

***KIRSTEN G. SCHUDER***

# **INSIDE DWELLER** **GENESIS**

**INSIDE DWELLER SERIES**  
**BOOK ONE**



Black Rose Writing | Texas

This book contains scenes and subjects with sexual assault, suicide, violence, and death.  
Reader discretion is advised.

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I would like to thank, first and always/ my family.

To my husband, best friend, soulmate, and the bravest and best person I have ever met.

To my children, also my best friends, and two of the loveliest people I have ever known.

I could not have achieved what I have without you.

You have helped me become the best version of myself.

You have advised me and encouraged me.

I dedicate everything to you.

Also, I would like to thank the countless beta readers who have provided me with feedback. I can only hope that our exchanges were as meaningful for you as they were for me.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank the readers who picked up this book. I hope the adventure we go on together will be a memorable and fun one, as dark and twisted as it may be.

## ***LIST OF CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)***

**Miranda Sheppard:** A twenty-nine year old accountant; experiences difficulties of known and unknown origins.

**Alison Sheppard:** Miranda's sister, surrogate mother, and retired skydiver.

**Dr. Daniel Foreman:** Neurosurgeon.

**Dark Stranger:** A mysterious enigma.

**Janice:** Nurse.

**Alistair and Ester Foreman:** Daniel and Steven Foreman's father and mother.

**Steven Foreman:** Daniel Foreman's brother; Miranda's boyfriend.

**Dr. Gerald Fine: Psychiatrist:** Dr. Gallagher's business partner.

**Dr. Jack Gallagher:** Clinical psychologist.

**Harry:** Home security technician.

**Mike and Joe Cavanaugh:** Paranormal researchers.

**Bill and Rita:** Emergency medical technicians.

**Tim:** Mike and Joe's cousin; paranormal computer guru and technician.

**Tara:** Infrared camera technician.

**Dr. Abraham Tetenbaum:** Head scientist of world's most powerful MRI; Dr. Gallagher's friend.

**Mrs. Berkshire:** Family friend to the Sheppards: Local business woman.

**Heather:** Drs. Gallagher and Fine's secretary.

**Frank:** Restaurant owner.

**Dr. Grace Kelly:** Dr. Gallagher's mentor.

**Dr. Favian Widener:** Teacher and bibliophile; Dr. Grace Kelly's friend.

**Mrs. Jack Gallagher:** Jack Gallagher's wife.

**Dr. Svoboda:** Psychiatrist.

**Dr. John O'Connor:** Psychologist; author of *Id Speak*.

**Dark Stranger's Friends**

***ALL FICTION IS REAL IN THE LAND OF POSSIBILITIES.***

“The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing  
the world that he doesn’t exist.”

—*The Usual Suspects*, 1989

**INSIDE DWELLER**  
*GENESIS*



# ***1***

## ***MIRANDA***

Miranda Sheppard had crossed a line, unable to turn back time to extract her from the set of circumstances placing her at the intersection of Wilson Street and Marten's Place in Davenport. A scream evolved from a deep, primal urge she didn't know existed until the moment her life was in peril. Miranda's seventeen-year war with God stopped dead. Using her last conscious seconds, she begged a faceless, callous entity for her life with all she could muster, an enervated, "Please..."

Miranda braced herself for the ruinous impact. A million pins stung Miranda's arms and hands as she clutched the steering wheel and slammed both feet on the brakes. The nose of Miranda's 2007 custom-painted, candy-apple-red Corvette convertible collided with the flank of the crimson Shop-n-Bag box truck and crumpled inward. The cancer scare, the constant state of exhaustion from the last six months, the horrible dreams and images lurking every time she closed her eyes, and the last image, her sister, flashed across her mind and then liquesced as she plummeted into darkness.

*Trapped. A pair of eyes glimmered from a vast expanse of blackness. Loud buzzing filled her ears, the noise tormenting her for the last six months. Darkness enveloped her entire being. Dark vines exploded from Miranda's core and smothered her from the inside out, choking her. They smelled like sewage, burned matches, and rotting flesh.*

*The entire scene dissolved and morphed into a darkened room. With Miranda's wrists bound to the arms of a chair and her ankles to the legs, she could not escape. She could not look away, her head strapped to the high-backed chair. She could not blink, forceps forcing her eyes to remain open. She could not scream, a ball gag stifling her cries. A movie screen played bloody images, skinned alive, dismembered, disemboweled, charred bodies in the wake of atomic bombs, children crying next to their parents' motionless corpses, blight, sores weeping pus and blood. Storms, earthquakes, walls of water ravaged the landscape until our beautiful, blue globe acquiesced...*

*For months, these images had shocked her awake, making sleep impossible, but in waking, she had been able to avoid the images. Forced to witness, Miranda screamed through her ball gag before succumbing to the darkness.*

. . .

The mixture of misery and antiseptic cleanser and the sight of the I.C.U. at Morningside Hospital in Davenport made Alison's eyes sting with tears. The image of Miranda, head bandaged, the left upper side of Miranda's gaunt face engorged with different colors, and breathing with the help of a respirator, shocked Alison back into the worst day of her life. The blood rushed to her head. Alison doubled over at the prospect of having to bury her last living family member, her sister.

"Whoa, easy." A pair of hands caught her under her arms.

"Thanks." Alison gulped in air to keep herself from crying. Her eyes met Dr. Foreman's. The last seventeen years had been kind to him. Bits of white intermingling with his black hair at the sides of

his head and little crow's feet around his brown eyes were the only detectable differences. If Dr. Foreman's face had not become synonymous with the darkest days of her life, Alison would have considered dating him, preferring men with a swarthy complexion since her teenage years.

"Here, Ms. Sheppard." Dr. Foreman steered Alison to an empty examination room and sat her down on a stool with wheels.

"You remember me."

"It's difficult to forget the extraordinary. I remember the strength you had for Miranda."

*Yeah, sure. If I were that strong, I would have dragged Miranda to the doctor myself.* No force of nature, though, was as resilient as Miranda's will. Alison's lunch with Miranda earlier that day haunted her. Miranda's copper-kissed, red-brown hair, usually shiny and straight, looked like a pile of orange straw, her face gaunt, and her green eyes dull, almost lifeless. She didn't eat her lunch, and she kept swatting at imaginary insects swarming her ears. Alison could see why Miranda had been avoiding her. The entire day disrupted her sense of reality. On her way home, she considered staging an intervention to save Miranda's life. *Could she really be losing her sanity? Was it just the lack of sleep?* Tears blurred her vision. "I don't know if I have any strength left if I... if I..."

The loudspeaker of the hospital's public announcement system squawked about someone bringing something somewhere.

In anticipation of the end of Alison's fragmented sentence, Dr. Foreman offered, "Miranda sustained an injury to her head, but she is very lucky. We did an MRI and a CT, and we didn't find any damage. She incurred severe external injuries. Her brain is intact, thankfully, and the skull was not fractured. She is not in a coma, but she has a concussion."

"Oh, thank God." *Shoot.* Alison hated it when her eyes and nose leaked.

Dr. Foreman reached over to the end table, took a tissue, and handed it to Alison.

“It’s not just like Mom, when she...” Alison gulped, dabbed her eyes, and pinched her nose with the tissue. “Why isn’t Miranda awake, then? And why is she on a ventilator?”

“With head injuries and a loss of consciousness, it’s a precaution we use to guarantee her brain receives oxygen, which aids the recovery process. The next forty-eight hours are crucial. We will be monitoring her to ensure her brain doesn’t swell. If that does happen, we will insert a catheter to normalize the pressure. Now, we manage her injuries and wait.”

“She is going to wake up, right, Dr. Foreman?” Alison drew in a shaky breath.

“She’s critical, but we’re optimistic at the moment. It could be worse.” After a pause, Dr. Foreman asked, “Was Miranda having any medical issues? She shows signs of malnutrition.”

Alison shrugged. After all, she didn’t have any proof that Miranda was mentally unstable. After her extreme concern, she convinced herself that it had to be the lack of sleep, explaining her lack of intervention she would live to regret. “Miranda couldn’t sleep or eat for the last six months. She always has some small issues around the anniversary of our parent’s death, but this year was different. It’s almost like something vexed her.” *Now this. I knew something was really wrong. It’s my fault. I should have stopped her.* Alison’s sobbing became involuntary. She stood up and hugged Dr. Foreman.

For the first time in Dr. Foreman’s history at Morningside Hospital, which included becoming the youngest doctor to run the Neurosurgery Department, he hugged the family member of a patient until Alison’s sobs subsided, allowing himself to feel attraction without acting upon it. “Your sister is a fighter. She’ll come through.”

Alison laughed, stepped back, and wiped her eyes. “Yeah, she’s too stubborn to die.”

Dr. Foreman nodded. “I will make my rounds and be back in a little while to check on her. Okay?”

Alison nodded. Dr. Foreman opened the door for her. She made her way to the nurse's station surrounded by a circle of I.C.U. beds. Nine of the beds remained empty, and patients on respirators and heart rate monitors occupied three others. Alison walked on the outside of the circle and took her place next to Miranda's bedside.

Alison made eye contact with a woman approximately in her seventies sitting at the bedside of a gentleman, most likely the woman's husband. Through their generational differences, Alison understood the woman's look of hope intermingled with desperation. No one sees it until the moment a loved one lies in a hospital bed, struggling for just one more breath. If she had seen this woman in passing, she wouldn't have felt any connection with her at all.

Alison wouldn't have taken any moment for granted had she known that at the young age of eighteen, she would have to pull the plug on her mother's respirator and the intubation tube from her esophagus while her father lay on the silver, cold table in the morgue.

## 2

# AWAKE

An encasement of pain gripped Miranda's head. Through her one open eye, she could make out blurred, misshapen colors and light. *What the hell is this thing in my mouth?* She couldn't scream for help. *What the hell is on my hand?* She pulled on the lump and winced, withdrawing something sharp from her skin. She heard the footsteps of the aliens. They blocked her vision with complete blackness and despair. Their black tendrils seized her wrists.

. . .

Alison had only left for a moment to use the bathroom. When she spotted Miranda, she had already pulled out her I. V. The blood from the back of Miranda's hand spotted the crisp white hospital sheets, her olive-green hospital gown, and smeared her cheeks and forehead. Miranda felt the respirator tube in her mouth, and her arms flailed. Her heart rate monitor beeped in response to her distress. Alison grabbed the nurse walking back to the nurse's

station in the middle of the circle of beds. “Hey, over there.” The nurse ran to the phone and called for help. A doctor ran to Miranda’s bedside.

. . .

A male voice trickled into Miranda’s ears: “Stop pulling on the respirator tube...” She yielded, too weak to struggle against the tentacles holding her wrists in place. They reminded her of tar.

. . .

The next time Miranda opened her eyes, she lay in a hospital room, the curtains drawn on the windows. Alison’s blond hair hung in front of her eyes as she dozed in the chair next to her bed. *I wonder how long she’s been sitting there...*

. . .

Miranda awoke to the sunrise, the brown-beige curtains unable to conceal its brilliance, outlining the figure of a man with his face darkened, like a photograph lit from the back. She could only see his dark hair, eyes blacker than a cloudy night with no moon, and his seven-foot stature, taller than any person she had ever seen. A pungent smell invaded her nostrils, and she coughed. *I wonder who he is.*

. . .

