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The Crystal Necklace

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Honors Studies in English

By

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English

J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Arkansas

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For the third day in a row, I had continuously knocked on Stacy's bedroom door and waited outside her room. I made sure that I was careful not to bang my knuckles against the overlapping signs that were taped to the wooden surface. I didn't want a repeat of the last time I touched her artwork. Most of these signs are ones that she designed for our school pep rallies. The one that really stood out from the rest had "McGavock High School, Home of the Raiders" drawn in big black letters with a sharp-edged design to them, and below that it said, "Nashville's Best." She definitely got the artist gene over me. I could barely draw the human figure in my art classes that I took freshman year. The faces had always ended up deformed with uneven eyes and giant noses.

Stacy got better at drawing and painting as she got older. She had been taking art classes since her freshman year, and now she's a junior in a senior level advanced class. She could draw the human body to look so realistic that it could be mistaken for a photograph that someone had taken. I remember when she had drawn a family portrait for one of her art shows. She portrayed Dad's no-nonsense business demeanor and Mom's hardened eyes perfectly through her acrylic paints and expensive paintbrushes. The way she could capture the human form just as it is in real life always amazed me. She's such a great artist that the school asked her to design the front of the graduation program for my senior class.

It didn't matter how many times I knocked today. She never answered. Usually she would yell at me, or I would hear a thump behind the door, which always meant she had thrown something.

“Come on Stace! We’ve got to go to school. We’re going to be late. Again,” I mumbled that last part. If she felt ill again, I didn’t want to seem as if I was being insensitive to what she has been going through.

Stacy had been struggling with really bad headaches for the past couple of months. Just a couple of weeks ago I’d noticed her pain was starting to get worse than usual, which worried me. She didn’t seem concerned even when I confronted her about it, and that made me worry even more.

She had actually been having headaches for quite a while before Mom and Dad finally noticed and took her to the doctor. The doctor said her headaches were just migraines. He gave her medicine that helped for a little while, but soon her headaches got worse. The only thing that she could do was shut everything out and lie in her bed for hours. Mom and Dad never noticed that Stacy was getting worse.

Our parents were rarely ever home, and they always seemed distant with each other. Dad was always at his office working or out of town on business. Mom continued to work extremely hard at her law firm as a high-profile criminal defense lawyer. So it was as if she never had time for us anymore. She was always home late or going into her office late at night.

I wish that Mom and Dad would notice Stacy hurting. Even though I still felt that something was wrong, Stacy would always reassure me that she just had migraines. Even when I suggested that she talk to our parents about it again, she was adamant about not going to them. She told me that they always overreacted, and that I was starting to sound like them.

I knocked on the door one more time before I decided to barge into her room. I could deal with the griping later. The parts of the room where the hallway lights couldn't reach were left pitch black. I expected to see her jump up, ready to scream at me, but nothing moved. All was quiet and still, except for my heavy breathing. "Stace," I whispered. "Are you all right?" There still wasn't an answer, so I stepped into the room a little ways.

All of a sudden the overhead light flooded the room and bounced off the turquoise and brown walls. Mom pushed me to the side as she rushed into the room. She knew something that I didn't. At first glance, I didn't see anything wrong, but deep down, something felt wrong. The dead silence reached out and grabbed me. It took a firm hold of me so that I could barely breathe, and for a minute there, my eyes were beginning to lose focus. If I had paid attention, I would have seen the sheets on the bed pulled off to one side. I should have noticed the overturned easel and the paints and brushes scattered all over the floor next to one of her paintings of a multicolored starburst design. Stacy would have never left her art supplies lying on the floor like that. I should have seen the foot peeking out from around the edge of the footboard.

Mom had fallen to her knees on the other side of Stacy's bed, so all I could see was Mom's light brown hair, freshly curled, frantically bobbing up and down. Mom was around my height, which was about 5 feet. So when Mom had fallen to the floor, she had almost disappeared.

"Alexis! Go and get your father," a soft voice shook between sobs. Her big, brown eyes grew as they looked at me from over the bed, urging me to move quickly. Little black marks trailed down her face from her outlined eyes. The perfectly applied

makeup that made it look as if she had on a porcelain mask was now covered in black lines. It looked like her mask was cracking. Her thin red lips trembled. I could see the fear in her eyes as she stared at me, begging for help. “Don’t just stand there!”

A soft moan made her look down at my sister, who was cradled in her arms. I could see the foot twitch and eventually move out of sight. Dad must have heard the commotion because he ran past me, dropped his black briefcase and the phone that had been pressed against his ear, and knelt next to Mom. I could vaguely hear the dull drone of a voice on the phone that lay next to my feet. He must have been on some kind of a conference call.

“What should we do, James?” I heard Mom sob. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t even know what happened. When I came in here she was just lying on the floor like this. I don’t think she hit her head. I don’t...”

“I’m fine,” I heard Stacy mumble. “I just got up too fast, and I guess I blacked out.”

“We’re taking her to the hospital,” he said. The way he talked to Mom made it seem as if they were the only ones in the room. He didn’t even pay attention to Stacy’s protests as he picked her up in his arms.

“James, should we move her like that? We’re not even sure what all she hit when she fell,” Mom said. “We should just call an ambulance.”

“Mia, hurry and grab whatever you need.” His voice never wavered. He was all business. He passed me, his dark brown, hard-set eyes only glanced my way for a few seconds; but for those few seconds, I could see that deep down he was terrified. He may not have wanted to show it, but he couldn’t hide the fear from his eyes.

Mom jumped to her feet and ran out of the room. I could hear Dad's heavy footsteps as he bounded down the stairs with Stacy held close to his chest. Before he left the room with her, she had her arms folded, but she didn't say anything. She seemed to want to, but maybe she was just as freaked out as our parents were.

I stood there, against the door to my sister's room. I couldn't look away from the mess on the floor. It looked so out of place with the rest of the clean room. It looked as if Stacy had tried to hold onto her easel, but it wasn't sturdy enough to hold her weight. And as she fell to the floor, her easel had left a long, deep scratch on the bright green wall.

"Mia. Alexis, hurry up," I heard Dad yell from the front door of the house.

I ran to the door, and he stepped aside so I could get around him. He was so tall that his head almost touched the top of the doorway. Pieces of his brown wavy hair stuck to his glistening forehead, and I could see sweat drip down the side of his head and into his gray sideburns. His chest rose and fell as if he had just run a mile in his black, nicely tailored suit.

"Where's your mother? Mia, what's taking you so long?" his voice boomed past me.

"I'm coming!" she yelled as she ran to the doorway and passed us. She ran towards the car with a pile of clothes in her arms, and peeking out from the pile, she had Stacy's tiny stuffed lamb. She was also carrying two backpacks, one on each shoulder.

"What is all that?" Dad called after her.

"I got some clothes for the girls and their book bags. So when this whole mess is cleared up they can make their last few classes," she said as she scurried around us.

“Seriously? Mom, we aren’t going to school today,” I said under my breath. She had finally lost it. After all that time she kept her emotions hidden, the barrier was finally breaking and everything was rushing out. I looked up as I heard Dad clear his throat. He was looking down at me with his arms folded. I ran out the front door and towards the car idling in the driveway. I ran past a shirt that, I assumed, had fallen from Mom’s arms. I didn’t bother to turn around to pick it up.

I spent the car ride staring out the window at all of the cars that we passed. We must have been going at least 15 to 20 miles over the speed limit. “James, maybe you should slow down a little.” I heard Mom say from the backseat. Her words drifted into the air and then disappeared as fast as they were said. Dad didn’t say anything. He didn’t even look at Mom in the rearview mirror, but he did slow down somewhat. He loosened his grip on the steering wheel, so that the white faded from his knuckles a little.

I glanced at my sister in the side mirror. Her messy, brown hair was flat against the window. Her eyes were squeezed shut. She was probably off somewhere far away. She turned her head to the side a little. Her light green eyes flicked open and fell into mine, and for a moment, it was almost as if our eyes became one in the mirror, a mixture of light brown and green. Our eyes mirrored the fear that we both felt and the unspoken things that we wanted to say to each other.

The car screeched to a stop in front of the Nashville General Hospital sign. The building towered over us. Dad jumped from the driver’s seat. Without saying a word, Mom got out of the back and took over the driver’s seat so she could park the car. I opened the car door to get out before she pulled away, but she stopped me with a hand on

my elbow. I watched as Dad ran Stacy into the ER. A group of nurses surrounded them, put Stacy into a wheelchair, and took her through the massive double doors.

Mom didn't say anything as her grip tightened on my elbow. I looked up at her tired face. The lines around her eyes deepened as she tried to keep herself composed. She had tried to wipe off the black lines on her face, but I could still see them faintly. I closed my door and sat in silence. I looked into the side mirror and saw my reflection. My brown hair was just as messy as Stacy's. Little pieces of it were sticking up every which way. My eyes were a little swollen, and my lips looked really dry. I licked my lips so the cracks would become less noticeable.

Stacy should have said something to Mom and Dad. I could see that Stacy was getting worse, but she didn't want to acknowledge it. She hid it very well from Mom and Dad, but she couldn't hide it from me. I knew I should have ignored Stacy's pleas and just told them about how bad she was getting.

As soon as Mom pulled into a parking space, she jumped out and slammed the door. I hurried and got out before she locked me inside the car. She ran into the parking lot without looking, and I trailed behind her. A loud honk behind us made me jump, and I swung my head to the side to look. An older woman threw her hands up in the air and mouthed "crazy bitch," which I'm sure would've made Mom stop in her tracks if she had heard.

