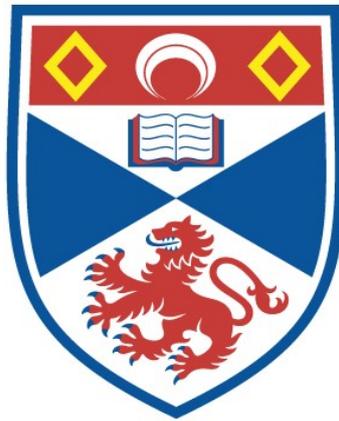


MY GIRL: A NOVEL THE FIRST TWELVE CHAPTERS

Jessica McFarland

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MFA
at the
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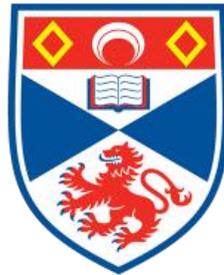
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My Girl: A Novel The First Twelve Chapters

Jessica McFarland



University of
St Andrews

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts (MFA)

at the University of St Andrews

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Abstract

Ginny Moore is seventeen in the winter of 1950 when she gets hit by a car in a freak accident, resulting in the amputation of her legs from the knees down. The accident sets the scene for the novels' themes to expand and interact: Ginny must come to terms with living her life disabled, losing her dream of winning a math scholarship and attending university, and whether her faith in God is inherited or inherently her own.

The small Virginian town in which she lives still deals with the emotional and physical scars of WWII. Due to her injuries, Ginny starts identifying with local veteran Raymond Bennet, believing he's the only one who can really understand how she feels, despite all she hears pointing to the contrary. Additionally, she's blind to her father's potential to help her through her trauma. She idolizes him but fails to see his struggle with depression from his experiences as a soldier during WWI, and how she could relate to him on a deeper level.

Chapters One through Twelve set the groundwork for the climax and falling action in the ensuing chapters. Ginny's existing relationship with her mother and long-time friend Sandra are tested, her new relationship with crush Bobby is overshadowed by Sandra, and Nurse Wallace—the only person who treats Ginny normally—leaves. The sudden, climatic, death of her father brings all these relationships to a crisis point and compels Ginny to examine the realities of her beliefs and whether she'll trust in herself or God.

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My Girl

Chapter One

When Raymond Bennet returned home in the fall of '43, I stared like everyone else as he walked down the aisle at church Sunday morning. A crutch under his right arm and his empty pant leg neatly pinned up. He sat on the pew with his stump thrust over the edge—all I could see was that stump. Raymond looked forward with a blank stare, ignoring everyone; even his mother who wouldn't let go of his arm. Pastor Haywood's sermon that morning is forever lost to me as I kept imagining Raymond's stump sprouting like a sapling and growing a new leg. Night after night I dreamt of how Raymond lost his leg. There was a grenade, machine gun fire, a bayonet, a mine, and shrapnel from artillery. The following Sunday, after the sermon, I walked up to Raymond and asked if his leg had been sawed off with a bayonet or blown off by a howitzer.

Mrs. Bennet paled, tightening her grip, and the old lady who always sat in the pew behind us passing gas said it wasn't polite of me to ask. Raymond motioned me toward him, leaned on his crutch, and placed his lips to my ear. Stale whiskey accented the words he whispered to me. "A German general," he said, "ate it while I slept in my fox hole."

My face must've blanched because Mrs. Bennet looked at me worriedly. "Raymond," she said, yanking on his sleeve, "what did you say to her?"

He only straightened and kept my stare.

"What'd you do when you woke up," I asked breathlessly. Everyone leaned in to hear what he'd reply.

"I shot the bastard."

The old lady flatulated so forcefully in her shock that the parishioners didn't know which act was more disrespectful.

Raymond Bennet was right to make that response. No one understands until they do. You can say whatever you want, and they'll nod their heads and blab about how they understand, how they *know*. But they can't quite look at you straight; they can't grasp your silence; they can't fathom your pain. I wish I could see Raymond again, not only to redeem my eleven-year-old self, but to

be with someone who does know. It doesn't matter that six years have passed since that moment. A simple look and we would understand each other.

Sometimes, I wake in the middle of the night because of a foot cramp and as I reach down to massage it there is nothing. Then I remember the loss and fall back on the pillow and stare at the hospital ceiling because I can't bear the thought of looking at my legs and realizing once more they are no longer there.

They weren't particularly nice legs—skinny and a tad knobby—but now that they're gone, well, I'd take them back if there were hooves instead of feet at the end of them. Does Raymond feel the same? Would he mind a hoof for a foot if it meant he could run or dance? At least he's got his other leg, he can still hobble about on his own. I can't even hobble. They chopped off both my legs without a second thought. Nobody asked me if it was okay. Or did they? Did I tell them that it was okay to saw them off, that I'd rather live without them than die with them? I can't remember.

I can't remember much of anything. The accident is a blur of screeching and grit. The only sensation I remember, and this briefly, is the wetness of the snow and ice seeping through my wool coat. The rest is gone. And sometimes I don't really know if I want to remember. Time is all jumbled and I don't know if it's been a week or a month since the accident, but I do know they didn't amputate right away.

When I first woke, I was in the hospital—the lights bright and searing—and I saw the throbbing mash of muscle and bone that were my legs. That's when I thought the pain would kill me, and I immediately embraced the darkness again.

The next time I woke I could barely draw breath. Someone had put an anvil on my chest, and I was delirious with the desire to push it off, but my mind was crowded with the image of only one throbbing mash coming into sight as the nurse propped me up with pillows. My right leg was gone, and the left soon followed.

Breathing is easier now, but there's still the cough and chest pain which I'm told is the lingering aftereffects of pneumonia. My gaze fixates on the ceiling of the hospital room, and I know it intricately now. The smooth cool places, the places with slight discoloration, the place where the spider tries to weave its web despite a janitor coming in every other day and sweeping it away with his feather duster.

My gaze has traveled around the room and knows it well. I often shut my eyes and project an image of the room in my mind and place everything exactly where it is in reality—an attempt at entertainment. It's barely even a distraction. Still, directly opposite my bed is a framed poster of an oil painting depicting a scene from farm life. A red barn rises to the right of the frame, the loft's hay door is open, and two bales barely peek out. The barn door is also open but there's just a murky blackness inside; no animals are at home. A grassy paddock with an oak tree edging the left side of the frame is in the foreground. The paddock is oddly empty of animals and the rolling fields in the background are dotted only with haybales. There isn't an animal in the entire painting, which seems to me to be a rather large oversight.

To my left is another bed which has been rotating patients. Opposite that bed there's also a framed poster of a painting. This one is of a simple wooden fence in a field. I don't know if it's holding anything in or keeping anything out. The staff want to give the patients something to look at, I suppose. But they're placed so that we can never escape them. That's why I'd rather stare at the ceiling. I can't see what's outside the window on the left wall. It's probably just the parking lot, but it'd be kinda nice to watch people coming in and out. I could see them, but they couldn't see me. There is a window on my side of the room, but it just shows the hallway and visitors always peer in as they pass. There's no such thing as privacy here. It was through that window that I first saw Pop and Mother.

Things were hazy and it took me a bit to focus on their faces. I blinked hard twice, and as visual definition returned, I saw Pop's smile and he moved to come in. Mother didn't move. He pulled gently on her arm, but she didn't budge. That's when I locked eyes with her. The only word I can use is horror. Just as it was fixed on her face the image of it is fixed in my mind.

Pop managed to guide her through the door, but that's where she stayed. He came and sat in the chair next to the bed. She stood by the door horrified. Mother had never looked horrified in her life and there she was looking at me like I had turned into something she didn't know, couldn't comprehend. Like I was some creature from the abyss come to haunt her.

I wanted to cry but I felt a type of horror rising in myself that choked any tears. A horror that I had become a horror to my mother.

Pop kissed my forehead and thanked the Lord with tears in his eyes that he saved my life, and that he does so every day.

“Donna,” he said, beckoning her.

She tore her eyes from me and looked at his outstretched hand. “I can’t,” she whispered, shaky and pale.

“Donna,” he said again.

“It’s too much, Harvey.” The words hung in the air as she slowly left the room.

Pop took my hand in his. “Your mom,” he began, “she loves you so much that this has nearly broken her. Don’t hold her behavior against her, give her some time. If she could take away your pain she would, you know that.”

I looked at him but all I saw, and all I do see, is her horrified eyes.

“I’m here, Ginny. And don’t forget the one who’s always with you.”

The one who’s always with me.

I stare at the empty paddock in the fake painting, still trying to forget that scene. Was it a week ago, two?

I love Pop, and part of me admires his solace in God, but I can’t find the same comfort. I feel a remarkable amount of nothing. Like my faith was amputated right along with my legs. Honestly, I don’t think there was much to amputate anyway.

Pop’s faith never falters and neither does Mother’s faith in Pop. I can’t blame her for trusting so strongly in Pop, I have more belief in him than I ever did in God. He’s never given us cause to doubt. As a rational person, I know he isn’t perfect. He does have the annoying habit of smiling at everything and going, “Well now . . .” and he does suck his teeth after dinner. Whenever Mother makes corn-on-the-cob, I make sure to set the jar of toothpicks in front of his plate as a reminder. But really, those are silly faults and I can’t fault him for them.

I used to fault my parents for being so old. I didn’t realize how old they were until I saw other children with their parents. Mother was forty-one and Pop was fifty when they were blessed with a miracle child. I often think that child is someone other than me the way they go on about her. Perhaps, in the innocence of infancy, there was a glimmer of a miracle in me, but that miracle belongs to all children just born into the world. I can’t really claim any uniqueness regarding that. Pop always insists that I should have died soon after I was born because I was so small.

“Barely five pounds,” Mother would whisper to herself after he said this.

The dripping of the IV bag fills my vision until the drip is so close that the splash shakes my brain. I shift my head and stare at the ceiling again—blank and smooth. Lucidity returns as the ceiling smooths my mind into a reflection of itself. I take a deep breath and immediately regret

doing so as I heave with coughing; my fractured ribs scream, and the drip fills my vision again. “Barely five pounds...”

I always thought they called me a miracle child because they were so old compared to most parents and I was so small compared to most children. They had wanted a child so badly that when I came they thought me a miracle. They often talk like that of a Sunday evening, after a day of reflection and relaxation. It’s the only time I’ve seen them get sentimental and they always talk about how unlikely I was to be born, but lo and behold. I’ve really only viewed their talk as sentimentality and, perhaps, too much love.

Mother was always there, hovering over me with her big arms and anxious eyes. I frequently got colds as a kid, and she’d always tuck me in bed—swaddled in a hill of blankets—plying me with soup and stories. Only stopping to refill the hot water bottle or to get me more ‘liquids’. I used to hate her anxious eyes as the moment I saw them I knew she’d say, “Perhaps you shouldn’t go, after all” or “I’d think it’d be better if you stayed home with me”. I wouldn’t mind if I saw them now, especially because they finally have something to be anxious about. If she’d just open the heavy hospital room door, walk in with a wavering smile, and sit next to me and say how good it is that I’m getting enough liquids.

Every time I come back from drifting, I feel the strength leaking out of my body one agonizing minute at a time; the fears of a future lost and the fears of this new strange future sit in my mind like lead and I let myself drift off again—to forget.

But one thought never leaves me. If God was going to bring my life to such a point, why did he even let the miracle child be born in the first place? If Mother can’t look at me, wouldn’t it be better if she never had? If Pop cries over me, wouldn’t it be better if I were never here for him to cry over? It would have saved my parents so much pain if the unlikeliness of my being born had been true. At the very least, God could have spared Pop.

Pop looks at me now, through the window of my hospital room, though he thinks I’m asleep. I watch him through my eyelashes until he leaves. He’s been talking with Dr. Deering. I suppose they’re discussing whether it’s safe enough for me to go home. I do hope to sleep in my own bed soon. The man down the hall screams awfully bad at night and the woman in the bed next to mine won’t stop talking about how her appendix burst just like her father’s, and her brother’s,

and her aunt's, and her aunt's cousin, and her aunt's cousin's cousin. She's rather proud of the fact, I think. She told me last night that her daughter is sure to have hers burst as well.

"I wonder how it will happen," she had said, staring at the ceiling dreamily. "I hope it won't be like mine. It happened to me while I was on the toilet. There's not much romance in that. Perhaps, she'll be walking along a busy street, and it will hit her suddenly. She'll clutch at her abdomen and cling to a light pole for support. In that moment, as no one pays her any heed, she'll think she's likely to die in the gutter like a hobo. Oh, but then, but then a strong arm takes her and lifts her to himself. He'll take her running all the way to the hospital and she'll wake to his dripping brown eyes pooling down at her. Wouldn't THAT be romantic?"

"Oh!" She clapped her pudgy hands together. "And it could be raining! Rain makes everything so much more romantic. And not to worry, they wouldn't catch pneumonia like you did. Although, I heard the nurse say it was the rolling about in the ice and snow that did you in. You shouldn't go about doing that. Of course, my daughter would have to get rid of that husband of hers somehow, because the handsome stranger is much nicer than he is. Her husband's got ears that go all the way out to here." Her hands stretched dramatically away from her head until they were about a foot out. "Whenever I mention it to her, she just says, 'Well, Cuthbert's heart is twice as big as his ears.' I wonder if that's how he'll go? Do you think it could just pop right through his chest?"

I stared at her blankly and she said, "Don't worry dearie, no need to speak. I can see how romantic you think it is and I suppose Cuthbert's heart will explode someday. That's how his grandfather went. He was just walking down the street and, pop, off it went like a rocket. His wife was completely scandalized. I suppose it wasn't a very dignified way to die as he'd fallen face first into a pile of horse manure. But such is life." At that point she had looked at me pitifully then wiggled her toes as if doing it for the both of us.

I can't turn and must lay on my back so I can always see her globular form out of the corner of my eye. I shut them like I'm going to sleep so I won't have to see her pity, though I can feel it emanating from her bed as if it has its own life force.

What must it be like to be her daughter? A woman who wants your husband dead so you can marry a stranger, just because it'd be more romantic. No matter how silly she is, she still said it. How can her daughter bear to be seen in public with her? The pudgy lady gives me the

impression that the stream of ludicrous commentary pouring from her mouth is as constant as the sea.

At least I've never had cause to be embarrassed by anything Mother's said in public. She might look a bit dowdy, but she certainly isn't ridiculous. The pudgy lady is overtly silly, from her outlandish appearance to her equally outlandish personality. Mother looks like a sensible woman from 1939 who hasn't realized twelve years have gone by and that sensibilities have changed.

So, what was it that made her change her sensibilities that night? Why didn't she wring her hands and say the roads were too dangerous or that I might catch cold? That I should stay where it's safe. What made her say yes?

Did she, somehow, expect what I expected? But how would she have known about Bobby and why would she even want anything to happen with him? Maybe she simply weakened and thought I should have a night of fun for once. I wish she had said no. She'd said it so many times before, she should have said it that night.

The drip in the IV bag fills my head again.

I'll always laugh from now on when someone complains of being uncomfortable. 'This blouse is uncomfortable,' or 'This chair is uncomfortable.' I'll howl. There's something about the word chronic that makes it suited to only describe physical discomfort. Chronic. That will be my life word. Chronic pain, chronic discomfort, chronic irritation, chronic, chronic, chronic. Searing will make an appearance semi-regularly, but, of course, searing is only connected with pain. Discomfort can't be searing. Pain brands your body and your mind—sears your soul.

A nurse comes in to check on the pudgy lady, briefly smiling at me as she swooshes past.

"How am I doing today, dearie," the pudgy lady asks spritely. "Will my appendix burst again?"

"No. You don't have one anymore. We removed it, remember?"

She looks crestfallen. "Well, no doubt my gallbladder will go next." She sighs dramatically. "My uncle had to get his removed. His skin turned a horrible shade of yellow, but then a friend of mine got her gallbladder removed and her skin hadn't turned any colors. I think she just had some tummy pain." She looks up from examining her skin to probe the nurse with her eyes which are so serious it's silly. "Can you catch a bad gallbladder from someone? Even if you aren't related?"

The nurse replaces the chart at the foot of the pudgy lady's bed. She's either repressing a laugh or the desire to bang her head against the wall. "No, you can't catch a bad gallbladder from anyone."

"My uncle couldn't have given it to me?"

"No, it would be impossible."

"Hmm, well, never say never is what I always say."

"I'll be back later when your husband gets here. You get to go home today, remember?"

"Oh yes, that's right." She sounds a bit disappointed. The nurse leaves without waiting for the pudgy lady to elaborate.

She looks at me and elaborates. "My daughter is making the house all welcoming, I expect. She's got a real knack for arranging flowers. In the summer she picks them from her garden; I hate to think of her having to buy flowers for me." Her face takes on a cheery appearance. "My neighbors must be busy making casseroles and soups for me. Good neighbors are such a treasure, don't you agree?"

I look at the ceiling. She's waiting for me to agree.

Giving up, she says, "I can tell you have the exact same sentiments." She pauses but it doesn't last. "My husband is an absolute doll, isn't he? If he were a bit younger, he'd lift me in his arms and carry me all the way home! He's much more romantic than Cuthbert." Her voice turns sour. "Oh, Cuthbert. Anyway, you liked him, didn't you? My husband of course, not the other one."

He seemed perfectly normal when he visited yesterday but then he did marry her, so, there must be something loose upstairs. I had woken up to her telling him that it was a shame that my legs had to go like they did (as if they went on vacation and decided to stay there), but that it was a mercy I was so tiny because Pop was too old to be lifting anything much above ninety pounds. "Poor thing will have such a dismal little life now," she had said. "No one will want a girl who looks like that."

I guess a girl with no legs is not as romantic as one with appendicitis or a bad gallbladder.

"No, I suppose not." Her husband had said. "But she does have a cute nose." It was nice of him to say so, but any nose compared to his wife's would be considered cute. Though she herself, like I've mentioned, is quite pudgy her nose rises from the flat of her face like a toucan's. You

could also describe it as mountainous. So, he must be a very generous man. It'd require a generous heart and a blind eye to marry her.

"I'm glad you liked him, dearie," she says as if I gave her an in-depth response—or any response. "He liked you too." She sighs. "He liked your nose."

I hazard a glance and she's going cross-eyed trying to see the tip of her nose past her bridge. That bridge is impassable. Before she can catch my glance, I turn my head toward the IV bag and watch the drip hurtle toward the pool of liquid.

"Well, I best catch a quick nap so I'm nice and strong when it's time to go. Oh, it looks like you've beat me to it. Sweet dreams, dearie."

A man is in the hall, staring at me through the window like I'm an exhibit at the zoo. I stick my tongue out at him. He jumps and moves along. Two other figures appear in the window, their backs are to me as they consult with each other. They move and the door to my room opens.

Dr. Deering comes into the room with a soft smile. "How are you this afternoon, Ginny?" He looks at me expectantly as he's done every day since I've been here—four weeks, five? I am tired, weary to my soft bones, and wish to bring the blue blanket over my head and disappear from this life.

"You should really try and talk soon," he says in a fatherly tone. "It will cheer you up, and it will make your parents mighty happy to hear that sweet voice of yours."

I don't see any point in talking. Once I start, everyone will begin peppering me with questions and queries. 'On a scale of one to ten, ten being excruciating, what number would you choose to categorize your discomfort when I press here'. Pop and Mother will want to know the details of how the accident happened. 'Why were you in the street?' 'Were you walking home?' 'Why didn't Bobby drive you?' And so on, and so on, ad infinitum. Right now, it's much easier to say absolutely nothing.

A new nurse walks in, fresh and lovely. Dr. Deering glances at her. "Ah, Miriam, there you are. Ginny, this is Miriam Wallace. She's to be your nurse for a few weeks while you get settled in at home. She has experience with injuries like yours and assisted me during your surgeries." He grins at me again. "You'd like to go home, wouldn't you? I'm sure you're tired of my hospital. Now, I was talking to your dad this morning and we think we can get you home this week. How does that sound to you?"

It sounds wonderful, although, the ceiling in my bedroom looks like an old man's hand—yellowed and crisscrossed with veins of cracked paint—not smooth and cool-white as the one here. It won't be as calming to look at in the gloom of night.

They both look at me, optimistic that this news will surely make me speak. “Well, I'm sure you'll be much more comfortable in your own bed,” he adds as I remain silent.

Nurse Wallace smiles at me, but it's not plastered on like the other nurses. There's a shrewdness behind it that intrigues me. She's probably thinking she'll make me talk. Well, she'll have to kill me first.

Chapter Two

Mother cleaned my room. She must've been cleaning the entire time I was in the hospital. By no means am I a pig, but Mother loves scrubbing and scouring, and I never quite come up to her standards. There's not a speck of dust anywhere and the floors look polished. Now I can use it as a mirror. All the papers on my desk are in neat piles; my books arranged from height on my bookcase; my records are in their sleeves, and my armchair has been brushed free of cookie crumbs.

The dresses I'd flung everywhere that day trying to figure out which one would look best have been rehung. Somehow, everything is where I'd put it as if I had done the tidying. It's a stranger's room now, yes, but I know exactly where everything is. It belongs to a stranger who had her life planned out; a stranger who believed her future hinged on one thing; a stranger who thought if she wore the right dress it would change everything. That girl no longer lives here and, somehow, I'm in her place. Her dreams are no longer mine. Her future is someone else's, but here I am anyway.

Here I am in this strangeness that is still, somehow, comforting. Strange because I'm a stranger, comforting because I have that stranger's memories. And now that I'm here, what do I do?

I cry.

I cry and I think I might cry all night. I cry despite Nurse Wallace's sleeping form on the cot across the room, because being here is too much of a relief and too much of a pang for me to care. The tears run down my cheeks and pool in my ears. I don't sob because it will hurt too much, my ribs protest every time I take a deep breath, so I just cry tears and sniffle miserably. Crying in the hospital was impossible. Always there was someone around, checking this, poking me here, poking me there. Mother trying not to look at me through the hospital window. Pop praying by my bedside.