Miranda awoke again to the stream of sunlight peeking through the curtains, insufficient in their ability to block the warm, yellow rays invading the dim light of the room.

“Heeeey. How are you feeling?” Alison stood up from the chair, sat on the bed, and took Miranda’s hands in hers, mindful not to

unrest the IV Miranda pulled out ten days earlier. “You scared the crap out of me. You can’t imagine how happy I am to see those green eyes of yours.”

“What...” Miranda whispered, but coughed because of the dryness in her throat. Her tongue was slow and thick, like it was getting in its own way. “Water?”

“I’ll ask the nurse if it’s okay.” Alison pressed the buzzer. “You were in an accident.”

The question sat on Miranda’s face. Her Cherry Red, her Corvette, her baby.

“No, I’m sorry, hon. Your car didn’t make it.”

A car. It wasn’t just a car. After all, Alison had never owned a Corvette, so she wouldn’t understand. A Corvette is an expression of beauty, and when one has been decimated and could no longer participate in the world, its lack of presence must be mourned.

“Well! You’re awake. And how are you feeling, Ms. Sheppard?”

“Janice. I remember you,” Miranda croaked. Janice, an I.C.U. nurse, had cared for her mother before her death. Janice had gained at least seventy pounds. Her hair had taken on a dyed strawberry-blond hue, a change from the jet-black she wore seventeen years ago. Janice’s ample hips and legs swayed as she made her way to the end of the bed to check Miranda’s I. V. Miranda wouldn’t have recognized her if it weren’t for her unmistakable southern drawl. Even though she had transplanted from Alabama decades ago, her voice sounded like she carried her hometown with her. “Like I got sat on by an elephant.”

Janice and Alison laughed. “Yeah, a car accident can do that to a person.”

“And thirsty,” Miranda added.

“Is it okay for her to have a drink?” Alison asked.

Janice checked Miranda’s chart. “Yes, of course it is! Would you like some ice?”

Miranda tried to nod and smile, but winced at the pain in her head.

"All right, I'll go get it. Welcome back to the world, Ms. Sheppard."

"Thank you, Janice," Alison said.

Janice returned with the pitcher of water and poured Miranda a cup. "Here you go," Janice handed the cup to Alison. "I'll let Dr. Foreman know you're awake. He'll come in to see you in a few hours. I'll return to check on you in a little while."

"Thanks again, Janice," Alison smiled. "Nice and cold. Sip it slowly." She held the plastic straw to Miranda's mouth while Miranda took in the cool liquid bit by bit.

Miranda leaned back. She reached up and touched the bandages on her forehead making her face feel heavy.

"Yeah, you're pretty banged up there." Alison placed the cup on the bedside table. "You are crazy lucky, though. No broken bones. You have a concussion."

"How long have I been out?"

"You've been in and out of it for ten days."

Miranda groaned. "I must not have a business left."

"Oh, don't worry. I asked Mrs. Berkshire to help you out. She went through your appointment book and called all of your clients for you, claiming to be your new secretary. I also called the accounting program at the local college and arranged for you to have an intern. You can start interviewing as soon as you get out of here."

Miranda paused. She didn't need to ask how Alison's week had been: hair disheveled, clothes wrinkled, and eyes puffy with dark circles. She looked just like Mom with that blond hair and her blue eyes. So pretty, as messy as she was, like one of those Hummel statues of the kids with perfect features and the little dirndls. "Wow, that's incredible. Thank you so much."

Alison nodded. "I'm happy you're back."

"How do you manage it?" asked Miranda.

"What?"

“After Mom and Dad died, I cried, I screamed, I sulked, carried on, I went Goth and stuck my ears full of holes and pins, and I didn’t listen to a word you said. And somehow, you always kept your cool, just like now. How do you do it?”

A trace of a smile traversed across Alison’s lips. “What you see doesn’t match what you don’t. But, I focus on what’s going right, and I get myself back on track. Right now, for instance, you’re alive and awake. You conquered half the battle. Maybe you were catching up on sleep.”

“What are you talking about?” Miranda yawned. “Owww,” Miranda moaned. She couldn’t even yawn without pain. So tired. The bed drew her head down onto her pillow.

Alison paused for a moment. Could her sister be putting her on even in this condition? She was just the type of person to do it if she could pull it off. “Don’t you remember, all those doctors you saw? You went for months with only a bit of sleep every night.”

“I don’t remember the crash.”

“Dr. Foreman told me that it is common.”

“I had trouble sleeping? I can tell you, I don’t think that will be a problem anymore.” Miranda closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Alison sat back down on the chair next to the bed. “So, what exactly do you remember?” she whispered.

# 3

## *RECOVERY*

“What about the fact that she doesn’t remember the last six months?” Alison had pulled Dr. Foreman outside Miranda’s hospital room while the nurse had her busy signing forms and listening to instructions for her release.

“Sometimes, memories come back a little at a time. It’s only a six-month period. Some people lose a majority of their childhood memories or can barely remember anything at all. It could have something to do with the sleep deprivation, which can also affect memory and not have much to do with the trauma. It’s best not to push her on it. Just be there to listen if the memories return.”

“But, isn’t it strange that she’s forgotten everything, including visiting all those doctors, the insomnia, the malnutrition?” Alison didn’t know why this unsettled her, but she couldn’t deny it, like something trying to scratch through a wall in her head or pick away at a scab.

Dr. Foreman waved his hand. “Well, we don’t know everything about how the mind works, but it’s not so strange when you think

about it. If the memory of the accident was traumatic for her, all the other memories might have been buried or forgotten only because of how close they were to the event.”

Alison wondered if he erred, and if he did, would he be as confident?

While Miranda’s lack of recall concerned Alison, relief flooded through her at the return of Miranda’s mouth.

“You should go to your bed, you know.” Alison opened the side door leading into the kitchen of Miranda’s house. “Dr. Foreman said...”

“I’m sick of staying in bed. Don’t you think I’ve already spent enough time in bed?” She hobbled through her little galley kitchen. “I want to lie on the couch for a little while so I can feel more like a normal person, not an invalid,” Miranda argued. “Besides, you can keep a better eye on me on the couch because you won’t have to run up and down the stairs to go to the bedroom.”

Alison sighed, although Miranda’s obstinacy promised signs of her recovery. The alternative was much worse. “Remember, Dr. Foreman said for you to take it easy. I’ve already called the physical therapist and set up your first appointment, and you have your appointment with Da... um, Dr. Foreman too.”

Even through her pain, Miranda caught the slip-up. “With who?” Miranda’s lips curled upward.

Alison could only shake her head and put their bags on the floor. “Here. Let’s get you over to the couch.” She took Miranda’s arm.

“Yes, and you can tell me all about Daaah.”

*She’s always been too smart for her own good.* When Miranda was three, their dad lost the tiniest screw while fixing his glasses, and after almost an hour of the family searching for it, Miranda found it in the shag carpet. Her parents had commented on her sharp mind and intellect even then. Alison learned that her sister’s uncanny eye for detail meant she noticed *everything*, as if she could see right through her. Now, not even a concussion and an exorbitant amount

of pain could distract her from observing Alison and Dr. Foreman's new first-name status.

Alison knew better than to try and bypass the subject. She hoped Miranda had forgotten after she established her in the living room with pillows, a blanket, and chicken noodle soup she had made at home, but Miranda never forgot anything. Miranda's crossed arms and expectant look worked better than her usual verbal pestering.

"Okay, okay. Dr. Foreman, Dan, took me to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee a couple of times while you were under. Of course, I couldn't even think of him that way, since getting you better was my total focus, but we spent a lot of time talking. I always had thought of him as attractive, but I never acted on it, because, you know." Alison paused and looked down at her hands. "Well, on the way out, he asked me if we could go out for coffee again."

"So, did you guys fuck yet?"

"Miranda!"

Alison's shock produced a smile on Miranda's lips.

Why was Miranda always so happy when she annoyed Alison? "Infant." Alison rolled her eyes and turned away to walk into the kitchen but stuck her middle finger in the air on her way.

Miranda laughed, wincing from the pain it caused in her head.

Alison turned back. "Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"Laugh when I stick my middle finger up at you?"

Miranda smiled. "'Cuz I know I got to you."

"Yeah, well..." Alison turned and stuck her middle finger up behind her as she walked to the kitchen to start the dishes. Miranda chuckled. "Hey, guess what?"

"Yeah, what?"

"*The Davenport* did a story on your accident."

"Really? Why?"

"Do you want to see?" Alison brought the newspaper over and placed it on the coffee table. "Here's your mail and your magazines. I figured I should tell you before you found out another way." Alison

walked back to the kitchen to clean the dishes. “I found out myself a day or two ago,” Alison called from the kitchen. “I went to the newsstand right outside the hospital, and I looked down and saw your picture. The reporter didn’t even contact your office, or me, or anything. I have no idea how they even found out.”

Miranda took the paper and saw the portrait she had of herself on her website. *Local Business Woman Survives Devastating Auto Collision*. “See, this is proof, me on the front page, why my friends and I almost died of boredom throughout high school. Nothing exciting happens in this town. Ever.”

Alison laughed. “As a rule, I would agree with you if you weren’t selling yourself short, Miranda. You underestimate your importance. You have accomplished so much, and you’re not even thirty.”

The heat rose to Miranda’s cheeks. She didn’t usually think of herself in terms of accomplishments. Sure, she provided accounting and tax services to most of the businesses in the community, and she had a turkey drive for Thanksgiving, a coat drive for the winter, and a toy drive for the kids every Christmas, but it simply constituted part of what she did with her time. She didn’t find anything extraordinary in it.

She tried to read beyond the first sentence of the article, but focusing her eyes hurt her head, although she did catch Mrs. Berkshire’s name as she scanned down the page. That would explain it. Mrs. Berkshire came off as a dowdy old woman, but the girls had learned over the years that she was a lot shrewder than she let on, as if she enjoyed other people’s underestimation of her abilities and intellect. “It’s like they’re talking about a stranger.” Miranda put the paper down on the coffee table, leaned back on the couch, put her feet up, and closed her eyes. She couldn’t even think, like someone beat her head from the inside with a hammer.

Alison finished washing up, dried her hands, and sat on the black leather easy chair next to the matching couch. “Tired from the trip home?”

“Yeah. I still ache from head to toe, but mostly from head. Oh, who was that really tall doctor at the hospital? You must have met nearly everyone. They all told me you practically lived there.”

“I didn’t meet a really tall doctor. The tallest one I saw was Dr. Foreman. Maybe the guy was part of the night shift.”

Miranda shook her head. “Can’t be. Strange. The sunlight poured into the room, but I couldn’t see him, sort of like a shadow hid his face. I figured you saw him. And I smelled something awful.”

“A smell like what?” Alison put out the feet of the recliner, sighed, and closed her eyes. Maybe she should get some new furniture like this chair. She could fall asleep in it.

“Like rotten eggs.”

“Huh.” *What could smell like that in a hospital?* “Maybe it was iodine or something.”

“No, it definitely had a rotten egg smell.”

Alison waved her hand as if she could make it disappear with magic. “It was probably a dream. You were pretty out of it. They had you on pain killers too.”

“I guess. It seemed pretty real to me, though.”