Mom had almost crashed through the doors of the hospital because they didn't open fast enough. She bumped shoulders with a short, bald man, and he mumbled something under his breath. I followed her into the hospital waiting room where Dad paced back and forth. As soon as we neared him he looked up. At first he was furious, but

then his fury melted into fear as he looked into Mom's eyes. She walked into his open arms, and muffled sobs played against the loud voices of the other people waiting. He hunched over so that he could be as close to her as his height would allow him.

All I did was stand here, stunned. I had never seen them like this. They were always so closed off. Mom pulled away from him and turned an open arm towards me. Her brown eyes glistened against the film of tears that eventually spilled over her bottom lashes, and her face was already red and splotchy. New black lines trailed down her face.

I didn't move towards her open arm, even when she moved her hand in a beckoning motion. Instead, I looked around at everyone in the waiting room. To the right, a young boy sat in his mother's lap and scribbled on a piece of paper, while the mother kept making sympathetic glances over at Mom and Dad. An elderly couple that sat over by the little fish tank was holding hands. The old man was taking deep breaths, and his face was pale. The woman sat next to him and rubbed his chest to console him.

We had left the outside world and entered into a whole new one. This was a part of the world that I had thought I would never see, at least not this quickly. The suffering and anxiety was overwhelming. The only time that I had seen the inside of a hospital was in TV shows. It was always easy being a distant observer because I could watch the hour-long shows and then be finished with the tragic events that had unfolded in them. Now I was stuck in one of those shows, and I couldn't simply turn off my TV to escape.

I played with the hem of my pajama shirt as I continued to scan the room and look at all of the people who sat in anticipation of what would come next. A few people were still glancing at my parents and me, but most of the people talked amongst themselves or

sat back in their chairs with their eyes closed. I never looked back at my parents. I just pretended that they weren't there.

A couple of people looked behind me and sat up in their chairs. A tall man in a white coat walked past me and headed over to my parents. He had dark curly hair and light brown eyes with flecks of gold around the pupil. He glided as he walked. The people who had sat up straight as he neared the waiting room entrance just folded themselves back into their chairs.

Mom nearly ran to the doctor when she saw him, but Dad held her back. The doctor stopped in front of them and started talking softly while referencing a chart that he held in his hands. Dad's dark brown eyes squinted as he listened to the doctor. The constant squinting was one of the many signs of him getting ready to lose his temper.

Dad tried to keep his voice low when he started interrupting the doctor with his questions, but his hands were waving around, which showed that he was having a hard time keeping calm.

"I don't understand what the hell is going on," Dad said a little too loudly. "The last time I took my daughter to a doctor, he said that she just suffered from bad migraines. Now you're telling me that it could be something worse? Doesn't anyone know what they're doing around here?"

"Sir, we will get to the bottom of this. We're going to run some tests to see what could be the cause of her headaches and dizziness," the doctor said in a level voice.

"She's in great hands, and I will keep you informed every step of the way. You will know everything as soon as I do." The doctor sounded so genuine that I was surprised that Dad

didn't immediately calm down. I could tell that the doctor's tone had reassured Mom a little bit.

"You better find out what's wrong with her," Dad said, getting closer to his face. The doctor backed up a little so he could keep that small space between him and my dad. My dad towered over the doctor, which made the doctor a little nervous. "I don't want another bullshit of a diagnosis that..."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see that a couple of the nurses had started to make their way over to us. They seemed to be debating on whether they needed to call security because my dad's outburst made him look as though he was going to attack the doctor. I've seen my dad mad before, but I've never seen him this mad. Honestly, I would never think that my dad could be capable of hurting anyone, but at that moment, even I wasn't so sure.

Mom finally intervened. She laid a small hand on Dad's shoulder and apologized to the doctor. Dad took a couple steps back, and Mom took over talking to the doctor.

"What kinds of tests are we talking about here?" Mom asked.

"Besides the normal physical examination, which involves checking vital signs, temperature..."

"Yes, I know what that entails," she interrupted. "What are the other tests that Stacy will have to undergo?"

"I've decided that an MRI would be our best bet in finding out the cause of her symptoms, because from what your husband told me about her symptoms earlier, it sounds like the cause could be in a part of her brain."

Mom stood silent for a few long seconds. I could see her moving her little silver ring around on her finger.

“Will you take us back to see Stacy now?” Dad asked.

“Yes, of course,” the doctor replied.

Dad started walking towards the doors before the doctor had moved. When the doctor realized that my dad was just going to keep walking even though he had no idea where he was headed, the doctor speed-walked to get in front of my dad. Mom and I followed in tow.

The doctor led my parents and me through the double doors and into a giant hallway that had a couple of gurneys pushed up against the walls on either side; probably just in case of an emergency. Every now and then we would pass little metal boxes filled with small, thin drawers. One of the drawers wasn't closed, and I could see that it was stocked full of white gauze. A nurse popped his head out of one of the rooms that had one of these small boxes sitting outside of it, and he grabbed the handle on the side and wheeled it in before he closed the door behind him.

The doctor led us down a couple more hallways and then came to an abrupt stop outside of a cracked door. This hospital was like a giant cruel maze. It felt as if we were all stuck here without a way out. We walked into the room to see my sister lying back in a bed, staring at the ceiling. As soon as she heard our footsteps, she shot up. “Thank God!” she breathed with relief. “I was wondering how long I would have to wait before I could talk to someone. Even being alone for a few minutes sucks.”

She looked expectantly over at me. There was exhaustion in her face. She tried to hide it, but she wasn't doing very well. Her usual rosy cheeks were stark white, and her

green eyes looked a little dull. The person I saw in front of me was my sister, but at the same time she wasn't. For the past few days I had noticed that she looked paler than usual and a little more tired, but today was the worst that she had ever looked. Maybe the fact that she was in the hospital wasn't helping her situation. She was already converging with her environment.

I walked over to her and plopped down on her bed. "We're going to have to get you another bed in here," she joked. "I'm not sharing mine. It's already a lot smaller than my one at home."

"Yeah," I laughed as much as I could in this situation. "I suppose you'll have to paint more to cover up these ugly, plain white walls too."

"You know it," she said. Out of all the things that we could've talked about, we talked about how we could spruce up the room to make it more suitable for her.

Stacy was just trying to make light of the situation, but for some reason, I could feel that half of what we were saying was true. As soon as Stacy was carried through the hospital doors, I could tell that it had claimed her. I just remember when my grandpa had fallen ill. He was taken to the hospital with promises that he would recover. No one saw any of the other possibilities. We were just told that his illness could be managed. A year and a half later, he died. Hospitals are remorseless.

"How are you feeling, Stacy?" I heard Mom ask behind me.

I didn't even turn around to look at Mom. I just looked at Stacy's face. She told Mom that she was fine, and Stacy gave her a reassuring smile, probably just to make Mom feel better. We all knew that she wasn't feeling well, and no amount of stiff smiles could show us otherwise.

I got up so the nurse could help Stacy into her wheelchair. She was extra careful of the IV that stuck out of her arm. Stacy spotted me looking down at it. The way that it stuck into her arm just looked so wrong to me. I've never seen Stacy so helpless. She rarely ever got sick. A small bruise was already forming around the needle.

"Oh, yeah. This thing," she said raising her arm for emphasis. "They already gave me a souvenir. Lucky me." The nurse wheeled her out of the room.

"We'll be back in a couple of hours," the doctor said as he followed my sister and the nurse out of the room. "You may stay in here, or feel free to visit our cafeteria if you haven't had breakfast yet." The door shut with a resounding click. The waiting game had begun.

Now that everything wasn't so hectic, I looked down and noticed that I was still wearing my polka dotted boxer shorts and oversized nightshirt. "I forgot to grab the clothes out of the car," Mom said when she noticed me staring down at my pajamas. "I'll run and get them."

"No, I'll get them," I volunteered immediately. Even though I knew that it was ridiculous for Mom to have worried about packing clothes just in case Stacy and me ended up going to school, I realized that this was my way out of this room. I snatched the keys from the little wooden table next to the bed and ran out the door before Mom could say anything.

The hall was a little less busy this time. I veered off to the side to avoid a small group of doctors who were talking amongst themselves as they balanced medical charts in their hands. Without paying attention, I took a right when I really should've turned left. I walked a little ways until I noticed that I was passing the main station for this floor. I

couldn't remember passing one on the way to Stacy's room. I casually turned around to go back the way I came. I didn't want anyone to realize that I had gotten lost.

As I walked down the hall, I heard some commotion inside a room off to my left. The door was wide-open. I stared into the room and saw that a woman was hunched over a small plastic tub that she held in her hands. I noticed that in the corner of the room the chair was turned over on its side. The woman had thick, black hair that was tied back at the nape of her neck and little pieces of it stuck to her forehead. Her hands shook as she held the tub. A strong man with thinning hair held onto her hands to steady the shaking. She sobbed as her body continued to heave. What I saw scared me. She looked as if she was in so much pain, but I couldn't figure out what was wrong with her.

The man immediately looked up and steadied his gaze on me. His tired gray eyes stared into mine.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled as I hurried off.

I walked farther down the hall with my arms crossed over my chest as I tried to hold myself together. I couldn't get the image of that woman out of my head. She looked so vulnerable.

I noticed that a couple of nurses were looking at me with concern. I hoped that I could make it outside before they pulled me aside and started asking questions. The last thing that I wanted to do right now was to tell a stranger what was wrong and why I'm here in the hospital. If I told them what my family was going through, I would have to hear about how sorry they were and how everything would end up all right. One of the nurses opened her mouth as if to ask what I had been dreading. I told her that I was fine

before she could even get a word out, and I sped up my walking so she didn't have time to think about stopping me.

I had never been so relieved to see the giant red letters glaring down at me on the exit sign. As soon as I broke through the door I felt as if I could breathe again. The sun beat down on me, which made my pajama shirt cling to my back.

