

FICTION WRITING

A COLLECTION OF STORIES

CREATIVE STYLES, EXPERIMENTAL & UNFAMILIAR GENRES,
FINDING MY WRITING VOICE

“A feeling of chaotic energy builds within her until she has to begin writing it out. There, on the paper, it takes on a life of its own.”

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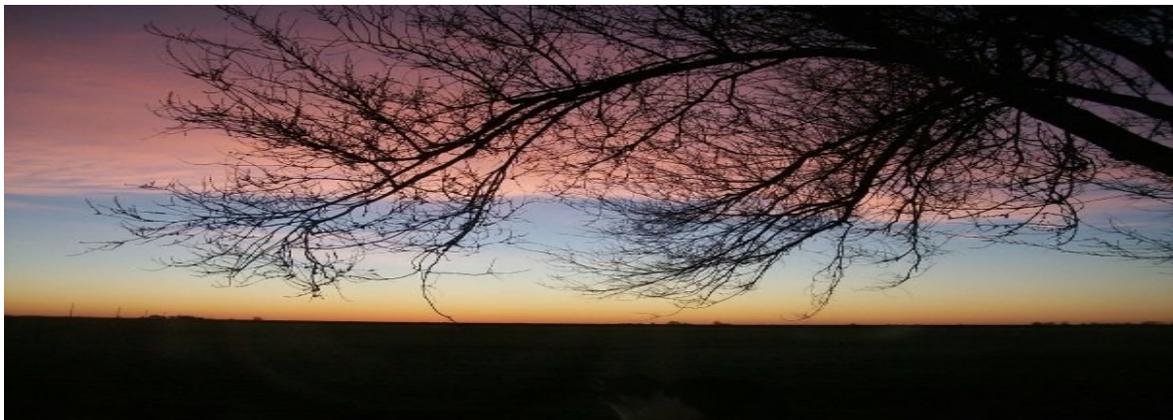
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Fiction Writing Reflection 2024

This semester has been full of new ideas, expanding my comfort zone, and conquering challenges, both in classes and in my personal life. I have learned a lot about my writing and myself. And if I haven't necessarily conquered all of the challenges, I definitely put a lot of effort into understanding them and how I can use them to better my writing voice.

While I can say that I can expand and go outside of what I consider my comfort zone, the place where my writing excels, I will still enjoy my usual calm, casual, and sometimes, comical writing. Along with my poetry and journaling, my fiction writing has kept me "sane" more than once. And I feel as though I have not only grown as a writer but personally I have reached a few important milestones.

I will most likely always be a little held back from the "Norm," but perhaps that's because I don't fit in the "norm," and I'm perfectly fine with that realization. I want to be me. The me that has opened up and let the words just flow onto the paper. The me that has learned that I can be way too critical of myself, and while I still expect a fairly high standard of quality. I can relax and share writings that are of a different nature than what most have come to expect from me. Even myself. And how best to learn, than to try something new. Imagine that!

The works in this portfolio are a wide range of different emotions and imagery and a proverbial "spreading of my writing wings" to see what I'm capable of...and I have enjoyed it very much! I look forward to the changes that I know will come in my writing over time, big and small. And I look forward to seeing how some, the part that is my signature voice in writing, stay close to the same but perhaps more confident and willing to share.

I have become willing to try without the guarantee of success, and for those who know me personally, that is a terrifically huge deal! I couldn't have achieved that without my instructors and peers; I will always feel as though this time has been my shedding of the shell that I'd closed myself up in, and I have to tell you... Watch out! Because I'm ready, ready to see what else I can achieve. If I can't conquer it, perhaps I can learn to understand it and use it in ways that are best for me. Maybe even share with others along the way... That would be a beautiful bonus!



Why I Write



She often begins with a vague thought, sometimes triggered by a memory, or sometimes, they are thoughts that come to her out of the blue. It bounces around within her mind, a mind that is constantly working, even in her sleep. The thought is like a bit of energy; it begins to grow and change, and she has to write it down. There, it takes on a life of its own. When she writes it down, it isn't as if she has complete control of it, but it is easier to look at it and try to decipher what it means. Then she can work with it and see what it is meant to become.

Her whole life has been a world of things she has had to decipher: her family, friends, and herself. Some days, she feels the thoughts bubble up inside of her, and she feels suffocated. A feeling of chaotic energy builds within her until she has to begin writing it out. Some thoughts are simple, and once written, that is all that becomes of it. Other thoughts are parts of a bigger picture that dance in her mind. Little scenes that play together and mesh into one long thought, with turns and twists, and the energy that is spent while writing gives a sense of peace to her.

Some thoughts are like daggers, buried deep within, and to begin some healing, they have to be slowly pulled out and placed carefully where it becomes a necessary evil to dispose of them upon the innocence of the white paper. If for no other reason but to get the poison from the dagger out of her system. Left behind might be a hole that cannot be healed, but when she reads the words later, she can slowly release their hold upon her, and they lose their power.



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At times, she writes nonsense, thoughts that, for some reason, make her smirk at the mental picture it presents, and the rebel within her decides to write it down. Maybe it will be a brief moment of carelessness or a sense of carefree abandonment that she knows only she has the real meaning to, tucked away in her safe place within her mind. She can share those with others if she chooses. Those thoughts often come as a defense against the darkness she has carried within caused by others'



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actions and thoughtless destruction of others, but that became her burden. By writing them down, she lets the paper hold the burden for a while, and given time, it ceases to have such weight.

Her favorite thoughts to write down and play with on the paper cause a chuckle when read back later. The ones that, when shared with others, cause them a chuckle or two, nothing elaborate but something to change the mood and something that will show that while tragedy is a part of life, humor is a part of survival. And she is, above all, a survivor.

The Adventures of the Water Wrestler *(Introducing Koby Joe)*



The summer days can get very hot in Kansas; having lived here almost all of my life, I know. I didn't have a special swimming pool when I was growing up, just an old farm pond that we shared with the cows, muskrats, turtles, a few fish, and probably more snakes than I care to think about even now. We could not see through that water; it was dark and murky, and well, it was shared with some very unhouse broken animals.



If you were a bit awkward as I, your humble author, you tried not to think about the water you just choked on or what might have been in it. The "good ole" days, some would call them. My siblings and I tried to beat the heat, jumping and splashing and hoping nothing decided to take a bite of a toe or finger. Had we had a "Water Wrestler," I imagine I would have felt more at ease, but none of my childhood pets liked it when we got too rambunctious in the water, and they preferred to loll in the sun on the bank of the pond.

After growing up and raising my own daughter, who is this water wrestler's adoptive mom, I was honored to become "Nana" to Mr. Koby Joe, the infamous "Water Wrestler." When my daughter moved out, her landlord at the time did not allow pets, so Koby remained with me, and while we enjoyed going to the lake, there were times when we needed to cool off at home. And I wouldn't be the best kind of "Nana" if I didn't spoil my grand-pup; at least, that's my personal perspective.



Koby Joe is (now) a seven-year-old part Saint Bernard-Retriever on his dad's side and Mastiff-Lab on his mother's side. He takes after his mother in most ways except the extremely thick fur and "squishy" neck, and droopy jowls. This causes

him to overheat in the summer, and while he would rather drink water from the toilet than take a bath, he loves to wrestle the water in his pool. Especially coming straight from the hose, he simply cannot resist showing it who is boss around here. As the water streams out, his ferocious growl gives a warning, and barely does the water exits the hose before he has it in a move similar to a “head-lock,” I believe. I’m not an expert on wrestling, but Koby seems to be, and who would I be to disagree?

