

As the van wound its way up the long driveway to her new residence, Annie peered out the window at the gray stone buildings, formidable in their austerity, unwelcoming, foreign. Not completely foreign. Annie knew the starkness of cement structures with innards of rigid walls and clanging sounds of metal on metal at both scheduled and unpredictable times of the day. The jail where she'd stayed for two months hadn't exactly been homey. On the outside, though, it achieved a snug fit into the city as one building among many others. This complex was different. The structures here were lackluster in their concreteness, and spread out. Fences surrounded the compound, complete with barbed wire. Yet the impeccable landscaping, the plush emerald grass that endowed some fortunate individual with a good-paying job, rendered the entire scene paradoxically misshapen.

To Annie, a prison seemed to serve as a prolonged and formal timeout, as if those sentenced to their punishments were nothing more than overgrown children. She remembered the articles she used to read for ideas on how to give her daughters a proper "timeout." No food, no toys, only boredom to keep them company, so they'd be compelled to think about what they'd done.

Annie would mull over what she'd done if she could. The evidence certainly had made it impossible to deny the truth, but she couldn't reconstruct that truth in her mind. Repressed memory was how her lawyer had referred to it during the trial. Hard to know what to call it when you're the one experiencing it. Penetrating blankness. A chunk of time that had escaped into a black hole in the middle of her brain. No matter how intensely she searched for the memory, it wasn't there.

She didn't read the papers, but her lawyer had thrown more than one across the room at her, frustrated with trying to get her to remember something, anything. When she tried, she could sometimes envision blurred movements, colors hemorrhaging into one another, then nothing again.

Annie wished now that she'd been clever and intuitive enough to create a lie about the act that her mind firmly declined to recollect. Her lawyer would have preferred it to the repressed memory defense. Something more substantial, with maneuverability. Maybe a credible lie also would have protected Lexi. It was Seth who used to say that mystery and the law made for bitter enemies. He always said if you didn't fill in the holes, they'd be filled in for you in a court of law.

He was right. Of course. He knew his domain well. Regardless of the truth revealed towards the end of the trial, and what Lexi had to endure to provide it, Annie's portrayal as a liar and superb actress had accomplished the necessary damage, giving the jurors the motivation they needed for their verdict, and the judge his reasoning behind her sentencing. Yes, ironically, a well-constructed lie at the outset of the trial would have stood up better as truth than the truth.

As the van stopped in front of the largest building of the concrete set, she felt the distance from everything she'd known. The city prison had been close in proximity to her home, the people she loved, the girls. She'd sensed her daughters' nearness, picturing them moving about in their lives. Annie prayed for them at night, any faith she had left in anything focused on them. And there'd been that slightest smattering of hope always present, tinged with darkness but hovering, dodging easily her attempts to push it away.

Now, the distance that had grown with every inch the van progressed towards this massive compound of sentences to be served deepened her silence. She was hundreds of miles from all that she knew, and it pronounced itself as she was led into this bleak ugly building. She vowed that the silence would be her steady friend here. It would keep her girls close, despite the distance.

Other thoughts began to invade Annie's mind as she stood at the entrance to the building while the people in charge organized their tasks into an ordered regime. She didn't notice what was going on, and she didn't care.

She did remember, with succinct clarity that played itself over and over again in her mind, discovering what Seth had done to Lexi. In one debilitating moment, she'd realized why her daughter had felt lost to her for months. Why her personality had descended to teenage angst with no warning. It was like her daughter had stepped out the door one day, and someone else had returned in her body.

Laundry. The basement. Not enough detergent in the world to wash away her discovery. She remembered the girls coming home from school, sending Sammy to go watch television, and Lexi knowing. Knowing what she, her mother, now knew. Frightened. Defeated. Lexi collapsing into her arms and a stabbing pain pulsing through her body as she held her daughter.

How many times she'd tried to remember the rest, a blanket of darkness blocking out any glimmer of a memory. She'd memorized the patterns of the blood on her hands, the blood around her, the knife. Seth lying next to her, face down in the blood, not moving. His face turned away from hers. His dark chestnut hair perfectly in place with that gel he'd used since she met him. His signature hair, the acme of his impeccable looks. She remembered thinking how he'd always worried about losing his hair and gathered pride as he didn't. She'd wanted to touch it, but she couldn't move. The cold was infiltrating her. A numbness.

