few moments.

My heart jumps but I don't respond. I think I realized it was me the moment I saw it. I just keep looking at the drawing. I feel like I'm going to cry.

"Turn the page," Dave tells me.

I do and it's the exact same drawing of the girl, me, rendered almost identically, only she has turned her head, still on an angle, just slightly, and opened her eyes. She is looking straight out at the artist, Dave. Her eyes are brilliant green and full of love. Her lips are just slightly turned up into the hint of a smile at the corners. She looks happy to see the artist. "So this is how you saw me?" I finally manage to ask. I am amazed that I could have ever appeared this way to anyone.

"Yes," Dave says simply. "I wanted so badly for you to look at me like that." I finally tear my eyes from the drawing and look at him. He is sitting very close to me and we look into each other's eyes for a moment. "I still do," he whispers.

Then he kisses me.

When his lips touch mine, I start to pull away, but I am so engulfed by the image of how he saw me, how he felt about me, how sweet that was and still is that I let myself sink into the kiss, to be that girl in the drawing, just for a moment. Then I pull away and get quickly to my feet.

"I have to go," I stammer grabbing the empty wine glasses and taking them quickly inside to the kitchen.

"Lynn, I'm sorry." Dave is following me. He looks so sad. "I shouldn't have done that. I got caught up in the moment. "I avoid his eyes barely glancing at him as I brush past him to collect my purse in the living room.

"Me too," I whisper as I pass. I am almost to the door, Dave right behind me, when the door opens and Marisa comes in followed by her grandmother. Her hair is freshly cut and blown dry. She stops abruptly when she sees me. "Hi, Marisa!" I say too loudly and too cheerfully. "I was waiting for you so we could talk a bit, but now I have to run. We'll catch up another time okay? Hello, Mrs. Reback. It's so nice to see you again."

I don't give her a chance to respond. I just brush past her out the door and into my car. I start the car. When I look up, all three of them are standing on the porch watching me go. Dave smiles sadly with resignation. His mother looks confused. Marisa waves. I wave back to her, pull out of the driveway.

I drive so fast, like I'm being chased, that I don't even see the squirrel that runs into the road until it's too late. I just hear and feel that awful ka-chunk as my tires crush its little body. I pull my car over on the shoulder then I just cry, long and hard. I cry for the stupid squirrel. I cry for that beautiful girl who never knew she was so lovely or that anyone ever saw her like that, and for the sweet young boy who loved her, and for the tired, worried, worn-out woman she has become bereft of the carefree wildness she once had. I cry for a long time. Then I drive slowly home.

Chapter Eighteen

When I arrive at home Steve is coming out of the shed with a ladder. I recall him saying something that morning about cleaning out the gutters. I pull down the makeup mirror and inspect my face before I get out. It's still pretty obvious that I've been crying. Oh well. I'll think of something to say if he notices. I get out of the car and start up the front walk waving to Steve and trying to smile. I hope he'll just wave back and carry on, but he doesn't. He stops leans the ladder against the house and walks over to me pulling off his baseball cap and wiping sweat from his brow as he comes. I stop and wait for him to join me on the front steps.

"Hi."

"Hi."

"So where've you been?"

"I told you. I went over to help Dave with Marisa."

"You've been there all this time? I thought maybe you'd gone somewhere else.

You were gone for more than two hours."

"No. Nowhere else. It just took a while." Steve leans over and looks hard into my face.

"Are you okay? You look like you've been crying."

"Oh," I try to laugh, and raise a hand to rub at my right eye. "I hit a squirrel on my way home and I lost it. I just sat in the road and cried like a baby."

"Over a squirrel? Were you texting while driving?"

"No! I never do that! I just felt so bad for the poor little thing."

"Yeah. That's too bad. Are you sure you're okay?" He looks a bit strange. I can't read his face.

"Yes, I'm fine. It was just a shock I guess. Well, I'm going to go in and start dinner." I say turning toward the house. "Is Kristen home yet?"

"Yeah. I picked her up an hour ago."

"Okay!" I say too cheerfully, waving, and retreat into the house.

Cassie is sitting on the bottom step of the stairs when I come through the front door. I jump a little. "Honey! What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you."

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Nuffin' I just want you to be home."

I sit down next to her and put my arms around her. "Well I'm home now."

She looks at me. "Why you cryin'?" she asks. There's no point denying it. My squashed-tomato face is a beacon to the world that I've been crying. I tell Cassie about the squirrel. She puts her arm around my shoulder. "Don't worry Mama, the squirrel is okay. It's alright. It's okay. I make mistakes all the time. You just have to try to do better next time." She pats my back and I have to fight the urge to start blubbering all over again. She is being so sweet and she obviously has no concept that the squirrel is not at all alright and never will be. I pull away from her.

"Thank you, Honey. I feel better." Cassie's face lights up with a beatific smile.

"Why don't you come and help me make some dinner?" She gets up and follows me to the kitchen where I put her to work peeling some cucumbers for a salad. She has been improving with her motor skills and her occupational therapist has prescribed tasks like

this one to help strengthen her hands. She concentrates and peels slowly over the garbage can. "Make sure you always peel away from you, never toward. That way you won't cut your fingers."

"Got it," she says.

Kristen walks into the kitchen and opens the fridge without speaking.

"We're eating dinner soon, so don't eat much now," I tell her. She grabs a chocolate pudding and heads back to the family room. I watch her go for a moment. "Hey!" She turns and looks at me unsmiling. "How was practice?"

"Fine," she says spinning on her socked feet and walking away again.

"Nice chatting with you!" I shout after her.

"She's mad cuz of the girls," Cassie tells me.

"What girls?" I ask remembering the entry I had read in Kristen's diary.

"The mean ones. She said her friends are bein' mean."

"She told you that?"

"Yeah, cuz I asked what's wrong," Cassie nods earnestly at me.

"Hmm. Maybe she'll tell me about it later." Cassie nods some more and continues to work on a cucumber that is getting thinner and thinner. She is peeling it down to it's core. "Honey, remember, only peel off the dark green. All the light green stays." I gently take the cucumber from her and put it on the cutting board. "Here, start working on this one," I say handing her another one.

"Aw'wight." I watch her concentrating on her task. The tip of her tongue pokes out of the corner of her mouth as she works.

When Kristen is in bed I go in and sit on the edge of her mattress. "Did everything go okay today?" I ask her.

She looks up at me. "Yeah. Why wouldn't it?"

"I don't know. You just seem like you're in a bad mood." I know better than to let on that Cassie told me anything. She rolls onto her side facing away from me. "I'm fine. I just had a lot of homework this weekend, that's all."

"Maybe I can help you with some of it tomorrow."

"Nah, I got it all done. G'night Mom." She dismisses me. I know there's no point in pushing more right now, as much as I want to.

"Goodnight. I love you." She doesn't answer. I leave and close her door.

The next afternoon I get a call at work from the high school principal. Of course I know him since we both work for the same school district. "Lynn, I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but I've had to suspend Kristen. I need you to come and pick her up. She is going to be out for two days."

"What!" I practically scream. I cannot believe I'm hearing this. It's surreal.

Kristen has never been in trouble before, not even minor trouble and now she's being suspended? "What on Earth for?"

"For fighting, Lynn. She punched another girl several times in the face, almost knocked her out." I realize I'm on my feet. I don't even remember standing up. I grab the edge of my desk for support.

"Joe, I don't even know what to say. That is so unlike Kristen. Are you sure it was her?" I can hear Joe sigh on the other end of the phone.

"Yes, it was her. She's sitting outside my office right now. The nurse had to bandage her hand, she banged it up pretty bad. The other girl's parents are threatening to press charges unless they are satisfied with Kristen's punishment. Kristen is pretty upset, and I have no choice but to suspend her. We have a zero tolerance policy for fighting."

"Why would she do that?" I ask him, still flabbergasted.

"She won't tell me," Joe says, "but apparently the other girl said something offensive. I'm sure Kristen was provoked. Still, physical violence has to be punished."

I finally feel my wits returning. This must have to do with the bullying that has been going on. In a very odd way I feel a small sense of relief because now I can talk to Kristen about it without having to reveal that I read her diary. "I'm on my way," I tell Joe, and hang up. *God Fucking Dammit!* I arrange to leave work early and pick Kristen up.

On my way to the high school I call Steve. He is furious. "What the hell is going on with her?" I try to calm him down.

"Steve, I think she's been putting up with a lot of shit about Cassie."

"What?"

"I think there are girls at school, who she thought were her friends, who have been saying mean things and posting stuff online about Cassie being an idiot. Stuff like that. In a way, if that's what it is, I'm kind of proud of her for standing up to them."

"Why would they do that?"

"Girls can be really mean. It sucks, but I think that's what's going on. I'll try to get the story out of her when I pick her up. We can all discuss it tonight."

"Okay, keep me posted," he says and we say goodbye.

Kristen is sitting in a chair outside the Principal's office, by his secretary's desk, when I come in. Her eyes are swollen and her face is blotchy. She can't hide it when she's been crying any better than I can. When she sees me walk in, she looks away and I see a fresh tear slide down her cheek. I say nothing, for once. I just put my hand on her shoulder, then continue past her to the door to the principal's office. Joe is on the phone and waves me in pointing to a chair when he sees me at the door. After a few minutes he hangs up.

"Hi Lynn. That was the other girl's parents. They've agreed not to press any charges since Kristen will serve a two day suspension. They also want a written apology from Kristen to their daughter." I sit back in my chair and exhale loudly.

"Can you tell me more about what happened, Joe? I just can't understand it."

"Kristen is not being very forthcoming. According to Chloe, the other girl involved, Kristen came bursting out of a bathroom stall and popped her in the side of the face. Repeatedly. There were other girls there who apparently just watched the whole thing. They are backing up Chloe's story." I think of Chloe, the beauty-queen newcomer to town from Kristen's slumber party. "You'd think, from the way she tells it, that Chloe was just standing there combing her hair or some such thing and Kristen came out of nowhere, but I'm sure that's not the whole truth."

"What does Kristen say about it?" I ask.

"Nothing really. She said that Chloe was 'a bitch,' he uses his fingers to indicate quotation marks, but didn't give any specifics about what precipitated her punching Chloe." *Great. Way to defend yourself, Kristen* I think. I sigh audibly and glance out

through the open door to where I can see Kristen sitting. She is staring straight ahead almost like she is in a trance, like a prisoner waiting for the gallows.

"Okay, so what happens now?" I ask Joe.

"I'm going to ask you to take Kristen home now. I don't think it would be productive for her to stay here to try to finish the school day. Then she will be suspended tomorrow and the next day. She can't go to any extra-curricular activities while she's suspended so soccer practices are out for the two days. She can come back on Thursday but you will have to bring her in in the morning. We have to have a quick re-entrance meeting before she returns to her classes, just a formality."

"Okay, does all this go on her school record?" I ask.

"Well, of course the whole incident has been documented. I'm sure this is an isolated incident. Do try to get her to tell you what's going on."

I stand up to go. "Okay, Joe. I guess I'll see you Thursday morning." I walk out to where Kristen is sitting, still impersonating a statue. "Come on," I say to her in what I hope is a gentle voice. I have to try to figure out what really happened and I'm not sure how to approach the subject so instead of taking her straight home, I drive to a frozen yogurt place. She is silent, of course, until I pull in, then she looks at me with contempt.

"What are we doing here?" she asks in an outraged tone.

"You've had a rough day. I thought maybe you could use some fro-yo, something to cheer you up a bit."

"What kind of mother are you? I get suspended for punching someone, and you take me out for frozen yogurt!" she practically screams and I see the tears starting again.

"Kristen," I use my firm, I'm-not-putting-up-with-the-dramatics voice. "I am certainly not trying to reward your behavior. I just know that it would take something pretty bad for you to end up punching someone. I suspect that Chloe was saying or doing something extremely hurtful or you would never have reacted like that. I'm trying to show you that I empathize with whatever you were going through that caused you to behave that way." I pause for a breath and just look at her waiting for a response.

Nothing. "Maybe I'm just an idiot to think that. Am I wrong? Was Chloe standing there innocently saying her prayers and you marched up and punched her out of nowhere?"

"NO! She wasn't saying her fucking prayers! She was talking about how I'm an outcast because my sister is an idiot!" Kristen screams at me then starts crying again. I feel like I've been punched in the gut. I swallow hard.

"Okay, then. That makes a lot more sense," I say quietly. Kristen starts to talk a mile a minute through her sobs.

"She's been doing that for months! She posts crap about me on Instagram and everyone thinks it's so funny and if I get mad they say I'm overreacting and it's just a joke. She mimics Cassie all the time whenever I pass her in the hall. Once she even did that when I was walking with Cassie! Luckily Cassie didn't get what Chloe was saying. Most of my friends are with her and have dropped me. I eat lunch alone every day, and she fucking knew I was in that bathroom stall and that I could hear her. Finally I had had enough so I came out of the stall and punched her. I wish I had better aim. I was trying to break her goddamn perfect nose." She dissolves into sobs.

I can't help it, tears are now streaming down my face too. I unbuckle my seatbelt and lean over to hug her as best I can in the car. "Oh, honey. I'm so sorry." I say over and over.

After a few minutes she pushes my hands away. "What are you sorry for? Sorry you had me? Sorry you had Cassie? Sorry she is the way she is? Sorry you don't even care how hard it is for me to have her as a sister? Sorry I don't have the strength of character to ignore all this and rise above?"

Whoa, another gut punch. "No, I'm sorry that you are being treated this way. I know it's hard having Cassie as a sister, but I didn't know that you were dealing with this sort of thing. Why haven't you told me about it?"

"Because, what could you do? Nothing. You would just feel bad, or call up someone's mother and make a scene which would ruin my life even more. There was no point."

"Kristen, I certainly don't have all the answers, but I might've been able to help.

At least you wouldn't have been dealing with this all alone. Dad and I are always there for you."

"Yeah, right." She turns away from me to look out her window.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

"Do you not know that we are there for you?"

"You're only there for me if Cassie doesn't need anything at the moment. And she never doesn't need anything." I'm speechless. I don't know whether to be mad, or indignant, or defensive, or apologetic. "Yes, I'm a terrible mother," I say angrily and start the car.

"You're a great mother, for Cassie," Kristen says. We drive home in silence.

When we arrive at home we both go into our rooms and shut the doors. I sit on my bed and sob. How else am I supposed to handle my children? Kristen is so capable, Cassie is not. I have to do more for Cassie. Is there another way to handle all of this that would be better? I think and think about that all the while feeling so sorry for my little girl who doesn't feel mothered. How can I do things differently?

After about a half an hour, I hear Cassie come in the front door from school.

"Mom?" she yells. Usually I'm waiting for her in the driveway when the bus drops her off. Shit. Now I'm failing both of them.

"Be right down," I shout to her trying to sound like everything is alright. I splash some water on my face quickly and run down the stairs. "How was your day?" I singsong to Cassie.

"Kristen wasn't on the bus," she says.

"No, she came home early. She's in her room."

"She sick?" Cassie asks.

"Sort of. Yes. She's not feeling well." I help Cassie hang up her coat and her backpack in the hall closet. "Do you want a snack?"

"Yes, please. Why is your face red? You been cryin'?"

"Oh, a little. I'm fine."

"Did you hit another squirrel?"

"No, nothing like that. I guess I'm still sad about the one I hit yesterday. Do you have any homework tonight?"

"Just a math page. Can I watch *Doc McStuffins* before we do it?"

"Sure." I hand her a yogurt and she takes it into the family room.

I look up toward Kristen in her room and wonder if it's too early for a drink.

I decide that it is, and think about the cigarettes hidden in my bathroom upstairs, but I had promised myself I would never smoke when the girls might catch me. I sigh and start making a marinade for chicken for dinner while trying to decide how to handle Kristen.

I'm up to my elbows in raw chicken when the phone rings, of course. I see from the caller ID that it's Steve. I had never called him back. Ugh. I run to the sink and quickly wash my hands and while I'm drying them the ringing stops. Damn.

I pick up the phone to call him back and am surprised to hear Kristen talking to Steve. Kristen usually acts like she's allergic to actually talking on a phone rather than just texting. I listen for a few minutes putting my hand over the receiver so they won't know I'm there.

"Yeah, I'm suspended for two days," Kristen is telling him. She sounds so sad.

"I'm going to miss the field trip to the Oceanographic Institute with my Science Class.

That sucks. And I can't go to soccer which is a relief, actually."

I had forgotten about that field trip.

"Why? I thought you loved soccer," Steve says.

"I love the game, not the people I have to play with."

"So what happened Kristen?"

"Chloe was saying some crap about Cassie being an idiot. I was in the bathroom stall and she damn-well knew I was in there. She wanted me to hear it. I'd had enough so

I came out and hit her."

"You realize you gave her just the reaction she wanted."

"Yeah. I'm so mad at myself I could scream. If I had to lose control I wish I'd broken her nose at least."

"Yeah. That'd've made it all good," Steve says with a laugh in his voice.

"Dad," Kristen says with an exasperated whine.

"To tell you the truth. I'm kind of proud of you."

"For taking the bait like a fool and earning myself a reputation as a hot-head who's out of control?"

"No, for showing her she can't get away with talking smack about you and your sister. I bet she won't do it again."

"I hope not, and Dad?"

"Yeah."

"Don't say stuff like 'talking smack'. It's cringey"

"Not cool, huh?"

"It probably would've been better to stay in the stall and we could both pretend I'd never heard her."

"I'm not sure about that. You'd have felt awful for not doing anything, and Chloe would just continue to push you. It would only have gotten worse."

"Yeah. I guess."

I decide not to say anything. I just wait while they say their goodbyes and hang up. I don't give a damn what time it is. I pour myself a glass of wine. So everything is

fine? What about all that anger? That's only for me? Steve is the perfect parent? I'm talking to myself so much that Cassie comes to the kitchen door.

"Mom?" I look at her. "Who're ya talkin' to?" She looks genuinely freaked out.

"No one, Honey," I sigh. "I'm just thinking out loud."

"Huh," she says as she heads back into the other room. Now one hates me and the other thinks I'm nuts. Fabulous!

I decide to go for a walk while the chicken marinates. I tell Cassie I'm going and start to call to Kristen, but I can't deal with a snarky reply or worse, no reply, right now so I text her and head out the front door.

I am furious at the crap Kristen is laying on me, but also feel guilty because I know she's kind of right. Not that I don't care about her. Of course I do. But my focus and concern is more often on Cassie. I need to do something for Kristen. I need to pay better attention. She's obviously having a hard time and I need to help her. I just wish I knew how.

I'm walking along having a full conversation with myself, probably confirming for any neighbors who didn't already think so, that I've gone around the bend, when something occurs to me. I stop dead in my tracks. Chloe needs to have some kind of punishment from the school. What she's been doing is bullying and harassment. Joe said that Kristen wouldn't tell him what Chloe did to her, and he was so worried about her parents and their reaction. Is she is being allowed to play the victim in all this? I realize then what I can do for Kristen. I march back home like a soldier on a mission.

Of course, the day's events are the topic of conversation at the dinner table, an abridged version. Everyone is careful not to allude to what Chloe said in front of Cassie. I

manage to keep my mouth mostly shut to avoid any further venom from Kristen. But I do ask about Chloe.

"How many days of suspension did Chloe get?" I ask.

"For what?" Kristen looks surprised. "I hit her. She didn't even fight back."

"For bullying you." I tell her. Cassie gasps. 'Bullying' has become such a buzz word around the school that she is very familiar with it.

"Kristen! Chloe's a bully? That's really bad!" She says.

"Well, I hadn't thought of it like that, but yeah. I guess she is a bully," Kristen says thoughtfully.

"Exactly. She deserves to be punished too." I say.

"Well, I think Kristen handled that," says Steve.

"That's not the point," I tell them. "Kristen should never have gotten to that point.

And by hitting Chloe she ended up punishing herself too."

"Kristen hitted Chloe?" Cassie yells, eyes wide. "What the hell?"

"Cassie!" I'm shocked. I've never heard her use a swear word before. We're careful not to say them around her because she picks everything you don't want her to remember right up. "We don't talk like that in this house."

"Kristen does," Cassie says sheepishly.

"Sure, throw me under the bus," Kristen says.

"I didn't' throw you under a bus," Cassie squeals. "There's not even a bus here! Silly." "Alright. Everyone calm down," says Steve--ever the voice of reason. "Kristen, you watch your mouth around your sister. Cassie, don't say 'hell' it's not appropriate language."

"What's 'propriate language?" Cassie asks.

"It's just not nice," Steve tells her.

"Oh. Okay."

"Okay," Steve pats Cassie on the head ruffling her hair. "So who's on dish duty tonight?" he asks.

"I'll do it," Kristen stands up and starts clearing plates.

"Me too." Cassie jumps up and grabs her plate and silverware so quickly she almost drops the whole armload.

"Great," says Kristen sarcastically.

"Hey!" I warn her, then want to smack myself. There I go again worrying about Cassie over Kristen. Kristen seems to read my face and looks pointedly at me for a moment.

As soon as they're out of earshot I whisper to Steve, "I'm going to find out what happened with Chloe and demand that they address the bullying issue."

"No you're not. You're overreacting. Kristen handled it in the time-honored tradition of kids since the dark ages. It's over. Let it go."

"I can't. I have to help Kristen. She's been putting up with so much."

"You'll just make it worse."

"Do you know that Joe mentioned Chloe's parents possibly pressing charges?"

Steve shifts in his seat and suddenly looks much more serious.

- "No, you hadn't mentioned that." He seems exasperated. "So are they going to?"
- "I don't think so, since she's being suspended."
- "What if we pressed charges?"
- "Lynn, we're not going to do that."
- "Well, we'll just see how things go at that meeting on Thursday morning." I stand up and grab a serving dish and walk away from him into the kitchen.
 - "Lynn, just let it go," he says to my back.

Chapter Nineteen

Tuesday when I arrive at work, all hell is breaking loose. Eleanor has an office full of kids and is on the phone with a parent and it's not even 8:00 yet. As I walk in, she covers the phone receiver with her hand and whispers, "Matt wants to see you." Fabulous. Matt is the principal of our building. All I need right now is another principal meeting.

"Okay," I tell her. "Let me just get some of these kids handled, and I'll go see him."

"I think you'd better go now," she whispers. Her face looks anxious.

I just stare at her for a moment trying to gage the situation. "Okay," I finally say and head to the main office. I'm probably in trouble for leaving so abruptly yesterday. I knock on his closed office door.

"Come in," Matt calls.

I walk in and he is behind his desk, a set of parents sits in front of it. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I was told you wanted to see me, I'll come back later." I start to close the door again.

"Lynn, come in. We've been waiting for you," he says with a pointed look.

"Lynn, this is Mr. and Mrs. Larson. Their daughter, Hannah has complained to them about some inappropriate language she heard you use."

What?! I try to think of what they are talking about. I know who Hannah Larson is, but can't think of what they are talking about.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure I understand. What did she hear? When?" I ask, at a loss.

Mrs. Larson jumps in helpfully. "Hannah was in your office yesterday because she wasn't feeling well, and she heard you say 'God F-ing Dammit' as you hung up the phone.

Oh God. Hannah was lying down on one of the cots resting and the privacy curtain was pulled around her when I got the call about Kristen. I completely forgot she was there. I remember thinking *God Fucking Dammit*, but not saying it out loud. What the hell is going on with me? Am I really losing it? I look at the Larsons.

"I am so sorry," I tell them. "I had just gotten some very upsetting personal news on that phone call. I reacted without thinking. I rarely use words like that, I was just really upset. Please accept my apology. It won't happen again." I don't want to tell them that I don't remember saying it, or that I had forgotten Hannah was there. Neither of those admissions will help me out here.

"That's just it, though," says Mrs. Larson. "We've heard of other instances where students have heard you use inappropriate language. That's why we took the time to come in today.

"What other instances?" I ask, astounded.

"Well, without naming any names, friends of ours said their daughter heard you say the F-word too. And you were speaking about the girl's mother at the time."

"What?" I'm much too loud and Matt shifts uncomfortably in his seat. Before he can silence me, I say, "I would never use that word about a student or parent."

"It was something about buying pants that fit?" Mrs. Larson looks down, abashed, but her tiny, embarrassed smile says she's enjoying this.

Susan. That was Susan the last time Eleanor had to sew up her pant-seam. Shit.

That is what I said. I'm sitting there stupidly trying to figure out what to say next. When

Mr. Larson adds his two cents.

"It's really no surprise I suppose. What with what they say about apples and trees and such."

"What?" I am genuinely confused.

"Our good friends and next-door neighbors are the Davises?" says Mrs. Larson.

I don't know what she is talking about and just look at her blankly. She sees my confusion and says, "I believe their daughter, Chloe, um...*knows* your daughter, Kristen?" Oh. How lovely. I just stare and say nothing. I want to smack her. After a few moments Matt intervenes, not comprehending the uncomfortable silence.

"Well, Mr. and Mrs. Larson, Mrs. Holcomb has apologized. I assure you that there will be no further incidents of this kind. Lynn, you may return to your office I know you have students waiting for you. We'll talk more on this later." Dismissed, I turn on my heel and leave.

As expected, Matt calls me into his office later that day.

"Lynn, about the Larson family..." he seems to expect me to jump in and start explaining. I stay silent. "Well, is there anything you want to tell me about?"

"No. I was upset for personal reasons. I shouldn't have said what I said. Hannah was lying down behind the privacy curtain, and I momentarily forgot she was there."

What's worse, I didn't even know I had said it. "When the other incident happened, I had a broken ankle and was in pain. I'd had a long day and I wasn't as professional as I usually am. I also had no idea Susan could hear me, she was in the bathroom. Still, I

shouldn't have said it."

"No, you shouldn't have. If there's one more incident like that, I'll have to take disciplinary action. I'll have no choice." I nod, and he continues, "I was wondering about that odd silence ..." he trails off as I steel my jaw and jut it a bit, "I thought maybe there was something... well, anyway, just make sure nothing like that happens again. One more thing, you left early yesterday without letting me know. Obviously you had something personal to deal with, and you did arrange things with Eleanor, but that is the sort of thing you should've come to me about."

I hang my head, the penitent. "I'm sorry. I promise none of this will happen again.

I do have some personal issues going on with one of my daughters. I will probably be late on Thursday. I have a meeting first thing in the morning at the High School."

"Okay," says Matt. "Duly noted. Let me know if I can help. And Lynn? I hope that leaving early and coming in late are not going to become habitual."

"Of course not," I tell him.

I march Kristen into Joe's office first thing Thursday morning feeling indignant.

"Good morning, Lynn, Kristen." Joe smiles seemingly with relief. "Well, now that's over and we can get back to normal. Kristen, I trust that I will not be seeing you for any further incidents of this sort?"

"No. You won't," Kristen answers.

"Okay then, you can go to your homeroom. And just so you know, you won't have to spend much time with Chloe. Her parents insisted on a schedule change so she is

no longer in any of your classes. Her parents wanted you removed from the soccer team, but I refused. I feel that your suspension was punishment enough."

Kristen nods and looks at the floor.

"Okay, then. I think we're finished here," Joe says standing and extending his hand for Kristen to shake. She does, then heads out of the office.

"Bye, Mom," she says quietly.

"Bye, Honey. Have a good day." I'm still seated. Once she leaves Joe looks at me with his eyebrows raised. He must wonder why I'm still sitting there. "Joe, I want to talk to you for a minute."

"Oh. of course." He sits down.

"Joe, was Chloe also suspended?" I ask.

He looks taken aback. "Well, no. She did not physically fight. Apparently she didn't even try to hit Kristen back."

"Yes, but what about the verbal abuse and bullying she's been putting Kristen through?"

"Did you find out what Chloe did to precipitate Kristen's actions?" Joe looks concerned.

"Yes. Chloe's been saying horrible things about Kristen verbally and on social media because of Cassie."

Joe sighs and raises a hand to his forehead. "Oh Lynn, I'm sorry. That's awful."

I am relieved he agrees. "Yes, it's extremely hurtful. So, I'd like to know how

Chloe will be punished and what will be done to ensure that the bullying stops."

Joe looks at me for a moment. "Lynn, do you have any proof of Chloe's behavior?" I'm stunned for a moment, then I think of Kristen's diary.

"Well...no, not really. Kristen told me what Chloe was saying in the bathroom about her being an outcast because her sister is...an idiot."

Joe looks down at his hands templed on his desk. "You mentioned social media? Is there anything there we could use?"

"I'm not sure. Apparently Chloe sent out some negative messages on Instagram and Snapchat, but I don't think I can see what Chloe posts on Instagram, and Snapchat posts disappear don't they?" I want to cry.

"Yes. They disappear unless someone takes a screenshot of them."

"I don't know if Kristen did that. I could try to find out," I say wondering how on Earth I am going to ask about that since I only know about it from Kristen's diary.

"Chances are that she didn't," says Joe. "If someone takes a screenshot of a Snapchat post, the person who originated the post gets a message alerting them to that. If Chloe has been giving Kristen a hard time, I doubt Kristen would've wanted to make it worse by doing that. But it's worth asking her about it."

"Oh, I didn't know that. I'm at a loss. I just can't let this go on..." I can't think of the right word, "Un-dealt-with. It must not be allowed to continue."

"I couldn't agree more, Lynn, but without some proof beyond Kristen's word...I'm afraid there's not that much I can do beyond alerting the teaching staff to keep an eye out for any inappropriate or hurtful behavior between them, but if Chloe never does anything outwardly, then this all becomes very hard to take action on within school."

"How is it that I have no power in this?"

"I know it feels that way, but it's because Kristen took physical action, Chloe did not."

"Right." I stand up, exasperated. "I have to get to work. I'll see what I can do to get some 'evidence' and I'll be back in touch. I promise you, this is not over."

Joe smiles weakly and stands to shake my hand. "Maybe some of Kristen's friends saw or heard something?"

"Why would word from one of them be more valuable than Kristen's word?" I demand.

"It's not that it's more valuable, it's that the more people there are to corroborate a story, the more valid it is."

"Kristen's word is not valid?"

"Come on, Lynn. You work in a school. You know how things like this work. If I punished everyone based on hearsay, we'd have the makings of a witch hunt on our hands."

"I suppose so, but the way it is now, it's virtually impossible to stop one student from harassing another. All they have to do is be the slightest bit cagey about it and they are all-powerful."

"I'll talk to you soon, Lynn. In the meantime, I'll ask the teachers to keep an eye on interactions they see between Chloe and Kristen." He shakes my hand and I leave.

It's impossible to concentrate that day. I am so angry the more I think about the things Chloe has been saying to and about Kristen. I fantasize about ripping every perfect

hair off her pretty little head. Who the hell does she think she is? How dare she say things like that about Cassie? How dare she make having Cassie for a sister harder than it already is for Kristen? I can't stand it that there has been no comeuppance for her at all and it sounds like there isn't going to be. The more I think about it, the more I know I have to do something, even if Steve disagrees, I have to do this for Kristen.

At lunch time, I call Chloe's mother. I figure I'll start there. I hope maybe she has some sense and will maybe speak to her daughter about how she treats others. So what if she and her husband were talking about pressing charges, and complaining to their neighbors? I would probably feel that way too if I thought my daughter had been attacked out of nowhere the way they had been allowed to believe that Chloe had.

"Hello, is this Mrs. Davis, Chloe's mother?"

"Why yes, Chloe's my daughter." She has a Southern accent. I remember then that Chloe had just moved from North Carolina at the beginning of the school year. I picture a blond, blue-eyed, slight pudgy Southern Belle in a flowered dress and a huge hat on the other end of the line. Like she's on her way to the Kentucky Derby, drinking a mint julep or sweet tea on her enormous white-pillared front porch. Wow Lynn, nothing like mentally throwing every stereotype in the book at her before you even introduce yourself. I'm surprised at myself.

"Yes. Hello." I stammer. "This is Lynn Holcomb. I'm Kristen Holcomb's mother."

"Oh." Nothing more. I hear wariness in her voice.

"Well, I wanted to speak with you about what happened between our girls."

"You mean when your daughter punched my daughter in the face like a savage?" she says sweetly.

"Of course Kristen shouldn't have hit Chloe, but I wondered if you had asked Chloe why she thinks Kristen did that."

"No Darlin', I just figured she was jealous of my Chloe. Chloe's always had that effect on...certain girls, of course none of them have ever gotten physical before. It's her curse," she sighed. "Of course physical violence cannot be tolerated!"

"Of course not, nor should emotional abuse be tolerated."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Chloe has been bullying and harassing my daughter over her sister."