After a few chops at the water, sending drops of it scattered all about, he goes in for the big bite, which is very effective. The water has no chance, the amazing water wrestler is quick to react, and before the water knows what is happening, it has been whipped and settles to the bottom of the pool. All within a matter of minutes, and then just to make sure the water does not forget who the boss is, Koby will go around and around in the pool, stomping and biting that water and keeping it from misbehaving.

When Koby, the Water Wrestler, feels that the water is sufficiently subdued, he is content to go let out a few “zoomies” around the yard and then comes back to check to make sure the situation is still under control. I am so thankful for his efforts; after all, water is a slippery foe and has a very short-term memory span, which is why my gran-pup has to continue to teach that water a lesson here and there. It’s a tough job, but Koby Joe is definitely up to the task. It is indeed a “dog’s life.”



Purple Overload

“Excuses, excuses!” I heard a woman holler. Shaking a gnarly, but neatly polished finger in the young man’s face. I don’t think his eyes could’ve gotten any wider. He kept backing away from her. I wasn’t sure what she was so angry about at first. By the time I reached the front counter, she was really backing the poor guy up. She was angry.



Her face was drawn and red. I could see the sweat beading on her forehead and, just under her chin, and above the expensive jewelry that seemed too large for her wrinkled neck, there were purple splotches appearing. She had rings on several fingers of each hand, and her dress was a dark purple, giving her a rather ominous look. It was like the purple of her dress added to the reddish-purple of her face as she shouted for the manager.

“I know he’s here somewhere!” She screamed, “I’m not leaving till I get my refund and your job, you feeble-minded boy!”

“Ma’am, I’m sorry, but,” he tried, “Mr. Foster has left for the day. I’m the assistant, and we simply can’t give you a refund for a dress you’re wearing,” he looked close to tears. I’m sure it was tears from exhausted nerves.

The harder he tried to calm her, the more she wanted that refund. I thought to myself, it looked to have been tailored exactly for her thin, gaunt frame. I’ve seen and heard a lot of things, but this had to be a new one. I kept trying to look away, to keep the ridiculous image out of my mind.



The sight of this overwrought woman, all dressed up and proper, but having a fit, right there, in the front of the store. And the poor assistant manager tried to explain, that a refund wasn’t possible, with her still wearing the dress.



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My eyes started to water. I knew if I wasn't careful, this hysterical thought that kept passing through my mind of her stripping down, right out of the dress. Right there, in front of everyone. I had to put my hand up to my face and cover my mouth. I didn't want to draw her belligerent attention.

"This isn't over yet!" She screeched, sweat was dripping off her, and the over-done makeup upon her face seemed to be trying just as hard to run

away as the poor assistant manager. This lady had lost it. Over the top and out into orbit! I looked around and realized I wasn't the only one struggling to keep from laughing. I mean, I felt bad for the young guy, but this lady was going to the extreme, and nothing the young man said, helped.

"Ma'am, please," he tried again, "I apologize, but there's nothing I can do with you still in the dress." He couldn't have looked more apologetic. She just kept getting angrier, and more and more purple. If she just would've brought the dress in, and not worn it.



To Tell The Truth

We had all heard the talk, the whispers, and had seen the looks that passed between the two as they tried to act as though they really didn't know each other. The young woman was obviously in love with the older, more distinguished man. But we also knew he had a wife at home, and there were murmurs of him and the secretary from the front office having been caught coming from the conference room one day.



It might not have been anything to talk about, but they both seemed flushed and were hurrying to their respective offices as if they were children caught playing during an exam. Just yesterday, Sally and I had overheard Maggie from the business office complaining of having to cover Jill's desk while they had "meetings," and yet it was only the two of them that entered and exited. At least, that's what Maggie had said.

And now, this young intern was beside herself with tears and begging for another chance from Mr. Norris as if we were watching a soap opera unfold right before our very eyes. Another chance at what, we wondered? Her job? Or were the whispers about them accurate as well? He was quite a handsome man, second partner in the firm, and, from what we understood, excellent at winning his cases.

But with a wife at home? Would he be so bold as to have not one but two affairs at the same time? It also seemed rather conspicuous to have two ladies in and out of his office at his every whim. And the whispers in the break room were that it was his wife's grandfather, who had actually started the firm that her brother and husband now shared as partners.

Most of us older ladies in the office agreed, plenty of eyes to be watching if things were going on of a less-than-appropriate nature.



There are always rumors in any office, but it did seem that our office had more than its fair share when it came to Mr. Norris. If only he wouldn't flirt with all the ladies and the jokes he would tell in the breakroom. Certainly not the kind that a well-known law firm would want their clients to hear coming from one of its star lawyers.

Of course, Sally and I had to say we were above such things. He had never flirted with us in that way. We would surely have put him in his place, with the whole firm's reputation on the line. And poor Mrs. Norris, at home with the two little ones. How ridiculous of him; he truly needed to learn to act his age and stop all this foolishness. For the firm's sake, after all, we all depended on our jobs there for our own families.

It was hard to say for sure; you know how things are in an office when the truth is at stake.



Rewriting A Movie Scene *(From Constantine)*

His face carried the look of someone who had seen the worst in this world and defeated it. His black suit with a crisp white shirt caused a stunning contrast to the man inside; well-tailored and made him look humble but sophisticated at the same time. The atmosphere around him was turbulent. Some came from the outside world in which he walked in, and some from within the man himself. Another call had just come in, and the sudden flurry of more and more calls left him suspicious. There was something behind the dramatic surge of calls, and John knew it was not going to be good.

He ordered his driver, a young man eager to please and eager to learn what exactly it was John did, desperately begged to come along. Without a single word, the look John gave him immediately stopped his pleas. There was no room for the inexperienced person, and it would put everyone in danger. There were only two options: be successful or not; if unsuccessful, the terms were deadly. John had been doing this for so long



now, his movements were second-natured, and despite his haggard look at times, he was very efficient and always aware.



The mother met him at the door, the fear washing over her was palpable to John's keen sense of smell. Too many times, he had been called upon to save someone's child or spouse, and the knowledge of being faced with a world most only imagined would strike such fear in those who experienced a loved one being possessed. While some only imagined the evil, he had stared down that evil and sent it straight back where it belonged, to hell. A place that he had already seen himself and knew to be as true as the sun rising in the early morning.

He came prepared with a simple silver chain wrapped around his left hand with a simple cross dangling from it. His request to have a mirror had been fulfilled, and from the eerie sounds coming from upstairs, his arrival had been duly noted. The screams of a young girl mixed with calls of evil and demonic taunts that were spouted from the young girl's mouth. This was an upper-level demon that had possessed this innocent young girl; John could feel the energy, and the different taunts told him all he needed to know. This was not going to be easy.

When the mother showed him to the door of the girl's bedroom, his quiet and stern demeanor softened just a bit. He patted her on the shoulder and beckoned her to go downstairs and not come up for any reason. The men that had gathered there at his request brought the mirror, a gold-trimmed ornately decorated mirror, upstairs, and waited for John to open the door. There was no element of surprise in these dealings, the evil had been waiting. Their sense of just the right one to possess was unmistakable, and their wishes for it to be the infamous John

Constantine to be the one to come for the exorcism caused a sense of frenzy filled with excitement. To take down the great Constantine and present him to their lord would ensure them otherworldly riches beyond belief.