As she sat in the squad car, ignoring the officers and their condescension, she couldn't stay in the present. Her mind wandered back, seeing Lexi as an innocent toddler with her potential visibly growing up inside of her, often ahead of her, ready for her before she was ready for it.

Another memory came to her, as she pretended she was alone in any car, not a squad car, not hearing the officers communicating through their bulky, high-powered radios. Lexi was ten, with her jet-black hair and intense gray-blue eyes, vibrant skin, taller than all the other girls in her fifth grade class. Thin and delicate. Very feminine. She informed Annie that she wanted to wear make up.

“Once you start wearing make up, you don’t stop. It’s a milestone. Once you grow up, you can’t be a kid again.” She tried to be nonchalant about it.

Lexi’s eyes blinked. She did that when she was absorbing new information. She’d always pause before saying anything. “The girls at school said I should try it. Well, Angela.”

Annie should have known it was Angela. Lexi was starting to develop, but Angela was almost done. It worried her, for Angela of course, but more for Lexi. “I’d say wait a while. If you really want to, I’ll help you. But just be a kid, honey. Enjoy it while you can. You never get to go back.”

Annie slumped against the back of the squad car. Lexi had listened to her, surprisingly. Now, though, at thirteen, Lexi couldn’t go back. Where would she go? Annie fumed. She was too young to know what she knew and too old to fit into her body, inexperienced at processing what it had endured. Annie wanted to explode, let the pieces blow all over the intersection where the officers were waiting for the light to turn green. Instead, tears fell down her face aimlessly, mixing with the blood on her sweatshirt.

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Annie didn’t even know the name of her new residence. She’d forgotten. She didn’t want to know. Did it matter? She couldn’t see her girls, and she’d told her mother not to visit. It was too far, she’d explained to her mother. And it was, but visits from her mother also would be excruciating, knowing she spent every day with her daughters and Annie couldn’t. The judge had ruled that the girls wouldn’t be allowed to visit her until they were each eighteen years old, and there would be no other contact as well. He claimed he was protecting them. From their violent mother incarcerated in a maximum security prison? She might hurt them with the guards watching?

Her mother had visited the city prison a few days before Annie had to leave for this place. It seemed long ago now. Annie had waited at the table in the glass room after the guard dropped her

off and staked his position outside the door. She saw her mother walking towards him. Her light reddish brown hair, colored to hide the gray, the gray more persistently than ever sneaking through the color. Her face pale, exuding a zombie-like exhaustion. Annie had never seen her mother look this way. Usually so pristine with not a hint of imperfection. She'd been unfailingly at all times the schoolteacher, requiring herself to be unruffled for dealing with young children, a mannerism that had continued on into retirement.

They searched each other's faces for clues to the truth. Annie could tell her mother didn't want to cry. She didn't believe in that abominable display. She expected a stiff upper lip of her students, her children, and most severely, herself.

"What am I going to do? Do you want me to appeal? What did the lawyer say?"

"She said I could appeal the verdict if I wanted to. It would take a while for all the paperwork to go through, and the dates to be set." Annie paused, wanting her mother to accept what came next. She knew she needed to say it without faltering. "I won't appeal. We've all been through enough. Especially Lexi. I want us out of the news. I want the girls free of all this. I want their lives to get back to some kind of normal."

"But they need you." Her mother's voice sounded feeble, but Annie didn't have the energy to console her. She and her mother had gotten closer since her father had died, but her mother still wouldn't vocally, or visibly, express that closeness. She understood her mother. She'd held the household together all the years Annie was growing up, and she didn't know how to quell her ferocity when she didn't need it anymore. Yet when Annie finally left Seth, and during the chaos that ensued, her mother's tenacious strength infused her with some of her own. She'd be good for the girls. Annie thought they needed her mother right now, just as she had.

"I don't know about that. It's not like I've been mother of the year or anything." Annie's voice sounded flat, lifeless, even to herself.

"You're still their mother. Even if you just appeal the sentencing, so you can see them. Or, my god, be able to write them letters at least."

“I don’t think they’ll change the sentencing unless the verdict is changed, and I don’t see that happening.” Annie felt exhausted, like the nights of empty sleep in the cold darkness were knocking on her brain, demanding to be replaced by ample rest.

