

The University of Akron

IdeaExchange@UAkron

---

Williams Honors College, Honors Research  
Projects

The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors  
College

---

Winter 2023

## All-Consuming Madness

Ainsley Doyle  
aad93@uakron.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors\\_research\\_projects](https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects)



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

---

### Recommended Citation

Doyle, Ainsley, "All-Consuming Madness" (2023). *Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects*. 1759.

[https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors\\_research\\_projects/1759](https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/1759)

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact [mjon@uakron.edu](mailto:mjon@uakron.edu), [uapress@uakron.edu](mailto:uapress@uakron.edu).

Ainsley Doyle

Senior Honors Project

William Honors College

1 December 2023

“All-Consuming Madness” – Summary

“All-Consuming Madness” is a short story that follows the main character Annie as she struggles to cope with the aftermath of a car accident that changed her life. Her younger sister, Daisy, supports Annie throughout the story as they both learn how to navigate their new realities. Over the course of the story, Annie is forced to confront what happened during the accident and try to reconnect with her father who is also learning to cope with their new reality at home. The story explores the impact grief can have on family relationships and how trauma can close people off from each other. It also explores Annie’s journey towards healing as she struggles to forgive herself for the accident.

### Self-Analysis of My Writing Process

Writing started out as a form of escapism for me when I was younger. I'd been reading stories for as long as I could remember and came to the realization that I too could write stories. At first, I kept the stories to myself. I wrote knowing no one else would see what I had written and I was satisfied. As I got older and more serious about writing, I started to share stories with my friends and family. Once I got into high school and college, it started to turn into something else. It was still escapism but it also became an avenue in which I could explore difficult topics without hurting my mental and emotional state. I explored how anxiety and depression can do terrible things to a person's mind if they don't find something or someone to help them.

Part of the inspiration for this story comes from my own journey with grief and loss. Since losing my father to cancer more than 10 years ago, I've learned how grief changes over time but there will always be days when it feels like it just happened. I'd written some nonfiction about my grief in the past but had never had an opportunity to explore it in a piece of fiction, until I started brainstorming for my honors project. It was a long process. Many of the ideas I came up with didn't seem to make any sense when I put them to paper.

When I first started to think about my honors project during my freshman year, it seemed like this massive thing that would one day be a great source of stress for me. A massive undertaking that would lead to sleepless nights and the death of my social life. But now that I understand the purpose of the honors project, it doesn't seem as daunting. In fact, it became a source of excitement. I get to write something that I can be proud of and delve into the process that created it. I even get to write about the influences on my writing and my story.

My writing process has changed a lot since I first started writing seriously in middle school, though there are still things that haven't changed much since then. The major thing that

has remained constant is my starting place. I always start with dialogue. No matter the genre of the project I'm working on, the dialogue always comes to me first. Oftentimes, because of this, I'll write out entire conversations between characters without adding anything in between. Later, I'll go back and add dialogue tags and movement. The dialogue between characters gives me a starting place for each of the characters' personalities.

The character of Annie was an interesting one to create. The emotions she struggles with are quite similar to ones I experienced in my own life. In the beginning of the story, she is avoiding her father and her grief. She talks to Daisy and even goes so far as to make her breakfast. Annie is in denial for this part of the story. She knows Daisy isn't there. Deep down, she knows it but because she can't let go of her little sister. It isn't until she falls into the pond that she momentarily stops seeing her sister. The cold water acts as a reset for her. She follows Daisy out onto the pond and in doing so almost kills herself. This forces her to finally address her grief and her guilt.

The scene with Annie in the bath was the most difficult to write.. It took the longest to write. I had to constantly stop writing it and take a break. Emotionally, I couldn't have written it all at once like I try to do with some scenes. Annie grapples with her guilt and her grief. She tries to forgive herself. She even argues with God. Writing something so heavy can take a toll if one isn't careful. I kept myself well by making sure I took time away from the heaviness of this scene, and the heavy nature of the story overall.

The location of the scene is important, when I started writing it I couldn't set it anywhere else but the bathroom. Annie had to be taking a bath, the scene didn't make sense otherwise. Her sitting in the bath puts her in a physically vulnerable position, which reflects her emotional state. She's bare to the world and to herself. She has finally reached a point where she has to confront

herself. Annie has been avoiding her grief and anything that has to do with it. But in this moment, she has to contend with the fact that her avoidance of her grief has done a great deal of harm. It's hurting her relationship with her father and now she finally comes to terms with what she's been dealing with privately. By the end of the scene, she's ready to let Daisy go and talk to her father about how both of them have been doing.

The second most important character in this story is Daisy. Creating Daisy's character was a delicate process. I wanted a few things to happen with her character. I wanted her to be aware that she was no longer without making it obvious to her sister, Annie. Despite this awareness, I still wanted her to act in almost the same way she would have when she was alive. She could still act like a child even if she had the awareness and even wisdom of someone who has died and been able to look at their loved ones from the outside.

The ambiguity of Daisy's character is intentional. Is she a ghost or a hallucination brought on by the physical and emotional trauma? Different people will have different opinions. I think it could be interpreted either way. The one thing that should be clear, though, is that the father never interacts with Daisy in the story. The only person who interacts with her is Annie. She is there for Annie, because she wants Annie to be okay without her. She tries repeatedly throughout the story to get Annie to see that she isn't real and she needs to allow herself to move on from the accident and heal.

The character of the father was a difficult one for me to create. The loss of a child is unimaginable and portraying the father's grief in a respectful and authentic manner took plenty of careful thought and planning. I'm 21 years old. I have no idea what it is like to lose a child. In order to get a better understanding, I chose to read poetry and listen to music. Both poetry and music tend to be very vulnerable and would give me a good understanding of the kind of grief

parents experience when they lose a child. But at the same time, I needed to keep the father's character from taking over the story. He wasn't supposed to be the main character.

His role in this story was especially difficult to create because I wanted there to be a balance to his character. He wasn't the center of the story but I didn't want his grief to get lost along the way. His grief was important too, both to his character and to the story overall. He and Annie feed off of each other. Their grief has put a wedge between them because they are suffering in two very different ways and are handling their grief differently as well.

The choice to omit a mother from the story was one I made at the very beginning. It seemed to make sense for the story and I wasn't sure at first why. There are two reasons for this decision. The first reason comes down to the focus on relationships. There are two primary relationships depicted in this story: Daisy and Annie, and Annie and her father. The inclusion of a mother would've added two additional relationships to juggle. The second reason is that I wanted to depict a single parent. I've been raised by a single parent and there are over twenty million kids being raised by a single parent in the United States today.