“Sometimes dreams will do that. Besides, you also thought aliens experimented on you.” Dan had explained many intubated patients experience hallucinations of undergoing medical experiments conducted by aliens.

Miranda laughed. “Yeah, I guess I was out of it.”

Alison hopped out of the chair, sat next to Miranda on the couch, and patted her own lap. “Here.”

Miranda smiled and laid her head on Alison’s lap, just like she did as a teenager. Alison was good at being there when she needed her.

Alison smoothed her hand over Miranda’s coarse hair: still so pale, so thin. She resumed eating and sleeping in the hospital but still had a long way to go. Alison rubbed Miranda’s uninjured cheek until her green eyes closed.

• • •

A few minutes faded into the darkness of the evening. Alison woke with a start. Miranda's feet rested on her thigh. She looked to the side to find Miranda's sleeping face on the other end of the couch. She grabbed the back of her neck and winced, appreciating the fact that her pain couldn't possibly surpass Miranda's.

Miranda's accident was just one incident in a long line of life trials for the sisters. Losing their parents eradicated their former existence with an ideal family to a troubling childhood for Miranda and a shaky start for Alison's adulthood.

Her parents had visited her aunt and uncle a mere ten miles away from their house on August 28th, seventeen years ago. When Alison awoke the next morning and found her parents absent, she called her Aunt Cheri and Uncle Dave. A sickening feeling settled into the pit of her stomach when she heard the worry Aunt Cheri tried to conceal in her voice.

Aunt Cheri convinced the police that they needed to drive along the ten-mile route from their house to her sister's house as soon as possible, an easy sell due to the fact that her brother-in-law worked with the police chief on a group of ritualistic mass murders. This prompted a drive-through of the route from Aunt Cheri's to the Sheppard home.

Officer McGloughlin discovered the unfortunate evidence that Aunt Cheri's instincts possessed more than worried imaginings. At 6.8 miles from Aunt Cheri and Uncle David's door, at mile marker 15 on County Road 25, he discovered the skid marks leading down the side of the mountain. He followed the tracks to where the silver 1998 Oldsmobile Cutlass and its victims lay and the tree responsible for its haphazard part in their demise.

Dr. Allen Sheppard had passed on impact. Upon examining Dr. Joy Sheppard, Officer McGloughlin discovered a faint pulse when he placed his ungloved finger on the side of her neck. His quick

response allowed her to survive another 24 hours in the I.C.U. at Morningside Hospital, where Aunt Cheri, Uncle Dave, and Joy's two girls, Alison and Miranda, kept vigil and waited.

The following day, after Alison authorized the tests needed to determine the condition of her mother, Dr. Foreman showed Alison the extent of the injuries her mother sustained to her cranium and the pictures of the parts of her brain destroyed in the crash.

Even though the chances of her mother having any type of recovery were null, it did nothing to ease Alison's conscience or to quell the reoccurring nightmares she still had of taking her mother off life support. She needed to be the one to send her mother into the afterlife, her way of honoring the greatest woman she ever knew.

An autopsy revealed two healthy, 48-year-old adults with no evidence of drugs or alcohol in their system, passing from the injuries sustained in the crash. The weather had been clear that night. The police presumed Dr. Sheppard swerved to avoid something in the road, maybe a deer. Her aunt accepted this explanation more readily than Alison, but Alison's certainty of foul play led her to ask the chief of police, Mr. Joseph Halenbecker, to investigate.

Halenbecker entertained the conversation out of respect of his former colleague but did not pursue it any further. He assured Alison that his investigation revealed no signs of murder. Alison later resolved that her parents most likely swerved the car to avoid hitting a deer, and her feelings, something insidious surrounded the circumstances of her parents' death, arose due to the shock of her parents' sudden death.

Besides, she had enough problems with Miranda. Her parents would have wanted her to focus on her sister rather than their demise.

Aunt Cheri and Uncle Dave offered to take them in, but Miranda wanted to stay in her parents' house, unwilling to lose any more of her mother and father than she already had. Miranda could not bear

the thought of moving from the home where her mother and father's presence could still be felt, seen, and smelled, the place they had lived all their lives. After the accident, she fell asleep every night in her parent's bed where she grew up feeling safe and comforted, sleeping on her mother's pillow still enveloped with a hint of lavender, the scent of her mother's favorite shampoo.

Alison couldn't force Miranda to leave their house and rip her from her home after her parents' departure ruptured her entire childhood. She would have to plan their finances carefully, but she could make it work thanks to the life insurance policies her parents had left them in their will. Alison tried her best to fill both her mother's and father's shoes, but when Miranda hit thirteen, dyed her hair black to match her clothes and makeup, stuck her face full of metal rings, her usual self-confidence faded into a worry so profound for Miranda, it made her stomach churn day and night.

Aunt Cheri, though, kept a watchful eye over them, serving as an advisor for Alison. "She's a teenager. Uncle David and I don't have children of our own, but you know I have been working with eighth graders for fifteen years now. Even children who don't lose their parents go through this. Keep trying to communicate with her. She'll get it." Aunt Cheri's blue eyes gleamed. She looked so much like Alison's mother, with the fair complexion and blond hair. It should have given Alison some solace, but at times, it caused her more pain, a reminder of the absence in her life.

"Yeah, but I'm not Mom. That's who she really needs, and there's no way I can give it to her. It's all my fault." Alison's voice faltered as she tried to swallow the impulse to cry.

"Hey, hey, look at me." Aunt Cheri laid her hand on Alison's cheek to assure eye contact. "They died in a car accident. Not your fault."

"Yeah, but I killed... I killed Mom." Alison couldn't stop the steady flow of tears trickling down from the corners of her eyes.

"No, honey, you didn't. She had already passed."

"I know all that, but it doesn't help the nightmares I have every night. Miranda's mad at everyone and everything, and she has every right to be. Yes, I feel guilty for taking Mom off of life support and because I had a normal childhood and she doesn't. It's not fair that she doesn't have Mom and Dad the way I had them. I know Miranda blames me too, so why shouldn't I blame myself?" Alison collapsed in a deluge of tears.

Aunt Cheri took both of Alison's hands in hers. "You know, I admire you."

Alison couldn't help laughing, choking at the same time as she rubbed the tears on her cheek. "Yeah, right." She grabbed a handful of tissues. Maybe she should invest in a tissue company. She probably kept them in business, especially lately.

"No, really, I'm so proud of you. You are so young, and you did what most young women your age couldn't even fathom. You have shown such strength through impossible circumstances."

"I don't feel strong."

"But you are. You handled your parent's funeral with a grace I haven't seen from most adults. You stayed to take care of your sister. I don't know many people who would have handled these things the way you have, regardless of their age."

"So, what do I do with Miranda? I can't seem to do anything right. If I agree with what she says, she gets even madder. If I try to put my foot down, she yells that I'm not her mother, so she doesn't have to listen to me. It's like watching a train wreck that I can't prevent, or like I'm stuck in an alternate universe called Opposite Land where my parents are dead and my sister hates me. I hate me too. She used to follow me everywhere and cry when I had to go to my room to do my homework."

"Oh, no, please don't talk like that," said Aunt Cheri, patting her niece's hand. "I wish I worked in your school system, but I do know the guidance counselor there. I'll speak with her to see if we can get her an appointment."

Miranda hated seeing the school counselor more than having to wake up every day and pretend as if her parents weren't dead. Her friends and she had drifted apart. She supposed they got tired of her crying all the time. Still, she detested the idea of talking to anyone about how horrible it had been to live life without her parents. Her sister and Aunt Cheri convinced her to go with the veiled threat of dragging her to a psychiatrist instead.

Ms. Krishner, the school counselor, wasn't a bad person, per se. She would sit there and say nothing at all. Sure, she seemed to be listening on the surface, nodding and um-humming at the appropriate times, but her eyes focused on something else in the room, most likely on a mental vacation to a tropical island with a hunk named Jacques rather than listening to the tortured soul of a teenage girl.

Since Miranda's precociousness and her intolerance for boredom often prompted the trouble she elicited, she decided that since she didn't want to attend the meetings in the first place, she would make up stories to pass the time. At first, she tested the waters and threw in something a little strange, such as running around her room in her underwear, to see if it registered a response, but none came. Miranda's conclusion: Ms. Krishner was either comatose or hard of hearing.

As a source of amusement, Miranda challenged herself to make up outrageous stories, each week topping the previous to see if she could make the dead rise from her chair.

"So, Miranda, how has your week been so far?"

"I had a better week. My ritualistic sex club cheers me up."

"I see."

"Yeah. You know, orgies are really fun. A great distraction. I got to have sex with at least eight different guys. Girls, too. We had orgies every night this week so far."

"Uh humm."

Miranda used the orgy conversation as proof that her attendance at these weekly sessions was as useful as Congress has

been in balancing the national budget, something they read about in their government class.

“How do you know what an orgy is?” Alison asked.

“Alison, really? I’m not five any more you know.” Miranda’s tone dripped with sarcasm.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Three months. I’ve made up every kind of story imaginable. I even told her I was kidnapped and ravaged by pirates over the weekend, and it was a lot of fun. Great party.” A fake smile accompanied her upward-turned thumbs.

“Mir-an-da!”

“You would think I would have gotten some sort of reaction. It’s like talking to a giant mushroom.” Miranda folded her arms, her smile conveying a sense of satisfaction for making a well-argued point and a clever simile comparing the shape of the counselor’s curly hair with her level of responsiveness all at the same time.

Alison sighed. If her parents had survived, she wouldn’t have to sit with the angry, sullen version of her sister. Alison would have join her friends at Boston University instead of holding down two part-time jobs and attending the community college, and her parents would know what to do. Her mother would employ her superior listening skills, say all the right things, and work out whatever issue Miranda brought to her. Her father would offer a few more things to make Miranda feel all better and happy. After all, they spent their lives helping others feel better.

Besides, Alison remained convinced that she could not provide any more comfort to Miranda other than the fact that she would stay with her no matter what, but even this was offered on a shaky foundation. Alison could die tomorrow as well. If it happened to her parents, who seemed indomitable in almost every sense, it could happen to her. *Come on, Alison. It’s not like you didn’t learn anything at all from your parents. Try and think of what they would do.*

“All right, listen. You can see the doctor Aunt Cheri found for you, Dr. Gallagher...”

"Yeah, right," Miranda snorted. If they weren't her parents, she didn't want to speak to anyone else.

"You can see our pastor at church and speak with him..."

"Why? He's consorting with the God who snatched our parents away," Miranda snapped.

Alison rolled her eyes and blew out a sigh. *We'll work on that.* "Or, you can start talking to me or Aunt Cheri."

For a moment, Alison saw the true Miranda for the first time since her parents' passing. "I don't know if I can," Miranda whispered, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I'm sorry life has been so hard, Miranda." Alison folded her hands over Miranda's pale, slender hands. "We'll get through this together somehow. I won't leave you. I promise. I didn't go to Boston and dump you off at Aunt Cheri's house. I'll keep trying. Even when you're a pain in the ass." Alison and Miranda laughed with tears in their eyes. "Okay?"

"Okay. I guess I can try too. It hurts."

"I know. Let's figure it out together."

Things changed, for the most part. Miranda's outlandish behavior subsided, but she couldn't bring herself to speak about her inner turmoil. She decided to take the pins out of her face, dye her hair back to red, and wear colors other than black. It was time for her to move on and figure out what she wanted out of life. Her parents would have wanted that.

