



PROPHASE

A Present Tale

M. Street

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The Mitosis Series



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Published by Mitchel Street

www.mitchelstreet.com

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ISBN-978-0-9915543-1-7 Pbk

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014910388

Cover design and illustrations by J.Robert

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Printed in the United States of America



This book is dedicated to you.
May your cup be overflowing with light, love, and expression.

To my editors, Jennifer Adams and Lanie Baily,
Thank you for turning my dreams into print.

To Caryn, Katie, and Tinny,
Thank you for being my real life Guardians.

To my sisters, Jeanne, Kathryn, and Jill,
Thank you for always being there to make sure the cradle didn't fall.

To my Dad,
You've always been my hero. Thank you for all that you did for us.

And most of all, to my partner in creation, John,
Without you none of this would be.

I Love You All



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III METAPHASE

~About Mitchel Street~

I Interphase

The phase of the cell cycle in which the cell spends the majority of its time and performs the majority of its purposes including preparation for cell division.



1

In the Beginning

Intense pain was the only familiar feeling. Everything else was twisted upside down, with the worst yet to come. I screamed in an attempt to release the pressure as another contraction shook my body. My tears and sweat intermingled. It was unprecedented for a woman of my age to conceive, much less give birth. I ground my teeth and closed my eyes as another wave of compression screamed through my body, dispelling any thoughts I held.

The night's wait went in bursts. I was sure I hadn't been followed, but nonetheless my heart skipped beats from my vulnerability. It was just me and my unborn child. The second birth wasn't any easier and worlds apart. It took all of me to control the fingers of fear whittling at my concentration. My apprehension climbed as night faded into the starry dawn.

I nestled deep inside a forest of giants.

"We are safe here. We are amongst friends." I talked to her constantly now. I wanted her to know my voice. It helped me now knowing it would help her later. I squatted over towels and blankets leaning against the trunk of a redwood. This was no way to usher in life, but I had no choice with so much at stake. My breath ran shallow as my body took control, convulsing me into an all-consuming push.

Miraculously, I had managed to keep the entire pregnancy a secret. Only her father and I knew of her conception. He had given his life protecting ours. She would never feel his strong yet tender touch, hear his comforting voice, or see his blue-green eyes.

"He is with us, child." I pushed my hands against my tight, swollen belly. She bore down on my back, fracturing my straining feelings.

Her life would bring about great change. She alone could balance the tilted scale. Her identity would remain secret; not even she would know who she was or what she could become. It was too dangerous to tempt the fates. Any revealing of her identity would be cataclysmic not only to her life, but to the world as well. I shared my secret of her impending birth with

only one other, her protector. He prepared her way. My body clamped down, making me light-headed.

I reached down and felt her head. It was time. I pushed my bare feet into the damp ground and clutched the redwood's exposed roots, bearing down with my remaining strength. The pressure in my body raised me to dizzying heights, but the ice-cold spring air kept me lucid. My heart pounded forceful beats as her head broke through. I pulled her out, lifting her to my breast.

Her cry resounded with the first rays of morning.

I carefully slid down the claws of the tree and onto the earth. I wiped her clean, blinking to clear my tears. She was beautiful, radiating pure innocence. Struggling, she filled her virgin lungs with cool, pine air.

I kissed her forehead. She was our child.

Her day of birth was no coincidence: the vernal equinox.

“Piper Frieda. You shall bring us back into the light.”

I cherished each grain of time remaining. I kept my thoughts of what was coming at bay so I could be present with her. We lay as still as sleep wrapped in old quilts under the arms of an ancestral tree. Closing my eyes, I soaked in the momentary peace.

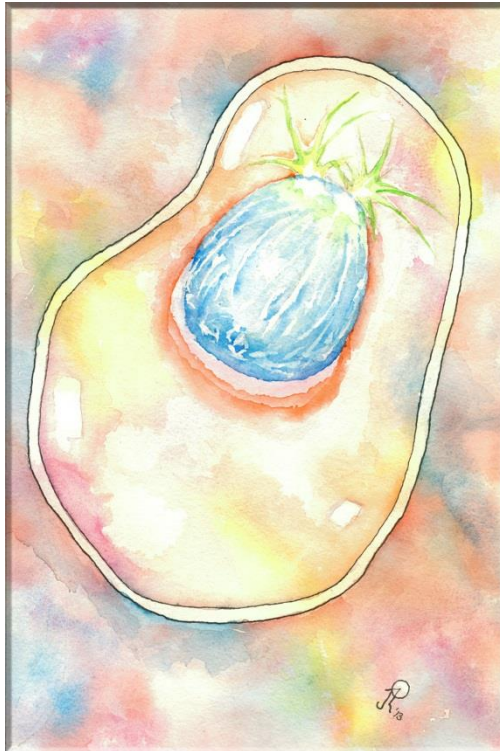
A great tale had begun.

II

Prophase



The first stage of mitosis, during which the chromosomes condense and become visible, the nuclear membrane breaks down and the spindle apparatus forms at opposite poles.



2

In the Soup

The unwelcome north wind intensified as I left the woods. I didn't know the sky could be filled with so many shades of grey. The smoky clouds looked pregnant with rain, but with temperatures so cold we might be in for another late season snowstorm.

The lifeless trees protested as the icy wind rigidly shook them in the churning weather. We lived close to the high school, so I didn't ride the bus. Our house was across from a field that turned into a small forest that I called the woods. It had many paths, one of which cut through to the high school. Even though I was a senior and had a boyfriend with a cool Jeep, I found myself walking through the woods often.

As long as I could remember I loved spending time in nature. Every season held wonder. The wild flowers of spring, golden rays against green leaves of summer, raining fire colors of fall, and ghostly blues cast by the moons of winter. I'd rather be out in the country than be anywhere inside. It felt good out here. I was part of something bigger.

