

All the Wrong Places

A Novel

Rebecca Fisher



Rebecca Fisher Books

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All the Wrong Places

∞ *All the Wrong Places* ∞

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Chapter One

The Hillside

Sheets of rain fell, leading my car along a blind road. The rhythmic sound of the rain was soothing and combined with the fabricated heat, threatened a sleeplike trance. But memories of the day's surreal events were like a constant alarm, keeping me more aware than I would like. Each image brought with it a sickness in my stomach. I tried to shake them away, and it worked momentarily, but they inevitably returned.

The love songs on the radio were now the background music for the tragedy replaying in my head. It was epic in proportion, like in *Pride and Prejudice*, except the likely ending had Elizabeth settled for the shady Mr. Wickham.

It was the love dedication portion of the program, and I thought I might vomit in the passenger seat when the d.j. began reading the letters

out loud. There's not a feeling more awkward than the embarrassment you have for someone else when they pour out their feelings in a letter mailed to a radio station. I wanted to call in and assure the writer that the undying love they felt would pass shortly, and that the real person would come out of hiding when there was no longer a need for pretenses. The thought of how this bitter truth had played out for me took me from self-pitying to thoroughly ticked off. I gripped the steering wheel tighter to suppress the rising emotions - remembering I wasn't alone.

Maddy had fallen asleep in the backseat, without the knowledge of the weight of the world now resting on my shoulders. I would do anything to protect her from our sudden change of circumstance and the harsh reality that created it.

She had shifted to one side, head bent toward the head rest, in an attempt to sleep comfortably. A once plush hippopotamus, now missing one eye and most of its stitching, was cuddled up in her arm. His name was Hippo, and he was her very favorite animal. One of those animals you bring with you everywhere because it seems to soothe them. It still soothed her.

I glanced back at her and fought the welling lump in my throat, crying vicariously through the rain so as not to wake her. My face ached as I tried to hold in the tears. My bottom lip was pushing out from the permanent frown. I always looked like a cry baby when I cried. I used to wish I could be an elegant crier, like in the movies – back of the hand to the forehead and no matter how long you cried, your makeup would be perfect and your eyes wouldn't swell and redden like Italian sausages. That wasn't me. I was a mess.

As the disturbing memories continued to replay, I began to realize that we had nowhere to go. The shock of the day was wearing off quickly now and reality setting in. I decided that before I had a complete meltdown, I would attempt a logical review of our situation.

To start, I didn't have a clue where I was going. I was simply following a winding highway – going only God and GPS knew where. Secondly, I had no one left to help me. In the last hour I had closed the door on any chance of familial assistance, and friends were out of the

question as I no longer had any. Third, I was nearly destitute. I didn't have a single credit card to rent a hotel room with, and though there were sixty dollars in my purse from my unfinished grocery errands, it probably wouldn't be enough to rent a room anywhere in the state without the promise of filthy sheets, cockroaches and social deviants.

The logic was fading and the tears threatened a victorious return. Trying desperately to leave my emotions out of it, I moved on to possible solutions. I thought about what someone else in my shoes would do. What would I suggest they do with no friends, no family, and not much money? Every city has a shelter, right?

The image of Maddy sleeping on a stiff, green cot, next to a urine-soaked, dingy, smiling man with no teeth broke down the last bit of fight I had in me. I cried out in utter desperation, "Help me!"

A sudden chill came over me, setting off uncontrollable sobs. Everything I had been holding back for the last few hours was fighting its way to the surface with a vengeance. Every muscle tightened as the waves of heartache and panic searched for a way out. As I finally gave in, allowing it all to flow from my defeated emotional dam, a sudden jolt sent the car spinning at a dizzying pace.

Every emotion playing inside me was replaced with a fierce flood of adrenaline. I couldn't see anything through the windshield except the headlights flashing on ever-changing objects as we spun. The moment seemed endless. The screech of the tires on the asphalt triggered an automatic response. Without thought, my foot slammed on the brakes and I jerked the steering wheel against the spin of the car. Everything around me seemed to blur until we slammed into an unwavering structure and came to an abrupt halt.

I knew we were stopped, but *I* continued to spin. The breath had been knocked out of me by the impact, and all sound had been drawn from my ears. The silence was disorienting, but I was pretty sure by the rate of my heartbeat that I was still alive. It took a while before I could focus on anything through my blurred vision. My thoughts raced as I tried to catch my breath and figure out how much damage I was facing.

The realization of what I might see in the backseat hit me hard and furiously. My eyes shot back as I continued struggling to pull myself together. The volume of my surroundings and the ability to scream quickly returned.

“MADDY!” My voice had fought its way out before I could complete the terrifying images that shot through my mind. Maddy lay quietly holding Hippo, her eyes squinting in a dreary, dreamy fog.

“Mommy?” she responded in a confused daze. She lifted her head up, securely holding her hippo in her arms.

“Maddy are you okay?” I fumbled to unbuckle my seatbelt and carelessly stumbled into the backseat, freeing her from her seat and scooping her up in a panic - my arms trembling. “Maddy are you okay?” I asked again, desperate for a response that would quell my fears.

I frantically attempted a medical assessment, feeling around each and every bone - where they began, where they joined, and where they ended. She seemed so small and fragile as I held her in my lap. I ran my fingers over the slopes of her head, searching for any damage. There didn't seem to be anything wrong. Was it possible, with that impact, that we were okay?

She wiggled her head under my hands and looked up at me, confused.

“Mommy, what are you doing? I'm tired,” she complained through a yawn. “Can I lie down again?” Maddy was a notoriously sound sleeper. I had once vacuumed the entire living room carpet with her baby carrier right in the center. She never budged. It didn't surprise me that the accident barely stirred her considering she had also succumbed, not even an hour ago, to a dose of acetaminophen. I had picked her up early from school because of a slight fever.

Pangs of guilt seized me. I stroked at her hair, determined to make things right.

Dozing off, she pulled Hippo in closer, tucking her hand around his body and into her chest. To provide extra security, she wrapped her other arm around him tightly.

The trust she put into the protection of that stuffed animal was so simple and so real. It seemed at the moment that it had more to offer her than I did. I so badly wanted to curl up with her and join in her peaceful sleep, trusting that everything would be alright, but I would have to settle for just one of us having it.

“Go to sleep, baby,” I whispered. Her body soon lay limp with sleep. I gently leaned her head back on the seat as I continued to catch my breath. Fear had taken flight in my veins, and my heart raced to keep up. Trying to slow the pace, I took every other breath through my nose. I closed my eyes and tried to empty my mind of the swarming images.

The beating of the rain on the car seemed too simple a sound to follow such chaos, but I longed for simple. I tried to focus just on the sound of the rain and waited for my heart to slow.

The irregular rhythm of my heart had started shortly after Maddy was born and had grown steadily worse since. The doctors called it a tachycardia and assured me that it was unlikely I would die from complications. Doctors can be so very comforting. Unfortunately, the preventive medications I was prescribed to treat it caused a respiratory reaction, similar to an asthma attack, and with surgery as my only other option, I chose to just deal with it. But in stressful events such as these, the tripled rate of beats made it impossible to catch my breath.

I mindlessly stroked at Maddy’s hair until my heart rate and breathing had returned to normal. I sat and waited for the next indicated step to present itself to me, but realized with heaviness that I was the only adult in the car, and at some point I would have to do something.

I peered through the back window to assess the situation. Above us the sky was black, filled with countless iridescent beads. Beneath us, a hill covered in ivy - our car propped upon it.

I slowly shifted my body from under Maddy and climbed back into the front seat. I figured I’d start with the basics and hope for the best. I started the car again and put it into gear. It wouldn’t move forward, and it wouldn’t budge back. The day’s wrath was clearly not going to subside.

I peered through the fog-stained window, wiping my breath away with my sleeve. I could barely make out the shape of a building just atop the hill, and the outline of a large, lit sign bearing what looked like the shape of a cross. The sign revealed its age - a yellowed, fiber-glass cover framed by brick. I couldn't quite read the large, block letters to determine where we were. I had no choice but to investigate further than the driver's seat.

Though still dizzy and a bit nauseated, I turned off the car, put on my jacket, and climbed out into the cold.

It was pouring down now, and I had neglected, rather, never considered to pack an umbrella in my escape. It was merely drizzling when the day began, and I had come to truly love the feel of the light sprinkle on my face. I often laughed at the sight of others hiding under their umbrellas from such harmless mist. I found comfort in the smell of wet asphalt and the sound of squeaky shoes on linoleum. The rain seemed to change everyone and everything. It quieted the usually busy streets, replacing the fast-paced tension with the rhythmic wipers on the windshield and parting waters through the intersections. It was a change, and change for me was good, if only just wetter than before. It gave me the strong desire and hope to have more than the loveless, unfulfilling, and unfaithful reality that was my marriage.

This was real rain. The kind that won't let you forget as it pummels the top of your head. The winds didn't help matters either, and before I could close the door, my seat was soaked. I closed it quickly but quietly to avoid the litany of questions that are inevitable with a curious five year old.