But a question I posed to myself was: why include a father rather than a mother? I have experience being raised by a single mother not a single father. Why would I flip them for the story? Honestly, it wasn't originally planned that way. It was a gut decision to write a father into the story and not a mother. I felt the story needed a male presence and I felt a father would make a more compelling relationship than a brother-sister or even girlfriend-boyfriend relationship would have.

Deciding to write this story was not an easy decision. The discussion of grief is one I historically have tried to avoid. I lost my father when I was 10 and there are times, even now that I'm 21, that I feel like I'm still processing that loss. Grief is an ongoing process that doesn't ever

really end. However, in this story I wanted to consider what grief can look like so soon after a loss. But because of my own grief, I didn't want to write a story that was too similar to my own. This meant that the death that was being mourned in the story couldn't have been caused by any illness. My own father died from cancer and writing a story about a character dying slowly from a known illness would have been too difficult.

Oftentimes, when I'm looking for inspiration I turn to the writers that have come before me and try to listen to what they have to say. One quote by Ray Bradbury in particular was a great help to me when I was first starting to consider what I would write for my project. Bradbury has said, "Your intuition knows what to write, so get out of the way." This quote gave me the mental freedom to stop putting so much pressure on myself to come up with a great idea. I let my mind wander to the topics that interested me, the problems that I'd dealt with in my own life, and everything in between. Eventually, I came to the decision to write a story about grief.

I've never done anything quite like this. Going through the process by which I wrote this story has given me a new view of the way I write. This story is special to me. It's helped me on my own journey with grief and I look forward to coming back to it in years to come. I'm happy that I've had the opportunity to create this story and go through the process by which I created it. It's been a lot of fun and I am so proud of the story I was able to make. I will always look back with fondness on this story and the journey I've taken with it.

### Critical Analysis of Influences

Writing for me, like other authors before me, is an ongoing learning experience. I'm constantly reading and learning things about the craft. There is always something to learn, no matter how well read a person may be. Despite knowing this, it hasn't always been easy for me to recognize which writers have truly influenced me over the years. I've read so many stories by so many different authors that it can be hard to figure out where I picked up certain writing habits or traits. So, when it came to writing this story and taking an in depth look at the writers and works that had influenced it, I found myself looking forward to looking more critically at my influences.

One of the first stories that came to mind when I started thinking about grief and trauma was *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart. In the novel, the main character suffers from amnesia due to a traumatic accident and over the course of the story she slowly starts to realize what actually happened the day of the accident. Throughout the novel, there is obvious tension between her and the rest of her family. The audience, however, is unsure of the cause of the tension. The main character, Cadence, is a teenage girl who is struggling with her amnesia and trying to figure out who she is as a person.

I've always enjoyed reading stories from the perspective of an unreliable narrator, especially when it isn't clear at first that the narrator is unreliable. I thought it would be interesting to try writing an unreliable narrator that is so consumed by her own grief that she, for the first part of the story, believes that her sister is still with her. Having Annie be unreliable made it so the reader could be in the same headspace as Annie. At the beginning, Annie believes that her sister is still around, and because no other character suggests anything to the contrary, the reader believes that Daisy is actually there. Despite this, there are details that may lead the



reader to realize that Daisy isn't actually there, such as Daisy never interacting with anyone besides Annie as well as Daisy not wanting to be touched by Annie. She isn't actually there, so she can't be physically touched.

While Lockhart makes it clear by the end of the story that her main character has been communicating with ghosts, I chose to keep my story a bit more ambiguous. Daisy may be a ghost or she may be a hallucination that Annie has been experiencing since the accident that killed Daisy. But the ghosts in *We Were Liars* play a similar role to Daisy in "All Consuming Madness." They want to be there for Cadence like Daisy wants to be there for Annie. Cadence's ghosts try to help her remember the traumatic incident while also trying to help her cope with her amnesia. Daisy wants to support Annie and help her realize it isn't her fault and that she is going to be okay without her. By the end, both Cadence and Annie are ready to say goodbye even though they are still grieving the ones they have lost. They realize that it is time to let go.

Another moment from *We Were Liars* that was influential is a moment between Cadence and her mother. Cadence's mother is trying to give advice to her daughter about how best to publicly handle her pain. She tells her daughter, "Silence is a protective coating over pain" (Lockhart 32). It's a rather harsh thing to say to one's child, but Cadence takes it to heart. It's a line that speaks to the character of Annie. She doesn't want to talk about her pain. She shuts people down when they try to bring up the accident or Daisy. She's trying to protect herself but she also doesn't want people to pity her. Both Cadence and Annie take this misplaced wisdom to heart and choose to remain silent rather than allow themselves to be comforted by those closest to them.

Later, after Cadence fully realizes what she did and how painful her actions were, she thinks to herself "Here I am frozen, when I deserve to burn" (Lockhart 232). In this way,

Cadence and Annie have a lot in common. They both feel responsible for the death or deaths of someone they loved. Cadence unintentionally killed three people she loved. Annie feels responsible for the death of her sister because she was driving the car when they got into the accident. She, like Cadence, believes she should have died too. They both believe they don't deserve to still be around to mourn the ones they have lost, especially when they feel responsible for the deaths.

At the end, when the ghosts come to say goodbye to Cadence after she finally remembers what happened, they all leave her with some piece of wisdom. One of them tells her, “Be sad, be sorry-but don't shoulder it” (Lockhart 240). This quote fully encapsulates the character of the father. Like Annie's father, this ghost knows that she feels guilty but at the same time doesn't want her to carry around the guilt for the rest of her life. He wants her to know it wasn't her fault and that he is with her in the pain. It's okay to be hurting inside and to be sorry about what happened and the part that she played in it, but that doesn't mean you have to carry it with you for the rest of your life. Daisy, in the moment when she says goodbye to Annie, also tries to get her to understand that it's alright to be sad and sorry but that she doesn't have to blame herself. Carrying around the guilt doesn't do anyone any good.

When I came to the scene where Annie falls through the ice and into the water, I was trying to figure out how I wanted it to read. How could I best portray her frantic thoughts and actions as she scrambled to get herself out of the freezing water? I wrote a couple different versions of the scene but wasn't happy with what I had written. Nothing I wrote seemed to convey what I wanted Annie to be going through, both internally and externally. I decided to set it aside and work on other areas of the story while I considered how I wanted the scene to go. Eventually, I recalled one technique I had read numerous times but had never utilized myself:

stream of consciousness. I'd read stories that used stream of consciousness as a narrative mode but had never tried out the technique in my own writing. I experimented with the technique in other stories before getting ready to write the pond scene with Annie.