Since kindergarten, I knew I was a bit different, even before Mom died. I looked like everyone else, but felt like no one I met. As the years clumsily passed, I learned to fit in. I didn't mind girly stuff, but it ranked low. Listening to and playing music under a tree in the woods was way more fun. It was all right tagging around with Lisa and her friends, but it would get old fast. I once heard her tell someone that my behavior was a side effect of my intelligence and that they should treat it like any other neurosis. I knew she meant well. It was more fun when it was just the two of us.

I heard one of Dad's temporary girlfriends say my "weird" behavior was a reaction - like it was chemical - to when Mom died, but it wasn't.

Mom saw my interest in nature from the time I was a toddler. She joked that I headed straight to the woods the second I could crawl. Mom, a science teacher, thought it was great and encouraged my interests. She took me for countless walks in the woods, even when it rained. She would explain all sorts of cool stuff to me. It didn't take long before I was raising

tadpoles and caterpillars. Mom usually concluded most facts with: “It’s what we know so far...” or “another miracle right under our noses...”

I loved to be around trees. I had so many favorites. Maples were easy to climb. Fruit trees flowered with amazing beauty. Pines were great for hiding and Oaks were good to sit under for a good cry. Any of them would be happy to share a starry night.

As I left my wooded sanctuary, I spied ghostly light flickering out the family room window. Charlie was home feeding his mind with TV. I hope he finished his homework so I could check it for him before I did my own.

As my feet traded the path for the sidewalk, my favorite little guy trotted out to greet me. As always, I was ear deep in music. “Hi Jazz,” I near-shouted, partially unplugged. I bent down and scratched his furry old head. He responded back with a meow-purr. “Did you get any critters today?”

The stout, Lynx Point Siamese zigzagged in front of me walking home. It was our ritual. I fell in love with Jazz long ago, the day I looked into his aqua eyes. The color of his irises were proof of magic. He followed me to the front door, wrapping himself around my legs.

“Jazz, really, it’s going to rain, go home now.” I opened the door and darted in. He stood there like I had left him at the altar. Jazz wasn’t mine, but I was definitely his.

Charlie was curled up on the couch grazing on the TV.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. His young eyes carried baggage.

“I don’t feel good. The school nurse tried to call Dad, but he didn’t answer. I spent over half the day in the nurse’s office.” I rubbed my hands together warming them. I knelt down and put my hand on his forehead.

“You have a fever. Come on, let’s get you something to eat and then up to bed.”

“I’m not hungry,” he said without moving. Charlie was a good kid despite having had to grow up fast. Without a mom, and what remained of Dad, being a big sister felt more like being a parent.

“How about chicken soup? Next time tell the school to contact me if they can’t get Dad.”

“I told them to call you first, but you didn’t answer either.” he said with a rejected look on his face.

“Sorry. I had powered down my phone to save the battery. I forgot to turn it back on.”

I prodded Charlie into our tiny kitchen. I warmed up the soup, along with leftovers for Dad and me. As I served Charlie, the door exploded open. The burst of cold air robbed the house of what little heat was left.

Dad was home. From the look on his face he was in a worse mood than usual. He was mumbling and cursing under his breath like a madman.

“Hey Dad, Charlie isn’t feeling well. The school tried calling you.”

“I wasn’t at work!” he abruptly interrupted. I could smell the alcohol. “They cut my hours. I’m down to 24. A couple of us were at the tavern making our case with the union. Where’s dinner?” His chilly demeanor cut as strong as the polar wind whistling around our half-attached gutters. He shuffled in and plopped down at the table.

I pieced something together that resembled a meal.

“Beer.” He commanded, pulling in his bad leg.

Dad started drinking after Mom got sick. It didn’t take long for him to become dependent on a bottle of some kind. The bottom gave way when he totaled the car, crushing his leg a month after we buried Mom. We’ve been in a long and drawn out downward spiral since. I have washed out memories of when he was happy. Charlie has none. The good times were long ago. All that is left now is a shell of what he used to be, or maybe something entirely different; something angry, caustic, and dependent on poison.

We never talked about how much we missed Mom. His self-made disaster, a hip and knee replacement, quickly took center stage. Missing her became the norm. Any memory of her turned Dad into an ugly drunk. It didn’t take long for us to stop talking about her. Nevertheless, Charlie was a constant reminder of Mom; he had her bright, fawn-colored eyes.

Doing anything in the kitchen reminded me of Mom. She was the best cook, rarely measuring anything. She was older when she got pregnant with Charlie. We were so excited. Mom and Dad always hoped for a second child and I dreamed of a little brother or sister. I can still remember her belly growing while she spun around the kitchen.

Mom was six months pregnant with Charlie when they found a lump in her breast. Everything I called home unraveled, no matter how hard I wished for the cancer to go away. I felt, first hand, what change can really do. The helplessness scared me.

It’s also when Esther became my ‘grandma’. I came to understand family was more than just blood. Blood may be thicker than water, but both freeze solid.

Esther, Jazz’s official owner, was our really old next-door neighbor. Dad said she was already elderly when we moved into the house. Esther was my first encounter with kindness of a stranger. She always had time to help, especially when Mom got sick.

Mom adored Ester. She took care of Charlie and me for months when Mom got too sick from the chemotherapy to get out of bed. Along with her

teas, Esther helped Mom feel better by softly waving her hands just above her head. She would say she was adjusting Mom's light. She was an old, kooky, cool character like one out of a book. I would giggle, but I couldn't deny it worked. For a while it was the only thing that relieved the pain, but then nothing did.