The heat was almost overwhelming, after having been in the artificial environment of the hospital. I would face anything to not have to go back in there again, to face my life and my distraught family. The unknown eats at people and tears them down. I can see it first thing with my parents. All they could do was hold onto each other for strength, but then what would happen if one of them, or me, lost that strength? Would we topple from the imbalance?

When I got to the car, I lay down in the backseat and stared at the ceiling. I thought that the silence would offer me some relief, but it didn't. Now I was left alone to my thoughts of Stacy and what her symptoms could mean and my parents and how they've already started to fall apart.

I grabbed Stacy's stuffed lamb, which she had named Lambie Pie when she was younger and hugged it to my chest. The little squeak made me laugh. When we were born, we were each given a little stuffed animal from our mom's parents. Stacy was given a little gray lamb with giant glass eyes, and I was given a little tan teddy bear with soft hair that became coarse and sparse from all the times that it had to be washed. Mine didn't squeak like Stacy's did. Every time someone would squeeze the stuffed lamb's belly it would squeak, almost like a little dog toy. She never hesitated to punch me in the shoulder whenever I said that our aunt's dog would love to play with it.

She never left home without her lamb, though. After Grandma and Grandpa died, she became more attached to it. She even took it with her when she would go to a friend's house for the night. Sometimes she would leave it in her bag, but it still traveled with her. I think that she just can't bring herself to leave one of her most precious memories behind. We were really close to our grandparents. We had very few special memories without them. That's why Mom brought it with us to the hospital. She knew that Stacy would want it with her.

A bright blue light lit up the car. I glanced at the screen of my cellphone. Mom was calling me. I dropped my phone facedown onto the floor and turned my attention towards the backpacks. I still couldn't believe that Mom had gotten all of our school stuff. Maybe she was just trying to cope with the scary situation that had befallen the family. A few seconds later, I heard a knock on the window. Dad stood outside of the minivan with his face pressed up against the tinted glass.

"I'm sorry, Dad," I said as I slid the door open. "I just had..." I was waiting for him to scold me, but his face made that fear fall from me immediately.

"It's okay, Alexis. This is hard on all of us, and sometimes we just have to take a step back and think," he said. After a few long seconds of silence, he sat down on the floor in the doorway of the car. We continued to sit in the darkened car and listen to the noises that were being made around us. I could hear the faint noise of cars driving a few floors above us, trying to find parking spots. I wondered what they were here for. Maybe they were just like us, lost and scared.

"So, um, what do you think is going to happen, Dad? Is Stacy going to be okay?" I was hoping that he would answer confidently and tell me that everything would be all

right. That was actually a really stupid question that I asked. I knew that everything wasn't all right, but I still wanted to pretend that it was.

“Honestly, I don't know,” my dad mumbled in answer. “Your mom, of course, wanted to believe that all of this would be cleared up, and that's why she packed everything for y'all. I'm sure that it was just some kind of reflex. Since we've been here, she has thought and thought about all of the possibilities where everything will end up being okay. I'm just worried about the worst that could happen. It'll destroy your mom if there's something very wrong with Stacy, and I don't know how to prepare her for anything else.”

Seeing Dad this helpless was awful. He seemed so defeated and tired. His shoulders slumped over like he was holding something extremely heavy on his shoulders, and in this moment, his whole body just looked frail. He looked small sitting next to me in the shadows.

“Everything will be all right, Dad,” I tried to reassure him as I put my hand on his shoulder. He turned his head around a little so that I could just barely see his face. The little light from the car showed that his eyes were a little red with unshed tears. Even now he was trying to hold it back. He immediately cleared his throat and stood up. Now he was back to business. It was almost a relief to see him fall back into his old self, even if it was just a lie.

“Well, we should probably get back to your mother. The doctor should be back soon with Stacy. Then we can figure out what's going on. Did you grab the clothes? We can't forget those or your mother won't be too happy.”

“Yeah, I got the clothes,” I answered. I clutched the wadded up clothes against my chest just like Mom had when she was running out of the house earlier, and I was sure to grab Stacy’s lamb.

We walked all the way back to the room in silence. As soon as we walked through the door, the doctor welcomed us. Mom was pacing back and forth, anxiously waiting for us to get back.

“What took you so long?” she asked in a high-pitched voice. “I’ve been waiting with the doctor. He has some updates about Stacy. He says that they’re still running a few more tests, but he decided to come tell us what he’s found so far. I wanted to wait. I didn’t want to do this by myself.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Dad said. “Alexis and I were just having a little chat.” He turned away from the doctor and Mom and half smiled at me. The smile never reached his eyes. There were dark circles under his eyes, and the wrinkles in his face became more defined as he tried to make that half smile believable.

I looked over towards the doctor and saw something in his face. He looked hesitant, almost. Mom immediately saw it too.

“What have you found?” she asked immediately.

“Well, the results of the MRI that we did...” he began. Dad drew Mom into his arms. He was trying to prepare them for what was to come. I backed up and sat down in a chair. What the doctor said next, I couldn’t really understand. He had said that they found a mass in Stacy’s brain, some kind of tumor. Mom broke down into heart-wrenching sobs. Dad had to hold her up. I could see tears streaming down his face. He finally broke.

“I’m so sorry,” the doctor said as he moved a little closer, as if he wanted to give them some comfort by touching them on the shoulders. He had stopped himself and began to try to console them with his words instead. “We’ve found it, and we will do everything we can to take care of it. Stacy is a strong girl and...” Dad interrupted the doctor. I was a little worried about the way my dad reacted before, in the waiting room. This time he kept himself in check.

“What’s our next step?” he asked as he continued to hold my mom.

“We will have to take her into surgery to see what we’re dealing with. I will have a neurosurgeon come and talk to you about what exactly will happen next. Your daughter will be in good hands.”

“A neurosurgeon? So you’re saying that my baby will have to undergo brain surgery? What if something goes wrong during the surgery, James? What if they accidentally hurt her even more? I can’t risk this!” Mom said as she turned to Dad.

“I can assure you...” the doctor began to say but was cut off, once again, by my dad.

“Mia, Stacy needs this. She can do this. The doctor knows exactly what he’s doing. Right?” he asked as he turned back to the doctor.

“Yes, sir. We’ve already started to come up with a plan. More risks do come with brain surgery, but with Stacy being the age that she is, she has a much better chance. And I will bring in one of our best neurosurgeons to see this through,” the doctor said.

“How bad is the brain tumor? Will you be able to get it out?” Mom asked.

“I will not be able to tell you much more from what I observed from the MRI. The part of her brain where the tumor is located is most likely the reason why she fainted

this morning and has been having intense headaches. May I ask how long she has been having these headaches?”

“Like I told you earlier when I brought her in the hospital, Stacy had some headaches a few months ago so I took her to a doctor. He gave her some medicine, and it seemed like it was helping,” Dad said.

“It has been a few months now,” I blurted. My parents immediately turned to me. The way they looked at me caused me to sink down into my chair. It was almost as if they were accusing me. “Stacy told me that the medicine helped her for a while, but then she started to complain about it again. She said that it was happening more frequently and it had gotten a little worse.”

“Why didn’t you tell us this, Alexis?” Mom asked. She continued to stare at me as the doctor and my dad continued the conversation. I wanted to tell her that Stacy begged me not to tell them, that it wasn’t my entire fault at all, and they shouldn’t be blaming me for anything. They should’ve been home to notice! I was already blaming myself enough. I just sat in silence, holding Stacy’s lamb in my arms and facing my mother’s wordless accusations.

Eventually the doctor left, and once again I was stuck in a room with my parents.

“Why didn’t you tell us about Stacy?” Mom asked again.

“Mia, we don’t need to focus on that. We just need to focus on Stacy and everything that comes next.” My dad was trying to calm her down, but it didn’t seem to be working. The more she talked, the louder her voice got.

“Why are you asking me the reason I didn’t tell you? How come you never noticed Stacy getting worse? You can’t blame all of this on me! It’s not all my fault!” I yelled.

“Alexis!” my dad said angrily.

I immediately regretted saying that as I watched my mom suddenly burst into tears again.

“Why didn’t we ever notice that she was getting worse, James? How could we not? She’s our baby girl,” she sobbed into my dad’s chest. “This is all my fault. She’s dying because of me. If I had taken her to see someone sooner...”

“Mia, Stacy is not dying,” he said. He almost had to force that statement out of his mouth. The ferocity in his voice told me that he wasn’t sure of the truth of his statement, but he didn’t want to believe what he really felt. He had no idea what was going on with Stacy, but just like me, he feared the worst. “We don’t exactly know every detail yet. It’ll all be okay. This is no one’s fault, so don’t you blame this one on yourself.” He led her over to the bed so she could sit down. “We will figure everything out.”

She nodded her head and calmed down a little. There was another soft knock at the door. The nurse came in with Stacy sitting in the wheelchair. Stacy looked even more worn out than when she left. Her hair was pulled back into a messy bun. I could see some residue on her forehead by her hairline. It was probably from one of the tests that they did. Her small frame was hunched over in the chair. She looked so tiny in her hospital gown. It was as if she would be swallowed up any second. She was tearing off the light blue nail polish on her fingers.

“I’m gone for only a couple of hours and when I come back, everyone is crying. What’s going on?” As soon as that left her mouth the room grew quiet. It was as if everyone was afraid to breathe. Mom and Dad looked at each other briefly and then at her.

“Oh, it’s nothing honey. We’re just stressed out. You scared us,” Mom said as she got up like nothing happened and walked over to Stacy to hug her. That was the bitterest lie that I’ve ever heard.