John knew that once the door was opened, there would be no peace, no rest until the job was done, and if he failed, the demon would claim his and the girl's souls, and the rewards would be extravagant down below. A flashing memory of when John had first visited the dark lord's domain after his suicide filled his nostrils with the stench of brimstone and fire. The only reason he had been brought back to the earthly world was in hopes of redemption granted by a pact that Gabriel masterminded. He knew that Gabriel was playing both sides, his disgrace for valuing earthly treasures and luxuries had warped his sense of right and wrong. His only redemption would come from his successes.



When John slowly opened the door, lying across an old iron bed was a young girl of 14 or 15, with the look of an angel that twisted into the darkness of the devil. Her body was tied at the wrists and ankles to the bed posts, but still, her body managed to contort, and foul taunts came from the mouth of an innocent child.



The momentary softening John had had for the mother disappeared and would not return unless he successfully freed the young girl from the grips of this horrible evil. The foulness of being possessed would always linger in the child, but she would gain a perspective that few have and would become a warrior for God above, willing to give her life for the life that was about to be saved, hopefully.

(The impact of this scene in the movie is deeply felt but with an aloofness by John Constantine, who had become hardened by what he

had seen and been fighting. The setting of good trying to conquer evil and the drastic surge of more occurrences were warnings of what was to come. While John had become hardened and seemed to lack sympathy for those afflicted or those watching a loved one be consumed by evil no longer caused him to flinch.

I believe that in a battle of good versus evil, maintaining a sense of compassion and humanity is vital, for the risk of succumbing to evil is more prevalent without these characteristics. There is always some sense of desensitizing that happens when all one deals with is the bad, the terrible, and the threatening, but to lose humanity is just as devastating and the first step of defeat.)



Is This Goodbye Part I

Blindly staring ahead, the solemn man watched as the water moved in gentle waves towards the bank and then back out. He looked down at the ground before him, and the dark liquid slowly coursed towards the water. It was as if the two were drawn together by some unseen force that would not be satisfied until they were united. The haggard-looking man had once felt that deep in his soul; her blue eyes would sparkle forever, as she looked at him. Promising him unconditional love and a safe place for his heart and weary mind. Above them, in the last moments of the evening light, there was a constant chirp from the birds as they flew over the lake, and the man sat

there on the bank without hearing them. The darkness that filled his once-loving heart was consuming him and leaving an empty shell of a man.

Again, he glanced down at the little rivers of the dark, thick fluid that inched closer and closer to the cool water of the lake. It came from the still vessel that lay just a few inches away from where the man sat. The rage that had blurred his brown eyes was gone, like a flame that died from lack of oxygen.

The warmth that gave the vessel movement, slowly left with the liquid, leaving behind a cold and empty shell that lay there. Still as could be, with the exception of the dark liquid still seeping out and into the sand.

When the man looked up at the sky, he could see the last shimmers of the sun coming off the lake reflected eerily upon the coming evening sky. The day had been hot, but he didn't worry about lots of visitors coming to this lake to cool off. It was too far out from town and partially overgrown from years of neglect. It would hide his terrible secret, hold it close, and never tell, just as the empty vessel would speak no more. The words of betrayal had been carved out like the inside of a tree that had developed a disease and rotted from within.

No longer would its beauty taunt him; no longer would he suffer from wondering who would hold it tonight. The Earth would consume the empty vessel, as it would consume the remnants of the dark liquid that was slowly soaking into the sand. The small amount that had reached the water would soon be diluted beyond recognition. The man knew that, eventually, a decision would have to be made.

Should he leave the calmness of the lake that offered no reprimand for his treacherous deed, or perhaps he should enter the calmness of the water and wait until it enveloped his now empty shell and offered the silence and serenity that the man so desired? The kind he could only find within its reaches. The kind a sanctuary offers even to those underserving at times.

He would find no mercy either way, for he showed no mercy in his act. He deserved no forgiveness, and the water offered him none but it

did offer a forever silence. The cattails near the water's edge gently began to sway; a breeze was coming up, and it was inviting him to play along. He stood and gathered up the cold and stiff, empty shell into his arms. He had decided that together, the two empty shells would enter the forever deep silence and hide amongst the darkness that the bottom of the lake provided. Slowly, the natural world around them would bury deep within its layers the truth, the unforgivable truth. Once and for all, it would still his weary mind, never to be restless again.

The dark rivers of the precious liquid mocked him, and he used his old boot to scrape sand across what remained. He would still it's mocking as he stilled the betraying lips of one so fair. And as he entered the water, it was as if it was encouraging his surrender, welcoming the man who was far too gone ever to survive out in the world again.



Is This Goodbye Part II

I couldn't make him understand that the rumors were all lies. Started by a jealous woman who had wanted him for herself. She had had her chance, but she betrayed him. Then, to try and win him back, the rumors she had viciously started about me. Ones like, I was being unfaithful. It was so untrue, and she kept telling him more lies. Stating I had a lover in several places around town. Each one was like a dagger in my heart.

Then the terrible words he said, the cursing of my very name, drove the daggers of those cruel words even further into my soul just as

he plunged the sharp knife into my chest. I screamed, and begged for him to stop, but there was no way to reason with him.

The man that stood in front of me was a Godless stranger possessed by rage, and the quietness of the lake we once enjoyed was now suffocating and stifling my cries. The birds overhead chirped as if to warn me that my life was near the end. The blood pulsed out of my open wounds as he plunged the knife deep and pulled it out to plunge again and again.

I could feel the warmth from my body leaving; as the blood spurted out of the knife wounds and covered both him and me; this was how I would leave this world. By the hand of the one who had promised me love and safety within his arms forever. When my vision began to fail, and my body no longer answered my commands, I could feel myself falling. I knew I was near the water's edge, and as soon as I fell to the ground and lay there in my own pooling of blood, I could hear the cool water lapping at the bank. It was welcoming me, inviting me to come lie within its watery depths.

I knew I would be long gone before the narrow rivers of my own blood coursed down towards the water's edge. I could feel his presence near me as if he wanted to prolong my agony. I heard him saying my name, the tears that streamed down his face and caused his voice to quiver offered me no comfort. He had become the monster of my nightmares, and I had become the victim of a callous, lying woman whose hand did not plunge the knife but led him to carry out her dreadful deed.

As if breaking us apart was not enough, setting up a meeting at what used to be our special place and toying with his mind until it was full of nothing but rage, she had left before I arrived. The warmth of the sun lingered, and the breeze in the wind promised an evening of coming peacefulness. But little did I know that I would surrender to the great forever of a dark silence that enveloped me, long before the days light was gone.

There I lay where I had fallen, in a heap. My dying was a process, a slow and surreal process in which I could feel the life leaving my body

as the blood coursed out, finding its way down to the lake water to mix and become one.

I knew one day my life would be over. Had I been asked for a spot dear to me to leave this world, I would have wished for this place. Unfortunately, I did not think I would leave by his hands. The hands that used to hold and caress me. The quiet of death was wrapping its dark fingers around me and carrying me away to the sound of his sobbing.

If I could have, I would have told him one more time, that there was no hatred in my heart for him, I knew what drove him, but my time was over. My body turned cold, ravaged by death's disregard for the life I wasn't finished living, and slowly, my being, the part of me who made me the woman I was, disappeared within the darkness that would hold me now and forever more.

When Jealousy Wins, This Is Goodbye

The night air was thick and seemed to hang stagnant around the edges of the almost forgotten lake. Years ago, many neighbors and families would gather here for the day. All the children would playfully splash and carry on with laughter and giggles in the cool water. The adults would sit in the shade of the old oak trees and sip on iced tea, catching up on the gossip. Young couples, lovers wanting some privacy under the stars, or newly engaged or married couples would come to this lake in the evening and night hours. This was a serene place once.