I was never so sad as on that late winter day we lowered her in the ground. Leftover charcoal from defrosting the cemetery plot dirtied the pristine snow. In that moment, I knew there was no such thing as a broken heart...only cracked ones. Mine beat with a sad pain. I changed that day. My feelings of happy were buried in the cold, hard earth with Mom. Dad stood numb holding a screaming Charlie.

It was also the day I met Lisa. I ran out of the crowded house full of sad smiles to the only place I knew would make me feel better. In the center of the woods where all the paths met, Lisa stood crying. She was lost. She told me I looked nice and then asked me why I was crying. Before that day, she was just the girl down the street; since then, we've been soul sisters.

Lisa and I hung out constantly, although we were in different crowds. That made our friendship real and less complicated. We were tight before cool was something to be. I dabbled in the athletic and slightly nerdy groups, while Lisa was part of the popular crowd. Everyone loved her. She was sweet, funny, and pretty, never letting the attention go to her head. She was kind and always approachable.

I put the steaming Tupperware containers on the table. Dad dug in, always going first. We usually ate in silence. I turned to Charlie.

"Please try to eat something."

"What the hell is wrong with you, boy?" Dad yelled. The force of his voice caused Charlie to straighten up. His eyes ran to me. I could feel the fear condensate along my spine. Anything could set Dad off when he was drinking, but today the rage was cocked in his eyes.

"Dad, he is sick. Please." Charlie quickly picked up the spoon and started to slurp.

Just when I thought we had passed go, Charlie knocked over his glass of milk, sending a white tidal wave gushing over the table and onto the floor. My face flashed red foreseeing the oncoming storm. Dad rocketed out of his chair, sending it flying. My instincts kicked in, jumping up between Charlie and Dad. My heart pounded in my chest.

"Please Dad, it was an accident. He doesn't feel good!" I exclaimed frantically, trying to reason with a beast. I looked down at a defeated Charlie.

"Move, Piper!" I could feel his breath as he closed the distance between us.

“He didn’t do it on purpose!” I shouted. I felt his iron grip on my arm. He wasn’t a big man, but he had the strength of an ox. With one flick of his wrist, he sent me flying across the room. I landed hard against the counter. My ribs hit first, knocking the air out of me. The pain radiated out in all directions as I clenched my teeth and closed my eyes. Everything was still and dark for a moment. I opened my view to see Dad inches from Charlie. He was screaming and pointing in his face.

Dad looked at me with blame. “You, clean this up!” He gave Charlie a look of disgust. Go to your room and think about it,” he ordered sternly. Charlie looked at me with sorry written all over his face. He ran quickly up the stairs. Dad, dragging his leg, slowly made his way to the refrigerator for another beer. He opened the bottle and threw the cap on the floor, watching me.

I cleaned up the kitchen while Dad watched TV. I had gotten good at putting everything in order over the years. Inconspicuously, I made Charlie a peanut butter and strawberry jelly sandwich. I knew he would be hungry. As I was finishing up, the phone rang. It was Lisa.

“Hey, can I call you back? Thanks,” I whispered. I turned all the lights off except for the one above the sink. That was the signal that the kitchen was closed and clean. I smuggled the sandwich past Dad to go upstairs. “I’m going to do homework.” He said nothing back as I darted up the stairs.

“Knock, knock.” I opened Charlie’s bedroom door.

“Hey,” he said in a muffled tone. Charlie was lying face down on the bed.

“I got you something.” He smiled a thank you. He wolfed down the sandwich with man-sized bites. “I’ll get you a glass of warm milk and honey when Dad goes to sleep. That will fix you up.”

“Thanks, Piper,” he said like a true kid.

“Are you feeling any better?”

“No.”

“Rest up and try to work on your homework. I’ll see how you are doing in a bit.”

I went in my bedroom and took off my shirt. I was going to have a big bruise where I hit the counter. Without knowing, a tear streamed down my face. I was already worrying about how Charlie would manage when I went to college this fall. I couldn’t wait for high school to be over and to get out of the house, but my heart would stay with him. With a heavy foot and a fast car, I could get back from Madison in little over an hour.

Just then, I heard a meow at the window.

“Jazz...you crazy cat.” In a hurry, I let him in along with several snowflakes. “You are a sight for sore eyes. What are you doing outside during a snow storm?” Jazz meowed loudly, rubbing up against me. “Shhh, Dad is in a horrible mood and he’d kill me if he knew you were in the house.” Dad was weird; he didn’t like animals. Jazz responded with a muffed grunt, strutting like he owned the place. I put him on my bed. He quickly started to knead the blankets to get it just right to rest his fur.

It seemed Jazz spent more time with me than with Esther. He was like my feline guardian angel. He would cuddle next to me and lick my nose. I would talk to him like a best friend telling him everything, even more than Lisa. He blinked his big cerulean eyes occasionally as if he was contemplating all my secrets. In return, I gave him slices of bologna he would devour in seconds while purring. In the morning, Jazz would wake me up just before my alarm. I would open the window and he would jump out in a blur and return to the wild.

Esther knew Jazz slept with me at night. She was rarely concerned about his whereabouts. I felt better when he was with me. Despite being a fierce and crafty nomad, with the woods so close by, a fox or a coyote could snatch him up. Esther thought it was “delightful” that Jazz had taken such a “fancy” to me. It amused her.

Since I was a little girl, I had made it a habit to visit Esther once a week. I felt a kinship with her after Mom died. Like us, she had no relatives in the area. She knew a lot of history, especially of the neighborhood. I mostly stopped by after school. We always found something to talk about. She loved to hear about my day, claiming it helped her leave the house and stay connected to the outside world. I knew she enjoyed our visits as much as I did.

I would ask about her life, but she wouldn’t say much. Her husband, Cal, had passed way many years ago, crushing her heart. Talking about it made her melancholy. She had no children or siblings. She led a solitary, but content, life. She always said the future of the youth was so brilliant. I wish I had her faith.