“I’ll leave y’all for just a few minutes, and then I’ll be back with the doctor,” the nurse said quietly as she backed towards the door. This nurse knew what was going on. Mom just lied about the bomb that was just dropped into our lives.

“Thank you for your help,” my dad said as he closed the door behind her. “We need to talk to you, Stacy.”

“James,” Mom hissed. She didn’t want to go down that road right now, but what time is ever a good one?

“Mia, we have to talk about this. We can’t avoid it,” he said sternly.

“Guys, what’s going on?” Stacy asked as she glanced back and forth between all of us. Her gaze finally rested on me. She looked scared to death. What are my parents doing? Why are they arguing about this in front of her? I looked away from her pleading gaze. I didn’t mean to, I just didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how to tell her that she had a tumor in her brain that had been causing her to feel sick.

“Mom, Dad, just tell me for God’s sake!” Stacy yelled. They immediately stopped arguing and turned towards her. Mom got up off of the bed and stood close to Stacy while Dad positioned himself behind Mom. They told her, and all she did was sit there with

shock written all over her face. Words escaped her. She looked like she wanted to ask them questions, but she just couldn't bring herself for fear of what else they would tell her.

"I can't believe this," Stacy said almost to herself. "How can everything just lead up to this? I should've said something sooner about my headaches. I just thought that they were nothing. I never knew that they could be caused by a tumor. And I'm healthy." She continued to ramble on more to herself than anyone else in the room. I could tell that Mom was about to lose it again, and Dad was having a hard time, too.

Once again there was a knock at the door, and a new doctor walked in. He was wearing thin glasses that were positioned on the middle of his nose. His light brown eyes glanced at all of us. A realization that he should've given us a little more time showed on his face.

"I can come back in a little bit when everyone is ready to talk," he said apologetically.

"No. It's ok. We need to talk about this, and this is as good a time as any," Dad interjected.

The doctor nodded his head and closed the door.

"I'm Dr. Matthew Sims, and I will be your daughter's neurosurgeon." His dark hair was graying around his sideburns and a little around his hairline. He still looked fairly young for a surgeon. It seemed Mom thought so, too.

He turned to Stacy and gave her a reassuring smile. "Hello, Stacy. Do you..."

“How long have you been a surgeon, Dr. Sims?” Mom asked, interrupting him as he was trying to talk to Stacy. Now she was going to quiz the surgeon to see if he was fit for doing the surgery on Stacy. She flashed me a dirty look as I let out a loud sigh.

“Mia...” Dad started as he laid his hand on her shoulder.

“I assure you Mrs. Barns, that I am very qualified. I have spent about 15 years working here, and before this, I was working at the Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. Stacy will be fine. She’s a trooper,” he said as he winked at Stacy. He did a good job at talking Mom down. She seemed to relax a little more.

“So what is the next step Dr. Sims?” Dad asked, trying to get everything out there in the open. No more tiptoeing around the issue.

“We will take her into surgery within the next couple of hours to see about removing the tumor. Right now, it looks as if we won’t have a problem removing it, and then we will have to test it to see whether it’s malignant or benign.”

“So you’re saying that I could have cancer right now?” Stacy asked with wide eyes.

I got up and started walking towards the door.

“Where are you going?” Stacy asked, immediately noticing my advances towards the door.

“Alexis, we need you to stay in here with us,” Dad said sternly. “We need to be together.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled as I ran out the door. I held Stacy’s lamb as I zigzagged around nurses, doctors and patients. I briefly heard someone yell after me that I needed to

slow down, but I ignored her. I slammed into the exit door that I had gone through earlier, freeing myself out into the sticky air. I couldn't go back in there. I refused to.

I walked towards a bench off to the side of the hospital and sat down. I looked down at my polka dotted boxers as I pulled my legs up to my chest. Stacy's lamb was crushed in-between my chest and knees. Its small glass eyes stared up at me. I could almost see my reflection in the eyes, but then I couldn't really tell if it was me that I was looking at.

All of a sudden, a shadow was cast over me. I looked up half expecting to see Mom or Dad standing in front of me. The person who stood in front of me was an older man who was leaning on his cane for support. Because he was leaning, he looked fairly short, but I bet if he were able to stand up straight, he would be pretty tall. At first glance, he reminded me of my grandpa. He was tall with short grey hair that wrapped around his head. The top of his head had a few stray hairs that stuck out of some light brown spots. He smiled down at me, which revealed that he was missing a couple of teeth. His teeth that were still there looked pretty yellow. His big hands tightened around the top of the cane. When he noticed that I wasn't returning his smile, he looked at me, concerned. I could tell that he was struggling to keep standing because his wide shoulders tensed up, and he wavered a little.

"Do you mind if I join you?" I looked around at all of the other empty benches. He seemed to notice my eyes glancing at all of the other places that he could sit. "It's never good to be alone in a time like this," he said. It was as if he knew what was going on with me. I nodded once. He settled into the seat beside me. When he sat, he sat up straight. It looked as if he was once a big strong man, but time had taken over, leaving

him with smaller and weaker arms and legs. His voice made up for his appearance. If I had closed my eyes and heard him talk, I wouldn't have expected to see an old man at all.

"I was wondering if you were going to make an ailing old man like me have to stand here for a while, waiting for an answer," he chuckled as he leaned forward on his cane. He glanced over at me, waiting for my reply. I continued to stare at Stacy's lamb.

"I hope you don't mind me sitting here with you. I like to talk people's ears off when I can. Most of the people have wised up around here after a while, and they tend to avoid me," he laughed again. "You seem like the type of girl who will wise up way before many of these people ever did. You would think that because most of these people are nurses and doctors that they are a lot smarter. Maybe they just aren't as smart as people like us," he winked. I couldn't help but crack a little smile. I noticed that after he would finish a sentence he would take a deep breath in through his nose. His upper lip curled, which made it look like the top of a heart, every time he talked.

"See?" he said as if he was making some kind of point. "Being alone never helps people smile." His laughing turned into coughing fits. He doubled over with his hand fistfisted into his chest. A shock of panic ran through me.

"Are you okay? Do I need to go and get someone?" He shook his head, and soon after, the coughing subsided.

"Don't worry dear. I cough like that all the time. Serves me right for smoking as much as I did," he said as an afterthought. "So, what brings you out here on this lovely day?" I laughed a little. When he didn't laugh, I stopped.

"Oh no, I mean it," he said. "Today is a lovely day, even though it feels like hell has come to the surface. Every day that you can be a part of and see with your own two

eyes is a good day.” He closed his eyes like he was revering in the sweltering heat and blinding sun. He took a deep breath and his coughing fit resumed. I looked around to see if anyone was near us that could help us. Even though he said that he didn’t need any help because this always happens, I didn’t trust him.

I looked over at him just as his coughing stopped. This time he had a handkerchief against his mouth. When he removed it, I could see the slightest bit of bright red showing against the aged white of the cloth. He didn’t seem alarmed at all when he saw it. He just folded it up and stuck it back into his pocket. After a few minutes, he noticed me looking at him.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said waving it off. “So, what’s the story on your little lamb?”

I didn’t notice that I had been squeezing it so hard until he asked about it. I moved to where it slipped down into my lap a little more.

“I got it as a gift when I was younger,” I mumbled. He nodded his head.

“It’s always good to keep the things that you’ve attached special memories to, close. I have a few things like that.” He dug into his breast pocket with his left hand and took out an old folded up piece of paper. The sun shone off of the thin gold wedding band that fit loosely on his ring finger. The ring fit so loosely that it looked as if it could go flying off at any moment. He gripped the letter real carefully, as if it was a precious gem that he could never bare to lose. The letter had so many creases and dark spots all over it that it looked like it would disintegrate if he tried to even open it.

“This right here is one of the most important memories that I keep close to me. My wife wrote this for me when I was away at war. It was her last letter that she ever

wrote me, before the accident. She was always such a gifted writer. Sometimes she would write me little love poems in my letters. Memories of her carried me through the war and through my entire life. I wouldn't be here right now if it wasn't for her. Memories are what carry a person." I could see a slight sadness in his eyes as he looked far off into the distance, but it was almost like that sadness was mixed with acceptance and a little bit of anticipation. Those three emotions almost seemed as if they didn't belong together.

"I read it every day, in the morning when I wake up and at night before I go to bed. Sometimes when I'm having a really bad day I take it out and read it more than just those two times," he continued.

"Oh," was all I could say.

"So, enough about me. I don't want to bore you to death. What is your special memory that you've stowed away in your lamb," he asked as he put the letter back into his pocket. He held his hand over the letter for a few seconds before he folded his hands back into his lap.

"If you don't mind me asking," he added in after a few seconds of silence. "I'm just a nosy old man." His blue eyes sparkled in laughter. Something in his eyes told me that he had seen so much. He was a very wise man, but at the same time, his eyes still held a boyish sparkle to them; especially when he had talked about his wife writing his letters.

"Well, it's actually not mine. It's my sister's lamb," I waited for him to ask me all of the questions that I dreaded to answer.

"Ah. So it holds both you and your sister's memories. Now that is a powerful object," he said a little to himself. "It holds many stories and shows many things."

Now he was just kind of rambling. I had no idea what he really meant.

“Max. Now what are you doing out here? You know that you shouldn’t be out in this heat. I’ve told you that this will only aggravate your coughing,” a high-pitched voice said. An older woman in pink scrubs hurried over to us. She smiled softly at me before she turned her gaze on him. He only laughed.

“Oh Alice, no worries here. I was just talking to this young lady...”

“Well I’ve told you time and time again that you shouldn’t be out here, especially without a nurse to accompany you,” she said cutting him off.

“Oh, I’m in trouble now,” he whispered to me. The nurse helped him up. She held his elbow and steered him towards the door.