"Over her sister?"

"Yes, my older daughter has Down's Syndrome."

"Oh, well bless her heart, the poor thing."

"The point is," I'm absolutely seething by this time, "that your daughter has been bullying Kristen on social media and verbally. She is saying that Kristen is an outcast because her sister is an...beca.use she has a disability." I can't bring myself to call Cassie an idiot to this woman, even if I'm just parroting Chloe's words. "Only she used much harsher language," I add.

"Well, I'm terribly sorry to hear about your older daughter's, um, affliction, but I just can't see my Chloe behaving that way. It's just not in her nature. She's such a gentle girl. Are you sure that your Kristen didn't just make that story up to try to justify her behavior? That's what it sounds like to me."

"Yes, I'm sure she didn't make it up. I'd like you to speak with your daughter. She needs to learn that she cannot treat people that way."

"Well now it seems to me," she drawls, "that maybe you are the one who needs to be addressing your daughter's behavior. I must say I'm glad we decided not to press charges now that I know how much you have on your plate. It's no wonder Kristen is troubled, but she has to know she can't go around punching people. I wish you luck. Goodbye." She hangs up.

I want to scream! I can't believe her. The condescension! I don't know why I'm so surprised, apples and trees and all, I think relishing the nastiness. Girls like Chloe don't just spring into existence fully formed as vicious glamazons. They learn everything they know at their mother's knee. What a stupid Pollyanna I am.

That afternoon Kristen won't speak to me. I don't know why and I'm getting pretty damned sick of her treating my like this so often. I ignore it until we are all sitting at the dinner table.

"Kristen, how was it being back in school today?" I ask her.

"How do you think it was?" she snaps.

"Did you have any trouble with Chloe?"

"Why? If I did, are you going to call her mother again?" I'm speechless. How does she know?

Steve puts down his fork and stares at me. "Lynn, you didn't."

I glare at him, "Of course I did! What mother wouldn't? She needs to address her daughter's behavior."

"Yeah, well I guess they had a good laugh over it and Chloe snapchatted a parody of the entire conversation. I'm an absolute laughing stock now, thanks to you Mom, as if Cassie wasn't bad enough!" She gets up and leaves the table and storms upstairs.

Steve and I both glance at Cassie.

Cassie, wide-eyed, looks at me, "Why'm I bad enough?" she asks, confused.

I look to Steve and he just looks at me to see what I'll say to that. His mouth is full of food. He has stopped chewing and his raised eyebrows say, "Well, what now, Einstein?" I know he's also mad at me for calling Chloe's mom. He never thinks I should take action like that. I want to give him the finger, but can't do that in front of Cassie.

"You're not bad enough," I tell her, "I mean, you're not bad at all. Kristen is having a hard time and she feels bad so she says things she doesn't mean. We all do that sometimes."

"Why's she havin' a hard time?" she asks with her mouth full.

"Swallow your food before you speak," I can't help telling her. Steve shakes his head. I could smack him. "Some girls are being mean to her at school."

"Why?" Her mouth is still full. I ignore it this time. How do I answer that?

"Sometimes people are just mean." I tell her.

"But why?"

"They just are, maybe they're jealous or something."

"Jealous?"

"Yeah."

"Why."

"For God's sake, Cassie, they just are, maybe. Eat your dinner." She looks hurt and surprised. Steve just looks up at me, then continues to eat. "Thanks for your help," I snap at him.

"It seems to me you're handling everything just great," he says, sarcastically, with his mouth full. "You certainly don't want to hear anything I have to say."

I stand up and start clearing dishes. I'm not sure what to do. I feel like I should be doing almost anything but standing at the kitchen sink washing the damned dishes. I throw a handful of silverware into the sink with a satisfying clatter and go upstairs.

"Kristen?" I bang on her door, which is locked, of course. "Open up. I want to talk to you."

"Go away."

I go into the office and find a paperclip. I unbend it and jimmy her lock. I make a lot of noise doing it, so she has to know I'm coming in. Still, when I open her door, she looks surprised. She has headphones in her ears and is laying on her bed looking at her phone. She jumps when I come in and shoves the phone under her pillow.

"God, Mom! Don't you have any boundaries?"

"Not within this house young lady, and the next time I have to pick your lock I'm going to take the door right off at the hinges and you can live without it".

She rolls her eyes dramatically, but doesn't say anything. She knows I would do that.

"Now, I want to talk to you." I sit on the edge of her bed.

She grudgingly moves her legs a few inches to accommodate me. "I guess I have no choice in the matter."

"No, you don't." I look at her for a moment, not sure what to say. She stares back at me, eyebrows raised. "I'm sorry I caused more trouble by calling Chloe's mom. That was not my intention."

"Yeah, well. Intention or not, you definitely made my life suck even worse than it already did, and that's saying something."

"I thought her mother might want to know how she's been treating you, and might speak to her about it."

"Why on Earth would you think that?"

"Well, why wouldn't she? I'd want to know if it was you."

"No you wouldn't. You wouldn't believe that about me any more than she believed it about Chloe. No one wants to find out her daughter is a horrible person."

"Well, that's true, but if it was you, I would want to deal with it, and not let it continue, to make it right. I thought she would want to do that too."

"That's the trouble with you, Mom. You always think you can make things right.

Sometimes you just can't." She turned away from me and picked up a book.

I can't think of anything else to say in the moment so I stand up and walk to the door. "Well, I want you to know, I am sorry."

"Yeah, I got that," Kristen says without looking up.

Maybe I should take her phone away, I think. Then at least she won't be aware of the social media stuff. I wish I could have Chloe kicked off the internet. Cassie is in her room when I walk by her door and she waves at me sadly. She is sitting on her bed like she is waiting for me, so I go in and sit down.

"Hi, honey."

"Hi." She looks down at her lap. She is clearly waiting for me to ask what's wrong.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"You yelled at me."

"I was just frustrated because you kept asking the same question."

"But you never answered it. Why are the friends jealous of Kristen?"

"I don't know if they are. It's just a guess. It's always hard to figure out why people are being mean. Maybe they're jealous because she's a good soccer player, or because she has such a nice sister." I tickle her a little when I say that. She giggles which makes me giggle. Cassie has the most infectious laugh. Just then Kristen walks by Cassie's door on her way downstairs or to the bathroom and looks at us laughing. I see hurt in her eyes. She quickly walks on.

All the short-lived lightheartedness drains right out of me. God, it's hard to deal with people. Sometimes I wish I lived alone in a cabin in the woods, and never had to speak to anyone. Life would be so much more peaceful. I look at Cassie, who didn't notice Kristen and is still smiling and trying to tickle me back. I hug her tightly and she pats my back.

"Will you draw a picture for me?" I ask her?

"Sure!" she says enthusiastically. "What do you want it to be of?"

"A beautiful log-cabin in the woods by a lake with lots of flowers all around and me in a hammock just outside of it."

"Okay!" she says, and goes to sit at her desk. I leave her room once she's working on it and go back downstairs. Steve is in the kitchen washing the rest of the dishes.

Kristen is sitting at the table doing Math homework and talking to him. I listen for a minute from the front hall, out of sight.

"No matter what's going on," Kristen is telling him, "she is right there with Cassie, all happy and fooling around. I could drop dead and she would be worrying about Cassie and trying to cheer her up."

"Now, that's not true..." Steve starts to say.

"It is!! All she ever worries about is 'poor Cassie'. She only called up Mrs. Davis because she was mad that Chloe said mean things about Cassie."

"No, she's worried about you. She probably shouldn't have called, but I know she did it for you."

"Well she sure helped me out a lot!" Kristen says sarcastically.

"Don't worry. This too shall pass," Steve says. "In the long run, none of this will look as bad as it seems like it is now. I know it's hard on you to have a sister like Cassie. Just remember she can't help how she is. We have to love her and take care of her. She's ours."

"I know, and I love her. I really do. But sometimes I wish she wasn't my sister."

I walk to the door of the kitchen and just stare at Kristen. She looks ashamed for a moment, then glares back at me defiantly. "How dare you say something like that," I whisper terrified that Cassie might be listening. "What if she heard you?"

Kristen doesn't answer and Steve stands there looking from one to the other of us while water drips from the fingertips of his yellow dishwashing gloves onto the floor.

"For God's sake, Lynn," he says, "can't you just..."

Suddenly I don't want to hear a thing from either one of them. I walk back through the foyer, open the door and go outside shutting the door firmly behind me.

It's pretty cold out and I don't have my jacket, but I don't really care. The cold wind feels sort of good right now. Not good, exactly, but...appropriate. I wander through my rose garden for a few minutes, the bushes like giant, lumpy potatoes in the moonlight all bundled up in burlap for the winter. I half expect either Kristen or Steve to come out after me, but neither of them does.

Without really deciding to do so, I find myself walking down the road. The moon is up and there is plenty of light. I realize I don't even have my phone with me. I look around and wonder why I don't do this more often. It's so beautiful out here at night. And the smells! I've always loved the smell of the fallen leaves decomposing in late Fall. The smell reminds me of bonfires. It feels good to walk, to move a little.

I can't believe Kristen said that! But, of course I can believe it. I battle all the time with similar feelings. I certainly don't wish Cassie wasn't my daughter, but I do wish she was different. I wish she was normal. Then it fills me with guilt to wish she was different than she is. She wouldn't be herself otherwise, everything about her makes her her and I love her, so ... how can I fault Kristen for feeling the way she does about Cassie? I have really not given enough thought to how hard our situation is for Kristen. I've always thought of her as the lucky one. Maybe not so lucky in some ways.

I walk and think for a pretty long time, I guess. When I get home everyone is in a panic.

"Where were you?" Steve meets me at the door. He has his coat on and looks all ruffled. "I was just about to go out looking for you! Where did you go?"

"I just went for a walk," I tell him. "I was in the neighborhood." I actually can't remember exactly where I went I was so lost in my thoughts. "I didn't go very far."

"It's been an hour and a half, Lynn. At first I thought you were just sitting on the front stoop. It never occurred to me you'd go wandering off this time of night. I actually considered calling the cops!" He made me sound like some deranged escapee from an asylum.

"I didn't go 'wandering off' I went for a walk." I push past him and go into the kitchen. "And it's not that late. It's only 8:00!" I glance at the clock and correct myself, "Okay, quarter to nine. You act like it's 2 am. or something." I put the kettle on for tea.

He stares at me angrily for a few minutes, and I stare defiantly back. "I'm going to bed," Steve says finally, he goes upstairs.

Good, I think, but I'm not really glad. Sure it means we won't fight now, but we won't get a chance to talk about anything either. Just what this house needs, another moody teenager. I sigh and go check on Cassie to see if she's getting ready for bed.

Cassie is in her pajamas sitting on her bed with a sad look on her face. It's like she's waiting for me, again.

"What's wrong?" I ask her.

"You told me to draw you a picture, then you just left! And you got lost!" she says.

"I didn't get lost. I just went for a walk."

"Dad said you were lost. I was scared. Why'd you leave? Didn't you want to see my picture?"

"Of course I want to see it. Let's go look at it now." She gets a piece of printer paper from her desk, Just like I asked she drew a house and a lake and flowers and there I am waving my stick-figure-orange-crayon hand from a purple hammock that is just hanging in thin air not attached to anything. "I love it." I tell her, and I really do. "That's just how my happy place looks."

"What's a happy place?"

"Just a place that you love and you feel happy being there."

"Isn't here your happy place?"

I hesitate for a moment. "Yes, of course it is. This picture looks like my imaginary happy place."

"Oh." She looks dubious.

"Did you take a shower?"

She looks at me for a minute then looks away. "Mmm-hmmm. 'Course I did."

"Cassie, you're hair isn't wet." She puts a hand on her head and thinks about this.

"I used the hair dryer."

"You hate the noise of the hair dryer."

"Yeah. It's too loud."

"You didn't take a shower, did you?" She shakes her head no. I debate whether or not it's worth pushing the issue and making her take off her pajamas and go take a shower. She looks clean enough. It won't hurt to skip a night. "Okay. Just this one time I'm not going to make you do it, but you have to take a shower tomorrow, got it?"

"Got it," she says happily and climbs into her bed. I kiss her on the forehead and turn out her light. "G'night Mom."

"Goodnight, Honey. I love you."

Kristen's door is closed. I really don't know what else to say to her in the moment so I just go downstairs and get the pack of cigarettes out of the cupboard in the old fashioned desk in the living room. Its cubbies and drawers are full of old paper work and school pictures and that sort of thing. No one ever looks at any of it.

I don't want to go outside in case any of them look out their windows and see me smoking, besides I'm freezing after my walk, so I go down in the basement. I can always say I'm doing some laundry if anyone is looking for me. None of them is likely to walk all the way down the stairs. I take a small glass of whiskey down there with me.

I sit on an old packing box full of dishes we don't use anymore, but that I couldn't bear to get rid of since they're perfectly good dishes, just too heavy. I light up and inhale luxuriously, feeling the smoke fill my lungs and the nicotine hit my bloodstream. It's amazing how quickly I feel a calming effect.

I actually laugh out loud looking down at myself. I'm wearing a hoodie sweatshirt and jeans and I'm skulking around in my basement just like a naughty teenager. Pathetic. It hadn't occurred to me to grab an ashtray so I am tapping ashes into my palm. I take one more long drag, then run the butt under the tap in the laundry sink to put it out, then stuff it deep in the small garbage can I use for dryer lint. Guaranteed I'm the only one who would find it there. I wash my hands and go back upstairs. I re-hide the pack of cigarettes, and sit in the dark living room with my drink. When I'm sure Steve's asleep, I go to bed.

Chapter Twenty

Thanksgiving comes seemingly out of nowhere. I'm surprised at myself. I usually decorate the mantle with a garland of artificial Fall leaves, and candles in fall colors in various sizes and shapes, with a large ceramic turkey right in the center. I make sure the dining table has fresh mums and Gerbera daisies in vibrant reds and oranges and buttery sunflowers arranged fresh for Thanksgiving, but I forgot to do that this year. I realize I never even ordered the pies from the farm market that I always get, and now it's Wednesday and too late. I don't even have a turkey yet!

There's no time now to defrost one. After school I drive to the local farm to see if they have any fresh turkeys left. It's going to cost an arm and a leg. The only one they have is a twenty-three pounder. We only have five people. We'll have leftovers forever. I sigh. There's nothing I can do about it. I buy it.

I call Caroline on my way home. "I assume you're coming tomorrow as always," I say. "Yes. Of course. I'm bringing a Spinach dip in a bread bowl and the sweet potatoes," says Caroline.

"Can you also bring a couple of pies? There must be a good bakery near you. I forgot to order my usuals."

"You forgot? That's not like you. I was wondering why you hadn't checked in yet about Thanksgiving. Did you forget it was coming at all?"

"Kind of. Somehow I thought there was another week."

"Wow. What's going on with you, Lynn?"

"Probably early-onset Alzheimer's," I joke, sort of wondering the same thing. "I don't know. Just a lot going on, I guess. It's not easy raising teenagers."

"Great. I'll look forward to it. What happened?"

"Kids at school have been bullying Kristen about Cassie, and one day she had enough and punched the ring-leader in the face and got a two day suspension, but the bully got nothing and I called her mom to talk to her about it and she's a total bitch and now Kristen isn't talking to me, and Steve's mad at me too and Cassie is trying to understand what's going on and it's all a huge mess. I think I should press charges, don't you?"

"Holy shit. Why's Steve mad at you?"

"He doesn't think I'm handling any of this right. And I'm too focused on Cassie.

What the hell do they want from me?"

I'll bring wine too. Lots of wine. Even though I can't drink any. You need some." I laugh.

"Yeah. That'll be nice. I just hope I have all the food together. I kind of woke up this morning and realized tomorrow is Thanksgiving."

"I'll tell you what. I'll bring the mashed potatoes and green beans too. You just do the turkey, gravy, and cranberry sauce."

I laugh. "Thank you. Don't worry about the side dishes. I've got it. It'll be okay. But do bring pie, and wine. I'll see you at 2:00."

Thanksgiving is subdued. Steve and the girls spend most of the day in the family room, either watching the parade or football. Caroline and I hang out in the talking while

we get the food together. By some miracle, it's not bad. No one has much to say during dinner. When the day is over, I'm relieved.

The following Wednesday, I have to go into the high school again, this time for Cassie's annual IEP meeting. Steve usually comes to this meeting with me, but he's on a business trip to Chicago. We thought about rescheduling the meeting, but had a hard time finding a date before Christmas when he could be there. I felt like waiting until the new year was too long, so we decided I'd go alone. He made a comment about how it won't matter whether or not he's there since I'm going to make all the decisions anyway so we might as well go ahead with the meeting as scheduled rather than change anything. Fine. It'll be better this way. I won't have to worry about him judging every concern I bring up. In any case, he makes me promise not to sign anything until he has a chance to weigh in.

When I pass through the lobby in the front of the school, there are a number of students and teachers sitting at the tables scattered around the area and I see many of them look in my direction. I tell myself that it doesn't mean anything, of course they look up when someone walks by. But I know from my own experience how fast news travels in a school and realize that probably most of these kids and teachers know exactly who I am and are whispering about me right now. That thought makes me break out in a light sweat on the back of my neck. I square my shoulders and hold my chin up looking straight ahead as I proceed into the Child Study Team office for the meeting. Let them stare.

I'm greeted by Cassie's case manager, the school psychologist, Howard Appleby.

He leads me into a conference room where several teachers and other school personnel

are sitting. Since she'll turn 18 before the end of the school year, we have to make some final decisions at this meeting for Cassie's future. I'm nervous because I really don't have a good idea what the best plan for her would be beyond high school. Of course we've talked about this quite a lot over the years, and there are several possible avenues for Cassie to follow. Cassie is not at the meeting. Usually she is.

"Hello," I greet each person as he or she is introduced then finally ask, "Is Cassie going to be here?"

"I thought we would conduct most of the meeting without her so that we can speak candidly. We are planning to bring her in at the end of the meeting if appropriate."

"If appropriate?" I'm not sure what to think. "How can we discuss her future without her input?"

"Well, that's what I mean," says Howard, "once we come to a decision about her future after this school year, we can bring her in."

"I thought she would be part of making a decision about her future."

"We find it's best at meetings for students like Cassie, Mrs. Holcomb, to discuss the options then bring the student in when we are closer to a decision. Sometimes the student is unable to be realistic about his or her ability and things can get emotional."

"Oh, I see." I'm sure that actually they expect parents of "students like Cassie" to be the ones who are unrealistic and emotional and want to spare the child the trauma of witnessing her parent dissolving in tears. I sigh and steel myself for what they have to say.

"So, first of all, before we discuss next year, and the future, we need to discuss some behavioral issues that Cassie has been having lately," Howard tells me.

This is a surprise to me. I was not aware of any behavior issues this school year. "Oh!" I look around at each of the faces watching me. "What sort of behavioral issues?"

"Well, Cassie has been throwing tantrums in class and occasionally stubbornly refusing to cooperate. For example, one day the class was leaving the room to go to gym class and Cassie flat out refused to go. Nothing worked and finally an aide had to be left in the classroom with Cassie while the rest of the children went to P.E."

"Yes," interjected Cassie's classroom teacher Ms. Finke, "and that's a bigger problem than it sounds like because, as you know Mrs. Holcomb, students with developmental delays are even more likely than typical students to feed off of each other's behavior. We had several other students that day who tried to refuse P.E. when they saw Cassie doing it. We were able to get all of them to go except for Cassie, but the fact that Cassie ultimately did not go, is not the learning experience we want the other students to have."

"Of course, I understand. Why wouldn't she go? And why didn't anyone call me about this?"

"We already had this meeting scheduled and thought it might be best to discuss it with you here when we'd hoped we'd have more insight about what motivated Cassie, but unfortunately we don't. Cassie was unable, or unwilling, to tell us why she behaved that way. She's never done that before, so we had very little to go on in trying to figure that out."

"Well, surely you gave her a consequence. What was her consequence?"

"She had to sit out of Art class that day. Art is her favorite class. We made it clear that missing Art was a consequence of refusing to go to PE in hopes that it would alter not only Cassie's but the other students' future behavior as well."

"Oh, I don't really like that. Cassie gets so much out of Art. Did she make the connection? Did it work?"

"We're not sure yet. We have PE again later today, so we'll see what happens. Do you have any insight as to why Cassie might have refused to go to PE?

I thought about that. Cassie is included in regular gym class and I'm not sure who's in the class. Cassie knows Kristen's been having friend-trouble. Maybe some of her "friends" are in Cassie's class. Every person at the table is looking at me expectantly.

"Well, there have been some issues at home. My younger daughter has been having some trouble socially," there are nods all around. I take that to mean that they've heard about Kristen's suspension, and maybe about my meeting in the principal's office. "I didn't think that was affecting Cassie much, other than confusing her. She knows Kristen is having some trouble, that other kids are being mean."

"Well, we wondered about that too. Cassie's tantrums started around the time that Kristen was, uh, suspended for a few days," says Howard.

"Really?" I can feel my face reddening. "I'm surprised to hear that. She didn't act differently at home at that time. Also, I feel like I have to tell you, since you know about Kristen's suspension and you probably know why she was suspended, that she was reacting to long-term verbal harassment by another student...about Cassie. I intend to make sure that student has a consequence as well for her behavior."

"Are you comfortable telling us more? It might help all of us get to the crux of whatever is going on with Cassie." says Howard.

"Well, this other girl has been bullying Kristen verbally and on-line about having a sister like Cassie." I start to cry. Damn it. Ms. Fincke pushes the box of tissues on the table closer to me as the others all try uncomfortably to avert their eyes.

"I'm so sorry," Mrs. Fincke says quietly. They give me a moment to pull myself together.

"I'm sorry," I tell them. "I'm very emotional about the whole thing. It's so unfair to both my girls."

"Yes," agrees Howard. "Ms. Fincke and the other teachers who work with Cassie thought there might be a connection between Kristen's incident and Cassie's recent behavior. How much do you think Cassie knows about it?"

"She knows that Kristen's friends have been being mean to her, but doesn't know that it had anything to do with her or her Down syndrome. I couldn't stand for her to know that. How would she feel?"

"Mrs. Holcomb," says Howard, "I think Cassie is more aware of what is going on with Kristen than you think she is."

I just look at him. How could that be? I think about it then realize how silly I am to think I can control what Cassie does and doesn't hear. She's away from me for most of her day. Who knows what people have said to her? "Do you think Cassie has been bullied too?" I'm almost whispering. Is it possible that I have no idea what is happening with either of my girls?

"I'm not sure," says Ms. Fincke. "I've certainly never heard anyone speak unkindly to her, but one of the places she might overhear something is in the girl's locker room during PE. She's never in there alone, there's always an aide with Cassie when she's changing for PE, but it is one time that it's possible for her to interact with some of the other students, then and in the lunchroom.

Cassie likes to sit with some of the kids who are not in her class during lunch. As far as I know they are kind and welcoming to her, but it's possible that she heard something there too. The aides can always see her, but allow her the independence to sit where she wants to sit. I suppose we can change that rule, if you think it's best."

I don't want to limit Cassie any more than she needs to be limited, but I can't stand the idea that others may be unkind to her, even if she just overhears something someone says not directly to her.

"I don't know what the right thing to do is," I say. "Could an aide just walk by periodically to make sure that nothing unkind is being said?"

"Yes, of course we can do that, but teenagers are pretty savvy about avoiding being caught when they are being mean. Still, realizing that they are being somewhat monitored might curtail anything they are saying that they shouldn't say."

"Let's hope so. I'd like to try that before limiting where Cassie is allowed to sit.

That doesn't seem fair to her. I'll have to try to find out from her at home what she knows about Kristen's situation."

"We also need to come up with a behavioral plan for Cassie, at least until she changes some of her more recent negative behaviors." Howard tells me. We discuss what

kinds of consequences might work with Cassie if she refuses to do something she is supposed to do, or if she throws a tantrum.

We then move on to discuss Cassie's future. I want to cry. Various things are suggested. She could go into a sheltered workshop, or she might be able to work in the community as long as she has a job coach. She could bag groceries at the supermarket or something like that.

"Is there any possibility that she could take some courses at the Community College?" I'm hopeful. They all just look at me.

Finally Howard speaks. "Mrs. Holcomb, Cassie would be frustrated in a situation like that right now. It would be likely to damage her self-esteem and cause her unnecessary anxiety."

I'm not sure I agree, but I realize she probably does not have the ability to take a course at a college. "There is one other possibility," says Howard. "Given Cassie's disability, she could qualify for a residential college-experience program. There are several schools that offer this sort of thing for students with Down Syndrome. They focus on independent living skills and job skills as well as academics at an appropriate level.

"Yes, I think eventually something like that would be perfect, but I just don't think she's ready to leave home yet."

"Well, as you know, Cassie can stay here at the high school until she is 21 years old. We can find her some local work experience and she can spend part of her day on a job site with a job coach, and part of her day in classes here," says Howard.

"Yes," I hear myself say. "I think that would be best for Cassie. Let's keep her here until she turns 21."

We then spend a few minutes choosing Cassie's classes for the coming year. She is brought into the meeting so she can make some choices about her electives. She is particularly excited about the plan for her to have a Structured Learning Experience where she works at a local job or a series of jobs with a job coach.

"Will I make money?" she asks.

"Not at first," Howard tells her, "but once you learn to do the job, there will be a possibility of earning a paycheck."

"Yes!" She grins and pulls her upturned fist in toward her body in a gesture she's seen other kids make.

"Okay," Howard says making a notation on the draft of Cassie's IEP he has in front of him. I'll write all of this up, and send you a copy. You will have 15 days to discuss this with your husband, make changes, or to reject the IEP before it goes automatically into effect." He stands up and holds out his hand to shake mine.

I make my way back through the lobby avoiding the looks I am more aware of this time. It's not until I'm in my car and headed back to my own job that I realize that Cassie and Kristen will now graduate the same year. Then my nest will empty all at once. I decide not to think about that.

Chapter Twenty-One

"Now you and me are gonna graduate at together and then we can *both* get a job at the store and *get paid!*" Cassie tells Kristen that afternoon.

Kristen is glaring at me for some reason and responds with, "I'm not going to work at a store, Cassie. I'm going to *college!*" She gives me another piercing look and flounces out of the room.

"Then I'll go to college too!" Cassie calls after her.

"Fat chance," I hear Kristen say quietly from the stairs. Cassie hears her too and looks at me confused.

"Doesn't Kristen want to do stuff with me?" she asks.

"She wants to do things with you," I tell her, "but you may not follow the same path after high school." It's all I can do to keep from marching upstairs right now and slapping Kristen. Why does she have to be so mean? "College may not be the best choice for you, but it might be a good choice for Kristen."

"Why? Why can't we both do it?"

How do I answer that? "Well, it depends on a lot of things," I stall.

"Like what?"

"Well, like what you want to be when you grow up."

"I want to be an artist," Cassie says with a sure nod of her head, "or a ballerina," she adds, considering.

"A ballerina?" She's never even taken a dance lesson. "I didn't know you liked to dance."

"I want to be Clara." We've taken the girls to productions of *The Nutcracker* several times over the years. Cassie strikes a pose with her fingertips touching above her head and her legs akimbo, knees bent.

"Well, it takes many, many years of hard work, training, and practice to get to be a ballerina like Clara." I tell her, adding, "and it hurts sometimes."

"It hurts?" she asks.

"Yes, when the ballerinas go up on their very tippy toes?" She nods. "Well, that hurts a lot, and you have to wear special shoes with wood in the toes."

"Oh," she makes a sour face. "I don't want to hurt. I'll just be an artist."

"You seemed excited at your meeting about making a paycheck."

"Yeah. I want some money so I can buy stuff."

"Well, maybe you will have a job where you make some money and you can still be an artist as a hobby. You could still take lessons with Miss Kathy."

"Yeah, that would be good."

Later that night I find Kristen in her room and enter without knocking first even though I know she hates that.

"Kristen, you weren't very kind to Cassie earlier. Why do you need to demean her?"

"How did I demean her?" Kristen answers with an attitude.

"You acted like having a job after high school was beneath you, like you were so much better than that."

"Well, it is beneath me, Mom. I'm going to college."

"Of course you are, but don't act like what she's going to do is not valuable too."

"Well, you don't want her to think we're going to do the same thing right up until the last minute do you? Think what a shock that would be. And why wouldn't she think that, now that she's staying at the high school until I graduate? Thanks a lot for that, by the way."

"What does that mean?"

"Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to be in school with her? I thought that after this year she'd be gone and I'd be able to just be me. People would forget that she is my sister, but no, she's going to be there for the next three years with me, then we have to play some fantasy game about how we can work together or I get in trouble? I suppose you have some cute little idea about a joint graduation party and then Cassie and I can be roommates in an apartment nearby. Well, forget it. I'm going as far from here as I can once I graduate." That stings.

"It's the best thing for Cassie," I say weakly. "She is not ready to leave school yet. She might be able to learn a bit more if she stays which could give her opportunities she won't have now. And no, I do not expect the two of you to be roommates."

"Of course, then by all means, do it. As long as it's the best thing for Cassie!"

"Kristen..."

"What? Did you ever, for one moment, give a thought to whether or not keeping her at the high school would be the best decision for me?" She pauses for a moment then keeps going, "No, of course you didn't. Because it's the best thing for Cassie. I bet you didn't even think about what that would be like for me."

I'm trying to think of the appropriate response and no, I did not consider whether or not keeping Cassie at the High School would be good for Kristen. I didn't even think about Kristen. Should I have? Before I can think of anything to say Kristen freezes and her mouth snaps shut and her eyes go wide. She is looking past me. I turn around and Cassie is standing in the doorway she looks like someone just slapped her, stunned and about to cry. I look back to Kristen, "Nice going," I say and turn to walk toward Cassie.

"Why you don't want to be in school with me?" Cassie practically whispers.

"Come on, Cassie, let's get you ready for bed," I say trying to bundle her out of the room. She sidesteps me and marches up to Kristen.

"Why you don't want to be in school with me?" she says louder standing right in front of Kristen. "Don't you like me, Krissy?"

Kristen is avoiding Cassie's eyes and mine. I see a tear slip down her cheek.

Cassie sees it too and reaches out to wipe it away. Kristen grabs Cassie around the waist and forces Cassie to sit next to her on the bed. "Of course I like you. You're just silly."

"Is that why you don't want to go to school with me, because I'm too silly?"

"No, you're silly for thinking I don't like you."

"Oh, but why don't you want to go to school with me? I love going to school with you."

"It's not you, Cassie. I'm just having a hard time in school lately."

"Yeah, mean kids."

Kristen looks at her, surprised. It's like they've forgotten I'm in the room. I do my best to keep it that way.

"Yeah," says Kristen after a moment. "Mean kids."

"Why they gotta be mean?" Cassie asks.

"I don't know. Because they suck."

"Yeah, they suck," Cassie says. Kristen starts laughing, so Cassie jumps up and dances around yelling, "They suck, they suck, they suck!" and cracking up. I decide to leave the room quietly just as Kristen gets up and grabs Cassie's hands and joins her yelling "They suck!"

I leave them to it and go downstairs to call Steve. It's 9:00, hopefully he'll be back in his hotel room and able to talk for a minute now. He answers briefly and asks if everything is alright. He's still at a restaurant with a client and can't talk now. I remember that Chicago is on Central Time and it's only 8:00 there. I'm too exhausted to wait for another hour or two to talk to him, so I tell him goodnight. He'll be home tomorrow by dinner time. I'll tell him about the meeting then.

The next morning, Cassie won't go to school.

"Come on, Cassie. It's time to get up." I'm literally yanking on her arm trying to forcefully pull her out of bed. She lets me pull the top half of her body off the mattress, and just hangs there limply with her long hair sweeping the floor. She's dead weight and won't budge. I try a different tack. "Cassie, what's wrong?" I stop pulling on her and sit on the edge of her bed. I can hear Kristen in the shower. Cassie doesn't answer. I look at the clock on her bedside. If I don't get in the shower myself, we're all going to be late.

"Cassie, I'm going to take a shower and when I get back I want you dressed and ready for school. Do you understand?" No response. "Your clothes are on your chair." I leave praying that she will do as I said.

When I come out of the shower, Kristen is downstairs eating cereal. "Mom," she calls up to me. "Do we have any more Pop Tarts?" Cassie is still lying in her bed exactly as I left her. She hasn't moved. Her head is still hanging down and her hair is still brushing the floor. I take that back, she is moving a little bit. She is rocking just slightly so that her hair swings back and forth on the floor. I hear her laugh quietly while she watches her hair.