I put my sleeping tee on and settled in my child-sized desk to do my homework. I was in the advanced placement classes, which gave us extra assignments on top of the normal load. Every night I had a minimum of two hours of studying. I didn’t mind. I saw the extra effort as a way out of Oak Creek. I worked hard for my grades, which had gotten me a hefty scholarship.

Finishing up my Calculus homework, I heard the TV go off downstairs. I waited for the loud snoring to come up through the heating vents.

Jazz was sleeping soundly curled up by my pillow. I slowly opened the door, since it made more noise than a rusty wheel. Dad did little upkeep and it had really started to show. As I slipped out the bedroom, Jazz slowly open one almond-shaped eye with a look of caution. I froze for a second.

I crept downstairs and got milk, mixed in a tablespoon of honey, and nuked it. Dad snored over the hum of the microwave. I stopped the countdown before the ending beep. I used my finger to stir it, testing the temperature. Perfect. I tiptoed up the creaking stairs and slowly opened Charlie's door. He was fast asleep on his math book, sleeping like a baby. I carefully closed the book, set it on his little desk, and covered him up with blankets. I closed the door, leaving him to dream.

I cautiously opened my door and slipped in. I drank the warm milk, petting Jazz. He stretched and let out a big yawn, sniffing the air towards the glass.

Getting into bed, I remembered to call Lisa back.

"Hi Lisa, I hope it's not too late? My dad had another fit. Typical."

"Are you kidding? Calculus is keeping me up. What is with these integrations?" she asked, frustrated.

"I can help you tomorrow before class. The problems are too long for phoning. So what's up?"

"Oh cool! Don't forget about band practice tomorrow night. We have a lot of work in front of us. I don't want to look stupid!"

"Whoa, I forgot, what are we going to perform? Do we know?" I asked with a note of unenthusiastic curiosity. Lisa, Chris, Josh, and I were in a band called the Coat Tails.

I breathed music. The vibes fed my soul. Along with nature, song twirled through my veins. Like trees, I had all kinds of favorites depending on my mood. From country to hard rock, fast or slow, my heart felt best beating to a tune.

Every year the seniors performed a talent show for the entire school. Previous shows were amazing, some really good bands. We auditioned, making the cut; I couldn't believe it. We formed the band our junior year when Chris and I started dating. Chris was an amazing guitar player. Josh, Chris's best friend, was on the drums. Lisa was on keyboards. I played bass and was nominated as the lead vocalist. I could carry a tune, but was stronger sharing the vocals with Lisa.

I still could not believe I agreed to it. Having fun in Chris's basement was far away from playing in front of everyone I knew. At the time, it seemed like a good idea. It was in the distant future, plus it was so important to Chris. Now it was just a month away. Although we've been

playing for a while, we were only hobby good. We'd never had an official gig.

"I hope we do something retro, like from the 70s." I said. I listened to Mom's old tunes a lot. The music was classic and kept her close.

"Yes! My vote is something from Fleetwood Mac," Lisa said, determined. "'Rhiannon' would be cool."

"Stevie Nicks rocks, but that song is practically a solo!" I said with a note of upset.

"Come on. I already talked to Chris and Josh. They love it! The song kicks ass," she added with excitement. "Just try it before you freak."

"I don't know. We'll see," I said accepting my fate.

"Great! We'll try it tomorrow. Practice at 3:30," she claimed victoriously.

"It will have to be 4:30. I have swimming practice," I said unenthusiastically.

"Ugh, I don't know why you joined the swim team. It wrecks your hair," she stated matter-of-factly.

"Ha ha, see you tomorrow before class!" I closed my cell phone.

I got under the covers. The storm outside battered the window. I hoped this was the last snow of the season. I looked forward to the lime greens of spring. I connected headphones to my phone and put "Rhiannon" on repeat. Humming along, I memorized the words. I turned off the light and pulled Jazz in close under the covers. I relished his warmth. He was a living stuffed animal when he was deep in sleep. At this moment, I felt safe. I kissed Jazz good night, listened to the music, and drifted.

3

A Sixth Sense

A soft and furry nose pushed against my chin accompanied by a familiar purr. “Good morning boy,” I said cracking open my eyes. To my delight, sunlight was pouring into the room. Last night’s storm was over and the golden rays brought in fresh prospects for the day. About three inches of snow blanketed everything, but was rapidly melting in the bright sunshine.

Jazz jumped off the bed and sauntered to the window.

“Meeeeeooow!” he said long and drawn out with paws on the sill.

“Ok. Ok.” I walked over and opened the window. Like a moving cloud, Jazz zoomed out and down the tree effortlessly. “Please tell Esther I will come by tomorrow.” I smirked as if he could understand me. “Too much going on today for a visit.”

Everything outside glistened, drops of water chiming with sounds of dripping ice. I reached over and stopped my cell phone still playing “Rhiannon.” Even singing solo seemed possible today!

I grabbed my basket of products and headed to the bathroom. I knocked on Charlie’s door on the way.

“Wake up.” Getting ready didn’t take long. I wore little makeup. Even though I was a senior in high school, Dad did not approve of me “whoring up” so I kept it light or put it on after leaving the house. My ash-blond hair was long and extremely straight. I usually wore it in a ponytail. My skin was pale with breakouts. I mostly tried to give my dull hazel eyes some color.

“You up?” I asked outside Charlie’s door.

“Yeah,” he said in a half-asleep tone followed by a big yawn.

“How are you feeling?” I opened his door. It creaked like it was stiff from a long sleep.

“Way better.” He reached up and stretched.