Alison smiled at her slumbering sister through the darkness, grateful that at least she lived through the accident, but also at the memory of what Miranda did in her sessions with Ms. Krishner. She commended herself for keeping a straight face when Miranda told her the first time. If it weren't for the circumstances, it would have sent her into a giggling fit.

Alison slid Miranda's feet onto the couch and pulled the blanket over her. She picked up her bag she left in front of the kitchen door and padded over to the bathroom down the hallway on the other side of the wall of the kitchen, appreciative of the location of the

first floor bathroom, a decent distance from the living room so she didn't have to worry about waking Miranda up. Dan said Miranda would probably sleep a lot, which would promote her recovery.

As Alison brushed her teeth, she heard a noise. She paused, the toothbrush still in her mouth. She narrowed her eyes and listened, but attributed it to her unfamiliarity with her sister's house noises. Her father used to say that houses had creaks and moans because of the way they settle over the years. Her mother would counter that it is a spirit. Alison used to hope her mother was joking.

She finished washing her face. Another noise, this time louder, like the footfall of heavy boots? *That couldn't be Miranda.*

Alison unplugged a lamp on a small table in the hallway right outside the bathroom, the only weapon she could find, and crept down the dark hall, feeling ahead with each leading foot to ensure the soundlessness of her steps. Panting, perspiration dampened her forehead. Her nose wrinkled against an offensive odor. *Jeez, did something die in here?*

Alison froze, trying to peer in the dark, swearing she saw the form of a man? A shadow? It seemed like it was moving, but it was way too tall to be a person. Did her eyes deceive her? She read something about a brain phenomenon where people see patterns in abstract shapes in the darkness even when one isn't there. Each passing moment seemed like an hour.

"Alison?"

Alison gasped. "Oh, God, it's you!"

The hall light switched on. Miranda stared at her with a questioning look. "If you like the lamp that much, all you had to do was ask. I would have given it to you."

"No, I thought I heard something. Did you just get up? Here, you shouldn't walk around by yourself." Alison took Miranda's arm with her free hand.

"I got up to go to the bathroom." Miranda hobbled toward her intended destination. "You're probably not used to the noises around here."

"I thought so too, but this one noise, I could swear I heard it in the kitchen, footsteps. I got ready just in case. I didn't want to see anything else happen to you."

"You and I survived probably the worst of the worst, and I'm still here. Looks like you're stuck with me."

Alison squinted her eyes and stuck out her lips into a pout. "Promise?"

"Yeah, promise. Okay, why don't you put down that lamp first? You're making me nervous, dangerous with that thing."

Alison giggled and put the lamp back down on the end table.

"Geeze, have you been working out?" Miranda squeezed her sister's arm with her free hand. "I hope I don't make you mad. Now I'm even more nervous."

Alison giggled again. *I hope this means things will continue to look up.*

## 4

# *THANKSGIVING*

Miranda's favorite season, autumn, settled upon Davenport, blanketing colors upon the trees populating the soft, round mountainsides, making the quaint town appear as if it posed for a portrait. The historical buildings dressed in demure grays and pastels. Stark white church steeples challenged the orange, yellow, and red treetops for attention. Proper, immovable brick buildings, standing since the 1800s, lorded over the town, the figurative headmistresses in charge of discipline.

Autumn showered kindness that year, providing the residents with plenty of time to become reacquainted with the cold as the temperatures dropped in small increments. Long coats replaced sweaters and light jackets by Thanksgiving, and chatter of snow arose before Christmas. Miranda oft heard people parroting their thankfulness that the usual October blizzard bypassed them for a pleasant change.

Miranda and Alison usually spent Thanksgiving with Mr. and Mrs. Berkshire, family friends and the local fruit-and-vegetable-

stand owners. The girls knew the Berkshires their whole lives. They were as influential as the brick buildings on the town and infamous for their banter, mostly on Mrs. Berkshire's end. No one really knew for certain if the couple even liked each other.

During the holidays, the Berkshires stepped in to fill as many voids as they could after Alison and Miranda's parents died and Aunt Cheri left. However, Dan Foreman invited the sisters to a gathering at his house, so they quieted Mrs. Berkshire's protests and promised Christmas Day to her. Of course, they could bring their dates, as usual, Mrs. Berkshire winked.

"What do you think about this one? Too dressy? More for a night of dancing. Oh, there's this one. Ugh, that's right, this one says, oh, hi, these are my boobs, and by the way, I'm Alison." She held outfits up one by one as she appraised herself in the mirror.

Miranda sat on the edge of Alison's bed, trying her best to avoid flying clothing. "Why didn't you move into Mom's and Dad's room? I'm sure they would have wanted you to."

Alison stopped for a moment and turned to her. She shrugged. "I guess it's a lot of things. It's hard to explain." Her forehead furrowed. "You were sleeping in there for a while, so I didn't want to intrude on that. I also didn't want you to think that I was trying to replace them. I suppose, too, I didn't want to move their things out, you know? Sort of like they're..."

"Still here," Miranda whispered.

"Yeah."

The sisters held a gaze of mutual understanding. Miranda walked over to Alison's closet and picked out a burgundy dress. "This one is perfect. Not too slutty, not too dressy, not too business. It's the perfect fall color, it compliments your complexion and hair, and you look beautiful in it."

Alison beamed as she took the dress, held it up to her shoulders, and looked in the full-length mirror. "Thanks, Mira. Let me do my hair and makeup, and we'll go. Oh, I love what you're wearing, by

the way.” Alison stripped down to her bra and underwear and slipped the dress over her head.

Miranda hoped she would look like her in several years. Alison’s face had changed since she was a teenager, but it was more like she grew into her looks. “Thanks.” Miranda looked down at her royal blue dress with a simple leaf pattern, just above the knees and shrugged. “I’m in no rush. He’s your boyfriend. You know how I feel about the holidays.”

“Yeah, I guess things haven’t been the same since Aunt Cheri moved away.” Alison applied her mascara.

*Since Mom and Dad died.* When Miranda thought of the word home, it meant Christmas at home with her parents. Aunt Cheri would always have Thanksgiving at her house, but all that disappeared when she took the principal’s position at a boarding school for girls in California after obtaining her doctorate in school administration. It was the change she needed, she expressed, to get over what Uncle Dave did to her, and a once-in-a-lifetime job opportunity.

While Miranda celebrated with her, of course, she couldn’t help but feel the rest of what she considered “home” flew out to California. The holidays held nothing for her but the unsettling feeling of being a visitor at someone else’s Hallmark family holiday and the twinge of emptiness at the loss of her own. This time of year served as a constant reminder of loss, a lackluster time of year devoid of all magic and full of empty promises. The only thing she had left of home was her parents’ house and her sister, but fussing over dresses with Ali in the nearly empty house didn’t do much to console her.

The ride to Dan Foreman’s house in Elmswood took thirty minutes across town. Before long, the rows of buildings gave way to the tree-lined rural route roads of the suburbs nestled in the sides of the mountains surrounding Davenport. These suburban towns and villages comprised the richer communities of Davenport, evidence of robust economic times.

Though not a gated community, Elmswood had the reputation of one, especially with their private, well-paid police force, which was not at all shy about pulling over unfamiliar cars driving through late at night. The homes all smacked of upper middle class. Miranda had considered buying in Elmswood but didn't like the similarity of all the houses except for one or two features to produce the illusion of differentiation. Because of the lure of a short commute to her office, she had decided to buy on the outskirts of the downtown area within city limits and on a house that had a little more personality.

Dan's home contained tasteful, decorative items and furniture with muted colors and simple patterns, as if the items were trying to hide how much they really cost. Plus, Miranda imagined the housecleaner spent more time there than Dan did.

By the time everyone had finished the appetizers and congregated around the dining room table to admire the turkey Dan had spent the day basting, Miranda distinguished a perceptible slighting of the sisters from Dan's parents, Alastair and Ester of the Davenport Foremans. Even worse, Dan's brother turned out to be Steven, the troll who tortured her all throughout high school, but Mr. and Mrs. Foreman's behavior sent the entire evening over the top.

"So, Alison, Dan told us, although I find it difficult to imagine," Mrs. Foreman laughed with a grimace, "you jump out of planes, for a living?" She asked as if she heard a crazy rumor. Mrs. Foreman toyed with a necklace that Miranda would not have bought from a yard sale for five cents but saw in a Michèle Ferrar catalog for two-hundred dollars.

Alison smiled politely. "Yes, it's true. I am a certified skydiving instructor. I teach people how to skydive. I am also part of a skydiving show. We do the Fourth of July celebration every year at Manahassee State Park. Or at least, I used to. I am retired now."

Miranda's mouth hung open. "What? And when were you going to tell me this?" *Unbelievable. There she goes again, shutting me out.*

"I quit right after your accident to focus on you."

"Is George going to let you come back?"

"No. I want to go back to college, so it's not important."

"Oh." *Of course Alison deserved to go to college.* Miranda could never be mad at Alison for more than five seconds, her most admired but stymieing quality.

"Oh?" Mrs. Foreman seemed unaffected by the sisters' exchange. "What do you plan on doing now?"

"I studied nursing when I was younger. I never did get a chance to finish."

"That's because she was too busy taking care of me," Miranda smiled. "Alison put everything she had into giving me a normal childhood after my parents passed."

"It broke my heart when my Daniel split up with Sarah," Mrs. Foreman stated, bypassing all of Miranda's input. "She had such a wonderful wedding planned. She was a brain surgeon too."

Out of the corner of her eye, Miranda caught Alison cringing. *Mrs. Foreman must do this all the time.* Mr. Foreman and Steven didn't even lift their eyes at the way she spoke, as if she weren't speaking at all. Alison would never have the chance to show that she was a worthy match for Dan because in Mrs. Foreman's mind, there was no comparison. To her, her son had become a doctor, the most respected profession, and he gave up his perfect match, a woman in the profession she admired most.

Miranda had several wealthy clients, but they acted more like real people. They spoke as if they didn't have a care how much money anyone made. Mr. Foreman didn't speak much to anyone, as if any conversation were an inconvenience, and Mrs. Foreman spoke with an air, as if she were doing that person a favor by speaking with them at all.

"Mother, I'm sure no one here wants to hear about ancient history." Dan caught Alison's eyes and mouthed *I'm sorry*. She furnished a brave smile for him. He cleared his throat to shift the conversation to more productive pursuits. "So, Miranda, Alison told me you have an assistant now. How's that working out?" asked Dan.

“Oh, better than I expected. Tanya has been a dream. Alison has been my rock through all this, so clever of her to set this up for me even before I woke up. But, that’s the type of person she is, so warm and caring.” While Miranda’s efforts to boost her sister’s image were going to be fruitless, she couldn’t help but try. She glanced often at Alison, who downed a full glass of wine when Mrs. Foreman pointed out all the wonderful strengths of Dan’s ex-fiancé. Alison’s smile conveyed her gratitude through her flushed face and glassy eyes.

“What happened?” Mr. Foreman asked, not looking up from his plate.

*Finally, he speaks.* “I had a car accident.” Miranda preferred the rest of the night’s conversation to focus on something else other than her health challenges, but it was better than Mrs. Foreman’s inappropriate nattering.