Pulling the top of my jacket over my head, I knelt down to assess the damage. What little was left of the front tire was embedded in the ivy, and a large rock stood guard just behind the rear tire. I scooted through the ivy to the front and ran my fingers over the shredded rubber, which no longer covered the metal beneath. I had helped a couple of friends change tires in the past and convinced myself that it couldn't be too hard. I had a spare in the trunk. It wasn't impossible.

I moved through the pools of wet leaves toward the back. I glared at the rock standing firmly behind the rear tire. If only looks could move rocks too. Determined as always, I bent down, placed both hands on the rock, and pushed to test its hold. It was solid. I decided to push harder, judging by its shape that it couldn't be too deeply embedded in the ground. This time I stepped back with both feet, now in a runner's starting position, and pushed like our very future depended on it. In an instant, my right foot gave under the wet mush, and all of my weight landed my face on the side of the stubborn stone. In the sharp cold, the pain throbbed.

I sat in the ivy, since my clothes were already entirely soaked and covered in mud, and gently touched around my face. I winced at the pain. Pulling my hand away to assess the damage, I saw no blood. Nothing too bad.

Since it was painfully obvious that I wasn't going to get very far on my own, I decided to call information and get the number for a tow truck. They could surely pull us out. I forced out of my mind the fact that the service wouldn't be free, and even when the car was back on the road, we still had nowhere to go.

I crawled back to the door and slung my wet body onto the seat, shivering uncontrollably.

I searched through my purse looking for my cell phone. My fingers were so cold that they moved in stiff, slow motion. My mind wasn't moving much faster through the shivers. I had turned the phone off earlier, avoiding any possible contact with what was behind us. I held the power button down and waited for the sound. *Searching for network* flashed on the screen.

I felt sick at the thought of what I imagined coming. Of course I wouldn't have service. This day was determined to earn itself the ranking of "the worst of my life" without a single hopeful contender.

I had been so confident and sure about every choice I had made that day. It felt right, like for the first time I was on the right path, making the right choices for both of us. Was this a test of will? The

challenge stirred up a new wave of courage. I *would* make this work. I would *never* go back.

My face and hands burned as they warmed. I would never go back, but I did need help. I looked again at the yellowed sign and at the mysterious building. Along one side there was a window warmed by an inside light. It glowed through faded curtains.

It was getting late. Could someone be there? I figured that if nothing else, someone in a holy establishment would feel compelled to help us somehow, perhaps give us shelter for the night. I did have the pathetic, lost, single mother appeal, and a tired, helpless child to boot. That was a cross on the sign after all, and from what little I knew of crosses, they carried with them the great burden of helping those in need. Though I didn't necessarily buy it, I would take help any way I could get it.

With no other options and a fierce determination to make my first claim on independence, I climbed back out of the car. I hurriedly opened the back door and pulled Maddy out and over my shoulder. I grabbed her jacket and placed it over her head. She squirmed a bit but didn't wake. My wet jeans provided some grip against her clothes, but my numb arms and fingers were finding it difficult to keep a tight grasp around her body. I didn't know how long I could hold on before I would have to set her down.

I looked to the building again, trying to decide what I was getting myself into. It didn't look anything like a church - too square and simple. There weren't any churchy ornaments or engravings. I hadn't been in a while, but I was sure churches didn't look or feel like this.

I forced my way up the hill, which was impossibly slick and steep. I could feel my shoes fill with cold water and my toes squish with each step. The bottoms of my jeans grew heavy as they absorbed the water from the leaves of ivy. My thighs burned from the climb. How long had it been since I'd walked at an incline holding a fifty pound weight around my neck and waist? I immediately regretted my lack of any consistent exercise. My body begged for air, and my lungs did all they could to keep up with what I sucked in.

We finally reached the top. I stopped to try and breathe through the burn in my legs and chest. I tried to encourage myself by declaring that no other kindergarten mother could have done the same.

Before us was the next leg of the journey - a large and empty parking lot.

With short but quick strides, I hurried across the asphalt until I reached what I figured was a front door. It was covered by a green awning - strands of accumulated water plummeting from the sides like miniature waterfalls - a shelter of sorts. Again, I wasn't picky and would take what I could get at this point, as it seemed an equal amount of water fell from me.

Large, dense shrubs lined the walkway lit by an old lantern affixed near the solid wooden door, shining the same yellowed color as the sign. It created a gloomy atmosphere, as if dark, rainy, and mysterious weren't enough. It seemed more like a door to a home than a church, but nothing concerned me more than the wet, biting cold, so I reached out and rang an archaic doorbell.

I could hear the faint sound from inside. What were the chances I would be lucky enough to get a response?

The adrenaline from the crash and the cold hadn't completely worn off, so I paced back and forth under the overhang awaiting an answer. Nothing. I rang it one more time without much hope.

I walked back into the rain to see if I could get a better look at the window on the side. Maybe if they could see who waited at the door they would be more likely to open it.

As I peered around the corner, the glow of the sign from the side of the building caught my eye. What I thought to be a cross were the deceptive designs of pine tree branches. I stepped in closer to read. Squinting through the rain, I mouthed the words out loud as I read the bold, black letters. *Golden Oaks Funeral Home.*

As the words sank in, a new feeling was causing the shivers. I gasped in and fought the growing scream, fearing what might follow if someone heard. I immediately turned to run and regretted having rung the bell twice.

Terrified at the thought of what lay behind that door, I started back out into the unrelenting showers. I covered the same amount of distance across the lot in less than half the time. Climbing down sideways to avoid the inevitable slip, I carefully but quickly made my way back to the planted car and fell inside. I closed the door and placed Maddy, who was now half awake, into the passenger seat.

“Where are we?” Her foggy eyes tried to make sense of what she saw. I must have looked alarming at best. I knew I was soaked. My skin must have been chalk white with fear and cold. I hoped I could lull her back to sleep without too many questions. She yawned. “Mommy? Why are you so wet?”

“It’s okay, sweetie. Go back to sleep,” I coaxed. I reached over and reclined her seat all the way. She pulled her knees up to her chest and shivered slightly. I tucked her jacket in tight all around her and started the car and the heater. Within moments she was asleep again.

Collecting my thoughts and my breath, I leaned my own seat back and closed my eyes, going over and over in my mind the events that led us to the top of that hill, hoping we were hidden from whatever lay behind that door.

Chapter Two

The Study

The memories of the events preceding our crash-landing came with a cutting pang of regret. Though I resisted, they replayed clearly on the back of my eyes.

We approached the familiar front steps, fifty paces beyond the white-gated entryway, along the rose-lined path that wound around and dropped off squarely in front of the oaken, arched door. I moved slowly, contemplating my choice to walk this path one more time. I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I was making a big mistake. The feeling grew as I recounted my last visit six long years ago.

One wet brick at a time, I fit my feet into each rectangle perfectly, careful not to step outside of the lines. This was a habit learned early on.

With each step, I grew more densely saturated in the memories of this place and neglected to notice Maddy helping a snail along the recently rained upon walkway. Her little fingers delicately grasped its shell and walked it forward, speaking to it in a loving and motherly tone.

“Here we go little snail, doo, doo, doo, doo do.” The nap on our drive over had given her a second wind of energy, and the sound of her voice was sure to sabotage my attempt to remain inconspicuous. I ditched my careful walk and quickly tip-toed to her.

“Maddy!” I hissed. “Put that down right now, and hold my hand.”

My heart raced as I seriously contemplated my motives and the likely outcome of this visit. I was just steps away, and I still hadn’t made up my mind. Maddy didn’t know much about being secretive or indecisive, and she certainly did not know how to whisper. Everything out of her mouth had the same innocently shrill volume.

Why was I hiding? This was ridiculous.

In the midst of my turmoil, Maddy carefully explained to me the dire situation with the snail.

“He needed help mommy. He was never going to get to the door.”

I sometimes wondered if she understood more than I gave her credit for. Would she pick me up with her little pincer grasp and carry me to the door if she could?

We eventually reached the front door where I stood still for a long thoughtful moment. Ringing the doorbell was such a simple yet nearly impossible feat.

“Oh, can I ring it, can I ring it? Please, can I ring it?” Maddy danced around in front of the doorbell, as if greeting it with a ritual before pushing.

“NO!” I growled. “Just wait a minute. Just wait.”

Each ripple of flutters that came begged me to run. I turned to look out onto the landscape before me, hoping for a sign, or possibly a quick escape. But Maddy couldn’t wait any more.

“Mr. Snail doesn’t want to wait,” she insisted. She reached for the doorbell, and before I even realized what was happening, she had rung it five times.

“Maddy stop!” I gasped with horror, pulling her hand away.

Panic spread throughout me. My instinctive, gut reaction was to grab her, pull her down the stairs, and run. I looked around, choosing flight over fight, but saw no place to hide in the approaching storm. It was wet everywhere, rain coming down harder now, and I didn’t think I could explain to Maddy why we were shamefully crouching behind a bush. I knew it was too late.