Even at night I was never alone. Before the pudgy lady, a man recovering from hypothermia was next to me. He'd thrown himself into a lake the day after Christmas. His pretty wife came every day and read heaps of poetry to him, but he just stared right past her at the wall. So, I stared with him in a weird desire for solidarity. His wife would kiss him on the cheek then rest her own on his for a moment before she got up. After adjusting her skirt and putting on her

hat, she'd smooth his bedcovers and tell him that he'd be better soon and not to forget about Timothy who sent him his love. I guess Timothy is their son.

He never talked nor cried nor sighed, nor did he sleep. Every time I woke during the night from pain or from vision-like dreams of wounded soldiers hobbling through my mind, he'd be sitting in his bed, propped up by multiple pillows, staring unblinkingly at the wall. I couldn't bear to cry in front of him and break the silence. It would have felt sacrilegious somehow. So, I've held it in all this time but now that I'm in my own room I can't bear it anymore. So, I cry.

My body hurts in new ways after being jostled in the transportation process. The male nurse with the giant mole on his neck kept telling me to relax as he put me in the wheelchair, as the driver stopped too quickly at a stop sign, as he carried me upstairs, and as he laid me on my bed. Relax. How can I relax when my body is screaming bloody murder? Relax, relaxation, relaxing—they've all been scrubbed from my vocabulary of future physical possibilities.

The thing is, it sometimes feels like they're still there—my legs. And I can't tell anybody because they won't believe me. How can you feel something that isn't there? They'll think I've gone crazy. And it doesn't just feel like I could wiggle invisible toes, but like my missing limbs are angry at me for letting them go. So instead of simply giving me the illusion that I could stand up and walk, they light themselves on fire and watch me sweat from the confusion and pain. How can they cause me physical pain when they aren't attached to me?

Are they haunting me? Did they not receive a proper burial and so are stalking me from the nether world? After Dr. Deering and Nurse Wallace sawed them off, did they put them in a bin to putrefy and decay? Or were they thrown into a furnace and cremated? Is that why I feel them burning?

The main thing is I mustn't let on. Mother will wring her hands to putty and Pop will go all quiet and then do something serious. They'd send me to a shrink, and I don't want to be the first Moore to go to a shrink. I don't want to be examined and labeled. I don't want to be someone's interesting case they talk about at dinner parties.

I feel impossibly sore and soul weary.

Nurse Wallace waited discreetly in the hallway when Pop came in to say goodnight. He tried asking me questions again, but then sat and looked at me quietly. I tried to look away, but I couldn't break his contemplative and sad gaze. It was almost wistful.

He took my Bible out of the nightstand drawer and flipped to Psalms. He meant to comfort me by reading the one that goes:

I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy . . . I suffered distress and anguish . . . when I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest; for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling; I will walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

But it didn't comfort me.

Instead of comfort, I felt mocked. God tried to take me from the land of the living and though he didn't succeed in ending my life, he did remove the living part.

The night passes slowly, and my tears dry on the side of my face.

Nurse Wallace stirs, and I pretend I'm asleep; she peeks over at me then the air moves as she tiptoes out of the room. The stairs creak when she comes back from the toilet, and she sighs to herself as she lays back on the cot. My bedroom window frames an expanse of dull grey sky. The porch roof juts into my eyeline like the bow of a ship as the sun prepares to rise over the horizon.

Nurse Wallace walks quietly about, fully dressed in her uniform, the sun is shining, and I realize I'm in my room and the pudgy lady isn't talking to me about her family's medical history.

I watch her as she goes about stacking gauze and tools on a tray she's sat on my dresser. Her name, Wallace, doesn't seem to fit her. Miriam, however, matches her looks: warm, fair, a bit too thin maybe, but she has such soft brown hair. Her eyes are brown too and appealingly wide. Why did she become a nurse? I don't expect everyone to be a Florence Nightingale, but she hasn't smiled since Dr. Deering introduced her at the hospital. She could at least attempt one since, I'm sure, she's being paid nicely to be here by my parents. How my parents can pay her at all is a mystery. She isn't wearing a ring, so maybe she's unlucky in love. I don't see how with her looks. Maybe she has a personality defect.

"Oh, you're awake." She startles when she catches me looking at her from the mirror where she stopped her stacking to re-pin a curl. "How do you feel this morning?" A professional briskness enters her voice; she comes to my bedside, hands clasped in front of her, and smiles at me patiently. "Well," she says when I don't answer, "do you need to relieve yourself?"

I cringe and want to shrink away. There will never come a day when using the bedpan will not be dehumanizing—like some pet going on a newspaper. But the reality is that I need to pee horribly, so I nod and endure the humiliation of someone else lifting up my nightgown, pulling down my panties, and placing the cold metal pan underneath me. Nurse Wallace politely looks away, but the sound of the pee hitting the metal is undeniable and loud. When I finish, she whisks the bedpan away and trots out to scrub it clean in the kitchen sink. At the pace she goes, how does it not slosh everywhere?

Nurse Wallace walks back in with a tray instead of the bedpan. Toast with butter and Mother's peach jam, scrambled eggs, sausage, and a glass of milk are set primly on the nightstand. Nurse Wallace carefully pulls me to a sitting position. She smacks the pillows behind me (she apparently doesn't fluff) then sets the tray over my lap, its little legs creating a bridge.

"Shall I eat up here or can you manage on your own so I may eat my breakfast downstairs," she says. It's not really a question and I pick up the toast and take a savage bite. The professionalism slips as she raises her eyebrow. "I'll take that as a yes. Ring the bell if you need me."

I throw my toast on the plate as she leaves. I'm not hungry and it's near burnt anyway, just as Mother likes it. I like mine golden brown. The steam from my eggs slowly dissipates and I hear the clatter of plates from downstairs. They must be finished with their breakfast. The heavy tread of Pop's boots sounds up the stairs. He leans in with a smile on his face.

"How's my girl this morning?" His smile slips a bit when he sees my untouched food. "Aren't you hungry? After that hospital food I thought you'd be hankering for some of Mother's peach jam."

The once bitten toast stares at me reproachfully.

"No matter," he says taking the tray from my lap. "Let's not worry about it this morning, Ginny, my girl. Tomorrow, though, you've got to eat your breakfast. Mother would start to worrying and she's had her fair share of that these past weeks. I've had a mite of worry too," he adds, softly, more to himself than to me.

His voice is like hot chocolate, warm slippers, and medium grade sandpaper. And his thick hair is grey now, but it still flops over his forehead like a schoolboy's; it's one of the things I love most about him.

He sits next to me and takes my hand. He strokes it once then says, “You just take your time, Ginny. Don’t worry about Mother and me, you just take your time.” He kisses my forehead and whispers he loves me. Nurse Wallace walks in and her lips press into a thin unbecoming line.

“Mr. Moore, I need to change the bandages, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Pop gets up. “I need to get off to work anyway. Have Mother call the factory if you need anything, Ginny. I’ll make sure to get it on my way home.” He flashes one of his signature smiles—broad and hearty—and clatters down the steps.

Nurse Wallace eyes the tray critically. “I’ll be eating lunch up here to make sure *this* doesn’t happen again,” she points to the tray. “Now,” she grabs the metal bowl filled with rolls of gauze, scissors, and medical tape, “let’s get some fresh bandages on.”

She sets the bowl on the nightstand then whisks back the covers. The cold sends goosebumps up my spine. “It won’t take but a minute,” she says in reply to my shiver. Swiftly, but carefully, she cuts off the hosiery and gauze and uses her expert eye to examine the sutures. I don’t know how she manages it on a full stomach.

“They’re healing very nicely,” she says and goes about reapplying gauze and slipping the hosiery back on. It hurts like the devil and his stabbing henchmen, and I can’t breathe until she finishes. She puts the covers back around me (as she doesn’t fluff neither does she tuck) and administers my antibiotics and pain medication. The medication appears to do little, if any, good because there’s a constant itching, prickling pain that I’m sure will cause my insanity. No one told me it’d be like this.

Nurse Wallace screws the caps back on the bottles and plops them into her bag. She is annoyingly efficient when she’s in full nurse mode. Sometimes, when she thinks I’m not looking, I see the nurse slip and a much less annoying version of Nurse Wallace—Miriam, I suppose it is—comes through. Miriam gets distracted by her thoughts (which don’t always strike me as pleasant ones) and presses her lips together to match the pressing of her emotions. Miriam’s smile is wry, and her eyes are layered with sadness and humor and things I don’t understand.

Her eyes look that way now as she gathers her supplies and leaves.

“Oh, Mrs. Moore,” I hear her say in the hallway, Mother must be looking askance at the tray with the dirty bandages and uneaten food, “would you mind if I use your telephone?”

“Oh, no, Miss err—Nurse Wallace, please go right ahead. Make as many calls as you need.” Mother sounds thoroughly cowed, though Nurse Wallace said it politely. Mother doesn’t know how to behave around medical people.

“I only need to make the one,” Nurse Wallace says on her way down the steps.

Mother peeks into my room.

I look away.

“Good morning, Ginny,” she whispers. She shuffles in, her eyes, no doubt, glued to the floor. “I thought that, maybe, umm, you’d like me to read to you for a while.”

She creaks into my armchair that’s squished into the corner with the windows on either wall.

“I know you were reading that Nicholas Nichols book before, err, before. . .” She snuffles and I dread her crying. “Before winter break,” she finishes. “And I thought you’d like to know the ending.” She opens *Nicholas Nickleby*. “I’ve never read anything by Charles Dickens, this should be exciting.”

She takes a deep breath and I hear Nurse Wallace say, “Hello Minerva, dear,” into the phone then Mother begins, “*’The bile and rancor of the worthy Miss Knag undergoing no dimin-u-tion during the remainder of the week, but rather aug-augmenting with every successive hour’* I wonder what augmenting means,” she interjects. “Do you mind if I get a dictionary?” She doesn’t look at me, but she shuffles over to the bookcase to get the dictionary. Lord, if Dickens didn’t feel like an eternity before he definitely will now.

“A, ab, ac, ad, ae, af, ag, ah, ai, aj, ak, al, am, an, ao, ap, aq, ar, as, at, au, u, aug, aug,” her finger runs down each page, “auuuuggggg, ah, augment, oh, ogment: to make greater, as in size, extent or quantity. Do you mind if I look up,” she looks back to Dickens, “dim-in-u-tion? I wonder if it’s the same as augmenting.” Maybe, if I pretend to fall asleep, she’ll stop.

Nurse Wallace kept her promise and made sure I ate my lunch. She sat in my armchair reading a book while eating her own portion of Mother’s egg salad on rye. Mother isn’t known for many things but women at church are always pestering her for her egg salad recipe. They don’t understand that what makes it so good is the rye bread which she makes herself.

It does feel good to have a satisfied stomach. That last week at the hospital I noticed my appetite increasing. I just never felt like eating after watching the pudgy lady consume her food like a reverse fireman's hose. It's a wonder her small intestine didn't burst instead of her appendix.

Maybe my increasing appetite means I'll have more energy too as I am sleepy all the time. Sleep is all I can think about. My bed is ever so comfy. But I suppose I should try to stay awake for at least an hour. You're not supposed to go to sleep right after you eat. Or is that swimming?

I jerk awake. Darn it, I fell asleep. It can't have been long. Nurse Wallace isn't back yet. I wonder what new plans she's hatching to get me to talk. When she arrived yesterday afternoon, she tried explaining to me in soothing tones the importance of expressing how I was feeling. The words came out stilted and we both immediately felt uncomfortable. It gave such a different impression of her than what I saw at the hospital. I think she felt foolish. But I can't tell if it was because it was so obviously forced or that I smirked at her. At least, I think I did. I was smirking on the inside but some of it might've leaked out. Whenever someone puts on a soothing tone, I can't take them seriously. It's disingenuous.

My guess is she took the wrong advice on how to talk to me, which is odd as she strikes me as more individual than that. And Dr. Deering said she's had experience with my type of case before. Regardless, to both of our relief she hasn't taken that tone again. As Nurse Wallace she's disapproving and efficient, as Miriam she's tired and laughing at some secret. That's enough for me. Although, she must have some sense of humor or devilry to encourage Mother to read to me so much. Mother is no orator.

If I were to read it myself, maybe *Nicholas Nickleby* would be a distraction instead of a torture. Mother left it on the seat cushion of my armchair and a shaft of afternoon light envelops it in an encouraging glow.

Nah, it'll just put me to sleep. And I can't very well fetch it myself.

My gaze rises to the ceiling. I create an imaginary pattern around the cracks and water damage. With a few swift lines, a dog emerges. Then a cat spitting at the dog. Then a horse looking on in disdain.

"There was an old lady who swallowed a fly. I don't know why she swallowed a fly, perhaps she'll die." A yawn takes over. "There was an old lady who swallowed a spider that wriggled...and jiggle, and jiggled..."

"Ginny."

I blink awake.

“Ginny, you need to eat now.”

I fully open my eyes to the firm voice and Nurse Wallace stands by my bed with the dinner tray. I glance out the window where the sky is now dark.

She sets the tray at the foot of the bed and helps me sit up. Placing the tray over my lap, she goes to the armchair with her own plate, moving *Nicholas Nickleby* to the windowsill. She’s still in nurse mode because she eats her chicken and peas like an efficient robot. Miriam couldn’t possibly eat that way.

I eat too, though I’m not as hungry as I was at lunch. It’s easier to just eat whatever I’m given than to resist. Nurse Wallace would probably spoon feed it down my throat if I did.

We finish at the same time and Nurse Wallace discreetly closes the door while she helps me use the bedpan. I can’t look at her afterwards and she goes downstairs.

A knock sounds and it’s Pop at my door, smiling at me.

“How’s my girl doing?” He comes and sits at the end of my bed.

A pause. Nurse Wallace talks to Mother downstairs.

“I got a call from Pastor Haywood this evening. He and the congregation are happy to hear that you’re settling back in nicely. They’re mighty glad you’re home and he’d like to visit as soon as you are ready to see folks.”

Fat chance. I don’t need to see people’s pity or hear their platitudes. Or answer their questions.

“Do you want to see anyone in particular? We could invite one of your friends over.”

No, no friends. I don’t want to see their momentary sadness as I remind them of how young lives can be cut short and then see their step go light as they leave because it’s not after all their life, their life stretches ahead of them dazzling like the sun.

“Well, you just let me know if you want to see anyone, alright?”

A pause.

A quiet laugh rises up the stairs and turns bubbly as it comes. Pop and I look at each other—startled. It’s Mother’s laugh. A strong peal joins Mother’s bubbling and before either completely fades Pop says, “Now that’s something I’ve not heard in an age.”

Has Nurse Wallace made Mother laugh? Mother can’t speak to her without stuttering this morning but can laugh with her tonight? The only time Mother laughs is when she’s listening to

The Jack Benny Show on the radio. She never misses it. And when I was little, we had this cat that always got its head stuck in everything and would chase its tail until it fell down dizzy, never failing to make her laugh. I remember making her smile, but I never made her laugh. She doesn't have a gay personality—that's for certain.

"Didn't I say it'd make you laugh" we hear Nurse Wallace say.

Pop chuckles. "Well, I'll be." He shakes his head then sobers a little when he looks at me.

"Can I get you anything before bed?"

I gently shake my head no.

"Alright, then." He stands then leans over to kiss my forehead. "'Night."

There's a traffic jam in the hallway as Mother and Nurse Wallace come up as Pop leaves. Mother looks plenty subdued now as she peeks at me from the hallway but doesn't come in to say goodnight.

Nurse Wallace comes in and gathers her pajamas and toiletries to get ready for bed in the bathroom downstairs. "I'll bring you up a glass of water," she says as she pads out of the room barefoot. She'd taken off her shoes and nylons.

What did she say that made Mother laugh? A cat joke in the voice of Jack Benny? Well, it's certain she didn't say whatever it was as Nurse Wallace.

She comes back in with her uniform draped crisply—somehow—over her arm and sets the glass of water on my nightstand.

"Do you mind if I keep your desk lamp on so I can read a bit," she asks, flipping the overhead light off.

She pauses mid-walk to her cot to wait for my response.

I shrug.

She shrugs.

I roll my eyes, but it's too dark for her to see me do it.

She glances at me. "Do you want your own book?"

Gosh, no. I guess I shouldn't stare at her. I look away and draw the covers up to my chin.

I bought *Nicholas Nickleby* on a whim after having read *A Tale of Two Cities* in English class.

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the

season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...'

It had me from those lines and I wanted to read everything that Dickens wrote. I'd dredge through the endless descriptions of plum puddings just to discover more golden lines. And *Nicholas Nickleby* had me too, for a while . . . I could care less about him now.

Sleep cries out to me, and I try to relax my body. My ribs ache, the scab on my chin itches, the bruises on my back are soft and tender, and my legs agonize and antagonize. The more I try to relax the more the burning and pricking sensations intensify. They are mocking me again. They taunt me as they burst into flame and I want to scream, but I squirm and bite my blanket. Nurse Wallace mustn't see. She'll tell Dr. Deering and he'll tell Pop and he'll tell Mother and then they'll all get together and whisper I'm going insane.

Morning dew settles on my brow and the quiet hum of a summer morning meets my ears. I squint harder. I want to see the tall summer grass and the ducks on Farmer Hammond's Pond. I want to feel the warmth, the heady relaxation of the sun's heat seeping into my bones.

Cool water drips down my temples as the pain lessens. I open my eyes and Nurse Wallace leans over me dabbing my forehead with a compress.

"It's okay," she whispers. "Take deep breaths."

As my breathing steadies, she looks at me more acutely—medically.

She asks, "Will you tell me what kind of pain you're feeling?"

They're haunting me and I can't say that. I can't say anything. I look at her keenly when I realize she used the word pain and not discomfort. Everyone at the hospital used discomfort like it somehow made the horror of my injuries into an inconvenience—like a bug bite—like it helped me deal with the loss.

"I can't help you if you don't tell me anything." Her voice turns frustrated at my silence. She wrings the compress into the basin on my dresser, slaps it over the edge of the pitcher, and sits on her cot. Her features scrunch and she says, more to herself than to me, "If you don't talk soon . . . I'll either give you a good spanking or check out more novels by Dickens from the library for your mother to read to you."

She yanks the lamp chain, and the room goes dark. I listen to the chain tink against the side of the lamp until all I hear is Mother's soft snoring down the hall.

Have I cracked through to Miriam already? Nurse Wallace wouldn't have dared to say such a rude thing—too unprofessional. I don't believe her regardless. Empty threats. That's all they are.

Chapter Three

He was a magnificent cat, light grey with white only on the tip of his tail and paws. His eyes were green and mischievous. I called him Poof because of his tail—long, regal, and extremely poofy. Mother doesn't like naming animals, and he was her cat, so he probably didn't have an official name—at least not that I remember. Poof's magnificence only extended to his appearance. No matter how hard he tried to live up to his looks, his personality and general lack of grace always let him down.

Anything that's physically possible for a cat to get its head stuck in, he managed to do it. A vase, a tin can, an unexpectedly narrow railing, an embroidery ring, and a hole in a wooden fence are just a few. With yowls of indignation, he'd keep backing up, swinging his head to-and-fro, trying to free his perfectly formed head until he'd lay prostrate in humiliation and defeat. Mother always came laughing with a can of lard or scissors to lather or cut him free. And against his better judgment he'd catch sight of his regal tail and—mesmerized—he'd chase it until he fell over dizzy.

He liked to watch Mother and I in the garden, pulling weeds and tossing worms to our two bedraggled chickens. He'd strut along the top of the fence, exulting in his high position, and deriding the inferior status of the chickens—and us.

One time, so caught up in his superiority, he took a misstep and with an unearthly screech he fell. Unlike most cats, he never managed to fall on his feet. He didn't pause to reflect on the saying, *'Pride goeth before a fall'*, but with claws out scrambled up the fence trying to pretend nothing had happened.

Mother's laugh bubbled and spilled over, and I laughed with her. The chickens clucked their own laugh at Poof, and he gazed down at all of us, his green eyes hurt and disdainful.

When he was quite old, he disappeared into the woods. I think he was sick with something and hid under a log to die. Why do cats hide when ill? Mother looked for a week but couldn't find him. She's never gotten another cat. It'd be kinda nice if we did. There'd be something else to direct her attention toward, other than my sick bed. Maybe it would limit her reading time. To watch her placidly read Dickens aloud in my reupholstered armchair (the original checked red peeking through the now worn ridged green), her dress somehow loose on her big frame, her grey hair pulled old-fashioned into a bun at the back of her head, is more than I can bear.

If she came in, sat in my armchair, and began telling me a memory—about Poof and the garden—it'd be easier to overlook her behavior at the hospital. But it's been a week and her chance is gone.

"You look rather fierce." Nurse Wallace stands at the door with my lunch tray.

I drop my eyes to the quilt and pull at the familiar thread which sticks up from the fabric. She sets the tray over my lap, takes her plate off, and sits in my armchair.

"All the snow has melted," she says. "Although I do hate looking at the dead grass and bare branches; I'll take cleared roads over snow any day." She deftly slips her spoon into the squash soup and raises it to her lips, eating it without a slurp. "There's always a sigh of relief at the hospital when the roads clear." She takes another spoonful then leans her head back onto the chair in reflection. "I remember being a kid and the snowdrifts looming down at me like a mountain. Snow here is nothing like what we got in New York."

New York, huh? Now that's interesting. Over this past week she's been letting Miriam slip through more and more. Consequently, I'm liking her more with every slip. I know her favorite authors are Jane Austen and John Steinbeck. She can't stand lima beans because she pushes them to the edge of her plate when Mother serves them. And if the weather is too bad for her to go outside and exercise she gets irritable. New York is by far the most exciting tidbit. She darts a quick glance at me and sees the interest I can't hide.

"Yes, New York. I used to go into the city on weekends and do the craziest things."

I see what she's doing. It won't work, so she can just go on talking about herself. I won't say a thing.

Disregarding my spoon, I bring the bowl—ignoring the heat tingling my fingers—to my lips and sip it loudly.

"Very elegantly done." Her words ring with sarcasm.

I ignore her and finish my squash soup, which I hope Mother won't make again. What surgery is it where you get to eat lots of ice cream?

The room is suddenly still. I look up from the dredges in my bowl to see Miriam gazing into her soup; her lips are pressed and pensive. She looks at me and Nurse Wallace spreads over Miriam's face—bland professionalism over intriguing humanity. "Make sure to eat your sandwich too, Ginny."