"Cassie!" I shout and she jumps and falls the rest of the way out of the bed. Luckily she falls on her side. She picks up her head just in time. She starts to cry.

"Mom!" Kristen yells again from downstairs.

"Dammit, Kristen! Check the pantry for the fucking Pop Tarts!" I scream back at her at the top of my lungs, then immediately clap my hand over my mouth. Cassie stops crying and stares at me. "Get dressed," I tell her and leave her room to go down to the kitchen. I can feel the chill emanating off of Kristen before I even enter the kitchen.

"Kristen," I say. She ignores me, rooting around in the pantry. I can't help but note that she is actually moving some things around so she can see everything in there. Why is that not an automatic behavior when looking for something? I seem to be the only one in my family who has developed that skill. I pour myself a desperately needed cup of coffee. "Kristen." She walks from the pantry to the toaster on the counter with a box of Pop Tarts. "Kristen, I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"Yeah, you snapped alright," she mutters.

"Cassie is refusing to get ready for school and I'm a bit frustrated," I tell her. "I see you managed to find the Pop Tarts all by yourself," I can't help but add. She pins me with one of her cold, teen-aged stares.

"Don't bother to drive me today," she says picking up her backpack and heading out the front door, Pop Tart in hand. "I'm going to take the bus." She slams the front door behind her.

Just as well. At least she'll get there on time. I walk slowly back up the stairs to see if Cassie has started to get dressed. I do my best to put on a cheerful attitude. "Cassie, I'm going to make you some scrambled eggs, and a Pop Tart. Be down in the kitchen in five minutes," I call to her as I approach her room. The end of the sentence dies in my throat.

Cassie is still sitting on her bedroom floor tangled in her sheets, pajamas rumpled.

She crosses her arms in front of her and sticks out her chin defiantly when she sees me.

"I'm not going." She punctuates this statement with a firm downward nod of her head.

"Cassie, if you are not downstairs in five minutes, with your clothes on. You will be punished. You are not sick and you are going to make me late for work. You cannot stay home today, because I will have to stay home with you and there is no reason for me to miss a day of work. I need to get to work. Now, GET UP!"

She just shakes her head and watches me. I pick up her ipod on her nightstand and set the timer on it for five minutes, then leave again to make the eggs I promised. I hear the alarm go off as I'm stirring the eggs around in the pan. She is still not downstairs. I look at the clock. It's 7:15, there's no way I'm going to make it on time, even if she comes down right now. I text Eleanor to let her know I'll be late. Fabulous. I'm already on Matt's radar for coming in late too often. I debate whether to call the Main Office and let them know too, or just to hope I can sneak in unnoticed.

"Cassie! Are you dressed?" I call up the stairs. "The timer went off."

"No!" she yells back. "I'm not going."

Fuck it, I'm going to have to call in sick. God dammit. I want to cry. I make the call apologizing all over the place for how late it already is. Then I call Eleanor and apologize to her. She says all the right things, "I understand," and "It's okay," and "Don't worry about it," but I can hear in her voice that she's mad. I hang up the phone and turn around and Cassie is standing in the kitchen, still in her pajamas, but downstairs. She is beaming.

"We are staying home!" she crows. I guess she heard me make the phone calls.

"I'm ready for eggs and Pop Tarts."

I cannot believe this. I've lost the war, but I have to win at least a small battle. "I told you that you could not have eggs and Pop Tarts until you came downstairs dressed," I tell her.

She looks suspicious, "But we're staying home right? You called."

"Yes," I tell her, defeated. "We're staying home."

"Okay!" she says happily and goes obediently up the stairs. In 10 minutes, she is back in the kitchen wearing the clothes I had laid out for her the night before. I put a plate of eggs in front of her and sit down at the table with my coffee.

"Cassie, you cannot do this again. I will lose my job if I don't go to work just because you want a day off." She looks at me and I can't tell if there is genuine concern on her face or just mild interest.

"You'll get fired?" she asks.

"Yes. I have to go to work unless I have a legitimate reason not to go."

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"What's legitimate?" she asks.
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"I don't know," she tells me. "I just don't like it anymore." She takes a few more bites, then looks at me and says, "Why doesn't Kristen want to go to school with me?

"Is that why you didn't want to go today?" Cassie just shrugs and takes a bite of Pop Tart. "It's not you," I tell her. "Some kids have been being mean to her."

"Yeah, but I'm not a mean kid. Why not go to school with me? I'm not mean."

"No, you're not mean. Sometimes the kids are mean to you too and Kristen sticks up for you." I watch Cassie's face to see how she takes this. I see a mixture of delight and confusion. The confusion wins out.

"Kids are mean to me?"

[&]quot;Well, like a good reason--like if you're sick or I'm sick or something like that."

[&]quot;Do you feel sick?" she asks.

[&]quot;A little," I say, realizing that it's true.

[&]quot;So it's legi-mate," she smiles and takes another bite of eggs.

[&]quot;Cassie, I mean it. You have to go to school tomorrow, okay?"

[&]quot;Okay," she says looking down dejectedly.

[&]quot;You usually love school."

[&]quot;Yeah."

[&]quot;What changed?"

[&]quot;Sometimes."

[&]quot;But, why?"

[&]quot;Kristen has heard them saying mean things and she tries to make them stop."

[&]quot;About me?"

"Sometimes."

"But why?"

"Cassie, you know how we've talked about how you're different from a lot of the other kids?"

"Yeah, cuz I'm special."

"Right. Well, some people get nervous about people who are different from them and they are sometimes mean to those people."

"Why nervous?"

"Because they don't understand and that makes people afraid."

"Of what?"

"I'm not sure, really. Maybe they just want everyone to be the same."

"That would be boring," Cassie says shaking her head.

"You're right. It really would," I agree and boop her nose with my finger. She wrinkles her nose and keeps it wrinkled while she looks at me for a moment. I have to laugh. She loves it when she makes me laugh and breaks into a beaming smile.

"Mean kids have to stop being mean," she announces.

"Yes. That they do," I say and stand up. "Since we're staying home today, you can help me clean out a few closets starting with yours. Put your dishes in the sink and come on upstairs."

"Awww Mom!" she reminds me of Spanky from *The Little Rascals* as she takes her dishes to the sink dragging her feet. I almost expect her to kick at the floor and say *aww shucks*.

We spend the morning going through and organizing her closet, then the linen closet, and finally my closet. It's exhausting, especially because Cassie keeps bringing up Kristen not wanting to go to school with her and we have to go through that conversation again and again. After lunch I let Cassie watch a little TV hoping that I've made staying home when you're not sick unpleasant enough at that point that she won't pull that again. I'm putting a box back on my closet shelf when I change my mind and take it down again. It's the box where I kept all the letters I received back when people still wrote letters. I pull out a stack of letters from Steve tied in a red ribbon. We wrote to each other constantly during one summer when he went home to work for his dad and I worked as a camp counselor at a YMCA camp on the Cape.

I untie the ribbon and pull out the top letter. His handwriting still hasn't changed in all these years. I think about how just seeing it on an envelope would increase my heart rate back then. I loved getting letters from him. The other counselors used to tease me about how often I got letters and even little care-packages from Steve. I unfold the letter and begin to read. Before I'm two lines in, I'm smiling. I remember this one. I must've read it a hundred times in the first few days after I received it.

Dear Lynn,

What's New? Even though I'm really enjoying working here, I can't stop thinking about you. Dad let me sit in on the development meeting, which is very interesting since it's where all the creative stuff happens. I kept trying to think of something brilliant to say to contribute and impress the hell out of everyone, and all I could think about was the way you looked at me the last time, in my dorm room, before we left for the summer. The way one perfect

curl fell over your right eye, and you stared at me with that look, like I was the only man in the world. You didn't even say anything, just stared at me like that for a few minutes. It was like our souls were connecting (along with a few other things). I know you felt it too. If there was any doubt, then what came after the look erased that. (Oh My God You Are Amazing.)

I miss you so much it actually hurts. I can't stand that we are so far away from each other this summer. I was really enjoying how much time we spent together last semester, and I don't just mean time alone in my dorm room. I'm really falling for you big time. Missing you so much this summer makes me realize how much I Love you. Yep. I said it. In writing. There's no taking it back now. I LOVE You!! I LOVE You!

Okay, I'll stop. I don't want to freak you out, but I wanted to tell you. I've never felt this way about anyone before. You are the first thing I think about in the morning, and the last thing I think about at night, and the focus of most of my thoughts in between. Then I dream about you-- I don't think I can even tell you about the dreams, at least not in a letter. That'll have to be an in-person topic of conversation. I hope you're enjoying camp and not missing me too much. That's a total Lie. I hope you're miserable without me. That's A lie too. I never want you to be miserable. You know what I mean.

I can't wait for the end of the month when we're meeting in Boston.

What did you tell your parents you're doing that weekend? Did you decide

yet? I'm looking forward to hearing what kind of crazy story you come up

with. My parents think I'm going to Boston with a bunch of guys from the Frat.

That's safe enough since none of them are likely to be over at my parent's house and blow my story like my high school friends might. We are going to have the most romantic weekend ever. I have a few surprises planned.

Until then, my love (I had to say it one more time). Happy Camping. I miss you and love you, (again)

Steve. XOXO

I had loved Steve's openness. I'd never met a guy who was so willing to be honest about his feelings. I couldn't believe his courage using the L-word for the first time in a letter like that. I'd called him from the camp pay phone to tell him I loved him too. There were other people waiting to use the one and only phone we had access to. It was during the hour of free time before dinner that most people spent napping. I kept giggling because so many people could hear me. But I had to tell him I loved him too. I couldn't just let him hang his heart out like that.

My heart hurts a little thinking about how far we are now from the insanely-inlove, the-world-is-our-oyster couple we were then. Where did we go? Where did I go? I can hardly even relate to the intoxicating girl he's talking about in that letter. Was I ever really her? I put the letters back in the box and replace it on my shelf. I'm stir-crazy and just have to get out of the house.

I bundle up in my hat and gloves and wrap a scarf around my neck. I'll go for a little walk while Cassie watches TV. I know I've got at least an hour, because she just started the *Aladdin* DVD. Normally I wouldn't leave her alone, but I know she won't move until the movie is over, and I need a break. I slip quietly out the kitchen door and onto the porch.

It's a crisp, sunny afternoon. I consider going back inside and making Cassie come with me for a walk so she can get some fresh air and exercise, but the thought of the constant questions about the mean kids deters me. I set off toward the beach. I love to walk there, but rarely seem to find the time. I figure I have time now to get to the beach and to walk a bit in the sand along the water's edge, then get back home before *Aladdin* is over. Kristen will probably be home before I will. I guess I should've left her a note. She will definitely be surprised that I'm not there. Oh well, I decide. She can call me if she wants to find me.

I'm at the beach before I know it. I love the beach in the winter. There hasn't been any snow yet, and the light is slanted and just a bit brighter since it's late in the day. I start to walk North along the water. There's a couple walking a dog, but no other people there right now.

I pick up rocks and shells as I go thinking of the Cape Cod blessing, "May you always have a shell in your pocket and sand in your shoes." The story is that if you do, you'll always come back to Cape Cod. I know we are lucky to live here and I really appreciate it at times like this when the summer crowd of self-serving tourists is months away and just a memory.

I see several seals poke their heads up out of the waves as I walk. They are so playful and curious. I always wonder what they think when they look at us on the beach. They are like puppies of the sea. One seems to be trying to keep pace with me. Just when I think he's left me he pops his head up above the waves again and looks at me. I wave, then look around to see if anyone is looking at me. I laugh and stop to skip some of the stones I picked up. I always feel a warmth for my dad whenever I do that. I'm

immediately a little girl of seven again and he and I are walking on this very same beach and he is teaching me to skip stones. It seemed then like it took forever to learn to do it right, but now it's as natural as riding a bike.

All of a sudden I'm crying. What the hell is wrong with me, I'm not an easy cryer, but lately I've been becoming overwhelmed with emotion more often. I just feel so alone, dealing with everything. I don't know what to do about it. I don't know what I'm going to do if Cassie decides to pull this again. I've kept it together pretty well all day, but I realize I have absolutely no control. She can just decide not to go to school and I have to miss a day of work. She is far too big for me to force her bodily, and I don't think it would be right to do that if I could. The poor kid should have some agency in her own life. And I can't do anything right as far as Kristen goes. Or Steve, for that matter. He has nothing for me but criticism. What happened to that sweet, love-struck college kid who wrote that letter and thought I was a goddess?

Now he never thinks what I'm doing is right, and he's always at work, or away on a business trip anyway. I'm sure he'll disagree about Cassie staying at the high school until she's 21, especially since Kristen's so upset about it.

I stop and look around and realize that I've walked long past town. I look at my watch and it's 4:00! I can't believe it. I left at two. Now it'll take me another two hours to walk back and Cassie's movie is over by now and Kristen is probably home. I can't even decide what to do, I just sit down in the cold sand. My phone rings just a few minutes later. It's Steve.

"Hello?"

"Where the fuck are you Lynn?" he yells.

"What the hell? Why are you screaming at me?" I'm immediately on high alert.

"Is Cassie okay?"

"Shouldn't you know that? Where are you?"

"Tell me what's wrong! I just needed to go for a walk."

"You went for a fucking walk, Lynn? And left Cassie home alone? You won't leave the kid with a fucking babysitter to go out for one night, but you took off on a walk and left her sitting there by herself? What the hell is the matter with you?"

"Did something happen? Are you home?" I ask.

"No, Goddammit! I just landed. I'm at Logan. Kristen called my cell when she got home from school and said you were nowhere to be found! I got her voicemail when I landed and called her back."

"Why didn't she just call me?" My voice sounds far away.

"Because she's terrified. She came home and found Cassie alone. She thought you were dead or something. I don't think it even occurred to her to call you. She figured you would never leave Cassie of your own free will. So she called me."

"Well, everything is fine. I'll be home soon," I tell him, and before he can say another word, I hang up the phone. It rings again within a minute and it's him. I turn my phone off and keep walking. I know I should call Kristen and let her know that I'm okay, but I just keep walking.

Who does he think he is calling me up and yelling at me like that? And who does Cassie think she is refusing to go to school and making me miss a day of work? And who does Kristen think she is, giving me the bitch attitude when all I'm trying to do is help her? Fuck them all. I may never go home. Let them try to get along without me for a

while. Goddammit. Who am I anyway? I don't even exist anymore! I'm just someone's mom or someone's wife or someone's sister and everyone ignores me or tells me to get lost or butt out unless they need me for something, well screw them. What the hell happened to me? I used to be someone...didn't I?The image of Dave's drawing of me pops into my head.

The sun is beginning to set. The sky is turning pink. This time of year the days are pretty short and it's getting a lot colder. I'm exhausted. I don't want to walk any further, and I don't want to go home. That is not going to be a pleasant scene--everyone treating my like I'm some naughty child. I do feel bad for making them worry. How could I have left Cassie alone for so long? What if she had needed me? It would've taken a long time to get to her. I start to imagine all the things that might've happened.

I try to remember whether or not I left the dryer running. What if I did and what if it had caught fire? Would Cassie even have known to get out of the house? I think she would've, I mean, we've practiced it, but what if she didn't? Or what if she got hurt somehow and no one was home and she was bleeding or something. She would've been so scared. I stop walking and sit down in the sand. Tears are running down my face. I'm looking out over the ocean at what is promising to become a beautiful sunset, all pinks and oranges and purples and I can hardly even see it.

What about Kristen? She must've thought I'd been kidnapped or lost my mind entirely, just like Steve said. Fucking Steve. Goddammit, he's right. I scared her and I didn't even think about that. I really don't think about her enough. She probably feels so alone because I'm never there for her. I'm a horrible person. I deserve to be invisible. How dare I feel sorry for myself about that.

I just sit and cry until I realize how much colder it's getting now that the sun is going down. I really have to get home. I turn my phone back on and see that it's now 5:15. Steve wouldn't be home yet even if he left the airport right after I hung up on him, and I don't want him to pick me up anyway. Who else can I call? I'm not going to call one of the neighbors, how on Earth will I explain what I'm doing so far from home on a "walk"? I wish Caroline lived closer. She'd be a pain in the neck at first, but I think I could take it from her. She'd know when to cool it, at least. I think of Dave. He won't judge. He'll understand.

I dial Dave's number. I think in some way I knew all along that I would, I just wanted to go through all the other options first and talk myself out of them.

"Hello? Lynn?" His voice is all hopeful. I consider hanging up. This is a really bad idea.

"Hi, Dave," I say after an awkward pause.

"How are you?"

"Um, I'm okay. I wonder if you could do me a favor."

"Of course. What do you need?"

"Could you pick me up at the beach and give me a ride home?"

"Sure. Where?" I have to look around. I can't see any houses or buildings from where I am on the beach.

"Hold on a minute, and I'll find out." I start running toward the nearest walkway leading off the beach. I'm near the lighthouse. I'll have to walk about a mile up a path in the woods to get to a parking lot where he can pick me up. "Can you pick me up at the lighthouse parking lot?"

"Sure, but what's going on, Lynn? Why did you have to check where you were?"

I sigh a bit too loudly. "I went for a walk that got out of hand. I don't have the energy to walk home."

"Oh. Okay, I totally get it. Sometimes the need to escape is very strong."

"Yeah," I breathe, grateful. "I have to walk up from the beach, so if you get there before me, just hang out a minute, okay?"

"Um, why don't you just hang tight on the beach, and I'll walk down and get you there. It's getting dark, and you shouldn't walk alone through those woods."

"I'll be fine. Thank you. See you soon." I hang up on him too.

I start walking up the path back toward the parking lot up by the main road. It's much darker under the trees and I'm a little nervous. "Snap out of it," I tell myself.

Maybe it'd be a good thing if the boogie man got me right now. Then I wouldn't have to deal with any of this.

When I have about a quarter mile to go, Dave jogs up to me coming from the direction I'm heading. I look at my phone for the time. 5:40. He must've started driving before I even hung up from our call.

"Hi," he says, coming to a stop and bending over, both hands on his knees, breathing hard. "Just give me a sec." He takes a few more breaths panting in and out, "just have to catch my breath. I'm not used to running anymore."

"Did you run all the way from the parking lot?"

"Fast as I could. I wanted to make sure you were safe."

"I'm okay, thank you so much for coming." He's trying to be my knight in shining armor. Trouble is, I really wish I were not a damsel in distress. That role pisses me off. "I'm perfectly fine, actually. You didn't need to race over here like that."

He looks up at my face, hands still on knees, then straightens up slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. "Well, you sounded a bit upset on the phone. And most people don't go for such long walks that they can't get home without assistance."

"Yeah, well. Like you said earlier, I needed to escape."

Breathing normally now, Dave turns to walk beside me and we start up the path. "So, what happened?"

"Oh, I don't even know where to start," I tell him. "I guess the most immediate thing is that Cassie refused to go to school today so of course I had to take the day off and stay home with her. No one else's schedule got the slightest wrinkle in it, just mine, always mine."

"Oh, is that something she does often?"

"No. Actually this is the first time. I hope she's not going to make a habit of it. I don't know what I'll do if she does it again. I have a job, you know."

"Yeah, and most bosses are not very understanding about that sort of thing."

"You sound like you're speaking from experience."

"Well, not quite the same situation, but I had to cancel a business trip once because I was afraid to leave Marisa home with my mom. She said I should've just gone, Marisa would've been fine. And I'm sure she would've, but she pitched such a tantrum, sobbing and carrying on that it broke my heart. I couldn't just walk away. I almost got fired over that one."

"Wow." I had stopped walking and was just looking at him. "That's rough."

"Yeah, but I know she really needs me, you know? Especially since she doesn't have her mom. I guess I'm more okay with her controlling me than I am with her feeling like I don't care." At that comment I feel such a stab of pain in my chest at the thought that at this point probably both of my children, and my husband, are feeling pretty strongly that I don't care. The magnitude of what I'd done just leaving Cassie alone like that suddenly hits me. I begin to cry in deep, gasping sobs. Dave stares at me for a moment, mouth agape, eyes wide.

I turn back toward the beach. I have half a thought of just continuing back down there. I have to get away from him. Then I feel his arms close around me from behind. "It's okay," he whispers into my hair. It feels so good to be held that I just relax back against him letting my head fall back to rest on his shoulder. He doesn't ask what's wrong. He doesn't say *don't cry*. He whispers, "Just let it out," then holds me while I do.

It takes a long time. I can't believe how much I need to cry. I've been so stressed for so long, and I've been so *alone*. I'm making big ugly noises and I can feel my nose running. I don't care. I just let it go and Dave keeps holding me. Finally I am wrung out like a rag. My sobs subside and I pull gently away from him and sit down on a rock. I start to feel in my pocket for a tissue and of course I don't have one. Dave holds one out to me without a word. I just nod and blow my nose and wipe at my eyes. I duck my head down and try to get my hair to fall forward over it as much as possible.

"I'm a horrible person," I say.

"No, you're not," Dave says.

"Yes, I am. I left Cassie alone all afternoon while I went on this stupid, selfish odyssey."

"You left her alone? We'd better get going," says Dave.

"She's okay, Kristen's home now. I just scared them both to death and everyone is mad at me."

"They'll get over it." Dave says.

"I hope so. Thank you." I feel tears coming again and I stand wiping furiously at my eyes. "Let's go. Time to face the music."

"Okay," says Dave simply. He follows me as I continue up the walk toward the parking lot. After a few minutes I feel his hand trying to grasp mine. I pull away and sense that he flinches. I feel like a jerk for hurting his feelings when he's being so kind, but I cannot handle any demands or even requests at the moment. I realize he is probably just trying to comfort me, but it feels like a bid for affection and I just can't. I just want to get home to my family. We walk in silence to his car, me a few steps ahead of him. I wait silently by the passenger door for him to unlock it. He does and I climb in while he walks around to the driver's side.

He gets in and turns to look at me. "Lynn, can I just..." I cut him off.

"Please just take me home." He looks at me for a few moments as if he hopes I will give in and talk to him. I just stare straight ahead. Tears threaten again. If he doesn't start the car soon I'm going to scream. He turns the key in the ignition and we drive in silence, other than my giving him directions.

When he pulls up in front of my house I get out immediately, then look back at him. "Thank you," I say again quickly, then shut the door before he can say anything

else. I feel awful for being so cold, but I have to focus on fixing the mess I've made. I can't worry about his feelings. Hah! Part of me laughs derisively at this thought. *But that's what I do* a voice in my head says. *I worry about other people's feelings. Clearly not enough* says a different, harsher voice just as I look up at the house and see Steve watching me from the living room window.

I know that Dave hasn't pulled away yet since I haven't heard the crunch of the tires. They are both watching me, and watching each other. Oh God. I feel a deep pit in my stomach like I just dropped five floors in an elevator. It won't matter what I say, I won't be able to convince Steve that nothing happened between Dave and me. He's probably in there right now conjuring up images of the two of us in bed all afternoon.

I open the front door and turn toward the living room to face Steve. He just stares at me and the mixture of rage and hurt that I see in his eyes is terrifying.

"Steve, it's not..." I start.

"What the hell is going on, Lynn?" he whisper-yells, his neck muscles taut, his eyes furious. "Where have you really been?"

"Steve, I went for a walk, like I told you..."

"Bullshit! Stop lying!" he blurts, louder, then seems to catch himself. I guess he's trying not to let the girls hear. He strides across the room raking his hands through his hair, muttering, "I can't fucking believe this." He turns to face me, "So you left Cassie here alone all afternoon, and scared the shit out of Kristen so you could be with your *boyfriend* from Art class?"

"No, Steve, I told you, I went for a walk...alone. Dave just picked me up and drove me home because I had walked so far."

"Stop," he says quietly but firmly. "I don't want to hear it." He turns away from me and walks up the stairs. I start to follow him, but change my mind. He needs to calm down. I'm not going to get anywhere with him right now. It occurs to me that he might've gone to grab his suitcase and leave. I tell myself to stop being so dramatic. Still, it feels like needles are pricking the backs of my hands, just like what happens when I narrowly miss colliding with something while driving. A wave of cold sweat washes over me, but I can't muster the regret that I'm supposed to feel. I just feel angry. I stand there and seethe for a moment, trying to decide what to do next.

Cassie comes into the living room just then. She launches herself at me and throws her arms around my neck. "Mommy!" She yells right in my ear. "Where were you? I was scared." I turn and put my arms around her and hug her back tightly. "I was so scared," she says again. I feel a tear run down my cheek. *Don't!* I tell myself. *You'll only scare her more. You do not have the right to do that.* She pulls back and looks at my face searchingly. "Mommy?" she says in a small, frightened voice. She sounds so much younger than her 17 years. I try to smile at her. It must look like a hideous, unnatural grin.

"I just went for a walk," I tell her.

"A walk?" she asks, like she doesn't believe me.

"Uh-huh." I nod too vigorously, still trying to control my tears and losing the battle.

"Why you cryin'?" Cassie asks.

"I just feel bad for scaring you and for upsetting...everyone."

"Oh," she nods to herself. This she understands. "I was scared."

"I know, Honey. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I just needed a walk." She thinks about this for a minute, then a big smile lights her face and she pats my back reassuringly.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm a big girl." This makes me cry harder, which confuses

Cassie. I've got to get myself together. I wipe my face with my hands and sit up

straighter.

"Yes, you are. I'm proud of you."

Cassie smiles her beaming grin at me again then asks, "What's for dinner?" I look at the grandfather clock in the corner. It's after 7:00. I haven't even thought about dinner. It's so strange that even when the world seems to be caving in, there still must be dinner and all the mundane things that consume our lives.

"I don't know," I tell her standing up. "Let's go see what we can put together." I turn toward the kitchen door and see that Kristen is standing in it leaning on the door frame. I'm sure she wasn't there before Steve went upstairs, but assume that she's been listening to Cassie and me.

"Hi," I say to her warily. It comes out like a question. She stares hard at my tearstained face. I can't help wondering if she saw me get out of Dave's car. I can't read her expression. She stares for another moment before answering.

"Hi." She continues to look at me like she's waiting for something.

"Kristen, I'm sorry," I tell her. "I never meant to scare you. I just needed to get out for a walk. I needed... a break for a little while."

She nods. I sense that she understands on some level. Her body relaxes and she moves to the side allowing me to walk past her into the kitchen. "Okay," she says. "But do you think you could leave a note next time? I thought you were dead or something."

Cassie gasps at this and looks at me as if to make sure I'm not dead.

"Yes, I will leave a note." I start to say that I won't ever do this again, but think better of it. I'm feeling a bit unsure of what I might do or not do. "Don't be so dramatic," I say instead playfully tapping Kristen's shoulder. "I have no intention of dying anytime soon." Cassie laughs. Kristen doesn't react. She's still trying to read my face. I smile at her and put my arm around her. She stiffens for a moment, then relaxes into my embrace. "Come on. Let's go figure out something to eat for dinner.

We end up eating scrambled eggs, bacon and English muffins, which both girls seem to find delightful. I had always loved to have breakfast for dinner as a kid. I wonder why I never think to do this. I hope the smell will bring Steve downstairs. When the food is ready I send Kristen up to get him.

She comes back down a few minutes later. "He's not coming down," she says. "What's he doing?" I ask trying not to sound overly anxious.

"He's sleeping." She sounds surprised, and a little worried. "He's in bed with all the lights out. I whispered to him to ask if he wanted dinner and he just shook his head without opening his eyes. Do you think he's sick or something?"

"I don't know," I say, suddenly exhausted. "It's been a long day, but I'm sure it's nothing to worry about." Nothing will get resolved tonight, but at least he isn't going anywhere.

We sit down to eat and Kristen says to me, "I understand, Mom." She is giving me a knowing look. I'm not sure what it is she understands.

"What do you mean?"

"I get it that you sometimes need to just get away from everything. From us."

Cassie's eyes widen. "I'm sorry, Mom. I promise I will go to school tomorrow.

Then you won't need to run away again."

"Oh Cassie, I didn't run away because of you. But I'm glad you are going to go to school tomorrow. I hope you won't do what you did today again."

"I won't," she says solemnly, eyes still wide.

Kristen has begun to eat again. I watch her for a moment. "Thank you," I tell her.

She looks up.

"I just wanted you to know that I understand, is all."

"You have no idea how much I appreciate that." I reach out and give her hand a squeeze. She meets my eyes and after a moment we both smile.

"I understand too," says Cassie, grabbing my other hand in spite of the fact that I am holding a forkful of food with it that gets dumped onto my placemat when Cassie pulls my hand. "Oops," she says.

"It's alright," I tell her and grab a napkin to wipe up my placemat. We finish dinner and I send the girls right up to bed, it's time for this day to be over. I clean up the dishes feeling grateful for my girls, and anxious about Steve.

Later that night when I finally climb into bed, Steve silently gets up, grabs his pillow, and leaves the room. "Steve, please listen," I say as he leaves. He just shuts the

door behind him. I sigh and turn on the light to read. I read a few pages, not following the story at all, then turn it off again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

In the morning, I'm finally feeling comfortable and sleepy when my alarm goes off. I finally fell into a pretty deep sleep only a couple of ago. I don't push through to wakefulness. I hit the snooze button and relish seven more sleepy minutes.

When the alarm goes off again, I sit up and realize that Steve is gone, then remember that he slept on the couch or in the guest room. I check the guest room, then run down to the kitchen thinking I will find him there. Nope. I check the garage. His car is gone. My stomach flips. He left. He didn't even say goodbye. I'm not sure if he just went in to work early, or if he's really gone.

I run back upstairs and throw open his closet to see if his clothes are still there. They are. I check his bureau drawers for underwear and socks, still there. I breathe a sigh of relief and wonder how long he is going to avoid talking about what happened. I know he's got the wrong idea about Dave. *Does he really though?* Says a voice inside my head.

I let Dave kiss me one time, realized that was wrong, and haven't done or allowed anything like that since. I think of him holding me while I cried yesterday. I shake my head to dispel the image and go to find something to wear from my closet. Hopefully some brilliant approach will come to me today that will help me to know what to say to Steve and how to say it. I'll follow him around tonight until he has to talk to me.

True to her word, Cassie is partially dressed when I pass her room to go downstairs. I breathe a sigh of relief. Despite her promises, I really wasn't sure how she would be this morning. Things go smoothly and I drop both girls off at the high school on my way to the Middle School. They both wave cheerfully as they leave the car. Thank God. At least as far as they are concerned, things are okay. I realize that neither one of

them had asked that morning where Steve was. Is he usually gone before they get up? I try to think. I guess he is.

* * *

Steve comes home late, but he does come home. By the time he walks in, we've already eaten dinner and the girls are in their rooms either finishing homework or getting ready for bed, and I'm a nervous wreck. I had called his cell phone several times, but he didn't answer. He's never done anything like this before. He always calls if he's going to be late. When I hear the garage door open I am so relieved I want to run to him and hug him.

Instead I rush into the family room and turn on the TV trying to look like everything is normal and I haven't been pacing for two hours unsure of what to do next. Of course the girls had asked at dinner time where he was. I made up a story about his having a late meeting. I'm not sure I convinced Kristen, but she didn't challenge me.

"Where've you been?" I call out immediately when I hear him enter the kitchen. I fail to keep the anger and worry out of my voice. So much for appearing nonchalant.

"What do you care?" he mutters.

I walk into the kitchen. He is looking in the refrigerator.

"I saved you some dinner," I tell him.

"I already ate," he says closing the fridge and heading for the stairs without looking at me.

"Steve, we need to talk."

"I have nothing to say." He is walking up the stairs. I follow him.

"You can't just give me the silent treatment forever. There is nothing going on between me and Dave."

He turns around and just stares at me. I see such pain in his eyes that it stabs my heart. What have I done to him?

"I can't stand the sight of you, Lynn," he says quietly turning to walk into the bedroom. Before he can slam the door I stick my foot in it. "Move your foot."

"No. We need to talk."

"God Damn it, Lynn!" he shouts shoving past me back out of the bedroom and down the stairs. "I don't want to hear your lies."

"I'm not lying!" I shout after him, then follow him. He can't avoid me forever. He's moving fast. I hear the electric garage door opening. I'd rather he throw something than just keep leaving. I dash out the front door to head him off in the driveway. He has already pulled out and turned the car around when I get there. I stand in the driveway daring him to hit me. He speeds past me swerving onto the lawn to avoid hitting me. I slam my hand down on the trunk as he passes. There are deep, muddy tire tracks in the still unfrozen earth of the lawn. "Great Steve!" I yell at his receding headlights. "That's great! Just run away. Very mature."