In a similar way to Cadence, Annie is so lost in her own grief that she disregards the grief that her family is also experiencing. It's hard for them to break through that protective layer that people experiencing grief like to put up when they themselves are also struggling to cope with their own loss. No one experiences grief the same way, even two people who are grieving the same person. So, when it comes to comforting someone who is grieving, it can be a difficult process. Especially in the case of Cadence and Annie who have both experienced something that is both emotionally and physically traumatic. They are trying to heal physically and emotionally and they may experience frustration when the process isn't as quick as they would like it to be.

There are many more examples of Faulkner's use of stream of consciousness, but this one comes from his novel *As I Lay Dying*. He writes,

While I waited for him in the woods, waiting for him before he saw me, I would think of him as dressed in sin. I would think of him as thinking of me as dressed also in sin, he the more beautiful since the garment which he had exchanged for sin was sanctified. I would think of the sin as garments which we would remove in order to shape and coerce the terrible blood to the forlorn echo o the dead word high in the air. (Faulkner 118)

The character's thoughts bounce from one thought straight into the next. There's no clean breaks or pauses. It accurately represents how a person's thoughts don't flow like proper sentences. The thoughts flow into each other, building off of each other. The paragraph, because of the way the character's thoughts have moved so quickly, ends in a completely different place than it began. I wanted to use this technique to show how Annie's thoughts move rapidly once

she falls into the pond. She is so caught off guard by being suddenly submerged in freezing cold water that she doesn't have any time to slow down her thought process.

While novels tend to be where I find my main influence and inspiration when it comes to my writing and this story in particular, I have also found poetry to be quite influential. The poem "The Little White Hearse" by Ella Wheeler Wilcox was a major influence on the character of Annie in this story. Her grief is what controls her up until the end of the story when she is finally able to let go, and this poem was influential in portraying her grief authentically. It gives a heartbreaking look into the mind of a woman who has lost a child in the past and is watching someone else have to go through the same suffering. Through the poem, she watches someone else's grief while reliving her own. The first stanza reads,

Somebody's baby was buried to-day—  
 The empty white hearse from the grave rumbled back,  
 And the morning somehow seemed less smiling and gay  
 As I paused on the walk while it crossed on its way,  
 And a shadow seemed drawn o'er the sun's golden track. (Wilcox 1-5)

The poem begins by painting a dark picture. A child has died and is being taken away to be buried. The narrator is not the mother of the child, only a spectator to the mother and family's grief. She doesn't know them, but the grief the family is experiencing has darkened the day for her. The morning isn't as pleasant, and the sun isn't as bright. Shadows seem to descend on the world and chase away the light. Everything is tinged with the kind of sadness only brought about by the death of a child. There is no grief quite like that of a parent burying their child.

The second stanza continues by describing the child that the mother has lost and is now being carried in the hearse:

Somebody's baby was laid out to rest,  
 White as a snowdrop, and fair to behold,  
 And the soft little hands were crossed over the breast,  
 And those hands and the lips and the eyelids were pressed  
 With kisses as hot as the eyelids were cold. (Wilcox 6-10)

The details of the child reflect the innocent nature of the child that has been taken. A child that a person could trick themselves into believing is simply asleep. This is how Annie doesn't want to imagine Daisy, even though this was the reality. She wants to imagine that her little sister is alive and well, and by the end of the story, when she's come around to accepting the truth, she likes to imagine that this is exactly what Daisy looks like now. Daisy, in Annie's mind, isn't broken or battered, she's soft and fair.

The third stanza returns to the image of the child in the coffin riding in the hearse that the mother is watching from afar:

Somebody saw it go out of her sight,  
 Under the coffin lid—out through the door;  
 Somebody finds only darkness and blight  
 All through the glory of summer-sun light;  
 Somebody's baby will waken no more. (Wilcox 11-15)

Some of the details of this stanza reiterate some of what was described in the beginning stanza. The narrator, unlike the mother, doesn't follow the coffin down the road. It disappears from the narrator's sight but the sorrow stays with her long after it's disappeared. The light of the sun has completely abandoned her as she's consumed by the sorrow that only losing a child can

bring. This all consuming sorrow that both the narrator and the mother of the deceased child are feeling is what Annie struggles with throughout most of the story.

The fourth stanza continues describing the sorrow the narrator is feeling as well establishing that the narrator doesn't personally know the mother or the child in the coffin:

Somebody's sorrow is making me weep:  
 I know not her name, but I echo her cry,  
 For the dearly bought baby she longed so to keep,  
 The baby that rode to its long-lasting sleep  
 In the little white hearse that went rumbling by (Wilcox 16-20)

The sorrow of the child's mother brings the narrator to tears as she recalls her own grief. Both mothers wanted so badly to keep their children. Every parent tries to do everything in their power to protect their child from this fate, but sometimes things are out of one's control. Unforeseen illness or accidents can take even a precious child who has done nothing to deserve their fate. Annie wanted so badly to protect Daisy and help her grow up but there was nothing more she could have done to protect her.

The final stanza reveals to the reader that the narrator can articulate the mother's pain so well because she too has lost a child. The last few lines read,

I know not her name, but her sorrow I know;  
 While I paused on the crossing I lived it once more,  
 And back to my heart surged that river of woe  
 That but in the breast of a mother can flow;  
 For the little white hearse has been, too, at *my* door. (Wilcox 21-25)

The mother narrating the poem builds to this last line where she reveals to the reader that she knows what the other woman is experiencing and feeling because she too has had the hearse at her door, taking away her child. The line that describes the sorrow surging to the narrator's heart like a river is so impactful. Sorrow is a force of nature that can't be ignored once it reaches the heart. One can do their best to keep it from reaching their heart, but true sorrow will always manage to get there.

Finally, Agatha Christie has had an important impact on the way I started to write my descriptions. I'd struggled with writing descriptions of rooms and people because I was never sure how much information was enough and how much was too much. I found that Christie was good at finding a balance and making sure the descriptions always served a purpose. One example, from her novel *Sleeping Murder*, showcases her ability to accurately describe a character while also giving insight into the mind of the narrator: "Raymond, with his odd appearance, rather like a pouncing raven, his sweep of hair and his sudden crescendos of quite incomprehensible conversation, left Gwenda round-eyed and nervous" (Christie 22). In this moment, Christie showcases Gwenda's perception of the man and also gives the reader a clear picture of him. She doesn't simply say that he looked odd, but fully describes why Gwenda chooses to label him this way.