“Don’t give up. Please. I’m fine taking care of the girls. It’s not that. But despite everything, they need you. I see a sadness in both of them, especially Lexi. They miss you.”

Annie winced when her mom mentioned Lexi. The chasm between Lexi and Annie had grown so deep during the past year, and now that she knew why, she ached to know what Lexi was thinking and feeling, to talk to her and hold her, edit and revise, to end up with something different, better. Annie strained for the calm she forced upon herself when her feelings became overwhelming.

“Annie, are you listening to me?”

“I’m sorry, Mother. I’m tired.” Annie took a deep breath. “We have to talk about something, okay? And I know you’re not going to agree with me on this one.”

“Why must you start it that way? Give me a chance.” Her mother’s eyes pleaded with her.

“Lexi needs therapy. I know you don’t think much of therapists, but Lexi’s been through too much to handle it on her own.”

“I never said I didn’t like therapists.”

“Mother, please. Okay. I’m just asking you to get Lexi some help. Somebody good. Somebody recommended for girls...who’ve been...sexually abused.” Annie could barely get the words out. She’d almost said “molested,” but that word she couldn’t stomach. Imagining it repulsed her.

“Well, she’s been writing, and she has a book about it.” Annie’s mother wouldn’t look at her.

“I know, but I think she needs more than that. Just try, okay? I know she’s tough right now, but just try to get through to her.” Annie started to cry. She knew her mom wouldn’t know what to do, but she couldn’t stop herself.

“It’s okay. I’ll do it. I’m sorry. I know,” her mother said, as she awkwardly patted Annie’s back.

“I want her to have a chance at a regular life,” Annie said, once she’d composed herself and drew back from her mother. “That’s the only way I can keep going. I have to know the girls will be okay. I know that puts a lot on you, but please. Do this for me.” As Annie wiped her tears away with her hands, her voice became a whisper. “Please.”

“Okay,” Annie’s mother whispered back, and touched her daughter’s arm gently.

The guard came in, indicating it was time for Annie to go back to her cell.

“I’m sorry.” Annie looked her mother in the eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say. I didn’t mean for all this to happen. I’ll write to you. Please write to me, and let me know...everything, okay?”

Her mother looked like she wanted to say something, but Annie knew she couldn’t. When she was younger, it was her dad who would hug her and soothe her tears. Annie had been determined to be different with her own daughters, and she had been. Now, though, she couldn’t be anything to her daughters.

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Finally, the first day was almost over, and there had been no dignity in any of it. That was the point, Annie gathered. She and the women she entered with were searched, removed of their belongings including their clothing, showered, and handed a uniform. She put hers on, robotically. The dark blue, short-sleeved, thin shirt with matching pants, each garment stiff and uncomfortable. The V-neck that assured no need for buttons or zippers, as if such an embellishment would be too easily transformed into a useful weapon. If Annie could have managed a smile at that thought, she would have.

Pictures were taken, the rules were reviewed. Annie barely paid attention until they got to the prison guard assignments. She knew this would be important, as she watched the guards line up for their orders. Most of the guards were stout, with thick middles difficult to hide in their uniforms, but

not too scary. Except for some of the more masculine-looking ones. These women were sturdy and strong, looking for a reason to use their underestimated physical prowess.

As she scanned the guards, one stood out. She was flawless in appearance, and Annie wondered why she was working here. She was attractive enough to be a model, without any makeup, tall and thin, with smooth tawny brown skin. Yet the unwelcoming look on her face would assure she'd never secure a modeling job. She radiated a conspicuous rage with her dark, brooding eyes and frigid expression, like death had found a home inside of her but decided to walk around and experience the world for a while. Annie wondered if maybe she'd built a shield behind her eyes, or if she'd always been made of stone. That was it. That was what she looked like when you looked in her eyes. Impenetrable granite. She knew the guards had to be hard to work this job, but this woman was hard in a different way. Hardened. Mean. Annie knew that look. Undoubtedly, she'd be assigned to this one. The others didn't look like they'd be as nasty or detached.

She was right. Punishment on top of punishment. Another sentence. Yes, she got Nasty. Nasty looked her over, and seemed about as happy with Annie as Annie was with her. They were even.

"This way," Nasty said, as she looked at her clipboard. "987523. I'll show you to where you'll be living." Perfunctory, turning, pointing.

"My name is Annie."