The lights come on in Mrs. Andrews' kitchen next door. I slink back to the front door, mortified by the whole scene. My heart is pounding so hard I actually worry for a moment that I might be having a heart attack. Anger swiftly takes over. How dare he just keep leaving? What the hell am I supposed to do now?

Kristen meets me at the door.

"What's going on?" she asks looking worried.

"Your father's being a fucking asshole. He just left," my hand slams over my mouth of its own volition. I can't believe I just said that to her. Neither can she. Her eyes widen and her mouth drops open. We stare at each other like that for a moment then I sink down on the bottom step and sit. "I'm sorry, Kristen. I didn't mean that," but I did. He is being a fucking asshole. Why do I have to keep it all together? Suddenly I am utterly exhausted. I sigh loudly. Kristen is still standing there.

"Is he coming back?" she asks in a small voice.

"I don't know," I tell her. "I'm sure he is. He's just angry right now."

"Why?"

"Because of yesterday."

"Who's Dave?"

I look up at her. Then shake my head and look at my knees. "He's just a friend who gave me a ride home yesterday."

"Is that all he is?"

I look into her eyes. "Yes," I say firmly.

"Hmmm," she says, then walks away from me into the kitchen. A few minutes later I hear the TV come on in the family room. I just sit there on the bottom step waiting for something. I don't know what. I don't know what to do next.

I hear Cassie's bedroom door creak open at the top of the stairs. I don't turn around. I don't want her to see how upset I am. I hear her socked feet padding down the carpeted stairs. She sits down on the stair above me and pulls my shoulders until I'm leaning back against her knees. She starts running her fingers through my hair, not saying a word. Before I know it, tears are streaming out of my eyes. Cassie just keeps stroking

my hair. Eventually a sob escapes me and Cassie whispers, "It's okay, mom. Sssh. There, there."

I turn around and give her a big hug. A long hug. She pats my back.

"Come on," I tell her, giving her my hand and pulling her to her feet. "Let's go to bed." I lead her up the stairs and wait for her to get into her pajamas and arrange her stuffed animals the way she likes them, then I climb into her bed next to her and grab the copy of *Charlotte's Web* we've been reading together and I begin to read.

A little while later, just as I'm kissing Cassie goodnight and turning out her light, I hear Kristen's bedroom door open and close next door. I knock on her door after leaving Cassie's room. She doesn't answer.

"Kristen?" I call, "I'm going to bed. Good night."

"'night." I hear her say softly. I'm not sure what's going through her head. I decide to just leave her alone.

I get ready for bed and climb in. I just lay there staring at the ceiling, my mind racing. I thought I might cry some more, but no tears come. I'm jumping out of my skin with nerves. Where could Steve have gone? Eventually, half-dozing, I hear the garage door open. I take a deep breath, the first one I've managed in hours and roll over into a comfortable position. He's home. That's enough for tonight. Whatever's coming next, at least he came home. I'm asleep in minutes.

The weekend is a nightmare. Steve continues to avoid me and to keep odd hours, but he does end up at home each night, even though he sleeps on the couch. He goes out to do errands without telling me he's going. When I mention that it would be nice if he let me know where he's going when he leaves, in case I needed to do an errand too, he says,

"Why? Are you feeling another walk coming on?" I imagine smacking him right across the face. I start to say, "It's just common courtesy," then imagine what he'll say to that, and snap my mouth shut and spin on my heel. I'll just take Cassie with me anywhere I need to go, then it won't matter what he's doing. God knows I function without him often enough. It won't be a problem to do it now.

I keep trying to get him to talk, but he refuses to listen to me. Finally, I decide not to push him anymore. I tell myself that eventually it will have to happen. We will have to have this out one way or another. I'll just let it happen organically. I try to carry on as though everything is fine. My false cheeriness falls flat when met with his lack of response. I force myself to be patient and just keep things as normal as possible. I know he's mad at me, but how can he do this to the girls? He's barely home when they're awake and doesn't interact much with them even then.

The following Saturday night Kristen is sleeping over at a new friend's house and Cassie and I are watching a movie. I'm relieved that Kristen has social plans. Maybe things are turning around for her at school. Steve is home, but doing some work on his computer in the office. There is a knock at the door. Surprised, I press the pause button and jump up, already nervous. It's after 9:30, who would be knocking? Two policemen are standing on my porch lit up almost comically by the colored Christmas lights I strung around the door. They have Kristen between them.

"Hi Mom," she drawls, giving me a lopsided grin.

"Kristen! What happened?" I ask looking at the police and reaching to pull my child into the house. The cops do not let go of her arms.

"Mrs. Holcomb?" one of them says in a stern voice. "Is this your daughter?"

"Yes, she's my daughter," I tell them stepping back to let them into the foyer.

"What's going on. Is she okay?"

"She's very drunk, Ma'am."

Kristen giggles incongruously. "Drunk," she repeats softly. "Hey Cass!" she says loudly when she sees her sister. Cassie gives an unsure wave. The two police officers look over at Cassie and each gives her a nod then they both look back at me.

"We picked her up along with three other teens about an hour ago. They were in a car on Forest Road driving erratically. The driver has been arrested. Your daughter has been cited and fined for underage drinking. You will have to appear with her in court," he tells me handing me a citation. We searched the car and found a quantity of marijuana as well. So it's possible that further charges or fines may follow.

"Further charges?" I parrot stupidly.

"Yes Ma'am. It was clear to us that your daughter and her friends were under the influence, possibly of several substances. Our breathalyzer detected a blood alcohol level of 0.10%. Since we also found marijuana in the car, there are likely to be further charges, that's up to the judge. We've already scheduled a court date for your daughter." He hands me a slip of paper.

I just stand looking at him with my mouth hanging open. They had released Kristin's arms once they were inside and she had drifted over to the bottom step and slumped down on it leaning her head against the wall with her eyes closed. I look at her for a minute then pull myself out of my stupor and look back at the police.

"Thank you for bringing her home safe," I whisper.

"Yes Ma'am. Just doing our job. We're lucky nothing truly tragic happened."

I nod thinking of the possible horrific outcomes to the situation and feeling an uncomfortable mixture of gratitude, shame, and fear. The officers nod curtly and turn to leave. I close the door behind them and just look at Kristen. I'm not sure what to do.

"Mom?" I hear behind me and jump. I had forgotten Cassie was there. "Is Kristen sick?" Her eyebrows are furrowed with confusion. Yes. I think. That's right. Kristen is sick. My heart sinks and I let out a huge sigh. What am I supposed to do now?

"She'll be okay," I tell Cassie. "Can you go up and get your pajamas on while I help Kristen?"

"I'll help too," Cassie says firmly sitting down next to Kristen and plopping a stuffed pink kitten into her lap. I know it's one of Cassie's favorites. Cassie tries to pull Kristen up into a proper sitting position. Kristen slumps over to the other side without opening her eyes and rests her head on Cassie's shoulder. Cassie smiles up at me and puts her arm around Kristen. "See? I'm helping!" She tells me.

Just then Kristen stiffens and sits up, then hangs her head between her knees and vomits all over her own legs and shoes, the pink kitten, and the tile. It splashes when it hits the floor and some gets on Cassie and on the carpeted bottom step. "Ewwww!" shrieks Cassie jumping up and pushing Kristen away from her. Kristen blinks up at me and starts to cry. "Mommy," she croaks. Then Cassie starts crying too.

I feel like joining them, but remind myself that this is a good thing. Kristen is much better off having gotten rid of some of whatever she consumed. "I'll be right back." I say and run into the kitchen for paper towels and a plastic grocery bag. I run some of the towels under the tap to get them wet, grab the rest of the roll, and start to run back to the foyer.

"What's going on?" Steve asks. He's standing at the top of the stairs looking down on the chaos in the foyer. I look up at him. I'm so glad he's there, and speaking somewhat normally, that it's a moment before I can answer.

"The police brought Kristen home drunk," I tell him over my shoulder as I begin to wipe up the mess. Kristen lets out a wail as if she is just finding this out herself. *Good*. I think. *You should feel some regret*. "She just threw up and I need to get it cleaned up and Cassie needs a shower and Kristen needs some food and a lot of water to help her sober up before she goes to bed. God *damn* it, Kristen," I yell the last at her as she tries to stand up and lurches across the foyer spreading the mess.

Steve surveys the scene for a moment and shakes his head with a look of utter disgust on his face. "Come on, Cassie. Let's get you cleaned up," he says softly. She stands and walks slowly over to him, still crying. "It's okay," I hear him tell her as he leads her up the stairs.

I look for a moment at Kristen. "Come on," I say extending my hand. She takes it and stands up, beginning to hiccup, tears still streaming down her face. I take her into the kitchen and sit her at the table with a large glass of water. "Drink all of this."

I turn my back on her and set about making her a couple of slices of toast. I figure a little bread might help absorb some of the alcohol in her stomach if there is any left.

"Mom?"

The shock is beginning to wear off and I am angry now. I can't believe she would pull a stunt like this. How long has she been drinking? Who was she with? What else has she been doing? This is the last thing I need right now with Steve barely speaking to me.

The police brought her home for God's sake! She has to go to court! What if she'd been hurt or killed in a car accident? My stomach is in knots.

"Not now," I manage to croak. "You are going to eat this toast and drink some more water and go to bed. We'll deal with this in the morning. Just don't plan on being allowed to go anywhere anytime soon." I slam the plate of toast down in front of her. She weeps silently and picks up a slice then takes a small bite. I turn away again and look out the window waiting for her to finish, taking deep breaths trying to calm down.

I keep picturing Kristen bloody and broken on the side of the road, having been thrown from a car. I need to stop imagining the worst. *It didn't happen. It didn't happen. But it could've. But it didn't.* I want to just grab Kristen up from the table and hug her. I also want to slap her. *Who even is she? She's been lying to me. I don't even know her. At least she's home safe.* I take another breath, then another. Finally, Kristen finishes her toast.

"Go to bed," I tell her. "We'll discuss all of this in the morning."

She stands, still sniffling, then walks slowly out of the kitchen. As soon as she leaves I open the slider to the deck planning to find the cigarettes I hid in my gardening shed and have a well-deserved smoke.

I hear Steve's voice. I can't hear what he says, but he's talking to Kristen on the stairs. I step back inside and shut the door with a flash of anger at him. *Now* he's going to come in here and talk to me. After days of the silent treatment when all I wanted was for him to seek me out, now when I just need a moment to myself, when I really need a cigarette, he's going to come in here. I turn to face him as he comes into the kitchen.

He glares at me. I glare back.

Suddenly I am overcome by exhaustion. I sink into a chair at the kitchen table. "She has to go to court," I tell him picking up the citation I had left on the table and holding it out to him.

"Shit," he says looking at it. "What the hell happened, Lynn?" He asks angrily slapping the citation on the table after looking at it. "Who did she go out with? How long has this been going on?"

"Why do you sound like this is my fault? She was supposed to be sleeping over at Madison's house. That's where I thought she was. I have no idea who she was with. Or how long she's been pulling crap like this."

"Don't you check with Madison's mother before you let Kristen sleep over?"

I just stare at him. I can't believe he is blaming me for this. How am I supposed to keep track of what Kristen is doing when she's at someone else's house? She's fifteen, for God's sake, I can't just keep her locked up at home. She needs to socialize, especially right now. "No, I didn't check with Madison's mom," I yell. "Did you?"

"Me? I didn't even know she had plans in the first place!"

"And why not?" I jump up out of my chair. "Don't you live here? Aren't you a parent? Why don't you ever know what's going on around here?"

"Because I have to commute for three hours every day so that I can make enough money to support this family and you can live in your precious, God-damned hometown!" he shouts. "So I never get to be home!"

I'm speechless. So I can live in my hometown? Steve is glaring at me, breathing hard. He looks like he'd like to hit me. I've seen that look on his face a only a few times. Once, when a truck driver fell asleep at the wheel on the highway and drifted into our

lane, colliding with the car ahead of us. The car that Cassie and Kristen were riding in with Steve's parents. The car was totaled, but everyone was okay, miraculously. I thought Steve was going to kill that truck driver with his bare hands before the police got there. His expression now looks just like it did then. I take a step away from him. My own anger is choking me.

"You know that! Don't try to make it sound like I just can't leave my home town. And, you don't support this family! Not entirely. I work too, or did you forget about that since you leave before I do in the morning and get home after me? What. Do you think I'm just sitting around all day watching soap operas while you're out there *supporting* us? I do everything around here. Absolutely everything. I might as well be a single parent!"

"Do you think I like it that I can't be here? Do you have any idea how much I've missed over the years that I can't ever get back? Do you? Do you have any idea how much time I spend alone? I can't even get you to go out with me for an evening because you are so busy trying to win Mother of the Year. Do you ever even think about what my life is like, or what I might need?"

"Yeah, probably about as often as you do the same for me," I say slumping back into the chair. I had planned to slam out of the room and refuse to talk to him for a few days. Give him a taste of his own medicine. But all the fight has gone out of me. Despite my effort to avoid it, I start to cry again.

"Oh shit, Lynn," Steve sits down across from me. "Great. Bring on the waterworks. I can't stand it when you cry."

"I can't help how you feel. Don't lay that on me too. Believe me. I wouldn't cry if I could help it. I hate to give you the satisfaction."

"You use crying as a weapon when it suits you."

I just lay my head down on my folded arms on the table. What's the point?

"No, Lynn," Steve says. "You don't get to just check out right now. We have to figure out what to do about Kristen."

I jerk my head up. "I am not the one who checks out around here," I snap. "That's your department."

"No. You just go for long, aimless walks and leave your handicapped child home alone, then call your boyfriend to come and comfort you."

Handicapped child? My boyfriend?

"Fuck you, Steve."

"Fuck you too, Lynn."

We just stare at each other for a long time. In a stand off of sorts. I don't think either one of us knows what to do next. Finally I get up and pour myself a whiskey.

"What are we going to do?" I ask after a long moment.

"About Kristen?" We're both speaking more calmly now.

I just look at him for a moment, then nod.

"Well. I guess we'll have to hire a lawyer since she has a court date."

I feel my heart skip a beat. A lawyer. Court. *Good Lord*. I wonder what long-term repercussions this whole stupid episode will have for Kristen. Will she be able to go to college? Will she ever be hired for a decent job? The tears keep slipping from my eyes. I nod at Steve and take another sip of my drink.

"She'll have to get some counseling," I say, "especially since she's been having so much trouble with her friends. I'm sure that all of that stuff is at play here."

"You mean her suspension for hitting Chloe?"

"Yes, and all the other stuff."

"What other stuff?"

I realize too late that I know all the "other stuff" because I had read it in Kristen's diary, not because she told me about it. Steve has no idea I did that. Well, things are already bad. Might as well tell him this too.

"I read about some things in her diary."

"What? Jesus Christ, Lynn. First you violate her privacy by reading her diary, then when you find out disturbing things you do nothing about them?"

"I was worried about her. I tried to do something. But I couldn't let her know I'd looked in her diary. If I did, she wouldn't trust me anymore."

"Exactly. You aren't trustworthy anymore. I don't even know who you are."

"I feel the same way about you. God knows I can't rely on you for anything. I have to take care of everything on my own. That's not the man I married."

"So you decided to find a new man."

"Goddammit, Steve. I've told you over and over there is nothing going on between me and Dave."

"Does he know that? I've only met the guy a couple of times, but he is like a lovesick puppy over you. He doesn't even try to disguise it from me. 'Where's Lynn today? Will she be back next week?' You're either lying to me or you're lying to him and leading him on. Which is it?"

Which is it?

"This is stupid. There is nothing going on between Dave and me. I'm not lying to anyone. I'm going to bed, I'm too upset to deal with all of this right now. In the morning we need to have a serious talk with Kristen. Then we'll call a lawyer and figure it out from there." I leave the room before he can say anything else.

When I get upstairs I lock myself in the bathroom with the remainder of my whiskey, then fish a cigarette out of the tampon box and hang my head out the window while I smoke it. Steve could come out on the patio at any moment and catch me. I hope he does.

Chapter Twenty-Three

I'm up early the next morning, seeing no point in lying in bed wishing sleep would come any longer. Steve snores next to me. I wonder why he decided to come back to our room to sleep. I watch him for a moment trying to see the beautiful boy I fell in love with in college. I know he's in there somewhere. Eventually I give up. I'm not sure if we can ever regain "us" again. Maybe we've both changed too much. I go downstairs barefoot and in my pajamas and head outside to my garden.

I sit down right in the middle of it, on the ground, in the dirt, and have a good cry. I begin picking up handfuls of dirt without really realizing I'm doing it, and just letting the soil sift through my fingers. Once I notice I'm doing it, I squeeze the dirt in my right hand as hard as I can then let out a little scream as I throw it across the yard. That feels good so I keep on doing it. I pick up dirt and throw it as hard as I can. I find a couple of rocks and throw those too. Some of them hit the shed and make a very satisfying noise. I'm still crying, but now I'm laughing too because in some corner of my mind I'm aware of how I must look early in the morning in my pajamas throwing dirt and rocks like a bratty kid in a sandbox.

I accidentally pull up a tulip bulb with one of my wild grabs and am horrified for a split second, then I feel an insane smile spread across my face as I realize that it feels good. I've stopped crying and just want to feel more of this joyful release. I start digging up bulbs with my fingers as fast as I can and winging them across the yard. Within a few moments I have utterly destroyed the garden that I have tended to so carefully for so many years. It's gone. I start to laugh hysterically because it feels so freeing. But then I think of all the tender effort and back-breaking work I poured into this garden that I truly

love. Now it's nothing. It's utterly destroyed. The sadness of that realization is so painful that I have to lie down. Right in the middle of the mess, on the cold December ground. All I can think about is everything I've ruined. Not just the garden, but my relationship with Steve, my obligation to keep Kristen safe, and Cassie, the fact that I risked Cassie's safety when I left her alone. I have failed on every score that matters in my life, and all while trying so hard to be successful, to keep everyone going, to make sure everything is okay, for everyone. How has this happened?

Eventually I must have fallen asleep, despite the cold, because I wake up, looking up at the sky and at Cassie's worried face. She is sitting in the dirt next to me stroking my face and saying, "Mama?" She looks terrified. I sit up.

"Hi, Baby," I croak. She smiles and I see her relief.

"What're you doin'?"

"I couldn't sleep so I came outside to do some work in the garden, then I got tired. I must've dozed off." Cassie looks slowly around at the ruin of the garden. Her mouth is open slightly and her brow is furrowed. "I made a mess of it, didn't I?" She nods and smiles.

"Why'd you do that, Mom?"

"I don't know." I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I guess I decided it was time to start over."

Cassie nods vigorously like this makes perfect sense. "I can help you re-do it, okay?"

This makes tears slide from my eyes again and I lean forward and hug her tightly. "That would be great. Thank you, Cassie."

"No problem, Mom. It'll be okay." She pats my back with one hand while holding me tightly in her arms. What did I ever do to deserve her? She holds on and pats my back.

After a long time, I wipe the tears from my cheeks and pull back to look at Cassie, my hands on her shoulders. She looks searchingly at me for a second, then her face lights up in a big smile. Maybe she decided I was going to be okay.

"Thank you, Cassie. I love you."

"I love you too," she tells me. "Kristen's sick."

I nod. "Yeah, I know. Is she up? We'd better go inside."

Cassie nods vigorously, agreeing on all counts, and lowers her hands to the ground to aid her in standing up. I get up too and put my arm around her and we begin to walk toward the house. I look up and see Kristen watching us out the kitchen window. She looks stricken. I stop and just look at her for a moment. My poor child. I've failed her in so many ways. Cassie follows my gaze to the window, sees Kristen, and waves, then performs an elaborate pantomime intended to communicate to Kristen that we are on our way in and will be there in a minute. Kristen gives her a half-smile, and a sad wave and disappears from the window.

When Cassie and I come into the kitchen, Kristen is sitting at the kitchen table with her chin in her hands as if she can't hold her head up on her own, and looks up at me with anxious eyes.

She points out the back door toward the garden, "Did you do that, because of me?" she asks.

"I did it because of a lot of things, I guess. How are you feeling?"

"Awful. My head feels like it's going to split open."

"Yep. That's a hangover. Was it worth it?"

She shakes her head slowly from side to side and puts her face down on her arms on the table.

"See?" says Cassie, pointing to Kristen. "I told you. She's sick." I nod.

"You were right," I tell Cassie. I turn back to Kristen, "I'm going to make you a nice greasy breakfast with bacon, and eggs, home fries, and toast and coffee, then we're going to have a little talk."

"Ugh," she mumbles, face still in her arms. "I can't eat."

"Yum!" says Cassie enthusiastically.

"It'll help. You'll see. In the meantime, drink this and take these." I hand her a glass of Coke and two Advil. She looks surprised, since I don't usually allow her to drink soda, only at restaurants and parties. The only reason we have it in the house is that Caroline is addicted and I keep some around for her. Kristen picks up her head and takes a tentative sip.

Glad to have something constructive and mindless to do, I set to work at the stove. Steve comes into the kitchen and looks at each of us. I just watch him to see what he'll do or say. Cassie says, "Hi Dad," and Steve gives her a little smile. "Hi Cass," he says. Then he looks at Kristen for a moment, who avoids his eyes and says nothing, just sips her Coke. "Little hangover this morning?" he asks. Kristen nods. Steve shakes his head, then looks out the back window toward the yard. His eyes widen as he takes in the scene. He looks at me with a question on his face and I see him notice the dirt smeared on my pajamas, and probably in my hair as well. "What did you do?" he asks.

"I just did a little pruning in the garden," I tell him breezily, and turn back to the stove..

"Jesus, Lynn. You destroyed it."

I feel my shoulders stiffen. "Yeah. I destroyed it," I say keeping my eyes on the eggs.

"Jesus," he says again, then begins to make some coffee. "Why would you do that?"

I don't answer. I just shrug, then look at him directly in the eyes for a moment. Finally, I say, "I felt like it."

He shakes his head again, but doesn't say anything else. He sits at the table and begins to massage his temples and run his hands through his hair. "So what now?"

"First breakfast, then we need to talk to Kristen," I answer decisively. I say nothing more about the garden. I glance out the window and my heart drops when I survey the extent of my destructive impulses. I shiver, not sure if it's because my time outside in the cold, or the thought of how much I need to rebuild.

Kristen flops over dramatically, her head on one arm on the table. "Ugh," she moans.

Cassie watches her wide eyed, then she begins to laugh. We all look at her, surprised. She looks at each of us, still giggling. "Kristen's funny." She says, then in perfect imitation of her sister, she flops over onto one arm and laughs harder.

"Yeah, real funny," says Steve.

Cassie raises her head slowly looking at Steve with wide eyes. She caught his sarcastic tone, but not the reason for it. She blinks at him and looks like she's going to cry.

"What?" she asks quietly.

Steve looks at her and sighs. "I'm sorry, Cassie. That wasn't about you. Kristen did something she shouldn't have, and I'm frustrated with her."

Cassie looks from him to Kristen. "Oh. Kristen's sick,' she tells him.

"Yes. She made herself sick." Kristen continues to lie on her arm on the table, pretending to ignore this entire exchange.

"She did?" Cassie looks amazed. "How'd she do that?

Kristen picks up her head and says loudly, "I drank a lot of beer, and some vodka too."

"Why?" Cassie asks her, awestruck.

"Because it's fun," Kristen mumbles into her arms, her head back down on them.

"It doesn't look fun. You're sick now and you throwed up last night. On me. That wasn't fun."

Kristen raises her head and looks at Cassie, then mutters, "Sorry about that," and lets her head fall again.

I bring her a plate, and one for Cassie too. "Sit up, Kristen and eat this." She pushes herself up and leans back in her chair as if she is trying to distance herself from the food. She wrinkles her nose. "Eat," I say.

Cassie digs in with enthusiasm. I go back to the stove and fix myself a plate.

"Is there enough for me?" Steve asks as I walk back to the table.

"Help yourself," I tell him with my mouth full. He gets up slowly and goes over to the stove and comes back with some eggs and a couple of pieces of bacon. Kristen finally picks up her fork and starts to eat. We all eat in silence for a few minutes. I watch Cassie eat. I am waiting for her to finish so I can send her upstairs and we can talk to Kristen. It takes her forever. Kristen finishes first and stands up.

"Thanks, Mom. You're right, I do feel better. I'm going to take a shower."

"Sit right back down," Steve says firmly just as I open my mouth to say exactly the same thing. Kristen turns to face him. "You are not leaving this table until we have a little talk."

"I already know what you're going to say," Kristen says.

"Yeah. To not to drink beer and vodka," Cassie offers helpfully.

"Duh," says Kristen rolling her eyes.

"Duh," says Cassie imitating her, eye roll and all.

"Sit!" Steve roars. We all jump a little. Kristen sits. Cassie sniffs and refocuses on her food.

"Cassie," I say trying to distract her. "Will you go upstairs and draw me a picture of my garden? We can use it to help us know where we should put things when you help me rebuild it."

She looks up at me and smiles, nodding happily while she chews a mouthful of toast. "Okay, Mom," she says getting up immediately. "I'll get started now." She takes the remainder of the toast with her and I just let her go instead of insisting she eat in the kitchen like I usually do. The three of us at the table all seem to be holding our breath as

we listen to Cassie's footsteps as she climbs the stairs. Once we hear her close her bedroom door, Kristen looks from me to Steve and back again, waiting.

"Kristen, what you did last night was unbelievably dangerous. Do you realize that?" Steve begins, trying to regain his calm.

"What you did was extremely stupid!" I cut in. "Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you are in, Kristen?"

Kristen nods slowly. "I'm sorry, but..." she tries, but I cut her off.

"But nothing!" I yell. "You are going to have to go to court. There is no way to get out of that!" I look up at them, a bit shocked by my fury.

Steve stares at me for a long time without speaking. I stare back. Finally I look at Kristen.

"Tell us exactly what happened. Start from when you left here yesterday afternoon."

Kristen takes a deep, halting breath. "Okay. So I got to Madison's and she got a text from this kid, Jason. He wanted us to come out with him and his friend, Robbie. Robbie is a senior and he has a car. They were planning to pick us up. I didn't really want to go, but Madison really likes Jason, so we said we would."

"What did you tell Madison's mother?" I can't help asking.

"We didn't tell her anything. Madison's parents were going out to some big 50th birthday party. We figured we'd go out and be back home before them. No big deal."

"So then what?"

"Robbie picked us up at the end of the street and we went to the mall. He and his friend, Jason, had a bottle of vodka and a gallon of Kool Aid and some beer in the car.

We never went into the mall, we parked way around the back where the dumpsters are, and just hung out. I had a small cup of vodka mixed with Kool Aid. Madison got really drunk. She was so busy making out with Jason that I'm not sure they even knew Robbie and I were there."

I want to throw up. "What were you and Robbie doing?"

"Just talking and stuff. He tried to kiss me once, but I didn't let him. It started to get pretty boring, so I was trying to get them all to leave and go somewhere else. Jason knew of someone whose parents were out of town that was having a party, so we went there."

"And you drank more there," Steve says.

"Well yeah. They had this punch that tasted really good. You could hardly tell it had alcohol in it, but I guess it did."

"No doubt," says Steve.

"So anyway, things got a little out of control, and Robbie started to get nervous that the neighbors might call the cops since the party was so loud, so we decided to leave. That's when we got pulled over. It turned out the cops were on their way to break up the party and they caught us pulling out of the street. Robbie had pot in the car too, that's why he was so nervous, but I never did any of that. I just had a couple of beers and some vodka punch. Madison and Jason are going out now. If we hadn't gone with them, that wouldn't have happened."

I just stare at her. Is she trying to justify this whole thing? "Oh, well then. Good thing you went! For God's sake, Kristen! Are you serious? Do you realize how dangerous

all of this was? Why would you ever get into a car with someone who'd been drinking? Haven't we taught you better than that?"

"Robbie was worried about the cops. I had to leave. I had no other way home!"

"Of course you had another way home! You could've called us!" Kristen rolls her eyes. "Thank God the cops stopped you before you got into an accident."

"Robbie was fine. He hadn't had that much to drink. He drove fine from the mall to the party. He's used to it. His tolerance is high."

"Kristen, how old is Robbie?" Steve asks,

"He's 17," she tells him.

"So he has a Junior license and is not supposed to have any passengers under the age of 18 in his car, so before we even get to the alcohol or pot, the kid just lost his driver's license, and who knows what other consequences he'll have to face."

Kristen looks at him uncomfortably for a moment, then she looks away and says softly, "What's going to happen to me?"

"You'll have to go to court and find out. The date on the summons is for Monday,

January 13th. I'll have to take the day off work to go with you." Kristen nods miserably.

"I'm going too," I tell them.

Steve looks at me. "Yep," he nods. "Kristen, starting now, you are grounded until further notice. You will go to school and that is all. Otherwise you are at home. Also, hand over your phone. You won't be needing it while you're grounded." Kristen starts to protest but he cuts her off. "I don't really think you have any room for bargaining here, do you?" She slumps and hands him her phone.

"May I be excused?" she asks formally. "I'd like to take a shower." Steve nods.

"Before you go," I say quickly. "I'd like to add that I am going to find you a therapist. It seems you've been going through a lot lately...according to your diary." I glance quickly at Steve as I say this and see him turn to watch Kristen for a reaction.

"You read my diary!" she yells at me.

"I needed to see what was going on with you. You've been so angry and there was that incident with Chloe at school, now this. Though I have to admit, this one caught me by surprise. I'm really worried about you." She just stares at me, then whirls around and stomps up the stairs.

"Great, that went well," says Steve, shoving back his chair, standing up, and walking out of the room right behind Kristen.

I stand and pick up the breakfast dishes. I feel drained, but somehow relieved, cleaner.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Christmas is strained to say the least. I can't decide whether or not Kristen should even get all the gifts I have for her after her drinking episode. Do gifts count as a privilege that should be lost when one is grounded? Finally, I decide they don't. I'm going to give her everything I already bought. I don't bother to ask Steve what he thinks. What would be the point?

Steve's mother arrives on December 22nd. She's staying for a week, then will go back to Florida in time for the New Year's party at her condo complex's clubhouse. I wonder if Steve's even told his mom anything about our recent issues. My guess is probably not, but I'm not sure. Since I don't know, I'm more on-edge than usual when she arrives.

"Hello, Gwen. Welcome. Merry Christmas!" I practically bow trying to be welcoming and to take the shopping bag she's clutching from her. She holds on tight and I end up off balance and trip a little. Steve comes in from the garage behind her, carrying her enormous suitcase.

"Hello, Dear," says Gwen pecking me quickly on one cheek. "Do you have somewhere you'd like me to put the fruitcake I brought?" She holds up the shopping bag. Fruitcake. Ugh. Is there anyone on the planet who actually likes the stuff? Besides Gwen, I mean. She hauls two of them up here every Christmas and we spend the week trying to be polite while we choke some down. Thank God I made plenty of Christmas cookies.

"I'll just put them in the fridge in the garage. That's where all the desserts are." I wrest the bag away from her and march out to the garage and shove the bag unceremoniously into the refrigerator.

When I come back in, Gwen is giving Kristen a big hug, then she walks over to Cassie and pats her on the shoulder awkwardly. "Hello, Cassie," she says slowly. "How are you?" She has a too-bright, too-wide smile on her face and her eyebrows have disappeared into her hairline. I give Steve a look that says, "Seriously? Do something about this."

He steps in, "Mom, Cassie loves to give big hugs."

No sooner are the words out of his mouth than Cassie throws her arms around Gwen in a big bear hug. Gwen stiffens, then hugs her back awkwardly. I can't even believe how uncomfortable she still is with Cassie after all these years. I turn away, disgusted, Steve gets a glass out of the cupboard and pours himself a drink. "Can I get you a glass of wine or something Mom?"

"Oh, no thank you, Stevie. If I have wine now, I'll be asleep before dinner."

Steve nods and takes his bourbon into the family room. "Come on in and sit down."

"Can I help you with anything, Lynn?" Gwen asks.

"Oh no, I've got it all under control. Kristen, take Grandma's suitcase up to the guest room for her." Kristen hefts Gwen's suitcase up the stairs,

Cassie stands next to Gwen looking at her expectantly. She grabs Gwen's hand and I see Gwen jump. "C'mon, Grandma. Let's go inna family room." She pulls on Gwen's arm, but Gwen stays planted, looking at me.