“I can very well walk by myself, thank you,” he said to her. “I’ll stop walking on my own when I’m dead.” The nurse sighed and let go of his arm. He immediately turned around and walked back to me. He looked like he had no problem walking at that point. He didn’t even really use his cane. The nurse hurried after him. He held out his hand to me.

“It was nice talking to you...”

“My name is Alexis,” I said taking his hand. His handshake was very firm. For just a split second, he didn’t look sickly anymore.

“Very beautiful name, and I suppose you now know my name, too. I hope you enjoy this lovely day,” he said with a smile. “Remember, just because it feels like hell doesn’t mean it is.”

“Max,” the nurse hissed. “Don’t use that language around the other patients.”

“Alice, not everyone is as conservative as you are, and if you would pay attention, she is not a patient here.” It sounded as if he was beginning to scold her now. “Back in my day...” I could tell that he was getting ready to go off into a long story, which made me smile.

I sat here for a few more minutes. I tried to enjoy the sweltering heat as Max easily had done, but I still don't see how he could. It was almost unbearable out here. There was sweat running down my back and my head began to hurt from the brightness of the sun. Maybe I should go back inside. I had no idea how long I had been out here.

As I walked through the halls of the hospital trying to remember which way to go, I couldn't help but think about what Max had said about his wife. I wonder how she had died. What really stuck with me, though, was the way he told me about it. He sounded okay with her death. He was able to tell me without flinching. Even though it had been years since my grandparents died, I'm still not as okay with it as he was about his wife.

I finally found my way back to the room, and when I walked in, I found Mom lying next to Stacy in the hospital bed. Dad was standing by the window with his phone to his ear. As soon as they realized that I was in the room with them, Dad turned towards me and put the phone down. My parents looked furious.

“Where the hell have you been, Alexis?” Dad asked. “I went looking for you, and I tried to call you several times,” he said, waving his phone for emphasis. “This is not all about you and how you feel. Stacy needs our support, and you're being so selfish right now.

“Dad. It's fine. Alex, why are you still in your pajamas? Nice boxers,” Stacy giggled. Even now she had my back. I smiled back at her. “Is that my stuffed animal?”

“Oh, yeah. Mom thought you would want it with you,” I said as I walked over to the side of her bed, ready to give it to her.

“Mom, I’m not a baby you know. I can stand to be without my stuffed animals for a while,” Stacy said.

“Oh we know that’s all a lie,” I said with a wink. It seemed as if everyone had forgotten about my absence earlier, thanks to Stacy’s quick thinking.

“Oh, whatever. I’m not the one who has been carrying it around the hospital with me.”

I stuck my tongue out at her as I tossed her the lamb.

“Don’t get her too excited, Alexis. She needs to rest before her surgery,” Mom said.

“Mom, I’ve been resting for most of the day. I’ll be fine. Plus, I’ll get plenty of rest during my surgery anyway. I wish you would stop worrying about me. It is what it is.”

I could see Stacy’s forehead start to crease, and she only did that when she was getting mad.

“Stacy, this is serious. You need to lie down.”

“Why Mom? I’m probably never going to get to go home again anyways. Who knows? I might not even make it through the surgery! Or if I do, I probably have cancer. Just leave it alone, Mom.”

“Don’t you ever talk like that again,” Dad said. “Your mother is only trying to help. We need to stay positive.”

“Well, I wish she would stop helping, and I wish y’all would stop talking to me like I’m a child. I know what’s going on, so I wish everyone would just treat me normally.”

Silence filled the room. Stacy would have never gotten away with the things that she just said. She would have gotten yelled at in return and then grounded, and she knew this.

“And no one has anything to say after what I said?” Still the silence continued. Mom was looking over at Dad, and he was looking out the window. “This is exactly what I mean. Please, just treat me like a person. I don’t want to be babied into surgery. I want everyone to act like this isn’t a big deal because right now, no one is helping me. I’m scared, and y’all are just making it worse.”

“I’m sorry sweetie,” Mom said as she kissed Stacy’s forehead.

“When is the surgery?” I wasn’t sure if I should ask. I didn’t want to upset Stacy, but it just sort of came out of my mouth.

“If you were here, Alexis, you would’ve heard when the doctor told all of us,” Mom said.

“It’s within an hour or so now. After you left, the doctor explained that the surgical rooms were all booked and that he would grab the one that frees up first. He also told me that they have to shave my head,” Stacy answered me. She looked down at her sheets and cleared her throat a little after she told me about her hair.

I could feel a small lump form in my throat. All I could do was nod my head. I didn’t want to open my mouth to say something and burst into tears instead, especially in

front of everyone. I had no business crying anyway, and I'm sure that it would come off as selfish. I'm not the one who was fighting for her life.

Stacy recognized the inner struggle that I was having. It was always hard hiding things from her. She patted the open space on the bed. I didn't take her invitation, and instead, I plopped down in the seat by the door. The room fell silent again, except for the clacking of Dad's work shoes against the floor. He had started to pace back and forth in front of the window. His thumbs were racing across the screen of his phone. He was probably checking work emails. One of the only ways that he could cope with anything was by submersing himself in his work. When he looked over at the hospital bed, Mom shot him a dirty look. Of course, she didn't say anything. She had no problem calling me out on everything that I do, but she can't seem to do the same to Dad.

I looked at Stacy again. She had her lamb hugged against her chest, careful not to make it squeak, and she was nervously chewing on the little crystal that was attached to a thin brown string around her neck. I gave her a half smile as I braved eye contact. She never took off that necklace.

I smiled as I watched her hold the crystal. I would never be able to forget the story behind that pretty rock. One summer, I ended up going away to a camp for about a month, and Stacy wasn't able to go with me. She wasn't old enough because she was only 11 years old at the time. It just so happened that she was just shy of a couple months to be able to go with me. I remember her being devastated when she found out that we wouldn't get to spend the summer going on our little adventures. Before I left, I had promised her that I would find her something so special for her that it would make up for

my absence. For a while she was really excited because she always loved gifts, but the day that I told her goodbye, I thought that she would never let me go.

While I was away at camp, I would send her letters almost every week telling her about all of the adventures that I had gone on. With every letter that I would get in return, she never failed to ask about the special present that I was going to bring back for her. Of course, I would remind her that I couldn't tell her because it was a surprise. Secretly, I hadn't found the right gift yet. I knew that she would enjoy a surprise that was even more unexpected than something from the gift shop that was at camp. She never cared much for twine bracelets that weren't made especially for her, or a silly wooden statue. Her special surprise would have to be something that could hold a story in itself.

As the weeks wore on and I couldn't find anything that she would like, I had begun to worry, because there was no way that she would forget my promise. On the last day, I went hiking with a small group of about five other kids. We were getting to go explore a place where we could see some of nature's most beautiful formations. This was the surprise trip that my parents wouldn't tell me about. I ended up asking some kids that had been to the camp before and found out that we were going to a crystal mine. They told me stories about how huge the crystals could become and that fairies could've only formed the biggest crystals. The only way that they could sparkle and shine was by the magical ability of fairies. I remembered laughing because it just sounded silly, but deep down I felt excited.

As soon as I had laid my eyes on the crystals, I immediately believed that they could have only been formed by magic. Even when the guide told us about crystal formation, a little part of me believed that magic had to be involved. I ended up taking

home a handful of crystals, and I gave Stacy the prettiest one of the bunch. It had hues of purple and blue. Of course, I told her that it was a special crystal that was made by the magic of fairies and that even the littlest bit of fairy magic would keep her safe and give her good luck. She immediately fashioned it into a necklace so it would go everywhere with her. I found myself smiling because even now, she won't take it off. It really would be amazing if it could turn this whole tragedy into something good.

"I told you that I would never take it off," she said when she noticed me looking at the way she was rubbing it in between her fingers. "I need some of that fairy magic even more now than ever." She gave me a smile.

"Yeah. I just wish that that childhood story was true," I mumbled more so to myself. I could tell that she caught every word, because she looked down for a brief second. It looked as if she was trying to figure out what to say to make that childhood story seem like it could be real.

"Well, it's a nice story," was all she said.

"Alexis, why don't you run into the bathroom to change your clothes," Mom said. She got up and walked over to the place where I piled the clothes. As she was digging through them, she noticed that something was missing.

"Did you get everything out of the car, Alexis?"

"Yeah, I did."

"Well, I don't see how Stacy's shirt could be missing. I had it in my hands as I was walking out the door. I'm sure it's still in the car. You probably just didn't see it when you grabbed the other clothes."

I had no idea why I didn't tell her that she had actually dropped it in the driveway. I knew for a fact that it wasn't in the car, because I had watched it lay on the ground as we drove away.

"Oh, Mom. It's fine. I have to wear these stupid hospital gowns anyway. Just forget about it," Stacy said as she rested against the pillows.

"But sweetheart, it was your favorite shirt. You know, the tie dye one that..."

"I don't really care anymore," Stacy said cutting her off. She just stared up at the ceiling and started mouthing numbers as she counted the specks in the ceiling. There was no concern over Mom's reaction to her statement. I could see Mom's lower lip quiver a little but she kept quiet, and Dad didn't say anything either. All he did was glance up from his phone for a moment. I couldn't really read the look that crossed his face. I would think that it could've been a little bit of shock mixed with some uncertainty at what he should say. No one knew what to say in a situation like this, and no one wanted to cross any lines that they couldn't come back from.

I couldn't help but feel a little bad for Mom. She couldn't keep up with Stacy's mood swings, and she had no way of taking control of the situation, which had to be really hard for her. I hated seeing Stacy like this. She was scared to death and we were, too. She wanted everything to be normal like it was before today, but it can't be.