"You'll have to speak up, I can't hear you when you mumble."

"My name is Annie. Please don't call me by a number."

"Okay." Nasty paused, a purposefully discomforting pause. "Annie...Any other special requests?" Ah, sarcasm. Great.

"No." Annie dutifully followed the misplaced *Vogue* model down quiet colorless corridors, through what seemed like hundreds of keyed entry doors. They buzzed upon opening and then sealed shut behind those who passed through, as if sucking out all the oxygen as they closed, leaving none for the next space being entered. Annie felt vacuum-packed in a metal and stone interior. Nasty



finally stopped in the middle of a cement-floored central walkway flanked by steel-barred cells. Dark blue. To match their uniforms.

“Here you go.” Nasty unlocked a cell on the right, not numbered, no address. “Annie.”

Annie entered her cell slowly, unsure of each step. The blue bars of unbending metal gave way to walls of gray cement. So this would be her “room.” A narrow metal bed with a flimsy mattress rested to one side of the cell. The bathroom, or toilet that is, stood in the corner, near the foot of the bed. This wasn’t even as “accommodating” as the cell she’d had at the city prison. Smaller. Harsher somehow. More severe. Saying without anything needing to be said, you don’t deserve anything better.

Nasty started to walk away after she’d locked Annie’s cell behind her. Annie fought back something that wanted out of her. A sob. A guttural cry. (Maybe a yelp.) Suddenly, so that it surprised her, she didn’t want to be left alone. She turned quickly and asked, in controlled a voice as she could muster, “What’s your name?”

Nasty hesitated, seeming reluctant to turn around. But she did. “Tamika,” she said. “Tamika Jones. Anything else?” The woman made it clear with her chilly stare, though, that there was not to be anything else.

Annie shivered and turned away. Why did she care what this woman’s name was, anyway?

She curled back up in her safety net of silence as she heard Tamika walking away, the jangling of her keys fading as she reached the door, the keys being used, the buzzing sound, the vacuum-packed sucking in of the door as it closed behind her. The silence remaining whispered, validating her thoughts, *you are nothing*.

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There were no words to speak the sorrow between Lexi and her. What they’d both lost. But Lexi seemed to understand. Annie had been in awe of Lexi that day. She seemed strong at the trial

when she came in for her testimony. But after it was all over and they had to say goodbye, Lexi crumpled into her arms when they were alone. “Mom, please don’t let them do this. I want you to come home. It’s not fair. Sammy needs you. She screams and cries, and gets wild. Grandma and I don’t know what to do.”

Annie held her. Again, she didn’t know what to say. She couldn’t fight anymore. She knew she wouldn’t appeal.

“Lexi, we’re going to accept this. I want you to move on with your life. No more legal battles. No more testimony from you. You need to heal now.”

“But I need you to be there while I do. I can’t do this.” She started to whimper and suddenly seemed so young. “I hate that jury. Why can’t I visit? I don’t understand.”

Annie touched her daughter’s soft black hair and looked directly into her eyes, slate blue that seemed to change with the weather or her mood. She answered her daughter slowly. “I think they were thinking about you and your sister being away from any reminders of what happened.”

“Mom...”

“What, honey?” The “honey” had slipped out. How long had it been that she’d stopped using any terms of endearments with Lexi, due to the look on her daughter’s face of near hatred when she did?

Lexi struggled to say something, as if the words had to be formulated in her mind and spoken in another language. “Why? Why...did you do it?”

Annie waited, took a deep breath, and fought back her inclination to have the guard come for her. “I don’t know. I don’t remember it. All I remember is you. And knowing what he did. Then it’s a blank.” Her voice started to break, and she caught herself. “I’m sorry, Lexi. I’m so sorry.” She didn’t know what else to say. The guard walked in, like he’d read her mind. But now she didn’t want to go. It was as if someone was ripping her infant daughter away from her as she held her close to her body for the first time.

Lexi put her arms around her, and held on tightly, almost as if willing the guard to have to take her with them. She cried gently against Annie's shoulder. In that moment, Annie hated Seth, but she couldn't allow herself to be drawn into the rage encircling that emotion, and instead gently eased her daughter back and away from her, holding her face in her hands.

"Lexi, I can't change what I've done. Neither can you. We have to accept this. There's nothing we can do that wouldn't make everything worse." Annie tried to drink in this moment, knowing it would be the last time she'd see her daughter as a child. She couldn't think about it, though, not if she wanted to hold herself together.