"Go, sit and relax, Gwen. We'll eat in about an hour. I'll bring out some hors d'oeuvres."

Finally Gwen looks at Cassie. "Okay, Dear. I'm coming. Why don't you tell me about what you're doing these days in school?" They walk together into the family room. I can't help rolling my eyes. All Gwen can think of when it comes to Cassie is whether she's "improving" as if her Down syndrome might someday be cured altogether.

Caroline arrives the next morning. She and Gwen have never liked each other much, but they tolerate each other during Christmas every year.

"Hello, Caroline, Dear. It's so good to see you!" Gwen gushes when Caroline comes in. "Oh my, look how precious you look!" She pats Caroline's tiny baby bump. "Why you're hardly showing at all! How are you feeling? I guess you won't be drinking so much wine this year."

I know Caroline hates it when people touch her like that, but I also know she can handle Gwen herself, so I busy myself hanging up Caroline's coat and asking Steve to take her suitcase upstairs. I have to suppress a laugh when I hear Caroline come back with, "No, there'll be that much more for you," in response to Gwen's comment about the wine.

Dinner is tense, luckily Gwen has had a few glasses of wine by then. It's a mixed blessing. She talks so much that the fact that Steve and I are barely speaking to each other is easier to hide, but so much of what she says is veiled criticism that I'm ready to scream. Kristen leaves the table right after dinner and stays in her room. I don't have the energy to fight with her and make her stay with the rest of us.

Steve turns on the TV after dinner and *It's a Wonderful Life* is on. I think there playing it on a loop all day long. It's at the part where George and Mary get married. "I just love this movie," says Gwen, and she settles in to watch. Cassie cuddles up next to her on the couch and Gwen looks a little uncomfortable. I will her to put her arm around Cassie. Steve's in the recliner and looks like he's about to fall asleep. Finally Gwen does put her arm around Cassie and they watch together looking more relaxed.

Caroline corners me in the kitchen. The fact that Steve and I aren't exactly speaking did not get past her.

"What's up with you and Steve?" she asks.

I tell her about going for a walk and about Dave driving me home, and how there's no getting through to Steve that nothing is going on.

"He's been giving me the silent treatment for weeks. I can't get him to talk about it. I'm not sure how long he plans to keep this up."

Caroline looks serious. "I warned you about Dave," she says.

"Oh for God's sake. We're just friends. There is nothing going on." I don't see any reason to tell her about the time he kissed me. That was a one-time thing, it's not going to happen again.

"You need to stay away from him, I think," says Caroline.

As a change of subject, I tell her about Kristen's arrest. I really need someone to talk to about all that, and Steve isn't available for that right now.

"Oh my God, Lynn. That's really scary," says Caroline. "Now you have to go to court?"

"Yeah. In a couple of weeks."

"And Steve is acting like a complete asshole. Why doesn't he just scream at you or leave or something? The silent treatment is worse."

"Yeah, I would rather just have a huge fight, but every time I bring it up, he says he doesn't want to hear anything I have to say, and if I push it further, like follow him around and keep talking, he just leaves."

"That's awful. I can't believe you haven't called me."

I don't know what to say to that. I'm not sure myself why I haven't called, except maybe that I didn't want her to lecture me about Dave.

"And, you've got to put up with the queen-of-all-she-surveys in there," Caroline adds, nodding toward the living room.

"Yep." I dramatically take another sip of my wine and Caroline laughs.

"Do you think Steve's talking to her about all this?"

"I was afraid he would, but I don't think he has. I'm not getting any vibes from her that she thinks I'm a cheating whore or anything, just the usual implication that I've failed somehow because I haven't fixed Cassie yet. Imagine if she knew what Kristen's been up to lately. That would all be my fault too. I guess it's a blessing that Steve has never been one to open up to his mother. He finds her overbearing too. Usually we can bond over that. We actually get some laughs out of it. Not this year."

"I'm so sorry you're going through all of this, Lynn. Steve'll snap out of it eventually, you know he will. He's just having a hard time. Do you want me to talk to Kristen?"

"What would you say?"

"I don't know. Maybe share some old war-stories about making some bad choices and how that can lead you down the wrong path, being careful who you choose to hang out with, that sort of thing."

"I guess you can try if you can get her to listen to you. I've tried all the same tactics, but she hasn't got any use for me at the moment."

"Of course, she doesn't. You're her mother. You know she doesn't really feel the way she's acting, but she can't drop the act either. Don't you remember being a teen-aged girl?"

"Yeah," I sigh. "It's a rough place to be."

"It sure is," agrees Caroline. "I'll try to talk to her as soon as I get a chance without her grandmother lurking around within earshot.

"Good luck with that," I smile.

After Christmas, Caroline tells me she did manage to talk to Kristen a bit, and she thinks Kristen will be okay. That this was a one-time incident and Kristen learned her lesson. That's a relief.

"She's really worried about you and Steve, Lynn," Caroline tells me. "She's far more aware of what's going on with you two than I think you realize."

"What did she say?"

"That you've been hanging out with the dad of one of Cassie's friends and that she wonders if there's anything going on between you two. She knows that Steve thinks there is, but I couldn't get out of her if he told her that, or if she just deduced it. She kept saying, 'I just know he does,' when I asked her. I hope he wouldn't say something like that to her."

"There was a time when I'm sure he wouldn't have, but I don't know what to expect from him anymore. Apparently he feels the same way about me." The weight of all of this is palpable in my chest. It feels like an elephant is sitting on my lungs and I can't get a deep breath. I've been feeling that way for quite a long time, I realize.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Steve and I take Kristen to her court date on Monday January 13th. None of the other kids she was with in the car are there that day. They must have given them all different court dates on purpose. Because she's only 14 years old, she gets lucky and is assigned 30 hours of community service, and she must attend a weekly drug and alcohol awareness course taught by a police officer at the police station. None of this will remain on her record after she turns 18, and her name is not printed in the police report in the newspaper because of her age. Later that evening, I find that I'm almost grateful that this happened so she could learn a lesson without consequences that are irreversible.

We find out later that Robbie had his driver's license revoked for two years and that he has to do 200 hours of community service for driving under the influence and having too many minor passengers in his car. He also has to do the drug and alcohol course. He's lucky too, however, because he is still under 18, so the consequences will not be public. If they'd been in a car accident that night, Robbie would've been sentenced to time in a juvenile detention center.

Somehow the high school found out about the incident and Kristen was banned from playing on the girls' soccer team for her sophomore year. She will be allowed to try out for the team again when she's a Junior. That's what she's most upset about. I feel sorry for her because I know soccer is the activity where she feels she shines the most, but secretly I'm kind of glad about it because it will get her away from some of the girls who've been so awful to her.

I keep my promise and arrange an appointment for her with a therapist who I'm aware of because of my job. Her name is Linda, and she has a reputation for being

especially successful helping teen aged girls navigate the pitfalls and pressures they face. Kristen is resistant and angry at me for making her go, but doesn't flat-out refuse. She must figure she hasn't got a chance at winning that fight given the circumstances.

For the first visit, Linda, wants to meet only with me to get the background on what's going on before she talks to Kristen. I listen to myself telling her all about Kristen, about Cassie, and about how hard it must be for Kristen to be her sister, about how angry Kristen seems to be at me all the time, about the bullying and the fight at school and the things I've read in Kristen's diary, and even about some of my own recent behavior and how Kristen has seen me being dropped off by another man after disappearing for a few hours, and fighting with Steve, and ripping up my beloved garden. I end up crying in her office.

I call Linda after a few weeks just to see how it's going with Kristen. I know she can't tell me anything they talk about unless she's concerned for Kristen's health and well-being, or for the safety of someone else. Linda had explained all of this in our first meeting. Confidentiality rules and all. Of course I'm familiar with the parameters as a result of my job, but still it's strange not to know what is going on with my own child. So I call her since I can't get anything out of Kristen. All I want to know is whether or not any progress is being made, if this seems to be helpful for Kristen or not, not the details.

Linda actually seems glad that I called. She says that she was thinking of calling me after the next session depending on how it went. She says Kristen won't talk at all beyond what she needs to say to be barely polite. She doesn't flat out refuse to answer Linda's questions, but she doesn't say much at all. Linda doesn't want to waste our time and money. If Kristen doesn't start talking, they aren't going to be able to get anywhere.

"That's the thing about therapy," she says. "If the person receiving it, doesn't want to participate, it isn't going to be productive."

I sit Kristen down that night to talk to her about it.

"I told you I don't want to go, Mom. You can make me go, but you can't make me talk. I have nothing to say."

"Then how do you explain your drinking incident?"

"I'm a teenager, Mom. We do things like that. It's pretty normal, really."

"I disagree. I never thought you were that kind of kid."

"Well, I am 'that kind of kid'. You thought wrong."

"Kids who turn to things like drinking are trying to rebel or to escape. What are you rebelling against, or escaping from?"

"Gee, I don't know. What could I possibly be trying to escape from around here?

I have such a perfect life!" Her tone is dripping with sarcasm.

I'm stung. "Well you do!" I insist. "You have a safe home, all the comforts available in modern life, a loving family, loads of talent and ability, what do you lack? You should be grateful for all your advantages, not trying to escape. Don't you realize how lucky you are? The world is your oyster. You can do anything you want to do if you're willing to work for it. You have no limits. Not like...." My voice catches on an unexpected sob. I can't finish the sentence.

"Not like Cassie," Kristen finishes for me. "Since I don't have Down syndrome, I should be just fine. I don't have the right to have any issues since I don't have to deal with that one."

I stare at her. "Oh Honey..."

She holds up a hand to stop me. I see a tear slide down her cheek. "I'm still a person, Mom. I'm still a kid. I still make mistakes and need help and have to deal with stuff. And maybe I'm weak because I can't just spend every day feeling grateful that I'm not like Cassie and go ahead and live my perfect life. Maybe I should be able to do that, but I can't. Do you know I sometimes wish I was the one with Down syndrome?"

"What? Why would you wish that?"

"Because then you would spend all your time worrying about me, and my feelings, and my future, and if I'm getting everything I need," she almost yells. "Because then I could just be. I wouldn't have to be the one who has to be good at everything and do well in school, and make something of myself so you and Dad can have one kid who's doing great! I could happily draw pictures and go with the flow with no pressure." She starts crying. "Then everytime I think that I'm so ashamed of myself I can't stand it. I suck. I'm a weak little brat. I hate myself."

I have no words. I can't say I'm shocked, but I am a little. I really didn't realize the extent of how Kristen's been feeling. How's the poor kid supposed to be able to handle all this stuff, plus the issues she's aware that Steve and I are having, without a little bit of help? I'm a horrible mother.

I reach out and pull her to me. Thankfully, she lets me. I hold her and stroke her hair.

Finally I'm able to summon speech. "I'm so sorry," I tell her. That's all. She doesn't answer, but she stays and lets me hold her for a long time. There's so much I want to say to her. I want to argue and to persuade her that everything is actually alright. But I know it's not. It would be disrespectful of everything she just said to say anything

more. I just hold her and stroke her hair. Eventually, we both fall asleep. Right there, on the couch, curled up together. I wake up and the room is dark except for what moonlight comes through the window. There is an afghan over Kristen and me. Steve must've found us and covered us up. I'm surprised he didn't wake us up.

I look at my youngest child in the moonlight. She's fast asleep and her thumb is near her mouth as if she is about to pop it in and suck it the way she did when she was little. It had taken me forever to get her to stop. I would wrap it up at night with Popsicle sticks held on with Band-Aids so that if she put it in her mouth it would taste and feel terrible. She had a sticker chart next to her bed and earned a sticker every morning if she had not sucked her thumb the night before. At the end of a week of stickers, she earned a prize. She got to pick out a toy. It took several weeks, but eventually the habit was broken and she never sucked her thumb again. I smiled thinking about it. As glad as I was when she stopped, for the sake of her teeth, I was also a little sad because it seemed like such a milestone. My baby girl was growing up.

I watch her sleep, careful not to wake her. I'm not sure what to do. I want to go upstairs and climb into my bed, but she looks so comfortable I don't want to wake her. I also don't want her to wake up here alone. Finally I decide to spend the rest of the night in the recliner. I push it all the way back to its flattest position and pull a throw blanket over myself. I think I will have trouble falling back to sleep, but that's the last thing I remember before waking to sunlight streaming in the sliding glass doors.

Kristen turns 15 on February 11th. It's a weird birthday this year. We all go out to Kristen's favorite Italian restaurant for dinner, and sing happy birthday, but none of us is

feeling particularly festive, except Cassie. She loves a birthday. She keeps hugging Kristen while we are at the restaurant and is as excited for Kristen to open her gifts as she would be if it were her own birthday. We don't make any plans to do anything with Kristen's friends in honor of her birthday this year. She says she doesn't want to, and I don't want to either given all that's been going on. I tell myself she's too old for all that stuff now anyway.

A few days later, on Monday afternoon, the phone rings. It's Linda. Kristen had had an appointment with her that afternoon. I hadn't heard from her in several weeks and considered no news to be good news, so my heart does a quick flip when she identifies herself. She wouldn't call unless there was something bad to tell me.

"Lynn, I need to talk to you and to Steve about Kristen. Can we make an appointment for just the three of us?"

"Umm. Of course. Is there something wrong? Is she okay?"

"She's okay in the immediate moment, but I have some concerns I have to share with you. How's tomorrow at 5:00?"

I check the calendar quickly. I have an appointment with my allergist at 4:30, but I'll just reschedule. I don't even check with Steve to see if he can come home early from work. He'll just have to make it happen.

"Yes. Okay. Tomorrow at 5:00."

"Good. I'll see you then. Good bye."

"Bye. Oh, uh, Linda?"

"Does Kristen know about this?"

"I told her I would have to get in touch with the two of you. So yes, she knows I'm planning to talk to you, but I wouldn't mention it to her until after we meet tomorrow. At that point you can address it with her. She won't be surprised when you do."\

"Oh, okay. Can you just..."

"Lynn, I know this sounds very worrisome to you, and I'm sorry to leave you wondering, but I feel that this is a conversation we need to have all together and in person. So I'll see you tomorrow. Goodnight." She hangs up.

I just sit there with the phone in my hand wondering what this is about. Steve's not home yet from work but I am impatient for him to get here. I think about calling him but decide to wait until he gets home. Kristen comes into the kitchen followed closely by Cassie. They both stop and look at me just sitting there, phone in hand.

"Mom?" Kristen seems wary. Am I just imagining that? "What's up?" "Yeah, what's up?" Cassie echoes.

"I don't know," I answer honestly standing up to put the phone back. I walk over to the fridge and open it thinking I should start making dinner, but I draw a blank and can't think of what I was looking for in there. So I just stand there for a moment staring, then close the door and turn back around. Both girls are still watching me. "What? Can I help you?" I'm irritated.

"We just wanted to tell you we're going next door to play with Muffin if Mrs.

Andrews says it's okay. Maybe we'll take him for a walk or something," Kristen tell me.

Cassie jumps up and down a couple of times and claps her hands. "I love Muffin," she sings.

"Okay. It's cold out, be sure to wear hats and gloves. Be back by 6:30. We'll have dinner then."

"Sounds good," says Kristen, giving me one more strange look as she pulls her knit hat onto her head. Her ponytail makes a comical bump in the back of her head. She heads outside followed by a jubilant Cassie. I watch them through the window. They disappear inside Eleanor's house, then come out a few minutes later with Muffin on a leash. Kristen holds the leash, but once they are outside, she hands it to Cassie and I see her talking to her, probably giving instructions on how to properly walk Muffin. Muffin stands patiently waiting for them to sort things out, then marches happily down the street almost pulling Cassie along. I'm sure he's glad to be out. Evelyn doesn't walk him much in the cold weather.

I decide to go outside myself with my gardening shears. It's a good time to cut some forsythia twigs and bring them inside to force them to bloom. I need a little bit of Spring as soon as I can get it. I cut an armload of branches from the forsythia bordering the yard and bring them in. I have a tall, turquoise ceramic vase that will be pretty with the yellow flowers when they come. I fill the vase with water and arrange the branches in it, then set it on the hearth. I can't stop thinking about Linda's call. She would only call if she was afraid Kristen was a danger to herself or to others. What can be going on? I have a hard time thinking of Kristen as dangerous as, through the living room window, I watch her stroll slowly up the street at Cassie's pace, coaching her as she walks Muffin. Is she doing something to harm herself? Is she suicidal? Oh God. Oh God. Just then I see Steve's car turn the corner. He stops for a moment to say hi to the girls, then continues on and pulls in the driveway.

We've been continuing to avoid talking to each other more than just the necessary functional things like who need a ride where and when, that sort of thing. I go into the kitchen to wait for him to come inside. What is taking him so long?

He opens the door and strides in and almost runs into me. "What the hell, Lynn?" He sounds annoyed, then he looks at my face. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"Steve." He looks at me, a question on his face. "Linda called." I watch his face as he takes a moment to work out who Linda is.

He gets it. "And?"

"We have to meet with her tomorrow at 5:00."

"Why, what's going on?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell me. We're not supposed to mention it to Kristen until after we meet with her. It's got to be something bad. She wouldn't call otherwise."

"Okay," he says walking around me and putting his briefcase down on the table. "So we'll meet with Linda tomorrow at 5:00. I'll have to move a few meetings around, but I think it's do-able." He starts to head toward the stairs to go up and change as usual. I follow him.

"Steve." He turns to look at me, part way up the stairs. "What if she's suicidal?" My voice comes out as a whisper without my meaning it to.

He just looks at me for a moment, thinking about this. Then he turns and continues up the stairs. "I'm sure she's not. You always jump to the most dramatic conclusions." He disappears into the bedroom. I actually feel a little bit better seeing him carry on as usual. It must not be anything as bad as that. It'll be okay.

I force myself to make dinner, just some pasta and sauce. I'm grateful for the frozen meatballs I forgot we had. I heat them up with the sauce and throw together a salad and we're all set. I'm just setting the table when the girls come back in. They're laughing and sweaty.

"Hi Girls" I call out, all fake cheer and normalcy. "Can you finish setting the table while I dish this up? We're ready to eat.

"Sure," says Cassie, and they get to it.

"How was your walk?"

"Great!" Cassie tells me. We took Muffin to the beach and played frisbee with him.

"That sounds fun. I bet Muffin loved it." *How could anything be wrong? Look at Kristen she looks happy and relaxed. It'll be okay.* Kristen sees me watching her, and her smile fades. I turn away quickly. "I know Mrs. Andrews appreciates your help."

Steve comes downstairs and miraculously, we manage to have a relatively normal dinner. I see him watching Kristen more closely than usual while Cassie is telling us about her day at school. Kristen notices too. I wonder if she will bring anything up.

She doesn't.

The next day at 5:00, Steve meets me at Linda's office. She has us come in and sit down and offers us some water. I notice that there is a box of tissues on a side table right between the two comfortable chairs she has set up for us. I take a deep breath and try to look calm.

Linda sits facing us both. "Thank you for coming in at short notice," she begins. "I have a concern that has been growing and after my session yesterday with Kristen, I knew I needed to speak with you."

I'm holding my breath.

Linda continues. "I think that Kristen has a fairly serious drug and alcohol problem. I think she needs in-patient treatment for a while, beginning as soon as possible."

I just stare at her; I can feel my eyes narrow. I'm trying to understand this. "Drug and alcohol?" I finally blurt out like a moron. Steve doesn't say anything. He just has his hand up to his face, rubbing his temples with his thumb and ring finger. His eyes are closed. Oh God. Is he going to cry? I find myself very alarmed by this thought.

He doesn't. He looks up after a moment. No tears. "What is she using, and how long has this been going on?" he asks.

"For several months now, since the Fall," says Linda. "She told me in our last session that she is almost always high on marijuana or drunk."

"How is it possible for that to be true, and for us not to know?" I whisper.

"Addicts are often very talented at hiding their condition. Plus, you didn't suspect anything, so you weren't really looking for the signs. She's vaping THC, the drug in marijuana. Vaping is the use of electronic cigarette-like devices."

I interrupt. "I know what vaping is," I tell her. "I'm a nurse in a middle school."

"Okay, then you know how common it is these days. Vaping devices are easy to hide and they look like computer flash drives, so it's not necessarily something you'd notice. Kristen says she smokes outside so the smell is less noticeable. Also, the e-

cigarettes don't have the same skunky smell as joints do, so you probably wouldn't have recognized it anyway. She uses perfume and body spray to cover it up. I wouldn't be worried if she said she had tried it, or that she did it once in a while. It's that she is almost never sober that worries me. She's drinking as well, mostly vodka, again because it's easy to hide. It looks like water, and really doesn't have much of a smell. She just mixes it into whatever she's drinking, even the water bottle she carries."

She stops talking and just watches us. I feel hot tears sliding down my cheeks.

After a moment Linda says, "I'm sorry. I know it's a lot to digest."

"I'm aware of many of these tricks, but never for a moment did I think Kristen was doing anything like that." *How have I missed all the signs?*

"So what do we do?" asks Steve.

"I've called an in-patient program that's only about an hour away. I've sent clients to them before and their success rate is very good, especially with teens."

"Can't she just go to a program at the hospital or something? Why does it have to be in-patient?" I ask, trying to stay calm.

"It's very important that we get Kristen out of all of her current environments for a while in order for this to be successful. That means her at-home environment, as well as her school and social environment. They have space for Kristen and are willing to take her. So you just have to get her there and sign her in." She pulls a shiny brochure out of a folder on her lap and hands it to Steve. "The first step is to call them. They'll explain their program to you and all of the intake procedures. They also have a support program for parents that I recommend you take advantage of. Some parts of the parent program are mandatory, but I think you will find all of their support helpful."

I'm caught by surprise when Steve stands up and offers his hand to Linda. "Thank you. I appreciate your guidance with this," he says to her. "We'll call right away."

"Wait a minute," I say. I want to understand more. I want this explained. "What about school?" I ask for lack of a better question.

"The teen program includes a school component. Most kids are able to keep up with their schoolwork with only minor setbacks. Let's be clear though, that school is not the primary concern right now. Kristen needs to focus on getting sober and healthy."

"Of course," I whisper. "But how can this be happening? Did she just come out and tell you about it?"

"She did finally start to open up in our sessions. Some of the things she said made me suspect something like this, so I just asked the right questions until it all came out."

"But..."

Linda stands up. "Please feel free to contact me with any questions after you speak to Bright Horizons," Linda says. "They'll assign Kristen to a case manager who will be an important resource as well. You'll feel better once you've talked to them."

We leave. Steve is carrying the brochure for Bright Horizons. I feel like I'm watching the whole scene in a movie. This cannot be happening. I stop outside Steve's car.

"So what do we do now?" I ask him.

"You mean you don't have that all figured out? I thought you'd be issuing me my instructions now."

"Steve, can't we please put our differences aside and deal with Kristen?"

"You're right," he says taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry." He pauses for a moment to regroup. "I think we have to sit down with Kristen and tell her everything we just learned. I don't see any other way to do this. Tomorrow morning you can call Bright Horizons and find out how we go about admitting her," he says.

I nod. There doesn't seem to be any more to say, so I turn slowly away from him and walk to my car.

I drive home trying to make myself believe that this is real and that I have to do something about it. I wish Steve and I had come in one car, so we'd have a chance to talk more about this and try to figure out what to say to Kristen when we get home. I wish I'd thought to ask Linda about that. How do we bring this up? Does Kristen already know that Linda is recommending in-patient treatment? It seems so extreme. If the situation were that serious I would know about it, wouldn't I? Linda must be over-reacting. I just can't believe that this is possible without my seeing some signs.

We both pull into the driveway and into the garage. I look over at Steve and find him looking at me. Good. Maybe we can put our issues aside for now and be united in handling this. I get out of the car. So does he.

We look at each other for a minute, then both turn to go inside like prisoners facing the gallows. That's how it feels.

Kristen is sitting at the kitchen table doing homework. She looks up as we come in.

"Hi," she says. "I put the casserole in the oven just like you said, Mom. It'll be done in a half hour." She's acting like a little kid trying to win back favor after being naughty. She knows we know. I can see it on her face.

"Kristen, we have to talk," says Steve.

Kristen sighs and closes her book. I see a tear run down her face and I want to wrap her up in my arms and make all this bad stuff go away. "I guess you talked to Linda," she says.

"Yes," says Steve. "We just came from her office."

"I'm sorry," Kristen whispers.

We sit down at the table with her. "Where's Cassie?" I ask. They both look at me as if I've lost my mind. "I just want to know whether or not she's occupied, so we can have an uninterrupted discussion."

"She's listening to music in her room." says Kristen.

"Okay, good. So, Kristen, what's going on?"

"What did Linda tell you?"

"That you have a serious substance abuse problem and need in-patient treatment," answers Steve matter-of-factly. I glance quickly at him, a little shocked at his directness.

"Oh God," says Kristen, putting her face in her hands.

I put my arm around her. "Is it true? Are you high all the time?" I croak, willing her to say no.

She nods slightly, and sniffs hard, then nods more emphatically. "It's true. I'm sorry."

I feel tears streaming down my face and my nose starts to run. I get up to grab a box of tissues from the bathroom. When I come back, Kristen takes one and blows her nose loudly.

"So, you're sending me away?" she asks.

Oh God. "No, of course not." I insist immediately, then have to go back on my words. "Well, just temporarily."

"You need help to beat this," says Steve.

"No, I don't," Kristen pulls away from me and stands up. "I'll just stop. That's all.

I promise I'll stop."

I look up at her frantic face, and look carefully into her eyes. They're glassy.

"Are you high right now?"

"No!" Chin held high, she looks outraged at the very idea, then her shoulders drop into a slump. "Well, A little. I was nervous. I had a feeling that when you said you had an appointment it was with Linda. I wish I'd never told her anything."

"Well, it's good that you did. You must've wanted help, even if you don't think so. That's why you were leaving your diary out where I would find it." I realize as I say it that it's probably true. She wanted me to read it.

Kristen sighs and flings herself back into her chair, her shoulders whacking hard against the wooden chair back. It looks like surrender. "I was leaving it out on purpose, Mom. I knew you would read it. At least I hoped you would. I wanted to find out if you were interested in me at all."

"So you *did* want me to read it?"

"Yeah. I wanted you to know how angry I am at you, and about the mean girls at school, and how you are always focused on Cassie. I thought you might be able to help. But I guess that didn't work. I didn't even know whether you'd read it or not until you mentioned it a few weeks ago. I figured you just didn't care."

I feel like I've been sucker-punched. "But you were so mad when I told you. You were just pretending?" I say, but then remember how surprised I was that she seemed to get over it so quickly.

"No, I wasn't. I was glad. Then I was just sad, and I guess angry too, because it didn't make any difference. Nothing changed."

I look at Steve. He's rubbing his temples with the fingers of one hand again. Part of me feels a bit smug. *See, Steve? She wanted me to read it. I was right to do that.* Then I'm just overwhelmingly sad. "So, that's why there was nothing in it about drinking or getting high," I say. "You only wrote in it what you wanted me to know."

"Right. I'm not stupid."

"No, you're not."

"So how and when did the drinking and other stuff start?" asks Steve, obviously anxious to get back to the immediate problem at hand.

"Yeah," I say. "I guess that incident with the police wasn't such an isolated incident."

"Nope, and that's another thing. Since we're being all honest here. I didn't exactly tell you the truth about that night either. It was all my fault."

"What?" I ask. I can see her shoulders relax a little as if she's just put down a heavy weight.

"It wasn't Madison's idea to call the boys. It was mine. I told them to bring some drinks. I'm the one who knew about the party, not them. Madison's never done anything like that before. I kind of dragged her into it. And she wasn't making out with Jason. I was, with Robbie."

"Oh," is all I can come up with.

"For God's sake, Kristen! What the hell is wrong with you?" Steve says.

"Hi," says Cassie. We all jump. None of us even saw her come in. She's standing in the living room door, chewing on one fingernail. "What's up?" she asks.

"We're just having a talk," I tell her. She looks slowly at each of our faces.

"What kind of talk?" she asks, coming in and sitting down.

Everyone is looking to me for a response. Kristen looks scared. I realize that she's afraid of Cassie finding out about all of this.

"Well, Kristen is going to go away for a little while. She's sick and needs to get better." I finally manage to say. It comes out more like a whisper.

Kristen starts to cry quietly.

"She's sick?" Cassie asks, looking alarmed.

I nod.

"Is she gonna die?" Cassie whispers, eyes wide.

"No," I say quickly, recovering my voice. "She won't die. She's going to get better. She just needs help."

"Okay," Cassie says, nodding. She reaches out and pats Kristen's hand. "Don't cry Krissy. You gonna get better."

Kristen just nods, tears sliding down her face.

Steve stands up. "Okay. I guess we're done here for now," he says. "Let's go out to get something for dinner."

"But the casserole is in the oven," I tell him. "It should be done by now."

He pauses for a minute, then says. "Fuck the casserole, Lynn. Let's go out anyway. We need to do something a little out of the ordinary. The casserole will be fine reheated tomorrow."

Cassie slaps her hand over her mouth and giggles in a mixture of shock at his language, and delight in the idea of dinner out. Kristen takes a deep shuddering breath. I put my arm around her. "Okay. Leftovers tomorrow it is," I agree. "Where do you want to go?"

Cassie yells, "DiOrio's!" She loves their pizza.

"DiOrio's," agrees Steve with a nod.

"Fabulous," says Kristen sarcastically as she stands up, "Let's have some fun family time before I get shipped to the loony bin."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Bright Horizons admits Kristen for a two-month program. The drive to drop her off is the most harrowing experience of my life so far. We are all silent in the car. What on Earth do you talk about during a ride like that. A few times I think about trying to say something cheery about how sometimes the things that seem like they are the worst things that happened to us, turn out to be the best, or at least positive experiences. One look at Kristen's face, and I drop any notion of saying something like that. She sits staring out her car window, headphones on, and tears streaming down her cheeks. Cassie, who understands that Kristen is sick and that we have to leave her at a "hospital" for a few months, sobs loudly, devastated by the idea of being without her sister. There's nothing I can do to make it easier for her. It is that sad and that scary.

Every so often I turn around awkwardly and pat Cassie's knee and whisper, "Shh. It's alright." Once when I turn, I see Kristen holding Cassie's hand. Kristen's knuckles are turning white, like she's squeezing her sister's hand pretty hard. Cassie hiccups a little, and calms slightly. She reaches over to wipe a tear from Kristen's cheek, and I turn quickly forward again, close my eyes, and take some deep breaths trying to maintain control of my own emotions. I do not want to cry now. That will just make this harder on both of them.

Steve is like stone. I wish I could hold his hand, but I can't risk rejection right now. He'd probably push my hand away. That would push me over the edge. He seems a million miles away. Maybe he is, in his head. Maybe that's the only way he can keep it together. He keeps his eyes on the road, and never says a single word. Thank God the ride is only an hour.

First thing after we arrive, we have an intake meeting with the therapist who will be Kristen's case manager, Rosa, I asked if there's somewhere for Cassie to wait during the meeting, I don't want her to overhear any details that I will have to try to explain later. Rosa gives her a place to sit and draw, or color in a common area. There are coloring books of beautiful mandalas and stained glass window designs on the low tables near a number of colorful couches. Rosa's office has a glass window that looked out on the common area, so I sit in a spot that will allow me to keep an eye on Cassie.

Rosa's office is set up like a sitting room with comfortable chairs arranged to encourage conversation. I'm grateful for that. I had sort of imagined that we would be sitting on folding chairs in front of an imposing desk while the person behind it fired accusations at us. Sort of like being called to the principal's office when you're a kid. Rosa asks Kristen a bunch of questions about what's going on with her including, "Are you here of your own free will?" I look up at Kristen, wondering will happen if she says no. I open my mouth to jump in, and Steve grabs my arm. I look at him, and with his eyes he tells me to stay quiet.

"Not really," Kristen whispers. "My parents and my therapist want me to come."

Rosa nods. I watch her write on the form on her clipboard. "I have to inform all of you that recovery treatment really only works if the patient is on board with receiving it.

If she wants to recover." My heart sinks into my stomach. So before she even gets started, we need to know that it's not going to work?

Kristen clears her throat quietly and we all look at her. "I do want to get better. I want to stop, that's why I told Linda what I've been doing. I want to stop and I know I

need some help to do that. I just want to do it at home. I didn't know I'd end up having to be sent away somewhere. No offense," she adds, looking up at Rosa.