"Stacy, you know Mom is just trying to help," I blurted out. I couldn't believe I had said that, and from the look on Stacy's face, she didn't either. For most of the day I didn't know how I really felt, and I still couldn't piece my feelings together.

“Alex, I thought you would be on my side,” Stacy said. “You know better than anyone that I hate being an invalid. And I loathe being treated like one even more. Why is everyone ganging up on me?”

“Stace, we aren’t ganging up on you,” I tried to reassure her. “This is as hard for us as it is for you. I love you, Stace,” I said as I walked towards her. I held out my hand, expecting her to take it, but she didn’t. She just gave me a look and turned away from everyone.

“No, Alexis. This is even harder for me,” she said quietly. “I’m sick! Hell, I’m probably even dying.”

“No, sweetheart. You are not dying,” Mom said as she ran towards Stacy. She brushed me aside as if I wasn’t even there. “Stacy, look at me.”

She started running her hand down the back of Stacy’s hair, trying to coax her to turn around. For a while, Stacy didn’t make a sound. She just lay there with her face buried in her pillow.

“Mia, we should let Stacy rest,” Dad said.

Mom slowly looked up towards Dad and immediately dropped her hand. The look on her face scared me a little. I’ve never seen her look like that towards him before.

“Seriously, James? You spend most of the day on your damn phone, not saying a word. And now when you decide to speak up, it’s to get onto me. Your making this sound like it’s all my fault. That is so typical of you.” With each thing that she said, her voice just got louder.

“I’m not trying to pin this all on you, Mia,” Dad shot back. “You’re doing that all on your own. All I said was that Stacy needed to rest, and now you’re going on the defensive. You need to calm down.”

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm down. Don’t you patronize me,” Mom said in a low voice.

The yelling voices reverberated throughout the tiny room. With each passing moment, it felt like the room was getting smaller and the angry voices were getting bigger. Pretty soon there wouldn’t be enough room in here to hold them.

I glanced over at Stacy. She still hadn’t moved, and I figured that this arguing would definitely cause a response in her. I walked over to her and tried not to listen to my parents yelling at each other. As soon as I laid my hand on her shoulder, her body got really tense. Then she started shaking. The way she was shaking looked so unnatural. Her body was jolting so rapidly that she was shaking the whole bed.

“Don’t just stand there,” Dad said as he ran to the other side of her. “Hold her down! You’re going to have to hold her, Alexis.”

I could barely understand what he was saying. All I could do was look at Stacy and the way that her legs moved back and forth. Her eyes were nearly closed, except for the white of her eyes peeking through her lids. I remembered seeing this on TV. Her eyes had rolled back into her head.

The door to the room slammed open, and the doctors and nurses rushed in. We were pulled back and away from the scene. I could see Mom trying to push her way in so she could be at Stacy’s side, but Dad had pulled her back. She tried to pull away from him.

“What’s happening to my baby?” she cried. Even though the room was full of loud voices and the shifting of things, I could hear her voice over everyone else. This only lasted for a minute, but it felt like it had lasted forever.

Most of the people backed up because Stacy had been stabilized. The only person that was by her side now was the doctor that had met us in the waiting room.

“What in the hell just happened?” Dad said. Mom broke free and ran back to Stacy’s side. She picked up her limp hand and kissed it.

“Come on sweetie, wake up. Can you hear me, Stacy?” she asked as she ran her hand over Stacy’s forehead. “Why isn’t she waking up?”

“Stacy had a seizure. Now, it’s a common side affect of the tumor pressing on the brain. She’ll be fine. We gave her something for the seizure. She will wake up any minute now,” the doctor said, trying to reassure my parents.

“What do you mean, ‘should’?” Dad answered. “And when in the hell is she going into surgery? If this tumor is going to affect her like this, you need to remove it immediately. What are you waiting for?”

“Sir, please calm down.” The doctor raised his hands in midair, almost as if he could reduce Dad’s anger with the power of his fingertips. “The room is being prepped for her surgery. The neurosurgeon will be here in about ten minutes or so.”

That information made my dad back off a little. I could hear Stacy stir, and her eyes finally opened. I could finally breathe when I didn’t see that awful white. Her green eye color was back. Her forehead creased a little as she looked around the room. For a few seconds she looked completely lost.

“We’re at the hospital, Stacy,” Mom said. She could immediately tell that Stacy was panicking, so she tried to soothe her as much as she could.

Dad and the doctor were talking near the door. The doctor’s face looked a little stern as he talked.

“Sir, I know that this is a difficult time for everyone. Stacy is sick, and we are trying to make her better. The arguing is only putting more stress on her. Not only is it putting stress on her, but it’s also putting stress on the other patients. We need to be as calm as we can around her. She needs a positive atmosphere to make her more comfortable.”

All my dad did was nod his head. He didn’t challenge the doctor at all.

“I’ll be back with the neurosurgeon so he can start prepping Stacy for the surgery. If you need anything at all before then, let us know.”

As soon as the doctor left, Dad walked over to Stacy. He didn’t really say anything as he passed Mom. He just glanced over at her and then focused all of his attention on Stacy. She was lying very still, probably too afraid to move. She continued to stare wide-eyed up at the ceiling.

“Are you all right, Stacy?” Dad asked as he put his hand over her fist. She had the covers fisted into her hands. “You can relax. Everything is fine now.” He tried to coax her to release her death grip. She finally let go of the sheets after a few long seconds.

“What happened?” she whispered. She tilted her head so she could look at his face. Her eyes looked so broken and vacant.

“You had a seizure, but the doctor says you’re fine. Your surgery will be soon, so you won’t have to worry about having a seizure anymore. They will make everything

better, honey. You're strong. You can overcome this, Stacy, and we will be here with you every step of the way." He squeezed her hand a little more and moved over so Mom could stand next to her.

A soft knock filled the room and then the door opened. In came Dr. Sims followed by the other doctor and a couple of nurses. Even though everyone knew that this moment was coming and hoped that it would hurry up so we would know the extent of Stacy's illness, no one was prepared. I could see Mom wrap her hand around the bed rail. Her knuckles turned white as she tightened her grip. As far as she was concerned, no one was going to be able to detach her from Stacy's side.

"Are you ready Stacy?" Dr. Sims asked her. She nodded her head slightly. He gave everyone a reassuring smile as soon as he noticed the looks of uncertainty. "The procedure will last a few hours, and as soon as she's out of surgery someone will let you know."

One of the nurses squeezed around Mom to get to Stacy's side. Mom didn't budge. She kept her eyes on Stacy the whole time.

"Mia, they need to take Stacy. Let go of the bed so they can take her." This time when Dad talked he sounded like his mood had improved somewhat. His face softened as Mom turned around to look at him. She slowly let her hand drop to her side.

"Wait," Stacy said as she tried to sit up in bed. One of the nurses encouraged her not to, but she didn't listen. "Aren't y'all going to give me any goodbye hugs?" Now I could tell that she was back to her old self.

"What are you talking about goodbye hugs?" Dad said as he tried to give her a smile. "Lets make these 'until later' hugs." My parents both hugged and kissed her.

“Alexis, why don’t you come over and see Stacy before she goes into surgery,” Mom said.

I didn’t look at anyone as I walked over to her bed. I just concentrated on my feet hitting the floor. It felt like the weight of my family’s stares was going to crush me. Maybe I could take a final step and fall into oblivion, away from this place and time.

Stacy reached out her hand, and I took it. She tried her best to squeeze it really hard to assure me that the way she looked on the outside wasn’t really how she felt. I could tell that her strength was gone.

“Don’t worry about me, Alexis. I’ll be back in here before you know it.” She strained a smile. All I could do was nod my head. She let go of my hand and took the necklace from around her neck.

“No. I can’t...” I started to say before she cut me off. She was going to give me one of the things that meant most to her.

“Take it,” she said as she put it in my hand. “Keep it until I get back, and don’t lose it. And don’t pretend to lose it and keep it yourself. I know how envious you are of it.” She smiled. “You can hold the good luck for the both of us.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep it safe,” I said as I looked her in the eye. “You know it wasn’t very easy to come by. I could never lose something as important as this.” She smiled even bigger at that last comment.

“Yeah, it’s full of fairy magic and all. There’s nothing like it anywhere else in the world,” she said.

Everyone stepped to the side so the doctors and nurses had enough room to wheel Stacy out. As soon as everyone left the room, Mom sat down and rested her forehead in her hand. I thought that she was going to start crying, but she just sat there silently.

“Maybe we should all go and get something to eat,” Dad suggested.

“No. I’m not leaving this room. I want to be here when Stacy gets back,” Mom answered immediately.

“Mia, you need to eat something. You haven’t eaten since breakfast, which was nearly 11 hours ago. It doesn’t help anyone if you starve yourself. It has been hours since we all last ate. This will help the time go by faster.”

“But what if we don’t get back in time before Stacy gets back? I can’t risk it.”

“You heard Dr. Sims, the procedure is going to take a few hours. We will be here when Stacy gets out. Everything will be okay, Mia.”

She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. After a few seconds, she nodded her head in agreement. Dad grabbed her hand and helped her to her feet.

“You too, Alexis,” Dad said when he noticed that I wasn’t walking towards the door. I squeezed the crystal in my hand.

“Sweetheart. You should go ahead and change,” Mom added in. Once again I had failed to change my clothes.

“Y’all can go ahead and go find a spot in the cafeteria. I’ll be there after I change,” I said as I walked to the bathroom door.

“It’s okay. We can wait for you to change,” Mom said. By the looks on their faces, I could tell that there would be no discussion about it.