Art influences and inspires other art. This is the case for many great authors and yet for a long time I struggled with it. I felt as if all my ideas needed to be wholly original or else I wasn't a real writer. The rational part of my brain knew this was an unreasonable expectation. Every idea has been done by this point in time. It took me time to learn that there was a major difference between inspiration and theft. Everyone needs positive influences, both in their life and in their art. Learning from writers that have come before you is one of the best ways a writer

can improve their craft. It has been wonderful to have this opportunity to consider the authors and works that have been great influences in the creation of my story.



Works Cited

Christie, Agatha. *Sleeping Murder*. New York, Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1976.

Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying, Sanctuary, Light in August, Pylon*. The Library of America, 1985.

Lockhart, E. *We Were Liars*. New York, Ember, an Imprint of Random House Children's Books, a Division of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018.

Wilcox, Ella Wheeler. "The Little White Hearse by Ella Wheeler Wilcox." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45938/the-little-white-hearse](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45938/the-little-white-hearse). Accessed 13 Aug. 2023.

## All-Consuming Madness

It had been a dark and dreadful evening, made brighter only by the light of the television my father refused to turn off. I slip my shoes off quietly, careful not to look over to the right into the living room. If he's asleep on the couch, he won't hear me go upstairs. If he's awake, he might ignore me if I'm lucky. Once my shoes are off, I turn quietly and take three light steps to the base of the stairs. I have my right foot on the first step when I hear him shift. "Did you eat dinner, Annie?" my dad calls to me, stopping me at the base of the stairs.

"Yes," I answer without looking at him. I can feel him staring at me, wordlessly willing me into the living room.

"What time do you work tomorrow?" he asks. He's trying to start a conversation. Trying to get me to come into the living room. Maybe even sit with him on the couch.

"My shift starts at six," I answer, turning to face him but keeping my right foot on the first step of the staircase. The light from the television isn't enough to give me a clear look at his face, but there's an obvious darkness under his eyes.

"Was it a good day?" he asks, leaning forward.

I roll my eyes and answer, "It's never a good day. People are awful this time of year. There's always something wrong with their drink." The coffee shop I work at was always busy, but December was always impressively chaotic.

He nods and clears his throat as if to say more but for some reason chooses not to.

"You still haven't put the tree up." It comes out as a statement rather than a question, which seems to surprise my father. He was expecting me to ask why.

"Haven't found the right moment," he answers. For whatever reason, the statement seems open-ended. Like he's waiting for me to finish his thought. Like he wants me to say I've found

the right moment. It's his favorite holiday. I hadn't helped put up the tree in years. He didn't need me to help him and yet he seemed to be waiting for me. I nod, unsure of the response he is expecting or hoping for. Instead of staying at the base of the stairs and staring, I decide to force my tired body up the stairs to my bedroom. Each step up the stairs is a reminder of the crappy week I've had. The brief conversation with my father has only worsened my already sour mood.

We haven't seen much of each other these days. We've both been going to work earlier and I've been spending most of my time after work focusing on schoolwork and studying for my upcoming finals at the library downtown. Despite the accident, I'd made it clear to my professors that I could keep up with the work and would be good to go come finals week. Even with our busy schedules though, we both spent a good deal of time in the house at the same time. But that didn't matter to him. Not when he didn't want to see me. Or more accurately, he didn't want to see my injuries. He'd taken me to my first PT appointment but once it was established that I could drive myself, and I'd gotten a new car, he decided that I was old enough to take myself. I hadn't had the energy to argue with him at the time.

I open the door to my room and am met with a tiresome sight. An eleven-year-old who has no sense of personal space sitting on my bed, shoes and all. "Shoes off the bed, please." She rolls her eyes and scooches to the edge of my bed, letting her feet hang off. I cross my arms and lean back against the wall, putting my foot by the door to keep it from trapping the warm air in my bedroom.

"My feet aren't on your bed," she says with an innocent smile. Daisy was an eleven year old pain in the ass but liked to pretend like she wasn't.

"I know you think you're funny, Daisy, but I had a long day and don't want to argue with you," I tell her. She sighs, long and dramatic like I've done something horrible to her. I set my

jaw and narrow my eyes and she suddenly decides to scooch to the edge of my bed so her feet rest on the floor. I nod in approval and step towards her. She giggles as I sit down hard on the bed, making my pillows bounce dramatically.

“You’re a child,” she says with a laugh.

“Congrats, you’re a genius.” I smirk.

“Annie,” she says, her tone unexpectedly serious. “Did you talk to dad at all today?”

“What kind of question is that?”

“It’s just a question,” she snaps, scooting away from me as her tone becomes defensive.

“Yes, I have. Why do you care?”

“Because he’s your dad and you should talk to him.”

“I talk to him every day, Daisy.”

“For more than a couple minutes at a time?” she asks, raising an accusatory eyebrow at me. I roll my eyes but don’t answer. “Exactly,” she says, a victorious smirk on her face.

“I’ve been busy.”

“So has he, but at least he’s been making an effort.”

“What effort?”

“He tried to get you to talk to him but you shut him down just like you do every time.”

“How would you know?” I ask harshly.

“I just know,” she says, her voice small as she refuses to look at me. Silence consumes the room as I struggle to come up with something to say to her. Something to defuse the growing tension between us.

“Go to your room now. It’s time for bed,” I tell her. The best solution I can come up with to soften the tension is to make her leave. Nicely handled, Annie. She heaves a long sigh before looking at me.

“I’m not tired,” she states.

I snort. “Regardless of whether or not that’s true, I am most definitely tired. So you need to vacate my bed so I can get into it.” I swing my hand to smack her leg playfully but she dodges me. A flash of hurt passes across my face but I swallow the feeling. She lowers herself slowly off my bed and takes a few steps towards the door.

“Are you coming too?” she asks, looking back at me. I sigh. “Not tonight, Daisy. I need to shower and catch up on some studying for finals.” She frowns at me and turns back to the doorway. I get up and move to close the door behind her but she stops abruptly in the doorway before I can.

“You’ll come tuck me in soon, though, right?”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before answering. “Yes, Daisy. I will, just not tonight.”

“Okay,” she says softly. I watch her walk to her bedroom but turn and shut my own door behind me before she opens her door. I breathe a shaky sigh of relief and stare longingly at my bed.

“Day’s almost over,” I remind myself, before moving to my desk to study.

---

The sound of footsteps wakes me up before my alarm does. My father has never been good at walking quietly. I’d gotten used to it for the most part, but my melatonin can only do so

much when he decides to thunder through the kitchen at four-thirty in the morning. Pushing myself up, I rub at my eyes in an effort to get my brain to wake up all the way. After forcing myself out of bed, I dress quickly so I have time to make a proper breakfast this morning.