"You need to keep being there for your sister, and she'll learn to be there for you. You two have each other, above all else." Annie paused. "I don't know if you ever saw it, but I had a quote above my desk. 'Making the decision to have a child...is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.' You and Sammy are my heart. When you think I'm far away and you're angry with me for that, I'm right there. I'm not far. You can still be angry. That's okay. But I will be loving you. Always."

Lexi looked at Annie with a weak smile, not hiding her wounds or fear very well, and not ready for the anger Annie knew would come in time. Her feet were heavy as she turned and walked out of the room. She didn't think she'd make it out, but she did. She willed herself not to turn back for one last look at Lexi; she couldn't do that to her daughter.

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As Annie lay on her mattress, her mind kept traveling back to memories that kept her daughters close. Good or bad, it didn't matter. She needed them with her in some capacity. In her thoughts would have to do. She wouldn't forget them. She wouldn't be without them.

She thought of a Saturday back in April. How long ago it seemed now, like years had passed, not merely months. Her workload at school had been lighter that weekend, a brief respite from her

usually steady stream of twenty-paged stringent writing assignments. And, since she and Lexi had been biting at the tension that had unleashed itself between them that week, Annie told her boss at the restaurant that she needed Saturday night off to spend time with her children. It was Thursday. She knew Jack had plenty of time to get someone else. As she walked into his small, cluttered office where he sat behind his desk, phone in hand, either a beginning or an end to handling someone or something, she knew she didn't need to beg him, or give him puppy dog eyes, like the other, more pubescent waitresses felt were necessary. She could be direct, which was a relief.

"Jack," Annie said. "I'm taking Saturday night off. My girls need me." Jack looked up. "Something's going on with Lexi. I can't figure her out these days." She tried to sound casual about it, but she also knew Jack had kids of his own, around Lexi's age.

"How old is she? Thirteen?" Jack thundered. An inside voice was impossible for him to manage, yet his naturalized bark worked well for running a restaurant. Behind the voice and the burly physique was a gentle man who'd offered his fair share of kindness to Annie. It hadn't gone unnoticed, since she knew it wasn't easy to come by.

"Thirteen going on miserable." Annie tried to smile as she said it.

"I thought that's what you told me. Not the miserable part, but thirteen, although they do go hand in hand." Jack laughed, and moved forward in his chair, his round face and intent brown eyes focusing on Annie. "Yep, that's when it starts. I can't even look at my daughter anymore. She gives me this 'What?' with serious attitude. She used to be so sweet."

"I don't know, Jack." Annie sighed. "This is different. She hides away in her room. She's lost interest in everything. She refuses to hang out with her friends."

"Really? That's the one thing my daughter does do, too much I think. Her friends seem to rank up there with everything good in her life. Her mother and I are the enemies."

"No, it's not like that with Lexi. It's almost like the Lexi I knew is gone, and this new one's moved in. But when I try and ask her if anything's wrong, or why she doesn't want to do anything, she gets angry and defensive. It's awful."

“I know that feeling,” Jack said. “But I’ll admit it, it bothers Lucy more than me. I think she’d like to put Caitie through a wall sometimes. No matter what Luce does, it’s wrong.”

“I know! I get frustrated because she won’t let me get close, but then she gets angry when I distance myself from her. I do that so I don’t say anything I’ll regret later, or to keep her from saying something she’ll regret later.” Annie sighed, thinking of the futility of her interactions with her daughter.

Jack’s phone rang. Before he morphed back into business mode, he said, “Annie, take the night off. Take them hiking or something. Drive to the beach for the day. Take them away from the world. Sometimes Caitlin will open up when I do that. It’s worth a try.”

“Thanks, Jack.” Annie smiled her gratefulness and turned to leave.

He waved with one hand as he picked up the phone with the other. “Sambino’s Restaurant. Jack here.”

Annie took Jack’s advice and decided to take the girls hiking for a day, no-fuss hiking so no weighted backpacks or supplemental canteens. Sammy was excited, and chattered the entire way there about her week at school, observations she made along the highway, and basically anything that popped into her unfettered mind. It was a two-hour drive to Conyngham Falls State Park in Maryland. Annie had taken them there when they were younger, and remembered its calming effect.