“Oh, that’s right,” Steven said. “I remember reading a clip about it in the local newspaper. You’re in there quite often. I read about you every year, just last week, as a matter of fact. You had a great turkey drive for Thanksgiving despite your accident this past summer. And by the way, how are you doing?”

Miranda’s cheeks reddened. Why couldn’t she take after Mom’s side of the family like Alison? She bore her curse all of her life, her red hair and pale skin, always showing how she felt and broadcasting it to everyone else against her will. “Better. I have full use of my left hand now, and I’m not limping. I can’t remember the accident and some time before that, and I get migraines.”

“Sorry to hear it.” Steven shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes in his mouth and smiled.

“Thanks.” Miranda took a sip of wine. *Why is he being so friendly now? He was such a jerk in high school. He’s part troll despite his good looks. Okay, he’s hot. Not everyone has naturally black hair.* With dark brown eyes, tall, and a great build, she would have dated him in high school if Steven were mute. She couldn’t believe her eyes when she entered Dan’s house and saw him sitting on the couch in the

oversized living room, and it shocked her to learn he and Dan were brothers. Well, by marriage. Dan's mother, Ester, married Steven's father, Alistair, she learned during the appetizers. But still, Dan's warmth exuded from him, and Steven was just so, Steven. She felt out of place at this gathering. She even missed the verbal wars Mrs. Berkshire waged against her husband during Thanksgiving dinner.

Dan stood up and clanged his fork against his glass. He paused for a thoughtful moment. "Thanksgiving. What a wonderful time of year to dwell upon our blessings. For me, I have the gifts of my family and new friends. I am thankful that this delightful young woman is still here with us." He raised his glass toward Miranda. Miranda cracked a compulsory smile, placing her fingers on either side of her face as her cheeks flushed. "I am also grateful that out of Miranda's accident and survival, this wonderful woman sitting next to me here has reentered my life." Dan placed his glass on the table, moved his chair back a bit, turned to Alison, and took her hands in his, gazing into her eyes. Dan took out a black velvet box from his jacket pocket, put it in the palm of his left hand, and opened it up to reveal the diamond ring in its interior. He got down on one knee.

All Alison could do was let the tears roll down her cheeks and nod. Dan stood up, placed the ring on her finger, and leaned over to kiss his new fiancé.

All these years, Miranda didn't think she ever saw Alison so happy, and she couldn't think of anyone else more deserving. She glanced at Steven. For the first time since she met him in middle school, they smiled at each other. The only people not smiling, Mr. and Mrs. Foreman, made Miranda grateful for the little happiness bubble enveloping Dan and Alison.

Miranda stood up. "Congrats, the both of you." She walked around the table and took her sister's hands. "I am so happy for you." Miranda and Alison hugged, Miranda resting her head on her sister's shoulder and Alison grasping Miranda around the back of her neck and rocking her from side to side. Miranda spied Steven and Dan speaking in low voices and glancing their way. They were

talking about her. Steven wouldn't look her in the eye. Heat rose to her chest. He did the same thing in high school when plotting against her.

Mr. and Mrs. Foreman stood up. "Congratulations," Mr. Foreman took his son's hand, never breaking his stern expression. He nodded as if to say *I support your decision*.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" Mrs. Foreman asked Dan through a tight smile.

"Yes, Mother, this is what I want."

"Well, then, come here." Mrs. Foreman leaned forward to kiss Dan on his right cheek, then his left, and examined his face for remnants of her burgundy lipstick.

*Uncouth*. The word popped into Miranda's mind just like a mole in the Whack-a-Mole game at the fair. Didn't Mrs. Foreman realize that when she spoke out loud, everyone could hear her disapproval? The possibility that she didn't care bothered her even more than ignorance. And her horrible attitude toward Alison, the sweetest person anyone could imagine, made her blood boil with ire. If only she could, for one moment, say what she really felt.

Alison looked at Mrs. Foreman through narrowed eyes. An impish smile overcame her. "Mother!" She ran around Dan and wrapped her arms around the back of Mrs. Foreman's head, pulled her face close to her, and planted a big kiss on the never-ruffled Mrs. Foreman, who was unappreciative of this brand of affection; the grimace and flailing arms were a dead giveaway.

Dan and Steven turned toward the embracing women, mouths open as if it were the first time they ever saw another human muss their mother's perfectly coiffed hair. They looked at each other and smiled at her extreme discomfort. Miranda tried her best not to smirk, but it didn't work.

"Yes, dear, okay, okay, good, yes." Mrs. Foreman struggled to break Alison's embrace. She took Alison's arms by the elbows, slid her arms so she could take Alison's hands in hers, and attempted to smile, her pain showing through her grimace. "Congratulations."

She turned away from Alison. Steven moved in behind her to take his turn to offer a congratulatory hug to Alison.

Mrs. Foreman brushed off her jacket. "I hope she doesn't do that *every time*," she hissed.

Dan laughed. "I do. Come here, momma!" Dan wrapped his arms around his mother, who stiffened up like a board with rolling, impatient eyes.

Dan and Alison looked at each other over the shoulders of their congratulator, both with happy but slightly evil grins.

Mr. Foreman stepped over to Alison after she embraced Steven. "Welcome to the family." He shook Alison's hand. At long last, Mr. Foreman smiled.

"Excuse me. I have to go fix my hair." Mrs. Foreman went to the bathroom.

Dan shook his head. Alison grinned and shrugged. "My mother always said: when someone is not treating you well, kill them with kindness."

"Oh, I think you killed her alright," said Steve.

Miranda smiled. *That's my girl.* She found Mrs. Foreman's Achilles heel—human contact. Alison always complimented Miranda for her ability with numbers, but Alison possessed a subtle wisdom, which impressed Miranda more than her own skills for facts and calculations. Alison knew how to manage people. She never got into a conflict, always commanding a presence, always able to neutralize people with her kindness and steady temperament. Mrs. Foreman was certainly not the ideal in-law, but Alison would be able to handle her.

Moistness gathered on Miranda's forehead and under her arms. She fanned her face. Her chest tightened. She rubbed her eyes. What were those shadows surrounding her sister? *I must be getting a migraine. Damn, and me without my medication. I wonder if Dan has something to give me.* "Would you all excuse me for a moment? I think I'll get a breath of fresh air. I'm a little overheated."

“Oh, why don’t you go through the sliding doors?” Dan pointed toward the kitchen. “I didn’t have the chance to put away my outdoor furniture in the backyard.”

“Thank you.” Miranda walked through the sliding doors before she burned up.

Alison noted Steven’s gaze. Steven’s eyes lingered on Miranda as she slid the door open and stepped out into the cold night, as if she left a magical trail behind her. “Go on.” Alison tossed her head in Miranda’s direction.

Steven grinned.

Miranda leaned against the wall next to the sliding doors, gazing at the star-laden sky. Steven drew in an involuntary breath as the stars’ faint light played off of Miranda’s pale skin, as if she possessed a part of a constellation. Steven cleared his throat to cover up his excitement and pretended to be colder than he really felt.

Miranda gave a slight nod.

Steven balled up his fists and blew on them. “Big night, huh?”

Miranda nodded.

Steven cleared his throat again. “Nice night. Look at all those stars.”

“Yep.”

“You look beautiful tonight.”

Miranda looked at him as if he wounded her.

Maybe he should apologize again? “You know, I am really sorry for being such a jerk in high school. I was really glad to hear you were coming to dinner so I would have the chance to apologize to you.”

Miranda nodded.

“We’re going to be in-laws now.”

“Yep.”

“Listen, why don’t we get a cup of coffee after dinner? I really would like for us to get along, at least for your sister and my brother’s sake.”

Miranda's face flushed. "You know, this is what really pissed me off about you all throughout high school. All you do is manipulate. I see that hasn't changed."

"What?" Steven put his hands up with his shrugging shoulders. "Isn't it true? Don't we need to get along?"

"No. We can be cordial and civil during family gatherings, but we don't need to get along, talk outside of these gatherings, or know each other."

"Listen..."

"No, you listen for a change. If you wanted to have coffee with me, you shouldn't have tried to pull a ruse. I might have said yes if you had flat out asked me, despite the fact that you were such a jerk in high school."

"But I already apologized for that when you got here."

"And then you reminded me why we always fought."

"Okay, you're right. I'm sorry again."

"Stop apologizing. You're just being yourself. That's the problem."

Steven took in a quick breath. The tempo in his heart quickened. *This must be why I picked fights with her in high school.* The more his anger rose, the more he wanted to grab and kiss her, and because she possessed the ability to have her words cut to the quick, he often imagined many other naughty things. "Oh, and do you know your problem?" he challenged. Miranda's eyes flashed. *Damn, so beautiful.*

"Yeah, what's that?"

"You push everyone away."

Miranda pushed off the wall and faced Steven. "Hah! How dare you! You think you know me, but you don't know the first thing about me." The volume of her voice rose.

"Shhh. You don't want to ruin your sister's big night, do you?"

"Me? Ruin my sister's night? Well, I... I..."

Just as she was about to hit the ground, Steven caught Miranda in his arms.

• • •

When she awoke, Miranda lay on the couch in the living room. The last she remembered, the stars had turned into brilliant streaks of white light. Dan had his fingers on her wrist. Alison, Dan, and Steven looked worried. Mr. Foreman seemed surprised, and Mrs. Foreman looked displeased.

*What the hell happened? I don't pass out. I have never fainted in my life. Ugh, now Steven's going to think he makes me swoon, egotistical bastard.* Miranda blinked several times. It looked like there were black vines protruding from everyone there. *These migraines really mess with my vision. Dan said at times, my vision would be refracted, but he didn't mention anything about black vines sticking out from people.* Should she say something? They all might think she's hallucinating, or worse, crazy. As soon as she thought she might tell them, the blackness disappeared from around them—even Mrs. Foreman.

"Miranda. Okay, she's awake," Dan said.

"She's not going to die, is she?" Mrs. Foreman inquired as if Miranda's death would be an unpleasant inconvenience.

"Mother!" Steven shot her a look and shook his head.

"No, I'm fine." Miranda sat up. She still felt like she was on a ship but was determined to stand.

"As a rule, I would say it is probably not a big issue, but you had a concussion several months ago, Miranda. Maybe we should bring you in for a few tests as a precaution," Dan suggested.

"No way. I'm fine, really. I guess I got a little light headed. Where are my shoes?"

"I took them off. Here." Alison gave Miranda her black pumps. Miranda slipped them on her feet. "You know, Miranda, you should listen to Dan. I'm worried about you."

"I know. I'm fine."

"Is this the first time this happened since the accident?" Dan sat down next to Miranda on the couch.

"Yes."

"Do you feel nauseous? Any numbness or tingling anywhere?" asked Dan.

"No, none of those. Still a bit lightheaded, but I'll be okay." Miranda stood. "Let me take a few minutes to walk it off."

"Here." Steven rushed to her side and held out his arm. Too tired to argue and after flashing a dirty look, Miranda wrapped her arm in his and took a few unsteady steps forward.

Mrs. Foreman placed her hand on her husband's arm. "Alistair, why don't we clear away the dishes? Will you help me bring dessert and coffee to the table?"

"I'll have to bring Maria next time," Mr. Foreman muttered as they walked to the kitchen.