The door opened, and a friendly looking Hispanic woman stepped into the opening between past and present. I had never seen this woman before, but I knew exactly who she was. The “help” at the house had always changed every few years. My father never wanted *anyone* to feel too secure in their position. Sometimes he would merely fire them to get the others to work harder. Sometimes he would fire them because we liked them. He felt relationships undermined his authority and left too much room for an attitude of indifference.

She glanced to her right and to her left, trying to locate the ringer of the bell. She was pretty in a natural way, black hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail and dark features that made make-up unnecessary. I could tell that she was not going to give up the search anytime soon.

I was suddenly quite embarrassed by the fact that I was being so juvenile about the whole thing. I quickly tried to pretend that I was looking at some flowers on the side of the house. It didn’t work for long.

“My mommy is hiding,” Maddy announced. She pulled me forward and offered me to the woman who stood puzzled on the steps.

I tried to belittle Maddy’s comment with a chuckle and a brush off with my hand, but the look on the woman’s face told me she knew better. I forgot momentarily who she worked for. Who wouldn’t hide?

“Hello! Please come inside. Mrs. Richards is waiting for you.” The woman opened the large door into the entryway and stood at its side, waiting as I entered with trepidation. Her face was tolerant, warm, and welcoming - the required uniform of the estate. She must have sensed

my unnerved hesitation, because she began to coax me in with smiles and an upside down wave - fingers pulling inward.

I used Maddy's shoulders as support as I walked into the room.

It felt cold and almost vacant with its vaulted ceilings and tiled floors. The smell was the same with a hint of Oleander, most likely cut fresh each day. White, or some shade thereof, was the color scheme. Every surface was uncomfortably clean and every piece of furniture and adornment perfectly placed. As always, it was beautiful in a disturbing and unwelcoming way. It was a place to exist, never to truly live.

I laughed, a laugh of bitter resentment, when I glanced at the antique sofa in the formal living room. It, like most of the house, wasn't meant to be enjoyed in the normal sense of the word. The punishments I'd endured learning that rule were many. Even *we* had been just carefully dressed ornaments for the perfect picture.

As Maddy skipped forward, past the woman, and did a small landing dance in the center of the travertine floor, I briefly recalled the carefree girl *I* once was. Determination rose in a wave of heat. Maddy would keep her innocence and individuality, and this façade wouldn't stop me from making it so.

I reminded myself of my one and only motive here. Ask for help for the sake of my daughter and be gone. I felt my insides harden as I tried to imagine myself impenetrable.

"Thank you." I nodded to the poor woman whose fate I knew better than she did. As resolved as I tried to be, I still felt ill at the sound of the door closing behind me, my fate sealing with it.

The woman smiled, bowed her head and left the room.

I felt trapped between the two sets of white-railed stairs that wound up each side of the room to the gallery directly overhead. Within just seconds, Maddy was swinging from one of the delicately hand-carved rails.

"Maddy get down now!" I hissed. Not one minute had passed, and she had already broken at least three of the house rules. I could just imagine the lecture I'd get on raising a proper and respectful child.

I held Maddy's arms to her side and leaned over to explain the very basic rules, when I caught the familiar hint of brandy from behind.

"Hello, Casey. I'm so glad you came. I wasn't sure by your voice on the phone whether or not you would."

I stiffened and turned around, face to face with Evelyn, my mother. She was an attractive woman, always had been, and not just because of the expensive and well-applied make up, or the perfectly draped, designer clothing, or even the classic, heirloom jewelry that decorated her skin. She was tall for a woman, about five feet nine inches. Her hair was a thick mahogany frame that lay perfectly at her collarbone, with a graceful curl at each end. Her eyes were blue and gentle, but meaningful. Her presence was always one of great poise. Of course that was merely her appearance, not my experience.

She approached me in a deliberate glide and with a look of bemused condescension, reached out to embrace me in the "appropriate" way.

"Hello, mother," I responded blankly.

I allowed the stiff-and-proper hug. Only pats on the back could have written it off more perfectly. The false intimacy brought on an instant wave of nausea. I never knew if it was the pretense of it or the complete emptiness I sensed from her, but it happened every time.

I instinctively stood back and held Maddy slightly behind me with a protective grip as Evelyn eyed her curiously. It seemed that she was holding back some emotion. Her eyes were red around the insides of her lids. I couldn't tell if it was the liquor or real tears.

She hadn't seen Maddy often in the last five years, only when she could sneak away without the chance of being discovered. She managed a visit to the hospital when Maddy was born and a few here and there when my father was on business, but it had become nearly impossible since he semi-retired. Aside from the pictures I sent to her "secret" post office box, she hadn't seen Maddy in almost two years.

I hated her for staying with him. And I hated that I had repeated that pattern. But my heart ached when I saw her taking Maddy in and realizing all she had missed.

“Well hello, Maddy, aren’t you all grown up?” she said admiringly. “I’ve seen so many pictures of you and have looked forward to this day.”

She motioned toward Maddy, who was pulling away from me with great force. I held her tight, not sure that I wanted Maddy to experience the same cold and empty contact. Evelyn stopped and attempted to casually brush it off.

“Well darling, it’s quite alright. A hug isn’t necessary. Why don’t we move into the living room while we wait for your father?”

I had always been baffled by my mother’s ability to maintain her stride after the three-shots of pre-dinner brandy, and wanted nothing less than to watch her controllably sip at her fourth. Her eyes were definitely glossed from intoxication and surrender, and her perspiration was beginning to carry the brandy with it.

Though I resented her checking out like this, I knew exactly why she did it and privately confessed that I would have too. Instead of drinking uncontrollably, I had run the first chance I got. Evelyn had nowhere to go - a sympathy I knew had led to the agreement to see me tonight.

I looked her over, my heart softening slightly. Whatever wishes or values she had once proclaimed had been belittled and chided into something only recognizable to her as childish notions. Though I had nothing more than the clothes on our backs and the very little that waited in our car, both of us knew that I had more hope, and it seemed that Evelyn was trying to protect that as well.

While I desperately wanted to give her a few moments of real human contact, I reminded myself of my mission and declined.

“We’ll wait here.” I tried not to say it in the permanently broken and judgmental adolescent tone that usually came with every conversation with Evelyn. Instead came the ever-terrified little girl speak that always manifested before a meeting with my father.

Before she could respond with her typical deep breath in and dismissive sigh out, the housekeeper appeared again.

“Mr. Richards would like you to wait in his study.” Her English was slightly broken, but her voice was steady and soothing.

Again, the woman smiled and gestured toward the hallway off to the right. The way she looked at me made me think she felt sorrier for me than I did her. After all, it was *me* going into the study. This reminder brought on an episode of disorientation for a moment. Was I really subjecting myself to this again? Could it possibly have a happy ending? As I stood in my own little moment of doubt, Evelyn broke in.

“Dear, I’ll take Maddy through the house and maybe show her where you grew up.” She stepped in close to me, liquor mixing with expensive perfume. “Please listen to your father. He wants only the best for you.”

Maddy ripped from my hold and flew into Evelyn’s body, hugging tightly and beaming up with excitement. Evelyn stumbled slightly, not knowing how to respond to the rare expression of affection.

I went over her words in my head. He only wants the best for me? Well, we all knew that wasn’t true. The doubt turned into certainty. Of course my simple request would be met with negotiation.

“Mother, I asked for a loan. I don’t want *his* best for me. You said that wouldn’t be a problem, and that’s why I am here.”

I reached for Maddy, but the housekeeper had gently taken ahold of my arm to lead me in the direction of the study.

“I’m not here to negotiate!” I insisted firmly. I was ready to violently shake the woman’s hand from my arm when Evelyn pleaded.

“Just hear him out, Casey. Please!” she begged. The desperation in her usually controlled tone stalled me.

The housekeeper took this opportunity to put the nail in my coffin.

“Mr. Richards would like you to wait in his study.” She began to suggestively pull me away from the nauseating scent emanating from Evelyn and from the only important thing left in my life - Maddy.

“She’ll be fine. Please go and talk to him. It will be fine, dear. Go,” Evelyn urged.

Evelyn turned Maddy around with a clown-like smile, followed by a pleading look back to me.

Watching them disappear around the corner seemed like an omen, like the next phase of his plan to physically separate me and Maddy from each other and, more importantly, from the judging eyes of his society.

With the woman close behind, I carefully stepped into the old interrogation room and again felt my fate seal with the lining of the door.

I shivered and held myself to keep warm. He liked to keep the temperature unbearably cold. It was one of his brilliant tactics meant to keep his target uneasy before attack.

I slowly walked the length of the oak cabinets that were built into the walls of the room, running my finger along the wooden divide. Memories rushed back of my innocent and unfulfilled longing to be loved and hugged by a man who expected everything I wasn't and couldn't be. Even though I knew that something in his make-up made it impossible for him to love, I hated him for withholding it from me. I hated him for setting me up for failure. I was doomed from the start to seek love in the arms of yet another man who didn't have it to give. But I refused to be Evelyn, the empty, drunk, and lonely woman in the other room. I left my husband that day to save myself, to save Maddy. Evelyn couldn't do that.