I take a bite of my sandwich and chew it reflectively. She's done this before. She enters my room, makes small talk, lets herself relax, then in a lull her eyes acquire that layered look I don't understand, and Nurse Wallace reemerges. It's like she's defending herself against something. How professionalism and efficiency defend a person from their self I haven't a clue.

It's your tonsils, isn't it? That's the surgery where you get to eat a lot of ice cream afterwards. For a moment, I thought it might be your appendix but I'm sure the pudgy lady would have informed me of that.

The remnants of my lunch stare up at me. Who has decided that I should drink so much milk? Every meal I get a glass of milk and Nurse Wallace will stare at me until I drink it all. Is it Mother's idea of making me strong or is it a medical prescription? No matter how much calcium intake I get, my legs won't grow back. Nurse Wallace waits for me to finish so she can take the tray. I force down the last of the milk, it hits my stomach uncomfortably, and I choke back an urge to throw it up.

After setting the tray on my dresser, she helps me lay down so the sutures on my stumps don't pull. Even though I could probably sleep with sunlight streaming in, Nurse Wallace pulls the curtains closed on the grey day. She switches on my desk lamp, however, so its soft light partially illuminates her end of the room.

Mother comes in and I quickly close my eyes so she won't engage.

She whispers, "Hello Miriam."

Miriam? When did she start calling her Miriam?

"Can I help with anything," she continues. "Oh, Ginny's asleep."

"Asleep already? I only just closed the curtains." I hear the click of Nurse Wallace's heels on the hardwood and sense her looming over me. I slow my breathing. "Well, I wish I could fall asleep that fast." Her voice goes soft, but there's a sarcastic twinge to it. I'm not sure she's convinced.

When she moves away, I peek an eye open. They're standing by my desk, squished partially into the corner where my armchair sits. Nurse Wallace folds up the cot during the day to give the illusion of space. My room isn't big, and the addition of the cot, Nurse Wallace's suitcase, and the medical bric-a-brac makes it feel very squished indeed.

"How's everything going," Mother whispers.

Nurse Wallace's shoulders relax a bit. "She's improving quickly. Faster than I expected, even."

"Really?" I shut my eye as Mother turns her head toward me. "She was always so sick as a child; I just can't believe she's survived this."

"She's much stronger than you think."

"Well, I don't know...she might worsen."

"You mustn't worry so much."

A pause.

"Neither should you, Miriam."

I hazard another peek. Miriam has indeed returned. Her hand rests on Mother's shoulder. The light from the lamp casts Mother's worry lines along her eyes and mouth deeper.

"Is Minerva doing alright?" So, Mother knows who Minerva is. What else does she know? Miriam's hand leaves Mother's shoulder to touch her own forehead like it's steadying her thoughts. "Our neighbor checks on her but I do worry, being away so long."

"I feel so bad, taking you away from her."

Her hand goes back to Mother's shoulder. "Don't worry about that, Donna. This is my job. How is Mr. Moore doing? You mentioned he has longer hours at the factory."

Pop's working longer hours? How have I not noticed?

"Oh, well, while he doesn't like being away from Ginny right now, he does like keeping busy."

"I'm sure he has a great deal to keep him busy."

"Yes, but . . ."

They move stealthily to the dresser and Miriam picks up the tray while Mother trails behind as they leave my room.

". . . but sometimes I think he works too hard."

"That seems to be a Moore family trait."

"We've always had to . . ." Their voices dim as they reach the bottom of the stairs then drift away altogether.

Is Pop working longer hours because of me? I must be sending them into so much debt what with the hospital bills and a nurse. How much do hospitals charge per amputation? And how can Nurse Wallace stand there and call my mother Donna and still take their money?

I stare at the ceiling and try to trace a monkey from the yellow crisscrossed cracks but am unable to.

Maybe I'm not being fair. To be strictly honest, I don't like the idea of Nurse Wallace leaving. Well, I wouldn't mind Nurse Wallace leaving if it meant Miriam could stay. But I'm afraid they're a package deal.

I made a mistake. I need to go slower, much slower. I thought that if I sat myself up in one swift movement, it'd be like ripping off a band aid—quick with only momentary pain. Instead, it came in waves of fire. Leaning my head against the headboard I close my eyes to the ceiling and imagine swimming in a mountain lake. Clear, cold mountain water cooling and awakening every inch of me. Calming, relaxing—yes, relaxing—yet stimulating. It clears the mental cobwebs. I float on my back, my eyes closed to the sky, my exposed face drinking in the warmth of the sun.

With the vision, my body is less tense, and my ghost legs stop their persistent haunting for now. I am not in the lake, and I'm not relaxed, but the cousin of calm—latent worry—settles in my mind. Not quite calm because the lake fades out and the image of Raymond Bennet hobbling down the church aisle fades in. His face tired and stoic.

Even though our town is relatively small, I've only seen Raymond a handful of times. I don't think he's very social. I don't blame him.

The last time I saw him was at a church picnic, I think. Gee, I must've been about fourteen because it's been at least three years since I saw him attend church. He probably hasn't been because of what he did at that picnic. Some people blamed his behavior on the heat. It was oppressive, but August in Virginia usually is.

I remember sitting at a sun-bleached picnic table, trying to ignore the splintering wood working its way through the thin fabric of my dress. My hands were greasy from the fried chicken, and I was having difficulty picking up my glass of lemonade when a kerfuffle broke out amongst a group of men over by the game of horseshoes.

For some reason, Raymond wasn't wearing his prosthetic leg which he'd worn to church before. He was waving around a horseshoe.

Someone said, "Calm down, Raymond. You're getting hysterical."

That's when he threw the horseshoe, grazing a man's head. The man staggered and his hand came away from his head bloody.

Raymond was yelling incoherently and when he used his crutch to poke Pastor Haywood in the chest he fell over.

Mrs. Bennet was crying, and Raymond refused to get up from the grass. He crossed his arms and quietly stared into the sky. I thought he'd go blind from the sun.

The injured man was led past me and the lemonade slipped from my greasy fingers when I saw it was Pop. Mother grabbed my hand, yanking me from the table, ignoring my general stickiness.

Pop had winked at me in the rearview mirror as we settled in the car to show he wasn't too badly hurt. I briefly thought he looked pale, but I was too distracted by the fact that Mother was driving. Mother never drives.

I had to dislodge several splinters from the back of my thighs when I cleaned up. I remember that specifically because Mother insisted on disinfecting them, even though I protested that I was old enough to do it myself.

Nurse Wallace would've insisted on it as well. She walks into my room now, but it's actually Miriam. Her eyes are anxious, yet her chin determined. She's looked reflective the past two days, now, I guess, she's finished reflecting on whatever it is. She must have decided on something. I wonder if it has to do with Minerva. Whoever she is.

Miriam looks at me and her anxious, determined face is marred by surprise. "You've sat up!"

Don't remind me.

"Why, that's wonderful!"

I shrug.

"You shouldn't be so dismissive. That is called progress. Something you're achieving quicker than most people."

Progress? Achievement? I feel like a worm that's been cleaved in two—both of its sections wriggling away in opposite directions.

"This is good," she murmurs to herself. Her face resumes its determined look but there is ease now as well.

The image of Raymond lying in the grass like a stubborn toddler inserts itself in my brain again. Maybe he needed someone to call it pain instead of discomfort. Maybe he still does.

I watch Miriam count her medical supplies, ticking things off on her list. Does she know Raymond? I know she and Dr. Deering didn't see his leg off—that happened somewhere in France—but he must have gone to the hospital for some missing limb related ailment. My pulse quickens. Does his severed leg haunt him as mine do?

“Ginny?”

I blink and refocus on Miriam. Oh, no, Nurse Wallace has come back during inventory.

“I said, do you need to use the bathroom before I check in at the hospital?”

I shake my head no.

“Right, well, I'll try to be quick, but I daresay I can take my time on this occasion due to such stunning progress on your part.”

She straightens her nurse cap and grips the handle of her medical bag in her left hand and grabs her coat in her right. She stops in the hallway to talk to Mother who's just come up the stairs.

“Oh, Donna, I was hoping to catch you. I have a proposition for you.”

“Proposition?”

“Yes, I've been giving it a great deal of thought these last two days and I don't believe Ginny needs full time care.”

“What?” Mother's voice is quietly shocked. Is Nurse Wallace's new belief due to me sitting up by myself?

“Don't be alarmed, Donna. That's a good thing. Aside from Ginny's progress, our conversation the other day about Mr. Moore and Minerva got me thinking about both of our situations and if I just stop by once or twice a week to check on things that will be enough.”

“But Daniel, I mean, Dr. Deering said three weeks and—”

“Donna, I understand your concern, truly I do. Dr. Deering was generous in his estimates. He's been getting my reports and Ginny is making remarkable progress. I'll be discussing it with him today, and I believe he'll agree with me. You've been so kind to me, listening to my problems and giving me advice. I just can't stay when I'm not essential.” She pauses. Then says hesitantly, “And I hope you don't think me rude in mentioning money, but Dr. Deering, dear man that he is, never thinks of money. He only meant for me to be a kindness, to ease your burden, but I'm only increasing it.”

“Oh, you could never be a burden, Miriam. I-I've enjoyed our talks in the kitchen.”

“Then you understand my position, Donna. Minerva can’t manage without me anymore. She gets so lonely, and we’ve not been separated for so long since Matthew’s funeral. Donna,” her voice goes soft, and I can’t hear what she’s saying. Who’s Matthew? When did he die? Who’s Miriam to Matthew? Who’s Miriam to Minerva? And why does Mother know all about it?

“You’re right, you’re right, Miriam.” Mother’s voice sounds teary. “I just don’t know if I can, if I can, if I—”

“You’ll be alright. Mr. Moore will be here to help you and don’t forget you may call me at home or at the hospital anytime, alright?”

“Y-yes, alright. Will you talk to Harvey? He must decide what’s best, he always knows what’s best.”

“Of course, and I’ll stay one more night and you’ll help me with Ginny in the morning, so you’ll know exactly what to do. She’ll only need the bandages for another week and a half.”

“You’re too good, Miriam. Are-Are you sure Ginny’s voice wasn’t damaged in the accident,” Mother adds after a slight pause.

“There is nothing wrong with Ginny’s voice.”

“It’s just that you’ve had such experience with these types of things, and, and I don’t even hear her sigh. What if she doesn’t speak again?”

And what if I don’t?

“That is entirely up to her. Don’t press her too much or ask her lots of questions when she does decide to talk. She’s trying to make sense of what happened and how her life will look now. She might not be ready to talk about the accident for a long while, even if she does talk of other things. People react differently. Although, lately, I think she’s just being stubborn. You must be patient. And whatever you do, Donna, don’t stop reading to her. I can tell how much it lifts her spirits.”

The little liar.

“Thank you, Miriam. And please, give Dr. Deering my best.”

“I will. See you later.”

I slouch a bit and pull the blanket to my chin, turning my head toward the wall so it won’t look like I’ve heard their conversation.

“Afternoon, Ginny.”

I move my head in her direction, but she can't look at me and I can't look at her. We both are wishing Miriam won't leave. No pensive, sarcastic, changeling buffer between us.

"I thought I'd read to you for a while." Mother settles herself into my chair and picks up *Nicholas Nickleby* which she still hasn't managed to finish. Even the words she does know, she looks up, just to see how the dictionary defines them so Dickens stretches on and on.

Clearing her throat, she begins: "*The whole capital which Nicholas found himself entitled to, either in possession, reversion, remainder, or expectancy—Mr. Dickens certainly uses lots of words—after paying his rent and settling with the broker*"—will God never strike her mute?—"did not exceed, by more than a few halfpence"—I wonder how much a halfpence is—"the sum of twenty shillings. And yet he hailed the morning on which he had resolved"—let me look that word up. R, ra, rb, rc, rd, re, res, resolve. Alright, here, why that's not what I expected: to dissolve, melt, to break up. Oh, there's another entry: fixity of purpose. Now that is what I expected. Fixity is a funny word. Anyway, where was I. Oh yes, *'the morning on which he had resolved to quit London, with a light heart, and sprang from his bed with an e-e-las-tic-ity of spirit which is happily the lot of young persons, or the world would never be stocked with old ones.'*"

The elasticity of my spirit crumbles like an old rubber band. And there is nothing Dickens can do about it.

An eternity passes before Mother finally looks up and asks if I've fallen asleep. I'd make snoring noises if it'd convince her. My stillness is enough because she tiptoes loudly out of the room. Pop will be home soon, and Nurse Wallace will return and talk with him while Mother hovers demurely in the background, and they'll settle things nicely between the three of them. They won't ask my opinion about anything because, of course, they know best. I'll lay in bed nursing my bruises and wounds until I rot. Golly, I'll probably get fat now and turn into a useless lump that no one will ever love. Bobby would surely never love a lump. Pop might still love me if I get fat. I don't know what I'd do if he ever stopped calling me my girl.

Chapter Four

It's six o'clock in the morning and the sun has not yet risen above the horizon. Mother walks into my bedroom. Her gangly bones creak as she tentatively inches toward my bed. It's Monday and Nurse Wallace is gone. Of course, she or Dr. Deering will be back once a week to see if I'm still alive, but now there is only us. And so, Mother, whose frame contradicts her emotional fragility, leans over me to see if I'm awake.

"You up, Ginny?" Her breath is stale with coffee.

My nose wrinkles involuntarily and I open my eyes, staring into her grey ones.

"I've got to change your bandages. You alright with that?"

I shift my gaze to the ceiling in answer. Goosebumps rise when the cold air kisses my skin as she pulls down the comforter. She hasn't been able to look at my uneven stumps—bandaged sausages in hosiery. When Nurse Wallace showed her how to change the bandages, she watched with only one squinted eye open.

I can't bear the silence. A silence filled with so much hesitancy and anxiety that my eardrums are pressed to bursting. Nurse Wallace has taken away a wall that'd been so comfortable to rest behind. A wall I hadn't even realized was there.

"You need to turn the light on," I say. Mother jumps slightly and the words swirl through the semi-darkness unexpected by both of us.

My voice sounds weak and rough, irritating me. Mother isn't smiling at the sound of my voice either, though I wish she'd look somewhat pleased, would, maybe, kiss my forehead or brush back my hair. Do something to show that I'm still me, but she doesn't say anything. The worried lines of her face cast shadows as she turns on the bedside lamp. I turn from her as she licks her lips nervously. The room falls into a forced quiet. All I hear is Mother's breath coming in quick intervals.

"I'll be right back," she whispers, I turn my head to see her disappear into the dark hallway.

She leaves the covers pulled back and I stare at the odd figure my body makes—rising sharp angles dotted with bruises and discolorations. And legs that end too soon. Now that my voice has penetrated the silence, memory penetrates my thoughts just as unexpectedly. It is my body that's brought me to this moment. It's ugly just like the moment was. I remember everything, everything right up to that moment of impact that knocked the ugliness right through me. I

remember Bobby taking my hands and pulling me across the patch of ice. I remember Sandra calling him away in that plaintive voice of hers. I remember Roger and his polluted puffs of breath coming toward me in a relentless assault that I kept retreating from. He just wouldn't leave me alone. I remember shoving him away causing both of us to slip on the snow slick sidewalk. He fell onto the embankment and I fell backwards, twisting mid-fall, scraping my hands and ruining my new nylons. I remember standing up, half-crouched, attempting to keep my balance, and raising my head to see arms waving in the shadowy light of the streetlamp.

I know now that they were trying to warn me. I don't know whose arms they were, but it doesn't matter. The warning was too late. I felt the impact and was overcome by noise. It screeches in my ears. I stop it there as there's no need to remember more. And there's no need for me to share what I do remember. I must admit there's a relief at finally having spoken, but there'll be no relief in answering questions.

Voices from downstairs drift through my open door, Mother might be crying. Heavy footsteps come up the stairs and Pop walks through my door smiling.

"How's my girl this morning?"

"Cold," I say, a tightness easing in my chest at his smile.

"Well, I'll change these bandages quick, so I can tuck that comforter around you, and you'll be nice and toasty." I like that he doesn't mention that I'm talking now.

He brings the metal tray with the fresh bandages and gauze from the dresser and sets it next to me on the bed. I don't question why Mother didn't come back up. All I say is, "You'll be late for work."

"Perhaps, but that doesn't matter much." His big, gentle hands carefully peel back the hosiery and begin to unwrap the old bandages. My face must be white because he looks at me with a worried expression. It still hurts. The muscles contort in an itchy madness, trying to make my lower legs move about. Pop must feel them twitching and I want to reassure him, but I can't manage a smile. I think he knows because he goes on. "Sandra asked after you yesterday."

Sandra. I've almost been able to pack her away with everything else about the girl who used to live in this room. If she hadn't been there as I fell, she'd be gone completely. Our friendship has become too complicated and unfortunate for me to want her back in my life in any substantial way. I never used to call her unpredictable, but that last month she was anything but predictable. One moment she'd grab my arm conspiratorially and declare us lifelong chums, in the next, she'd

go AWOL and spend her time making all the boys heartsick over her. It didn't matter to her that she and Bobby were supposed to be going steady. He hardly even talked to other girls much less flirted with them. Sandra assumed that he'd stay steady even when she didn't. How he felt about it didn't matter to her. But it mattered to me. And suddenly it mattered to her that he started talking to me the week before winter break. It was completely innocent, of course. We were paired up for an assignment in our English class. She couldn't intervene since I had skipped a year ahead and so wasn't in our classes. She became rather gratifyingly jealous, but I'm too tired to care about her jealousy now.

"Oh," is all I reply. Pop is trying to distract me from the wound dressing; but I want to watch him, and I trace the blue veins starting to show through his skin with my eyes. He had been too old to go to war the second time. Sometimes, when he thinks I'm asleep, he comes in here and sits by my bed and prays. And when he prays the words from Ecclesiastes:

Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all. For man does not know his time. Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them.

I know he is praying about all the dark times in his life. This dark time must remind him painfully of that cloud of 1917, where he saw men in a condition not unlike mine. Where evil suddenly and swiftly fell. I don't know why he continues to pray. I can give him no happiness in his old age. No promise of a future to look forward to. No grandchildren in which to see his reflection.

Sixty-eight-years-old versus the forty-five of Sandra's father as she would remind me. Sandra's father, Mr. Jenkins, owns his own business. A business which has begun to make him wealthy as he shamelessly uses his purple heart and meritorious ribbons to advertise his star product: an "innovative", "miracle" commode plunger. When we were ten Sandra asked why I lived with my grandparents. The idea terrified me. I went up to Mother to ask her if this were true. She smiled and drew me to her chest saying, she was my mama and I was her miracle child.

But that was Sandra: always asking the awkward questions with no childlike innocence about her. I say *was* because throughout the years, she's learned that she gets more juicy details by masking nosiness with a veneer of concern. Sandra keeps a ledger of these details and other information bulleted underneath the names they belong to. Her power over the student body at

Jefferson High School is unrivaled. One would think as Sandra's, purported, best friend I'd be second-in-command. I've never held such a position and after peeking into her ledger I never want to. Having dirt on your peers is one thing, but the principal is another. Sandra said my name isn't in the ledger. If true that means I'm neither a threat nor possible pawn. And Sandra doesn't have advisors or allies. What does that make me then? A non-entity? Pop is just trying to cheer me up by relating Sandra's inquiry. Perhaps she'll visit me. The anger that brewed against her this past year is voided and replaced. It is unimportant, and I now think back on our friendship with passive observation. It would be nice, though, to know what's happening at school, if people are still talking about the accident or whether I've already been forgotten.

"Mother's going grocery shopping and wants to know if you'd like anything," Pop says. He removes the tray and tucks the comforter underneath my chin. Nurse Wallace should take notes on how wonderful his tucking is.

I reply, "No, I don't want anything."

"You sure?"

"Yes, Pop." I close my eyes and wish to turn onto my side.

"Don't worry, Ginny," he says leaning over me. His breath tickles the hair brushing my cheek. "This pain will pass if you let it." I keep my eyes closed as he kisses my forehead. The lamp clicks as he pulls the chain to turn off the light, and he leaves.

When I was six, I was invited to Wayne Peterson's birthday party. He was in my class year and our mothers were friends so we, naturally, ran in the same social circles. Wayne was a nice boy who always had a black eye. He also had a front tooth missing for so long that his parents realized his adult tooth, and not his baby one, had been knocked out when his brother Norman convinced him it'd be fun to ride the mattress down the stairs and out the front door. Wayne told me it was lots of fun until he realized, halfway down, Norman forgot to open the front door. His parents couldn't afford to fix it until he was fourteen and when the fake tooth was finally put in, he asked them to take it out again because he could no longer whistle and grin at the same time. His birthday party was the first time I noticed the inside of someone else's house. Everyone was outside playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey (Wayne was being spun mercilessly by Norman and his other brother Leon), while I came in to use the bathroom. I forgot all about my need to pee when I saw the entire hallway wall covered in family photographs. We only have one photograph in our entire house:

Pop and Mother's wedding photo on the fireplace mantle. There aren't any photos of me as they've never bought a camera.

It's as if my parents emerged from the ground independent of familial ties. As a child I wondered. I wondered about grandparents, about aunts, about uncles, and cousins. Pop used to get letters from a person called Sarah or Sacha who lived far away—Colorado or Montana or some such western state. But I haven't seen or heard of a letter from her in years. Neither of my parents has mentioned who she is, but they were never secretive about the letters either. I asked Mother once who she was, and she said it wasn't her place to say as it was Pop's letter. I think she's my aunt. It's the only thing that makes sense, because Pop surely wouldn't be getting a letter from a woman who wasn't a family member. I've never asked him about it.

The only thing I really know about my parents is how they met. There was a farm somewhere in Virginia. So, Pop has told me. Mother never contradicts him or offers her own version of events. She just bites her bottom lip to keep from either smiling or crying, never quite doing one or the other. She lived there with her father and Pop came on as a farmhand. Pop says, usually with a wink, that he fell in love with her when he witnessed her throwing a bale of hay into the wagon one-handed. He couldn't believe such a pretty woman had such physical strength.