“You’re actually going to make breakfast?” Daisy asks from behind me as I prepare the pan for the pancake mix.

“First time for everything, hun.” She moves soundlessly to the island to sit down.

“It’ll only take a few minutes,” I tell her as I pour the first round of pancakes on the hot pan. The sound of the pancakes cooking on the pan fills the room.

“Those pancakes look a little mushy. They could probably use another minute on the pan, Annie,” she tells me, a teasing smile on her face.

“You’re a pancake expert now, are you?”

“No, I’m just saying. Besides, you know I’ve always preferred waffles.”

“Oh, I remember,” I tell her, setting the plate gently down in front of her. I move around the island to put the pancake mix back in the pantry and grab at her ponytails. She jerks away and my fingers just miss the long frizzy strands of hair. I pull my hand away from her and put the mix away. “What was that about?” I ask slowly, turning back towards her. The hurt in my voice is clear despite my best efforts. She keeps her focus on the crappy pancakes in front of her.

“Daisy?”

“You know it’s hard for him to be in the house by himself,” she tells me. I set the plate down hard in the sink. The sudden noise startles the bird sitting on the porch railing just outside the kitchen window.

“There’s nothing wrong with being alone in the house,” I say softly to myself. I stop and look back at her, my eyes drawn to the untouched plate of pancakes in front of her. “Please just try to finish them, Daisy. I’d really appreciate the effort.”

“I’ll try, Annie,” she tells me. Despite only being across the room from me, her voice sounds much farther away.

---

“Annie?” Isabel calls from the doorway. She’s a few years younger than I am, still in high school. She’s soft-spoken, but loves helping the customers that come through every morning. “I have to take my break. Do you think you can cover for me? Just for fifteen minutes. We aren’t busy right now,” she says, the words coming out faster than I’m sure she intended.

“Of course. Go on your break,” I say, smiling to distract from my clenched jaw. She nods in thanks and scurries to the door behind me that leads to the break room. It’s early so the shop isn’t too busy yet, mostly just regulars taking their drinks to go. Another one of the baristas, Lacy, finishes making a drink and slides it to me to give to the customer. The customer in question is waiting patiently at the counter and is unfortunately a regular I recognize.

“How have you been, Annabeth?” Mrs. Roberts asks as she takes the coffee from me without breaking eye contact. She’s doing her best to not look at the fading burns that run along my right arm.

“Fine,” I answer, clenching my jaw.

“Good,” she responds cheerfully. She sips her coffee and is out the door in moments. I groan and hope the next few minutes go by quickly and quietly. My phone vibrates from my back pocket just as the door opens.

“Annie!” my sixth-grade teacher Mrs Wise cries at the sight of me. So much for being quick and quiet. Mrs. Wise has always been a talker. I force a strained smile onto my face.

“Hi, Mrs. Wise. It’s good to see you.” A huge smile breaks across her face at the sound of my voice and she moves quickly to the counter so I can take her order.

“I’m so glad you’re back out in the front. I’ve missed seeing you.”

“Thank you,” I say awkwardly, though she takes no notice as she peruses the menu knowing full well she’s going to get a mocha latte like every other day. I put her order into the computer as Kayla begins to make the drink. After a minute, she tells me what she’s going to order and I take her card. The drink is at the pick-up counter before she steps away from the register.

“It was very good to see you, my dear,” she says as she picks up her drink.

“Good to see you too,” I respond, hoping she’ll take her drink to go. She looks up at me after examining her drink for errors and her cheery smile seems to sour. *Don’t tell me you’re sorry*, I think. Everyone is always sorry. She takes a sip of her drink and turns to the door without another word. My phone vibrates again and I pull it out, hoping it isn’t my father calling. Dr. Bailey’s name stares up at me and I quickly excuse myself to the backroom to take the call.

Kayla nods in understanding as I pass.

“This is Annabeth Coleman.” I do my best to keep my voice steady, hoping this is a good call and not a bad one.

“Hi, Miss Coleman. Dr. Bailey wanted me to inform you that we’ve had a last-minute cancellation for three o’clock today. She knew you wanted to get in as early as possible.”

“That would be great. Thank you.”



“We’ll see you at three then.” The call ends and I look towards the backroom in the hopes that one of my superiors will materialize.

“Miranda?” I call to my shift manager as soon as she’s within my sight.

“Everything alright, Annie?” she responds immediately. I’m taken aback by her quick response but suddenly realize how distant I’ve been since coming back to work after the accident.

“Everything’s fine. I just have to leave early. My doctor was able to get me in earlier, if that’s alright?”

“Of course, just make sure you get a note for me. You know how upper management can be,” she says with a smile. She’s been very lenient with me and all my appointments since coming back to work. Everyone has. It’s probably better treatment than I deserve.

“Thank you,” I tell her. I mean to say more, to tell her what I’m thankful for, but the words won’t come to me.

---

Despite my best efforts, my knee still refuses to stop bouncing. *It’s just a checkup, Annie,* I tell myself. *She’s just making sure my physical therapy is going well.* These thoughts do little to soothe the anxiety coursing through me that is manifesting itself in my nervous knee. “Annabeth Coleman,” a voice calls from across the room. I look up from my lap to see a nurse waiting for me in the doorway that leads to the exam rooms. I force a smile onto my face and stand. She walks me to one of the rooms after taking my weight and height. After a few minutes of waiting, Dr. Bailey enters the room with a smile on her face.

“It’s good to see you, Annie.”

“Good to see you too, Dr. Bailey.”

“How have you been feeling? It says here,” she continues, pulling up the report from my last PT session, “that you’re going to move to biweekly appointments now.”

“Yeah, I’ve been doing better.” I realize a second after the words come out that I sound incredibly stiff. Like I’m lying through my teeth. Dr. Bailey eyes me carefully. “I am, really. I’m doing well. The therapy has been really helpful,” I insist.

“Good,” she responds, her attention moving back to the computer. The next few minutes go by quickly and I admit I miss most of it. “Now, one last thing. I’ve spoken to our resident CBT, meaning cognitive behavioral therapist, and she’s happy to meet you if you want.”

“Sorry?”

“She has experience working with people in your situation,” she explains.

“I don’t think that’s necessary,” I state.

“She does great work and has helped many of my patients.”

“That’s wonderful for them, but I don’t think—”

“Just consider what I’ve said, Annie,” she interrupts. “She has experience working with people who have been in your position,” she reiterates.

“Ok,” I tell her as we step out into the hallway.

“You’ve done therapy for your body in order to help you heal. Without it, your body may not have healed properly. Now, it might be time to try therapy for your mind.”