I made my way around the room to the chair on the opposite side of his desk. The chair's top reached my belly button rather than my forehead this time, but its cold repelling leather against my hand still personified him exactly. There was always a sense of loss in his presence - a useless and unsatisfied need to please him.

I fought back the welling lump in my throat, and the tears of anger toward him, and sadness for the little girl who stood here so many times.

I heard movement behind the door, and my knees became weak beneath me. I closed my eyes and prayed, desperately prayed, for the courage to stand my ground.

I turned to be sure to face him when he entered. I knew this would throw off the balance of power from the start. He would have expected to find me standing patiently with my head down, facing his empty chair.

I stood, as brave as I could be, awaiting his inquisition. He made no eye contact nor did he speak. His stride was slow and calculated. He stood momentarily, expecting me to sit. I didn't. With a dismissive breath, he took his seat.

He methodically lit his cigar, taking his time, and swiveled his chair to face a cabinet directly behind him. It was filled with hard-earned awards and plaques accumulated throughout his careers in the military and the law. Symbols of perfection - an unachievable perfection demanded of me from an age I could hardly remember.

This was how it always began - a silent comparison of the two unequal parties in the room. By now I would usually be hanging my head, but my perspective had changed a lot in the last few years, certainly the last few hours. I knew exactly what those accolades had brought him. They brought him nothing but the lifeless rooms outside that door, and the miserable woman who filled them. Though I had made plenty of mistakes, big mistakes, my experiences had bought me perspective. I had never felt more empowered.

A few endless minutes passed before he turned around and looked heavily upon me. The smoke lifted from the top of his head, seeming to carry his thoughts. The scent of judgment spread throughout the room, looming over me, not needing a single word.

I knew him well - the room, the scene, this same interaction on many occasions in my childhood. He was a commander, a tyrant who had been disobeyed and humiliated by an insubordinate inferior. He had sensed my desperation through the shaken phone call to my mother and confirmed it upon my first hesitant step into the entryway. He smelled my vulnerability and had laid out a clear plan of action long before I'd arrived.

His brows set low over his cutting, dark blue eyes, and were as perfectly framed as his entire dress. Everything pressed and everything

shined - not a thing out of place. He was handsome, intimidating, and commanding. His presence was stunning. He had a way of drawing in my attention - his first move. He allowed the silence to set the battleground with each side preparing - him unmoving.

I planted my feet and prepared my argument. I looked down just briefly.

I don't know how I hadn't noticed it before. I was completely distracted by the cold and by my fear. But there it was. The folder sat purposefully in its place, lying in the center of the desk, facing my chair. It sat there deliberately, its contents carefully constructed to inform, persuade, and conquer. He knew that I saw it. He said nothing, but fixed his eyes on me, slowly inhaling the smoke, with his hands folded in front of his face.

I was enraged by his intimidating posture, by my weak submission into his control once again. I didn't need to look in the folder. I knew enough by its cover, *Brookford Academy for Girls*.

My whole life I had disappointed him, from my petty wants for play as a child, to my irrational and impractical decision to have Maddy and get married. The rage grew as I stood there, watching him sit with his game face on, waiting for me to break, while smoke passed over his fixed stare. I remembered his cold and matter-of-fact decision that I needed to have an abortion immediately. How he was infuriated by my sabotaging his plans for me to work at his firm, make him proud, impress his colleagues, be perfect.

My breath was growing shorter and this very big mistake becoming more lucid. I could still hear the echo of his harsh words as he presented me with calculated thoughts on the adoption process and annulment. And finally, I couldn't erase the cutting words of shame, of intolerance, of humiliation as he warned me not to come around with the child ever again.

I couldn't believe I was standing there again, to be insulted by another cruel proposition.

He sensed my unease and decided to strike.

“Casey, sit down!” he commanded. His words flew, but his body seemed plastered in the same position. I searched for the perfect words, the closing argument, the victory cry.

“Casey, *sit* down.” His voice was growing hard and a bit concerned.

I closed my eyes and clenched my fists, thinking of the nothingness that lay beyond the front door. There was nowhere left to go from here, no one else to turn to. Maddy giggled from outside of the door. I could hear my mother scrambling, her voice faint.

“Maddy honey, come sit down in here, please. Okay darling, Grandmom doesn’t want to play hide and seek anymore.”

Maddy giggled again.

I knew this wasn’t the place. I had felt it all my life. It brought no comfort, no love, and no allowance for a life that could possibly bring the happiness I so desperately wanted to give to Maddy.

My concern for our future, even the next few hours, melted as unexpectedly as it had grown - turning into a determination unlike any I had ever known.

I nervously laughed, shocked by the peaceful and resolute feelings that overcame me so suddenly.

His face was molding into a glare of insult.

“What is it that you find so funny? Is it that you’re alone with nowhere to go, with a child that brings nothing but shame to this family,” he sneered, “or that you’ve come here once again to finally listen to something rational?”

He paused and waited. I was still in shock and absorbing the freeing feelings that had suddenly overcome me. He must have thought I was considering. He reached for the folder and started to explain.

“Now, in here you’ll see that this academy offers more than...” I cut him off sharply and looked him in the eye with conviction and certainty.

“Father, I want nothing from you, nothing that you can give me. I made a mistake coming back here.” With a mixed sense of strength

and surprise, I turned and walked toward the door, knowing that I could never come back.

I felt dizzy, as though my feet weren't really touching the ground. Everything was moving in a fast forward pace. My face felt hot and my hands were trembling slightly. I turned to look at him one last time, to say goodbye.

He stood up from his chair, his hands pressed firmly against the desk, and his cigar burning between his fingers. "Casey! Get back here and sit down!" he growled.

I continued through the door, into the entryway where my mother was desperately searching for Maddy. My heart sank. Had she known about his proposal? It didn't matter. I had set us both up for disaster when I called. She couldn't help me from behind enemy lines.

I watched as she stood up and looked at me with great concern. I loved my mother, and my mother loved me, but she could never take the stand I just had, no matter her desire to help me.

"Maddy, let's go honey," I ordered, using the *I'm serious* tone to make sure she'd come out quickly. I really didn't want Maddy present for the scene that would erupt soon.

"Casey, where will you go? Why don't you just hear your father out? Maybe there's a compromise," she pleaded, her voice shaky with the sound of heartache and fear. Her eyes were filling with tears, an uncommon sight to see.

"He has nothing for me...nothing. Maddy come out here now!" I looked around and found Maddy coming out from a closet beneath the stairs, grinning from ear to ear.

"Mommy, she couldn't find me, isn't it funny?" she giggled. Maddy ran to her grandma and wrapped her arms around her. "I love you, Grandma. When can we play hide and seek again?"

Tears streamed from my mother's face, which quivered as she fought to maintain composure. I was a little amazed, but felt an odd sense of release, a release that was a long time coming. My mother's tears were a needed sign that she knew everything *wasn't* quite right, something she could never admit out loud. My father charged out of the

room and pointed his finger at Evelyn. I grabbed Maddy and pulled her behind me. Of course, she tried to peek around.

“I told you she was hopeless. She’s an ignorant, hopeless fool, and *no one* can help her,” he snarled.

He marched past us all and disappeared down the hallway.

“Who was that?” Maddy asked in childlike astonishment. “He was very, very mad!”

She moved behind me with a frightened look, arms wrapped around my leg. I picked her up gently and held her on my side as I turned to face my mother.

“Goodbye, mom,” I said, sad to be leaving her in the situation.

Though it seemed too simple a statement to follow such a scene, it was all that I could gather. No words could begin to put together the puzzle of thoughts swarming my mind. I headed for the door.

“Casey, please call me. I’ll help you in any way I can,” she called after us. I could hear her walking toward us, but I was already out the door.

“I love you and I *will*,” I called back.

We walked out into the night sky. It was raining hard. I set Maddy down and pulled my jacket around to cover her.

“Where are we going? Can I go home now and play with my dolls?”

Maddy walked, holding my hand while trying to look at her grandma over her shoulder. She waved to her with an unknowing smile.

The horror of his proposition, sending Maddy to a boarding school as if she didn’t exist, had sent me without regret, into the dark, drenched night, with nowhere left to turn.

Chapter Three

Hand-me-Downs

Maddy interrupted my dream-like memories and startled me awake.

“Mommy, where are we?” her voice asked drearly. She was still sleepy.

“We’re just stopping for a minute, honey. Try to go back to sleep.”

I set the heat as high as possible. It was getting later and much colder. I was completely soaked, and Maddy was beginning to shiver. She slowly sat up, peeked outside, and then nuzzled back into the seat.

“We’re stopping on this hill?” she asked confusedly.

“Yes, honey, we’re stopping on this hill,” I said, as if it were perfectly normal.

I pulled her into my lap and wrapped her inside a hooded sweater from the back seat.

I couldn't form a logical thought beyond my frozen limbs. I waited for the heater to do its magic, and as our bodies slowly warmed, the rhythmic sounds outside tempted me to sleep.

