

"The Cave"

"But you said I could! You said I *could!*" Two wet and glossy eyes peered up between damp lashes, pleading but mistrusting.

"Plans change, Johanna!" The clink of ice huddling down into the bottom of a glass accompanied this pronouncement. Johanna's mother stood before her at the kitchen counter, the marble countertop stretching cold and long between them. She ran a thin, slightly shaking hand through her fading blonde hair. Her mouth settled down into the faint frown lines beneath her cheeks. She was a tall, very thin woman with eyes that used to be called bright. They were tired now and slightly lost, perpetually giving the impression they were seeing the world only through some unfathomable depth of sorrow. She moved to the sink at the other end of the large and empty kitchen, cringing away from the tortured look given to her by her daughter. She stared for a moment at the washed-out November afternoon out of a tall white window. The backyard grass waved feebly in the chilly wind, eventually blending into the pale sand of the beach beyond the yard. She twirled the golden contents of her glass absentmindedly. Eventually she turned back to her daughter, adjusted her tone, and explained softly,

"You can't be with your father this Christmas. And I'm sorry. I really am. But you can't."

"But I want to be with Poppa!" cried the girl, hysteria on the surface of her voice. "I always want to be with Poppa," she added in a small whisper, watching the effect of these words play across her mother's face.

"You can't be. And that's the *end* of it, Johanna," said her mother in a clipped and final tone.

“I hate you” Johanna spit, turning on her small heels and running from the hollow kitchen.

The force of her fury carried her from the house out into the yard. She shrugged on her yellow raincoat as she walked, her fingers fumbling with the smooth red buttons. The dead grass crunched under her boots before she reached the soft white sand at the edge of the beach. She looked back for a moment to see if her mother saw her leave the house, but the kitchen windows were the only things staring back at her, empty and blank and dead.

Johanna missed the one small face that did see her. Sitting in his own window above the kitchen, bordered by light blue shutters, Quinn alone watched the little yellow figure crossing the empty beach. A wooden train, freshly painted a glossy red, fell from his small fist with a thump on the thick carpet floor.

“Jonna!” he yelled out to the empty room, but the heavy curtains absorbed his little cry, leaving a deep and sterile silence behind it. The little boy pushed himself from his seat by the window and onto his chubby little legs.

Johanna’s legs knew where she was going before she did. They led her along the beach where the sand turned into speckled grey pebbles and tufts of stiff grass. The beach had a cold beauty this time of year, the waves all crisp and sharp, the sky a solid pale grey like an enormous sheet of metal stretched across the sky, imposing its greyness on all the earth below it. Johanna saw her destination coming up ahead. Here, the beach turned from pebbles and rocks into large boulders and craggy ledges. She remembered, despite the warnings of her parents, climbing and playing here as a child. The uneven boulders pressed up against each other, creating the perfect holes for small children to slip into during particularly desperate rounds of hide-and-seek. She had discovered, one heavy summer

afternoon, that one of these holes drops down into a narrow stone cavern. She hoarded this secret spot from the other children, keeping it as her own private haven. Ever since that day, Johanna returned to this little cavern when she felt the vast beach house threatened to suffocate her under its bright white walls. She slipped down into the little hole now, her 13-year-old body still lithe enough to wiggle down the slick stone.

Behind her stumbled along the tiny figure of Quinn, his bright red sweater covered in tiny balls of wool standing out against the solid grey stone. His small feet faltered on the jagged rocks, but he kept his eyes locked on his big sister, his repeated calls to her whipped away by the savage wind.

Johanna sat on the wet stone floor of the cave, letting her hair grow damp against the wall, relishing the cool, moist, salty smell of the place. She jerked alert after a moment, hearing a shuffling above her. She peered above her and saw, with a sickening slick feeling in her stomach, the figure of Quinn climbing down into the cave.

“Quinn!” she shouted. “What are you doing? Stop!”

The boy looked down at her, uncomprehending. Why would his sister not want him to come play with her? One small hand clung to an out-hanging rock, one small foot dangling two feet above the next foothold. Quinn tried to move his foot down but found nothing but slimy-smooth rock. His foot floundered, scraping uselessly against the wall.

Johanna saw what happened next through a red haze of immobilizing fear, Quinn’s helpless cry drowned in her own shriek of agony. Quinn’s body appeared suspended in the air for a fraction of a second before his head slammed against the rock with a sickening thump and his limp body fell down into the cavern below.

Johanna collapsed beside him, scooping up the lifeless toddler, pressing her clammy hands uselessly against the gash in his head, the hot, wet blood flowing over her fingers, staining his little red sweater a deeper crimson.

“No. Please no. Oh dear God, please no. Quinn. Quinn,” sobbed the girl, clutching her brother to her chest and mingling her tears with his blood. She pressed her ear to Quinn’s heart, her own heart skipping a beat as she heard his still beating, faintly, against his chest.

“Oh thank God,” she cried. She looked above her, spotting a weak grey light at the entrance of the hole. She saw immediately the impossibility of climbing out with Quinn still in her arms. But her arms convulsed around his body at the thought of putting him down. She could hear, down a small crevice at the bottom of the cave, that the tide was coming. She could hear the force of the heavy water, and knew it would flow through the tunnel and fill the cave. Standing and sucking a shuddering breath into her chest, Johanna screamed. She screamed until the scream consumed her and she was no longer a girl—she was just a scream in a stone hole. Eventually, Johanna’s voice gave out in a hoarse little whimper. It was then that a dark and heavy cloud descended upon her, and she sat down on the floor. It was not a surprise, really, that water had risen to her knees while she had been screaming. She rocked in the frigid water, pressing her ear again to Quinn’s tiny chest. The beat was faint now, almost gone. His bright life no longer in his chest, but on her hands, smeared down her face and soaked through her clothes.

“Shh, shh. It’s okay Quinn, it’s okay. Don’t be afraid, okay? Don’t be afraid,” she murmured into Quinn’s ear, brushing back his soft blonde hair, now matted and red. She stood again and braced herself, clutching Quinn to her fiercely.

The woman stood shaking and swaying in the harsh light of the examination room. Nothing now looked out from behind her eyes, and she responded to the police officers in an automatic and muted voice, always appearing baffled each time she looked around her and remembered where she was.

An officer led her into the examination room. He touched her shoulder tenderly before pulling the blanket away from the body.

“Yes,” the woman choked out. “Yes, that’s her.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss ma’am,” the officer said, meaning it. Rescue boats had located the girl’s body early that morning, the body having been pulled by the tide from the cave out into the sea. They had not found the boy.

“I..” the officer hesitated, “I’m not supposed to give you this ma’am, officially, you know, but...but I think you should have it. It was...we found it clutched in your daughter’s hand when we brought her in.” He pulled from his pocket a small red ball of wool.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you.”