I entered into the blinding light that filled the bathroom. I was careful not to look into the mirror because my reflection would only remind me of Stacy. We looked a lot alike. We had the same small nose, full lips, long eyelashes, and long brown hair. One of the only features that really stood out was the color of our eyes. She had green eyes, and I had brown eyes.

I hurriedly changed into the outfit that Mom had grabbed. It wasn't much of an upgrade from what I had been wearing before. Now I was wearing an old faded orange shirt with holes in the front and black gym shorts. The shirt had "Tennessee Volunteers" on it in big cracked letters. Where did she even get this outfit? The shirt didn't fit very well. She must have grabbed it from the bottom of my shirt stack. All of those shirts were from grade school. Dad bought me this shirt when he was dead set on me going there for college. At least she didn't get me shorts that were way too small.

I left the bathroom and faced my parents. No one said anything about my outfit as we left the room. We had a difficult time trying to find the cafeteria because the hospital was so massive. Eventually, Mom had to ask someone to tell us where to go.

"James, maybe I should go back to the room. What if something were to happen and the doctors can't find us?" Mom asked as she kept clutching at the hem of her shirt.

"Everything will be fine. Stop worrying about it. If the doctors need us they will find us."

"But brain surgery is so serious and something could happen. I can't..."

"Mia," he said as he stopped and took her hands in his. "Let's go grab a quick bite to eat. It won't take long at all. I promise."

Mom's face seemed to get older by the second. Most of the lines in her face were visible, especially around her eyes. The dark bags under her eyes were starting to show through her concealer. She looked like a broken woman that no one could possibly repair. The only other time that I had seen her like this was when her parents died, and even then, those around her were able to piece her together. Now, I'm not so sure.

I looked around at the doctors and nurses who were flowing around us like we were barriers that were blocking the middle of the hallway. I cleared my throat loud enough for my parents to hear. People were glancing at my parents who seemed like they were stopped in time. Mom smiled briefly, which made the lines around her eyes more pronounced. I don't know what their eyes said to each other, but it made a genuine smile spread across Mom's face for the first time today.

My parents continued down the hallway, and I followed behind them. When we finally reached the cafeteria, I was surprised to see how many people were in there. It was such an odd time of the day for there to be this many people. It was a little after 5 p.m., so it was too late for lunch but still too early for dinner. Then again, everyone has different schedules and they all have to work around them.

Most of the people in here were part of the hospital staff, but there were other families that were sprinkled throughout the room. Those families were probably like mine. They came to the hospital only to find out that they would be staying for a while. Some of the families were eating with patients. I guess patients that aren't bound to their beds can eat with everyone else.

As I continued to scan the room, I was surprised to see Max. By his nurse's reaction when she had found him outside, I would've thought that he was one of those

people who were bound to their beds. But then again, I don't think that he would stay there even if he had someone watching his every move.

He had his hand clasped to his mouth as he coughed just like he had done outside when I first met him. He was dressed in a light blue robe, and he was wearing a Vietnam veteran hat. It had a long patch with different colors, and when he turned a little, I could see the name on the back of his hat. His last name was Dunn.

"Come on, Alexis. Get in line," Dad said as he led me to the long line of people who were waiting to get a tray so they could start getting their food. "What were you staring at?"

"I recognized someone I had met earlier. That's it," I said. He didn't ask anything else. I figured he would've at least asked whom I had met.

The buffet of food was pretty big. They had everything from mac and cheese to salads and mixed veggies. I grabbed the first thing that I had come to, which had ground beef mixed with corn pieces, green looking spices, and chunks of tomato all covered in a red sauce. It didn't look very appetizing, but I wanted to get out of line as soon as I could. Dad had taken it upon himself to spoon some food onto Mom's plate, because she was passing the food choices without getting anything. Even when she objected to what he was giving her, he would just plop it down on her plate. I made a beeline to Max's table.

"Need some company?" I asked as I sat down.

"I suppose an old man like me could have some," he said with a smile.

"So, I thought you would have someone sitting here with you so you could talk their ears off," I joked.

“Oh, I’ll get the chance to do that soon enough. My wife should be here any minute to eat with me. She will love to meet you. You know, you have the same eye color that she does, but her eyes sparkle when the light hits them just right.”

All I could do was look at his happy smile as he thought about his wife. When I had first met him, he told me that she had died a few years ago.

“So how did y’all meet then?” I asked him.

“We met a few months before I got deployed. She was one of the nurses who was giving checkups before we went off to war. I was in the army for about 15 years. She was the one who got me through, you know? I would get letters from her all the time. Her letters were my saving grace. I knew as soon as I had met that woman, I had to marry her.” He had his hand placed over his robe pocket where the letter that he had pulled out earlier was stowed.

“That’s very special if you knew as soon as you saw her,” I said.

“It’s miraculous because most people don’t get that immediate spark,” he said. “It’s after dating for a while do they realize that they are whom they want to be with for the rest of their lives.”

“Wow, that sounds amazing. I hope I’m that lucky,” I said as I played with the pile of meat in front of me.

“I bet you will be. You seem like a special person,” he said. “Now wait a minute.” He sounded serious as he looked at me. “Why in the world did you pick that to eat? Out of all the good food over there, you pick out something that looks like it could grow legs and walk around this table. You should’ve gotten the lasagna, the mac and cheese or the hotdogs.”

I laughed as he raised his eyebrow in question, and soon he joined in with me. He was interrupted by a fit of coughing. I noticed that his water glass was empty. When his coughing subsided, he cleared his throat.

“I’ll run and get you some water,” I said as I grabbed his glass.

“Thank you, dear. While you’re up, get yourself some real food,” he said.

“What do you suggest that I get? The mac and cheese or a hotdog?”

“I would get the mac and cheese. Even though it may not be the best you’ve ever had, it’s still better than most of the other food here. Amazingly enough, the yeast rolls are to die for. You’re not supposed to, but I tend to always take a few extra for snacks here and there,” he said while he patted the side pocket on his robe. I hadn’t noticed it before, but his pocket was bulging. At first glance, someone would think that his pocket was full of tissues because there were some popping out of the pocket. He had stuffed the rolls down in his pocket and had filled the rest with tissues.

After I fill up his water glass, I grab another tray and get a big helping of the mac and cheese. Then I grab a couple of the yeast rolls.

“Oh, and get yourself some dessert,” he called over to me. He was close enough so that the whole room wasn’t staring at us when he yelled. “You need to put some meat on those bones.”

I smiled and nodded. They had a nice big piece of strawberry cake sitting out, so I grabbed that one.

“Why didn’t you get the chocolate?”

“I don’t really like chocolate cake,” I said. My answer made his face light up with shock.

“Oh, come now. Everyone loves chocolate, and you haven’t had good cake until you’ve tried the hospital chocolate cake. I could live off of that just fine. My wife doesn’t like it when I eat sugary things because of my blood sugar, but we don’t have to tell her.”

He moved his tray of half eaten food out of the way so he could start eating his cake. After his first bite, he closed his eyes.

“Like I said, the best cake you will ever have. So, what’s your name?”

“I’m Alexis,” I say with a half smile.

“Ah, that’s a beautiful name. Now, I don’t know why everyone can’t have a beautiful name like that. These days it’s almost like the parents name their kids after the first object that their eyes land on.” He frowned. “I was never blessed with children, but I would have never named them after a potato or tomato or whatever.”

“Why didn’t you ever have any children? I mean, if you don’t mind me asking that question,” I added in a hurry. I probably shouldn’t have asked that question. It’s too personal.

“Not at all. My wife and I wanted kids, but we just couldn’t have any. It hurt her to find out that we couldn’t. We actually thought about adopting a kid, but it just never happened,” he said as he looked over my head. A quizzical expression crossed his face. I turned around to find my dad standing behind me.

“Alexis, I was wondering where you went. You’ve got to stop wandering off like that. You’re old enough to know better. Why don’t you come eat with us, and let this man eat in peace?”

“She’s not bothering me at all. She keeps wonderful company.” Max stood up and extended his hand out to my dad. “I’m Maxwell Dunn.” He gave my dad a firm handshake.

“James,” my dad said.

“Now, you wouldn’t pull her away and leave an old man all alone to talk by himself would you?” he said as he gave me a wink. “We’re having a grand time.”

“Just as long as she isn’t bothering you, Mr. Dunn.” I’m surprised that he didn’t pull me away anyway. I suppose Max has a way with anyone. “Your mother and I will come get you when we’re finished eating, Alexis.” He patted my shoulder before he walked back over to his table on the far side of the room.

“Thank you,” I said before I took another bite of cake.

“For what, dear?”

“For letting me stay and eat with you.”

“Well, of course I would let you stay. I love talking the ears off of people who will listen, and now, I really want you to meet my wife. She’ll love you. You remind me a little of her. You both have the same soul. She’s always so spirited and she’s got that special something. I can see that in you.”

All I could do was smile at him. He was such a sweet man, and it broke my heart that he couldn’t remember that his wife had passed away. Just the way he talked about her made him look so youthful and happy.

“Here,” he said as he slid his cake plate over to me. “As far as we’re concerned, you had two pieces,” he said with a smile.

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“If my wife found out about that chocolate cake, she would yank out what little hair I have left.” He took off his hat for emphasis.

“I wouldn’t want that to happen,” I laughed. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Max’s nurse making her way towards us.

“Now what in the world are you doing, Max. Every time I turn around, you’re gone,” his nurse said in a high-pitched voice. “You’re going to make my hair go gray.”

“Now, Alice. That would be your fault because you know good and well that I can take care of myself. I don’t need some kind of babysitter. I’m 83 for Christ’s sake.”

“Max, you know that I can’t help but worry. Now let me take you back to your room, so this young lady can finish her meal.” She gave me a brief smile that disappeared when she saw the two cake plates sitting in front of me.