My current dilemma began to play every which way through my mind, leaving me without a clue as to what to do next. I hoped that no one was around to hear the doorbell, and that the light inside was only a security measure. I was sure nobody lived in these places, but had seen who rested there - once when my grandma died and once for a friend of my father. The images of both made me shudder. I figured after I warmed up enough, I would do what I could to try and remove the rock again and replace the front tire.

I watched as raindrops gathered in agreement before making their voyage down the windshield. The shock from the day and warmth from the heater were slowly quieting my mind. Maddy was still, our calmed breaths were falling into unison, and I began to slip, without fight, into a serene sleep.

A loud knock on the window sent me into an immediate panic. My heart rate doubled and the adrenaline was back, pulsing through my veins. I could see a shadow outside of the door as it knocked again. I desperately reached for the lock button and hit it three times before hearing the click. I quickly set Maddy back into the passenger seat and scrambled through the glove compartment to find any sort of weapon to protect us.

A muffled voice interrupted my panic.

"Are you okay in there?" it asked.

I stopped and looked through the window, taking short, shallow breaths. A face was beginning to form through the fogged glass. A tall and slender man stood staring at me inquisitively. He looked sleek under his protective umbrella, wearing a black, stylish suit. He was quite pretty to look at with every piece of his hair fixed perfectly, and dark-rimmed glasses that gave his narrow eyes a sturdy frame. His complexion was

pale with lips thin and red. His nose was pointed and accented his chiseled face.

We were locked in a contemplative stare for what seemed an eternity - me with a pen in hand, held to the right of my head as a threat, and the man, firm in his position under the umbrella.

“Do you need to come in and use the phone?” The accented voice struggled through the window and the rain.

I worked through my choices and settled on the fact that I really didn't have an alternative. I dropped the pen, suddenly feeling embarrassed by the thought of defending myself with a Bic. I scooped Maddy up and opened the door, starting in with rapid apology.

“I'll call a tow truck right away. I'm so sorry for this mess. I don't really know what happened,” I explained breathlessly.

The man quickly placed the umbrella over the two of us, not saying another word, and began to help us up and out of the ivy.

The silence on our way back up the hill was painfully awkward. We were across the parking lot and back under the awning before he reached into his pocket, pulling out a set of keys. I struggled to find any words that might provide just a touch of relief. I could only come up with two.

“I'm sorry,” I tried again.

He said nothing, but counted through his keys, quickly finding the right one.

“I'll get this taken care of and we'll be out of your hair before you know it.”

The man simply glanced at me with an unsettling expression, and unlocked the door. I was longing for a large hole to climb into, and briefly considered abandoning all of my self-respect and calling my mother to beg, but the thought of another demeaning conversation with my father and the certain disaster to follow, sparked an anger inside that suddenly gave me the willingness to walk through the opening door.

“Come in,” he offered with what sounded like attempted compassion to cover his aggravation. Without the window between us I could make out what sounded to me like a British accent.

He opened the door and walked us into an office directly off of a long, carpeted hallway. I was struggling to wrap my mind around the odd situation in which we now stood. I had no idea of what to do next. Each step forward brought me closer to that definitive reality.

Once inside the office, I gently placed Maddy into one of two armchairs next to the desk. They reminded me of furniture my grandmother used to have. They were upholstered with cherry red leather and lined with gold metal studs along the seams.

I was a little surprised but relieved that Maddy was still asleep. She was curled up peacefully, still clinging to her hippo.

The man interrupted my digression.

“The telephone is right over there.” He stood in the doorway and watched me with curiosity.

I looked around and thought of whom I might call. I already knew the answer to that, but what would I tell *him*? I figured I could start with a tow truck.

“Um, do you have a phone book, or...” I nervously played with my fingers, wishing he would say something to make this humiliating experience a little less so.

He walked to the desk and began to finger through a rolodex. His long fingers flipped through each card gracefully. He looked up at me and noticing my absolute discomfort, gave me a somewhat soothing smile as he dialed a number and waited. He tried to hide the smirk forming on his face while he watched my every movement. I could only imagine what I looked like. He must have thought I was either totally pathetic or totally crazy. I felt like both. Someone picked up on the other end of the phone.

“Hello, Jim? It’s Merman. I’m going to need your help. There’s a car in the ivy...Yes, *in* the ivy...No, *ON* the hill.” He paused and listened before continuing. “Can you do it tonight?” He paused again. “Jim, we need it out tonight, there’s a service at 10 am...,” his brows furrowed. “Okay then, first thing in the morning...if it’s still here.”

Merman hung up the phone and turned around in frustration, looking through the window at the anomaly on the hill. I began twiddling my fingers again.

“I’m so sorry. I’m sure there’s someone else we can call,” I suggested. I nervously fidgeted, waiting for a response. He was absolutely still as he stared out the window.

“You’ve managed to get yourself into a part of town where Jim is our *only* resource in these sorts of situations, especially at this hour.” He seemed to have softened a bit and chuckled slightly when he looked back at the car.

I responded with a nervous laugh, not knowing what else to do. He looked at me, then at Maddy and then back at me. He laughed again, shaking his head.

“Can I get you a towel or a blanket, or perhaps some tea?” he offered, his voice now gentle.

His suddenly hospitable tone was comforting, but then frightening as I remembered where we were. A blanket? Tea?

“You have blankets and tea in these places?” I tried not to sound terrified or incredulous.

He gave another chuckle and approached me with an outstretched hand, “My name is Merman, Merman Patterson.”

“Um, hello Merman, I’m Casey...Wheeler.” I reached out hesitantly to shake and then immediately returned my arms to the tight fold I had them in around my chest.

“Well listen, Casey - the two of you are clearly cold and wet, so why don’t I grab some towels and tea while you make whatever calls you need to. Jim will have your car out first thing in the morning.” He ducked out of the room, leaving me with some decisions to make.

“Yes I’ll call...whoever I need to,” I called after him.

I thought about whom that might be, knowing very well there wasn’t a soul.

I looked over at Maddy, who was still sound asleep, curled up in the chair. On the desk was a short clear glass with a bit of residue left over, and an ashtray that hadn’t been cleaned in quite a while. There was

an overwhelming dingy, cigarette smell that didn't quite fit Merman. He didn't seem the type to smoke, but then again I didn't feel the type who would be sitting in a mortuary drinking tea. I laughed at the absurdity of it, trying not to cry.

I looked around the room, hoping that a brilliant idea might hit me. Leaflets were stacked on the edge of the desk and had a picture of an old, smiling couple holding each other on the front. I picked one up and began skimming through it. *Pre-needs and plans for the future*. I wished that I had made some plans for the future. I had let Jerry take care of all the financial concerns and saved nothing for myself or for emergencies like this. My father had done the same my whole life, never allowing me financial freedom or understanding. Both men seemed determined to keep me as dependent as possible.

I walked to the windows, which were lined with mustard-yellow curtains at least thirty years old and housed dust the same age. I watched the rain and longed to go somewhere far away from my parents, from Jerry, and from my complete dependence. I wanted to start over and make a life for myself and Maddy, on my own, without the help of controlling, deluding men.

I took a deep breath to calm myself as the abnormal pounding of my heart started again.

“Get a hold of anyone?” Merman inquired. He had two towels, perfectly draped over his arms, carried a cup of tea, and had changed into a black smoking jacket, a matching pair of pants, and a cushy pair of slippers.

Despite the odd change, I found myself wanting to be in his warm and comfortable outfit. I squeezed my eyes closed to clear my mind of these thoughts that seemed so wrong to be having. I was quite confused by his new appearance and stared, uncontrollably. Where did he change? Why did he have clothes here? He paused and looked at the phone and then back at me.

“Casey?”

“Oh... well, no, not yet. Let me try someone else,” I said, stalling. I walked to the desk and anxiously picked up the phone, placing a finger on the buttons, not pressing one.

“I’ll just set this here and you help yourself.”

Merman placed the tea on the desk next to me. He handed me a towel and watched me intently.

“Thank you so much, this is really kind of you. I’ll be just another minute.” I was completely hopeless at this point and struggled to keep my voice steady as it had a tendency to falter when my heart raced. I stared at the buttons as if they might give me the answer to all of my problems if I just waited long enough.

“Take your time. I’m here all night.” At this he laughed to himself. I didn’t get it. I didn’t want to get it.

Noticing that I hadn’t taken my eyes off the buttons, or pushed any of them, he interrupted.

“Maybe you should sit and collect your thoughts for a minute. I’m sure it’ll come to you.”

I looked up at him in a pause I couldn’t shake. I wanted to say something, but I struggled to put the truth of the matter into words. As the reality of my situation became painfully sharp and clear, I dropped the receiver and fell into the chair next to me, sobbing. Crying never helped matters. I couldn’t catch my breath.

“There’s...no one...to call. I have no...one to call. We have...nowhere...left...to go.” I fought to get the words out between sobs and gasps for breath.

I felt helpless and hopeless and utterly alone in the world. If not for Maddy, I’d wish for that rare, fraction of a percent likelihood of death that comes with my heart condition.

Merman, sounding shocked and concerned by my outburst of tears, and probably blue lips by this point, picked up the dangling receiver and placed it back on the phone.