What used to be a popular place to meet and cool from the hot and humid days of summer or sneak a kiss or two now sat overgrown and somewhat peculiar. A touch of eeriness seemed to linger, swaying along with the tall grass and cattails that grew at the water's edge. People would talk about a strange and forbidding

presence that wandered at that lake now. Sadness and grief accompanied anyone who visited it now.

Only a few people even remembered this lake; even fewer still came to it. The new rage was an elaborate new aqua center in town only minutes from most, or the ones who didn't mind traveling a bit, the beautiful grand lake built on the far side of town. For those who used to travel the thirty minutes to come out here, as the children grew and were able to walk in groups of friends to the center, no longer begging for rides out to the lake, parents felt a sense of one burden being lessened in today's busy world. For the others who preferred the amenities at the new lake, the sentimental value of this little lake dried up as parts of it did.

The lake seemed just to give up and let the weeds and grass gradually take over, slowly chewing up the beachfront and encroaching on the good spots along the bank to cast a line or two for those who wished to fish. It was as if the spirit of the lake had been crushed, and there was no longer any purpose or attachment. It all just wasted away—a little at a time.

Many of the trees that still sat staunchly watching over the desolate area, battered by the storms of years past, were trying desperately to brave the coming of each new storm season. Spots that used to be mowed and well-kept were barely even noticeable. Places families would gather to set up the barbeque were all but gone. Floods had washed away items left behind, and the only young adults that visited now, with trouble on their minds, came out to party while vandalizing and looting until nothing much at all was left.

The funds donated for the voluntary cleaning crews withered away as the interest of those who wished for cleaner water, showers with hot water, and tables and grills for get-togethers became more prevalent. Many said there was no actual place to lay the blame; things just changed over time, and the lake was not immune. It sat there quietly as nature took back what people had claimed and then abandoned.

Lonely and lost souls who remembered the good times they had enjoyed here, wishing and longing for those times back, but knowing that was impossible, would still visit. It was once called the "Lake of Lovers," but that was until one evening when everything changed. Many locals knew bits and pieces of the story, but few knew all of it, and fewer still wanted to know anything about it. But I'll tell you if you'll listen. I was there. I remember it all.

It all started with a jealous woman who had wanted him for herself. She had already had her chance, but she had betrayed him. Then the rumors she started

about me, that I was being unfaithful, each one was like a dagger in my heart. He called me and asked me to meet him at our favorite place that evening. I expected a romantic evening near the once beautiful lake.

When I arrived, he was already there, sitting on a stump near the water's edge. There was nothing but him and his truck. No blanket was laid out lovingly,



no bottle of wine was chilled, and no glasses were waiting to be filled. There was no meal for a lover's picnic nor flowers to show the love he carried in his heart for me. I was confused. I parked my car beside his truck and made the short walk towards where he was, and I thought how strange it was that not once did he look up until I was directly beside him.

Then, all of a sudden, he stood, and the terrible words he began yelling at me. The cursing he used as he shouted so close to my face that I could smell the alcohol on his breath. He was calling me terrible names, saying that I was a filthy woman and a lying cheater. He kept telling me I would get what I deserved. I was shocked at first and tried to question him. That only further escalated his foul mood. The words he yelled and the manner in which he said them furiously drove his words and those awful names like daggers even further into my soul.

I couldn't believe what was happening, and I started to back away. But he grabbed my arm. Preventing me from moving away. He wasn't finished yet. His rage was building and blinding him. He kept hissing at me, telling me how he knew all about the others. The other men, the ones I would secretly go out and meet. I was speechless. My words froze in my throat, and my heart was trembling. I swore over and over to him that it wasn't true; I begged him to listen. I begged him to stop and listen to me. Then, with a heartlessly cold look, he plunged the sharp knife, down deep, into my chest the first time.

I screamed out of sheer terror! I asked him to listen and begged him to stop. I looked into his brown eyes where once there had been nothing but love for me, but there was no way to reason with him. He stabbed me again. Not once, not twice, but three more times, and as he reared back another time, all I could do was scream with what little energy I had left. I knew I wouldn't survive. I couldn't survive this attack.

As the blood began to pulse out of the open wounds on my chest, he plunged the knife deeply once more. His ex-wife did this; she knew what to say and how to

drive him to this point—using our love to destroy us and taking the dagger of what she had done to him, and turning it and twisting it as if I had done the same. She had turned him into nothing but a raging shell of the man I loved. He was no longer my love—no longer a loving man.

I could feel the warmth leaving my body. The blood kept spurting out of the knife wounds and covered both him and I. This was how I would leave this world by the hand of the one who had promised me love and safety within his arms forever. When my vision began to fail, and my body no longer answered my commands, I knew. I could feel myself falling. I knew I was near the water's edge when I fell, landing in a heap. I could hear the water lapping as if to greet me. I knew that this was the place where I would leave all that love we shared behind. I just didn't want to believe it. I couldn't believe it.

I didn't know if I'd be gone before the narrow rivers of my blood made their narrow courses down the bank toward the water's edge. Or perhaps my death would be slow and excruciatingly painful. I could feel his presence near me as if he wanted to prolong my agony. Yet, I heard him saying my name. I could barely make out the tears that streamed down his face when I looked up at him with what little sight I had left. His anger and anguish caused his voice to quiver, but it offered me no comfort.

He had become the monster of my nightmares. I had become the victim of a callous, lying woman. Her very hand did not plunge the knife deep into my chest, but still, it was her that led him to carry out this horrible crime. It was her and her vicious lies that drove him, consumed the good in him, and made a deranged man out of my lover. The last thing I saw was him slumping down beside me to sit on the stump.

Blindly staring ahead, he watched as the water moved in gentle waves towards the bank. Its gentle ebbing was mesmerizing and, in any other moment, would have brought a sense of calm and peacefulness. He looked down at the ground before him and saw the dark liquid that slowly coursed from my veins towards the water. It was as if the two were drawn together by some unseen force that would only be satisfied once they were united.

For her, breaking us apart was not enough. The wicked toying with his mind until it was full of nothing but rage, and driving this gentle, loving man to the brink of insanity was her mission. The warmth of the sun lingered even though it was already setting deep into the horizon, and the breeze coming off the lake made a false promise. It whispered of peacefulness and love. Little did I know that I

would surrender to the tremendous forever-dark silence that was enveloping me, carrying with me a broken heart and shattered mind. My dying was a process, a slow and surreal act.

It was no secret that I knew that one day, my life would be over. If I had been asked for a spot more dear to me to leave this world, it would have only been for this place. Unfortunately, I did not think I would leave by his hands, the hands that used to hold and caress me as we lay on a blanket and listened to the calming sounds. The quietness of death was wrapping its dark fingers around me and carrying me away. I was slipping away to the sound of his sobbing.

Had I a choice, I would have chosen to tell him one more time that there was no hatred in my heart, but my time was nearly over, and the words never left my lips. My body turned cold, quickly ravaged by death's disregard for the life I wasn't finished living. Slowly, my being, the part that made me the woman I was, was disappearing within the darkness that would hold me now and forever more.



The haggard-looking man who had once felt deep in his soul that nothing could tear us apart sat holding his face in his large, masculine hands. In his mind, my blue eyes would sparkle for eternity. Promising him unconditional love and a safe place for his heart and weary mind, but in a twisted, cruel trick, Above us, there was a constant chirp from the birds as they flew over the lake, but the broken man sat there on the bank without hearing them. The darkness that filled his once-loving heart consumed him and left an empty shell of a man.