“I’ll think about it,” I tell her in an effort to get her to drop the subject.

“Grief can be all consuming for some people, Annie. Your father included,” she says before walking back down the hall. Her words are unnerving and I’m barely aware of the receptionist as I schedule a follow up appointment.

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. I don’t need a therapist. I don’t need someone to tell me how sorry they are for me. Everyone is always sorry. I don’t want you to be sorry. I want you to treat me like a person. I’m not made of glass. Make eye contact. Ask me how school has been. Don’t ask me how I’ve been when you know how I’ve been. Stop trying to be nice.” The words are tumbling out of me so fast I barely understand what I’m saying. The more I stew in what she told me, the angrier I get. The car doesn’t care what I have to say, but I continue to rant to myself up until I pull into the garage.

“How did the checkup go?” he asks from his place on the couch. I sigh and step into the living room, knowing full well he won’t let me out of his sight until I give him an update from the doctor.

“It went well. Everything seems to look good but she wants me to keep going to physical therapy for the next few weeks. Says it’ll help me make more progress as well as maintain all the muscle I’ve managed to get back.”

“That’s good news. Very good news.”

“Yep,” I agree awkwardly. “She wanted me to see a therapist.”

“You’re already seeing a therapist,” he says, mildly confused.

“The other kind of therapist.”

“Oh. Will you?” he asks.

“I don’t need to talk about what happened to anyone just to have them sit there and tell me how sorry they are for me. And then demand payment for their time. That’s a bunch of bs.”

“Is it?” he asks.

“Pardon?”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea.” Surely he isn’t serious.

“Are you-”

“Just once. I’ll even go with you. It might be good for both of us-” he starts to reason but now it's my turn to cut him off.

“Us? This isn’t about us. This is about me. What does this have to do with you?”

“Annie, this is hard for me too. I know that may not seem clear and I never wanted you to get the wrong idea but-”

“But what? What do you know about what’s happened to me? Not us. Me!” I yell at him. He recoils from me, a mix of fear and sorrow in his eyes. “What the hell do you know?” I snarl. “You weren’t there. You didn’t feel what I felt. You didn’t see what I saw. You didn’t hear her scream!” A shuddering breath escapes me as I suddenly realize the wetness running down my cheeks.

My father is staring at me, soft horror written all over his face. Maybe he hadn’t thought about the accident like that before. Or maybe he hadn’t realized just how much I remembered, or how long I had been awake after the impact. “Sweetheart,” he says softly. He takes a cautious step towards me, opening his arms in the hopes that I’ll let him embrace me.

I shake my head and step back, my hands shaking at my sides. He recoils and looks away. I don’t know what to do either, I want to tell him. As if reading my thoughts he asks, “Have you tried praying?” I’m not sure how to answer him. I haven’t been going to church with him. Not for a long time. So no, I think to myself after considering his question, I haven't tried praying. But I can’t bring myself to admit that to him. He’d be so disappointed. He’d been trying for weeks before the accident to get me to come with him on Sunday morning only to fail miserably.

“I’m tired,” I say finally. I know that’s not an answer but it’s all I can muster at the moment. His eyes meet mine once again and, though he says nothing, he seems to understand.

He sees me clearly, but only for a moment as I watch his eyes dart to the television. I sigh, hoping it will relieve the pressure building in my temple.

“I’m tired too,” he says, but I can’t look at him. Not now. Not in this moment.

“I’m going to bed,” I tell him softly, the anger diminishing as the sorrow of my situation retakes control of my body.

---

The hardwood’s uncontrollable creaking comes to mind, when I consider what noise woke me up. I press my face further into the pillow and pull the blankets around my head in an effort to block out all the noise the world has to offer. “Annie.” She says it so softly I almost don’t catch it through the door. Part of me wishes she would go away and let me sleep. “Can we go to the park tomorrow?” she asks. It takes me a second to realize she’s being serious and I actually have to respond.

“There’s a lot of parks, honey,” I say, massaging my temple. The pressure has begun to return.

“The one we always take hikes on.” Of course, the short trail with the pond. It’s always that one.

“Yeah, sure. We can do that. In the morning,” I say quickly.

“Annie-” she starts but I stop her before she can get any further.

“In the morning, Daisy. Not now,” I state. She’s always had a way with words and I know, if I let her, she could talk me into doing anything.

“I know that,” she says, a hint of anger in her voice. “I wanted you to tuck me in.”

“No, Daisy. I’m not gonna do that.”

“But-”

“I can’t do that, Daisy. Not yet.” I pause and take a deep breath. “Go back to bed, Daisy. I’ll see you in the morning,” I call to her as I climb back into bed. There’s silence from the other side of the door as she goes back to her room. I pull the blankets up close to my chin and will the world to disappear as sleep arrives to consume me.

---

“Try to stay on the trail, Daisy.”

“Which trail?”

“You pick.” She takes towards the nearest trail, conveniently the shortest one that runs through the park. It doesn’t take long for her to stray from the path. “Daisy!” I call to her as she races ahead of me, trampling the wet leaves that cake the forest floor that surrounds the trail. She keeps running and I speed up to match her pace. Despite being ten years older, I’ve only got a few inches on her. She’s always been fast and unbothered by the cold. We complete the half-mile trail in no time at all and I half expect her to race me back to the car.

But instead she slows down and walks through the parking lot, right back to the pond we pass every time we take this trail. She stops at the edge of the frozen pond, while I’m still back in the parking lot. With a wicked grin on her face, she steps one foot out onto the ice. “Not funny. Off now,” I order with a snap of my fingers. She giggles and steps out fully onto the ice. “Daisy!” She ignores me and continues to slide out onto the frozen pond. The pond isn’t more than six feet deep at its highest, but I still don’t like the idea of her falling through the ice and getting soaked in freezing cold water. I hurry up the slope to get to the edge of the pond. “Daisy!” I yell to her as I carefully step out onto the ice. She ignores me and continues to spin and squeal in delight. “Stop being such a child, Daisy. Get over here!” I take another step out onto the ice and brace for it to crack. It holds. I release a shaky breath and take another delicate

step towards the eleven-year-old who has taken this too far. I feel the ice crack beneath my feet before the sound reaches my ears, and in the last moment before I go under, I wonder if her laughter will be the last thing I hear.