"Thanks, Mother. Oh, would you please pack some food for Miranda to take with her?" Dan asked. "I think she'll be fine," Dan comforted Alison. "Maybe she got overheated. The oven did warm up the house."

"Okay. But maybe she needs someone to stay with her tonight to keep an eye on her."

"Oh, no I don't," Miranda called back over her shoulder. She and Steven had made it across the living room. Not on Alison's special night.

"I'll do it," Steven volunteered, calling over his shoulder.

"Oh, no you won't." Miranda stopped walking, took her arm from Steven, and turned around. No way. Maybe she should go to the hospital.

"That is a great idea." Dan looked at Alison and smiled.

"Yes, I think so too." Alison clapped. "Thanks, Steven. Now I will rest easy tonight."

"It's a terrible idea. I'll be fine," Miranda insisted. Crud. What would she do with a troll at her house? She desperately scanned all corners of her knowledge to find a way out of it, but uncovered nothing.

“Here, Steve,” said Dan, “why don’t I get you some of my clothes so you have something to change into tomorrow?”

*I wonder if he’ll be able to pack a new personality in that bag as well.* Miranda summoned all of her strength to resist speaking her thought out loud.

“I’ll help you.” Alison grabbed Dan’s hand and the two and went upstairs.

“Great idea. I’ll take good care of her,” Steven promised.

“I appreciate your concern, really, but I’m fine now,” Miranda called up the stairs after them. Miranda faced Steven. “I’m fine now. I’m calling a cab.” She hoped the taxi could get there before Alison and Dan made it back down the stairs. As she attempted to make some strong strides to get her cell phone in her purse, her knees buckled under her, enough to send her stumbling.

Steven caught her once again. “I think you need to sit down and let me drive you home.” He guided Miranda to the couch. He kneeled in front of her. “You know, outside, I didn’t mean to make it seem like I was trying to manipulate you. Can we start over?”

Even though her head still spun, she couldn’t help smirking. “I guess everyone deserves a do-over once in a while.”

Steven made his best effort to seem as sincere as he could, taking her hands in his and looking into her eyes. “Miranda, would you like to have coffee with me sometime?”

“No.”

The two stared at each other for a moment and then chuckled.

“How about this, then. When we get to your house, I’ll make us both some decaf?” Steven asked.

Miranda paused for a moment. “I think I could live with that. Besides, it looks like I’m stuck with you for the night. No one is listening to me.”

Steven shrugged and smiled. “You have a point there.”

Dan came down the stairs with Alison behind him. “Here’s your bag, Steve. I’ll meet you in the front so I can go to the kitchen and get your doggie bag.”

"Alright, let's get you home, Miss Miranda." Steven stood up, held out his hand, helped Miranda up, and looped his arm around her waist to support her.

"I'm sorry I ruined your big night, Alison."

"Oh, honey, you haven't." Alison took a step forward and put her lips to Miranda's ear. "Not even Mrs. Foreman can ruin this night. Don't worry." The sisters smiled at each other. "Call me the moment you two reach home so I know you have arrived in one piece."

"Okay, here we go." Steve helped Miranda walk to the front door.

Miranda caught Alison's eye and mouthed the words, *I hate you*.

Alison mouthed back *I know*, the corners of her mouth turning upwards and nodding.

Miranda mouthed back, *you're so obnoxious*.

Alison nodded again, smiling and giving her a thumbs-up.

Dan helped Steven walk Miranda to his car, instructing him on what symptoms constituted a medical emergency. Alison handed the bag through the window to Miranda.

Alison looked at the rear window of Steve's Toyota Corolla as they drove off. "I hope she's okay."

"I think so. Don't worry. Steve will take good care of her tonight."

"Yes, I know. I always knew those two liked each other."

Dan laughed. "Yes, me too."

## **5**

# ***TRANSITION***

“There we go. One step at a time.” Steven guided Miranda up the stairs.

Miranda rolled her eyes. “You know, I feel fine now. You don’t have to stay.”

“What, and miss out on coffee? Besides, your sister warned me you would do this.”

Miranda fumbled through her purse to find her keys. “Do what?”

“Refuse to rely on someone else for a change.”

Miranda’s face bunched up as if she ate a lemon. “My sister has a big mouth.”

“Your sister is a saint.”

Miranda put the key into the lock, opened the side door, and sighed. “Yeah, she’s a saint.”

“See, we agreed on something. Maybe by the end of the night, we’ll find one more thing to agree on,” Steven teased.

Miranda gazed at Steven. “Yeah, we’ll see.” Steven smiled back. He was being sweet and attentive, asking her how she felt on the

ride home, and even letting her select the music to play on his satellite radio. Plus, anyone who spoke highly of Alison earned points in her book.

*I wonder what he wants from me.* High School Steven always had an ulterior motive. High School Steven never did anything unless it benefited him. Although, after meeting Ester and Alistair, it helped fill in a lot of blanks. Maybe this was New Steven. She hoped so. Most people didn't change from high school. The same people who gossiped in high school still spread rumors around town. They never grew out of it; they simply discovered a bigger venue.

Steven put his overnight bag down beside the door when they walked through it and locked the door with his free hand. The kitchen had just enough room for him to slide past Miranda to set the food on the kitchen counter. Miranda jumped a little, unaccustomed to having someone in her galley kitchen so close to her.

"I know where the kitchen is now. Ah, there's the living room. Let's get you settled here on the couch, and we'll see what goodies we have." Steven guided Miranda over to the couch, put her feet up, took off her shoes, and covered her with the afghan draped over the back of the couch, making sure she had her cell phone so she could call Alison.

She watched as Steven discovered the location of the items in the kitchen. He put their dinner in the microwave, asked for instructions on how to work her coffeepot, and opened drawers and cabinets to look for the silverware, plates, and napkins.

"You really don't have to do all this." Miranda yawned. The entire ordeal stole her energy.

"Think of it as my repentance for stealing your underwear in the eleventh grade."

"You didn't steal them. I gave them to you."

"I tricked you into it. I set up those cards so you would lose."

"I knew it!" The rush of heat crept up Miranda's cheeks. One more reason not to trust High School Steven.

Steven shot her a sheepish gaze. "Sorry."

"Unbelievable." Miranda folded her arms. Maybe he was still a troll after all.

The microwave beeped. "Ah, dinner is served," said Steve, grateful he had something to take the focus off of his pubescent transgression.

Steven brought the meal and drinks to the wooden coffee table, a special table Miranda found at a yard sale when she first moved into the neighborhood. When she bought the missing pane of glass that went over the wood, it acted like a huge picture frame. Steven held the dishes and stood over the table gazing at her collection. "These are really nice. Did you take them?"

"Yes."

"Wow, you have a good eye. Look at this elephant. Where did you take that one?"

"Borneo."

"You've got the travel bug, huh? How many places have you been?"

"Enough."

"Like where?"

"France, Spain, Portugal, Thailand, China, Borneo, Belize, Russia. But I haven't had time to travel since the accident."

He sat while holding the plates. "Don't worry. You will again soon." Steven spied a picture of Miranda in front of her Corvette.

"Wow, nice Corvette."

"Yeah, that's my baby, Cherry Red. I really miss that car."

"Oh, how could I forget?" Steve jumped up and trotted to the kitchen. He retrieved a lit candle, dimmed the lights, walked over to the coffee table, and placed it in the middle.

Miranda smiled. "You are certainly full of surprises tonight."

"I wanted to make a good impression, well, at least to make it up to you for that card game."

"It's in your best interests not to mention that again."

"Mention what again?"

"Yep, you got the idea. So, why do you seem, well, so human?" Miranda joked. This occasion, after all, marked the first time Steven didn't seem so Steven.

"Here, eat." Steven gave Miranda her plate. Miranda accepted it on her lap. "When I graduated college, I met the girl of my dreams. I mean, head over heels, one hundred percent in love. In no time, I had asked her to marry me. Then, she died in a car accident."

"Oh, Steven, I'm sorry." Miranda meant it, too. Why did car accidents always pop up in her life? Was someone unknown force trying to kill everyone she knew, herself included?

Steven nodded. "Somewhere along the way, I realized life taught me a cruel lesson. Karma, I think they call it? Don't ever let anyone tell you it doesn't exist, because man, it will kick you right in the ass." Steven shook his head.

"What do you mean karma?" Miranda asked.

"In high school, I was callous to your situation. I often thought after two years, you should just get over it already, move on, and stop your brooding. I thought you were doing it just for attention, and I'm ashamed. When I lost Hannah, I realized you never 'get over it.' I struggled with the senselessness of it all, which made it hard for me to move on. Life taught me that lesson I was missing, and I have been living with regret ever since. I realized there wasn't anything wrong with you. There was something wrong with me for judging you like that. So when I said sorry, I meant it."

Miranda and Steven held a long gaze. "Steven, that is probably the best apology I have ever received. I forgive you." *This is strange. I do forgive him. Maybe he has changed.*

"Thank you. I'm grateful you're still here so I had the chance to tell you. I couldn't believe my luck when I heard Alison hooked up with Dan, and I would be able to see you tonight at dinner."

He looked down. "Hey, you haven't touched your food. Don't you like it?"

"Oh, no, I love it. I'm not very hungry." Miranda set the food down on the table.

“Alison told me you would do this. She said to tell you, eat ten bites, and she will be happy, and not to worry because you are going to be okay.”

Miranda giggled. “She’s unbelievable. Okay, okay, ten bites. It’s like she has a camera on me inside her head, you know?” She picked her plate back up. Alison always harped on her to eat more. Miranda didn’t care a whit about her weight. She just didn’t have much of an appetite most of the time.

“She seems to know you well.”

“Like a book. I’m so happy for her and Dan. I worried that she hadn’t met anyone. She’s a lot like my mom. She would make a great mother.” *But I don’t feel like I know her at all*, remembering the bomb Alison dropped on her during dinner. She missed how they used to talk before Alison became her replacement mom. She supposed it was because of the burden placed on her. Maybe she thought she needed to act a certain way so she could maintain authority. Everything changed with her parents’ death, even Alison, and Miranda resented it for a long while. She appreciated Alison’s position and all she did for her when she matured enough to understand her sister’s actions and inactions another way.

Steven smiled. “So would you.”

Instead of responding, Miranda shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes into her mouth, hoping it would cover up her discomfort. “There, six bites, and I swear I can’t eat another.” She finished her mouthful and placed the plate on the coffee table.

“Good. Now I have another surprise.” Steven put his plate down and patted his lap. “Put your feet up here. I will reveal to you one of my talents.”

“Which is?” Miranda placed her feet obediently on his lap.

“Foot massages.”

Miranda wrinkled her nose. “Are you sure?”

Steven didn’t wait for her permission. He already had the covers off and started rubbing her toes. *How can this be relaxing when I’m worried if my feet smell?*

• • •

Miranda awoke at dawn. Steven's foot massage was so effective, she didn't remember when she fell asleep and couldn't remember when she had slept sounder. She heard him in the kitchen.

"Hey, how do you feel?"

Even through her sleepy eyes, with his shirt slightly rumpled and his hair tousled, he looked as good in the mornings as he did in the evenings. "Wow, you were not kidding. You have magic in those fingers." Miranda rubbed her face to wake herself up.