Again, he glanced down at the little rivers of the dark, thick fluid, my life force, that inched closer and closer to the water's edge of the lake. The rage that had blurred his brown eyes was gone now, like a flame that had died from lack of oxygen.

When the man looked up at the sky, he could feel the soft breeze coming off the lake whispering to him, offering him something I could never have given him. A sanctuary. It would hide his terrible secret, hold it close, and never tell, just as my empty shell would speak no more. The words of false betrayal had been carved out of me like the inside of a tree that had developed a disease and rotted from within.

No longer would my beauty taunt him; no longer would we share precious moments here at our little lake. The Earth would consume my empty vessel, as it

would consume the remnants of the dark liquid that was slowly soaking into the sand. The small amount that had reached the water would soon be diluted beyond recognition. The man knew that, eventually, a decision would have to be made. One that could only be made by him.

Would he leave the calmness of the lake that offered no reprimand for his treacherous deed, or perhaps he could enter the calmness of the water and wait until it enveloped his now empty shell and offered him the silence and serenity that he so desired? He would find no mercy, though, for he showed no mercy in his act towards me. He deserved no forgiveness. All the water offered him a forever silence.



The cattails near the water's edge gently began to sway; a breeze was coming up, and it was inviting them to play along. He stood with certainty and gathered up my cold and stiff body into his arms. He had decided that together, the two empty shells would enter the water and seek refuge in the forever-deep silence there. Slowly, the natural world around us would dispose of our corpses and hide the truth, the unforgivable truth. Once and for all, it would still his weary mind, never to be restless again.

The dark rivers of my precious liquid mocked him, and he used the side of his old boot to scrape sand across what remained. He would quiet the mocking as he had stilled the lips of one so fair, me, his greatest love. And as he entered the water, carrying my dead body, it was as if it encouraged his surrender, welcoming the couple that would, after all, spend eternity together.

What love had gifted and jealousy had consumed, the water would hold tight. The secret within its depths. Lovers who dreamt of a happy ever after but instead were robbed by the malicious mind of a jealous woman who had yet to realize her error. She might have won in the silencing of my beating heart, but the despair it caused her prize, her trophy, the man with whom she had blatantly destroyed through her wickedness, would be lost to her forever more. He would

surrender himself, along with me, to the cold and dark depths, and she would never hold him again as she had intended.

The lake would be renamed because of us. The people who lived nearby would call it the "Lake of Lost Lovers," and only the very lonely and bereft would visit our murky grave. Some would come to contemplate joining us, and others simply to sit a while. Until evening came, no one stayed past sunset anymore. For that is when my lover and I would rise from the depths of death and destruction to sit once more, lovingly, by the lapping water's edge. Two souls with no place to go, no way to leave, and no tomorrows waiting for them.

Meet You At The Diner

Growing up without her mother, Trixie Brenton Gray felt the world hated her. She thought it was her fault for her mother's death. She could see the hurt and what she believed was anger in her father's eyes, at least when he was sober enough to focus or home long enough to pass her in the tiny, run-down house they shared with his second wife.



Trixie only remembered little things about her mother. She was almost seven, the day her dad picked her up after school. He took her to the hospital, where her mother was dying. She remembered the soft touch of her mother's hand as she held it. She remembered hoping with all her might that her mother would get better.

When her mother didn't get better, Trixie was devastated. Her father went from being loving and gentle to being hateful and bitter. He was either drinking or working. Those were his two modes. She was terribly upset when he remarried only after two years to their neighbor

lady, Sharon. She became Trixie's stepmother, a miserable creature herself.

Her ex-husband had left her after their twins drowned in the backyard swimming pool because Sharon had passed out drunk. Sadly, they were only two years old. He divorced her and left her to wallow in her guilt. The twins would have been the same age as Trixie had they lived. A fact that Sharon would point out to Trixie when she was in her crying-drunk state about why the world was so hard on her.

Then, the next thing Trixie would know, she was dodging empty liquor bottles and being chased throughout the house with a wooden rolling pin. The bruises and cuts she suffered healed, but the broken heart inside of Trixie felt there was nowhere safe, no one to trust. Sharon's toxic nature and her dad's self-numbing only added to Trixie's sad state. The neighbor to their south, Patty, who had lived a lonely life after caring for her elderly parents, took in her young nephew, Carl. Carl Walker was almost nine years old, but his parents were too busy hustling and thieving, and the boy only slowed them down. Keeping a step or two in front of the police officers was the only thing they cared about more than the money they made from ripping people off with their scams.

When Trixie and Carl met, their brokenness brought them together, kindred spirits of innocent children born into toxic lives. Carl had a lisp when he talked. Kids at school would tease and bully him until he ran and hid. He spent most of his time trying to be invisible.

Trixie was small and fast. Before Carl came, she kept to herself. Most kids knew how wretched her dad and stepmother were to her, and she guessed that's why they didn't pick on her. But when they went after Carl, she would stand up to the bigger kids who tormented him and tried to convince Carl to "just punch them right back," she would say. "That'll stop them, bloody their noses," she'd tell him, "they'll leave you alone!"

But Carl wasn't a fighter. His pale blue eyes and dusty blonde hair that was always in a mess, mixed with his lop-sided grin, hid his sadness from everyone but Trixie. Who, with her curly dark brown hair cut shoulder length and fiery hazel eyes, shot daggers at anyone who got too close to them. The freckles across her little nose that she got from her

mother, "angel kisses," her mother would say, gave her such a cute and innocent look.

Trixie didn't know if she believed in that anymore. The black eyes and busted lips she would show up at school with were much more predominant. Day in and day out, she endured her living hell, and when people, teachers, and authorities would ask her what happened, she'd only mutter quietly, "Nothing, just fell." Some would ask her dad or stepmother, but their replies were always some off-hand comment about what an awkward child she was and how there was always some accident waiting for her around the corner. They'd say it with a chuckle or straight-out laugh. They made a joke out of it.

When Trixie and Carl would see each other between classes, they'd smile as they passed, and one would say, "Hey, meet me at the diner!" That was their haven, where Carl's Aunt Patty worked as a waitress. She always kept the back booth open so that about the time they would get out of school, it was ready. And an order of burgers and fries with a fresh, cold soda to wash it down for each of them, on the house, sat waiting for their arrival.

Patty often wanted to go over and tell Trixie's dad that she'd take Trixie and raise her. She would visit with Trixie's maternal Grandmother, Ellen when she came to town for a holiday to see Trixie. Patty would share with the grandmother what she knew of the living situation, but what could they do?

Two old ladies that everyone took for old spinsters. As the grandmother lived out of state and was too old to raise a youngster. Patty, well, the town made sure to keep the gossip going about how her failed attempt to catch a husband had left her an old maid caring for her parents.

People would talk in hushed tones about her taking in her nephew when the no-good, rotten younger brother finally gave up. He didn't even pretend to care about the boy anymore. Legally, the grandmother had enough money to fight for custody, but in a small town where it seemed no one cared enough to get involved except for Patty, she felt the odds were against her. That meant that until Trixie's dad gave up his

parental rights, there was only so much that money could do, and the two ladies had to hope and pray for her safety every day.

When Trixie reached seventh grade, Carl, who had been held back a year, was right there with her. He was a year older, but their friendship had grown. They only shared a few classes, but they would walk to the diner every afternoon after school to strategize their escape plan. While Carl loved his aunt, the small town offered no promise for him. And Trixie was desperate to distance herself from the despicable place called home.

They even carved their initials underneath the butcher block table, where they sat every day after school. They promised each other that they were friends for life and beyond. It was their little joke. The beyond was the happily ever after of any fairy tale. They hoped that one day soon, they would be on their way to find theirs. Come to find out, as far as they were concerned, happily ever after could be in Houston, Texas with Trixie's Grandmother. She would provide them with a safe and loving home, and they'd care for her in her old age.