“What do you mean? Surely you have a relative or a friend. Someone?”

His words burned through me and made the emptiness so much more sure and palpable.

I spoke the truth clearer this time.

“No one. There’s...no one. No family...no friends...no place to go.”

With this stated indisputably, the pangs moved through me without mercy. Though I tried to keep myself composed, for the sake of everyone in the room, my sobbing became louder and caused me to struggle for breath. He seemed startled and tried the next logical step.

“Well, we’ll just get you a hotel room then. There’s a decent place up the road,” he said with a calming voice.

He put his hand on my shoulder and offered me the tea off of the desk. Mindlessly, I took the offered cup. I was going to have to walk him through the entire process that landed me here in the first place. I had already considered the hotel.

“I have no money. I left...with nothing...but some clothes, sixty dollars and Maddy.”

I set the tea back down and reached for a box of tissue that rested on the desk. I was growing faint from the lack of oxygen. I put my head between my knees and tried to slow my breathing and crying. I was falling apart and felt horrible doing it in front of this poor stranger.

“Sixty dollars won’t even...get my car out of that mess.”

My eyes were beginning to swell from the tears, blurring the figures and the future before me. It felt like I had years of uncried tears waiting to come out. It was exhausting and yet a relief. In the middle of a sob, I yawned without control. I *was* exhausted. The day and the marathon my heart was running had worn me out.

Merman anxiously looked over at Maddy, who was beginning to shift around. I looked up to see him studying me, a hopeless mess in the antique chair of an old, haunted office. He nervously paced about, looking around the office and stopping now and then, shaking his head, having what seemed to be a silent argument with himself. He glanced back through the window, grunted a bit, and continued his pacing.

I felt horrible for dragging one more person into my mess. Having cried everything left to cry, I decided that Maddy and I would just sleep in the car until morning when Jim the tow truck driver could pull us out. I figured I had enough gas to be able to keep the heat going intermittently throughout the night.

I was about to tell him my final decision, when his eyes rested back on me with a look that told me he too had come to an arduous conclusion.

He hesitantly approached me and half mumbled, “I suppose if...if there’s absolutely nowhere...I suppose you two could stay here tonight.”

My residual sniffling and panting ceased immediately. I looked at him in disbelief...and horror.

“Here? What do you mean? Where? I can’t imagine...but this is a...?” I stuttered, trying to process what he possibly meant.

The smirk returned to his face as he watched me process. Did he mean here, in the office, in these chairs? I couldn’t imagine anything else. I didn’t want to imagine what else he could mean. The car suddenly seemed like a great idea.

“There’s actually an apartment here that I live in. I have a sofa bed that the two of you could sleep on,” he said coolly.

His voice had gained a conviction and even a hint of excitement that made me feel like he was really serious about his offer, and like he hadn’t had live guests in a long time.

He walked to the window and looked outside. I was frozen on the chair, completely speechless. My mouth stammered to find a response.

“Come on,” he argued “where else are you going to go? You can rest up tonight and plan your strategy tomorrow.” He folded his arms and waited for a response. I panicked.

“I’ll just change that flat and we’ll go,” I said resolutely.

I shot up and started to reach for my sweater that lay over Maddy, but he stopped me, gently taking my wrist.

“You might change that tire, but that boulder you’ve managed to plow over isn’t going to move.”

He let go of my wrist and leaned back onto the desk. His lip curved up into the smirk again as he seemed to wait for reality to hit me.

I walked to the window looking out at my fate. I looked back at Maddy and thought that it didn’t seem like such an awful idea considering my only other option would be trying to sleep at a cold incline in the ivy.

He interrupted again with resolve and a bit of humor in his grinning voice.

“What kind of a boring life would this be if you didn’t plow over boulders in the dark, pouring rain and land yourself in a funeral home once in a while?”

He seemed to find this very amusing. I’m sure the dead white look on my face told him exactly how comfortable I felt in a mortuary. How did anyone get used to this?

I looked at Maddy in the chair again and knew that I’d have to make the most of what we had in this very strange moment in time. I turned to assure him I had some kind of plan.

“We’ll be out of here first thing in the...”

Before I could finish he had taken my hand away from its reach toward Maddy.

“Come with me. We’ll find you both something warm and dry to wear.”

Something to wear? It seemed I had entered a parallel universe once I stepped over the threshold of this place? He let out a low chuckle in response to my gaping mouth.

“One more thing.” He stopped and faced me directly. “You have to swear to me that you won’t spread the word that we’re offering hotel services or people are bound to come in flocks, and the local hotels will not be pleased with the competition.”

I didn’t know how to respond. He must have been kidding, but he continued to look me straight in the eye, as if waiting for me to draw blood and shake on it.

“Well, of course I wouldn’t...” I began.

“Relax, Casey, I was kidding,” he interrupted, regaining his more serious tone, “I think the rumor’s already out, because people are dying to get in here.” He was totally messing with me now.

I laughed nervously in response and decided that I’d need to loosen up a bit and try to see levity in the situation if I were going to sleep at all.

“We take what we can get around here as far a humor,” he admitted apologetically.

At that I laughed out loud as he put his finger to his mouth, nodding toward Maddy.

We went down a long hallway with old, red carpeting. Along the wall was a small, antique table with more of the same pamphlets and a set of business cards resting nicely in its holder. A large, Victorian mirror faced us from the end of the hallway, through which I watched myself walk in my strange surroundings. I looked much worse than I had imagined. My normally wavy, brown hair was now much darker, soaked through with rain, and clung unattractively to my head. My usually clear, blue eyes were now red and puffy from crying, and the bleeding mascara reached down toward my red swollen cheek. Though I measured five feet, seven inches, the slight cower I stood in with my arms folded across my chest, made me look small and fragile, especially standing next to Merman, who stood well over six feet tall. I tried to stand up straight, to exude a little confidence. I managed to look a little taller, still fragile. I attempted to comb through my hair with my fingers and wipe the mascara from under my eyes. At second glance, it hadn’t done any good, and it didn’t much matter. I had more serious issues to worry about, such as my unfamiliar and eerie surroundings.

The lighting was dim, and there was an air of finality all about. There was absolute silence - even the rain had been muted. The smell was an odd combination of flowers and a chemical I couldn’t place.

We stopped in front of a door just before the bathrooms. Merman pulled out the same set of keys from his pocket and unlocked it. Inside was a large armoire along with a vacuum, other cleaning

accessories, stacks of stationary, and toilet paper. He opened the face of the cabinet, revealing drawers filled with neatly folded clothes of different styles and sizes.

“Now these are all clean. Just take your pick.” He nudged me forward.

“What is this stuff?” I began holding things up one by one, not sure why they were there. They looked nice enough, but certainly not new.

“Well, let’s just say nobody’s coming back for them.” He chuckled a bit under his breath and stared straight ahead at the collection.

I dropped the clothes and gasped, throwing my hand to my mouth to avoid screaming.

“You mean these are dead people clothes?” I choked out through my muffled mouth.

“They’re clean, I assure you. I washed them myself. Just try to forget that they’re *dead people clothes*,” he said, rolling his eyes and making quotes with his fingers, “and pick something out. Think of them as hand-me-downs.”

I could tell that he was enjoying my response to the whole idea. He tried to hold back a smile while I collected myself by closing my eyes and taking deep breaths in and out.

“You’re soaking wet, Casey. Of course, it is your choice. But as for the little one...Maddy, is it? I’m sure you don’t want her wet and cold all night.” He was right. Her temperature was back down from the slight fever she had earlier that day, but wet, cold clothes would most certainly worsen her condition. That fact still didn’t entirely ease my discomfort.

“Why do you keep these? I don’t understand why you would want to keep these,” I said in utter disgust and a bit of curiosity.

“Some people collect bugs, cards, magazines, soda can tops – I collect small pieces of people’s lives left behind. It reminds me that they are people – that I’m doing something good in a place where it’s easy to forget what’s good,” he explained. He seemed to know what I was thinking and shook his head, sad that he had to justify it.

“They are left behind, I don’t steal them.”

I cautiously fingered through the clothes, smelling a few of the items before choosing and closing the drawers. They did smell clean. Against my better judgment, I picked out a long, cream colored blouse, the color stained with age. It looked like it would serve fairly as a nightgown. There was also a medium sized long-sleeved shirt that I grabbed for Maddy. I was grateful that there weren’t any her size.

There were boxes of jewelry, rows of shoes, and nicely hung suits and gowns. I struggled to separate the clothing from the dead bodies they once belonged to. After looking around and getting my fill of the macabre closet, he locked it up and we headed back.

With every other step back to the office, I cringed at the thought of wearing the clothes I held. The steps in between reminded me that my options were slim, and we would make it through the night with a story to tell at the end of it. I was sure that all of this violated some health code or another, but I was afraid to ask and wear out my welcome.

He smiled and guided me back through the hallway. I wasn’t sure if I should be afraid for our lives or grateful. I wasn’t sure if I should grab Maddy and run into the night or hug this strange man. I wondered momentarily if he was a serial killer, if he set up spikes in the road just for this purpose, or if he was just taking pity on a mess of a woman and her small child.