Cold, so cold, earth shattering cold. The bottom, I hit the bottom. It's not deep, thank God it's not deep. What the hell? What do I do? Swim. Up. Out. Grab the ice, pull yourself up, do it quickly. Don't die in a pond, dumbass. Breaking the surface, breathing still. Freezing, somehow the air feels colder than the water. Dammit, falling back under. The ice is too thin. Break the ice away and move to the edge. Do it now! Pushing the water away, as if that would actually help. Surrounded on all sides, I can't feel my toes. The ground! Finally! Dig into the dirt and pull yourself out. Easy, don't lose your shoes. Sopping wet boots, I still can't feel my toes. I'm never going swimming again. Focus. Breathe. You're okay. You're alive.

"You're alive," I say, my brain having slowed down enough to allow me to speak. My heart races as I try to steady my breathing. My back will be brown when I'm finally able to force myself to sit up. But I'm alive. "Stupid little sister," I mutter. It takes me a moment to fully register what I've said. To remember why I had been out on the ice to begin with. Steadying my arms at my sides, I brace and push up. My body wills me to stay down but I force it into a sitting position. Breathing heavily, I look around cautiously. The ice is now as bare as we found it, no children dancing on it. Shaking so hard I fear my teeth might fall out, I fight the urge to curl into a ball to preserve my body heat. "Daisy," I manage to mutter through my chattering teeth. "Daisy," I call again, louder this time. Forcing myself onto my feet, I look up towards the hiking trail. "Daisy!" I yell, but again there is no response. "Please don't be gone. Not now. Not yet. Please," I beg quietly. My thoughts are reeling as I stumble back to my car in the hopes that I remembered to put a couple blankets in the trunk. As the car comes into view, I stop short. There

she stands, as if she's done nothing wrong. I approach slowly, avoiding her eyes. Her pigtailed are as frizzy and lopsided as they have always been. "That was a cruel joke, Daisy," I snap at her, forcing my voice to remain steady as the cold water clings to my skin.

"I didn't mean for it to be cruel," she says softly.

"Then what did you intend, huh?" The words come out angrier than I intend, but it's too late to go back. I stare down at her but she keeps her gaze firmly on the parking lot lines beneath her feet. "Don't lie, Daisy. You've always loved playing jokes on me, especially ones that hurt my feelings."

"That's not true!" she cries, stomping her foot in frustration but still refusing to meet my eyes.

"Dammit Daisy, yes it is." An uncomfortable silence hangs between us as I throw open the trunk door and pull out a couple of blankets. I hold out the smaller of the two blankets to her and finally, she looks at me.

"Annie. I don't need that."

"Don't be stubborn, Daisy. Just take it."

"No, Annie."

"Daisy, please."

"Annie. I'm not cold. You know that."

I slam the trunk closed, startling a pair of birds out of a nearby tree. "Get in the car, please," I tell her, torn between being hurt and being angry.

"Annie." Now she's staring hard at me, and I'm the one who can't look at her.

"Get in the car!" I snap. Taking a deep breath, I try to swallow down the uneasy feeling rising in my throat. My teeth are chattering so hard they feel as if they might shatter at any



moment. She doesn't say anything else, simply walks to the passenger's side of the car. The door doesn't open though, nor does it close. In fact, it's probably still locked. Nevertheless, she's sitting next to me when I put the car into reverse.

My grip on the steering wheel makes my knuckles turn an unhealthy shade of white, but I can't get my fingers to unhinge themselves. I've never been so laser-focused on the road in all my life. I can't look at her, even though I can feel her stare from the passenger's seat. Should've made her sit in the back, I think to myself. By the time I pull into the driveway, I've stopped myself from speaking at least five times. Which is a lot considering the house is a five-minute drive from the park.

Lucky for me, my father isn't home. I ignore Daisy as I move quickly into the house and head upstairs. I've never moved so quickly in my life as I turn the water in the bath on and peel off my wet clothes. I don't bother waiting for the water to get hot, getting in as soon as it's lukewarm. My father's words linger in my mind. Praying. Not the most original idea but I suppose it's worth a shot. "Hey, it's me, Annie. Haven't heard from me in a while, have you?" My words hang in the air. Unanswered.

"I don't know what I'm doing. Bet you knew that already."

I let the silence overtake me again, unsure of how to go on. "He thought this might help me. Talking to you. But it's been so long I'm not even sure what I'm supposed to do. So, forgive me if I don't address you properly, or if I insult you. That's not my intention. I'm just a human, looking for answers. You're supposed to be the creator of the universe. You've got all the answers, right?" I pause and take a shaky breath.

"Why did you take her? There were two people in the car that day. Two. One who should've looked both ways before rushing through the barely turned green light. The other who

shouldn't have been there in the first place. She only wanted to spend some time with me. I hated grocery shopping with her but she promised she would behave if I just let her come. So I caved. And you took her."

The words get stuck in my throat as tears fall rapidly down my cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry," I sob, resting my forehead on my knees.

"I don't know what to do without her," I moan, my voice breaking as another sob tears its way out of my throat. My breathing gets faster as the sobs refuse to let up. "Everyone keeps telling me it isn't my fault, and maybe they're right. But that doesn't matter. I didn't kill her, but it feels like I did." A couple deep breaths later and I'm no longer fighting for air. I scoop up the warm water of the bath and rub it on my face.

"She was right. It is all consuming. So, please, just take it. Take away this all consuming madness. Please." I hope in vain that someone can hear me. That someone is listening. But no one else is home.

"Annie," my father calls. I jump slightly at the sound of his voice, the water splashing against the wall. I didn't even hear the garage door open. He sounds like he's downstairs still. "Annie, are you alright?" he asks, obviously concerned. He's closer this time.

"Yes," I respond quickly, silently begging him to go away before I break down again. There's a moment of silence where I consider saying something else to him, but he speaks before I get a chance.

"Do you need anything?" he asks. His voice sounds strained, as if he's been speaking all day and could use a cup of tea to recover.

"No," I call back softly. The floor outside the bathroom creaks and I think he's going to leave before saying anything else.

“I love you, sweetheart. I haven’t said it in a while, but I do. I’m trying, Annie. I hope you know that.” I can tell he’s crying by the mild shakiness in his voice. Tears run down my face once again, though I do nothing to stop them. The floor creaks again and the sound of footsteps on the stairs fill my ears. Silence soon returns to the small bathroom. I wipe my face and turn the water off.

The soft scent of lavender permeates my bedroom as I take my hair out of the towel. I sit down on my bed, careful not to get the sheets too damp. The pitter patter of raindrops on the roof breaks the silence as I consider going to bed right this minute. “Why did I have to be like this?” I moan, tears threatening to return. A voice from beyond the door breaks the silence before it gets a chance to settle.

“Annie.” Her sweet little voice forces the nasty thoughts out of my mind. I walk quickly to my door and open it.