“Good. Maybe it was a twenty-four hour bug. See you downstairs.” I was relieved Charlie got better so fast. It was one less thing to worry about. I came down the stairs as Dad was putting on his jacket. “Hey Dad, Charlie’s better.” No reaction. “I have swim practice and then we are going to rehearse for the senior talent show so I should be home by 5:30 or 6.”

“Don’t be late,” he barked walking out the door.

“I guess the sunshine didn’t put him in a good mood. No matter.” I went to the kitchen humming “Rhiannon.” I put together a quick breakfast for Charlie and called upstairs, “Hurry up or you’ll miss the bus.” Charlie flew down the stairs knowing being late meant Dad would have to leave work.

Just as we were finishing breakfast, I heard the Jeep beep outside. Chris was here. I waved to him out the kitchen window. Chris, my one and only, was the first boy who didn’t care that I was some kind of nature’s child. He liked walks in the woods, was in the advanced placement classes, and was almost as music crazy as me. We made playlists for each other and shared new bands. He brought me back something I missed...hope.

He was the perfect boyfriend. I thought I was in love with him, but didn’t quite know what that meant so I wasn’t totally sure. He made me feel special and I felt more for him than any other person - besides Charlie and Lisa, of course.

“Charlie, time to go.” I put our dishes in the sink. Chris picked me up every morning. It was really sweet. The sporty Jeep fit his outdoor personality and mine.

Chris made me feel normal. He was good looking with short blond hair, blue eyes, and boyish charm. His structured face supported his big smile.

Chris and I started dating shortly after we were assigned as biology partners. He got accepted to the University of Wisconsin-Madison as well. Marrying him some day was a likely picture I took of my future.

“Don’t forget these.” I tossed Charlie his gloves, counting to make sure he had all the things he needed.

Chris came from the most normal family I knew. I would have dinner there on occasion. His parents were nice, so completely the opposite of Dad. On holidays they invited all of us over; of course Dad declined. Emily, Chris’s younger sister, was in the same grade as Charlie. Chris’s dad was an engineer and was good for helping us with tough homework. His mom was a nurse and a superb cook. The feeling of belonging to his family was comforting. It was a pleasant escape from my wrecked home. It’s what I imagined our family to be if Mom had beaten the cancer.

Charlie’s bus stop was at the corner of our street. We put our jackets on and greeted the sunshine. The warmth of the sun teased against the morning cold. For some reason, it quickened my soul more than usual.

“Have a good day,” I told Charlie heartily. He was already walking towards the group of grade school students waiting. I couldn’t believe my

baby brother was going to be in junior high next year. “I’ll be home late tonight, after practice.”

“See ya,” Charlie waved without turning around. He was busy stomping through the wet, heavy snow. Like me, Charlie already had a good group of friends. We rarely fought like a typical brother and sister, but our lives were anything but normal.

“Hey babe,” I said, jumping into the Jeep. I leaned over to kiss Chris.

“Hey.” He offered me his cold cheek.

“It’s nice to see you, too,” I chimed back, perplexed. “Looks like the snow will melt by the end of the day. Hopefully it’s the last of the season.”

“I wouldn’t count on it.” Chris drove away.

“Ouch.” My safety belt reminded me of last night’s injury. I was sore where I hit the counter.

“What happened?”

“Nothing.” Chris didn’t like my dad to begin with. I definitely couldn’t tell him about last night’s mess.

We drove in strange silence. We usually talked about something on the way to school, or sang, but today Chris was millions of miles away. With band practice, we spent a lot of time together both in and outside of school. Often he would drive me home after my shifts at Malts&Shakes. Lately with constant preparations for the impending end of high school and start of college, we had been missing each other. I knew when something was bothering him. It troubled me that he wouldn’t say what was on his mind.

We continued the short drive to school in silence. I knew he would tell me eventually, but the suspense was killing me.

Rounding the corner, I broke down. “Well? Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you? It’s a great day out. The forsythias are going to bloom any...”

“Yeah, Piper,” he interrupted me. “We’ll talk after practice tonight, no big deal. Did you learn the song?”

Finally, he was talking. “Yeah, but what is going on? Why wait until tonight?” My voice marched an octave higher, tightened by agitation.

We pulled into the school parking lot. “It’s nothing. We’ll talk about it later.” He reached out and took my hand. His touch reassured me, but his unusual words opened Pandora’s Box. I quickly scanned through the last couple of days. Nothing came to mind. He kept the faraway look on his face. Maybe it was something at home, but that was highly unlikely.

We got out of the car and started to walk into the school. Lisa and Josh met us as we arrived. On practice days we met before first bell by the entrance of the gym. That was the only time we could all be together. We said our hellos. Chris spoke with the authority of bandleader.

“So we’ll meet at my place at 4:30. We only have a couple of weeks, so it’s time to get serious.”

“Right on,” Josh said, mostly to Lisa, in his goofy and retro way.

“We have to look good!” Lisa added enthusiastically, smacking Josh in the arm. Although opposites I thought Josh and Lisa would make a great couple, but Lisa was dating Chet Robert, the most sought after guy in school. They were the power couple of Oak Creek High, dating on and off since freshman year. Chet had striking looks with dark hair and blue eyes. He came from money, did well in school, and spent hours in the gym. If it weren’t for Lisa’s inside track on their bickering, I would have thought he was perfect.

Josh was a great guy, but the polar opposite of Chet. He was shy, skinny, and anything but athletic. He did not think twice about fitting in. His longer brown hair went untamed, but worked with his big nose and crooked smile. I thought of Josh like a brother. Besides being an amazing drummer he knew his music, having every kind in his collection from classical to speed metal.

“So Piper, you’re cool with ‘Rhiannon?’” Josh asked me.

“I love the song, but it’s almost a solo,” I protested, nudging Lisa for help.