Mother comes into my room now. She shuffles over and takes the bedpan away to clean it. For a moment, the sun hits her once golden hair as a bale of hay swings across the sky. The image fragments. Her muscles sag off her big bones as she pauses in the doorway. She smiles at me, softly, hesitantly, showing her one remarkable feature—straight, white teeth. "I'm glad to hear your voice again," she says this then disappears into the dark hallway.

I sigh. It's two days late, but I suppose it's nice all the same.

A distracting slit of cold light slices a line across the room through the gap in the curtain that covers the front-facing window. My green armchair is there in the corner, and *Nicholas Nickleby* still sits on the end table. Mother is a slow reader and with her looking up over half the words and it being near a thousand pages, I fear there will be many more reading sessions in the future. I always did my homework in the armchair instead of at my tiny desk piled high with books and my postcard collection. And there's that church picnic photograph sandwiched between the first and second act of *Romeo and Juliet*: '*Tempering extremities with extreme sweet*' and '*Can I go forward when my heart is here*'. I scissored everyone else out of the picture except Bobby. His

smile . . . well, it was especially bright that day. We were paired in the three-legged race and finished a glorious second.

The first time I really paid attention to Bobby was sophomore year. Sandra had been experimenting with cosmetics and our friendship was in the early stages of waning. She was already on her second boyfriend, and I was standing just outside a circle of girls who had gathered in the hall between classes to listen to Sandra go on about how much they were in love. As I stood there, bored out of my skull, Bobby had emerged from a classroom surrounded by his own entourage—oblivious to everything except their laughing conversation. I was oblivious too until he tripped, causing his books to launch a direct hit to the back of my knees. I fell into Sandra, which caused an annoying scream to rise out of her. Some of the other girls squealed. I kept telling Sandra to just calm down. I disentangled myself and began picking up the books. Bobby was apologizing to Sandra for some reason as if she was the one who'd had books lobbed at her and Sandra began her little blush and giggle routine, which always worked so well. I stood outside the circle of girls who now surrounded Bobby. I was missing a textbook and assumed Bobby had picked it up by mistake.

“Excuse me,” I tried to interject. No one heard so I pushed through the circumference and firmly tapped Bobby on the shoulder. “Hey, you have my book.” I was irritated, and it probably showed, but when he turned and looked at me all left. I thought I might drown in his blue eyes. The bell rang, and students began to disperse, for a moment it felt like we were the only two in school. He handed me my book and said, “Here you go, Ginny.” He ran to catch up with his friends and I ended up late to my next class. That’s how it started. I haven’t stopped thinking about him since. I use him as a bookmark so no one else can see his smile. A smile I wouldn’t mind seeing about now. Instead, Mother comes back in and sets the clean bedpan at the foot of my bed.

“I’ll be right back with the hot water.”

She must have already been heating the water because she’s back quicker than I expect and I’m still lying on my back. I push myself up and my arms shake until I hunch forward. She sets the bowl on the bedside table and quietly lifts my nightie over my head. I crisscross my arms across my chest and wish Nurse Wallace were here instead of Mother. Her efficiency eliminated any awkwardness. I shiver slightly as the water from the sponge trickles down my back. It’s warm; hot almost, but the room is cold. The air is stale and smells like a hospital. But the soap has lavender

in it and my skin tingles with a refreshing humanity. I look away as she sponges my chest and stomach. She's quiet, though I can hear her thinking about something.

Pop changed my bandages again this morning before he left for work; she still can't manage it. She never will. She should tell me a story about Pop; how they met or what she likes about him. Pop likes her teeth and grey eyes, her tenderness and compassion—her laughter. She is those things, I suppose, but he must see differently than I do. There are so many things I see that he appears not to see. I don't want to have to ask her about her life. I want her to drop a story into my lap like a golden kernel.

She places the towel around my shoulders and asks if I want my hair washed. "It's too cold," I say.

"Okay, but it'll have to be washed tomorrow. Nurse Wallace is coming by in the afternoon." She goes to my dresser and pulls out a fresh, red-flannel nightgown. "This'll help with the shivers."

She brushes my hair and braids the greasy strands. Somehow, she always manages to glide effortlessly through the knots and tangles.

"Do you wanna sit up for a while?"

"I suppose."

She meticulously fluffs the pillows and gently scoots me back. Her muscles sag but she's still strong. "There," she says, smoothing my nightie and straightening the covers. She moves to leave, pauses, and says, "Ginny," like a question. She sits on the edge of the bed, her hands in her lap. "Ginny, I . . . would you like anything to eat or to drink?"

I shake my head no.

"Okay, alright." She stands up. "Ginny, I love you." In a blink she kisses me and leaves like one ashamed, and I'm unable to follow my gripping impulse to hug her. Hopefully, she'll come and pull back the curtain as daylight peaks around its edges. For now, I sit in the murky darkness. And think of Bobby squished in between the family feud of the Capulet's and Montague's.

Chapter Five

Charles Dickens won't stop talking to me. We sit across from each other at a wide table piled with different editions of his novels. His scraggly chin beard moves comically—stiffly—as he talks. He's pouring out his entire life story in agonizing detail and keeps telling me about how he pasted labels onto bottles of boot blackening. This is the fourth time.

“Six shillings a week. Six shillings! Can you imagine that?”

“Well, I—”

“And my father, my father, in debtors' prison all the while.”

“That sounds diff—”

“And I was supporting them. Me, a mere boy, supporting my entire family on six shillings a week.”

“Is that why you wrote such depress—”

“And my mother! My mother wanted me to keep slapping labels even when my father was released.” His beard vibrates with his emotion. “Can you believe that? What was she thinking? My own mother, good lord. Women can't be trusted with such decisions.”

“Is that why your female characters are so uninspiring?”

“Ha, she had no idea that I based the perennially confused Mrs. Nickleby on her. He, he, that says enough right there.”

“You're not listening to me, are you?”

“Pasting labels to literary genius and social critic.”

“Well, I do have to admit Newman Noggs and Wackford Squeers are certainly memorable. You have a way with names.”

“I am constantly in demand for readings. Everyone wants me to read my work.”

“That's nice.”

“I'm very brilliant.”

“Good for you.”

“Everyone says so. I'm practically clairvoyant. By the way, you should wake up.”

“What?”

“Wake up. You're talking to a dead man, you know.”

“I know you're dead.”

“Then wake up.”

“No.”

“You need to wake up.”

“I need to wake up?”

“Yes, dear, you need to wake up.”

“Don’t call me dear, Mr. Dickens.”

“Ginny, it’s time to get up.”

“Time to get up . . .” I’m mumbling.

“Ginny.”

A hand brushes my cheek. Dickens better keep his hands to himself. I push it away and crack open my eyes. “Mom?”

“I’m sorry to wake you, Ginny.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Who?”

I rub my eyes and look about the room. I’m awake and no Dickens. “Oh, just a dream.”

“I hope it was a nice one.” She opens the curtains. “I wouldn’t have woken you, but Nurse Wallace is coming in thirty minutes, and I need to wash your hair.”

I yawn and stretch my arms. There’s only a soreness surrounding my ribs now and the slow pull of my muscles almost feels nice. Cold air seeps under the covers and I pinch them under my chin to trap in the remaining warmth.

Mother must’ve already been in here this morning because the basin kept on the dresser steams with hot water. She sets it on the bedside table, and I reluctantly let her fold down the blankets and sit me up. She drapes a towel around my shoulders and undoes the greasy strands of my braids. My scalp had begun to feel itchy, and the hot water soothes my skin as she squeezes the sponge onto my hair. I long to soak in a tub and slip beneath the water. To have every inch of my body wet in one moment, every pore clean and tingling. It’s funny the things you take for granted your whole life. I never thought I could want a bath so badly.

I wonder if Dickens ever washed his beard.

The doorbell rings. Mother wipes her sudsy hands on her skirt and rushes downstairs.

I sit, clutching the towel around my neck; soap bubbles run down my forehead and drip off the tip of my nose. I shiver.

They clatter up the stairs.

“I really thought you’d have managed it by now, Donna,” Nurse Wallace says.

“But Harvey does it so much better than I could, and I manage everything else.”

“Well, I suppose. I just think it’s important for you to try in order to fully understand Ginny’s injuries.”

There’s a pause as they reach the landing.

“I’m sorry, Donna, that was a bit sharp. Minerva was in rare form this morning and she’s got me worked up.”

“That’s okay, Miriam. You’re right.”

“I shouldn’t have pushed you. I know you’re more than capable.”

“Oh, look at the two of us.” Mother laughs. “Apologizing over nothing.”

They walk in as I shiver for the hundredth time.

“I’m sorry, Ginny,” Mother says. “I’ll get you rinsed real quick.”

I thought maybe Miriam would’ve walked into the room, but it’s Nurse Wallace. She sets her medical bag on the dresser. “Let me help, Donna. Here, Ginny, you lean back onto my arms and, Donna, you rinse.”

The water has cooled, but despite the ridiculousness of needing two people to wash my hair it’s finished quickly. Nurse Wallace towels my hair then scoots me toward the pillows. Mother manages a quick pillow fluffing before I lean back.

Nurse Wallace goes to her bag and Mother comes toward me with a hairbrush.

“I can do it,” I say, reaching for the brush.

“Nonsense,” Mother replies. She leans over me and begins brushing.

“Have you finished *Nicholas Nickleby*,” Nurse Wallace asks as she lays out her supplies on the metal tray that’s kept next to the basin.

“There’s a few more chapters yet, though Ginny says she can finish them up herself. She’ll get through it a lot faster, that’s for sure. I have to stop so often to look up words.” She straightens up. “He sure used a great many.”

“Well, he was paid by the word.” Nurse Wallace comes over with the tray. “That should explain his incentive for being a little description heavy.”

Mother glances at the tray then at me. She turns. “Are you hungry, Ginny?” She flips the dirty towel over her shoulder. “Course you are. I’ll go make you breakfast. Oatmeal and cooked

apples okay with you?" She grabs the dirty basin off the dresser. "How about some coffee? I know I've never let you have it before, but I just think it'll warm you right up." She quickly shuffles away. "Be back in a minute," she throws over her shoulder.

"You should let her read to you," Nurse Wallace says after a moment of fiddling with some gauze, her face softens and Miriam peaks through.

"She talks enough as it is."

"Perhaps, that's because you never talk back."

"She never gives me an opening."

"Well, I think you need to want one."

I shrug.

Miriam hides as Nurse Wallace whisks back the covers.

I shiver again.

"How does your side feel," she asks lifting my nightgown to view the bruises.

"Sore, but I can stretch and cough without pain."

"Excellent. The bruising looks much better."

Placing my nightgown back down, she takes the hosiery off to examine the bandages wrapping my stumps. "Your father has done a good job with these." She lifts my right thigh and begins unwinding the gauze. "He's had experience doing this type of thing before."

"He fought in the war. The first one," I clarify, as her eyebrows start to raise.

"Ah, did he work in the hospital tents then?"

"I don't know. He never talks about it."

"Some don't like to."

"You were in the war, weren't you? As a nurse."

"Yes,"

"Wh—"

"I'm also one of those who don't like talking about it," she preempts my question.

She picks up my left thigh and repeats the process of unwinding the gauze.

I brace myself as she opens the jar of lotion. She carefully works it into my skin without letting it get too close to the sutures. I'm always afraid the rubbing motion will trigger an episode, but I force myself to relax by degrees and try to appreciate the cool air touching the red, tender skin.

“I’ll leave this here,” she says, screwing the lid back on. “You should apply it every day and if you need to use it more often then don’t hesitate. You’re healing very well and the sutures will come out soon, but your skin will feel very tight and it will dry out quickly. So,” she makes a show of setting it on the bedside table, “use it every day.”

“Is that normal?” I don’t like the sound of tightening.

“The dry skin is quite normal.”

“No, I mean about the tightening.”

She glances at me. “Yes, quite normal.” Her voice is softer, less business-like. My worry must’ve shown. “Do you have any other questions?”

“No.”

She applies the antiseptic and begins wrapping with fresh gauze. As I watch her hand go round and round, Raymond hobbles across my mind. Did she do the same for him? No, I guess not. Certainly not at the front, most likely not at a field hospital either. I suppose she didn’t start working here until after the war ended. Still, he must have gone into the hospital at some point for something.

Before I quite know I’m saying it I ask, “Do you know Raymond Bennet?”

She glances at me again, but her look is shrewd instead of soft.

“I know of him.” She takes the tray back to the dresser. “Why do you ask?” Her back is to me.

“Oh, no reason, just curious.”

She turns around and leans against the dresser, arms crossed. Her mouth purses briefly as she looks at me, her eyes evaluating.

I look down at the quilt and tuck it tighter about my waist. A brief pulse of anxiety shoots through me but as I look up it’s Miriam’s pensive but approachable face I see.

“What are you curious about?”

I let out a breath but drop my gaze again. “Well, um, if you or Dr. Deering have treated him for anything.”

“Dr. Deering has.”

“Oh . . . did it have to do with his leg?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

I knew that—doctor-patient-confidentiality. Silly question.

“Ginny . . . Raymond is, well, he isn’t the type of person for you, or anyone really, to approach for advice. His experiences, he . . . he doesn’t like to be asked questions.”

“I know. When I was little, I asked him how he lost his leg and he told me a German general ate it off.”

She smiles slightly. “That sounds like him.”

I let out another breath.

“There are people you can talk to, Ginny. If you’d like.”

I shrug. “No, thanks.”

“Well, if you change your mind, at any point in time, let me or your parents know.”

I nod.

She straightens up. “Do you need to use the toilet before breakfast?”

“Yeah, but I just really don’t want to use the bedpan.”

“Understandable. How about I carry you to the bathroom?”

“All the way downstairs? Can you manage?”

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if I couldn’t. Now,” she pulls back the covers, “give me your arm. If you’re in too much pain, holler.” She scoots me to the side of the bed and gingerly lifts me. A small grunt escapes her, but she marshals and carries me out of the room, down the steps, through the dining room, past my startled mother cooking apples in the kitchen, and into the bathroom. Feeling her steady heartbeat and her breath on my forehead, creates an odd intimacy that holds no awkwardness, and I don’t fully understand it. All I could do was feel awkward whenever she helped me with the bedpan, but this doesn’t seem so dehumanizing. She sets me on the toilet and helps me with my things. She turns her back but doesn’t leave in case I fall off the bowl.

“I’ve always thought this an odd place for a bathroom,” she murmurs.

“It used to be a pantry slash washroom slash storage area and was converted to a bathroom in the 20s, that’s before my parents bought the house.” She helps me with my underwear.

“Old house, then?”

“Doesn’t the linoleum in the kitchen make that obvious,” I snort.

She wets the hand towel and cleans my hands. “Your mother keeps everything so clean and well-oiled that I hardly notice the age of things.”

“Maybe you just need glasses.”

I catch a glimpse of myself in the vanity mirror as she carries me back out. With all the food Mother has been feeding me, I don't know why my cheeks look so sunken. At least the scab on my chin is gone.

Mother stares at us dumbfounded as Miriam carries me back out and upstairs. My hurt side tweaks uncomfortably as she sets me on the bed.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Mother peeks her head in as if expecting to find me stricken from exertion. When she sees me in bed, alive, she brings over my breakfast. I reach up for it, but she pivots and sets it on the bedside table to tuck the blankets around me to her standard then sets the tray over my lap.

"I need to make a call before I leave for the hospital," Miriam says, leaving the room.

"Say hello to Minerva for me," Mother says as she sits in my armchair with her darning.

Though I don't want to engage her in conversation, I'm too curious to stop myself, which seems to be the pattern of the day. "Who's Minerva?"

"Minerva? Oh, she's the woman Nurse Wallace lives with."

"The woman?"

"Yes, her mother-in-law."

"Oh, so Nurse Wallace is married."

"No."

Swallowing my oatmeal, I set down my spoon patiently and look toward Mother who, with her glasses perched on the tip of her nose, appears more scholarly than she is. "Then how is it, if Nurse Wallace isn't married, that this Minerva is her mother-in-law?"

"Oh, well, she is as good as. She's Nurse Wallace's fiancé's mother."

"So, Nurse Wallace is engaged, I see."

"No, the poor thing, he was killed in the war."

Is it Miriam or the fiancé who is the poor thing? I'll hazard both. "She lives with her dead fiancé's mother. Well, that's weird."

Mother frowns. It's not her usual worry-filled frown but one, well, yes, one of slight disappointment. I haven't seen this one before. "Ginny," she drops her darning to her lap, "please, don't talk about Miriam like that. All they have is each other, and I think it's a wonderful thing for a young woman like Miriam to care for a person she's not required to care for. They really love

each other, even though Miriam never got to marry Minerva's son Matthew. Now," her tone turns placating, "don't mention any of this to Nurse Wallace. It'll only upset her that you know, and she told me in confidence. I just didn't want you to keep talking as you were."

"Pick-a-lock, Mother." I mime tossing a key away and she smiles questioningly. I roll my eyes and go back to the oatmeal.

"I was so surprised to see Nurse Wallace carrying you like that through the kitchen. I nearly burnt the apples," Mother says after several minutes of silence, in which I was trying to hear Nurse Wallace's phone conversation. But she shut the door when she left, and I only hear the sound of her talking and no actual words. Why must she call Minerva so much? "She is so strong and healthy. It's remarkable too, with all that hospital work, that she doesn't catch whatever the patients have. Remarkable." She waxes on and I clatter my dishes to signal I'm finished in hopes that she'll take the tray and leave.

"You done?" She peers over her glasses at me. "Let me just finish this darn and I'll take the tray. Pop sure does wear through the socks. I keep telling him to cut his nails more, so I won't have to keep darning the tips so much, but he never thinks of it until they start scraping the front of his boots."

I am so glad I've already finished my breakfast.

"This pair is yours," she says getting up. "I'll just stick them in your top drawer." She freezes in place for several moments then dissolves like Lot's wife and sobs softly, "I'm sorry, Ginny. I didn't think. Didn't think."

I don't reply and she doesn't look at me as she takes the tray and rushes downstairs. Her words don't hurt. It's kind of funny actually. Miriam walks in as I'm laughing and raises a disapproving eyebrow. "That's no way to behave after making your mother cry."

"I didn't make her do anything. She did it all herself."

"Really. And what did she do?"

"She darned my socks." I start laughing again, but all she can say is poor Donna. Although, the corner of her mouth gives a small twitch.

Mother has recovered from darning my socks yesterday. She didn't mention it again and I didn't mention it, so it's water under the bridge. Things almost feel normal as we eat dinner together. Except for the fact we're eating it in my bedroom. Pop's sitting in my armchair and Mother sits on

the edge of my desk chair, afraid Pop will spill something on the rug as he's prone to do when he decides to tell a story. A rare thing. He doesn't notice her concern as his voice grows deeper in memory.

"And there he was towering above me," he says slowly rising in his seat, "big and black and the orneriest bull this side of the Appalachian Mountains. I couldn't have been more than five-years-old," he leans back. "But I knew I wasn't supposed to cut through that paddock, boy, if my father hadn't told me that time and time again. Of course, when I heard that supper bell ringing, I didn't think about going all the way around the paddock. No, that would've taken much too long. And then I saw my brother running into the house and I just knew he'd get all the best bits, and I thought it wasn't fair that just because he was older, he'd get the better bits. So, I squirreled over that fence and wasn't halfway across the paddock when out popped that bull from the shade of the oak tree. Now, I can tell you I didn't know what to do. My short little legs couldn't outrun him, and he was bound to start after me the moment I blinked." He pauses to take a bite of his mashed potatoes and Mother looks at the gravy dribbling through the tines of his fork with trepidation.

"But you see," he continues with a wave of his fork, "our neighbor happened to have the orneriest dog this side of the Appalachian Mountains. Although, he wasn't that big or black, he sort of looked like a smudge. A smudge with eager teeth attached to a one-track brain, mind you. Whenever this dog managed to wiggle loose from its chain, he'd barrel over to our paddock and start dancing with the bull. I don't rightly know which animal I was more scared of—our bull or that demon-dog. Well, the second I heard that dog's cackle howl I knew I'd have to take my chances with both. The bull whipped his horned head around just as the smudge cleared the fence. For a brief moment I had a spark of hope that they'd distract each other long enough for me to fling myself over the fence. But I moved too soon, and that bull whipped back around, gave a powerful, grunting, snort and would have dashed me to bits if I hadn't dived right under him.

"Honest-to-goodness truth," he says at my skeptical look. "I dove under that bull and rolled out the other side before he knew where I'd gone. The oak tree was to hand, and I scrambled up it just as the demon-dog bit the bull's tail." Bread crumbles from his lips and onto his lap, he absentmindedly brushes them to the floor and Mother sighs. "They kicked and bit each other until they both collapsed from exhaustion at the base of the tree. I spent the whole night in that oak."

"Didn't your parents come looking for you," I ask, as I know he wants me to.

“It was after dark when I heard my father hollering for me. And when he came over to the paddock fence and raised the lantern toward the tree and saw that bull and that dog lying there with my feet dangling ten feet above their heads, why, he said, ‘See you in the morning, son.’ And walked right back to the house.” Pop laughs, upsetting his glass of water which gushes to the floor like Niagara.

“Oh, Harvey!”

“I’m sorry, Donna, just got caught up in the story.” He whips out his napkin and starts dabbing the rug. “Not to worry, dear, it’s only water and this napkin is soaking it right up.”

Mother shakes her head and sighs as she gathers up the plates onto my tray and carries everything downstairs.

“Poor woman,” Pop says. “This is one of her favorite rugs.” He wrings out the napkin in the washbasin on my dresser and comes to the foot of my bed. “Do you want any dessert, Ginny?”

“No thanks, Pop.” A part of his story keeps nagging at me and if I don’t say anything now the opportunity will be gone, and I don’t think I’ll ever know. Pop almost never talks about his family or childhood and the need to know about his life overwhelms me at times. I only know Pop. I’ve never known Harvey or what he was like as a young man or a boy. Or how he could have possibly fought in the trenches of France.

“Hey, Pop?” He pauses in the doorway. “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

He turns. “Really? I never told you about him before?”

“Uh-uh.” He goes to leave. “Pop, will you tell me about him now?”