"None taken, Kristen," Rosa smiles warmly at Kristen. "The truth is, that no one wants to need a residential treatment program. You've already taken the first step by acknowledging that you have a problem and that you need help in order to recover. You don't even realize what a big step that is.

I know that it'll be hard to be away from home, but sometimes it's necessary to remove yourself from your environment for a little while in order to concentrate on rechanneling your addictive or unhealthy behavior. It takes you away from all the stresses that may have contributed to your turning to alcohol or drugs in the first place. That way you can work on acclimating to a sober lifestyle and learn some strategies for coping in healthy ways before you are back in your home environment. Does that make sense?"

Kristen nods.

Rosa turns to us and smiles. "Well, Mrs. and Mr. Holcomb, I am encouraged at this point, that Kristen will do well here. It's crucial that she wants recovery for herself, and she is saying that she does. I hope you feel positive about it as well."

I can't even speak. So many thoughts are spinning in my head. I keep hearing 'home environment' as part of the problem, and feel so utterly helpless and guilty, and also angry about that. Steve says, "Yes, thank you," quietly. I just nod weakly.

Rosa goes on to explain the parent and sibling counseling piece. I don't even hear most of what she says. Luckily she gives us a print-out of the dates for family counseling sessions and for visitation. We can't see Kristen at all, or talk to her, for a full month. I

can't even wrap my head around that. I do manage to come to my senses enough to ask about Cassie.

"I'm not sure Cassie will benefit from a group session with other siblings," I say.

"Right, says Rosa. "I will work privately with Cassie. That's one of the reasons I was assigned to Kristen's case. I have credentials for and experience with counseling people with intellectual challenges. Cassie won't need to be in the group sessions. I'll work with her to help her understand what's going on with Kristen, and will help her process it. She'll also learn some simple strategies for being positive and helpful when Kristen comes home." I nod again. I'm a little worried about what she'll tell Cassie. I don't want her to feel at fault for any of this, and I don't think she can comprehend Kristen's substance abuse at all.

"Can I sit in on Cassie's sessions?" Out of the corner of my eye I see Steve shake his head.

"No," says Rosa, kindly but firmly. "That would be detrimental to Cassie. Don't worry. All of our therapists are very sensitive to various needs and exceptionalities.

Cassie will be in good hands. You need to concentrate on your own healing while you're here for family counseling, Mrs. Holcomb." So now it would be detrimental for Cassie to have me around.

We don't even get to see Kristen's room before we leave her there. We have to say goodbye to her in the common area. I can hardly breathe while I watch Cassie and Kristen cling to each other. They're both crying again. Steve gives Kristen a fierce, quick hug, and kisses the top of her head. I hear him say, "I love you." Then it's my turn. Somehow I manage not to cry. I don't want Kristen to have to deal with my falling apart.

I hug her for a long time. I stroke her hair and whisper to her that I will write to her often, and when she's allowed to receive mail, after the first month, she'll have a pile of it waiting for her. She hugs me back and holds on to me tightly.

"I'm scared, Mom," she whispers. I hold my breath for a moment, and swallow back my tears.

"I know," I tell her. I want to say *me too*, but I don't. "It'll be okay. You're going to get help and it'll all be okay." I pray we're doing the right thing. I whisper, "I love you," one more time, then start to walk out the door. I can't look back and I can't stop, or I'll never leave her here.

All three of us are quiet on the way the way home. No one talks much. There's nothing to say. Just once I whisper, "She'll be alright, won't she?" Steve just nods, and I see a tear run down his cheek.

Kristen's been there now for a week. We haven't heard a single word about how she's doing from anyone. I knew it would be that way, but it's killing me. That's part of the program. No contact at all with anyone in your life for the first month. I keep telling myself that no news is good news. As long as we haven't heard from Bright Horizons, nothing is seriously wrong. She must be okay. It's nearly impossible to believe that when it comes to your child. We get to come for two scheduled and supervised visits in the second month. If she is progressing well, Kristen will be allowed to come home and continue on an out-patient basis after the second month. I've never, in her fifteen years, not talked to her every day.

I feel like one of my arms has been amputated. It's all I can do to keep on breathing. Sometimes I don't even do that very well. I catch myself holding my breath and have to tell myself to exhale. Somehow, life goes on. The sun still rises every morning. Steve and I still go to work every day. Cassie goes to school. I remind myself to be grateful that Linda took action on this before something irreversible happened, like Kristen dying in a car accident, or of an overdose, or any of a million horrifying scenarios that I have no trouble imagining, but it's hard to muster any gratitude for this situation. This is still fixable, I tell myself. All is not lost. But I'm broken. How did we get here? That's what I can't figure out.

Steve and I are speaking, but only about practical things. We're like roommates splitting up the household chores and responsibilities rather than like soulmates. I hate that, but I have no energy to devote to it right now. I'm on autopilot, just trying to make it to the end of each day when I can lie down and sleep. That's one thing that's better. I'm sleeping. I think by the time I get to bed each night my brain is so sick of itself that it just shuts off. I don't even dream, at least not that I remember. I feel like I could go to sleep and sleep for a hundred years. I kind of wish I would. Maybe I'd wake up to a better world.

I'm driving home from work after a stop at the grocery store on a Tuesday afternoon, when my phone rings. I see by the dashboard display that it's Dave. I don't answer. I just can't. Then I think about how kind he was the last time I saw him, that day I went walking on the beach for hours and caused all sorts of problems. How much things have changed since that day, only about a month ago. I hit Accept on the dashboard screen.

"Hi Dave," I say. I sound unsure of his name.

"Hi!" he says, too loud. "Finally, I got you. I left you a couple of voice mails over the last few weeks, but I'm sure you've been busy."

I never even saw that I had voicemails. "Uh, yeah. Sorry about that. There's been a lot going on."

"No worries. I figured. Just thought I'd touch base and see how you're doing."

"Not so great, actually,"

A car honks violently and I jump. The honking car slams on its brakes and barely avoids plowing into my left side as I cross the intersection. I realize that I just ran a red light. I automatically look around to see if any police cars are in the vicinity. None. The backs of my hands prickle. I pull into the parking lot of a store on my right and try to catch my breath.

"Lynn?" Dave is still on the line.

"Listen, Dave. I don't mean to be a jerk, but I've got to go." I tell him. I can hear him say, "Is everything okay..." as I hang up. I have got to get a grip. I sit there for a few minutes waiting for my breathing and heart rate to return to a semi-normal state, then I pull out and drive home. Slowly.

Cassie is helping me put away the groceries. There's a knock at the door. I look at Cassie, eyebrows raised as if to say *Who could that be?* She shrugs, elbows bent, palms up, bottom lip thrust out, and shakes her head *I don't know!* I laugh a little and she grins. Wiping my wet hands on a towel, I open the door. It's Dave.

"Dave!" I blurt. "What're you doing here?"

"Yeah, Dave," repeats Cassie behind me. "What're you doin' here?" Then she cracks up.

I glance at her, then look back at him. He has his hands in his pockets and his shoulders up around his ears.

"Well, I thought I'd stop by to make sure you're okay," he says. "You hung up so abruptly, and there was all that honking and tire-screeching. I thought you might've...."

He seemed unsure how to finish the sentence. "Well, I thought you might need some help."

Cassie steps up next to me, searching my face. I know she's worried about me now because of what Dave said. I put my arm around her. "I'm fine, Honey." I tell her, glancing quickly at Dave to convey my annoyance.

He gets it. "Sorry," he whispers.

I feel bad for making him feel bad. After all, he had my best interests in mind when he stopped by.

"Well, I'm fine. Thanks for stopping by to check, Dave. That was nice of you," I say.

"Can I come in for a minute? I'd really like to talk to you."

I look quickly at the clock to be sure Steve won't be home any time soon. He isn't due for about an hour and a half. I sigh, and look again at Cassie. "Okay, but just for a minute."

He follows me into the kitchen. I offer him a seat and something to drink. Cassie sits down at the table and looks expectantly at Dave while I fill two glasses with iced tea and one with lemonade. Dave looks at Cassie, then at me. I know he wants me to tell her

to go do something else. But, I think it would be better to let her stay right here, so he doesn't get any ideas. I join them at the table.

"So..." I say, prompting him to speak.

He looks one more time at Cassie, then plunges on. "Well, I haven't seen you for a while," he begins, "and I miss you." Cassie looks at me, mouth slightly open.

"Um..." Maybe I should've sent Cassie somewhere else. "Well. We've been really busy around here," I begin.

"Kristen's sick," Cassie tells Dave earnestly. "She had to go to the hoss-abull."

Dave looks up at me, a question on his face. "Kristen's in the hospital? Why?"

"It's a long story," I'm being careful not to say more than Cassie's already heard.

"Anyway, she'll be home in a few weeks."

"A few weeks? Is she okay?"

"She will be," I nod emphatically. "She'll be fine."

"Well, that's good," Dave is picking up my cues about avoiding any details. He probably managed to put two and two together and come pretty close to the truth. "So, how are you holding up in the meantime?"

"Oh, I'm fine," I lie. "Yep. All is well."

I hear the garage door open. Shit! Steve's home early. Shit, shit, shit. Steve opens the door from the garage to the kitchen, already scowling. I'm sure he recognized Dave's car in the driveway. Thank God I had Cassie stay in the room with us. Steve stares at me for a few moments and I stare back. He nods once, almost imperceptibly, and I can see he's made a decision about what's going on.

Dave stands up and nervously says, "Uh, hi Steve." He takes a step toward Steve, hand extended to shake. "I just stopped by for a minute to, uh, say hello." Steve shifts his gaze to Dave. His expression doesn't change. I see the muscle in his jaw clench. I realize I'm holding my breath again. Steve stares levelly at Dave, not speaking, not shaking his hand.

After a moment, Dave lets his hand drop to his side and starts to move toward the front door, not looking at any of us. "I've got to get going," he mumbles. I follow him to the door and see him out. Neither of us says a word more than "Bye."

When I come back to the kitchen, Steve is still standing in the same place. I see tears in his eyes. His face is a mask of fury. "I'm done, Lynn," he says. I glance at Cassie, sitting at the table open-mouthed, struggling to read the situation. Did she understand his words? Did I? Why would he say something like that in front of her? I look back at him. He shakes his head and looks down, smiling bitterly. "You can't even let this moment be about us," he whispers. Then he walks past me and up the stairs.

I tell Cassie to stay downstairs, then follow Steve upstairs. He has a suitcase out on the bed and is filling it carefully with neatly folded clothes he pulls from his bureau drawers. I lean against the door jamb for support as I feel my knees weaken. My stomach threatens to come right out of my throat. "What are you doing?" I ask stupidly.

"I'm leaving," he says softly. "I told you. I'm done."

I sit on the edge of the bed. "What do you mean you're leaving? You can't leave!" in the back of my mind I'm aware that I'm very loud and Cassie might hear. I tell myself to calm down. "Please, Steve," I say, my voice softer, don't go. There's no reason for you to go."

"We've been leaving each other for a while now, Lynn," Steve says softly. "This is just the final straw."

"But...You are misunderstanding. You won't listen to me." I don't even know what to say. I'm so tired. The tension has been so high around here for so long.

"I don't think I am misunderstanding, Lynn. I can't listen to you try to lie your way out of what you're very clearly doing. At least have enough respect for me to tell me the truth."

"But I *am* telling you the truth! He kissed me once. That's it. That's all that has ever happened and that only happened one time. He had a crush on me when we were kids. He got caught up in that. It wasn't anything real."

Steve stares at me for a moment. "And what did you do when he kissed you?" "I left immediately!"

"But you continued to 'be friends' with him and to see him after that. You called him when you went for you epic walk on the beach. Was that when the kiss happened? Was it that day?"

I shake my head. Steve watches my face.

"It was before that day, right? You are trying to congratulate yourself for putting a stop to his misguided advances, but you called him to rescue you from the beach AFTER the kiss you're trying to say was all his doing."

I look down. "I shouldn't have called him," I whisper. "I just didn't know who else to call."

"Me, Lynn. You could've called me!"

"You were so mad at me."

He shakes his head and slams his suitcase shut, clicking the clasps closed loudly.

I sit on the edge of the bed and cry. I just put my face in my hands and cry.

"I don't want you to go."

I look up at him and my heart wrenches at the naked pain on his face. "It's too late, Lynn."

He walks out of the room. I follow him. "Where will you go?"

"To a hotel near work for now."

"What about the kids?"

"I'll always be there for the kids." He sounds as exhausted as I feel.

"But you'll be in Boston! How is that not leaving them?"

Cassie is still in the kitchen when we get back down stairs. She is just sitting at the table where I left her. She jumps up when we come into the kitchen. Steve stops, puts his suitcase down, and puts his hands on her shoulders, looking her in the face. I can tell he is trying not to cry.

"Hey, Cassiopeia. I've got to stay in the city for the rest of the week. I'll see you this weekend and we'll do something fun, okay?"

"Okay," she says, staring up at him wide-eyed.

"Give me a hug, okay?" He sounds like a little boy and my heart is breaking.

Cassie smiles up at him and throws her arms around him. They hug for a long time, Steve strokes Cassie's hair and fights tears. I frantically wipe at my face and force myself to stop crying. I don't want to scare her any more than we already have. Finally they break apart. "Bye Dad," Cassie says, waving as Steve walks out to the garage. She seems to think this is the same as when Steve leaves on a business trip.

I push past Cassie and follow Steve out to the garage. He loads his suitcase in the trunk of his car. Then looks at me. "Bye, Lynn," he says.

"Steve, please." I step toward him, arms outstretched to embrace him. "We can fix all of this." *This can't really be happening*.

He puts up a hand to stop me. "Don't." he says. Then he climbs into the driver's seat and backs out of the garage. Before pulling out, he rolls his window down and says, "I'll let you know where I am." Then he rolls up the window before I can reply and drives away.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Cassie and I eat sandwiches for dinner and I get her through her nighttime routine on autopilot. I'm numb. She doesn't seem alarmed, or worried, so that's something. Once again it amazes me how life keeps moving and everything still needs doing, even when my world is coming to an end.

Late that night I get a text from Steve. "At the Doubletree on Washington Street." That's it. Nothing else.

I type. "Okay. Sleep well. We'll talk tomorrow." He doesn't answer.

I feel numb. I keep telling myself, "Steve left you! He's gone!" Trying to force some kind of emotional reaction, but I feel nothing. In the hours since he actually left, I haven't been able to muster any emotion. I just feel exhausted. It just doesn't seem real. I can't get it through my head.

After Cassie's in bed, I just sit by the window in the living room smoking and staring out at the front yard and the driveway. I'm not even thinking really. I just keep seeing Steve's car pull out of the driveway, over and over again. How did we get here? What happens now?

Eventually I fall asleep right where I am. I wake up at 3:30 and trudge up the stairs to bed. I don't even bother to undress. I just climb under the covers and thankfully, I'm asleep immediately.

Cassie wakes me up in the morning. It's 9:00. And it's Wednesday We both should be at school and we aren't. I never even set an alarm last night.

"Mom? Is there no school today?" Cassie asks looking worried. I blink at her for a moment, realizing what I've done. Oh well. Let them fire me. Whatever. "Not for us," I tell her. "We're taking the day off."

She claps her hands, delighted. "What're we gonna do?" she asks.

"Good question," I say, throwing the covers off. "We're gonna start with a huge breakfast. Go brush your teeth and I'll meet you downstairs." She leaves my room happily. I pick up the phone and call Eleanor. I quickly tell her about Steve, and how I need to take the day to get my act together, then call the school office to officially report that I'm taking a sick day. Thank God for Eleanor.

I discover after I speak to her that she had left me three voicemails and about a dozen texts by the time I called her, but she doesn't even mention that, just tells me not to worry about a thing. She will tell the office that I let her know early this morning that I have a stomach bug and wouldn't be in, and that everything is fine and under control.

I stretch and wander into my bathroom. I'm shocked by my appearance in the mirror. I'm still wearing yesterday's clothes and since I never washed my face, mascara is ringing my eyes. I can see tear streaks through the makeup. I wonder if I cried in my sleep. My mouth tastes like an old ashtray. I must've scared Cassie to death. For a moment, I'm glad Kristen isn't here. It would've been impossible to try to pretend everything was okay with her around. Maybe I can get this fixed before she ever has to know. That gives me a goal, a little resolve.

I decide to jump right in the shower, no point waiting. Then I brush my teeth, throw on sweats, and go downstairs and make a huge breakfast of pancakes, and eggs,

and bacon and fruit. It's more than just Cassie and I can possibly eat. I realize that I cooked as if Steve and Kristen were here, not just the two of us.

Somehow, this undoes me. As I scrape leftover food into the garbage can, I'm seized with sobs. I put the plate and fork down on the counter, and just sit right down.

Right there on the kitchen floor. Waves of grief just pour out of me. I can't control it, and it's loud. I can't control that either. I just let go and cry and cry. How can all of this have happened? How can we be here in this place, our family reduced by half.

My mind fills with image after image of Steve and I. Eating spaghetti and drinking wine while watching TV; skiing together, the first time for both of us, and laughing hysterically when we both ended up in a tangle at the bottom of the slope having crashed into each other; our honeymoon in Italy when he drunkenly serenaded me in a gondola just like in a cartoon, and I giggled like an idiot; the births of our kids; finding out about Cassie's Down Syndrome and clinging to each other; the letters he used to write to me.

Of course Cassie comes into the kitchen while I'm sobbing. I wish I could pull it together, but I can't. She crouches down in front of me, worried. I have to just let this out.

"I'm sorry," I croak between wails. "I'm so sorry, Cassie."

She stays right there and pats my shoulder. She looks so serene. "What's wrong? Everything will be okay. Ssshhh. It's okay." My sweet girl uses every trick I've ever used to soothe her, and after a few minutes it begins to work. I nod at her. Yes, everything will be okay. We'll figure this out too. Of course we will. That's all we can do. I start to hiccup which makes up both laugh. Finally I reach out and pull her right into my lap and

just hug her and stroke her hair like Steve did last night. We just sit there and I rock her, and she stays.

"Thank you, Cassie." I whisper into her hair when I can breathe normally again.

"I love you, Mom," she answers. "Why're you sad?"

"Because I've messed a lot of things up," I tell her. Now I have to start figuring out how to fix them.

Cassie nods sagely. "Do you have an eraser?" she asks.

I laugh and ruffle her hair. "If only I did."

"You can borrow mine." She climbs awkwardly out of my lap and goes to her backpack hanging by the door to the garage. She comes back and hands me a worn, pink eraser.

"Thank you, Honey." I look at the eraser in my hand and kiss it. "This is just what I need." Cassie looks pleased with herself. "Can I play a video game?"

"Yes, but go get dressed first. You can wear your emoji t-shirt today since we're staying home." She goes upstairs.

We spend the rest of that day cuddled on the couch watching movies, or playing video games. For just this one day, I don't even think about what to do next, or how to fix things. I'm surprised that I'm able to do that. It's such a relief not to require anything of myself for a little while. I don't accomplish anything at all. When we get hungry, I have a pizza delivered. I notice before bed that I never did the dishes from breakfast. I shrug. Oh well. They'll be there tomorrow. I'll do them then.

"We have to go to school tomorrow." I tell Cassie when I tuck her in that night.

"Why" she asks.

"Because we have to go back to being responsible adults."

"I don't want to be 'sponsible."

"Me neither. But we will anyway."

Cassie sighs. "Okay."

"Okay." I kiss her. "I'm glad we had this day off together. It was lovely."

"Me too. Lovely," she tries out the word. "G'night."

"Goodnight Sweetie. I love you."

We somehow get through the next two days as if we are normal. I text Steve a few times, just to try to get some kind of communication open so I can straighten this out. He doesn't respond to any of my attempts. Cassie and I get to school on time, appropriately dressed each day. I carry out my job as if I'm competent, and fine. I cook dinner, we clean up and go to bed. I don't think. It's strange. I have no idea what happens next, but I have given up trying to control it.

True to his word, Steve picks up Cassie on Saturday and takes her out to lunch and to an indoor mini-golf place. Other than the few texts required to arrange that, we've had no communication at all. Later I ask her what Daddy told her about why he didn't come home with her after their outing.

"He has to stay at a hotel again for the week," she tells me matter-of-factly. I'm grateful for once that business trips are so common-place for him. Otherwise, it would be very hard to help Cassie understand what's going on. Better to just let her think he's away for work.

Oddly, I discover this well of patience that I didn't know I had. I'm completely out of the control booth here, there's nothing I can do, but have faith that somehow Steve

and I will eventually work this out. But I have to let go of any ability to manage how and when that happens since I can't even get him to engage with me in a conversation.

Saturday, March 28th we are supposed to have our first scheduled visit with Kristen. I don't know if Steve remembers the date. I text him to make sure he does. He doesn't answer. I have to just wait and see if he's going to show up. I can't help worrying about how Kristen will feel if he doesn't.

Cassie and I are up early and drive to Bright Horizons. I'm nervous. I have no idea what to expect. We're told we have to visit with Kristen in the common room where other parents will be visiting their children too. We can't see her room, or visit with her without some supervision by the therapists. Afterwards there is a required group session for parents that will be part update on what our children are doing, and part therapy session. There is a separate session for siblings at the same time. That's when Cassie will have a private session with Rosa as promised.

Steve walks into the waiting room about ten minutes before the scheduled visit. I release a huge sigh of relief when I see him, at the same time I'm surprised suddenly at myself for doubting that he would come. He sees us, and comes over to sit in the seat next to Cassie.

"Hi," I say, smiling at him.

"Hi," he says with a polite nod. Then he engages Cassie in an animated conversation about the merits of white sauce vs. red sauce on pizza, one of their favorite arguments. The truth is they both prefer white pizza with extra garlic, but Steve always argues that red sauce is best just to get Cassie going.

I paste a smile on my face, and try to relax. I put my hand in my coat pocket and pull out the pink eraser Cassie gave me. I've been carrying it around for the last few days as a sort of talisman. I clutch it tightly now just as a doctor comes in and announces that all of the families should follow him.

The room gets very quiet and we all stand and file through the door behind him. I want to grab Steve's hand, but force myself not to. We are led to the large, sunlit room where Cassie hung out during Kristen's intake meeting. There are a number of seating areas in the space. Each has a couch and a few other comfortable chairs gathered around a coffee table. On every coffee table there is a box of tissues. The coloring books are gone. There are sliding glass doors leading out into a courtyard area surrounded by attractive hedges and flower beds. The couches and chairs are upholstered in bright solid-color fabrics that look durable. They are mixed and matched in no apparent pattern. At each little grouping of furniture, there is a teen waiting for his or her family to join them. The therapists are scattered around the room like attentive waiters in a fancy restaurant, anticipating any need for them to step in to a group conversation.

Cassie spots Kristen immediately.

"Krissy!!" she yells, and runs across the room toward her sister. I watch Kristen's face. She looks nervous, then slightly embarrassed when Cassie yells. But she smiles and meets her sister with arms outstretched. They hug.

"Hi, Cass," Kristen says as Steve and I join them.

"I miss you so much!" says Cassie.

"I miss you too," Kristen tells her. She looks at each of us, searching our faces.

"Hi, Baby," I say, hugging her tightly. "It's good to see you."

"You too," she answers letting go of me and turning toward Steve. He hugs her tightly for a moment. "I love you, Dad," I hear her whisper. He kisses the top of her head. I see that he is fighting tears and my heart breaks for him. We all stand there awkwardly for a moment, not sure how to proceed. "So, we're supposed to sit here and talk," Kristen says swiping quickly at her cheek and gesturing to the couch and chairs.

I wait to see who will sit where. Cassie pulls Kristen down on the couch with her and throws one arm around her, so Steve and I each take one of the armchairs on the other side of the coffee table. I ache to wrap my arms around all of them. Maybe if I hold everyone tightly enough, everything will be okay again. I squeeze the eraser and sit, trying to smile.

"How are you?" I ask Kristen.

"Okay," she says softly. She takes a piece of folded notebook paper covered with writing from her pocket. "I've got some things I'm supposed to tell you."

"Me?" I ask.

"Yes. Well, each of you." She takes a deep breath. "I'm really nervous. This is so hard."

Cassie squeezes Kristen with the arm she's got around her shoulders. "It's okay Krissy, you can do it," she says encouragingly. Kristen smiles at her.

"Okay, Cass, I'll start with you, then." Cassie nods approvingly several times.

"First of all. I love you so much." She starts to cry and Cassie hugs her. I clutch my eraser as a tear slips down my cheek. Kristen continues. "But I'm also angry at you."

Cassie's face falls and she looks stunned. I catch my breath and hold it. Kristen continues before anyone can speak. "You are so special and wonderful, Cassie, but you need a lot

of attention. It's not your fault. I know that. But I still feel angry because I'm never the most important one." Cassie looks at me, confusion on her face.

"Kristen," I begin. Steve reaches out and grabs my hand hard. I look at him. Tears are streaming down his face.

"Listen to her," he says. I close my lips tightly and nod. Kristen turns to me.

"Mom, I know you love me, but sometimes I think you don't even know I'm there. You're always busy with Cassie and the only time I have your full attention is when you're mad at me. Sometimes it's better to have you mad at me than not noticing me at all."

"Oh, Honey," I begin to protest, then catch myself. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to be like that."

"I know," Kristen says. "You always try to fix everything, and sometimes you make things worse. I feel like you don't trust me to handle anything on my own. You also make decisions that you think are good for Cassie, and if they're not good for me, then that's just too bad, I'm supposed to shut up and deal. I know you two are having trouble," she indicates Steve and me, "and I'm so sorry that my attitude and behavior have probably caused that. I never meant to do that."

Steve jumps in, "Kristen, you are not to blame for any issues that we are having. Nothing in our marriage is your fault." He looks at me. It's clear whose fault our problems are. I don't say anything. I cannot argue with anything Kristen said, but I also don't know how I could've been doing things differently. I'm feeling attacked.

"And Dad, you're hardly ever home, and when you are you're always busy working on some project. In the last few months, you barely talk to anyone, especially

Mom. It's like you've abandoned us, even though I know you love us. I wish I could spend more time with you, that you weren't always so busy." She looks down and folds the paper on her lap. "Anyway, that's what I needed to tell you today."

We all just sit there silently for a moment.

"I'm sorry, Krissy." Cassie says. She's crying. I can't tell how much of what Kristen said she truly understands. I see a tear fall onto Kristen's lap. She sniffs. "I'll stop gettin' all the 'tention."

That does me in. "For God's sake, Kristen! She's apologizing to you for having Down syndrome!" Kristen looks stricken.

"Lynn!" Steve says, "She is not! She's apologizing for getting all of your attention. That's a choice you made."

"A choice I made? I had no choice in any of this. I did what had to be done. It had nothing to do with choice. You cannot lay all of this on me." I look around at all of them. Everyone is crying. No one speaks.

Kristen's therapist, Rosa, dressed in a neat navy suit and high heels comes and sits on the couch next to Kristen. I guess my outburst summoned Rosa to us. I look up at her, then around the room and see that several other groups also have a therapist sitting with them.

"Hello, everyone," she says looking at each of us in turn. "It's good to see all of you today. As you know, I've been working with Kristen on a daily basis for the last four weeks. I thought I would join you now that she's had a few moments to tell you what she needed to say. Thank you for listening to Kristen share her feelings. I'd like for each of you to have a chance now to share what you are feeling." She looks at Steve.

"Can we start with you, Steve? Can you please share what you're feeling?"

Steve shifts in his chair and takes a moment to respond. "I feel sorry for Kristen. I'm ashamed for my part in how she feels. I also get it. I feel sort of the same way Kristen does." He looks at me.

"In what way?" asks Rosa.

"Well, I feel unimportant, I guess."

"Why?"

"I'm not around much, as Kristen mentioned. I work long hours and drive a long commute so that we can afford to live where we do, but I'm not sure how much my contribution is valued. As Kristen said, I think the rest of the family just feels like I'm never there, like I've 'abandoned' them. They don't think about why, or what it's like for me to be away from them all the time. I feel completely alone."

Rosa is silent for a moment, to let Steve's words sink in, I guess. "Okay, thank you for that. Lynn, what are you feeling?"

"I'm truly sorry. I feel like Steve and Kristen see me as the cause of all of our problems and I can understand that, but don't know how I could've done things differently. Kristen, I love you so much. I'm devastated to know how I've made you feel. Steve, I feel the same for you. I never meant you to be alone or unappreciated. I love you too.

On top of all of that, I feel overwhelmed and angry that I alone seem to carry the responsibility for the well-being of this family. I'm the one who always has to keep everything on track and keep everyone alright, and ultimately I guess I *am* the most responsible for what's gone wrong, but I'm also alone. There's no one in this family

who's worrying about my well-being. Not one of you sees me as a person. I'm just his wife, her mother. I seem to exist only in relation to Steve, Cassie, and Kristen. Who am I?"

"Okay. Thank you, Lynn. You raise a good point. One of the reasons I wanted you and Steve and Cassie to share your feelings is so that Kristen can begin to understand each of you a bit more as individuals. She needs to see what you struggle with, and how you feel so she can continue to process her own experiences." She turns to Cassie and extends her hand over Kristen to touch Cassie's arm. "How do you feel, Cassie?"

Cassie releases a deep sigh and says, "I feel sad." Two big tears slide down her cheeks.

"Why do you feel sad?" asks Rosa.

"'Cause Krissy's mad at me and Mom and Dad are angry all the time." Steve and I look at each other.

"Okay," says Rosa. "Do understand why Kristen's mad at you?"

"Um, cause I need too much attention."

"Oh, Cass. I'm sorry," Kristen says.

"Kristen, why are you sorry?" asks Rosa.

"Because Cassie feels bad and it's not her fault. All I did was make her feel bad. She doesn't understand."

"So, it's possible to be angry at someone for something that is not their fault. It's possible to understand that it's not that person's fault and still have valid feelings of anger. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, but I don't want Cassie to feel bad. That's not fair."

"Okay, how could you reframe this then?"

"Cassie, I'm really not angry at you. I'm angry at the situation. You need more attention than I do and that's just the way it is. It's not your fault." She looks at me. "It's not your fault that you need to focus more on Cassie either, Mom, I do know that, but I'm still angry."

I nod. "I get it. I know," I tell her. "I'm so sorry."

"Do you understand, Cassie, that Kristen is not really mad at you? Her anger is about the situation, not you. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Okay," Cassie nods a bit uncertainly.

"Okay, thank you, Cassie. We can talk about that more afterwards when you and I meet, okay?" says Rosa.

"Okay," Cassie agrees.

"I know this has been difficult, but I think you have all made great strides in just honestly sharing with each other what you are going through. I know that sharing this way will strengthen your compassion and empathy. You all feel alone, yet none of you is actually alone."

I think about how Steve has moved out, and how truly alone he and I actually are.

I feel worse now than I did before we came. I hope this has been beneficial for Kristen.

We have to say goodbye to Kristen. I hate to leave her right now with all this raw emotion out on the table. I want to take her home. I hug her for a long time. Rosa puts her arm around me as we walk to another room for the parent session.

"I understand how hard this is, Lynn. It's all part of the process. I know nothing is resolved yet. The goal today was for Kristen to be heard, and just as importantly, to truly

hear the rest of you. I think that happened. Kristen is making good progress." She leaves

Steve and me in the parent session, and takes Cassie off to work with her in her office.

We won't see Kristen again for another two weeks when we're allowed to visit again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Late that night I flop down on my bed and call Steve's cell phone. He picks up after the first ring, as if he was waiting for me.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi."

"Steve, that session today made me realize that we've got to start talking to each other, no matter what the future of our marriage is. We've got to communicate about what we're feeling. I had no idea you felt alone."

"Yeah. I didn't realize you felt like you had the weight of the whole family on your shoulders alone."

"Steve, what you do, commuting so far so that we can live here, where the services are best for Cassie, that's a huge contribution. I'm sorry if it seems like I've taken that for granted."

"Thanks, I'd like to think it is, but it does leave you on your own a lot, figuring everything else out all by yourself. Do you know Cassie didn't blink an eye when I told her last weekend that I had to leave for another week? It made me realize how used to not having me around she is."

"Do you think maybe the two of us could get some counseling together? Like I said, even if we can't save our marriage, we've got to find a way to share the load better so neither of us is so alone with their piece."

"Yeah. Okay. Do you want to set something up?"

"Sure, which nights in the coming week can you be in the area?"

"I was thinking I might come back home tomorrow if it's okay with you. I can

sleep in the guest room. I just want to be there. I'm supposed to be in California next week, but I'm going to cancel that trip."