"Here, I have coffee if you're up to it. Lots of cream, lots of sugar?"

"Yeah, how did you... oh, Alison, right?"

"You got it."

Miranda shook her head in amazement, accepting the cup of coffee from Steven. "Did you sleep?"

"Yes, some."

"Here on the couch with me?"

"I did for a bit, but then I moved over to the recliner. That's pretty comfy, by the way."

"That's why I bought it."

"You didn't have eggs, so I went to the market on the corner. How do you like yours?"

"I don't."

"You don't like eggs?"

"Why would I like eggs? They look like snot."

"You're supposed to cook them first."

"Why, so I can eat cooked snot?"

Steven laughed. "You are original. Okay, how about pancakes then?" He rummaged around her kitchen cabinets.

"I'll tell you what." Miranda stood up. "I'll take you out for breakfast to thank you for watching over me last night. You won't find anything in those cabinets. I don't have much time to cook."

"You don't cook? What do you eat, then?"

"Salads, mostly. And stuff I can put in the microwave."

"Why don't you cook?"

Miranda shrugged.

"It reminds you of family, doesn't it?"

Miranda looked up at him. *He really gets me. Hello, New Steven.*

Steven smiled. "Okay, but I'm treating."

"No, I'm treating."

Steven smiled. "We'll see."

. . .

"So, who paid for breakfast?" Alison munched on her salad, eyes fixated on Miranda as if Alison were engrossed in a movie.

"Jeez, would you stop looking at me like that? You look like some sort of matchmaker ghoul." Miranda looked around The Big Easy Cajun Restaurant to see if anyone had noticed.

Alison smacked Miranda's arm. "Come on, who paid?" she interrogated through her mouthful of food.

Miranda folded her arms. "He did, the idiot. He paid the waitress twenty bucks to give the check to him."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Are you going to see each other again?"

"No."

Alison put down her fork on her plate and swallowed. "What?"

"We said our goodbyes and went on our way."

"He didn't ask you out on another date?"

"Nope."

"Really?"

"Nope."

"What?"

"I'm messing with you." Miranda reached over, grinning like an imp, and poked Alison's arm. "He said he needs help with his

finances. He's coming over to the office next Monday. Then we'll see from there."

Alison breathed out a sigh of relief. "You are such a brat."

"And you're really nosy."

"Yeah, it's my job."

"No, it's not your job, but you do it anyway. And that's what I love about you."

Alison shook her head. "You're like a cinnamon bun wrapped in barbed wire."

Miranda wrinkled her nose. "And you're like a jar of honey."

Alison smiled. "You know, hon, I wanted to talk to you about our house."

"Okay, what about it?"

"Now, I don't want you to get upset. And I want you to know that it's only an idea, and I won't do anything unless you agree. Since Dan and I are getting married, I will move in with him. I thought if we had kids, we could keep our house so they have a place to move into when they get older. On the other hand, the upkeep could get expensive. The house is in decent shape now, but if we leave the house vacant for a long time, there's no guarantee that it will remain in sellable condition. Plus, if we sell the house now while the market is high, you and I could do something with that money, like maybe invest it to expand your charitable works or grow your business, or keep the money for your children and invest it. Your thoughts?" An uncomfortable smile crept up the corners of her mouth and rested there with her expectant eyes.

"Jeez, children? Steven and I haven't even been on our first date yet."

Alison rolled her eyes. "Yes, ha ha, very funny. Get serious."

"Sheesh, okay. My thoughts. I guess the idea makes me uncomfortable, but I knew we would have this conversation when you and Dan got engaged. The upkeep and the property taxes are significant. Our county charges one of the highest property tax rates in the state. Add in the insurance, and we'll pay out at least a grand

per month just to keep up on those costs. I considered renting out the house to have income on the property and cover the costs, but we both don't have any experience as landlords, and I have heard of some real nightmares of what happens when you rent to the wrong people. Real estate always has some value, but the market goes up and down according to the health of the economy, and the market is really high right now. The house still looks great, thanks to you, but if we wait, you never know if a hurricane might roll through and damage the entire house. I suppose now is the best time to sell."

"Wow, really? You mean it?"

"Yes. Let's clean it up and put it on the market. I'll help."

Alison's mouth hung open for a moment. "That was so much easier than I expected."

Miranda smiled, always happy to shock her sister. The negative ways were much more fun, but she did enjoy shocking her in positive ways every once in a while to keep her on her toes. "Listen, when you almost die, you gain another perspective. When we lost Mom and Dad, I couldn't stomach the thought of letting go of our wonderful past filled with so many good memories. Because of you, you didn't force me to let go of my entire childhood. You know me. I've had these numbers rolling around in my head for a while. It would make more sense to have that cash working for us now rather than keeping up the house."

Alison stared at Miranda. "You know, I'll bet Mom and Dad are so proud of you, up in Heaven smiling." She pointed upward and sipped her coffee. "I'm proud of you too."

Typical Alison rhetoric, referring to Heaven and faith. Alison stopped inviting Miranda to church after Miranda came up with the perfect reply to get out of it—I won't go, but you can pray for me.

Why should she go to church? God couldn't exist. Why would God take away her parents, the best people of all? If God possesses total power, he could have prevented their death. Since he didn't,

he must not be there. If he were, he would have heard her praying for her mother in the hospital. She found the idea of God not existing more acceptable than God existing but ignoring her pleas.

Alison sipped her coffee. "Okay, then. Listen, Dan and I are going away tomorrow for our own private celebration of our engagement."

Miranda smiled. "Oh, that's nice. I'll stop by the house to start cleaning out my room. Where are you going?"

"Not too far, in case Dan has to go to the hospital. You know that bed and breakfast right outside of town, the Victorian house those two guys restored?"

"Oh, the one with the room that has the bookcase that opens up into a marble bathroom with a Jacuzzi? I saw pictures. That place is so beautiful, lucky girl. That sounds wonderful. Have fun."

The sisters smiled at each other. "Alison, congrats again. I am so happy for you. Look at you. You're glowing. You deserve this."

"And so do you, sweetie. I hope you're this happy one day soon. You work all the time. Maybe it's time to slow down a bit and enjoy yourself."

Miranda shrugged. "Who knows? We'll see."

. . .

On Sunday, Miranda dressed in an old pair of jeans and sweatshirt and threw on her ski jacket. *Life is tough sometimes, but I'll have to be tougher than life*, she repeated on the drive over. She steeled herself so she would not spend the entire day crying.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay? It's not easy for anyone to give up their childhood home," Steven observed when Miranda declined his offer for dinner.

"No, I'll be fine. I'm going to pack and see what needs repairing or repainting."

She almost regretted passing on Steven's offer as she let herself into the house, but it felt too soon for her to be all raw and exposed in front of him. When she opened the door and walked into the living room, some empty cardboard boxes waited for her on the couch. Miranda turned on the Jamaican rum bottle lamp sitting on the end table, took off her jacket, and draped it over the top of the couch. She picked up the lamp and held it for a few minutes, tracing her finger along the colorful Jamaican lady. She could still hear her mother's laughter from the day they made the lamp together. Smiling, she turned it off, took off the lampshade, unplugged it, and put it on the table after she wrapped the cord around the lady.

A knock on the door. She jumped.

"Steven! What the hell are you doing here?"

Steven seemed surprised. "Not exactly the reception I had hoped for."

"Are you following me?"

Steven folded his arms. "What if I am? What if I followed you to make sure you're okay?"

Miranda sighed. "I'm sorry. That's sweet, really, in a stalker-y sort of way, but I'm fine. Thanks for stopping by."

*Stalker?* He shook his head and walked in. "I've been through this. You want me to stay."

"Oh? And what makes you say that?" Heat rose from her chest and crept past her sweatshirt collar.

"One, my sparkling personality," Steven grinned, holding up his pointer finger, striving for obnoxiousness.

"Ugh, get out." *Yep, there's the old Steven.* Miranda pushed him toward the door.

"And, B, because I've been through this, so I understand," he said a little softer. Miranda stopped pushing. "When I lost Hannah, I isolated myself for months. I pushed everyone away. Why bother, when they can up and die on you tomorrow, right?"

“Yeah.” Miranda stood and stared at Steven, stunned at his ability to describe the way she had been feeling for years in only a few sentences and the reason why she threw herself into her career. So, that’s what he meant in the backyard at Dan’s house. Maybe he saw something in her she couldn’t see.

“You know, we lived together for several months before we got engaged, and I went through all her things by myself. Besides losing her, it was the hardest thing I had to do. I wished I had someone there. You tried to pull your tough gal act on me over the telephone, but I didn’t buy it. It doesn’t matter when your parents died. It’s still hard, whether their death was last week or seventeen years ago. So, I’m here to support you.”

Miranda didn’t know what emotion prevailed at the moment: irritation due to the undisputable truth of his statements or endearment because of his insistence to help her. “Okay. Thanks.”

“I’m here to help. Just tell me what to do.”

“I know one thing. It won’t involve my underwear.”

Steven smiled. “Yeah? What if it does?”

Miranda looked down and put her hands to her face, as if she could prevent the telltale color from creeping up her forehead. She cleared her throat. “I guess I walked into that one, didn’t I?” A nervous laugh escaped her throat.

Steven smiled. “It was too easy. Now, what would you like to accomplish today?” He walked into the living room, and Miranda closed the front door.

“I thought I might go through the house to see if there’s anything I wanted to keep. Alison has dibs on everything in the kitchen, but if there’s any furniture or knickknacks I want, I could have them. She only wants one or two things, and they are already in her room. She said something about auctioning off the rest so she could raise a little money for my charity stuff.”

Steve smiled. "That's a nice idea. Why did you get into charity work?"

"My parents, in honor of them. They helped people in their practice right up until their death. I didn't get into psychology like they did, so I figured I could help in a different way." Because Miranda had sharp observation skills, her parents always encouraged her to get into psychology, but Miranda couldn't bring herself to pursue a career in it. Too much poking around in other people's misery would not have helped her at the time. She appreciated the safety of numbers. They didn't cry or dig up old memories that she would rather keep buried.

Steven's smile continued. She glanced down like an awkward teenager. Steven cleared his throat. "So, what room would you like to start in?"

"Here, I guess. Let me find some tape and packing stuff. Do you think you could wrap that lamp up somehow? Here, put your jacket with mine." Miranda draped Steven's jacket with hers over the back of the couch.

Steven took the box. "Neat lamp."

"Yes, my mother and I made it together one weekend. She always bought books that had ten thousand craft projects. Soon after that she and my father died."

"Do you have any bubble wrap?"

"Alison said she had some in the dining room cabinets. And Steven?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks." A secret part of her hoped Steven would show up after all, the distraction she needed to keep her from crying all day.

Steven nodded.

Miranda walked into the dining room to look for the packing materials. Her eyes settled on the "piece of art" she had drawn on the wall in permanent marker when she was too young to know better, but old enough to remember her parents' reaction. Instead of getting mad, her mother painted a frame around it and kept it.

Her father was less thrilled, but happy about how supportive her mother had been of her artistic efforts. Whenever the deep dark hole inside of her overtook her, the mural always helped her feel as if one day, the hole would fill up.