He comes and sits on the side of my bed. He neatly folds the edge of the blankets over and smooths them with his hands. “James was five years older than me and he’s been gone a long time now. I know you want more, but that bull story should keep you for one night.” He kisses my forehead and I know no matter what I say he won’t budge. “Goodnight, my girl.”

“Night, Pop.”

James Moore. The Moore boys—James and Harvey. I wonder if they were close and that’s why Pop won’t talk about him? I suppose he fought in the Great War like Pop. How long is a long time, anyway? These familial mysteries are all so frustrating. A box of golden kernels sits in the corner of my mind. They are few but all equally treasured. Each time Pop has dropped a golden kernel of memory, I pick it up and carefully store it in that box. Occasionally, I take one out and examine it, trying to analyze its history and trace it to my present. Sometimes, I simply let it dazzle

my eyes, transporting me to a place and a person I feel like I should know. But always, I wait for another golden kernel to fall.

Chapter Six

I went to a wax museum last year. Abraham Lincoln was giving the Gettysburg Address to a painted crowd in one corner and Rudolph Valentino was dressed as a sheik in another: his waxy, smoldering face attracting more attention than honest Abe's history making speech. Sandra had made me come and she hadn't told me she'd invited Bobby and his friend, Roger. I think his parents must have had some sick sense of humor because his last name is Rogers. So, while Sandra managed to whisk Bobby away amongst figures of wax I was stuck with Roger Rogers. He kept nervously picking at some acne on his cheek while I was developing a line-up of words to direct at Sandra when we were alone. I was staring at the thin lips of George Washington when Roger came up next to me. I ignored him, pretending I was blissfully alone, when I felt his hand creep around my waist then slide, almost innocently, toward my bottom. There was not an iota of flattery bouncing amongst the emotions occurring inside of me at that moment. Surprise, panic, disgust: these emerged paramount. But I froze and my meaning, momentarily, was misconstrued. He gave a slight squeeze and I jumped. My face turned hot and I pushed him away, and half-ran to the ladies' room. I watched droplets of water drip from my lashes, the faucet sounding loud, and realized I had begun to hate Sandra.

And now, I feel like one of those wax figures as I sit propped up in my bed while Sandra stares at me awkwardly from the chair Mother has placed at my bedside. Her eyes dart from her hands to where the blanket dramatically drops flat at my knees. She looks rosy and as voluptuous as ever, her black hair perfectly curled and waved to frame her oval face. A soft *tick, tick* creates an annoying rhythm in the room as she clicks the nails of her thumb and index finger together. Our cups of hot chocolate sit untouched on the tray, steam rises into the air and dissipates as we refuse to make eye contact.

Mother had to practically push her into the room. She stood in the doorway like to cross was to step off a cliff. What made her come anyway? Maybe trying to keep up appearances? That night, the night it happened, we weren't on speaking terms. Bobby had asked me if I'd like some spiced punch before he asked her. That was enough for me to be ignored for the remainder of the evening.

When Mother's hand rested on her shoulder, she shuddered and came toward the chair and sat in silence. Maybe she feels guilty for treating me badly before I got hurt? I wonder if she

suggested to Roger that he should try his luck again. He approached me with a surprising amount of confidence, even for him.

She shifts in her chair. "Mr. Kavanaugh asked after you," she says in a strained voice.

Of course, he would; Mr. Kavanaugh is one of the nicest men I know. He was more than just my math teacher; he was my mentor. The first day I walked into his class he gave me only a brief glance, knowing I had advanced a year, and was the youngest student there. After the first week, I quickly realized mathematics was his god and Roger Rogers his hope for achievement. However, Bobby was there too, and I'd come to class early to sit next to him. I had never moved in the circle of seniors before; Sandra was the only one from our class who'd managed to socialize with him. She was secretive about it because she was already making moves on him. My luck is forever rotten as I never managed to sit next to him because Roger Rogers would always slide next to me, his hair greased and dripping, and whisper, "Don't worry, baby, I'll explain it to you." How someone so dumb could be so smart is beyond me. "Back off, creep," I'd shout, but in my head. In reality I'd scoot to the far edge of my chair and keep my eyes drilled on Mr. Kavanaugh. I tried to ignore Roger's heavy breathing and that Bobby sat one desk behind me in the row to my left.

I almost threw-up when I discovered Roger Rogers was Mr. Kavanaugh's protégé. Gratefully, that quickly changed when Mr. Kavanaugh gave the class one of his 'impossible problems' and I was the only one to solve it. We had two entire days to solve it and I put it on his desk the same day without comment. His brows had risen in surprise. But, "Did you even try," was his comment. Indignation rose in my throat, but all I said was, "Yes, sir."

He held me back the next day after class and told me about a math scholarship I should study for and that he'd mentor me. From that point on, my dreams of what were possible were new and many. Mr. Kavanaugh's class exhilarated me. His pride in my abilities were palpable and they fed part of my soul I never knew existed. Bobby would smile at me when I squeaked out a hello, and Roger, well, Roger hung on to Mr. Kavanaugh's coattails as best he could, and I gave him little thought.

Sandra looks pained, like she can't breathe. I half expected her to waltz in here like nothing had happened and start talking about herself. But this hesitancy, this muted version of her is not what I expected at all. She's never been like this before. It's either a mixture of pity and that desperate feeling of wanting to escape or because she burnt her tongue on the hot chocolate. She sets it down and tries to look nonchalant.

“What’d he say,” I ask.

“Oh, this and th-that.” Did she stutter? “He hopes you’re healing ph-physically and wanted me to ask if you solved that math problem he gave you before break.”

“Oh.” It sits untouched and dusty on my desk. “Anything else?”

“No, not really. H-he’s just worried about you is all.”

“Well, you can tell him from me that I’m just dandy: peachy keen and the bee’s knees. What else has been going on?”

She shifts in her chair again, her façade of nonchalance revealing uncertainty. “Um, I don’t really know.”

This I can’t believe. I also can’t believe how relaxed I feel. I’ve never felt relaxed around Sandra. Never. It’s like the accident broke whatever hold she had on me. Granted the hold was growing ever anemic, but it was still there. Now, well, now I feel a freedom of the mind . . . and of the tongue. “Really, Sandra,” I begin. “You don’t have to pretend with me. You can stop this charade of propriety, or whatever you want to call it, and give me all the lurid details you hoard like a bridge troll. Have you filled your ledger yet?”

She flinches, yet her posture relaxes. “I don’t log any lurid details or keep any ledger. You must be referring to my diary and I only record my thoughts and emotions in there.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

She gives me a blank stare. There is a question behind that blankness I don’t want her to ask. “Continue,” I say.

“Well, umm . . .” Picking up her hot chocolate she blows on it then sets it down again. “I guess a lot of things have happened since December.” She settles in her chair a bit and dons a philosophical look. This ought to be good. “. . . Miss Dryer married that awful man Mr. Myer and decided to hyphenate her last name—Hester Dryer-Myer. I don’t know what she was thinking, you can’t go anywhere with a name like that. Umm, oh, Anna Horowitz got braces and looks even more hideous, but she doesn’t seem to realize it the way she flings herself at every available guy. Some of the boys call her “horse-face” behind her back and I simply had to tell the poor dear so she’d stop making such a fool of herself. She took it badly and won’t talk to me now. Why she should be angry at me, I don’t know? Let’s see.” Sandra’s awkwardness melts away as she relates her nuggets of gossip. Why was I ever her friend? No, that’s not right. Why was I her hang about? I clung to her like a burr.

“Pearl Summers dropped out,” she continues. “She said it was because her parents were moving, but I know it’s because she and Melvin Pavlovsky got frisky under the football bleachers.” Here she lowers her voice. “She’s, you know, ‘in the family way’.” She nods her head significantly. “That’s what I’m saying when people ask as I could never lie about a thing like that. Her parents are desperate to conceal it. Pearl insists that her dad got promoted to the home office, but she can’t deny the weight she’s gained. I don’t blame her parents for wanting to keep it a secret, who’d want Melvin as a son-in-law! Poor thing can’t show her face, so it’s just as well she’s moving. Anyway, the most exciting thing is we’ve started planning junior prom. I think we should rent out the country club as it’d be so classy there instead of the gym. I’ve started a petition and I think the principle will agree with me. Mother said I could have a strapless dress if I am good—it’ll be a light blue chiffon and I’ll wear a red rose in my hair with matching lipstick. Daddy is going to buy me a pearl necklace. It’s supposed to be a surprise, but I heard him telling mother about it. I swear she’s jealous as she said it was too good for me.”

“Really? Fancy her saying such a thing.”

My comment stung because her voice is sharper as she says, “Yes, well, she’s usually such a pal about things that I can forgive her this. But the real news,” her voice shifts to a lower register, “is this.” She pulls out a chain that was tucked underneath her blouse from which a class ring dangles. “He was so cute when he gave it to me,” she purrs. “I felt just like I had been proposed to. And I daresay, that was Bobby’s intention. His face was so red, and you should’ve seen his little blue eyes dripping in earnest! He’s so in love with me how could I not reciprocate? Everyone at school says we are the cutest couple, and mother is already planning the wedding and I shouldn’t be surprised if I were a June bride. Of course, we’ll have to wait until I turn eighteen, but Bobby would wait for me forever.”

“I doubt that.”

Her look of superiority slips. She crosses her arms and says, “Bobby is deee-voted.”

“I wonder if you’d even be wearing that ring if it weren’t for the accident. He did, after all, insist on driving me.”

“That’s only because you live next door to me.”

“Well, he certainly enjoyed talking with me more than he did with you. ‘Oh, Bobby! Why you carried not one but two glasses of punch.’ You couldn’t possibly think that would *actually* work?”

She recoils. "Are you mocking me?"

Am I? Maybe I am. "You must admit you are a bit ridiculous, Sandra. I mean, a 'June bride', it seems farfetched. I don't think Bobby is on the same page."

"Of course he is," she scoffs.

"I wouldn't be so sure if I were you."

"What, are you going to steal him from me?" Her eyes drop as her words hang uncomfortably in the air. She might as well have just said: no one wants a cripple.

"What I do doesn't matter," I say. "You don't really care about Bobby and when he finds out he won't hang around."

She slowly raises her hand and clasps Bobby's class ring through her blouse. "I came here out of friendship," she wheezes. "To cheer you up and to, to tell you how everyone was so worried."

"Well, you didn't do any of those things."

Her cheeks flush. "You've changed, Ginny. And I don't like it."

"That's because I'm telling you the truth."

Her lips part then close in consternation.

"I don't care what you think anymore," I clarify.

Her eyes sparkle with unshed tears. "I don't deserve to be treated like this, and-and-and you're a leech," she squeaks.

"And you're selfish."

We glare at each other like cats, our hackles raised.

"Then we're agreed," I say after a moment.

She looks off-kilter again. "Agreed?"

"Yes, agreed to not bother with each other anymore."

A mixture of relief and hurt pride skitters across her face. She smooths her skirt as she stands and raises her chin imperiously. "If that is what you wish then I shall abide by it and take my leave."

"Thank you."

She stops abruptly at the door, sways in deliberation then says over her shoulder, "I do hope you get better, Ginny." Her skirt swishes as she hurries away down the stairs.

I remember the time she got her first grown-up dress. It was our sophomore year. Her father was getting some kind of award for his plunger design, but Mrs. Jenkins fell ill at the last minute, so he decided to take Sandra. She called to tell me the news and wanted me to go dress shopping with her, but Mother said no. So, I moped about the house all day until Sandra rushed in at four o'clock with a big white box. Her excitement was contagious and I gasped as she lifted the pink, lacey dress from its box, so new and crisp. She pranced about my room with it draped across her front.

"You look so grown-up, Sandra," I had said, slightly envious at how it transformed her.

"Do I really?" She paused to admire herself in the mirror. "Ginny, will you try it on? I must see how the skirt swishes so I know how to move."

With tremulous hands, I slipped out of my cotton print and lifted my arms as a cascade of lovely satin enveloped me. It gaped in the front and moved loosely about my skinny and flat frame. I thought it'd transform me into a woman like it did Sandra, but it looked like I was drowning in a pink cupcake. I swished a bit to please Sandra but felt silly and uncouth.

"Is that enough? I feel ridiculous."

"You're lovely." The words leapt from her lips in surprise, unbidden and startlingly genuine. "I mean, the dress doesn't fit your body properly," she added quickly, "but the pink looks nice against your brown skin."

My skin was tan from working in neighbors' gardens for spending money, but the words 'you're lovely' rang in my ears. It was the first compliment she'd given me I knew was completely honest. Her own surprise at her words were proof enough. Simply having the knowledge that I could be lovely gave me a glimmer of confidence. A glimmer of hope when I demanded my textbook back from Bobby that day.

The floorboards creak as Mother comes in. "How was the visit," she asks, doubt slipping in as she retrieves the untouched hot chocolate. "Did Sandra cheer you up?"

I look at her contemplatively. Did she not hear anything of what just transpired? I'm positive Sandra didn't say goodbye to her. I don't feel like answering as I know she'll be disappointed and, well, sometimes I dread talking to her because she's always so cautious around me. Like I might break or crumble to pieces if I'm spoken to wrong. I wish she'd slap me on the back and tell me to buck up and do something for myself, but I have a hard enough time getting her to let me feed myself. "I don't think Sandra and I are friends anymore," I say at last.

She descends onto the bed with an "oh", resting the tray on her lap. "What happened?"

I shrug. "We're just not."

"Did she say something to upset you?"

When doesn't she? "No, not really. We've become different people, I guess."

"It just seems very sudden."

I shrug again.

"Is there something I can do?"

"No."

"There must be something I can do." She drills her fingertips against the tray.

"I'd rather you didn't."

"You need your friends, Ginny."

"Well, Sandra's out. That's all I can say."

She gets up, lost in thought. "I'll think of something," she says with a nod. "I'll think of something." She totters out with the tray and for the first time since the accident I pray to God, I pray that she won't think of anything.

Chapter Seven

Tomorrow February will be here, and Pop believes we'll get snow. It'd be nice to watch it fall outside my window, slowly covering the porch roof until it blends seamlessly into the landscape. In many ways, it feels like five years since the accident not the, what, seven weeks it's been. Dr. Deering is astonished at my recovery. My muscles and bones have swiftly knit themselves together at a remarkable pace.

I lift the covers and stare at my stumps. Every day I force myself to do so in order to confront reality, to combat the haunting of my missing limbs, and to not fall into the mental trap Mother's fallen into: out of sight out of mind. Sometimes, I think she pretends I've had a particularly bad cold and that all I need is a little extra care.

Pop doesn't deny what happened, but he constantly tells me to 'seek' God, to place my 'hope' in him, to find 'comfort' and 'peace' in him. The only thing is, he doesn't tell me how to do that. I believe God exists and that Pop finds those things in him, but I seem to exist in a world separate from Pop's. One without spirituality or faith. Again, there's a remarkable nothingness in me where faith is supposed to be. Even if I try to pray or 'draw close', as Pastor Haywood likes to say, it's manufactured and empty.

Last night, after dinner, before Pop kissed my forehead, he whispered: *This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.* My troubles do overwhelm me, and while I don't blame God for what happened, I've never felt him with me so why should I cry out to him? I don't believe he'll respond. I suppose I have a lot to cry out about and most people would think I'd be drawn to God more than ever. Maybe I will at some point, I don't feel strongly one way or the other.

Pop always seems so wise, and while he still is, in this matter I'm not so sure anymore. How can he be so assured about God's love when I've never felt it?

Mother never has anything concrete to add on that score, but she is right about one thing: I do like coffee. She left the entire pot on the tray for me, and I pour another cup, get another cookie and stare out the window to see snow is beginning to fall. Well, I guess Pop was right about that.

I always try to angle myself, so I see out the front facing window. From there, I see the ridge of the porch roof and the Peterson house across the street and, in the distance, the thick line

of the blue mountains. The side window, which is directly opposite the bed, faces Sandra's bedroom window. We used to have such fun talking late into the night from the comfort of our own bedrooms. And if a parent were to lumber up the stairs, it was a quick bang and a hop into bed.

Once Sandra had the idea to place a long, wooden board on each windowsill, so we could walk across and visit each other without having to use the customary front door. The board, however, wasn't quite long enough. It was a mercy that Sandra decided to crawl out the window feet first because the second she put her weight on the board it shifted and clattered to the ground. The moment I saw Sandra's new booties that I had been so jealous of drop from my view, I screamed like murder. Sandra, clinging to the windowsill with her dimpled hands, screamed so beautifully that mine quickly petered out and all I was left with was admiration followed by an overwhelming sense of urgency. That urgency took me downstairs and outside where I danced manically underneath the window yelling to Sandra not to worry and that I'd catch her.

Mother had heard the screaming from her vegetable garden and entered the house as I ran out of it. Catching a glimpse of Sandra's kicking booties from the dining room window, she moved so quickly I often think she managed teleportation. I plopped to the ground in exhaustion as I saw Mother lift Sandra back through her window. By this time, Mrs. Jenkins was coming down the walk with her shopping and had an irritated look on her face as Mother came onto the porch with Sandra crying in her arms.

"What's happened, now," she demanded.

"The girls have had quite the scare, Delilah," Mother said. I had dragged myself to the porch by now and was trying to comfort Sandra who still wailed uncontrollably.

"Stop that screeching, Sandra, you'll bring on one of my headaches. Whatever happened it couldn't have been that bad."

"It looks like they tried walking across a board they'd put between their windows and while Sandra was trying to cross it fell, but she managed to hold on to the sill and, thank the Almighty, didn't fall herself."

"Well, the Almighty," Mrs. Jenkins said this with mocking condescension, "wouldn't need to be thanked if you had watched the girls as they ought to have been watched."

"Why, Delilah, I thought you were at home. You didn't say anything about going shopping."

“I needn’t tell all my neighbors my itinerary now, do I?” I don’t think Mother knew what itinerary meant because she didn’t say anything. “Now,” Mrs. Jenkins continued, “give me my child so I may comfort her.” Mother held out Sandra, whose wailing had subsided to distraught hiccups, but Mrs. Jenkins only set her on her feet and took her hand. “Good day, Donna,” she had said to a perturbed Mother. She glared at us like a living statue until we’d walked off her porch and into our own house. As our windows were still open, I heard Mrs. Jenkins scold Sandra in her bedroom and tell her she’d have to behave herself better in the future or she wouldn’t get anymore new hats with ribbons or dresses with flounces. But to always remember that mommy loved her and for God’s sake to stop sucking her thumb or she’d cut it off.

Mrs. Jenkins unnerves me. At first, I thought it was her beauty. Her golden hair and voluptuous figure always move so languidly yet also effortlessly, her silky dresses mirroring her curves. Other women call her a distraction whenever she goes to social gatherings, but, of course, the men never seem to mind. She doesn’t go out much though. I often heard her say that she hardly left the house because she was such a devoted housewife. Mostly, I saw her lying on the chaise lounge in the parlor in her blue kimono, softly moving her toes in rhythm with the music rolling from the radio. She’d tilt her chin and blow plumes of cigarette smoke above her head and sweetly tell Sandra to run along and pour her another glass of juice. Not once did I ever see her enter the kitchen. How I was so skinny as a kid when Mother cooked all the time and Sandra so wonderfully chubby when Mrs. Jenkins never cooked at all?

It’s her eyes that really unnerve me. They are pastel blue with a contradictory sharpness that sit beadily in her oval face. When they zero in on you with disapproval or distaste you would never think her beautiful, you only wish you were anywhere else but under that gaze. I could have never been friends with Sandra if she had her mother’s eyes. Sandra wouldn’t have been able to make me do anything I’d just be hypnotized with fear, unable to move. Though Sandra has her mother’s figure, she’s dark like Mr. Jenkins. Her sister Abigail, however, is fair like Mrs. Jenkins but the skinniest and most freckled six-year-old you ever saw.

Mrs. Jenkins is horrified over her ugliness and never dresses her half so pretty as she did Sandra. Also, Abigail refuses to answer to anything except Gail, and Mrs. Jenkins hates derivatives. No one was ever allowed to call Sandra Sandy. Mr. Jenkins did once, and she didn’t talk to him until he monogrammed Sandra on almost every single article of clothing his daughter possessed. But Gail refuses to acknowledge anyone calling her Abigail; Mrs. Jenkins tried for an

entire month, and no matter what punishment, Gail refused to budge. So, Mrs. Jenkins was reduced to a derivative.

Gail's eyes are a striking, innocent green and she's never compared to either parent. I often see her playing baseball with Georgianna "Georgie" Peterson and Wayne's little sister. I threw back their ball one day when I was walking home from school, and Gail said it was a pity I was too old to play with them and Georgie said, "Yeah, then we could've been Georgie, Ginny, and Gail! The Triple G Gal Pals." I've always sort of wish I'd been young enough to be part of the Gal Pals.

The blue flakes spiral to the frozen ground and the afternoon holds its breath in anticipation. The stillness of the outdoors creeps into my bedroom and I ache to wrap my thick blue scarf around me and put on my matching mittens; to slip quietly past the remaining six houses on our street, jump Farmer Hammond's fence, to walk to the wooded pond that lies in the valley of his field, and sit on the trunk of the fallen cedar and watch the world turn white. I yank the covers over my head. No more solitary walks in the woods, no more evening swims, no more dancing, no more school or scholarships, no more friends or Bobby—no more future. My breath under the covers is suffocating and as I throw the blankets off, the coffee pot goes with them. I look over the edge of my bed to see brown liquid forming little rivulets along the grains of the floorboards.

"Ginny, you alright?" Mother's voice is drenched with worry as she bursts into my room.

"The coffee pot fell," I say, gathering the blankets back around me.

"You're not hurt?"

"No, I'm fine."

"You gave me such a scare. I thought you'd fallen off your bed." She takes a reassured breath. "Mr. Kavanaugh is here," she says.

My hands freeze from smoothing the covers. "What?"

"Mr. Kavanaugh has come to see you," she says as she puts the coffee pot on the tray, mopping up the coffee with a napkin. "He was saying how much he missed having you in his class when the pot fell. Do you want to see him?"