“Max, I hope you didn’t eat any cake. You know that you’re not supposed to,” she scolded him.

“I didn’t eat any cake. Do you see an empty cake plate sitting in front of me? And I know that I’m not supposed to eat cake, my wife doesn’t like it when I do. Plus, I told Alexis that she needed two pieces of cake so she could put some meat on her bones. Didn’t I, dear?”

“You sure did. He told me that I should try the chocolate, so I did. It’s the best chocolate cake that I’ve ever tasted,” I said. I had a hard time keeping a straight face because I could still see the doubt in Alice’s face. She didn’t say anything else about it, though.

“Come on, Max. Lets go back to your room,” she said as she looped a hand around the upper part of his arm.

“But I’m still waiting for my wife, Alice. I already told you that.” He yanked his arm away from her grip.

“When she gets here, she’ll find your room. Don’t worry, Max.” I could tell that it was hard for her to tell him that. She squeezed her lips together and took a deep breath.

“Fine. But she better be able to find my room, Alice. Or you’re fired.”

“Yes, I know,” she sighed. This probably wasn’t the first time that he had threatened to fire her.

“I had a great time, Alexis. I hope we will get to meet again. I’ll have to introduce you to my wife next time.” Alice led a griping Max away.

I gathered up all of the dishes on the table and took them to the dish return. On my way to my parents’ table, my heart stopped. Dr. Sims, the neurosurgeon, was sitting at the table with them. There is no way that we were sitting here eating for more than two hours. Why is he back so early? Something must have happened.

As soon as Dad saw me approach, he looked up. He looked just as broken as Mom had earlier.

“What’s going on?” I asked, interrupting Dr. Sims. No one said anything for a moment.

“Maybe we should take this back to the room to discuss in private,” Dr. Sims suggested.

“No. Tell me what’s going on, right now.”

He looked over at my parents, but they weren’t looking at him. Mom had her head in her hands, and my dad was still looking at me.

“You can tell her exactly what you told us, doctor,” Dad said without taking his eyes off of me. “It won’t make a difference whether you tell her here or in the room. Either way, the news will be the same.”

“I still think...” Dr. Sims began.

“Oh my God. Did Stacy...” I couldn’t get the rest out. I didn’t want to ask the rest of the question because I didn’t want it to be answered.

“Oh, no. She didn’t pass away, Alexis,” Dr. Sims immediately said.

“Then what’s going on? Is she better?”

“No. I couldn’t get the whole tumor out. I was only able to get a little. I sent the sample to be tested, which will take a day or so. What I didn’t expect to find was a smaller tumor.”

“Well why didn’t the tests pick it up? I asked.”

“Sometimes a tumor can be so small that it can go unnoticed, but I caught it during the operation,” he tried to explain.

“So she has cancer?”

“I don’t want to jump to any conclusions because I just sent off the test samples. But we need to start looking at the possibility, just in case.”

“So you are saying that she has cancer,” I interrupted him again.

“Would you stop saying that?” Mom yelled.

“Sweetie, we need to talk about this,” Dad said as he rubbed her back. She jerked away from his hand.

“Would everyone like to see Stacy in recovery?” Dr. Sims asked, trying to change the subject.

“Yes,” Mom answered and jumped out of her seat. Dad sighed and stood up.

“What were you thinking for as the next step?” I asked before the subject could be gone completely.

“That conversation is closed, Alexis. We’re going to see Stacy,” Mom said.

Dr. Sims looked around at everyone. He opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, but then he closed it.

“He said that we should try to think about looking at hospitals that specialize in cancer patients, especially because Stacy’s situation is unique. They will be able to try something different that could possibly remove the two tumors that he found, and if it comes down to it, they will be able to do what needs to be done,” my dad said quickly.

“Why are you discussing this at all? We don’t know if she has cancer and everyone is already acting like she does!” Mom cried.

“It’s something that needs to be done, Mia. We need to plan ahead just in case, and that’s what we will do. Think of what Stacy needs and not what you want.”

“Don’t you dare call me selfish, James.” Her voice got a little louder. “I’m not the one who is...”

“Mia, lets not do this here. Stacy is waiting for us in recovery.” She immediately quieted down, which the doctor took as a sign that he should take us to Stacy before any more outbursts.

We walked down a few hallways and went up the elevator a couple of floors. When I first saw Stacy, I couldn’t believe that it was her. She had tubes trailing from her body every which way, and her eyes were closed. What really caught me off guard was

the absence of her long brown hair. Even though Stacy had told me that it needed to be shaved off for the procedure, I still couldn't believe that it was gone.

Mom moved her hand to pet Stacy's head, but she immediately stopped when she realized what she was getting ready to do. Whenever Stacy was little, Mom would always run her hand over her forehead. It always calmed Stacy down. I guess Mom did it even more now because it took her back to a simpler time when she wasn't so consumed with work and when we were a healthy and happy family.

"Try not to touch her head, Mia!" Dad said as he stood next to her.

"I know that. I'm not an idiot," she snapped. All Dad did was sigh. He could see that he was losing the battle.

Stacy stirred in her bed and opened her eyes.

"I thought I heard y'all arguing," she said weakly. She looked around a little bit. "Where's my twin?"

I couldn't help but smile at what Stacy had said. People always said that we were close enough to be twins. So now that has become somewhat of an inside joke. We still looked similar, even though her hair was gone. I could see my face in hers, and that was all that mattered to me. As soon as Stacy saw me, she smiled.

"What are you doing all the way over there?" she asked.

I approached without saying anything. Her eyes were halfway open. It looked as if she was still trying to wake up, or maybe the lights were just too bright. As I got closer, I couldn't help but stare at where her hair should be. I tried not to make it so obvious, but I couldn't help it. Stacy loved her hair, and now it's gone. I tugged on Stacy's necklace that hung around my neck.

“I know. I look like hell,” she mumbled as she studied my facial expression. “And my hair...” She reached up like she was going to run her hand through her nonexistent hair, but she could only lift her arm about halfway. She blinked a few times and cleared her throat.

“It doesn’t matter, sweetheart. You’re still just as beautiful,” Mom said immediately.

Stacy didn’t answer. Her eyes were slits again. She closed her eyes for a few minutes, and the silence lasted for longer than that. We were giving her some time to wake up. After about 10 minutes, Stacy cleared her throat.

Stacy focused on the ceiling and stayed silent for a little longer. Again, I tried to hide my hair as best as I could.

“So, what’s the deal?” Stacy asked immediately. She was finally starting to wake up. “Am I cured? Is the tumor gone for good?”

As soon as that question left her mouth, the room got uncomfortably silent. It was as if everyone was waiting for the earth to drop out from under us. How were we supposed to tell her that she was far from cured? How were we supposed to tell her about the tumors that still hide in her brain and about the possibility of her having cancer?

“I see,” she said after looking at everyone’s faces. “That’s all the answer I need. I knew I was dying.”

“No, sweetheart,” Mom said immediately. “You’re not dying. We are still waiting for the results from the sample that the doctor took, so don’t talk like that. You could be just fine.”

“Come on, Mom. Don’t sugarcoat it. I can tell by the look on everyone’s face. Just tell me, Alexis. I know you won’t lie to me.” I was shocked that she singled me out to tell her the news. I looked to Mom and Dad for help, but they didn’t say anything. I hesitantly looked back at her.

“I..I can’t.” I immediately looked away. “Talk to Mom and Dad. They know what’s going on better than I do.”

“Seriously, Alexis? You’ve never had a problem with telling me the truth before. I was counting on you to stick with me and not tiptoe around me like I already knew Mom and Dad would.”

“Fine. The doctor said that he found a second tumor in your brain, and he couldn’t remove either tumor. He also said that we should start looking at cancer facilities just to be prepared. Now you have it,” I finished.

She just stared at me like I had slapped her. I clapped my hand over my mouth, but the damage was already done. Stacy burst into tears.

“Maybe you should step outside, Alexis,” Dad said.

“What was I supposed to do? Y’all were just standing there clueless, and she wanted me to tell her.”

“It was the way you told her,” Mom added in. “Now why would you do that?”

“Oh great. So this is all my fault. I’m glad that you can find someone to blame. I hope this makes y’all feel better.”

“Wait,” Stacy said. I had almost made it to the door, but Stacy’s demand stopped me. “Don’t go, please. Forget about Mom and Dad. I’m not mad. I asked for you to tell me the truth, and you did. Please stay with me.”

She held her hand out for me. I couldn't help but stand there for a couple of seconds. I took off her necklace and walked over to her. I laid it down in her outstretched hand. She looked at me quizzically. Then Stacy turned her hand to where she held the brown twine in her fingers so the crystal dangled in between us.

"You should have it back," I said. "I might lose it anyway."

"I figured," she said and then smiled. "Will you promise to stay with me, Alexis? I need you. No matter how sick I get and how crappy I look, you can't leave me."

"I promise that I will never leave you," I assured her as I rested my hand on top of her hand that held the crystal.

The fluorescent lights caught the crystal just right because beautiful colors flowed from the rough and uneven surface. I focused on the red and purple hues as they intertwined with a light blue and pink. Stacy moved the crystal more towards the light so we could see it shine even brighter.

I could finally see the magic that was encased in these indestructible walls. I couldn't take my eyes from the beautiful little colors that shot straight out. It was almost as if the colors knew exactly where they were going. It wasn't like a regular rainbow where the colors curved to form an upside down 'u'. These colors beamed around the crystal.

Of course I could tell where the colors from the crystal began, but I had no idea where they stopped. Did they even have an end? It wasn't like the story with a regular rainbow where you were told that there was a pot of gold. With this unique little rainbow, I didn't really know where the colors retreated, and I had no idea what was at the end.