Despite my paranoid imagination, justified or not, I found myself walking very closely to him, which he seemed to find amusing.

We went back to the office where Maddy continued to sleep as I lifted her up into my arms. From there, we were back in the hallway and headed to what I imagined would be Merman’s apartment. He found another key on his key ring, and before turning the knob he shot me a quick smile. His front door was off of the same red-carpeted hallway but opened into what looked like another world.

Candles burned from every corner, and the scent that filled the air was refreshing and soothing. The walls were decorated with posters from what looked like every Broadway play ever performed and many old black and white films. The floors were cherry hardwood and

beautifully shined. A white leather couch stood apart from everything as if a centerpiece for the room. A coat rack held a red boa and an old Charlie Chaplin looking hat. The place was enchanting, and all of a sudden, his smoking jacket didn't seem strange anymore.

Chapter Four

The Great Escape

Merman made every effort to make us feel at home. While Maddy and I changed in his exquisite bathroom, he made up his sofa bed with sheets and all. I could hear them being shaken out through the door.

Maddy stood wobbly with her eyes closed and hands overhead as I changed her into her new pajamas. At least I wouldn't have too much explaining to do.

I could tell by the details he paid attention to in his decorating that Merman enjoyed his beautiful little home in this strange world. The paint in the bathroom looked like it had been done by hand with a sponge and a lot of care. The sink was an antique with an off-white porcelain bowl on a wooden, claw-footed frame. The floor mats matched the hand-towels, and the framed black and white picture of a romantic scene from an old movie was the perfect accent. I caught myself smiling in the

mirror. The smile faded as I got a close-up version of what I had seen of myself in the hallway.

When I shuffled Maddy out of the bathroom, Merman was placing a fancy bottle of water on a side table next to the bed. I felt awkward, the two of us standing there in over-sized shirts, and hoped that we would get to the sleep part soon. I couldn't remember a time when I had looked forward to curling up in bed more than I did at that moment. My eyes had grown heavy, and my body was far beyond ready to quit on me.

"I hope that you find this comfortable for the night. I'll leave you two alone and let you know as soon as I hear from Jim." He kept his eyes down as he spoke to me, trying to avoid any embarrassment on my part, I assumed. He started to make his exit.

I felt like I had to make clear my gratitude to this warm, weird, and generous stranger.

"Merman?" I called after him. He paused and looked back, careful not to look directly at me in my archaic nightgown.

"Thank you, Merman. I can't thank you enough."

He smiled - eyes still away from me.

"Goodnight, Casey."

He was gone and in seconds I was soon in an unfamiliar bed, curled around Maddy's little body and drifting to sleep with the ever-haunting memories of our day.

The morning had been long, with an overcast gloom. My routine had been the same as any other Friday, but a sticky, restless, and inexplicable feeling sat in the most center part of my gut. My checklist was marked off almost completely, except for Jerry's dry cleaning and the grocery store. I had already posted up the art lesson flyers I'd made the night before, checked the post office box for responses from galleries and schools, taken an hour and a half to add a few paragraphs to the untitled play I had been writing for six months and eat a sandwich from the deli.

I hated pickles, had specifically ordered *without* pickles, but was once again picking them out. I could still taste their trails in each bite.

I had long since grown tired of the weekly routine of busy work for Jerry, but complied to avoid the lectures. Rarely did his flyers receive a response, never did a school show interest, and the galleries would always respond in the same “not our style” rejection.

Friday was his “private tutor” day, and my stay-busy-with-an-endless-list day. He thoroughly explained many times over how it would be too distracting to have me or Maddy fluttering about the house while he inspired young artists, usually from the junior college in the city.

Drizzle was forming a spotted sheet over the windshield as I sat in the deli parking lot. There was definitely a storm on the horizon. I smiled at the dark, looming clouds. There was something about the rain that brought me to a hushed calm. I enjoyed the quiet gray of the sky, the smell of wet asphalt, and the momentary pause of the unsettled feeling that came every time Jerry tutored privately.

I put the leftover pickle-tainted lunchmeat back into the plastic bag along with the crumpled napkin filled with limp pickle slices, and removed the crumbs one by one off of my shirt. I sometimes felt pathetic eating my lunch in my car like a homeless person, but I truly did enjoy the peaceful solitude.

I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes for just a moment before continuing with the monotony of my day.

It was off to the dry-cleaners and then the aisle by aisle search for every single craving he had written down. On Fridays he was always very particular about ounces and brands, surely a distraction to keep me busy.

I started the car and began to pull out when a buzz from my purse broke my concentration. I rarely ever got calls. It made me nervous every time it rang. I opened it, seeing an unlisted number, and waited curiously to see who it would be.

“Hello?”

It was Maddy's school. She was sick, a fever around one hundred and she needed to come home. She had been curled up on a mat in the office for thirty minutes.

"Thank you. I'll be right there."

I hung up the phone and felt shamefully relieved, though slightly concerned. I looked forward to the end of each day when I could pick her up and be in sweet smiling, unconditionally loving company. It was the happy moment at the end of a day when Maddy would race from the rock under the tree with her friends and slam into my body with all of her force, squeezing tightly and giggling. Even though today wouldn't come with that same greeting, I looked forward to rainy days when I could pull her up on my lap and drift to sleep watching some old black and white TV. There was nothing quite like being bundled up in that soft, blue blanket listening to the rain outside.

Jerry's cravings would have to wait until tomorrow.

When I got to the office, Linda, the secretary, jumped up and waved through the window. I walked inside, greeted by the smell of freshly copied papers, and signed Maddy out on the designated school form. From a room in the back of the office came Linda, gently guiding a pale-faced and weary Maddy.

"Oh, sweetie, come here. I'm sorry you're not feeling well. Do you want to go home and watch movies with me?" I pulled her in closely and placed my hand on her forehead. Maddy nodded under the pressure of my hand.

"I checked it again before you got here and it's down around ninety-nine now. Tylenol works wonders," Linda stated proudly, standing with her hands folded on the counter.

Linda was very friendly and always paid extra special attention to Maddy. A few appearances by Jerry had given everyone reason to pity us.

"Thank you, Linda. I'm sure she'll be better by next week." I picked Maddy up, an increasingly difficult task at her growing weight, and covered her with my sweater.

“Bye, bye, Maddy. Feel better.” Linda made a small, child sized wave at Maddy who was looking over my shoulder and trying to hide a smile.

We made it to the car with only a thin layer of drizzle covering us. I buckled Maddy in and shut the door behind me. The quiet was soothing, only the sound of little rain all around. As I sat in the car, preparing to start the ignition, a gnawing turning in my stomach disrupted my serene moment. I figured it was the pickle trails and started the car.

I knew that once we got home I’d have to quietly make my way up the stairs, hoping that Maddy didn’t have to pee, and keep the television on low. I was home two-and-a-half hours too soon, and Jerry was serious about the quiet time during his private lessons. Sometimes I desperately wanted to collect all of our pots and pans and drop them right outside of the studio door, just to see what kind of art would come out of it. Sometimes I thought of throwing the pans into the studio, at his head. I never gathered the courage to do either.

As I approached the driveway, the turning in my stomach worsened and my heart began pounding like mad. Despite the cold air outside, I was beginning to break into a sweat.

I paused before pulling in. The sudden and growing anxiety made my heart pound faster, and another flash of heat come over me. This felt like more than just bad lunch meat. I was anxious about something I couldn’t put my finger on. I parked and looked back to find Maddy half asleep.

“Honey, we’re here,” I whispered while gently touching her arm. “Let’s go sweetie, we’ll be lying down before you know it.”

Through the nauseating butterflies, I struggled to reach back and unbuckle Maddy’s belt when I realized that I should probably make sure the coast was clear before bringing her in.

“Actually, honey, wait here for just a minute, I’m going to go inside and see where daddy is, okay?”

She nodded, though she was still only half awake.

I wanted to make sure he was still busy enough to sneak past so I didn't have to hear about my incomplete list just yet, or worse, hear about it in front of his student and Maddy.

"Okay, mommy," she said sleepily. She seemed fine with the idea and cuddled up with her hippo.

I managed to make it to the front door before I was stopped by another round of twists in my gut. I doubled over, trying to calm myself and catch my breath. I unlocked the door and walked inside.

There was music coming from inside the studio. He sometimes used music to inspire. A load of crap, *I* thought. I crept toward the studio door to make sure there was still inspiration going on, when I heard a noise, grossly familiar. It was a sort of moan, Jerry's moan, and then another, and a giggle, a girly giggle. The knot in my stomach was unbearable. My heart was racing as the reality hit me over and over with each disgusting sound.

I locked my hand around the knob, unsure of whether or not I wanted to see and know for sure, uncertain of what that would mean, or what I would do. Without my agreement, my hand turned the knob and threw the door wide open. I felt removed from my body, like my hand had a mind of its own. I tried to think of an explanation for such unexpected behavior when my reasoning came to an abrupt halt at the sight before me.

The young girl in the room shrieked, and Jerry turned in utter surprise, covered in paint. They were *both* covered in paint, naked on the floor. I was stunned and didn't know what to do next.