I stare at her bowed grey head. I don't know . . . do I? He'd given me a foreign feeling. Something tinged with achievement and attention. It drew me forward instead of pushing me. Before Mr. Kavanaugh the future hadn't existed to me, rather I'd never thought of it. But now a

cloud hovers over the feeling he gave me, and once the cloud descends will snuff it out like a blanket over a flame. I was a fluke. The potential he saw a trick of the eyes. The flame is of his making, he pulled instead of pushed, and I want the mist to whisk all traces of it away. This room belongs to a different girl and so, perhaps does Mr. Kavanaugh.

“I’m too tired to see anyone.”

Mother looks at me. A full pot of coffee did not spill on the floor, and she knows I’m not truly tired. “Are you sure,” she asks. “He’s real anxious to see you.”

“I’m sure.”

“Okay, then.” She leaves and his soft voice wafts up the stairs like steam from a kettle or a friendly ghost as he apologizes for not calling first and that he’ll make sure to do so next time. Mother says something conventional in her irritatingly soft, simple way. There is always a moment in a child’s life when they realize something about their parents: that they aren’t as perfect, as wise, as kind, or as knowledgeable as originally believed. I was fourteen when I realized I had more formal education than Mother. It brings me a mixture of embarrassment and heartbreak. Her lack of education breeds insecurity and dismissiveness in her interactions with others because she believes everyone is smarter than her. What would she be like with confidence? When I try to describe her emotional state, I think of a milkweed or dandelion on a windy summer’s day—fragments of itself blowing away to God knows where.

“Please, tell Ginny we all miss her and that I hope to see her soon.” He raises his voice as if he wants me to hear. The front door shuts, and he’s gone, and now, now I wish I’d seen him. He would’ve told me all the news I wanted to hear, he would’ve encouraged me, and even though the scholarship would’ve been an elephant between us, he would’ve brightened my spirits.

“Mr. Kavanaugh wanted to give you these,” Mother says, coming back into my room. She shuffles over and sets a bouquet of pink flowers in a vase on the nightstand. Her hand hovers over my head for a moment and I think she might stroke my hair like she used to, but she simply takes the tray with the broken coffee pot and smashed cookies and leaves. The flowers must be from Miss Fernandez’s shop. They smell nice. A note falls from its perch on a petal.

—Ginny,

I know you’ve probably finished that problem I gave you weeks ago, so here’s another to keep you busy. Roger couldn’t figure it out. Thinking of you.

Get well soon.

Mr. K

He must really believe in me to keep sending problems like this. Who does he think I am now? I let the note fall to the floor. The math whiz has died, now I sit up here in my bed putrefying like some worm in a sidewalk puddle.

Nervously, I waited as he looked over my homework. The library, naturally, was quiet and all I could hear was his methodical breathing. In and out, in and out, eyes scrolling, in and out, eyes pausing, in and out, eyes scrolling again. The wait for his approval was always maddening. He set the papers down and smoothed them out against the table with the palm of his hand. Now, is when I'd know: a smile of approval or those dreaded words, "Let's take a look at this . . ."

He glanced at me, and I felt for sure I had done something wrong. It irked me that I hadn't seen it. What could I have missed? Then, but no, he smiled. I had done everything right. Everything right . . . what else had we talked about during those after school sessions? The library is one of the oldest buildings in town and the dark wooden floors blend seamlessly with the wood paneling and I can picture us sitting at that table in the corner buttressed by the comforting walls, munching cookies Mr. Kavanaugh had snuck in past Miss Crumpler and her shriveled lips. The monocle she wore always enlarged her right eye to enormous proportions and it was easy to imagine that she could look right through your bag and see the box of cookies. Why she wears a monocle instead of glasses, I can't say. Everyone knows she needs lenses for both eyes as she's often been caught squinting horribly with her left eye—her right eye watering with the effort of keeping open. What I do know for certain is that she confiscates any cookies (or other assorted snack foods) she finds; and this, I'm sure, is because she was denied them as a child and secretly eats every single cookie she confiscates.

Mr. Kavanaugh was a little different outside of the classroom. We'd sit at our table, he at my diagonal, and he'd smile at me as he tried to eat a cookie without Miss Crumpler seeing. While I worked on a problem, he'd grade quizzes, prepare the next day's lessons, or sometimes he'd look at me quietly. Once I looked up to see such a grieved expression on his face that I half believed he'd received a message while I worked that someone he knew had died.

"Is everything okay, Mr. Kavanaugh," I asked.

His eyes refocused and his face slowly slipped into a smile. "Oh, just lost in thought. How's the problem going?"

“Fine, almost finished.” I showed him the paper.

“Good, good.” He rubbed his face and sat slack in his chair.

He still looked sad and I wanted to ask why, but I couldn't ask such a personal question. I couldn't to anyone really, but a teacher especially. It says something about my character that a person who meant, means, so much to me was sad and I never had the courage to ask why. He acquired that expression several more times during our library sessions, but I never saw it at school. He was often absent-minded in the classroom; students would talk quite freely, and he'd never notice. People never got out of control though, he'd just look up or turn around and everyone would go quiet. He wasn't intimidating, it's just no one wanted to cause him difficulty. He's a marvelous teacher and never expects more than what a student is capable. In our tutoring sessions, he always pushed me just enough. And whenever I cracked a particularly difficult problem, he'd bring out a cupcake or small box of chocolates for me. This only happened a few times. Although, once he thoroughly surprised me. It was the last session we had before Christmas break, he caught me looking at him as his face drooped with melancholy. I don't know, but I think he knew what I wanted to ask. He never told me why he was sad, instead he put his hand on mine. It rested there, heavily, for a few moments; his eyes gazing at our hands. “You have so much potential, Ginny,” he said, “so much. You're smart and beneath that timidity ambition is pulsing.” He leaned forward and squeezed my hand. “It's pulsing and I won't see that ambition beat in vain.” His hand was clammy, making mine clammy, and he gently let go as Miss Crumpler shushed him from across the room. Her shush much louder than his talking.

I felt myself blushing under his sudden earnestness. “Really?”

“Really.” His voice softened and Miss Crumpler eyed us through her monocle. “You have a gift, and a gift like yours shouldn't lie waste neither should it go unrewarded.” He pulled out a small pink box. The edges of it were a bit worn and gray, as if it had been in his coat pocket for a good while and rubbed as he walked. “I know you'll get that scholarship, and you'll go to college, and forget all about this town in your ambition, as you should,” he added when I tried to contradict him. “This is just so you won't forget me and maybe, when you look at it, you'll remember our library sessions and think to write me a line. Just to say how you're getting along.” He opened the box and a silver charm bracelet lay on the white satin. I was too astonished to say anything, and a bit embarrassed that he'd give me such a gift. He fastened it around my wrist and the various charms—a division sign, the percentage symbol, a fraction, a plus sign, the symbol for pi—tinkled

as he lifted my hand toward the lamp light. “College will open many doors for you, but I’ll always like to think that I cracked the window.”

“It’s beautiful, Mr. Kavanaugh. I really don’t deserve it. The scholarship and college are all so wonderful, but there are so many difficulties and unknowns. Mother says I should wait another year until I’m older, and I’d have to move so far away. Anyways, the scholarship doesn’t cover all the tuition. How am I to pay for the rest?”

“No matter.” He patted my hand reassuringly. “We’ll deal with your parents and the rest of the money in the spring. This scholarship is all that matters right now.”

All that mattered. It was all that mattered to me. Even Sandra’s thinly veiled barbs about how much time I spent with Mr. Kavanaugh, didn’t dissuade my devotion. If Bobby had ever showed an ounce of interest, I knew, I’d falter, but Sandra had entrapped him by then. By November, Roger Rogers had gotten tired of trying to woo me and realized that I was a real contender for the scholarship and started studying more. His greasy hair dripped onto his papers as he maniacally ran his fingers through it as he tried to solve problems Mr. Kavanaugh had given me a month before.

I’ve never worn the bracelet. It’s carried a responsibility with it—something of importance—that’s made me hesitant. People, like Sandra or Mother, would’ve asked about it and I felt the purpose surrounding it would dissipate the moment of explanation. It’s been sitting in the drawer of my nightstand this whole time. The flower petals quiver as I open the drawer and take out the pink box. As I unlatch the clasp, I notice an engraving on the back of the abacus charm (the biggest charm on the bracelet). Why have I never noticed that before? What could Mr. Kavanaugh have engraved on it? My name? No, it isn’t my name. It’s someone else’s: *For Rachel*.

Chapter Eight

Mother found Mr. Kavanaugh's note. It now sits on my desk with the other problem he gave me. The new note is smooth and crisp whereas the other is crinkled, and the lead is soft and smudged, and every time my door opens or closes a corner of it lifts almost imperceptibly. I'd stuck it in my coat pocket when he handed it to me after class, but it was the last day, winter break had started, and I didn't care much about it because there was going to be a party that night. Normally, I wouldn't have cared about a party, but Bobby had specifically invited me. He'd asked if I was going right in front of Sandra and her livid expression sealed my fate. Sealed it because her expression signaled something I never thought could happen. That she was concerned that Bobby would even bother to ask me, that it meant, maybe, that he liked me. Not necessarily romantically, I've never thought that, but that he thought of me at all. That it was more than just politeness. And I couldn't say no to him, couldn't say that I had meant to study because the next day was the scholarship exam, so I said of course I was going, wouldn't miss it for the world. He smiled such a smile that I thought Sandra and I might erupt simultaneously but for completely different reasons.

Mother didn't think it a good idea to go because of the icy streets. She didn't care that I should've been studying for the scholarship. She kept saying that I'd slip on the way to the party and break my neck or that I'd catch a cold or worse pneumonia. Pop wasn't home from the factory yet, so she couldn't ask him to drive me to the party. She was surprised over my wanting to go. I'd never been insistent before and I was about to acquiesce when the phone rang. Mother was a bit dazed when she walked back into the room.

"You should go, Ginny."

"But you just said I shouldn't."

"It's okay now. That was Bobby Deering. He's coming to pick you up."

It was my turn to be dazed. I shouldn't have been though for he was really coming to pick up Sandra and I was just conveniently next door.

I've tried to force myself to recount every minute detail of the party. How we all wound up outside. How Bobby gripped my arm when I slipped and didn't let go right away. How Sandra ignored me and if she really told Roger that I liked him after all. I don't think I could ever forgive her that. Uhg, Roger. I can never get past the point when he leered at me, and we both fell as I pushed him away. I stand up and see the waving arms but freeze the moment. I know what happens

next. It's there—hovering in the back of my mind—but I stop it from coming because once I let it come it will come over and over again until I can't keep it inside. And then I'll tell someone, which will be Mother, and she'll cry then I'll cry. I'll cry and won't be able to hold back and will say my legs are haunting me and she'll think I'm crazy. She'll tell her friends who'll tell their friends and then the whole town will know I'm a loon. So, I stop at the waving arms and contemplate whether I should solve Mr. Kavanaugh's problem or not.

I look out my front window.

Georgie Peterson dangles from a low tree branch as she waits for the bus. Her red coat a stark contrast against the browns of earth. She starts to swing back and forth, using her legs to pump herself higher. The front door opens and her mother yells something at her. She drops to the ground and the second Mrs. Peterson goes back inside she sticks her tongue out and jumps in a half-thawed puddle of mud and snow. Brown specks travel up her stockings. The bus drives up and she's gone.

A smell of hot apples and cinnamon dance through my open door; Mother has finished baking her apple pie. She is not one to hum as she cooks, I've never heard her sing. She dances to some internal song—shuffling, softly swishing her hips in silence. You can't notice it unless you sit and watch her cook. Her big bones mask the small movements. Pie. It fills my thoughts and tantalizes my tongue. I was never allowed to touch one of her pies as a kid. It was 'after supper food' only. So, like a dog, I'd stand eye-level to the kitchen table and gaze upon it longingly, salivating like a bloodhound with a gland problem. One time, I thought, brilliant child that I was, I'd sneak a poke. When there is only one kid in the house it's not hard to deduce who put the finger-sized hole in the apple pie.

Hunger marches through me conquering every internal organ. My cup of coffee sits empty on the end table and the liquid now pushes against my bladder, making the hunger doubly painful. The bedpan is by the door. There is such shame shading my anger I can barely breathe. I am not supposed to move around much as there is still a stitch that must be removed, but my bladder is pounding, and I can't wait. I toss my blanket off and slide forward, balancing on the edge of the bed. How the hell do I get down? Pulling myself back from the edge, I lay on my stomach and go headfirst. A tender, bruising pain rolls upward as my stumps bang against the bed and my arms shake, as I lower myself to the floor. I lay on my side; breaths come in pants. I wrangle, push up and

drag myself across the floor. I have no plan and the bruising pain increases to an unpleasant soreness—a type of laceration deepening past skin to muscle. My stitch is pulling apart; but I continue forward, pulling myself like an inch worm toward the bedpan. The cool hardwood presses against me, a solid weight beneath my skin and bones, and sharpens the urgency in my bladder. A gasp wrenches my stomach. Out of the corner of my eye, the metal door stopper—a Beagle sitting erect—stares back, a warmth blooms between my legs. How have I been reduced to such a moment as this? My fingernails dig into the hardwood, and I sob.

The dull click of Mother's square heels punctuates my sobs as she rushes the stairs.

"Oh my," she breathes in the face of my humiliation. Her leathery hands wrap around my arms, and she pulls me to her lap. "I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." She cradles my head as I cry. Stinging erupts in my thigh as the urine soaks into the unhealed wound. "My child, my child," she whispers into my hair, "my darling miracle child." She sits me up and brushes my hair away from my eyes. I consider her aging face. It is wet and falters with a love afraid. "I've got to call Harvey; I can't carry you."

"Pop mustn't see me." My voice shakes, the tears still fall.

"I've got no choice, but don't worry, we'll clean you up before he gets here."

I feel lightheaded, my back against the wall, and Mother hurries down the stairs and lifts the receiver from the phone on the narrow table in the hall.

"Hi Patty, factory please. Hmm? Y-yes, I'm fine." A moment's silence ensues in which, hands trembling, I unbutton my dress and the side where I fractured my ribs begins to ache. "Frank?" A sharpness launches into her voice, and I can picture her knuckles turning white as she grips the phone in anxiety. "Yes, this is Donna, I need to talk to Harvey," she says. Her voice cracks. She wants Pop to come home for her and not me. "Harvey, Harvey," then her voice falls into a whispered panic, and I can't tell what she's saying. But I know she is pleading though all she needs to do is ask and Pop will come immediately. There has never been a need to plead with him for anything. It is either a yes or no, and no amount of begging or supplication will sway his mind. In Mother's case, he hardly ever says no. There has never been a need to.

The buttons go all the way down the front of my dress and there are two left as she comes up the stairs once more, this time carrying a ceramic bowl with steam rising and a cloth over her shoulder. Her eyes are wet but assured. She kneels beside me and helps me remove my dress. Reaching for my slip, she tries to raise it, but I push her hands away. "No, I can do it. Get me my

robe.” Her eyes reflect my shame, but there is a hidden embarrassment of her own that she battles as she hastily rises and goes to my closet without a word of protest. My hands shake as I raise my slip over my head and then as I awkwardly take off my panties. I take the sponge, bobbing in the warm water, and rub it over my skin. Creamy and unblemished, it wraps around my bones which protrude, and I wonder that it hasn’t been pierced through. I shiver, exposed. The flesh around the stitch is red and inflamed, and bleeds slightly. Finishing, I cover myself with the towel. Mother waits with her back toward me and picks imaginary fuzz off my robe. I clear my throat and she understands. She kneels and holds it as I put my arms through the sleeves. I cannot get it under me, but I cinch it tightly at the waist and drape it as best I can around my thighs. A car door slams. “Quickly,” I tell Mother, pointing to the urine still on the hardwood.

She grabs the sponge and mops up the mess and dries the floor with the towel I hand her. Once more down the stairs and the door opens just as she passes it with the ceramic bowl.

“Donna,” Pop calls. “Donna!”

“Harvey, I’m here,” she replies, running from the kitchen. There is fervent whispering then Pop’s heavy tread on the stairs and Mother picks up the phone again.

Pop kneels beside me, wordless, and kisses my forehead as he puts his arms around me. I throw my arms around his neck and burry my face into his shoulder; I might cry.

“Dr. Deering, this is Donna Moore, Ginny fell,” Mother’s voice is calmer now that Pop is here.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper as Pop lays me on my bed. Another house call, another bill he can’t afford.

“It’s not for you to apologize. None of this is your doing.”

I want to kiss him for being so nice to me, but he’s gone downstairs to Mother.

Why am I such a fool? I draw a deep breath then release it slowly, trying to steady this shaky feeling. My body pounds with a hot achiness. My arms are weak useless things. How was I supposed to manage getting back into bed? I wipe my eyes and breathe deeply again. I just want so badly to do something, anything, on my own.

“Ginny, Dr. Deering is here,” Pop says from the hall.

I didn’t notice them come up the stairs. Dr. Deering, Bobby’s father, stands in the doorway a moment before entering, Pop just behind him, Mother hovering behind Pop.

“So, we had a spill, did we?” He comes in and plops his bag on the nightstand. Why do doctors always talk in pluralisms? They aren’t the ones sick or broken. They must think it gives the patient a sense of inclusiveness, that they aren’t the only ones who’ve done this silly thing to their body. I have always found it patronizing, but Dr. Deering is a nice man. He has gentle hands and a warm smile. Bobby’s smile.

I grip my robe as he examines my thigh, realizing with an uncomfortable awareness that I’m not wearing underwear.

He puckers his lips, for a moment, in medical contemplation. “Not to worry, no real damage has been done. There is some slight tearing, but nothing that won’t heal in a jiffy.” He dabs it with a clear liquid that causes searing pain. I bite my lip. He now dabs it with some type of salve. “You stay in bed a few days, I’ll come back and check it, then you should be able to move around all you like.”

“That will be nice . . . won’t it.” Mother looks my way showing a forced optimism.

Dr. Deering smiles at me. “Well, I must leave. The flu is going around like the plague, Bobby himself is not feeling so well. He told me to say hello for him before I left.”

“Oh . . . th-thanks.”

“You folks have a good day now.” My parents follow him out of my room. Pop asks Dr. Deering how much he owes. Their voices go soft, but they left my door partially open and Dr. Deering replies, “There is no charge. I owe you more than any home visits can repay.” There is some mild protest in Mother’s high-pitched voice, but it fades as they walk downstairs.

Bobby says hello. And his family is indebted to mine. The day is full of mysteries I can’t solve, and the night seems so far away.

Chapter Nine

“This is the last you’ll see of me,” Nurse Wallace says as she prepares to remove my last stitch. “Your ribs are mended, the bandages are gone, and the scabs on your face are healed; although, there’s nothing I can do about that scar on your chin. But your body is healing well. You’ll still feel some tenderness and soreness in the muscles of your thighs, but you’re free to move around. I’d suggest getting a wheelchair, Donna,” she turns her head toward Mother who is hovering in the background unable to watch Nurse Wallace remove the stitch. “It’ll help bring some normalcy back into your life,” she says turning to me.

I raise my eyebrow.

“Do you want to be carried everywhere and only when it’s convenient to someone else?” Ah, there’s Miriam.

I say nothing.

“No, I didn’t think so. A wheelchair is a must. Now, here is a chart of some stretches and massages for you to do. I’d really recommend coming to the hospital once a week to work with a physical therapist, but that’s up to you and your parents.”

“If I’m just going to live out my life in a wheelchair what’s the use of therapy?”

“Ginny don’t say that,” Mother gasps.

“The use of therapy,” Miriam says as she puts the blanket over me, “is to strengthen your muscles and increase mobility. There is still a lot you can do if you allow yourself. If you want to use the restroom by yourself, for instance, you’ll need to increase the strength in those sticks you call arms. I doubt you could even push yourself in a wheelchair right now.”

“What does therapy or a wheelchair matter anyway? I can’t very well take a wheelchair down the stairs, can I? And I’m not about to drag myself everywhere like a worm.”

A tiredness comes into Miriam’s face and Mother says I’m not a worm. I wish I could take it back as it’s Nurse Wallace who says, “Where there’s a problem, there’s a solution.” The professionalism jumps back into her voice, and she turns to Mother. “Donna, have you thought about converting a room downstairs into a bedroom for Ginny? This would solve some more of the obvious issues and inconveniences.”

“A room downstairs,” she says, “I never thought of that. Hmm, it’ll be a lot to move the furniture but I’m sure Harvey can find someone to help him. How about the sitting room, Ginny?”

It's always shut up anyway, we don't have much company, and I've never used it for company at that. What do you think?" She looks at me.

The sitting room is in the back-left corner of the house. The exact opposite of my bedroom. I'll have to give up my view of the mountains and Georgie's antics for Mother's victory garden and the horrible yellow house next door. Also, I won't have any door. "Fine," I sigh. "I don't see the use of disagreeing as nobody takes my opinions seriously. But I'll need a curtain or something to go across the doorjamb. My privacy, though it's been severely invaded of late, is important to me."

"How very gracious of you," Miriam snorts. Mother doesn't appear to hear the tone in her snort, for she agrees with Miriam and gives her an appreciative smile.

"Well, I'll talk to Harvey when he gets home from the factory. If he can find someone to help him, we'll do it as soon as we can." Her brow furrowed. "Where do you get wheelchairs?"

"I have some information of suppliers I can give you, but you should ask around as there might be a used one someone is willing to part with."

"Are they very expensive?"

Miriam puts her arm around Mother as they leave my room. "New ones are, but I'm sure there's a used one in this town."

"I'll ask Dr. Deering."

"Oh, I already did." Their voices start to drift. "He didn't know of one."

Pop sold all the furniture from the sitting room to a secondhand shop. There weren't any antiques or valuable lamps or vases. It had been secondhand to begin with. Mother is a trifle upset, though she thinks she doesn't show it. She thought Pop would move everything from the sitting room upstairs, but he, kindly, said that it wouldn't be used, had never been used, and that they could use the money. He'd lowered his voice, but I still heard.

Mother has been emptying drawers and bookshelves all morning to make it easier to move my furniture downstairs. Pop is downtown buying curtains to go across the doorjamb and someone from church is coming to help move everything. I've been put on the sofa in the parlor room, out of the way, ensconced in blankets with a book I have no interest in reading. Mother got me *Little Dorrit* from the library as she thinks Dickens is my favorite author. A cup of coffee rapidly turns cold as I let the steam rise and dissipate unchecked.