A lot had changed since the last time they’d gone, and although Annie thought all the change would be for the better, it hadn’t turned out that way, this excursion no exception. Lexi fuming because she didn’t want to go. Sammy filling up the silence in the car, maybe trying to bridge the distance growing between Annie and Lexi. Annie fighting away frustrated tears. Why can’t I fix this, she thought. Lexi and I never had problems like this. I can’t get to her. She won’t let me. She used to get over our disagreements almost effortlessly. Both of us would. Now, we can’t even talk to each other without it turning unpleasant. Annie felt defeated before they even made it to the park.

When they got there, Sammy jumped out of the car. “Which way do we go, Mommy?”

“Wait, honey. I think this way. You coming, Lexi?”

Lexi gave her mother a hard look. "Can't I just stay here and read?"

"Lexi, please. Just this one day. Can't you spend time with us? Can't we spend time as a family?"

"Oh, yeah, one big happy family. You never home, Sammy always jumping all over the place, talking everyone's ear off, all happy, and me here to keep everything together."

"Lexi, that's not true. You act like I'm never around." Annie was exasperated, but she wasn't giving in this time. "You know what, I'm not doing this. Let's go. Now."

They started walking on the trail up to the falls. The day was perfect. A slight April chill in the air, but the sun was shining, and the leaves were starting to bud out of hibernation. Annie breathed in deeply as Lexi dragged behind. She could hear the falls bubbling as they approached. Sammy scampered off, as if she remembered being there before, although she'd only been two years old then. She started climbing up the falls, stepping on each rock next to the water. The rocks formed a natural pathway leading up to the top of the falls. She scaled them with the quickness of a rabbit, but with the carelessness of a desperate dog trying to reach his master at the top.

"Be careful, Samantha," Annie called to her.

Sammy pushed her way up with her hands and then her feet. As she got up farther, her feet slipped out from under her, she landed flat against the rock she was climbing, and started sliding down. "Oh god!" Annie said, as she watched Sammy fall to the rock several feet below her and then lie crumpled up in a ball. Annie and Lexi both started running towards her.

"Sammy, are you okay?" Annie knelt down, lifted Sammy's body to her, and held her. She was crying. Lexi leaned over them. She stroked Sammy's hair.

"Mommy, my foot hurts."

"Okay, baby, let's see it. Do you think you can walk?" Sammy shook her head. "Give it a try, okay?"

Annie stood up with Sammy, and let her try to walk. She limped and whimpered, but Annie could tell she was okay. At least it didn't appear to be broken.

“Okay, sweetie, take it easy. Why don’t you go walk around on the smaller rock paths instead of climbing that big one for now?”

“Okay.” Sammy seemed hesitant to go at first, limped a little, then walked. Probably a twisted ankle that kids rebound from in minutes. Annie thought how lucky they were with their reservoir of resilience always present inside of them.

She turned to Lexi, who was standing next to her, subdued. “Okay, I’ll admit it. That scared me.”

“Me, too.” Lexi faltered, like she was floundering for words. “Mom, uh, you know...well anyway, I’m sorry about being so bitchy.”

“It’s okay.” Annie’s voice was soft, and careful. “Me too. Honestly, I’m not much better sometimes.” She smiled then paused, not knowing how to proceed. “I just don’t know what to do. You won’t let me close anymore.”

“I know. I can’t help it. I...” Lexi’s voice trailed off, and Annie could tell she wanted to chase after it but didn’t know how.

“What, honey?”

“I don’t know. I hear myself talking sometimes, and I can’t even believe it’s me.” When had Lexi’s eyes become so sad, Annie wondered. She looked older, like her eyes had seen something that darkened them, and the skin around them had to fight harder to keep them open. She didn’t remember her own teenage years being this difficult, but she hadn’t had to deal with divorce, and warring parents. Maybe the battle scars were beginning to show.

“I know it’s hard growing up, especially with how things have changed for us. But don’t push those away who love you. Me. Sammy. Your grandmother.” Annie paused, and felt she had to be fair. “Your dad.”

Lexi’s face went blank, and then turned ominous, like a storm that comes up so quickly you don’t have time to prepare for it. “Mom, you know what? You have no idea what it’s like growing up

today. You had it so easy. You weren't part of a broken family, being one place one weekend, one place another."