Basically, Trixie's dad and stepmother didn't pay much attention to the time she spent at the diner with Carl. They didn't even realize she was catching a ride home with him and his Aunt Patty. Patty would drive them quietly home every day when the evening shift was over. Trixie never admitted it, but Carl and his Aunt knew that the meal after school was the only meal besides school lunch that Trixie would get.

It was always bittersweet when the two youngsters would help Aunt Patty wipe down the tables after the supper crowd. Knowing it was almost time for her to be relieved by the late-night waitresses and time for Trixie to go home to the one place she dreaded most.

She would try staying out on the back porch, avoiding going in, but the yelling and cussing would begin as soon as Sharon could see her



sitting in the old porch swing. And if she didn't go in and do whatever Sharon ordered her to do, it only made the punishments worse. If Sharon was unhappy about something, everyone else was as well. Trixie's dad never hit her himself, but he didn't stop Sharon, nor did he check to see if she was all right when he finally dragged himself home.

One evening came, and things were terrible. Worse than usual. The allowance that Trixie's mother, Kelly, received when she was living, and that had then passed to Trixie from the Grandmother, hadn't shown up in the mail yet. Sharon was furious and out of liquor.

Harrison, her dad, was getting home to find his supply of liquor gone as well. The two began fighting. Trixie tried staying out of the way, but it was such a tiny house, and Sharon slept in her room while Harrison slept in the master bedroom. This left the living room couch for Trixie and no safe place to get out of the way.

Like other fights, bottles were thrown, plates and bowls, and anything close at hand could shoot through the air from one dry drunk to the other. While some hit their target. Others crashed into the walls, and some would hit Trixie as she hid beside the couch, partially hidden by the old recliner that no longer worked right.

The fights were awful and loud, and then, when both had exhausted themselves physically, they'd go down to the local bar. They would beg the owner for a couple of bottles to get them through till the money came. When they arrived back home, they'd go to their separate rooms. They didn't speak to each other and Trixie would lay still, as much as possible, pretending to be asleep.

This time, though, Trixie had taken a bottle to the left side of her face. The force of it busted her pale, lightly freckled cheek open, and the bruising and swelling were already causing that eye to swell. The old tee-shirt she had found to hold some ice in up to her cheek was drenched

with her blood. She sat quietly on the far end of the couch and whispered over and over, "I can't do this anymore!"

The toll it was taking physically was horrible, but the emotional turmoil was breaking her spirit. While the two had been out, Trixie had gotten a sheet of school paper and written in big letters, "Meet You At The Diner." She taped it to the window so Carl would see it when he first got up the following day. They had already discussed that if ever a time came that things were too much and Trixie needed to get out of there, she would place the message in the window. When Carl saw it, he would know that Trixie was making her move, and instead of going to school that morning, they'd meet behind the diner.

It was time, and Trixie was glad. Her face hurt, but she was too hopeful about the promise that leaving the destruction behind would give her. She packed the few things she wanted to take into her school backpack and hid it beside the couch. It wouldn't take them long to drink themselves into a stupor and pass out.

Then she would sneak out, hiding in the garden shed till morning. That way, she wouldn't have to worry about dodging them in the morning. She just had to stay quiet a little longer, and not draw any attention to herself, broken and bleeding or otherwise.

Freedom was coming. She could feel it. It was close at hand. Trixie was relieved.

That next morning, Trixie cautiously left the garden shed just before the sun came up and walked to the dinner. She would wait behind the trash dumpster for Carl. He and his aunt would be there shortly, and Carl would act like he was heading off to school as usual. When his aunt went inside the dinner to open up, he would sneak around back to the dumpster where Trixie was hiding. Together, they would sit and make the final decisions.

Trixie had been saving what money she could get her hands on and had enough for two tickets on the bus. It would take them almost to



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Houston. They'd have to walk the rest of the fifty miles from the bus stop in some little town they didn't even know for sure how to pronounce. If they were lucky, maybe a kind stranger would pick them up and give them a ride. If not, Trixie knew she could walk that far; her very life depended on it. When Trixie told Carl the next morning of her plan, he looked doubtful.

"You come up with some of the dumbest ideas," Carl blasted at her the following day.

He was looking at Trixie with a startled look, "How are we going to get all the way to Houston by ourselves, most of it on a bus, with no one noticing?"

Trixie hesitated; Carl was her best friend, only friend, "If we travel as a family," she said, "It'll work. If someone looks for us, it will be for us, not two siblings."

"When I told you I'd go with you, I thought we'd find someone, even my aunt, to drive us. There'd be no questions then."

Knowing Carl was probably right but not being able to stay a moment longer, Trixie straightened herself and looked at Carl with all her hopes and dreams.

"If we don't try this, they'll come," she said, reaching up and touching her swollen face, "and it won't be a busted lip or some bruises next time. You know that! If you don't want to come with me still, then don't."

Frustrated, Carl sighed and said, "Fine! I'll go, but if it doesn't work, we're both in a ton of trouble. Trouble we can't get out of, and you know it!"

Even though he was right, she knew that this was her now or never chance, "Carl, I promise I will do whatever it takes to keep us from getting in trouble, or at least you, if we do get stopped. It's all my fault anyhow."

Frustrated but worried, Carl quietly said, "All right," he knew what this meant for Trixie, "Let's go."

She reached out, giving him a big hug, "Thank you, Carl! You don't know how much this means to me."

“No, I do,” he said, hugging her back, “I just hope it works out.”
“It will, I know it will,” she said, adding, “brother,” with a big grin.
“Now, let’s get to the bus station. I need to use the restroom,” she said.

Carl looked at her, confused, “Well, you better hurry.”

When they arrived at the bus station, Trixie quickly headed to the women’s restroom, unzipping her jacket as she walked, “You’ll see! I will be back in two seconds, promise,” she told him.

She’d bet five bucks that not even Carl would recognize her at first when she was done. She’d show him, she thought. After only a few



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minutes, the people started to load the bus. Carl was nervously looking for Trixie as he lined up to board, “Where is she,” he said to himself.

Just then, a younger-looking boy bumped into him as he cut in line. With an insincere apology, he sarcastically told Carl, “Oh, sorry. I didn’t even see you standing there!”

What nerve, Carl thought, then he said, “Hey buddy, watch it!”

“Whatever,” the boy said back and then turned to look at Carl, “It’s not like you’re going to beat my ass right here in front of everyone.”

Carl looked in disbelief. It couldn’t be. He was speechless at first, “Trixie?”

“TRIXIE?” the boy answered back, his voice raised, “Seriously, dude?”

Carl looked closer; he knew it was her, but it wasn’t, “What did you do to yourself?”

She had thought about trying to hide the busted cheek and then figured most wouldn't be surprised to see a young boy roughed up.

Feeling very happy with herself, she said, "Sometimes you are the dumbest person I know! The name is Trev," she giggled.

"Well, first off, don't do that! Boys don't giggle like that," he said, "not teen boys."

"Yeah, right. Don't worry. I'll work on it. Not bad, though, huh?" She gloated, and together, the two friends boarded the bus as siblings. They were ready for their new life to start.