All this bustle and activity on such a gloomy day feels sacrilegious to me, but I'm told it's Saturday and that is the only day, of course, that Pop is available to get everything moved. Mother clatters downstairs to check the soup simmering on the stove. The aroma of tomato and basil permeates the first floor. She wants to give whoever is helping Pop a good lunch as whoever is helping is doing it out of the goodness of his heart.

This must be Pop now. Car doors slam shut, and footsteps sound up the porch and inside. I can't see the front door, but Pop says, "Look who I found, Ginny! A school chum of yours is here to help." Could it . . . no . . . could it be Bobby?

"Aw, it's my pleasure to help, Mr. Moore." That voice. That awful nasally voice. It rounds the hallway wall and floats into the parlor. It is not Bobby. Gaseous fumes roll sluggishly from Roger Roger's mouth as he says, "Hi-ya, Ginny!" He runs his fingers through his shiny hair then walks up to the sofa and sticks out the same hand for me to shake. The hair grease has left a film on his skin. I would have shook it before. Not out of friendship, but because that's what people do. It's what we've been taught from infancy. One must be polite to people even if they give you physical and emotional gag-reflux because that's what makes a society civilized. But his hand is disgusting, there's no telling where he's put it, and the reality that Roger Rogers is standing in my house has caused whatever bubble of privacy and protection I felt from him to pop. He never knew where I lived, how he didn't learn from Bobby I don't know. Sandra would have killed whoever told Roger where she lived. She used him but she also loathed him. He lives on the wealthy side of town as his father is well-to-do and his mother is some sort of southern aristocrat. He always made me feel poor and vulnerable. But I'd finally got one up on him over that scholarship and Mr. Kavanaugh. I finally had something he didn't; I finally could feel a little superior and have a kind of power over him. I never wanted to use him like Sandra used him (the wax museum being one incident among several), but I wanted the ability to cow him if I needed to. My superiority in mathematics and Mr. Kavanaugh's attention were weapons I could use anytime he tried to sit too close to me or get too familiar, I could just whip out a "Mr. Kavanaugh said the funniest thing the other day" or give a small, confident smile when faced with a problem I knew he'd have trouble solving.

But now he's smiling at me, his red nose redder from the cold, and his dirty hand sticking out at me. I look him directly in the eyes then deliberately look away toward *Little Dorrit* which I open and pretend to read. My heart pounds and my palms sweat. I never told my parents about

odious Roger, they only heard about classmate Roger. The one who was also good at math and was trying for the scholarship. Pop is innocent. He has no idea what he's done. Has no idea why I don't greet Roger. I can feel his confusion and disappointment. Roger has no such emotions.

"How ya feelin'? It was a rotten thing what happened to you, real bad luck." Pop has gone to the kitchen and Roger leans over me. "'Specially, cuz your legs was one of your best features. Ha, ha! Everyone says so. The bad luck, I mean, not about your legs. Anyway," he straightens, plunging his hands in his jean's pockets, and meanders around the room. "I'm sorry that it happened to you. Kids been wonderin' what you look like now. You've been the most talked about girl in school since Sandra dropped the bomb that Pearl Summers was preggers. Ha, I didn't think Freddy had it in him!" He runs his finger along the bookshelf, and frowns slightly when no dust sticks to it. "Since we was so close, I thought it only right that I come visit ya. Bumpin' into your old man like I did and him needin' help movin' your stuff, I thought it was the perfect opportunity to come and see ya. Welp," he plops next to me on the sofa and since I'm sitting on it longwise, I must turn my head not to look at his pockmarked face. "I jus' knew you'd be feelin' down in the dumps on account of the accident and having to pull out of the runnin' for the scholarship that I want to help ease your pain. You shouldn't feel bad about the scholarship, you really shouldn't, Mr. K told me after the exam that he knew, deep down, that I was the only one with a real shot at it. The stress of takin' an examination is worse for chicks, you know."

"Mr. Kavanaugh never said that." My voice doesn't match the anger I feel but despite its quietness it has a gratifying steadiness that causes Roger to look at me differently—warily, maybe?

"Huh?"

"He never told you you were the only one with a real shot at the scholarship. And I recall you sweating buckets every time we took just a regular ole test."

"How'd you know that? You can't know what Mr. Kavanaugh tells me. You're not omnivorous."

"It's omniscient. And I don't have to be. Mr. Kavanaugh told me, personally, how annoying you were to him. He loathes you he really does." The smile won't come, I can't force it though I want to smile in his face, but I try to look complacently at the pages of *Little Dorrit*.

"Loathes me," Roger whispers incredulously, questioningly. "Bah! Mr. K loves me; I'm his proto-proto, oh whatever it's called, I'm it. I'm the smartest guy in school, the scholarship winner." He slaps his knee. "Ha! Loathes me. That's a good one, Ginny."

Again, how someone so smart can be so dumb is beyond me.

Pop comes back. “I thought we’d start with the bed, Roger.” He looks at me, a little worried, I think he’s heard some of our conversation.

“Huh?” Roger looks at him vacantly. “Oh, yeah!” He jumps up. “Let’s get to it old m—I mean, yes sir, Mr. Moore, I’m ready. Is it a big bed or a little bed? Is it metal or wood? Does it have any scrollwork? Did ya know that both metal and wooden beds can have scrollwork?” His voice trails after Pop’s footsteps.

The thought of Roger touching my stuff is nauseating. His bitten fingernails touching my favorite books, his bulging eyes taking peeks in my drawers, drops of grease staining my bedspread, his lolling tongue filling the imagination of classmates with Ginny’s pitiful existence.

Alive but not kickin’.

Cut down in the prime of life.

A fate worse than death.

Fe-fi-fo-fum I smell the blood of a legless one.

“How’s *Little Dorrit*, Ginny?” Mother smiles at me as she dries her hands with the thin kitchen towel.

I toss the book on the floor. “Boring as heck.”

She dons a hurt expression and goes back to the kitchen. I want to cry, rage, and hide all at once. I pull the blanket over my head, so I don’t have to see Roger’s stupid grin as he carries my stuff into the sitting room.

Exaggerated grunts come down the steps and through the parlor and Pop tells Roger to stop weaving back and forth.

“Whew! What a workout. Metal beds are always heavier than wood. ‘Cept oak. Hit my head against an oak headboard once and my ears were ringin’ fer days. Hard as a rock. Hullo! Is she asleep? I can’t never sleep when people are movin’ furniture about.”

“Leave her be,” Pop says. “We’ll bring down the dresser next.”

Roger’s hovering shadow moves off. After the dresser they brought down my bookcase and desk with Roger simultaneously complaining about how heavy everything was and praising his physical prowess. Mother comes in again to see if I’d like some tomato soup and a ham sandwich, but I leave the blanket over my head. It won’t come off until Roger leaves. I don’t care what he tells people. He can tell them I’m a withering recluse or that my face is massively

disfigured and that I've got a Quasimodo hump. I don't care. While I don't have a hump and my facial disfigurement amounts to a small scar on my chin, the withering recluse isn't an anomaly on my horizon. I'll probably never leave the house again as I have no one to see, nowhere to go, and nothing to do.

They're in the kitchen and Roger tells Mother how good her soup is and that his mother's cook isn't half as good and that she should hire Mother. What a snob. Mother swallows the barbed compliment whole as she thanks him and adds, "What a nice thing to say."

"You know what Roger," Pop says as they get up from the table, "you've been such a quick help that Donna and I can finish the rest."

"That's okay, Mr. Moore, I enjoy movin' stuff. I can lug the boxes and drawers down even quicker than the furniture. Lickety-split, fast as lightnin'; you won't be able to track me."

Over the edge of the blanket, I see Pop grab the back of Roger's leather jacket as he lunges for the stairs. "You're mighty generous with your time," Pop says. "Moving the furniture down was the help we needed. Donna and I can get the rest as Ginny will want to say where they go."

"Aw, Ginny can tell me where to tack her postcard collection just as well as you. I don't mind."

Pop steers him to the front door and out of sight. "Again, very generous of you but we can handle the rest. Have a nice afternoon Roger and say hello to your folks." The front door shuts, firmly.

"I've never seen such an oily boy in my life," Mother says from the kitchen.

Chapter Ten

The sun bakes my back. I strain and reach for the rock jutting only five inches from my grasp. My calf muscles are taught as I rise on my toes and lean against the base of Baily's Knob and feel for a hold. The only thing is to jump to reach the jutting rock and hope for a toe hold to appear. I leap, managing to grab the rock one handed. Swinging out, I scramble to reface the cliff wall. My left-hand latches onto the rock and the skin of my big toes scrapes off. I find a razor thin ledge to raise myself to the next hold. The sun's intensity on my back increases and I can feel the hotness of my skin as it burns, but the higher I climb the more breeze ruffles my hair and the less I notice the sun. I reach a ledge deep enough to sit on and stretch up my hand. It lands on something smooth and soft. Shrieking, I fling my hand back and let loose whatever I grabbed. Scrambling to reclaim my grip, I manage to drag myself up on the ledge not knowing if what I touched was a decaying piece of wood or a snake. A tree perched on the edge of the cliff above me brings shade as I catch my breath and let my legs dangle over the side of the ledge. I lean over to see how far I've climbed, and my left leg detaches at the knee with a resounding crack. I watch it, dumfounded, bounce off the cliff. My right leg follows, and I throw myself after them; desperate to catch them in time. They mustn't hit the ground. They mustn't. If they do, they'll shatter, and I won't be able to reclaim them. I stretch out my hands trying to grasp my twirling heel, but the ground opens, and I fall into darkness.

I'm running. Racing through the woods surrounding Farmer Hammond's Pond, leaves brush my cheeks and branches grab at my hair. I soar over deadfall and excitement bubbles in my stomach. I laugh—giddy with anticipation. The pond winks at me through the trees as I near the water. I lift off my dress, and my green swimsuit blurs with the leaves as I leap for the rope dangling over the water from the branch of a leaning oak tree. The sunlight hitting the surface glistens in my eyes. I blindly let go of the rope. The water envelopes me. Excruciating pain erupts from my legs as they shatter against a rock hiding in the murky water. The light disappears and the pond invades my open mouth. I silently scream.

My scream sounds maddeningly in my ears, growing in volume and rapidly differentiating in pitches until it splits into separate screams, and I realize I am not screaming at all but they're coming from unseen figures dancing and running around me. There is an enormous roar above me that begins to drown out the screams and I open my eyes to a dripping darkness. I'm conscious of

a wet cold seeping through my clothes, clinging to my back. Something hot, hard, and heavy presses from above. Where's Pop? Pop will know where the roar is coming from. Pop will know how to silence it and how to silence the screams. Why won't they stop? I must get up and find Pop. Pop will be able to explain everything. I must get up. I must . . . a shift . . . waves of piercing pain . . . God . . . my legs, God my legs—

“Ginny, sweetheart, Ginny wake-up, wake-up, my girl.”

I open my eyes, really open my eyes, and Pop cradles me in his arms, and I clutch at his neck as the pain emanates from the ghost of my limbs.

“They hurt,” I gasp. “Why do they hurt?”

“I don't know, sweetie, I don't know.” He holds me tighter as I fight the sharp squeezing pain that causes me to writhe and sweat. The pain is a specter that rises and hovers over my bed, taunting me with ghost legs that dance and kick, legs that throw themselves under crushing wheels, legs that don't listen to reason—legs that don't know they're dead and gone.

My breathing slowly steadies as Pop whispers a prayer, and I don't mind it this time. It's only when he leaves, and I lay on my back staring at the ceiling do I realize he now knows. Will he tell Mother? Or Dr. Deering? Does he think I've gone insane or that I just had a bad dream? But it wasn't a dream, and my stumps still prick. There are no cracks in this ceiling and while it isn't smooth and white like the hospital's, its dull flatness—creamy and old—does flatten my thoughts into bearableness. It's better than the yellow splotches in my bedroom. Although, this is my bedroom now.

I sit at our small dining table. Mother smiles at me with an oddly happy smile as she sets a bowl of mashed potatoes on the table. What has she to be so happy about? Is there something going on that I don't know? The green beans are set next to the mashed potatoes, and she settles into the creaking wooden chair. I hate green beans.

“I'm ready, Harvey.”

Pop smiles at her then clasps both of our hands and my parents bow their heads in unison. I watch them as Pop blesses the food and I get a ticklish feeling in the back of my throat. Their faces immediately relax, as if they're disconnecting from their own thoughts. I like them this way, even Mother, and the ticklish feeling grows. I clear my throat as Pop says amen and blink rapidly

then smile to show that I'm fine. They don't notice, though, as they're unfolding the napkins to place on their lap. I follow suit.

"So, Ginny, how does it feel?" Pop says with a grand smile.

I rub my hands against the worn-smoothed armrests of the wheelchair. "It's nice." For a museum perhaps. The wheelchair is so rickety, high-backed, and ornate I don't know if I'll plunge through the woven seat first or if the wheels will be the first to go. "It's a little big," I add.

"Yes," Pop admits, "it's bigger than I thought. But I measured everything, and it will make it through the hallway and the front door fine. It just might need an encouraging nudge to make it over the door jamb."

"Weren't it nice of the Fischer's to give you it though," Mother contributes. She thinks I'm ungrateful. "They are a nice family. It's a shame what that Anderson boy did to their storefront during the war. Shameful, shameful. And their oldest already killed in Africa, I don't know how Martha coped with it all. And how she still copes now that Dietrich is doing so badly."

"Is he doing badly? I didn't think anything was wrong with him." Pop takes a bite of green beans and grimaces—he doesn't like them either.

Mother takes the spoon from my hand and dishes me potatoes. "Do you want some meat?" She glances at me.

"Yes, but I—"

"Oh yes," she says, turning to Pop. Her blithe refusals to let me help myself are insulting, as my hands and arms are perfectly capable of lifting a bit of second-hand beef. She's given me too much meat. "His health has deteriorated rapidly these past few weeks. I was talking to Martha about it when we crossed paths in the butchers. She said he's just got no more strength. He isn't working, can't, so Martha's got a job as a secretary and she's doing his nursing." Mother's soft voice gets softer at this, in some kind of wonderment.

"I had no idea." Pop's brow furrows. "Doesn't she have a daughter?"

Mother's wrinkled lips tighten. "She married some traveling salesman last year and moved to Maryland. Martha's heartbroken over it. She says she hardly ever calls and makes excuses as to why she can't visit."

"I think I'll go over there Sunday and see if she needs anything."

"That's good of you, Harvey. Martha would like that, I'm sure."

My parent's jaw muscles flex as they grind up their food and the wet noises of their chewing and swallowing fill the lull in conversation. I'm not hungry anymore. "Why did the Fischer's give me the wheelchair if Mr. Fischer is so weak he can't work? Don't they need it?" I look to Mother and Pop. Pop looks to Mother. She swallows. "Martha said they got a smaller one as this one was too big for him to get around the house in."

I look at the lake of gravy Mother poured onto my potatoes. "That's understandable." This thing is near impossible to maneuver. Pop may have measured but I can just squeak out the front door by pulling myself through with the door jamb, and of course I can't get back in because the door is raised three inches from the porch. If Pop hadn't moved the lowboy from the hallway, I wouldn't even be able to wheel through that. Really the thing is useless unless I'm going in a straight line unhindered by carpets, furniture, and the bathroom door. It won't fit in the bathroom anyway, so I guess the door is a moot point.

"I'm going to my room." They stop eating and look at me.

"But Ginny, your dinner?"

"Let her go, Donna." Pop puts his hand on hers and goes back to his dinner. The wheelchair lurches violently as I maneuver away from the table and the creaks and trembles make every rotation of the wheels an adventure of the unknown. I roll the chair in small increments as I pull the curtain shut and part with the desire to sit in my armchair. The simple act of rolling this chair from the dining room to my bedroom has exhausted me. My arms are like overcooked noodles and won't push me another inch into my room much less haul my truncated body into an armchair. Maybe Miriam is right about those exercises.

The yellow house, blindingly bright despite the greyish dull of February, pushes through the window. I must stare at it or shut my eyes until I have the strength to move. I'm starting to see dots. The monstrosity belongs to Bryony Hoof. She's considered the neighborhood eccentric. Ever since her husband died ten years ago, she's gone crazy with her décor—inside and out. She started with painting the lovely blue house an electric yellow. A soft sunflower yellow or a warm dusty yellow were unimaginable, no matter how often the painters suggested it. I thought the British were supposed to be rather prim and bland like their food, but the ancient Widow Hoof is anything but. She married an American soldier during the first war and somehow ended up here. The way people tell it, Barnabas Hoof was a local boy turned war hero whose return was highly anticipated

as the news of his war bride had preceded his homecoming. Imagine, an English rose living in little ole Virginny with cows and cotton instead of sheep and potatoes. Bryony wasn't a rose but a forty-year-old spinster with a massive tooth gap. Ten years older than Barnabas, and neither ugly nor pretty, people thought Barnabas was still a bit shell-shocked to bring her home to his parents. She painted her shutters fire-engine red the day after he died.

The Widow Hoof's Residence is stenciled in large, white scrolly letters on her front door which is also red. She also did this the day after Mr. Hoof died. Although most of the neighborhood said that she should at least pretend to be sad he died, Mother said that people mourn differently. We were standing in the parlor, partially hidden by the curtain, watching the newly widowed Bryony stomp about her porch in her husband's overly large work boots and overalls painting her front shutters and door. Red paint streaked her white hair and flecks of it traveled over her face and arms as she attacked the door with her violent strokes. Her hand shook when she painted the words and Mother tucked my hair behind my ear, bent down to kiss my head and repeated, "Everyone grieves differently, Ginny. Don't let me hear you saying anything bad about Bryony Hoof." I continued at the window alone and Bryony's hand shook harder the longer she made the loops and scrolls across her door. When she finished, she looked right at me, pink tears rolling down her wrinkled face, cried, "Huzzah!" and crumpled to the porch in racking sobs. I let the curtain drop and never did say anything bad about Widow Hoof. Fact is, there's been a part of me that's always admired her. Assuredly, she is a bit off her giant wicker rocker, but there is only one Widow Hoof and I think she takes pride in that.

It's dark now. Still too tired to move onto my chair I roll closer to the window facing Widow Hoof's house. A light flicks on in her kitchen. She shuffles into view wearing a tattered flannel robe tied about her waist with a piece of string. Her long white braid rolls across her back as she fills a kettle with water and sets it on the stove to boil. She switches on her radio, pours her cup of tea, and sits at her small kitchen table that only has one chair. A white tin sits on the table, she pries it open and eats something from it. Loneliness whispers through the kitchen and dances around her evening of solitary tea and cookies. What could she be listening to on the radio? Is it the evening news or does she listen to Jack Benny like Mother? Mother never misses a night of Jack Benny, not once since I was a child. Widow Hoof slides back her chair and hops up, bumping the table with her hip. Taking an end of the string around her waist she twirls it slowly and starts to shuffle rhythmically around the kitchen. Is it Xavier Cugat or Benny Goodman? Fancy footwork

follows a modest lifting of the robe; she spins then grabs the counter to steady herself. Persisting in her arthritic dance, she attempts the jitterbug then clicks her slippers together with a raised hand. I'm sure she's just shouted, "Huzzah!"

Chapter Eleven

The doorbell rings. I open my eyes disappointed that sleep hasn't found me.

For the past three days I've been attempting exercise. There's about fifteen feet from one end of the room to the other, and since it's bigger than my bedroom my stuff is much more spaced out. So, I can wheel myself across, painstakingly swivel around, and wheel myself across again. It's exhausting and maddening, but it hasn't helped me sleep so far. I've skipped it for today.

I haven't told Pop or Mother how uncomfortable the wheelchair is. My lower back twinges just thinking about it. That's why I wanted to stay in bed today. Although, I told Pop it was because I just felt like a change. I don't think he believed me, but he left it. I suppose he thought Mother could lift me in a pinch. She does help me onto the toilet, but the bed to chair height difference is a bit much for her. Not that she's ever tried. The real test will be if I need to use the bathroom before Pop gets home from work. A real possibility since it's only 11 am. The bedpan is always an option, but I'd rather test Mother's lifting ability than use that again.

Murmuring feminine voices gravitate toward my curtain door which is pulled shut.

"Is the parlor alright," Mother asks.

"What about, Ginny? I don't want to bother her with talk of Raymond."

"Ginny's asleep, Irene. You won't upset her. Now, let me take your hat and get us our coffee."

I sit up quietly. Raymond? Irene is Mrs. Bennet, of course. Did I know that before? Doesn't matter. They're going to talk about Raymond. I wonder what's happening? Has he had a fight? He used to get into fights, but gosh, it's been years since I've heard of that happening. If I were to roll out there, into the parlor, would Mrs. Bennet let me talk to him? I look at the wheelchair across the room. Don't be ridiculous. You can barely wheel that darn thing.

Mother's come back, rattling the coffee cups on the tray as she sets it on the coffee table. "Now, Irene, what's happened? Your voice was shaking so hard on the phone this morning that I thought our connection was bad."

I hold my breath and strain my ears. A long sigh issues from Mrs. Bennet. At least, it makes sense that she's sighing and not Mother. I can't even see a silhouette through the curtains. "Raymond didn't come home again last night."

"Oh, Irene."

“Oh, Donna, ever since he’s broken off his engagement, he’s been acting so strange. I mean, him moving back in with me was odd enough. What grown man does that? But he locks himself up in his room half the time and the other half he isn’t home at all. I called his boss first thing this morning asking if he was at the shop. Well, he told me he’s a fine mechanic but that he hasn’t shown up regularly the past two months. He doesn’t want to fire him, but what can he do if Raymond doesn’t go to work? He’s a nice man, a good boss, and I won’t blame him if he fires Raymond.”

“Has he told you why he broke it off with Angela?”

“No! That’s the worst of it. He doesn’t give any reasons for the things he does. Last week I asked him point blank, I was frying bacon and he came into the kitchen to get coffee—a miracle in and of itself, he usually skedaddles before I get up for work—and I asked him, I said, ‘Raymond why did you break your engagement to Angela? She’s such a lovely girl and would make a wonderful wife. Why would you do such a thing? It makes no sense. I know she loves you, she told me so herself many times. I thought you loved her. Why would you ask her to marry you if you didn’t love her? A man doesn’t ask a girl to marry him only to break it off two months later. So, why did you?’ Oh, Donna, all he said was that none of it mattered and he poured his coffee and swallowed it in two big gulps. It was scalding hot, but he didn’t flinch. Just gulped it down and left.”