“Yes, my love.” My eyes dance over her face and it finally dawns on me why her t-shirt seemed both familiar and foreign to me. It’s what she was wearing the day of the accident. It doesn’t exist anymore. The matching shorts she’s wearing before me are also gone. She looks exactly as she did the last time I got a proper look at her. Right before she got in the car.

“Can you tuck me in?” she asks. The fear in me still wants to say no. But I made a promise.

“Lead the way.” I follow her to her room and open the door. The soft pink room is as messy as she left it. The bed is still unmade.

“Annie,” Daisy calls from the bed, forcing my attention back to her. “I’ll still be your Daisy, right?” she asks. For a moment, the wisdom fades and the innocence returns.

“You will always be my darling little Daisy,” I assure her softly. I stare longingly at her as she lies down and pulls the covers up to her chin. “You’re gonna haunt me, little sister.”

“No,” she insists, shaking her pigtailed at me. I smile sadly at her stupidly persistent optimism. “I’m not gonna haunt you. Not anymore, anyways,” she says with a smile.

“I’m sorry, Daisy.”

“Ann-”

I cut her off before she can even say my name. “No, I need to say this. Please.”

“Okay,” she relents.

“I’m sorry you had to convince me to let you come. I always wanted to spend time with you and I never wanted to make you feel like you were an annoyance in my life. You weren’t. Never.” I pause as a few stray tears slip down my cheeks. I fight the urge to wipe them away and continue. “I would’ve done anything you wanted. I would’ve taught you to drive if you asked. I would’ve taught you about boys and dating and being a teenager. I would do anything to show you how much you mean to me.”

“I know, Annie. I’ve always known,” she says with a smile. “I’m not afraid, Annie. But I know you are. And it’s okay.” She shouldn’t be so wise, not when she looks so small in her own bed. “You are allowed to be scared,” she continues, putting an emphasis on each word.

“Thank you for that, Daisy,” I say, my voice shaking as tears well in my eyes.

“You’re gonna be okay. You may not think so right now. It may not feel like it for a while. But it will be okay. I promise.”

“I love you, my sweet Daisy.”

“I love you too, Annie.” I look back at her one last time before opening the door. The door shuts behind me with a click and I release a shaky breath. The sound of Christmas music

floats up the staircase from the living room as I move away from the door to the top of the stairs. I descend slowly and at the base of the stairs, before I turn into the living room, I can hear my father humming along to the music.

“I was hoping you’d come help me put the tree up. If we work together, we might still be able to make it to your aunt’s party tonight,” he says when he sees me, a soft smile on his face. I return the smile and move to the couch where he’s set our ornaments out. Finally, the television is off and the lights of the tree are all we need to illuminate our lives.

---

I follow my dad up the slope to the edge of the pond. The sweet scent of spring wafts across the pond. My dad cradles the urn as he bends down. I remain standing as he pours the ashes out softly around the edge of the water. I fold into my father’s side as I watch the cool breeze carry her across the pond. In my dreams, she’s still dancing across the frozen pond, unbothered by the chill in the air or the murky water beneath the thin ice. “What’s one of your favorite memories? Or favorite things about her?” I ask him. We both go silent for a moment as he considers my question.

“She loved braiding your hair,” he says.

“She was terrible at it,” I counter with a small laugh.

“Oh, I know. You could never have told her though.” We both smile at the thought of her inability to see the obvious.

“Of course not. She would have been devastated. And she would have made you feel like a terrible person for telling her.”

“You remember that one Thanksgiving where she got you to go to Lauren’s house with your hair braided,” he says, a sly grin on his face knowing full well I remember that night all too well.

“Nobody wanted to say anything but they all stared at me the whole night. They couldn’t look away. I can only imagine how many pictures there are of that night,” I say with a short laugh. My cheeks turn pink as the memories of that night fill my mind.

“So many,” he responds, doing his best not to laugh at my expense. I have no doubt he took plenty of pictures himself.

“I’m just glad I hadn’t invited any friends to the party. That would have been a whole other level of embarrassment.”

“She never tried to get better. She enjoyed making a mess of your hair. She loved how much you laughed when she did it.” We both laugh at the thought. “What about you?” he asks, nudging me gently. “What’s your favorite memory? Or quality?” He’s staring at me and I suddenly feel all warm inside. It’s been a while since we’ve felt like father and daughter. “Take your time, Annie. This whole day is ours. We can share memories for as long as you want,” he says gently. After a second, he wraps an arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. I’ve never been big on hugs, but I can tolerate a dad squeeze.

“My favorite memory,” I say resolutely. I need to say something. It would be a disservice to her memory. I let my thoughts drift in search of a memory. One that sticks out in a good way. One that captures her spirit, her kindness, her everything. “Is it alright if I don’t have one?” I ask him. He laughs softly.

“Of course. There’s no such thing as a true favorite memory. What’s one that makes you smile, right now, at this moment?”

“A few summers ago when we went on one of those wildlife tours where you could feed the animals if they got close enough?”

“Oh, I remember.”

“She wanted to feed the giraffes so badly but the ostriches wouldn’t leave her alone,” I say with a laugh.

“Didn’t they end up stealing the bucket of food she’d been holding?”

“No, no, no. They didn’t steal it from her. She chucked it at them.”

“That was it!” He snaps his fingers as the memory comes back to him. We both laugh as the memory comes back to us fully in our minds.

“I don’t want to forget her,” I say suddenly. I’m not entirely sure where the thought comes from, but suddenly it’s the only thing in my head. My dad’s smile dips at my words. There is silence for a moment as he considers what to say to me.

“I don’t want to either. But it might happen. Actually, it will happen. It always happens. Our minds are imperfect, Annie. The more years pass, the more memories we lose along the way,” he tells me. I frown and a heaviness returns to the air between us.

“Good to know,” I say, my tone somewhere between mournful and sarcastic.

“I don’t want that to scare you. I just want you to understand. To reminisce about everything now. To write things down now while all the memories are still clear. Because the day will come when they won’t be. There will come a day when you won’t be able to recall what her voice sounded like. Or you won’t be able to see her face clearly without consulting a picture. These things will happen. But there is one thing you will never forget.”

“And what would that be?” I ask softly.

“You will always remember how she made you feel. The joy, and the love, and the laughter. All of it.”

“So, we’ll forget her face and her voice, but we’ll never forget her heart and her soul?”

“Exactly,” he says, a grin growing on his face. “Exactly.”

Nothing lasts forever. I’m not sure when parents start telling their kids that, but I wish they would stop. Because that isn’t true, is it? Love can last forever if you want it too. And we all want it to last forever, don’t we? Of course, just so long as it doesn’t consume us.