Josh gave me a sympathetic expression. “I’m glad you’re alright...” A five minute bell rang, interrupting his well wishes, but for what I had no idea.

“Josh, we need to get to class now!” Chris hooked him by the neck and dragged him away. “See you two later,” Josh said, looking confused.

I gave Lisa a puzzled look. “Strange, do you know what is going on? Chris is acting weird this morning.”

“Are you kidding? Boys act weird all the time,” she laughed. “Hey, can I see your calculus homework? I couldn’t get the last problem.”

I reached into my backpack. “Sure, here you go.”

We hurried to our first class of the day, Physics. Mr. Miller defined strict. Any tardiness resulted in immediate detention. Lisa sat in the middle. I sat in the back of the class one row over. I reached my desk just as the bell rang. Being in the back of the class was fun. I was far from the teacher and had a great view.

“Who knows what is special about this Thursday?” Mr. Miller kicked off class. Several people, including Lisa, raised their hands. That surprised me. Lisa did well in academics, but she struggled more than I did. For her to know something that I didn’t piqued my interest.

“Yes, Lisa?” Mr. Miller said with a glowing look of surprise that she knew the answer.

“It’s the Oak Creek Spring Fling Dance,” she said with a huge smile, bouncing up and down in her chair. “And it’s Piper Walker’s birthday!”

A couple of heads rotated giving me a variety of expressions, but I kept my glare on Lisa. I wasn’t much for chasing the spotlight. A huge laugh erupted as Mr. Miller’s stony face quickly turned angry. This year I was looking forward to my birthday. Dad repeatedly drilled into Charlie that he would be a man at eighteen. I guess that meant I was going to be a woman, although that happened years ago. “No, Lisa! Not everything in this world is a social event! Quiet everyone!” The class immediately hushed. “This Thursday is an equinox; the vernal point. It happens twice each year. Can anyone tell me what this means?” I quickly raised my hand. “Yes, Piper.”

“It’s the moment when the Earth’s axis is neither tilted toward nor away from the sun, resulting in equal amounts of day and night. A neutral moment. It’s the start of spring.” Lisa turned around and gave me a sassy smile that would later bring a “teacher’s pet” comment.

“Very good. Now who can tell me what the solstices are?” Mr. Miller charged into the lecture as I feverishly took notes.

The morning slid away quickly as usual. Last year, Chris was in my lunch hour. Every midday felt like a little date. Not being in the same hour this year stung, especially today. At least I was lucky to have Lisa and Josh this year.

The politics of where people sat at lunch were hard to negotiate. Lisa, the queen of popularity, had all the rules down. She made most of them. I benefited from her reign. Freshmen had it the worst being corralled closest to the teachers.

The cafeteria consisted of two rows of tables that stretched down a long room with a big aisle in the middle under way too much fluorescent light. It made the food look gross, like plastic. We sat at the last table, furthest from the teachers. It was prime real estate, housing the royalty of the school; mostly the top athletes and pom-pom girls. I sat at the end next to Lisa, Josh, and my friend from the swim team, Jade.

I didn’t belong. The only reason I was at the crown table was because of Lisa. Our long friendship seemed to transcend my obvious unworthiness. Same went for Josh and Jade. Completing our corner, always across from Lisa, sat Chet and his BFF Aiden. The seating order was maintained with very little variation. It made for a nice lunch hour, but I missed Chris.

I mostly talked with Josh and Jade. Lisa was busy making the rounds and flirting appropriately with Chet. Jade’s boyfriend complications usually dominated our sub-conversations. We’d hear about each one of her

problems in great detail. Josh was his usual shy self rarely saying much. Jade and Josh were like oil and water. She felt that all guys were incapable of understanding women. She used Josh as a pincushion for her jabs, but he dropped one-liners that were too witty for Jade to refute.

I got out my cell phone and turned it on. Chris and I frequently texted simple notes during school. "Thinking about you" would make my day. He was very romantic and thoughtful. No messages today; the mystery continued turning me into a detective. Josh had to know something since he was best buddies with Chris.

"Hey Josh, anything new?" I started my inquiry.

"Not much, I guess. We got a big assignment in Advanced Algebra, which sucks. Do you think you can cut swim practice and spend the time practicing instead?"

"No, she cannot!" Jade cut in. "We need the conditioning. Besides, our coach would freak out. You cannot miss practice if you want to compete."

"Is everything cool with Chris?" I cut to the chase.

My question caused Jade to turn to me with a puzzled look.

"Sure, same old Chris," Josh responded, like my inquiry came from nowhere.

"He didn't seem preoccupied or out of sorts?" I dug, avoiding eye contact to give him the impression that I didn't care.

"Nope, not that I noticed," he said, shifting around in his seat. I couldn't tell if he was keeping something from me. He seemed uncomfortable for a brief second. I didn't want to make a big issue out of it since I would see Chris later in Advanced Chemistry. Josh and I had been friends since junior high. He was always drama free.

"Are you and Chris having a fight?" Jade was quick to go pessimistic.

"What? No! It's nothing. Seriously," I said, while forcing a laugh and readjusting my ponytail. The last thing I needed was for Jade to get on my case.

"Ugh," Jade grunted with disapproval.

The afternoon classes took forever and a day. By the time Advance Chem rolled around, I could hardly concentrate on school. The bell rang and I dashed to last hour. I was hoping to have some time to talk to Chris before the start of class. I didn't know if I should be nonchalant or just be direct. I sat waiting at my desk, which was next to his.

Just seconds before the bell, Chris strolled in looking happy.

"Hey." It seemed like my Chris was back. A wave of relief rippled through me.

"Good to see you," I said like a question.

“Yeah,” he said, opening up his folder getting his assignment out. I was hoping for more.