“Do you think he’s still depressed,” Mother whispers.

“I don’t know. It was so dark when he came back from the war. That first Sunday, I’m still mortified about what he said to Ginny.”

“It did Ginny no harm. Don’t worry about that.”

“He talked like that all the time. He would yell things in his sleep. I woke up one time to him howling like a dog, only he wasn’t trying to imitate a dog, it was just this guttural thing in the back of his throat, and it was so loud. It frightened me. It sounded so despairing. His drinking made things worse. I mean it did pacify him a bit, but he wasn’t present. He’d just sit on the couch with a glazed, faraway look. Anyway, it took two years for him to get better enough to hold down a job. You know how excited I was when he got his own place. And then Angela, well, she was a gift from God. It was the first time I saw him smile since he was wounded—eight years it’s been.”

“Have you talked to Angela? Does she know why he’s fallen back to this kind of behavior?”

“I haven’t got the courage. I feel so ashamed of the way he’s treated her that I can’t face her. They dated for four years before he finally asked her.”

“Was it really that long?”

“Yes! And she was so patient, so understanding. Him to cut her off like that after only two months of engagement. I can’t face her. I can’t do it.” She snuffles.

“I’d try,” Mother says softly. “You’ve got to talk with her, Irene. Angela’s the only other person that knows what happened; the only one that can help you with Raymond. With understanding him. Maybe you should ask Pastor Haywood to talk with him. Maybe he’d be able to help Raymond, you know, man-to-man. Sort of like a father.”

“Raymond’s always needed one of those.” Her voice falters. “I did ask him,” she says after a moment. “I asked him if he’d like to talk with Pastor Haywood with whatever he was going through. I said that Pastor Haywood wanted to meet him for breakfast one morning to talk about things, you know, to catch up. But he laughed at me. He said that Pastor Haywood was an out-of-touch Army reject.”

“Oh, my.”

“It wasn’t Pastor Haywood’s fault that he was rejected by the Army. He couldn’t enlist because of his weak lungs; no branch would take him. Raymond sat stone silent when I said as much.”

“Do you think he’d talk to Harvey? Harvey’s older than Pastor Haywood and fought in a world war. He’s had problems like Raymond’s.” She lowered her voice. “He’s always suffered with being depressed, ever since a boy.”

Pop depressed? That’s one of the most ridiculous statements Mother has ever made. Pop is never sad like that. Never. Is he? A watery, indistinct image of Pop sitting in the living room staring out the window hovers like a nebulous cloud in the back of my mind. Not hearing my request to play, not seeing me stand before him, or feeling my hand patting his knee. I shake my head. No, I must be imagining it. If anything about that fleeting image is true, he was surely just tired. He works too hard.

“I don’t know, Donna. I don’t think he’ll listen to me. Maybe if Harvey approached him.”

“Alright, I’ll ask Harvey and he’ll sort something out. Harvey’s good at helping people.”

There’s a prolonged silence and some slurping of coffee. “He was too young,” Irene says at last. “He was too young to go to war.”

“They all were.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” Mrs. Bennet sighs. “Now, enough about me and my problems. How are you doing?”

I lean forward in bed. This ought to be interesting. Is Mother going to harp on how she thinks I’m depressed? It appears, momentarily, that she thinks everyone around her is depressed. Only the other night she snuck into my room while she thought I was asleep and sifted through my bin of records in the moonlight. Lately, I’ve only been listening to Frank Sinatra’s most depressing records. You know, the ones where he’s singing about how lonely he is and how he’s started drinking again. I classify them as depressing, but I really don’t find them so. They’re melancholy and, I don’t know, I feel better after listening to them. Mother is the one who thinks they’re depressing me, although she hasn’t asked if they are. The thing is she never listens to Frank Sinatra, so she doesn’t know which records hold his most melancholy songs. Thus, when she tiptoed in here to save my mental hygiene, she only managed to take a single called *Put Your Dreams Away*, but it’s not even that melancholy. I do like it, though, so that’s disappointing.

“Honestly,” Mother answers, “I don’t know. I mean, me, myself, oh, I’m doing alright. It’s hard, real hard, but I’ve been through hard before. But . . .”

“But it’s different when it’s your child.”

“Yes. It’s different when it’s your child, your only child. Miriam, that was her nurse, Nurse Wallace, she was good for Ginny. I could tell. No matter how I try I’m not what Ginny needs. I can’t be firm with her in the right ways and I can’t . . . well, I can’t tell her or show her things I should. Miriam knew what to say to get Ginny motivated. I can’t motivate her and this week . . . well, maybe it’s just a slump. I pray she’ll rise out of it, but I don’t know.”

“Hmm . . .” I’m sure Mrs. Bennet has a perplexed expression as she murmurs this. “Even though Raymond was rough around the edges, I made sure he got out and socialized. That just meant Sunday morning and any church events, but you should try that with Ginny. If she’s well enough to travel, take her to church. Initially, it did him good. Maybe she’d be better for it in the long run, even if Raymond doesn’t appear to be.”

“If she refuses, do you think I should force her?”

“I’m not sure. It might not be wise.”

“Maybe I’ll call Miriam. She might know more coming from a medical background.”

“That sounds like a good course of action.”

“Thank you, Irene.”

“Oh, please, don’t thank me. I’ve done very little.”

“That’s not true. There’re not many women I can talk to who’re in a similar situation. Raymond’s your only child, Ginny’s my only child. They’ve both lost limbs and have been traumatized in ways we’ll never understand. I appreciate you listening to me and giving me sound advice.”

“Donna, you’re a saint.” Mother must have that pained look she gets when given a compliment. They’re moving about now. I’m sure Mother is picking off any fuzz that’s landed on Mrs. Bennet’s hat and handing it to her with a solemn expression of shared martyrdom. “And we must help each other where we can, mustn’t we? Like the Apostle Paul said, we must encourage one another and build one another up. Thank you for the coffee, dear.”

“Anytime, Irene. Harvey and I’ll keep praying for Raymond and that he’ll find peace.”

“Amen, Donna, amen.”

I lean back on my headboard and pick at a loose thread on my quilt. Mother said her mother made this quilt and that every year her quilts would win first place at the state fair. That’s all I know about my grandmother—her prize-winning quilts. Miriam did tell me that talking to Raymond wouldn’t be a good idea, I guess she’s right. I thought he’d found peace and that if we talked some knowledge that he’s discovered that I haven’t yet would be passed to me in a kind of connection—sixth sense—because we’ve both lost our legs. Well, leg in his case. Still, even if he hasn’t found peace or lost it or rejected it, I want to know why. Why has he backtracked? Did he lose sight of reality, or can he not live in it? The thread loosens and another stitch pops out.

Chapter Twelve

The curtain moves and I know Mother's checking on me again. She's been concerned all day because I said nothing when she and Pop suggested we go to church tomorrow. But why should I go to church? Why should I be paraded down the aisle to our wooden pew, mother smiling self-consciously, and Pop gripping the arm of the wheelchair as it juts awkwardly into the aisle? I can't blame my missing appendages on a war. I'm no Raymond Bennet. At least he gets a, "Thank you for your service," with the pitiful looks. Unlike Sandra, I've never liked being the center of attention and now that I'm certifiably gawkable it'll be unavoidable. I especially have no wish to see Pastor Haywood smiling benevolently at me from the pulpit.

But I couldn't say no with Pop standing there, so I just shrugged.

"Is that a yes, Ginny?" Mother said.

I shrugged again.

"Miriam said it'd be good for you if you feel up to it. What do you say?" Her face looked down at me eagerly.

"Come on, Donna, we'll ask her again later." He smiled at me.

I've been quiet since, even when Mother brought me lunch. So, she peeks in here every hour on the hour to see that I haven't sloped over in despondence.

The day looks mild for February. Gripping the ridge in one of the windows facing Mother's victory garden, I try to pry it open. My arms shake, but with a groan it gives, and I inch it open until I can stick my head out. Sunlight filters through the woods beyond our yard and the air is warm but the cold wind bites at my face. A gust cuts through the room billowing the curtains and scraps of paper from my desk skitter across the floor. I shiver, goosebumps rise on my skin, and I smile for I feel, for the first time, something other than pain. The wind stirs the pain and leaves an eddy of nothingness in its wake. A blank. A joyous blank. How glorious it is to feel the cousin of peace. To feel nothing, in this continuous moment of cool wind, is of greater joy than peace will ever bring me.

The wind stops. I open my eyes, still smiling, and see Mother with a look of worry by the closed window.

"Ginny," she says, smoothing my tangled hair, "you'll catch pneumonia again."

I sigh and lean back in the wheelchair.

“You’re alone too much, why don’t you invite Sandra—oh, uh, invite a friend over?”

I look at her and smile, my insides feel cool and I daresay there is a type of happiness inside of me.

“Do you think it’d be possible to make things up with Sandra? I’m sure she’d like to make up.”

“Not likely,” I say with a short laugh.

She feels my forehead, “I wonder if you’re feverish.” She tries her other hand. “I can’t tell, my hands are too cold.”

“I like the wind.”

“The wind?”

“Yes, I think I’ll open the window again.”

She feels my forehead for a third time. “I think you might be a bit warm. I’m calling Dr. Deering.”

She leaves and I wiggle the window until it opens enough for the wind to whistle through. I watch the trees bend, but no breeze graces my room. I try to conjure the feeling of nothingness but cannot without the wind. Settling back into my wheelchair, I run my fingers through my hair. I catch a knot, yanking at the roots, and wince from the sharp pain. How quickly happiness can vanish. Fleeting. *‘A dream, a breath, a froth of fleeting joy.’* Shakespeare said that. And he was right. For what are our lives but little breaths waiting to be hushed? They are like our emotions, passing shadows. I really shouldn’t be so dramatic.

“He can’t come,” Mother says, coming back into the room and shutting the window again. “And Miriam is needed for a different patient.”

“I’m fine. I don’t have a fever.”

Ignoring me, she says, “He’s sending someone else as he doesn’t think it’s serious.”

“I don’t want to be fussed over. An afternoon alone is ideal.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. Hopefully, Bobby won’t be too annoying.”

I sit bolt upright. “What?”

But she’s already gone.

Did she really say Bobby? Why would Dr. Deering send his son to see one of his patients? I wonder if they—Pop, Mother, Deering—are talking about me behind my back? Worried whispers about my sanity. She can’t possibly think I have a fever. Is this a ploy for friendship? I asked her

not to interfere, and if this is her way of doing so, I don't know if I'll recover from the humiliation. Gosh, why is time going by so slowly? And why hasn't Mother come back in here to check my temperature?

My hopeful agony rises with the slamming of a car door, and I push my chair toward the dresser. I need to actually brush my hair, fingers won't do.

"Hello, Mrs. Moore." His strong, lovely voice rises. Bobby really is here. Oh, gosh. I don't care what Mother says in reply, I can't bother with her words. I wish I picked a prettier dress to wear today. And my hair must be a fright after all that wind. I'll just tuck the blanket higher up on my body and brush my hair again. The ends won't flip up. Drat. Sandra wouldn't have this problem. What am I doing? I go back to the window in despair. He loves Sandra. Sandra, Sandra, stupid Sandra.

"Ginny?"

I quickly pick up the book Mother conspicuously set on my end table and pretend to read.

"Ginny," she says again, this time fully opening the curtain.

I squint at the book harder.

"Here's someone to cheer you up."

"And to take her temperature."

"Yes, and to take your temperature."

"Ginny?"

I seem to be paralyzed, and I'm holding the book upside down.

"Well, I'll just leave you two to it then," she says in defeat. To what? What is supposed to be *it*? She leaves.

"Uh, hi," he says, looking uncomfortable and odd with a black grip in his hand. Medical competency is not what I think when I look at him. Has he really come just to 'cheer me up', as Mother put it?

He steps forward and says, with a comedic force that fails him utterly, "You're looking nice. H-have you lost weight?"

What am I to say to that? I certainly can't laugh. I stare at him with a hope that the awkwardness will dispel.

His face falls, and he stumbles forward tripping over his feet and tongue. “I-I’m sorry. My dad told me to be lighthearted and I didn’t know what to say and then that just came out. It was mean of me.” He sort of half-heartedly flutters and sits on the corner of my bed. “I’ve never done this before, and I was anxious and nervous to see you again.”

It’s odd to be on the receiving end of such anxiety, especially from Bobby. He has always looked so confident to me. It was I who blushed and fumbled over my words in his presence. Now I’m almost impassive, except, a strand of his brown hair has fallen across his forehead and my face grows warm as my fingers itch to brush it back.

He leans forward, straightens, then forward again. “I won’t talk about it if you don’t want to.” I don’t like where he’s headed. “But I saw it happen and if you want me to tell you anything about the acc-it, I can.”

This is morbid. I experienced it once and certainly don’t need to again. He’s only trying to help I suppose, but I can’t bring myself to answer him. I stare at my hands, flexing and interlocking my fingers.

There’s a double click as he unlatches and latches the grip. It thumps to the ground, and I look up as Bobby groans. His head drops into his hands.

“This is not going how I hoped.” He sighs. “You see,” he begins in an explanatory tone, “I’m going to college for pre-med this fall, and Dad thought I should get some practical experience, and since your family and mine—our parents rather—have been such good friends, and the fact he didn’t think you were sick, he said I should come and take your vitals. I’ve followed him on his rounds before and have worked in the hospital occasionally; and living with my dad is like going through pre-med, so you needn’t be concerned. I’m not a total idiot.”

His eyes look tormented but all I say is, “Okay.”

“Okay? Uh, okay.” He infuses a false brightness in his voice, and I love him for the effort. He digs around in his grip.

“How are you?” I cringe, for the words have come out harsher than I want them to. I wish my voice weren’t sharp, but soft and throaty like Sandra’s. A guy could fall in love with her just because of her voice. I have been convinced of that for years. I sound like I’m chopping someone’s head off and enjoying it. Still, he looks up and flashes a smile of relief.

“I’m doing alright. I’ll be glad once school’s out though, one more summer of freedom before doldrums.”

“Is that why you’re skipping school now? The doldrums?”

“It’s Saturday.”

“Oh.” I feel chastened. Right, tomorrow is Sunday. I’m such an idiot. He pulls out a thermometer and pops it in my mouth before I quite know what he’s doing.

“Everyone at school misses you. Mr. Kavanaugh especially.” He pulls out the sphygmomanometer, straps it around my arm, and begins pumping the little rubber thing on the end. The needle wavers as my veins bulge. “Roger is unbearable ever since he won that scholarship. He knows you would’ve smashed him, but he’s just going on like he’s some stupid protégé. I think that’s why Mr. Kavanaugh misses you the most, he can’t believe Roger is his crowning achievement.”

“You still friends?” I garble. I hope I haven’t bitten off the end of the thermometer.

“Oh, I’d forgotten about that.” He takes the thermometer and squints at the little numbers. “No fever. And your blood pressure’s fine. I always viewed Roger as a tick. Not sure how he got there and hard to shake off. His parents are so proud of him that they’re going to take him on a tour of Europe before he goes to college. Don’t see how it’d do much good. Culture avoids Roger like the plague.” He puts a tongue depressor in my mouth and shines a flashlight inside. “Anyway, he’s too busy to hang around much. Suits me fine.” He grabs his stethoscope from the grip, puts the ends in his ears, and gently lays the other end on my chest. The room goes strangely quiet, and I can feel the blood rushing to my head. There is a growing awkwardness between us. “Umm, inhale please.” I take a deep breath, swelling my chest. “Exhale.” It slowly deflates.

“How’s Sandra?” I can’t help myself.

His eyes flutter to mine, hold for a moment then drop. “Inhale. Sandra’s fine. Exhale. As always,” he adds. Irritation is in his voice, and I feel guilty that it gives me pleasure . . . and hope. Is that wrong? If it is, I don’t care. “Do you . . . ah, never mind.”

“What?”

He looks at me again. His hand still holds the stethoscope to my chest. “Do you ever feel that Sandra is here one moment and gone the next?”

There is a sudden and strong urge to smile, and I fight it back. “I always thought she should’ve tried out for the track team.”

“That’s not what I meant. I—”

“I know what you meant. Neither of us, I guess, are good at jokes. Sandra is . . . fickle, and a bit too clever.”

“Fickle? I’ve never thought of her like that. It’s just that . . . sometimes I’m not too sure about her, is all.”

I feel a bit too clever now as well. And I am never clever. What should I say? He is unsure about Sandra. This is the kind of opening that a girl prays for. I can easily plant a seed of real doubt; he is thinking of her right now—about her faults. Which ones should I expand upon? Her manipulation or her self-absorption? “Yes, she can be distant,” is what I say, but it isn’t what I intended to say. He is satisfied with my reply, but I don’t want satisfaction. What do I want? Heck, if I know.

“But being distant isn’t a bad thing, is it? I mean, as a quality in a person. A person can still be good and do good things and then disappear from you awhile? Can’t they?”

Bobby demands too much of me. Distant was a slip of the tongue. Sandra isn’t distant like someone who is tired of the world and needs solitude to replenish their strength to go back into the world to do good. She’s distant if she doesn’t get what she wants or is plotting some new scheme to suck some poor sap dry. She’s distant when it suits her interests. “I suppose,” I say, “if you’re speaking in generalizations but—”

“That makes sense,” he interrupts, although I don’t think he knows he did. “Sandra is so busy at school, and she has been taking care of Gail since she got the chicken pox, and, of course, she’s been visiting you so much. It makes sense that she needs some time to herself.”

“She’s been what?”

He says, startled, “Her little sister Gail has been sick, and she’s been caring for her. Actually, I think she’d make a good nurse. She has a soft touch.”

I shiver at that. “That’s not what I was referring to.”

“Oh, what did you mean?”

I’m tired. “It doesn’t matter.”

He likes talking about Sandra and he goes on talking about her. “It would be something if she became a nurse. Me a doctor, her a nurse. We could open our own clinic. I mean, she’s done so much already. For Gail and for you. She’s got the knack I tell you, she—what’s wrong? Are you feeling okay?”

My cheek twitches. I breathe deeply in an effort to relax the grimace on my face, but I feel ill. “Sandra hasn’t done anything for me,” I breathe. My stomach relaxes now that I’ve got that out. “She’s visited me once,” I add.

“What?” His face screws up a little. “She hasn’t been visiting you?”

“No. We’ve parted ways. It was a mutual decision.”

His furrowed brow deepens its furrows as he carefully places his instruments back in his grip. “Sandra,” he says, slowly, “has been telling the entire school that she practically raised you from the dead.” He looks to me. “That you depend on her.”

I laugh. Tears roll down my cheeks and my belly aches from it. Bobby stares at me, mystified, I guess. “Sandra always said she wanted to be the next Vivien Leigh,” I finally breathe, holding my stomach in. “‘An air for the dramatic’ is what Mother says about her.” I grip the arms of my chair and heave a big sigh as the laughter dries up. “I’m angry of course, but for the first time I do see the humor in the situation.” The blanket slides off my lap before I realize it and my scarred stumps in their elastic compression socks stare him down. My arms scramble for the blanket but can’t reach it and the panic rises in my chest. Wordlessly, Bobby kneels and picks it up. “It doesn’t bother me, Ginny,” he says quietly. He places the blanket over my lap and starts tucking it in slowly and methodically. I scrutinize his eyes, trying to find a lie. But I can’t.

“Why weren’t we ever friends?” I say this quietly and gently place my hand on his. We both know the answer begins with a big S and remain silent. “You’ll make a good doctor, Bobby.”

“You think so?”

“I do. You’ve made me feel better.”

“Well, then, I’m already a success.”

“You two need anything to eat?” I startle. How long has she been there? And with that stupid grin on her face.

Bobby quickly stands and grabs his grip. “Ah, no thank you, Mrs. Moore. I’ve got to be going.”

“How is she? It isn’t pneumonia, is it?”

“No. No fever. She’s perfectly healthy, far as I can tell.”

“Good, I’m glad you could come. You should come again. Sometime soon?” There’s an oddish look (could it be a glint?) in Mother’s eye. She has some plan, perhaps she’s in cahoots with Dr. Deering. If it should do with Bobby and me, well, I certainly don’t need her help.

“I’d like that Mrs. Moore, now, I’ve really got to go. Dad’s expecting me to check in.”

“Course, ‘course.”

“Bye, Ginny.” He has that uncomfortable look again. He better not make another joke.

“Bye, Bobby.” He turns and leaves.

“Well, that was nice of him,” Mother says, coming back from seeing Bobby out. “He’s such a nice boy.”

“Yup.” I roll over to the dresser and put my hairbrush back as I had tucked it under the blanket in a panic. There’s movement in the yellow house and I stop to watch Widow Hoof pound a breast of chicken on her kitchen table with the largest mallet I’ve ever seen. Bobby came to see me. That was nice of him. Did he want to? Widow Hoof raises the mallet above her head, staggering back a step, and slams it down on the chicken breast which shoots off the table with the velocity of a cannon ball. Whether he did or not doesn’t matter, I doubt he’ll be back. Although he knows that Sandra’s been lying, one look into her golden-brown eyes and he’ll forget all about it.

“He says he hopes to see you at church. Isn’t that nice?”

“Hmm.” Widow Hoof closely inspects the chicken breast (her eye a centimeter away) for impurities then slaps it on the table and whacks it again. Flat as flat can get, she seems satisfied and puts it in an uncovered bowl, which must hold a marinade, and disappears from the kitchen.

“I think it’d be so good for you to go to church. I really do. You’ll be encouraged by Pastor Haywood’s sermon and by seeing everyone. Pop thinks it’s a good idea too. What do you say?”

“Sure.” Widow Hoof walks back in the kitchen, shaking her head, and lays a dish towel over the bowl.

“Really? You’ll go?”

“Whatever.” On the brink of leaving, Widow Hoof backtracks and peeks under the cloth. She whisks it off, sets the chicken breast on the table, picks up the mallet, and gives it one more whack into oblivion.