• • •

In the living room, Steven had the bottle lamp in his hand. The lamps, situated around the living room, flashed even though he had not turned them on. Steven looked down. *It couldn't be.* The lady lamp's light bulb flashed with the electrical cord still wrapped around the lady's body. Steven put the lamp down, careful not to let it drop, and stepped away from the table. *It couldn't be.* It still lit up along with the other lamps in the room.

• • •

In the dining room, Miranda opened the cabinets of an odd piece of furniture with six box-like units that had doors on the front. She recalled how much her mother loved endless storage possibilities. She discovered packing materials in the bottom middle cabinet. When she pulled out the bubble wrap and tape, some papers fell onto the floor. *What are those strange diagrams?* She picked up the scattered papers. She examined a photocopied diagram of the human body with wheels drawn at different points along the spine and head, labeled *Diagram 3 - The chakras, colors, and points of origin.*

*What in the world is Alison reading?* She drew in a quick breath when she saw her parents' names under the title *Police Accident Report Form*. She peered into the living room. Steven fussed with the bottle lamp.

She picked up the papers, walked to the living room, and took her jacket. "Steven, I forgot to do something at home. I have to go."

Steven's eyes widened. "Um, okay. Do you need me drive you home?"

"No, I have my car here, thanks. I appreciate you coming by."

"Will I still see you tomorrow?"

Miranda paused. "Oh, yes, our appointment. Tomorrow evening after work, right?"

"Yes. Are you sure you're okay? This is a bit sudden."

"No, I mean, yes, I'm good. It's important. That's all."

"Okay then. Miranda?" How could he bring up the odd occurrence? When the lights stopped flashing, the lamp was like any other unplugged lamp. He turned the switch several times, but he couldn't get the unplugged lamp to light up like it had before. He couldn't explain it, not for the life of him. "I'll see you tomorrow." Steven grabbed his jacket.

"Yep, see you tomorrow."

Steven climbed into his car. *It was just an electrical malfunction. She probably has something work-related she forgot.* He hoped if he said it enough times, he would eventually believe it.

• • •

Twinges of guilt plagued Miranda. She made herself a cup of her favorite tea and sat down in front of the pile of papers, yellowed on the corners with age. She pulled out the police report and stared at the title for a few minutes. Daggers stabbed in her chest. Her eyes wandered down to her parents' names. She took a shaky breath and continued to read the details of her parents' death. *Clear night. Tire tracks. Tree. Mile marker 15 on Route 25. Dr. Alan Sheppard dead on arrival.* Miranda gulped her tea to hold back tears.

She leafed through the other papers. She pulled out a newspaper clipping from behind several of the top papers, an article from *The Davenport: Local Psychologists, Drs. Allen Sheppard and Joy Sheppard, in Fatal Auto Accident*. She ran her fingers over the photos of her parents with their hair in some crazy 1980s professional hair style. *Funny how different generations have their own sense of what looks good.* Her eyes wandered down the page. She gasped when she saw the

heap of twisted metal resembling the car from her childhood. It looked as if it had fused into the tree at the bottom of the mountain. She could see why her sister never shared this with her and almost regretted seeing it.

Miranda saw her sister's handwriting on a yellow sheet of lined paper from a legal pad. *Clear night. Not drunk. Halenbecker-no cause for the crash, not willing to look into it further. THINGS HAPPEN FOR A REASON!!!! Photocopies and accident-connection?????*

Halenbecker served as the chief of police throughout her entire childhood. Edward "Hal" Halenbecker had dinner over the house several times. She thought she heard Aunt Cheri mention that if it weren't for the fact that her brother-in-law consulted for the police department, he and Joy would still be at the bottom of the mountainside.

Miranda took the accident report, the newspaper article, and her sister's notes and put them into separate piles. She examined the colorful diagram that had caught her eye at the house. Her eyebrows furrowed. How could such an odd diagram have a connection to her parents' accident?

There were other diagrams, each as puzzling as the first. *Shapes in the Aura and Their Connection - Figure 10*, an illustration accompanying a "case" from the book. The "psychic" who worked on a man remotely detected a square over the man's right eye before the man revealed he was blind in that eye. The psychic also saw a WWI helmet from Germany. After a past life regression, the psychic reported that the man had lived a life as a WWI soldier and had been blinded during the war, all shared before the psychic learned of his blindness.

For *Psychic Tears in the Aura - Figure 21*, Miranda saw the tears noted in the different spots of the aura and the different physical ailments one could experience, as well as emotional and mental imbalances. She looked at the bottom of the photocopies. The only words there were *Id Speak*.

Miranda jumped when her cell phone rang. "Hello?"

“Hey, just got back. I see you were here, but you didn’t get much done. I’m checking on you to see if you’re okay,” said Alison.

“Yes, I’m okay. It was harder than I thought, but something came up.” Miranda glanced down at the pages.

“You mean, Steven? Did he stop by? He said he would try.”

“What is this, a conspiracy?”

Alison laughed. “Yes, and we’re all going tie you up and drag you down the aisle. I saw Steven at Dan’s house, and he asked for the house address, mentioning he might check in on you. It sounded like a good idea.”

“I knew you were involved somehow,” Miranda pouted.

“Miranda, someone is taking a great interest in you, and he is cute and nice. Why don’t you just enjoy it a while and see where it goes?”

Miranda laughed. “In other words, stop being a pain in the ass?”

“Well, um,” Alison giggled. “When you put it that way...”

“Yeah, don’t worry. I’ve got it covered. It was a very nice gesture, along with all of your efforts. But you have to start butting out now. I’m a big girl, and I can handle things on my own.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I realize what you are saying. We had a long talk. We’ll see what happens. Okay?”

“Okay, butting out, for now. My job here is done.”

The pride in her sister’s voice grated on Miranda’s ears. “Sheesh, Ali, you need a hobby.”

“Shut up. I have one. Do you know what it is?”

“What?”

“Getting married.”

Miranda laughed. “I can help.”

“Aww, really? Thanks, Mira.”

After a pause, Miranda said, “Ali, I hope you don’t get mad...”

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I promise. I found the papers.”

“What papers?”

"The accident report."

A long sigh. "Oh, those papers. I wish you hadn't."

"I do too, in a way. I have them here with me. Ali, what are those weird diagrams, and why would you think they were connected to Mom and Dad's death?"

"Hon, it's nothing. Ignore it. Mom and Dad were getting into some strange stuff right before they died. I thought maybe it had some sort of connection to their death, only because they were researching it right before their passing. It was easier than accepting that their death had no reason. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah." Miranda knew exactly what she meant. "Why did you give up on that idea?"

"Because I thought Mom and Dad would want me to focus on you rather than grasping at straws to find some remote connection for something I couldn't change, no matter what I found out. Everyone told me it was unhealthy to pursue it. As time went on, I couldn't deny it. I had my plate full anyway. Until I joined that show, skydivers really don't make very much, even as instructors, and even with the life insurance, so I focused everything I could to make our situation work. Make sense?"

Miranda sighed. "Yeah, I know I didn't make things easy on you either. I'm sorry."

"Hey, I always understood the pain you were going through. And listen. Don't concern yourself with those papers. I don't want you digging up painful things right now. It doesn't make any sense. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Mira, I'm serious..."

"I know, I know. I get it."

"Okay. Why don't we start cleaning the house together, maybe this coming weekend?"

"I'd love nothing more."

When Miranda hung up, she whispered to herself, *Sorry, Ali. For some reason, I can't let this go.* The photo of the accident drew her eyes

again like a magnet to metal. Maybe it contained the answers she needed. Or, maybe she'd feel closer to her parents. She walked to the other side of her table and opened her planner. She pointed to the next day: only one appointment in the afternoon before Steven would arrive at 6 P.M. Time enough to go to the site.

. . .

For the first time since her accident, Miranda had a tumultuous night of sleep. She dreamed of her parents' car careening down the mountainside into the tree from the photo. The scene remained on auto-loop until it melted into her crash, the crimson box truck's side yielding to her Cherry Red as the nose crumpled inward. She floated above as her body lay unconscious behind the wheel, reliving every moment of her crash she had all but forgotten.

*Am I dead?* She heard an annoying but familiar buzz in the distance. Its sound grew closer and closer. As she floated, dark clouds descended from the sky and blanketed everything below. *What is that? It couldn't be Heaven.*

When her alarm woke her, she had slept for a full half hour through its impetuous complaining, and it felt as if she hadn't slept a minute. The dream faded into the background. As she attempted to sit up, she squeezed her eyes shut due from blinding pain. *Probably from the lack of sleep.* When she swung her legs over the side of the bed, she winced. The pain worsened, and she got tunnel vision.

Her migraines had earned her the nickname "Little Grasshopper" from Dan. She told him when she had gotten her first one that she felt like a grasshopper because of the refracted vision.

Miranda made her way to her bathroom, painted and tiled all in white. She usually enjoyed the nice, clean look of the bathroom, but on mornings like these, with the sunlight streaming through the window, it blinded her. Wincing and shading her eyes, she opened

the cabinet and grabbed the little brown bottle of pills. Only pain like this could make her swallow those damn things.

As Miranda filled the glass of water, she felt a tickle at the back of her neck. When she looked up, a flash in the mirror, the figure of a man stood behind her. The glass slipped from her fingers, shattering in the sink into tiny pieces, distracting her enough to look down for a nanosecond. She looked up again. He had vanished.

*I better call Tanya and tell her to rearrange my appointments today. I have to go lie down.* She stumbled out of the bathroom. *This is a really bad one if I'm seeing things that aren't there.*

. . .

Miranda awoke on the couch. She heard the radio playing “Blinded by the Light.” She shook her head. Her parents used to listen to that song all the time. Who turned on the radio? Boy, she must have been out of it.

The pain and the halos had vanished. The grandfather clock chimed twice. She sighed and stood up from the couch. *Ugh, I hate losing my days to these migraines.* She pushed her arms through her favorite fuzzy button-up shirt and yanked on her stockings and jeans. No sense in freezing while she examined the accident site.

She grabbed her jacket, keys, and purse. On the way out, she pushed the button on the radio to turn it off. Miranda turned around. The radio switched back on again. She turned back around. She shook her head, staring at the radio. She pushed the button three times and turned it off. She made a mental note to call an electrician.

She walked through her little kitchen to the side door. She heard a bang behind her and then heavy footsteps. She gulped hard to abate her racing heart.

She whipped around. A towering, hulking man stood at the entrance of her kitchen. A pungent smell hit her nostrils. Her mouth watered. She resisted the urge to vomit. Her skin crawled with pins

and needles. The memory of where she saw him overwhelmed her: the hospital room after the accident, in the mirror earlier that morning. A strong shadow concealed his facial features. He walked toward her, his heavy boots thudding with each step.

Miranda's hands shook violently as she commanded them to unlock the dead bolt. Her breath grated along her throat as her mind screamed at her for not being fast enough.

Suddenly, all of the windows exploded in front of her. A foreign, guttural sound emanated from the center of her being. Little shards of glass stung as they wormed their way into her skin. Trickle of blood tickled her face and arms.

As she turned to face her attacker, she searched in desperation for a weapon, only to find nothing.

The stranger took an empty wine bottle off of the countertop and overtook her in three steps. She could not escape his towering stature. Before she had time to react, he raised the wine bottle in the air.

"Lights out," he growled. Miranda was certain the end had arrived as the bottle crashed on top of her crown, splitting her mind in two.