"That would be great," I have to fight to keep the tears out of my voice.

"Okay, then schedule something for any evening this week, 7pm or later. We can ask Mrs. Andrews to stay with Cassie.

"Okay. That sounds good. Thank you."

"Okay, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Steve comes home the next morning, carrying a bag of bagels for breakfast. I meet him at the door, then Cassie comes running and jumps into his arms.

"Daddy! You're home!"

He twirls her around, then sets her down and looks at me for a moment.

"Welcome home," I say and open my arms to hug him. I'm not sure what he'll do, but decide to take the risk. He hugs me back, briefly, then pulls away and walks into the kitchen.

"Who wants a bagel?" he yells.

"Me, me!" says Cassie jumping up and down behind him.

On Tuesday night, we have our first session with a therapist. Her name is Miranda and her office is very new-age looking. The overhead lights are off and she has a number of warmly glowing lamps around the room. There is a diffuser pulsing out a cloud of scented steam and I count at least five Himalayan salt lamps around the room. There are

three comfortable chairs situated for easy conversation around a low, round coffee table featuring a planter stuffed with succulents, and the ever-present box of tissues necessary for any therapy session.

Miranda is younger than us, probably in her mid-thirties. She has a mane of wild, dark curls that spring straight out from her head. She is wearing a black tunic, black leggings, and black boots with a vibrant red, fringed shawl around her slim shoulders. I love her look, but am dubious about her ability to coach us with all the issues we're dealing with that she can't possibly have had time to experience for herself yet.

"Welcome, Lynn. Welcome, Steve," she begins, gesturing with open palms toward two of the chairs. We sit obediently and smile at her expectantly. She sits in the third chair and smiles back at us. "So what brings you here?" She looks back and forth between us, encouraging either of us to start speaking. Steve and I look at each other and politely indicate "after you," with our hands. This goes on for a few minutes, then I finally just decide to jump in and start. I figure I'll just get right to it.

"Steve thinks I've got something going on with another man."

Miranda doesn't bat an eye. "And do you?" she asks.

"No," I state emphatically, "Well, I can see why he thinks so, but no, I don't. Of course there are other issues. This affair-stuff is symptomatic."

"Right. It almost always is. So let's start there, then. Steve, is Lynn accurate when she says you think she has something going on with another man?"

Steve is quiet for a few moments, gathering his thoughts, I think. I start to get antsy and am about to prompt him to start talking as if he didn't hear Miranda, who is sitting serenely, not the least bit perturbed by his silence. Finally he speaks and I hear raw

emotion in his voice and realize he was trying to keep his emotions in check, not trying to think of what to say.

"Lynn ran into a guy she used to know when she was in high school at our daughter's art class. Our daughter has Down Syndrome, and so does this guy's daughter. It seems like they picked their *friendship* back up where they left off when they discovered they shared that particular challenge. The guy is going through a divorce, and all of a sudden he's calling Lynn and asking her for help and stuff with his daughter, and they're getting together supposedly so the girls can socialize. All of that was fine, even though I was aware that he was obviously attracted to Lynn. If I ever took Cassie to art, he would ask a bunch of times where Lynn was, trying to get details out of me as if there was some big significance to why she didn't come that day.

I wasn't really worried about it until this one day when Lynn took off in the middle of the afternoon, and left Cassie home alone--something I wouldn't have thought she'd ever do in a million years. She was gone for hours--no note, no phone call, she scared both our daughters and me to death, then she shows up in his car. He drops her off in front of the house, and Lynn tries to get me to believe she just went for a walk and called this guy to give her a ride home because she walked too far. It's the lying that I can't take. That's when I knew I had been too trusting," he stops talking.

Miranda looks at me. "Well, Lynn. What would you like to say about what Steve just shared?"

I take a moment, then begin. "Steve's right that Dave's attracted to me. He had a crush on me when we were teenagers, and I think that the timing when we met again, while he's in the middle of a divorce, plus the shared circumstances of each of us raising

a daughter with Down syndrome helped him to think of me in a romantic sense. There's some nostalgia to it, you know?"

Miranda nods. "Okay, what about your feelings about Dave and about this situation? We seem to have a thorough interpretation of Dave's emotional state, what about you?"

"Well, at first I thought I was imagining things when he seemed flirty, then I realized I wasn't when he kissed me once." I can't look at Steve as I say this. I force myself to continue. "I admit, I kissed him back for a moment. He had just shown me a drawing he had done of me when we were teenagers. It was so beautiful. The idea that I had ever been that girl that he drew, that he *saw* me that way, and seemed to still see me that way was intoxicating. But only for a moment. I pulled away and left and nothing like that ever happened between us again."

"So you were attracted to the way Dave sees you. Were you attracted to Dave himself?"

I shake my head, "No, I don't really think so," and the tears that I had been holding back begin to roll down my cheeks.

"And how do you think Steve sees you?"

I look at Steve for a moment, daring to meet his eyes. He looks back, his eyes full of pain. "I'm not sure he does see me anymore," I whisper. "I think I've become my roles, wife, mother, nurse, not just to Steve, but to everyone, even myself. I can't really see myself clearly any more as an individual." I look up at Miranda. She's nodding and smiling slightly. I continue. "So, it was irresistible for a moment to feel beautiful and appreciated just for myself. But I know that what Dave sees isn't really me either, it's

some idealized version of who I was thirty years ago. I've got to figure out who I am now."

Miranda nods some more. "That's a powerful insight, Lynn."

"I guess, so. But I didn't think of any of that until just now. I just knew that there was really no substance behind what happened romantically between Dave and me."

I see Steve's fists clench. He stands up abruptly and paces back and forth. "So why on Earth were you with him that day, Lynn? If you had realized that there was nothing there and all that?" he asks. Miranda looks at me, waiting for me to answer.

"It was exactly like I told you," I say softly, suddenly tired. "I was frustrated after my day with Cassie and I went for a walk. I had no intention of walking so far. I just sort of kept walking without realizing how long it had been. I was alone. When you called and yelled at me, I got mad at you, and even more mad at myself for scaring everyone. It would've taken hours to walk back home, and I didn't want you to come get me. So I called Dave to pick me up. I knew he would, I guess. It was a bad decision. It wasn't fair to him either. But he really did pick me up and bring me home. He let me cry a little, but nothing happened romantically between us that day, you just thought it did."

"But you had already kissed him!"

I nod and look at my hands in my lap. Steve continues to pace, but doesn't say anything.

After a moment Miranda says, "Steve, tell us how you feel after hearing what Lynn had to say."

"I feel fucking betrayed!" Steve yells. "I kill myself commuting to and from a job I'm sick of day in and day out to afford to live where we do and I worry constantly about the future. My mind is always on my family. What's going to happen to Cassie when we can't take care of her? What harm have we done to Kristen? Why is she in such a mess? How have we failed her? Meanwhile, my wife, my life partner in all this, is running around with some jerk who can actually *see* her? What the hell is that? Am I supposed to feel bad, like I've pushed her into this somehow by not *seeing* her?"

Miranda stands and puts her hand on Steve's arm. He immediately stops pacing and starts to cry. I stand up and take a step toward him, and Miranda signals me to sit back down. She steers Steve gently to his chair and hands him the box of tissues. He drops into the chair and pulls a tissue out of the box. He sobs audibly. I've never seen him like this.

Miranda says, "There's not any way you are *supposed* to feel, Steve. I think you are beginning to acknowledge how you *do* feel. I think you've been keeping your feelings bottled up for a long time. Does that sound accurate?" Steve nods and blows his nose continuing to sob. "Say more."

"I'm so afraid all the time," he says. "I'm afraid that we've handled things with Kristen wrong. I'm afraid for what Cassie's life will be like. I'm afraid for what my own future will look like. How will I make sure everyone is going to be okay? And I feel alone. I know Lynn loves the girls and most of the time she focuses entirely on them, especially Cassie. She has no time for me. I'm just on the periphery of things, especially since I'm away so much. When all this started to blow up between us, this whole Dave thing, I felt so angry and betrayed and hurt that I couldn't even speak to Lynn at all."

I listen to all of this feeling strangely relieved. I should feel upset, and I do, but the relief of all of this coming out, is stronger. I feel like a weight has been lifted in a way. We are finally really talking about things we've needed to talk about for so long.

I'm not sure where we'll end up, but at least we're finally taking a look at what's going on with us and how we each feel.

Miranda says, "So, what you both need most right now is to start talking. You've begun to do that today. You probably feel wrung out and exhausted, but hopefully, also a little bit better since you are finally expressing yourselves. You've both shared very honestly today, and I have a homework assignment for you between now and our next session. I want each of you to write a letter to the other one in which you express why you love him or her. Continue to talk with each other about your anger and negative feelings if you can. It's important that you hear each other and that each of you feels heard. But in the letter, focus on love. Remember back to when your love was new, before life got in the way so much. What was it that drew you to each other and bonded you? I believe you will discover that who you were then is not really so different from who you who are now. Then find a time when you can be alone and share your letters with each other. Next week we'll discuss how that experience was for you and see where that leads."

Steve and I walk back to our car in a kind of daze. "Steve?" I say after we get in the car. He's just sitting there. He hasn't started driving yet. He looks at me.

"I'm so sorry," I tell him.

He nods a few times and swallows hard. "Me too," he whispers and starts the car. As we walk in, Steve says, "Can you handle Cassie and Mrs. Andrews? I need a minute." He probably doesn't want them to see that he's been crying. He goes right upstairs and I go to the family room where Mrs. Andrews and Cassie are playing Chutes and Ladders. I

chat for a moment with Mrs. Andrews, then see her out and get Cassie through her nighttime routine. I feel strangely disconnected, like I've taken strong cold medicine. I'm oddly calm.

Before I go to bed I knock on the guest room door to say goodnight to Steve. "Come in," he says. I open the door and he's sitting on top of the bedspread, leaning back on the pillows, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. He's still in his clothes, even his shoes. His feet are hanging off the side of the bed. He has a big yellow legal pad and is writing on it. He's not crying anymore, but his eyes are still shining.

"What're you doing?" I ask.

"My homework," he smiles at me. I smile back, and nod.

"Goodnight," I say.

"Goodnight." He's already looking back down at the pad, his pen moving smoothly across the page, as I close the door.

We arrange for Cassie to spend the evening at Mrs. Andrews' house on Friday night so we can share our letters as instructed by Miranda. I'm nervous, but also excited. I enjoyed writing my letter to Steve. I had gotten out the box of old letters I had kept from when we were dating and read through most of them in order to bring back some of the memories and try to recapture how we were. I feel like I have poured my soul into my letter, and maybe discovered myself again a little bit while writing it.

We sit down awkwardly together in the family room. I pour us each a glass of red wine, and we have a fire in the fireplace. It's still chilly despite being the first week of April.

"Okay, so how do we do this?" Steve asks. "Do we just switch letters and read each other's silently or read them out loud, or what?"

"I think it's better if we read them out loud to each other."

"Okay, you go first," says Steve.

I laugh. "Okay. Here goes,

Dear Steve.

I don't quite know how to start this letter other than by saying that I love you.

Look at me Steve, see it in my eyes. I love you. I have loved you since you spilled your coffee all over our table at the college coffee-house on our first date. You got so embarrassed and adorably flustered trying to clean it up before any of it dripped on my new white pants. As you leaned over my lap mopping at the spill with an enormous pile of napkins you had swiped off the waitress station, I looked down at the back of your head, your light brown hair a little too long, your back muscles visible through your University of Wisconsin sweatshirt (why on Earth did you have a University of Wisconsin sweatshirt? Oh yes, I remember, your cousin John went there). You were oblivious to how inappropriately close you were to me, leaning on my legs to wipe up the coffee that dripped onto the floor, (by then I had my white pants and my new pocket book well out of the way of danger). I knew right then that I was falling for you.

I can't say I was surprised that I felt that way so quickly. I had had my eye on you that whole semester in that tedious Economics class we were in together. Did you know that? Hopefully you didn't realize it then, and I'm not sure if I ever told you, even after all these years, but I was so attracted to you that Econ became my favorite class, just

because I got to stare at you across the lecture hall, no matter that I was practically failing the class and couldn't have been less interested in the subject.

Because I was so distracted by you, I had to go to the professor's office hours just to try to catch up before a test. Imagine my dismay (and delight) when you showed up for office hours too! So much for catching up with the Law of Supply and Demand and all that stuff, my whole focus was on acting just interested enough to get you to ask me out, while still maintaining my ever-so-cool aloofness. It worked. You asked me to go for coffee the next day after class.

After that first date, things moved quickly. Remember our first kiss? In my dorm laundry room? You had come over to hang out and "study" for our next Econ test in my dorm cafeteria with me. We didn't do much studying. We were too busy talking about everything and anything. You told me how you wanted to travel, and I told you about my love of surfing. I was running about a billion loads of laundry because I hadn't done any in a month and you came with me to the basement laundry room when I had to switch the last load from the washer to the dryer. I was bent over stuffing too many clothes in the dryer, and when I stood back up and turned around, you were right there, so close to my face that I could smell your breath. It smelled like Doritos. You kissed me gently and tenderly and I felt a fire in my belly that rose through me until I'm pretty sure sparks were shooting out of my fingertips and the ends of my hair. We stayed down there for about an hour just making out.

A few weeks later, after many more make-out sessions, we ended up in your dorm room one night. Your roommate was out for the night, but just in case, you had put a piece of scotch tape over the keyhole, so if he came back his key would be stopped and he

would get the clue. Much more discreet than the usual practice of putting a sock on the doorknob. The tape was invisible. You had strung little white Christmas lights around the windows and around the frames of your lofted beds. You had a jasmine-scented candle burning and had put on a George Winston CD-- "Winter" I think it was. To this day when I smell jasmine, or hear George Winston, I'm right back in that dorm room with you. That night was our first time. We made love over and over again, never tiring of each other. I remember I cried after the first time because I was so overcome by my love for you. I thought I would drown in it.

Then you wrote me that letter while we were away from each other that summer. You said 'I love you' for the first time in that letter. I still have it. We used to 'I love you' a hundred times a day. When was the last time we said it? I'm not sure. It's been a long time. Life got in the way. Worry and stress and pressure and to-do lists got in the way. That's why I want you to really get it, Steve. I love you.

I have always loved you and I always will. I love your smile and your laugh, and that little line that appears in your forehead when you're worried or nervous. I love your sense of humor and sense of what's right and good. I love how you love our daughters and care so much about being a good dad. I love how you cried with me when our children were born, and how you cried with me for months after we found out Cassie's diagnosis, and I love how you were wholeheartedly on board when I finally was ready to have another child. I love how hard you work to make our life possible. I love how much fun we've had over the years and how many happy memories we have together. I love who you are. I'm so sorry I've allowed you to feel alone. I never want you to feel that

way. I don't know what happens next with us. I hope we can find our way back to each other, but no matter what our future holds, I love you.

Truly yours,

Lynn

I look up at Steve when I finish. I'm not sure what to expect. He's crying. Tears are streaming down his face. He pulls me close and hugs me for a long time. "I love you too," he whispers into my hair. We just stay there for a while. It's so wonderful to feel Steve's arms around me that I almost don't dare to breathe for fear he'll stop holding me.

After a while we both sit back and reach for our glasses of wine. I thought ahead of time to bring a box of tissues into the family room with me, and I grab it now and hand one to Steve and take one myself. We both blow our noses loudly, then laugh.

"Okay, now it's your turn," I tell him.

He takes a deep breath. "Okay." He unfolds the yellow legal paper that he's folded into a tight little square.

Dear Lynn,

It's hard to write right now about how much I love you. I do love you. I have no doubt of that, but I'm also angry. I understand what you said about being 'seen' and all that, I really do. I've been thinking a lot about that. I'm not sure how anyone could possibly 'see' you better or more clearly than I do. It hurts a lot that you turned to someone else seeking that.

The first time I saw you, you were walking across campus with some friends. You were wearing denim shorts and a pink and white striped t-shirt. Your gorgeous curls were pulled back in a ponytail that wasn't holding up too well. Hair was escaping all

over your head like a reddish brown halo. It was about a million degrees that day. It was just the first or second day back on campus after the summer break. I was a senior (I found out later you were a junior). You were on your way into the ROTC Hangar where they held Add-Drop, so students could change their schedules. I followed you. Your face was so fresh, even with a light sheen of sweat on it from the heat, and your smile was so open. You seemed so relaxed.

You went over to the Economics department and I stood nearby and listened while you added Econ 150 to your schedule. You said something about needing one more business class to fulfill a requirement left over from freshman year. I was already taking Econ 350, but after you left, I added Econ 150 to my schedule too just so I could be in class with you. Luckily it was a big lecture-hall class so there was only one section, otherwise I wouldn't have known which one to pick. I told my parents some story about needing extra credits and how this would be an easy A when they asked why I was taking it. I don't think I've ever told you this story. That's odd after so many years together. I guess I just didn't want you to think of me as some sort of creepy stalker. Now that seems less important than letting you know how I 'saw' you, and still see you.

I tried to talk to you a few times, but you wouldn't give me the time of day, so I contented myself with sitting across the room from you where I could see you. Strangely, I looked up fairly often to find you looking right at me. It must've been destiny. One day I was hanging around after class trying to get up the courage to try talking to you again when I heard you make an appointment with the professor to come for help during his office hours. So I made one to come at the same time. After that session I finally managed to ask you out.

We went for coffee the next day and I spilled mine all over you. What an idiot. I was so nervous. It's a wonder you ever spoke to me again. But we really hit it off. We had so much to talk about. Before I knew it, we were a couple.

You asked me to your sorority semi-formal that semester and I'll never forget how you looked that night. You came down that staircase in an ice-blue gown, strapless and just above your knees. You had a tan already and I couldn't take my eyes off your collarbones. Your beautiful hair was piled on top of your head in some intricate style with just a few curls hanging loose on your lovely neck. And your eyes. I've never been able to get enough of looking in your eyes, Lynn. They are like tiger-eyes. Sort of brown, but the longer I look, the greener, almost yellow, they turn. There's something a little wild in your eyes. And despite how much we've been through or how many years have passed, that wildness is still there. I can still see it.

I think that may be the part of yourself you feel like you've lost. You've had to do so much for our family and to be responsible for every little thing, especially since I'm away so much. I want you to know that I still see your wild side. It's still there. You are still the girl who took off her high heels that night of the semi-formal and splashed into the fountain outside the country club, dress and all, laughing your head off. I still see her. I still see you. It's my biggest regret that you feel you had to find someone else in order to be seen. I'm not very good at expressing myself. I know that. It's especially hard when emotions are involved. I hope it's coming through in this letter that I do see you. I see all the aspects of you: the loving mother, the caring nurse, the responsible CEO of everything that needs doing around here, the daring little girl you once were before I knew you, the reliable big sister, and that wild and beautiful goddess that I first fell in

love with who just wanted to be free and experience an adventure. You are all of these things and so much more. I see you. I know you. I love you.

Always,

Steve

I pull Steve into a long kiss. I feel tears sliding down my face. When I look up at him, he kisses me gently and tenderly and it's just like that first time. The spark is still there.

"Wooooo wooooo," Cassie crows from the family room door. "Mommy and Daddy sitting in the tree..."

"K-I-S-S-I-N-G," we all shout together. Mrs. Andrews looks sheepish.

"I'm so sorry. I should've called before I brought her home. It's just that it's getting a little late and I know Cassie needs to go to bed soon." I look at the clock. It's almost 9:30. I had told Mrs. Andrews we'd pick up Cassie at 9:00.

"No problem at all, Mrs. Andrews," I say. I guess time just got away from us.

Thank you again for having Cassie over tonight."

Steve puts Cassie to bed after tucking the afghan around me and telling me not to move a muscle. I sit snuggled on the couch with my wine and stare at the fire. For the first time in several months, it feels like we are connecting. Maybe we'll be alright after all.

Once Cassie's in bed Steve comes back and sits with his arm around me. We drink wine and watch the fire and talk about more memories that come to mind because of our letters. Once we're sure Cassie's had time to fall asleep, we run upstairs giggling like two teen-agers. We make love hungrily, barely pausing long enough to remove all

our clothing. When was the last time we did this? I wonder afterwards. As hard as I try, I can't remember. We lay there for a long time, wrapped in each other. It's as though neither of us wants to speak so as not to break the spell. Finally we fall asleep. It's the deepest, most restful sleep I've had in months.

In the morning Cassie wakes us up, knocking on our locked door and announcing repeatedly that she's hungry. "You stay right here," Steve says. "I'll go." He gets up and pulls on his jeans and sweater from the night before, then disappears into our bathroom. I snuggle into the blankets and I must drift off again immediately. I never even hear Steve leave the room. When I wake up, it's after 10:00 am. I get dressed and go downstairs. Steve and Cassie are sitting on the couch together. Cassie is reading to Steve from a Junie B. Jones book. They both look up at me as I come in.

"I guess I needed a good long sleep," I say sheepishly.

"We're readin'," Cassie tells me.

"Yes, I see that. I'll just go get something to eat." I leave them and wander into the kitchen. For a moment, I can't decide what to do. I'm not used to feeding only myself. No one else needs me to do anything for them for the moment. How strange. What do I even feel like eating? I end up with a Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwich with potato chips and a glass of milk and an apple, like I'm five years old. It is absolutely delicious. While I eat, I read the novel I've been trying to get into but never managed to read more than a page or two before falling asleep at night, if I bother to try to read at all.

After a while, Steve comes into the kitchen. Cassie is using Brain Pop on the computer in the other room. I can hear her saying, "Silly Mobi," quietly to herself in

reference to the robot in the program. "So I've been thinking," Steve says, pulling up a chair.

"Me too," I put my book aside.

"I've actually been thinking about a lot of things, but last night helped me to get some of my thoughts in perspective. There may be an opportunity to work closer to home soon."

I take a deep breath. I've asked Steve for years to try to find something closer, but he was always afraid of losing all the contacts he'd made over the years and the reputation he had built up in his company. He said it was just too risky.

"Some of the people I've worked with in the past have joined to build a start-up company on the Cape. I think I could work for them, maybe even get in on the ground floor and potentially make a lot of money if and when the company goes public."

"Wow," I'm a little afraid to get my hopes up. "So what would that mean?"

"It would cut my commute by more than half the time, and I think I might be able to work from home a couple of days a week. That way, you wouldn't be on your own handling everything so much of the time."

I feel a lump in my throat. Steve's been with his company for over twenty years. I know it'll be hard for him to leave and start fresh.

"What about your current job? What will you lose?"

"Well, it'll all be new, but that's kind of exciting. There's also a lot of risk in a start-up. Many of them fail to get off the ground, but I feel like my years of experience in the industry will be a good safeguard against that. We'd be offering services from an online platform, which is the way most businesses have to go these days."

"Is is smart to be in a risky job at this point in your career?"

"Lynn, that's what's always stopped me before, but our marriage and our family are already at risk. Those things are way more important than my job. I can always find a way to make some money if I have to. I know this won't solve everything we need to work out, but I think it's important for me to be around more and have a more flexible schedule. It's something I'd like to do. When Kristen comes home, she's going to need a lot of supervision to make sure she doesn't backslide, and Cassie already requires so much. I need to be part of that more than I can be if I continue to work in Boston. For all of our sakes."

I just look at him for a long moment, then nod. "That would be great," I say softly, "Thank you."

Steve nods once decisively. "Okay then. It's settled. I have a meeting set up with Diane and Jack on Monday. We're going to discuss the terms of my employment.

They've been practically begging me to come on board, so we'll get this ball rolling."

"Wow, it's all so fast."

"Yeah, that's how it goes when the universe is telling you something is right.

Don't worry. I have a good feeling about this. I do have to ask something of you though,

Lynn."

"Okay,"

"I want you to break off all contact with Dave. I can't handle wondering what's going on if you remain friendly with him. And I want you to do something for yourself, just for you, but not the art class with Dave. Find something you can do to help you find who you are again. I can pick up any slack around here. I'll be here."

I nod. "Okay, I'd also like us to go on a date, soon. And on a regular basis."

Steve looks at me with the beginnings of a smile.

"How about a day on Martha's Vineyard, and maybe a night too, with no kids?" I say.

"Who will stay with the girls?"

"I'll see if Mrs. Andrews might be willing to have them for a weekend."

Steve grins. "That would be great."

Later that afternoon, when I'm alone while Steve and Cassie are out together doing errands, I call Dave.

"Lynn!" He sounds surprised and very happy to hear from me.

"Hi Dave."

"Hi! Is everything alright?"

"Yes. Everything is pretty good, actually, all things considered."

"Oh," he almost sounds disappointed. "Good, I'm glad. What's up?"

"Well, I need to talk to you."

"Okay, do you want to go get a coffee or something?"

"No, I think I'd rather talk right now, on the phone, if you have a minute."

"Okay," I can hear disappointment.

"Dave," I begin, "I really appreciate what a good friend you've been to me."

"Umm, I think I see where this is going," he interrupts.

I just cut to the chase. "I can't have a friendship with you Dave, I can't see you or talk to you after this phone call. I'm dropping out of the art class, both of them. I think you know our friendship is causing problems in my marriage."

"I was under the impression that your marriage already had quite a few problems, independent of me," his voice is cold.

"Well, yes. You're right. We are committed to working on them, together. So, I can't spend any more time with you if I want my marriage to work."

"What am I to you, Lynn? know you feel something for me. How can you just toss me aside?"

"I think what I felt for you had more to do with how you seemed to see me, than with you. I think I was attracted to your memory of me from when I was young. You seemed to think I was still that girl, and I wanted to be seen that way. It wasn't any more than that. I'm sorry if I made you think it was. Steve and I have built a life together. It's different."

"So you just used me as some sort of mirror? How self-absorbed can you be? You made me think you really felt something for me, something powerful."

"I'm so sorry," I say weakly.

"Yeah, well. You should be," Dave says and hangs up the phone.

I sit there for a few minutes, stunned. Somehow I hadn't expected his anger. Why hadn't I? Didn't I realize he was more invested than me in whatever our friendship was? Of course I did. On some level I must've known that I would end up hurting him, but I never allowed myself to think about that. I just let my needs in the moment to prevail over everything. What kind of person am I? I feel like an asshole.

The following Saturday, the weather is beautiful. It feels like the sun came out just for us. Mrs. Andrews was happy to be asked to take care of Cassie. Steve and I are on the 9 am ferry from Woods Hole to Oak Bluffs. I stand at the railing and let the breeze blow back my hair. Steve joins me handing me a coffee from the on-board snack bar and puts his arm around me. I lean against him and just breathe in the salty air.

"This is nice," I say.

"Mmm-hmm," he agrees and hugs me to him, smelling my hair.

When we get off the ferry in Oak Bluffs, Steve tugs my hand leading me to the Flying Horses. "Let's get on the first ride of the day," he says. The carousel opens at 10 am and there is a short line outside already. I laugh and let myself be pulled.

Even though I've ridden on it many times over the years, it's still a thrill for some reason even though the horses are stationary and don't "gallop" up and down like the horses on newer carousels do. There's something almost mystical about it being the oldest carousel in America. I also love the fact that riders can grab the rings from the mechanical arm on their way by. If you're lucky enough to grab the brass ring, you win a free ride. The nostalgia it evokes for a simpler time is intoxicating.

We do make it on the first ride of the day and are lucky enough to both get horses on the outside so that we can grab for the rings. I remember being so frustrated as a kid, because I couldn't reach the rings without falling off my horse, while my older cousins were piling them up on the tiny spike on the top of their horse's head. I've never caught the brass ring, but maybe today will be my lucky day.

After a few spins, I am coming up on the ring arm and I see the brass ring is the next one! I stretch as far as I can out to the right and my fingers brush it, but I miss! I want to cry like a five year old, then I hear Steve call my name. He's on the horse right behind me, and as I turn to look at him, he holds up the brass ring. He got it when I missed. I smile and give him the thumbs up. There's only one brass ring per ride, so he's the lucky winner this time.

When we get off, Steve takes his brass ring up to the counter and exchanges it for a golden ticket that entitles him to a free ride to be used anytime, and we head back out onto the street. Even pre-season, Oak Bluffs has gotten very crowded in the last twenty years or so. It never felt this way when I was growing up. I find that I'm itching to get out of the crowd.

"Let's rent bikes," I say.

"Okay," agrees Steve.

We find a bike-rental place and within a few minutes we are on the road to Edgartown. It's much more peaceful there. We leave our bikes in a bike rack and stroll in and out of shops for a while. We pass a place called, "Old Tyme Photos" and Steve stops.

"Let's go in," he says.

"No," I start laughing. "We'll look ridiculous."

"So? That's what's fun about it. Besides, the picture will be a nice memento of our day."

"Okay, fine. Let's do it."

We end up with him dressed like a gangster in a saloon and I look like his favorite prostitute. We pose with him in a chair holding a large gun, and me leaning on one of his

shoulders with my leg up on the edge of his chair so that the garter around my thigh shows. It's a hysterical shot, but I have to admit, we look pretty good. I have a huge feather in my hair and my collar bones are jutting out of my low cut neckline. I actually look pretty sexy, and just a bit wild and Steve looks dangerously sexy himself with a long, fake moustache and steely eyes. We buy a framed copy and leave the store laughing.

We hadn't really thought about how hard it would be to ride our bikes and carry the large photograph. It's too awkward to ride and carry it under the arm, so we find another bike rental shop and rent a basket to go on the front of one bike. We put it on Steve's bike since he has better balance than I do. I laugh to see him pedaling along with a white plastic basket on his bike complete with garish blue and yellow plastic flowers. I didn't even know they still made bike baskets like that.

We ride to Vineyard Haven and walk around some more. We decide to have lunch at the famous Black Dog Tavern. Then we stop for ice cream at Mad Martha's. Finally we ride back to Oak Bluffs and find a spot to sit on the green and admire the Gingerbread cottages that surround it.

"So," I finally work up the courage to say. "What do you think?"

"About what?" Steve is lying back, his arms folded behind his head on the grass, his legs crossed lazily. He looks utterly content. I hate to ruin that, but we have this rare time alone and we have so much that we need to talk about.

"About us." He sits up and looks at me.

"What about us?" he asks. His tone has changed. He sounds wary now.

"Are we going to make it?" I can't look him in the eye for a moment. I'm afraid to see what might be there. Finally I force myself to face him. He is watching me carefully.

"I guess that depends," he says after a few minutes.

"On what?"

"On whether or not we want to make it badly enough. We will both have to do some work. It depends on whether or not we're both willing to do that, to make some big changes."

"You've already started to do that, with your plans for your job."

Steve nods and looks down at his hands in his lap. "I'm trying," his voice is almost a whisper. I realize that he is afraid that I might not be willing to try as much as he is.

"Steve," he looks up at me. "I'm in. For the long haul. I'll do whatever it takes. I'm trying too."

He nods, then swallows hard. "What about Dave?"

"I've spoken to him," I begin. "I told him we can't have any sort of friendship at all. I think I hurt him pretty badly. He's really angry."

Steve doesn't look at me for a long moment. "I'm sorry you felt like I stopped seeing you," he says.

"Oh Steve, I'm sorry too. It kills me that you've been feeling so lonely."

"Somehow we both managed to become very isolated, by our own doing."

"How do we keep from falling back into that old pattern again?"

"We have to do more of this," Steve says. "We have to take breaks and spend time alone together. We have to learn to enjoy each other again. It's so important."

I nod. "We also have to start to function as more of a team. We're going to have to face all this together, and whatever else is coming in the future. We can't treat each other like co-workers."

Steve nods. "Lynn? I've had a really good time today."

"Me too." I take his hand. "It's really been nice just being with you."

We get home at about 8 pm. Cassie is full of stories about all the things she and Mrs. Andrews did together while we were out.

"She's a pleasure," Evelyn tells me. "I'd be glad of her company any time you need a hand."

The next morning, Steve and I stay in bed late, not sleeping. When I finally come downstairs and open the front door to get the Sunday paper, there is a bouquet of yellow tulips, my favorite, sitting on the porch in a little vase with a ribbon around it. In the bottom of the vase is some of that green, spongy, Oasis material soaked with water and holding the stems in place. I pick it up and bring it inside, forgetting all about the paper. There is a card in a tiny envelope tucked among the tulips. I open it.

Please give me another chance.

There's no signature, but I recognize Dave's handwriting. I look around quickly, guiltily, to see if Steve has come downstairs yet. Nope. I can hear the shower running upstairs. What do I do? Throw them away, I tell myself. But where? I don't want Steve to see them at all.