Class started and I couldn’t care less. After Ms. Weber got into the thick of the lecture, I texted Chris with ‘love you’. He read it from under the desk with no response. He put his phone away and continued to take notes.

Another brick added to the wall of weirdness. I tried to take notes for a while, but I started getting angry. He could have given me some kind of response. I whispered as quietly as I could, “What’s the problem?”

“Not now,” he said equally quiet. The question provoked him; his response provoked me.

“You’re not being honest with...”

“Piper, would you please tell the class what an allotrope is.” Ms. Weber said with a hint of anger.

“I... I don’t know,” I said back sheepishly.

“Then I suggest you pay attention and learn something.”

Chris was going to have to wait.

I watched the minute hand of the clock crawl. Finally the bell rang.

“Can we talk now?” I asked Chris promptly.

“Yeah, sure,” he said, indifferently collecting his things without a care in the world.

“Ok, something is going on, let me in on it!” I was stressed now and getting more angry by the second.

“Seriously, Piper? You’re making a big deal out of nothing. I just wanted more time to talk. Five minutes between classes is not enough. You’re smothering me!” He got up and walked out without waiting. I quickly crammed my notes into my backpack. Whatever he wanted to say was not good. I could feel it.

By the time I got out the door, Chris was down the hall.

“Wait a minute!” I hurried to catch up with him “Ok, school’s over, I’ve got all the time in the world. If it’s no big deal, why can’t you tell me now?”

“I thought you had swim practice?” he changed the subject.

“Yes, but I can miss that. It’s not as important as us!”

“Later.” His final answer came without care. I started to become distraught. Chris and I rarely fought. The blood rushed to my face. He put his arm around me, steering me towards the locker room. “Look, go swim and then come over after. We’ll jam for a while. It will be great. We can talk easy then.” He leaned in and kissed me on the side of my head. Chris had a case of hot and cold. Just then Josh came skidding around the corner.

“Hey bud, wanna start jamming early?” an excited Josh asked Chris.

“Absolutely,” Chris returned with gusto. Josh turned to me.

“I just talked to Lisa. She has a Spring Dance meeting. She’ll pick you up after swim practice. Come on Chris, we’ll have the drum and guitar done before they come.”

“Have fun being a fish,” Chris joked. All at once, they were headed out the door acting crazy. I wished I could be as excited as they were, but I still felt unsettled. Today was unusual. Chris was not himself. Even Josh was acting strange. I headed to the locker room.

I caught my reflection in the mirror while undressing. A huge bruise protruded on my side with various shades of red and purple and a hard center. It was going to take time to heal. Thankfully, the locker room was near empty. Jade had not arrived yet. I quickly pulled my shirt back on and went into the bathroom to change privately. My one-piece swim suit covered up most of the bruise. If I kept my arm down no one would notice. I wrapped my ponytail up in the swim cap, grabbed my goggles, and headed to the pool. I went to the far side where nobody was to stretch.

Jade made a beeline for me. She was going on about Greg, her latest. Her mouth moved, but I didn’t hear one thing she said. My mind kept going to Chris. Maybe I did something that pissed him off. Maybe we weren’t seeing enough of each other. I could give up my shift this weekend so we could go on an official date. After two years, everything seemed to merge into doing things rather than fun stuff. We loved hanging out at the lakeshore and climbing on the rocks. It would be cold, but beautifully romantic. I pictured us cuddling together watching the waves lap the shore. I awoke from my daydream...Jade was still babbling. She had a way of asking and answering her own questions.

“Ready!” the coach barked. We stood by our lanes, put on our goggles, and got into formation by the water’s edge. Jade had finally stopped talking. She looked at me with a question in her expression. I had no idea what she’d asked me.

“Why?” I asked quickly. My generic question added firewood to her rant on Greg.

The whistle blew and I launched into the water. The sound of the rushing currents and bubbles around me drowned out everything else, quieting my mind. Swimming was akin to meditating. Peace flowed in when I took a breath and stress went out on the exhale. The bruise ached at first, but it slowly subsided as I continued to warm up.

Jade was a faster swimmer than I. She was waiting for me as I finished my laps. I took off my goggles. She was already talking about Greg again. She went on and on while I cleared my nose and eyes, but not my thoughts. She had the same look in her eye as before, wanting some response.

“No way!” I said, hoping my generic response would make some sense. I gained another twenty minutes with this tactic. I quickly got out of the water and bolted to the locker room. Jade tried to keep up while talking. “Got to make a pit stop,” I said, grabbing my bag before going to the bathroom. I came out fully dressed.

“What? You’re not going to shower? I have to tell you what Greg said next.” She went right into it as I packed up my stuff. My hair was wet, I smelled like chlorine, and my skin itched, but I wanted to get to band practice and, more importantly, to Chris.

“Ok, see you tomorrow,” I said, pushing the door open. I couldn’t make out what Jade was saying, but I was sure I would get a full replay. Lisa was waiting for me as planned. “Hey girl, let’s go!” I said, walking by her. She quickly followed.

“Here, spray this on.” She handed me some perfume from her purse. “You smell like a kiddie pool!”

“Gee, thanks!” I sprayed on perfume, knowing she was right.

“You seem excited. I knew you’d change your mind about ‘Rhiannon’.”

“Yeah, sure. I’m more anxious to talk to Chris. Something is bothering him. He was so on and off again. Do you have any idea?”

“Are you kidding? No idea. Chet is the same way. It’s a guy thing. Lately, Chet never wants to do anything with just the two of us. It’s really frustrating. I don’t know why I put up with it. I guess we are a habit after all these years”

We slid into Lisa’s Pontiac Yellowbird. It was older than we were.

“I need to make a quick call.” I scrolled through my contacts. “I want to switch shifts on Saturday.”