Blinded

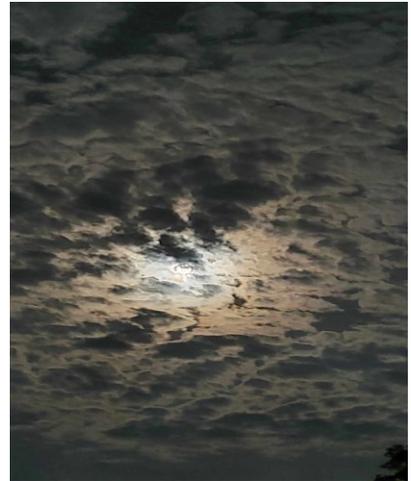
"Where were you last night?" He asked and watched her as he waited for a reply. He already knew the answer. He just needed to hear it from her, the truth. That's all he wanted, the truth, was it really that hard?

"I went to see him," she said quietly, looking down at her sandaled feet, "I needed to know it was him; they'd got him."

"I told you they'd arrested him," he said, a little softer now, she admitted it, he had needed to hear it from her and not from her nose-y mother.

She looked up, her blue eyes were full of emotions, like the ocean before a storm. Absolutely beautiful, but deadly, very deadly. It must have taken a lot of courage to face the man who had nearly ended her life three years ago. She survived. Scarred for life and afraid to trust, but she survived. No longer the sweet, carefree girl he had met a couple of years before the incident, but there she was, sitting on the edge of the bed, looking as gorgeous as ever but her eyes. That's where you could see, even almost feel, the turmoil inside of her.

He didn't know why it mattered so much that she be honest from the start, after all, he knew she loved him and not the man that technically was her husband. Her mother, God, he hated that woman.



Always stirring up trouble and trying to put doubt and suspicion in his head. She didn't want her daughter to be with someone like him, an ordinary man whose life was never going to be filled with monetary riches or glamorous fame. He was a lowly farmer and worked day and night to keep things going. He couldn't even tell you what a vacation was, much less, when the last one was that he'd actually taken. Something longer than a weekend trip to the city.

"Why? Why'd you go? I told you they had him. He can't hurt you anymore, Steph. He will never hurt you again," his heart ached.

He knew it would never be completely over for her, not that she still cared for him, Grant Berk. The famous actor and Hollywood's Most Wanted Bachelor. At least, he was until he and Stephanie Pearson met. The tabloids called it "A Whirlwind Romance," and within six months of meeting, they were married and expecting a child. A child that would never survive. A child that would pay for the sins of the father. The man that Grant truly was, and not what he portrayed on the movie screen. That was all a facade.

"Jack, I know you are trying, but you don't understand," she said, the tension in her voice made her sound so tired, "I had to see him behind those bars. I had to look at him, face to face, and I had to let him see me," there was such an urgency in her voice.

And a look of dark and forbidding hauntedness in her blue eyes. She tucked a lock of dark brown hair behind her perfectly shaped ear, the tears welled up in her eyes. Her hands, gentle and soft, trembled as she wrapped the Kleenex around her forefinger.

It had been an exhausting two years since he'd found her, nearly dead. Grant had gone into hiding after the attempted murder of Steph. The police had searched and followed every possible lead until finally, his agent turned him in after he nearly beat her to death. She'd been hiding him in her house out in the country. Like most people, she believed his lies, his twisting of the truth. But then, she had been in love with him for years, and when he married Steph, she still loved him and would have settled for second best. It was an ugly picture. The star actor with everything, the pretty, innocent girl from a small town new to the big

city. Grant had everyone, including his agent, falling all over themselves just to be close to him. And then the farmer, a simple man who just wanted to hold the girl he loved and protect her.

It made Jack sick to his stomach thinking about it. He had fallen instantly in love with Stephanie when they first met, but she wanted a bigger life, more glamorous than out on some farm. She wasn't going to settle for being a farmer's wife, she told him. Scoffing at his marriage proposal. He knew she felt something for him, but with the insistence of her overbearing mother to go be a star, go mingle with the stars so their grandness and charmed lives could rub off on her. She refused to allow herself to embrace those feelings. When she left and went to Los Angeles to try out for a small part, it felt like she had ripped his heart out and taken it with her. Only to discard it the moment she met Grant.

Maggie, her mother, went with her to keep her from admitting her true feelings. She was going to keep driving her to become more, want more. He rubbed his forehead with a work-worn hand, he was tired. Exhausted from worry and exhausted from holding back the frustration of loving a woman who nearly let those closest to her, destroy her. If she had stayed gone after she'd left when she found out about the baby. It would have survived, maybe. But listening to her mother, she went back. Even though she knew Grant didn't want the child, didn't even want her anymore. She was like an old toy from last Christmas, and he was always looking for the next, newest, and best shiny toy.



He used women like it was his right to do so. As if they should feel privileged to have him look twice at them. He used them and beat them, tortured them, and tried to break them, then left them. When he was done, he was done. He moved on to the next unlucky girl. While they tried to pick up the broken pieces of their wrecked lives, he moved on

and just kept going. Destroying all who got too close. And no one did anything about it. That's what Jack couldn't understand, he didn't even bother to try and cover his tracks. He knew no one was going to fight back; no one was going to tell the truth about him. And certainly, no one was really going to punish what the press called "the next Hollywood legend."

No one, until Steph. The small-town girl who only wanted to be loved and accepted. Who had spent her life trying to please everyone, especially her mother. The innocent girl who believed that if you kept working towards the impossible, it could happen. It could come true, and life could be carefree and beautiful. Glamor and riches, parties and lights, cameras clicking, and tabloids vieing for the juiciest stories. Waiting for the newest scandal to unfold or hoping the hottest directors would call and say, "We want you! You got the part! You're a star now!" It was enough to make him want to lash out, punch something, or throw something. But he couldn't do that in front of Steph.

She'd already been through too much, and you could see the toll as you looked into her eyes. The pain that would always leave its mark and the trauma that lay just under the surface. It would always be there. The loss of the baby. It happened when Grant had actually tried to end her life. The realization that not even her mother really cared what was best for her. And the man she'd pushed away before meeting Grant was actually her true love. The knowledge of the cruel fact that she would never be part of that world, never be good enough, not for them.

"Steph," he started slowly, quietly, "You don't have to be afraid anymore. And you don't have to stay here. You can come home with me," his green eyes tried to catch her blue ones, the tears now flowing steadily down her beautiful, but drawn face.

"I can't leave until they lock him away for good. You know that, Jack," she said, her heart pounding inside of her small frame, "If I'm not here to tell them what he did, he will walk. You know they'll let him go and if he decides to come find me, finish what he started, he will. You can't protect me like you think you can."

Frustrated but trying to understand her point, Jack reached out to take hold of her hand, "Steph, I've talked to your attorney and the D.A. and Detective Black...He's done for, he won't walk away from this."

"I want to believe that," she said, with a sniff and wiping of her eyes, "But you don't know him like I do, you don't know who all he has just waiting to help him get away with murder."

"He's not getting away with it!" Jack felt frustrated.

"He did. Once," she said, closing her eyes, "The night he beat me and raped me. I lost the baby. That was murder. And he's done it before, I know it."

"That will be brought up in his trial, Steph, Detective Black isn't letting that just slide. And you suspect, which I do, too. We just have to let the law handle it," he knew she was afraid.

"Detective Black can only do so much, D. A. Mason can only do so much! He's got important people in his pocket," she sneered, "He would tell me that over and over...in between the beatings and raping and choking me till I couldn't focus," she was becoming agitated at the flashbacks. Her body was trembling, and her voice even shook, "He can have whatever he wants, he knows that, I know that..." she paused, "Everyone knows that, Jack!" She looked at him squarely now; her face was like stone, and the softness retreated, "If I don't stop him, no one will."