"Casey? Casey, wait. I know how this must look, but," he struggled to get up from the floor but was slipping in the paint as he tried to make his way. Green and yellow covered his feet, thighs, and butt. "Let me explain!" he pleaded.

I stopped looking at that point and turned to run, hoping that Maddy hadn't come in yet. I ran to the front door and saw Maddy in the back seat holding up her hippo, holding it in the same way I had held her at school. My heart ached, but not for Jerry, or even me. It ached for

Maddy and all of the questions she would have. I turned and ran to our bedroom, trying to find a bag in the closet. I was going to leave him.

“Casey! Casey, come here!” he commanded. I could hear his irritated voice, but it was at a safe distance. He was preoccupied with trying to console the naked and likely confused girl.

I grabbed at random clothes on hangers and reached in the drawers for anything that would fit in the duffle bag. I looked around in a panic, not able to form a logical thought. I was scrambling to think of what I would need to bring when I could hear his voice coming closer. I couldn’t let Maddy see this. I threw the bag down and ran out of the room. I’d have to come back later.

When I entered the hallway, I was stopped short. Jerry was standing there with a false look of innocence on his face, naked and covered in paint. I started down the hallway.

“Casey, you don’t understand. Casey! Stop and listen to me!” His voice turned from pleading to authoritative again.

I walked right past him and toward the door. He pursued me, trying to catch up, but slipped and fell on the hardwood floor behind me. I turned to see him lying there, so absurd. The girl’s face peeked out from the studio. She looked no older than twenty and terrified. I felt sorry for her.

I walked out the front door and hurried into the car when I heard him growl, “Casey!” one last time from behind me.

I could think of only one place to turn as the rain began to build intensity. The thought of calling them to ask for help was almost too much to bear, but they were my last and only hope.

I awakened to the sound of an organ playing and a cloudy, gray sky peeking through the curtains of an unfamiliar window. It took a few moments for me to pull together enough information to figure out where I was exactly. My heart rate accelerated as I put the pieces and nightmarish memories together one by one.

The sickness in my stomach returned as I tried to shake them free from my mind. I couldn't decide which was worse – having spent the night in a stranger's apartment off of a mortuary or having nowhere to go after leaving my cheating pig of a husband and turning down an offer to rid of my daughter as if she didn't exist. As for the former, I tried to string together a perspective of gratitude. Though the events of the day had taken a morbid twist, fate had placed me in the hands of a generous, albeit odd, Merman. He had set us up nicely on what had turned out to be a very cozy sofa bed where, aside from the painful reminders in my dreams, I hadn't slept better in years.

I felt a shift next to me. Maddy opened her eyes and looked around in confusion. The very moment I had been dreading was finally here.

“Where are we, mommy?”

I hadn't had a chance to think of how I would explain this to her, but she was five and though she was growing sharper by the day, I could still get away with fudging the truth a little.

“We uh, rented a hotel room, honey,” I said assuredly, and got out of bed quickly, trying to avoid any further conversation on the topic. She wasn't going to let it go that easily.

“But there's a kitchen...and someone left a bunch of their stuff in here.”

“It's a different kind of hotel, but we're leaving soon so get dressed okay?”

She seemed satisfied enough with that explanation.

“Can I wear this shirt? It's pretty. Did you get it for me?”

Maddy stood up on the bed and posed for me.

“No, no. That stays here. We borrowed that, too,” I said, now frantically gathering our stuff. I wanted to make a quick and painless exit.

The organ was playing dreadfully depressing music, and Merman was nowhere to be seen. I hoped to quietly sneak out and maybe drop a thank you note later.

I got Maddy dressed and made up the couch. I looked around to make sure I wasn't leaving anything behind, grabbed Maddy's hand, and headed for the door. I reached for the knob and closed my eyes, dreading what might meet me on the other side. Slowly opening the door, I peeked out.

Nobody was in the hallway. There were voices far off, but quickly drawing near. I made a break for it. Holding Maddy tightly by the hand, I shuffled down the hallway toward the door, through which I had entered with such hesitation the night before.

The voices were getting louder the closer I drew to our escape. I could make out a conversation that was beginning to sound more like an argument. I couldn't help but stop and listen. I had an awful feeling that it was likely about us.

"What were you thinking, Merman? There's a goddamned car in the ivy, and that tow truck is blocking traffic. This service starts in thirty minutes. What are you going to do?" The man's voice was deep and extremely angry.

Thirty minutes? How long had we slept? Why didn't he wake us? Of all the terrible possibilities the morning could bring, this felt like the worst. I couldn't remember the last time I had slept until nine-thirty, and of course, the first time I did was the worst time I could have.

Merman sounded appeasing and calm, as if he knew how to diffuse this angry man.

"The car will be taken care of before the service begins, I assure you."

I could hear feet pacing back and forth on a harder surface behind a sliding door. Part of me wanted to run, quickly give the tow truck man all the money I had, and escape without having to face Merman and whoever that booming voice behind the door was. The other part of me wanted to stay and listen to Merman's confident voice. In the middle of my deliberation, he spoke again.

"They had nowhere to go. I couldn't just leave them out in the rain!" The pacing came to an abrupt halt.

“We are not a shelter, Merman. We’re barely a business! Where are they? Get them out of here before I’m collecting complaints instead of payment!” he snapped.

Without warning, the large, middle-aged man opened the sliding door and walked right into me. I stumbled back and clutched Maddy close to me. He glared at me and snorted before storming off toward the office. He left a strong wake of stale smoke behind him.

I looked up at Merman. He stood on the other side of the sliding door in another hallway, this one more clinical with a heavy chemical odor and beige linoleum flooring. He quickly closed the sliding door, as if it hid something unspeakable.

He was so becoming in his black suit, and I felt a slight and unfamiliar kind of attraction to him. He had a warm smile spread across his face that made me feel at home. What an odd feeling. Nobody had taken me in like he had, not without an expectation of something in return. Would there be an expectation? Stopping my selfish ruminations, I started in with apologies again.

“I’m so sorry, Merman. We’re leaving right now. Thank you so much for...” Merman interrupted me, pulling me closer to the doorway he stood in.

“Don’t worry, that’s just my Uncle Stanley,” he whispered cautiously. “He’s a grouch until about five o’clock when he’s had enough whiskey to color the whole world happy.”

He pointed out the front door, leading us in the right direction.

“Jim is here, and it sounds like he’s almost got things under control.”

A loud and persistent beeping sound was out of sync with the organ.

“So, where do you plan on going from here? Do you have a plan?” he asked with sincerity.

Merman looked down at Maddy, who was staring intently at him. He gave her a quick wink and looked back at me.

I hadn't really thought about what to do next. I'd have to go back home to get our things and demand money from Jerry. That was a start.

"I don't know what your situation is, but here's my card. You can call me at this number at any time." He handed me a business card and looked again at Maddy who was still staring at him.

"Mommy, what kind of hotel is this?" A smirk appeared on Merman's face as he looked back at me, tilting his head to the side, curious to hear my answer. I laughed nervously and avoided the question with a goodbye.

"Thank you for everything, Merman. We'll be fine. Take care. Come on, Maddy."

I turned toward the door, but before I made it outside, Merman had stuck his hand out to Maddy.

"It's a pleasure meeting you, Madame."

He took her hand and bowed. Maddy giggled and curtsied, waving goodbye as I led her outside toward the hill of ivy. There was something very comfortable and natural about the interaction. Maybe I was in shock. Maybe I was delirious with hunger. Maybe it was the sweetest and most normal thing I had ever seen.

When we reached the bottom of the hill, our car was out of the ivy and on the street with what looked like two new tires intact. My heart sank when I realized that now I would have to come up with money for the tires. We would never get out of here. I tried to imagine the cost as I hesitantly approached Jim.

"You must be Casey." Jim reached out his grease stained hand to shake mine and then laughed, pulling it back. "I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget how filthy I am. Well, your car is ready to go." He handed me the keys and turned to walk toward his truck.

"If you could just give me the bill, I'll pay you what I can now and come by with the rest later. I..." I felt horribly uncomfortable with the situation "I only have sixty dollars with me right now."

He stopped and turned around, waving me off dismissively.

"It's no problem. Merman insisted on using their auto club card for the tow, and I happened to have a couple of extra tires just lying around. Besides, the chapel here brings me a lot of business, what with their vans and hearses and such. It was no trouble at all, miss. You take care now and be careful out there." He grinned and shook his head. "I haven't seen something like this in quite a while." He nodded toward the scar I'd left in the ivy.

I didn't know what to say or do. I wasn't used to unconditional help like that. I was instantly skeptical, but thoroughly relieved. I looked back up at the mortuary just as confused as ever. How could I repay this?

It looked like a crowd was beginning to gather in the parking lot. Mourners. I shook off the eerie feeling that traveled down my back.

"Thank you," I called after Jim as he got into his truck. He waved back at me and pulled away.

I put Maddy into the car, knowing that I had bigger problems to face without the hope of much of anything unconditional from Jerry.