Insanely, I grab the flowers, get into my car and pull out of the driveway. I drive to the supermarket about two miles away and pull around back to the dumpsters. I take one last look at the flowers, what a shame to waste them, they're so beautiful. *Lynn!* I scold myself and fling the whole bouquet into a dumpster. It must be pretty empty, because I hear the glass vase shatter when it hits the bottom.

On my way back home, I drive through a Dunkin Donuts window, in my pajamas, and order two coffees and a dozen donuts so I have some excuse for why I went out so suddenly. I'm not sure yet how I'll explain the pajamas.

"Surprise!" I shout when I come back into the kitchen from the garage and see Cassie standing there looking sleepy. "I brought donuts!"

Her face lights up and she comes over to the box where I set it on the counter and chooses a glazed donut with white frosting and rainbow sprinkles, just like I knew she would. Steve comes into the kitchen then, freshly showered and wearing shorts and a t-shirt.

"What's this?" he asks.

I hand him his coffee. "I thought we deserved a treat this morning, so I ran out and got coffee and donuts."

"In your bathrobe?"

"Uh, yeah. I went through the drive-through. I didn't feel like getting dressed yet. I want to laze around and do the Sunday crossword in my pajamas. Oh! The paper! I never got the paper!" I sound absolutely hysterical I realize as I bolt for the front door and the newspaper lying on the walk.

"Are you okay?" Steve asks when I come back into the kitchen. He looks genuinely concerned.

I force myself to take a deep breath and calm the hell down. "Yes. I'm fine." I look at him like he's got three heads. "Better than fine, actually," I add with a little secret smile for him, planting a kiss on his cheek.

He smiles. "Me too." he says.

When I don't respond to Dave's flowers, he starts sending me really nasty text messages several times a day. How could I have not realized he was so fragile? He seems pretty unbalanced. I feel awful for causing him pain, but I'm beginning to get angry about his constant badgering. I almost wonder if I should get a restraining order. I block his number on my cell phone so he can't call or text me, so he starts leaving messages on our home answering machine. It's only a matter of time before Steve hears one. I decide I'd better just tell Steve about Dave's behavior.

"I think maybe I need to pay a little call on Dave," Steve says.

"Oh God!" I'm not sure what to say. "What'll you do?"

"I'll just talk to him. I'll make it clear that he'd better stop harassing you."

I'm not sure that will be successful, but I don't know what else to do short of getting the police involved. "Maybe I should talk to him," I say.

"No, absolutely not. That will only give him hope. You are doing exactly the right thing by cutting off all contact. Even if you get in touch to try to get him to go away, he will see it as a positive sign. The kindest thing you can do is stay silent."

I nod. I know he's right. I just can't imagine how a confrontation between the two of them will turn out in a positive way. I give Steve Dave's address, and end up cleaning the bathrooms while he's gone, just to stay busy. Otherwise I won't be able to stand waiting. He comes home within an hour. I'm surprised how soon he's back.

"Well?" I ask stepping out of the hall bathroom with my yellow gloves still on my hands. I get one look at Steve and start running to him. His right eye is already swelling shut. Incongruously, he has an enormous smile on his face. "Oh my God, Steve! Are you okay?"

"I'm great!" he says. "Oh, and you should see the other guy! I've always wanted to say that."

I just stand there, shocked. "What happened? You said you were going over there to talk."

"I did. I tried to talk to him, and he threw a punch before I even got through my first sentence. So I let him have it. God, that felt good. I think Dave understands that he should leave you alone now."

"Oh my God," I say again like a fool. "Just like two kids on the playground! Is Dave alright?"

"Sure. He'll be fine. I'm pretty sure I didn't break anything. He's just a little banged up is all."

"I can't believe the two of you actually fought."

"I'm so glad he took a swing. I wanted to knock his lights out, but was trying to hold back and just talk to him, like I told you. But once he laid one on me, I figured I had free rein."

I had some ground beef in the freezer and I put it in a Ziploc bag and handed it to Steve. Here, put this on your eye. Aren't you supposed to use steak for that? I think I got that from the cartoons. This is all so unreal."

"I don't think that really works, but this'll do. It's just like ice." He sits happily at the kitchen table holding the package of hamburger over his eye.

Whatever the whole interaction was between the two of them, it works. I do not hear from Dave again. I'm able to arrange for Cassie to take monthly private art lessons with Miss Kathy, which is nice, but it's a shame that Cassie lost the social aspect of the Saturday class. I tell myself that Cassie has enough socialization with school and after-school activities, and this is just about her love of art. Honestly, I don't think Cassie minds one bit having all of Miss Kathy's attention to herself, and I no longer have to stay for her lessons since Cassie's the only student who might need help.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

When Kristen comes home, two weeks later, Steve's eye is pretty well-healed, still a bit red still, but no longer swollen. We've been to several family sessions with her case manager, Rosa, at Bright Horizons to prepare us for her homecoming. Still, I'm extremely nervous the morning we leave to pick her up.

I had cleaned her room yesterday and this morning, before we leave, I decide to put a vase of fresh daffodils in it. Then, thinking that's too weird, too unusual, I move the vase to the mantel in the family room. But I want to do something special for Kristen, so I move them back. The hell with it, I'm leaving them there.

We arrive at 10:00 am at Bright Horizons. The first stop is a meeting with Rosa.

"Good morning everyone. It's a happy day today," Rosa says once the four of us are seated in her office. "It's also a little scary. For all of you. It's okay to feel that way, and to admit it."

We all look at each other, and nod, smiling shyly. Except for Cassie.

"Krissy's comin' home, right?"

"Yes, Cassie. Kristen is going home with you today."

"I'm not scared. I'm very brave."

"That's good. You can lead the way for your parents and Kristen, then."

"Lead?"

"Yes, you show them how brave you are and maybe they'll start to feel braver too."

Cassie puffs up her chest and looks around at each of us, full of importance. "Don't worry, guys. I'll lead you." Kristen giggles and hugs Cassie. I hear Cassie whisper, "I love you, Krissy. I miss you."

"I love you too big sis." Kristen plants a kiss on her cheek.

"Okay, good," says Rosa. "Let's talk about practicalities first. Have you secured all the alcohol and medications in your home in locked locations?"

I'm surprised at how frank she is in front of Kristen. I glance quickly at Steve, then at Kristen to see her reaction. She is entirely unruffled.

"Yes, we have," answers Steve, taking my hand.

Rosa notices my reaction. "Lynn, there are no secrets here. We cannot pretend that Kristen doesn't have an addiction. Part of her conquering it is in her accepting it. She understands that addictive substances have to be kept out of her reach, especially as she is settling back in to her life. The road is not always a smooth one. It's one thing to maintain a substance-free life while in treatment, quite another to do so back out in the real world. But I have no doubt that Kristen is ready, and she can do it." She smiles affectionately at Kristen and Kristen returns the smile.

I nod. "Yes, I do understand all that. I guess I just didn't realize Kristen knew about that rule too." I think guiltily for a second of the cigarettes I still have stashed in my box of tampons. Those are addictive too.

"Right," says Rosa, continuing. "It's important to maintain security on medications and alcohol, but it's also important to maintain a normal life. Kristen will have to learn to exist in situations where alcohol and other substances are present, and to

abstain from them. Please understand, Kristen is a 'recovering' addict, not a 'recovered' addict. That's an important distinction. The recovery is always on-going, never finished."

"For the rest of her life?" I ask.

"Yes, Lynn. For the rest of her life," she continues. "If Kristen were of age, part of her out-patient therapy after leaving our program would be to go to a bar, and sit for a while, and drink only non-alcoholic drinks. The temptation exists in normal adult life. It's important to be able to be faced with it and still abstain. I do need to know if there are any parties or events coming up soon, where people will be drinking and Kristen will be there."

I think for a moment. "Well, we are having a baby shower for my sister in a few weeks. It's a brunch and we had planned to serve Mimosas and Bloody Marys. We just won't. We don't have to have alcohol there."

"Lynn, you're not listening to me. Kristen needs to face temptations exactly like that one and conquer them. She has to be able to function in the real world."

"So what do we do?" I ask.

"Serve the cocktails," says Rosa. "Kristen, I want to schedule a session with you a day or two before the party so we can plan how you will handle it if you feel tempted."

Kristen nods.

"Should I taste anything she drinks to make sure she's okay?" I ask.

"No. Kristen is going to report to you afterwards about how she did, and to me in our next session after that. It's important that she take responsibility and own her own behavior, which means she needs to assess her actions honestly. I will help her to process her emotions around her actions and plan for how to make healthy choices. You do not

have to police her beyond keeping addictive substances out of her reach in your home.

Eventually that rule will be relaxed as well. It's just too much pressure on her when she first gets home if her easy escape is too readily available."

"Okay," I nod feeling nervous. How am I going to keep myself from keeping a hawkeye on Kristen throughout the shower?

"So, Kristen will start out meeting with me on an out-patient basis once a week.

Eventually, I expect we will be able to reduce that to biweekly, then monthly and so on."

"Then will the therapy eventually stop completely?" Steve asks.

"That all depends on how well she is processing her emotions and choosing healthy ways to react to them," Rosa tells him. "She may be able to discontinue therapy eventually, but may need to return to it temporarily when she is going through a difficult time. That's fine. There's really no way to predict that far into the future at this point. I will tell you that your daughter is a strong girl. She has a powerful will to overcome this, which is 90 percent of the battle right there."

Kristen nods resolutely and smiles at each of us in turn.

When the session is over, we go to gather Kristen's things from her room. She's already packed. Then we wait while she says goodbye to her roommate and a few other patients with tearful hugs and promises to keep in touch.

On the ride home, we're all strangely silent. I rack my brain for something to talk about, something that's just normal. "So, Kristen," I finally say. "Are you looking forward to getting back to school?"

She lets out a long breath. "Not really," she admits. "I'm going to have to break with most of my friends if I'm going to stay straight. Plus it's weird how long I've been gone. People will probably avoid me."

"I've talked to your guidance counselor," I tell her, "and he's changed most of your classes, all the ones he could, so you won't be going back into the same situation. It'll feel like a new start. Maybe you will make some new friends quickly," I add hopefully.

"You can hang out with me and my friends," Cassie tells her. "Like at lunch. You could sit with us and stuff."

"Thanks, Cassie," I hear Kristen say. "Maybe I will. That might be a nice change."

When we get home, Kristen heads up to her room to unpack and get settled. I want to help her, but Steve grabs my arm.

"Let her do it, Lynn," he whispers. "She probably needs a minute to herself." I nod and sit down in the kitchen, doing nothing, unable to decide what to do. Steve puts on the kettle. In a few minutes he brings me a cup of lavender tea, touted to relieve stress, I laugh when I see he has a cup himself. He never drinks tea.

"How very English of you," I tease. "When at a loss for what to do, make tea.

Thank you." I wrap my hands around the warm mug. I hadn't realized how cold they were until now.

"Well it's a pretty good habit, or ritual. You've got to hand it to the English. They figured out how to slow down and take a breather when they need to."

I nod and take a sip from my mug. We just sit there silently drinking tea. I can hear Cassie upstairs in Kristen's room with her and wonder if I should go get her so Kristen can be alone like Steve said, then I hear them laughing hard about something, and decide to let Cassie be right where she is.

After a little while, Kristen comes downstairs. She seems surprised to see us just sitting there. "Mom, thank you," she says.

I'm taken by surprise. "For what, Honey?"

"For being you," she says breezily, opening up the refrigerator to scan its contents, "and for the bouquet of daffodils you put in my room." She turns away from the fridge and beams at me. "They're gorgeous and I love them."

Wow! How I needed to hear something like that. "You're welcome, Sweetie. I'm so glad to have you home." I take another sip of my tea, smiling at Steve.

That night I gather up all the cigarettes in my hidden stashes and flush them down the toilet. No more addictions for me either. I'm quitting cold turkey.

Chapter Thirty

It's raining the morning of Caroline's baby shower, which is a disappointment because we had planned to have the shower on the patio at Renaud's rather than inside the restaurant. The patio has a tiny waterfall feature and a koi pond as well as a trellis dripping with wisteria where it would've been nice to take pictures. Oh well. Can't control the weather.

I call Renaud's and speak to Eliza, the head waitress for the party, and confirm that they'll be setting up inside. At least there are plenty of windows, maybe there'll still be some nice light despite the rain. I call Caroline to tell her, and she couldn't care less. She's thrilled to be having a shower and a little rain isn't going to ruin it for her. That makes me feel better.

I head over early with Kristen and Cassie to help with the set up. We are bringing in our own floral centerpieces for the tables. I made them myself and am proud of how they turned out. Each is a combination of yellow, and pink, and blue, since we don't know the baby's gender. Caroline didn't want to find out. We're also bringing a cake I ordered from my favorite bakery in Hyannis.

"Can I set up the diaper drop-off?" Kristen asks as soon as we arrive. We asked everyone to bring a package of diapers to donate, as well as a gift, and are planning to collect the diapers in the brand new Pack-n-Play travel crib we are giving to Caroline.

"Yes! That would be perfect." I tell her.

"I'll help," says Cassie following her sister. I watch them for a moment, feeling so grateful. The last two weeks, since Kristen came home have been a roller-coaster. We're all so glad to have her home, and she seems truly glad to be home with us, which is a

relief, but going back to school has been really hard. She was right that she would be pretty alone there, and that the other kids would be talking about her and avoiding her.

Despite our efforts to keep things private, inevitably there are rumors floating around about her having been in rehab. What can we do? We have to just own it, like Rosa said.

Steve's been coaching her to say that yes, she has been in rehab and has been working hard to get healthy and is really proud of herself for her progress. It's the right message, but easier said than done when you're 15. It turns out she *has* been sitting with Cassie's friends at lunch time. She says there is no judgement with them. However, hanging out with Cassie's class is not helping her social status.

"I think one of the lessons we can take away from this whole experience, is that social status is not all it's cracked up to be," I tell her. "Surround yourself with genuine people who care about you."

It's been hard to get her to get up for school. I'm afraid she's falling back into a depression. I've actually let her stay home twice. I know I probably shouldn't, but it's torture to force her to be somewhere that is difficult for her. Her sessions with Rosa seem to help. She had one yesterday, as promised, to help her prepare for today.

The wait staff arrive and begin to bustle around in preparation. I take Eliza aside for a moment.

"Please make sure that my daughters do not get served any alcohol, and that there's no way for them to get ahold of it. No champagne bottles in cooling buckets, for example."

Her eyebrows are raised so high they almost touch her hairline. "Mrs. Holcomb, of course we will not be serving alcohol to minors." Her brow scrunches and her eyes

narrow. It seems like she's about to say more, but then she just shakes her head. I've really offended her.

"I'm so sorry. It's just that.... Oh never mind. I'm sorry. Thank you. I appreciate all the work you're doing." She just nods and walks back into the kitchen.

What an idiot I am.

I busy myself with the centerpieces. I'm just finishing up, and the girls finally have the pack and play set up and the first few packages of diapers in it when Caroline arrives. She's wearing a floral dress and high heeled sandals that I wouldn't dream of wearing on my best day, but she can pull off at almost eight months pregnant. Her face is radiant. I haven't seen her in a couple of months and am amazed by how big she is. She isn't due for another six weeks, but it looks like she could deliver any minute. I give her a hug.

"Lynn, this is so beautiful, thank you. Who'd've thought I'd ever be the guest of honor at a baby shower? Sometimes I still can't believe it, despite my size." She lays her hand on her abdomen proudly.

"You look great," I tell her. "How're you feeling?"

"Like a beached whale," she says. "Everything is harder to do now, especially breathing."

I laugh. "Yeah, I remember. Trying to get a deep breath and having to pee every five minutes are the worst, not to mention pulling a muscle every time you sneeze."

"Yes!" she agrees. "That's awful."

"It'll all be over soon," I remind her.

"I can't wait."

The guests begin arriving and everything goes beautifully. The food is delicious. I remind myself to give an extra tip to Eliza when it's over, especially since I insulted her unintentionally. I can't help myself, I watch every sip Kristen takes. Thank God she's seated at my table. She drinks ginger-ale and chats animatedly with Caroline and a few great-aunts and cousins who are sitting with us. I hope she doesn't notice how closely I'm watching her.

Finally it's time for Caroline to open the gifts. I sit with her and keep a list of who gave her what. Kristen and Cassie take turns handing gifts to Caroline and scooping up the discarded wrapping paper into a trash bag between gifts.

At one point Cassie announces loudly to the whole room, "Mom! I have to go baf'room!"

I start to put down my pad and pen and ask Caroline to pause in her gift opening for a few minutes.

"Mom," Kristen says as I'm getting up. "Stay here. I'll take her."

"That's okay..." I begin.

"Mom!" Kristen stops me. "I'll take her. It doesn't always have to be you."

I nod and sit back down. "Thanks Kristen."

Caroline smiles at me and keeps opening gifts. She gets through them all in record time. She's been a guest at enough baby showers to know that this part can be tedious to watch. She had made me promise that we wouldn't play any silly shower games like guessing how many inches around her belly is, or taking bets on the gender and date and time of delivery. So there's nothing left to do but eat our cake.

Just then Caroline lets out a yelp and stands up quickly. The seat of her chair is soaked. Her eyes find mine. "Oh God, Lynn. I think my water just broke!" I jump up and put my arm around her to steady her.

"Okay, come on. I'm parked just outside. Let's get you to the hospital."

"But it's six weeks too early! I'm supposed to deliver in Boston! My doctor's in Boston!"

I marvel inwardly at how calm I manage to sound, "There are lots of great doctors in Hyannis at Cape Cod Hospital, and that's right around the corner. It looks like you may be delivering there." I turn to speak to the room full of guests, "Thank you for coming everyone! Please be sure to grab a favor on the way out. I point to the table Eliza has set up near the door with neat rows of cellophane-wrapped giant sugar cookies shaped like teddy bears and iced in various pastel shades. It looks like we'll have some happy news for you sooner than expected!"

I usher Caroline out the door and into my car. Once we're under way, I call Steve from my cell phone and tell him to head to the restaurant to pick up the girls, then meet us at the hospital. I explain that they don't even know what happened since they were in the bathroom. He says he's on his way and will call Kristen's cell phone to tell her what's going on.

By the time we get to the hospital, Caroline is moaning like she's in transition already. This is going much too fast. "Didn't you have any contractions earlier?" I ask, a bit irritated.

"Yes, but I didn't think they meant anything. I've been having Braxton Hicks contractions for a few weeks now. I've probably actually been in labor since last night. I

just didn't realize it was the real thing." She sucked in her breath and held it as another contraction hit.

If I could drop her off at the door and then go park, she wouldn't have to walk as far, but I don't think she can walk into the hospital by herself at this point. Oh well. I have to take my chances of getting a ticket. I double park outside the main entrance and jump out to help Caroline. She leans heavily on me as we walk in and the attendant at the reception desk recognizes immediately what's going on. He hollers for another attendant to hurry over with a wheelchair. We get Caroline into it, and the attendant rushes off with her to the elevator and the maternity ward.

"I'll be there in a minute!" I call after Caroline. "I'm just going to move the car."

She waves and disappears into the elevator. I am shaken by the look of terror on her face.

Ten minutes later I arrive in the maternity ward and find out that Caroline is in a delivery room and an obstetrician is with her.

"I'm supposed to be in the delivery room with her," I explain. "That's what we had planned."

"Are you her spouse?"

"No, I'm her sister."

"We don't have any paperwork saying you can be in the delivery room. Without that I can't let you in."

"You don't have paperwork, because all of that was done with her doctor in Boston. Can't you contact them or something?"

"I'm sorry. It doesn't work that way. Please have a seat in the waiting room. The doctor will let you know as soon as there's any news."

"But she's all alone, and this is six weeks early! What if there's something wrong and no one is with her?"

"I assure you, your sister is in the best of hands with Dr. Greenberg. She will be out to talk to you as soon as your sister is out of delivery."

Defeated, I walk into the waiting room. I never should've gone back to move the car. Fuck the damn car. If I'd stayed with Caroline, maybe they would've accepted her verbal consent to let me stay with her. I flop into a chair and pull out my phone. I feel like I should call someone, but who? I just stare at the phone for a few minutes, then start playing Tetris. About a half an hour later, Steve and the girls walk into the waiting room.

"How's Aunt Caroline?" asks Kristen, sitting down next to me. Steve sits on my other side. Cassie sits across from us.

"Is everything okay?" Steve asks.

"I don't know!" I almost shout. "I'm supposed to be there with her, but they won't let me. She looked so scared! Steve, this is six weeks early!"

"I know," he says softly. "Don't worry until there is actually something to worry about. Lots of babies born this early are fine."

"Is it really bad that it's so early?" asks Kristen. "What could happen?"

I turn to her, "The baby's lungs might not be fully developed enough for it to breathe on its own for one thing. Why were you in the bathroom for so long?" It comes out too harsh.

"Um," Kristen gulps. "I ran into a kid I used to hang out with. He's a busboy at Renaud's."

"What were you doing with him?" I snapped.

"Nothing, just talking."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Yes, Mom. He was on his break and was vaping out back by the dumpsters. I went out there with him to talk for a minute. He offered me a hit. He was vaping a THC cartridge. He thought it would be hysterical if I came back into the party high."

"Did you do it?" I ask, every muscle of my body tense.

She looks at me for a moment. "No. I didn't. I have to admit, it was tempting. All those relatives in there looking at me sideways, whispering about me and what a loser I am. It would've been nice not to care for a little while."

"Kristen, I don't think..." I begin.

"But then Cassie came out of the bathroom," Kristen raises her voice to talk over me. "She couldn't find me and I saw her turn down the wrong hallway trying to figure out where the party room was. So I told the kid with the vape to fuck off," Cassie gasps and clasps a hand over her mouth when she hears this, "and went after her.

We ended up in the bar. There were a bunch of guys hanging out in there in the middle of the afternoon. They were all watching a soccer game on the screens around the room. I decided to hang out for a minute and watch the game. See how I felt about being right there where I could see all those bottles. There were baskets of popcorn on every table, so we sat down at an empty one and ate the popcorn until it was gone."

"Yeah. Yum." contributed Cassie.

"They let you sit in the bar?" I asked.

"Yeah. At one point the bartender called over to us, that we shouldn't be there, but I told him we'd only stay a minute to check the score of the game, then we'd go back to the boring shower we were here for," she looked up at me when she said that. "Sorry, Mom, it wasn't really boring. I just wanted him to buy that we'd want to escape for a minute."

"How did it feel?" I asked.

"I felt strong. I think it was good for me. Not like I could saunter up the bar and order a drink anyway, but just sitting there looking at all those bottles. I kind of wanted something, but also knew I didn't need it. It was a good feeling."

"Wow," I said. "I'm proud of you."

"We had popcorn," said Cassie, and we all laughed.

Steve nods. He had apparently already gotten this story in the car.

We sat there waiting for about an hour when finally I told Steve he could take the girls and go home. There was no reason for all of us to sit there, it could still be hours."

"No, Lynn. We're staying right here with you," he said. "There's no way I'm leaving you to deal with whatever the situation is alone."

"So you think it might be bad?" I ask.

"I can't possibly know," he says, "but no matter what the news is, I'm planning to be right here when it comes."

"Thank you," I squeeze his hand. The girls had found an old checker board on a table in the corner and were playing using coins as replacements for the missing checkers.

After another hour and a half, a doctor walked in in scrubs and a white coat with the name Dr. Greenberg embroidered on the lapel.

"Dr. Greenberg?" I jump up. She walks over and shakes my hand.

"Yes, you must be Caroline's sister."

"Yes, Lynn Holcomb. Is she okay? Is the baby okay?"

Dr. Greenberg smiled. "Yes, Caroline is resting comfortably in a regular hospital room now. She was a real trooper. The baby came so fast, there was no time to give her an epidural."

"How is the baby?"

"Caroline delivered a baby boy," says Dr. Greenberg. "He weighs five pounds and eight ounces. He's a bit jaundiced and we need to keep him in an incubator for now to bring up his body temperature. We've fitted his nostrils with a cannula for oxygen flow just to give his lungs a boost. He'll be in the NICU for a week or two, but I don't have any reason to think he won't be perfectly fine and able to go home after that."

"Oh, thank God. I'm so glad. Can we see him? Can we see Caroline? Has she seen him?"

Dr. Greenberg laughed. "Yes, you can go up right now to see Caroline. She's in room 620. She can tell you all about it. It was nice to meet you, and congratulations on the birth of your nephew." She shook my hand again, then Steve's.

When we get to Caroline's room, she's sitting up in bed in a hospital gown staring out the window. She has a great view of the harbor.

"It's a boy!" Cassie shouts as we walk in. She's clutching the string of the large helium-filled balloon emblazoned with "It's a boy!" that we stopped and bought in the hospital gift shop before coming up. Kristen hands Caroline a light blue teddy bear we bought there too.

"Congratulations Aunt Caroline!" she says. "I can't wait to meet my new cousin."

"It's about time we had another male in this family," Steve tells her, bending over to kiss her cheek.

"Hi guys," her voice sounds a little shaky. "I have a son."

"Yes you do. Congratulations! Doesn't it sound weird to say that for the first time?"

"It really does," she agrees. Her eyes still look frightened. "He's in the NICU."

"We know." I tell her. "Don't worry. That's not uncommon when a baby is born early. He'll be fine. How are you?"

"I'm okay, just worried. I actually feel amazingly fine physically. I didn't end up having an epidural, so the delivery was pretty painful, but once it was over, it was over. I've already walked to the bathroom once."

"Wow. I remember not being able to walk until the next day after Kristen was born. But I had a really strong epidural with her. I was still numb for hours."

"I wish I could hold him. They said I can't nurse him yet. He doesn't have the sucking reflex down yet. They're going to have me pump, then I can feed him with a bottle. That's supposed to be easier."

I can't help myself. "Has he been tested for...everything? And is he okay?" Steve looks at me with understanding.

"Yes, Lynn." Caroline's eyes are sympathetic. "He doesn't show any signs of any," she hesitates searching for the right word, "exceptionalities," she finally says. I nod, unable to speak right away.

"So, you're feeling good," Steve says to Caroline. "When can you go home?"

"That's the thing," says Caroline. "I can go home after two midnights here, so on Tuesday, but the baby can't leave for a week or two. I don't want to leave without him." She starts to cry.

I sit on the edge of her bed and grab her hand. "Caroline, you'll stay with us. You can come here every day and be with him until he's ready to go home. It'll be okay. He's going to be okay."

She nods, struggling to gain control. "I know. I just hate to leave him here all alone. Thanks for the offer to stay with you, but I think I'm going to stay in the hotel across the street. I want to be able to be here for his feedings as much as possible."

"Of course," I tell her.

"Can we see him?" Kristen asks.

"I guess we can go see him. I think there's a window where visitors can see the babies. I don't think we can hold him, though," Caroline says.

We all go together to the NICU. Steve pushes Caroline in a wheelchair. It's still a bit soon for her to walk that far. It takes a moment to figure out which baby is Caroline's. A nurse with a mask over her face waves at us at points to one of the isolettes. There is a blue light shining on him and he isn't wearing anything but a diaper. He is so tiny. There are oxygen tubes in his nose, and an IV tube is attached to the top of his head.

Caroline takes in her breath when she sees all of this. I'm glad we're with her the first time she sees her baby like this. I grab Steve's arm and squeeze. The sight of the little guy hooked up to all of the tubes and machines reminds me so much of when Cassie was born, that for a moment I can't breathe.

A nurse comes over to us and explains to Caroline why her little boy is receiving all the treatments he's getting. He looks anything but comfortable. He's crying angrily. We can just hear his little voice through the thick glass. The nurse assures Caroline that none of the tubes is hurting him at all. He's just so unaccustomed to the lights and sounds. She encourages Caroline to go in and try to soothe him.

The nurse brings Caroline into the room with the babies and shows her how to put her hands into the tube-like gloves that will allow her to touch her child without disturbing his sterile environment, necessary due to his immune system still being underdeveloped. We watch through the window as Caroline tentatively strokes his little arms and rubs her finger in the palm of his tiny hands. She starts to sing softly to him, We can just barely hear her. After a few moments, I realize she is singing "Baby Mine" from Dumbo, a favorite that our mother used to sing to us, and that I sang to my girls. I feel myself tear up again.

Caroline wraps one hand around her son's whole left side, holding his arm against his torso and curling the tips of her fingers around his little diapered rump. With the other hand she rhythmically strokes his right arm and his belly. Within minutes he begins to quiet down. It's not long before he calms completely and visibly seems to relax.

Caroline looks up and meets my eyes through the window. Her mouth and her hair are completely covered by the mask and sterile cap they had her put on, but her eyes say it all. I make the "I love you" sign with my fingers and mouth to her, "He knows his Mama."

She nods, her eyes full of love and wonder.

I wave, and we turn to leave. We'll let mother and son get to know each other.

Epilogue, Three Years Later

"You can't catch me!" Jeremy screams in his high pitched, toddler voice as he runs in his lurching way across the grass giggling hysterically while Cassie chases him. She's careful to hold back and let him stay ahead of her for a while before grabbing him in a bear hug and tickling him while he squirms.

"She's so good with him," Caroline says to me taking a sip of her wine. "I'm so glad she'll be working with kids. She'll really enjoy that."

"Yeah. I'm glad too. I think this will be a good fit for her. Can you believe my girls have both graduated from high school? That all went way too fast."

Steve comes over to us and sits down. "The burgers'll be done in a few minutes, the hot dogs are ready to go. How should we do this, just open the buffet and encourage a free-for-all?"

"We should probably have adults and little kids get their plates first," I tell him. "With all these hungry teen-agers here there might not be anything left if they get to it first." I look at the groups of teens, some hanging around chatting, several playing volleyball, or corn hole. That's where I find Kristen. She's laughing as a handsome young man picks her up and swings her around to celebrate her tossing the beanbag through the ten-point hole.

I just watch her for a minute thinking about how far she's come. Steve interrupts my reverie. "It looks like the banner is coming down. I'll go fix it," he says. Sure enough the glittering banner that says "Congratulations, Cassie and Kristen!!" is flapping in the breeze, only secured on one end.

"Both graduation ceremonies were lovely," says Caroline.

I agree. We ended up moving Kristen to the high school in a neighboring town at the beginning of her sophomore year. It was too hard for her to get a fresh start in the school where everyone knew her history. That ended up being an excellent decision. She was really able to start over. She made new friends, played for the soccer team and helped them make it all the way to the state finals in her senior year.

Meanwhile, Cassie stayed on at our local high school and participated in a program that helped prepare her for a job in early childhood education and care. She just turned 21 and has gained some valuable work experience in the community over the last few years through her program at school.

Evelyn Andrews from next door comes over to me to say congratulations.

"I just can't believe you'll have an empty nest soon," she says.

"I can't either," I tell her. "What'll I do with myself?"

Miss Kathy, the art teacher, joins us. "Oh, you'll have an empty nest?" she asks. "I was just wondering about your girls' future plans."

"Well," I tell her, Kristen is going to start at the University of Connecticut in the fall. She wants to study Special Education. She's also going to play soccer for them on their women's team."

"That's great!" says Kathy, "What will Cassie be doing?"

"Cassie has been accepted to become a resident at Holly House, a group home for adults with developmental disabilities. She has a job as an aide at a pre-school, and will be taking courses at the community college where they have a "College Experience" program for people with disabilities. And hopefully she'll continue her art lessons with you."

"She'd better!" says Kathy. "I'd miss her too much if she stopped."

"So do you and Steve have any exciting plans?" asks Evelyn.

"Yes. As a matter of fact, we do. Cassie will be moving into Holly House in July, and we'll take Kristen to school the third week of August, so we are taking three weeks off starting Labor Day weekend, and taking a tour in Europe. A trip like that has been on my bucket list for a long time, and I think we finally have our chance."

"How lovely," says Evelyn.

"Make sure you take notes and lots of pictures to help us plan our trip someday," says Calvin sitting down with us and kissing Caroline on the cheek. They've been married just over a year. He's a wonderful man and he loves Jeremy as if he were his own.

Steve brings a platter of hot dogs and hamburgers over to the table, produces a megaphone that he usually uses to cheer Kristen at soccer tournaments, and yells, "Time to eat!" into it. Sure enough, all the teenagers swarm the table. Steve looks at me sheepishly, both palms in the air and shrugs.

I laugh and join him at the buffet and we watch as our loved ones and friends line up with their plates.

VITA

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