"I know that, I do. But you know what? Nobody's life is perfect." Annie wanted to kick herself for being so preachy, but she wanted Lexi to snap out of this incessant funk. Her self-pity was unbearable. "You've got to appreciate what you have, and not what you don't have. Concentrate on the good in your life, and try not to let the bad take over everything you do."

"Forget it, Mother. I don't need a silver lining lecture. Save it."

Annie cringed. Lexi never called her "Mother." It sounded intentionally frosty. She'd never wanted her kids to call her that, the name she called her own mother. Sammy started running over to them, just in time to break the ice, as if she knew.

"I guess her foot's okay. Miraculous recovery. Just another one of her ploys to get attention?" The spiteful Lexi had returned.

"Stop it, Lexi. I've had it, okay? Come on, Sammy, we need to head back to the car and get the lunch I packed for us." Annie tried to sound light, even though Lexi's instantaneous heaviness had bogged down the trip with a weight she couldn't pick up.

As they headed down the trail, Lexi dragging behind again, Annie couldn't understand what she'd done wrong. She wanted her daughter to be back to her old self, to see her laugh again. There had been a momentary reprieve where she almost made it past her daughter's defenses, and as swiftly as that moment appeared it vanished. Yes, her stupid Pollyanna approach had vanquished the only moment Lexi had given her in months.

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Annie felt the tears stinging behind her eyes, refusing to give into them as she lay on her mattress remembering that day. Lexi wanted to tell me, and all I could do was lecture her on making the best of everything. Make the best of what she was going through. Right. And as soon as she'd



mentioned Seth, Lexi had morphed into monster mode. Why hadn't Annie seen the signs? They'd been right there in front of her.

She heard keys turning in the door to the ward. The buzzing sound, the door closing, and then the *woosh*, like sardines being sealed into their assembly line cans. Someone was walking through. She could hear the padded footsteps, of more than one person. Annie rose from her bed and stood by the bars, standing back so as not to look eager or curious, insistent on remaining distant from the world here but not wanting to be alone in it. It was Tamika walking a woman back to her cell. Same dark blue uniform. But her face. Annie flinched. She tried not to stare, but it was hard to avoid the long, thin scars that curved around this woman's cheekbones down to her chin, and the straight scar across her forehead. Another thick scar ran down the length of her forearm. She winced at the excruciating pain these wounds must have caused at their infliction. This woman looked as if she'd been tortured. But then why would *she* be in prison? What had she done to be in here, when it looked like something had been done to *her*?

As the woman passed, she seemed to sense Annie in the shadows, and turned to smile at her. A warm and purposeful smile that didn't allow the option of turning away. This woman was intent on making a connection as Annie tried to conceal her bafflement that this woman could smile in spite of what everyone saw when they looked at her, her history of pain in no way private.

"Hi." The woman paused in her unrelenting path down the corridor. Annie moved closer to the bars, and rested her hands on them.

"Hi," Annie said, tentatively.

"I'm Lindsay," the woman replied, as Tamika stopped ahead.

"I'm Annie. I'm...new here." She didn't know why she said that, but she wanted this woman to know for some reason.

"I know," Lindsay said, tenderly. It felt like water in the desert where Annie had been lost for months. "It's nice to meet you. I have to keep moving along. Look at her with her hands on her hips. I'm coming." She rolled her eyes as she turned towards Tamika, but the guard didn't seem as

indifferent with Lindsay as she'd seemed about everything else that day. Annie could tell she was trying to hold back a smile. She might not have gotten the bad-luck one after all and almost breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“You’re not alone.” Lindsay put a reassuring hand over Annie’s on the bar. Annie reflexively almost pulled away but didn’t. The touch was too quick to refuse anyway. Annie could manage only a nod. Of thanks? Acknowledgment? Affirmation? She didn’t know.

Lindsay nodded in return, as if she knew what Annie didn’t. She turned then, and kept walking. Annie listened while Tamika opened another cell, closed it, and then *wooshed* through the door at the other end of the hall. She went back to her bed and lay down to try to sleep. As she closed her eyes, Lexi’s face appeared in front of her. The sorrow. Then little Sammy, with her bubbly voice. Both of them trying to tell her, show her. What? Would she ever know? Did she already know?

She whispered them a penitent goodnight as the darkness moved over her and sleep forgave her.