Jack heard the words, going off like silent gunshots, aimed directly at their target. He knew she was serious, deadly serious. His heart ached for her, the innocence she had lost, the baby she had dreamt about and lost. The loss of having her mother in her life, even if she was a selfish bitch. Maggie was still her mother. Steph didn't know how to navigate life without being pushed by her. It was as if she was the puppet and her



mother had been the puppeteer. Now that the strings were cut, how was she to manage? Could she manage?

She let out a long, weary sigh, "I just want to lay down. For a little bit. I need to rest," she looked as though she could just topple over, the slightest breeze would have knocked her over, "Will you stay? Stay with me? Please," she asked, as if there was anywhere else he'd rather be but by her side.

He reached out and pulled her close, his strong arms wrapping her within their warmth and strength. Willing his strength to pass to her, "I'll be here, Steph, I'll always be here," he kissed the crown of her dark head, silently willing all of her pain to be taken away. Knowing it wasn't that easy, but wishing it were so, "Get some rest, we can talk in a little while."

He knew she wouldn't sleep, probably, but he hoped the quietness and his assurance that he would be there would allow her to rest, somewhat physically but more mentally. He left the room so as not to disturb her, and not let her see how much emotionally it was affecting him. She was still radiant, but you could see the heaviness of all of this upon her, hear it in her gentle voice. She was not one to complain, but he knew she was twisted and tangled inside with the raging emotions of surviving a brutal attack, the loss of a child, and a complete failure of pursuing dreams that would never come true. Not in this town. Not with Grant still doing his best acting, as if he were the victim.

Jack busied himself in the kitchen, decided on a simple meal, and considering she really hadn't done any grocery shopping for a few weeks, there wasn't much in her kitchen to choose from. Thankfully, his mother had been a good cook and a good teacher of making the best of things. And he would whip up something comforting, something that, while not fancy like the restaurants served here in the big city, would help replenish the strength all of this was consuming from her. If she would only leave with him, go back to his place in the valley. Away from all of this. He would nurse her back to the carefree, happy girl he had fallen for...or at least, he would try. He would never stop trying. Not for her.

The phone rang. Not wanting to intrude in her small apartment but hoping if she was resting, the phone wouldn't wake her, he answered, "Hello? Stephanie Pearson's residence," he stated.

There was a momentary silence on the other end, and then a woman cleared her voice, "Yes," she said, sounding hesitant and unsure, "Is Stephanie there? May I speak with her?"

Jack didn't want to disturb her, but he had no idea who was calling, and it wasn't his place after all, "She's resting, can I take a message?"

"I really need to speak with her," the voice said, sounding as if their very life depended upon it, "I'm sorry, I just really need to talk to her. Please."

Jack sighed, "All right, just a moment," he laid the kitchen towel he had wiped his hands on down on the breakfast bar, taking the cordless phone with him, he gently knocked on Stephanie's bedroom door, "Steph," he called out, "You have a phone call."

When he turned the knob and opened the door, he hoped to find a sleepy-headed girl, but instead, she was still sitting up. She hadn't even moved, and her body was ridged. She acted as if she hadn't even heard him, and she flinched when he walked into the room and touched her shoulder. She was lost in thought. Having back flashes of the horror she had endured, "Steph, the phone," he said, motioning to the handset.



She took the phone without even acknowledging him, a blank, almost glazed look in her eyes, "Hello?" She answered, no emotion in her voice. It didn't even sound like her, "Stephanie here."

He stepped back, not wanting to invade her privacy, but unsure if he should leave the room. He looked at her, the look of torment written

plainly across her face. He didn't know who she was speaking with, she barely made any noise, and as if she forgot it was a phone call, he watched as she nodded her head in response to whatever was being said. The call was brief, very brief. She pushed the button to disconnect the call and just sat there with the phone still in her hand.

"Steph?" He asked, "Are you ok?" He could tell she wasn't, but it was as if she were only there physically, mentally, and emotionally; she was thousands of miles away. Somewhere far, somewhere dark.

Nodding her head in response, "Yes," she answered. There was not a hint of feeling in her voice, "I have a feeling I'm going to have a visitor. That was my friend Lacey. There's been a terrible incident at the jail. Grant's dead."

Not knowing what to say or even what to feel, Jack looked at her, "What?" He asked, incredulously, "What happened? You just saw him last night."

"Sit down, Jack," she said quietly and motioned for him to sit beside her on the bed, "Yes, I saw him last night. I told you I had to let him see me, that he hadn't won. I was alive, in some form anyway."

Jack's face was constricted with confusion and anxiety, making his breathing short and choppy, "Okay," he said, still unable to understand what was happening, "And then you went to your mother's. Right?" That's what Maggie had told him this morning when she came over looking for Stephanie, before Steph came home. She had let him stay at her apartment while she was out. He had worried all night, but he knew she needed some time to herself to process Grant's arrest.

"Yes," she softly answered, "I needed her to know that I finally can see her for who she is, not what I want her to be," there



was anguish in her voice that sent chills up Jack's spine. The saying that "one is at war with themselves" couldn't have been more plain to see and understand than right there, in that moment. Looking at the beautifully broken girl, he could see the splintered pieces of who she used to be, "I told her I was done with this city. These people, her. Done."

"And then you spent the night walking around? Or did you go somewhere? Like in particular?" He could feel a tightening in his chest. What was she trying to tell him? What was it she was about to say? He was afraid to even ask. But then, there was something about the way she sat, unemotional except for what was racing through her eyes as she looked back at him.

"I went somewhere. And, then," she was hesitating, "I...I..." she stammered. Tears again filled the eyes of the woman he wished to protect.

Swallowing as if there was an actual lump in his throat, Jack felt his own body begin to tremble in fear. He was afraid for her to finish her sentence. Afraid to hear what she was going to say. Afraid of losing her for good. His stomach felt queasy, and his hands were clammy. Did she do what he was thinking at that moment? Was he over-reading this? When you care so deeply for someone, it's possible. He sat there, beside her, waiting. Did he really want her to finish what she was saying?

"Steph, what is it?" He asked, he hated asking, but he also knew he had to know, "Tell me," he begged.

She didn't say a word, not a whisper fell from her lips, but her eyes spoke with such grief and agony. He felt as if someone had physically punched him in the gut. It couldn't be. There's something he was misunderstanding about this whole situation. Right? She would never, she could never. Or could she? He felt his heart skip a beat. He was looking at her, and while he still felt she was the most desirable, beautiful woman he had ever met, he wondered. Who was he looking at right then? The girl he fell in love with? Full of laughter and innocence, willing to challenge the world and make her dreams come true? Or was she someone else now?

There was a knock at the front door of the apartment. Jack and Steph sat frozen, but in their eyes, as they met, a million words were being exchanged. There came another knock, louder, more persistent. Neither one moved. It was as if the world had stopped. The second she hit the button to disconnect the call, everything had stopped. She didn't have to say a word, he knew. His heart crumbled. His faith shattered into a thousand tiny pieces. He had wanted to save her, protect her...but he knew, right then, he knew. He had failed.

Suddenly there was a loud bang and a splintering of the front door. A room with only two in it became crowded with guns drawn and voices shouting for them to freeze. They were already frozen. Like statues. Living, breathing statues. Jack remembered hearing someone saying, "Don't move! You're under arrest for the murder of Grant Berk."

Was he seeing things? Why were they looking at him instead of Stephanie? What was happening? His mind went blank. There was a roaring in his ears, his own heart beating out of control in his chest. There was something missing here. But he was the only one in the dark. The last thing he truly, coherently, remembered was thinking, "Yes, getting the truth really is that hard."