“Cool,” Lisa said, focusing more on the stereo than the road.

I called my co-worker Tess. She was in college and always needed more hours. “Hi Tess, it’s Piper. Could you do me a huge favor?”

“What?” Her suspicion came across loud and clear from the tiny speaker.

“Can we switch shifts on Saturday?”

“Yeah, I think so. Evening tips are good.” I knew she would.

“Excellent. I owe you.”

“Another date with the High School boy?” Her laugh pierced my eardrum.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” I replied defiantly. Tess wasn’t a big fan of Chris. She thought I should date more.

Lisa’s random pushes and turns to the stereo dials finally hit pay dirt. Music blasted out of the dashboard speaker full volume.

“I gotta run. Thanks!”

“Come on...let’s warm up!” Lisa cued up “Rhiannon.”

“Lisa!” I screamed laughing.

“Come on, hit it!” We both joined in.

By the time we got to Chris’s house, we were busting. I was totally into the song now. I loved Stevie. Her music had the effect of making everything all right.

“Do you think they’ll let us sing ‘Who will be her lover?’” Lisa asked with a devious smile.

“I refuse to change it to something stupid!” I cried out.

We walked into Chris’s house and down the stairs to the basement. We knew his parents were still at work; the drums and guitar were droningly loud. His parents were cool about the music, but we especially loved practicing when they weren’t home. We would crank up the volume and go nuts.

We had put together what we could in the corner of the basement to create a studio. We’d strung a mishmash of Christmas lights from the joists, a bunch of candles flickered in the middle on the floor, and tattered oriental rugs hung everywhere. It also came with an old mutt named Scruffy. He didn’t budge, even when we shook the walls. I’ve never seen a creature sleep that much.

Chris and Josh were warmed up and sweaty. Lisa went behind her keys and powered up. I looked immediately at Chris, not being sure what to expect. Seeing him again brought the strange day back to the surface.

“Hey,” I said, hoping for the best.

“You ready?” he asked excitedly.

“Please welcome to the stage... Miss Piper Walker and Miss Lisa Keating!” Josh yelled with a drum roll.

Plugging in my bass turned on my mood. There was no doubt I possessed a passion for making music. I must have inherited it from my mom. Music felt like my first language. Singing felt like free falling. I didn’t care for my voice, but everyone else did.

“Ready?” Josh asked, as we all took our places. We faced each other in a circle. I was across from Josh, with Lisa on my left and Chris on my right.

We warmed up and then began playing “Rhiannon.” Each one of us took turns messing up. The harmony on the refrain needed work. I tried to fill in the gaps between Chris and Lisa’s voice. We practiced for a good hour and a half before Chris’s mom came home. By that time, we had a couple of good takes down.

“We’re sounding good,” Chris said, wiping the sweat off his face. The amps were like space heaters in the cramped corner. “A few more practices and we’ll have it down. Piper, you sounded awesome!”

“Cool, thanks.” I had no problem looking at him now. Making music was intimate. We discussed the highs and lows of practice walking up the stairs, laughing and joking like post rollercoaster ride talk.

“Hi Mrs. Jenkins,” I said to Chris’s mom.

“Hi Piper. Hi kids.” She was putting away groceries and preparing for dinner.

“Mom, I’m going to take Piper home. I’ll be right back.”

“Ok dear, please hurry. Dinner will be ready soon,” she said in a motherly way.

We sat in the Jeep filling accustomed roles with no questions to ask.

The sun was down and the temperature dropped like a rock. At least all the snow had melted. We drove for a while not saying anything, but this time it was okay. We had just had an amazing practice and my voice was tired anyway.

“I switched my Saturday shift; I thought we could go on a real date. Maybe go down to the lake?” I asked hopefully. “Then out to dinner? My treat.”

“I’ve got plans,” he said coldly. The Hyde side of Chris had returned. His eyes were firmly planted on the double-yellow no pass lines.

I fought my thoughts from falling back into the ruts of the day.

“Piper, I need some space...” I went blank. “I want to break up.” My blood iced and my burning tears blurred my vision. This was one of those moments that would be engraved in my memory...like the first time I got stitches.

4

Cracked

I forced my eyelids open and made my way to the mirror. My eyes were swollen from perpetual tears. I couldn't believe Chris dumped me. It came out of nowhere. My cracked heart beat and it hurt like hell. He insisted it was only temporary. He wanted to be single the summer before college, something about finding himself. Whatever...I knew what he really meant.

I felt stupid about how I'd handled it. I'd tried everything. I had even gone to the place no one should go, and begged! I told him we could see less of each other. I told him I could change, although neither of us believed it; anything he wanted. Nothing mattered. He got angrier and I got more desperate. By the time we had gotten to my house, he wouldn't talk. He obviously had made up his mind some time ago.

The morning light made me feel worse. Today would be my first day without him. My identity was torn. Spikes of sorrow filled the fissures in my heart. With every beat I was reminded how painful loneliness can be.

The thought of going to school was oppressive. I could fake being sick, but postponing rarely helped anything. I couldn't take all the pity stares. I didn't want to be the wounded girl who was dumped. I felt like a failure.

I gave Chris all of me, but it wasn't enough. How could he act like it was no big deal?

"Meow." Jazz waited at the windowsill.

"Thank you for staying with me last night." When I got home, I had run up to my room without saying a word to Dad or Charlie. Dad didn't notice. His complaint about missing dinner followed me up the stairs. He wouldn't understand anyway. Charlie asked me if I was okay. Wallowing in woe, I ignored him as I slammed my bedroom door consumed by my hurt.

Thank goodness Jazz had been waiting for me at my window last night. I held him, crying, telling him everything. Surprisingly, it had helped. There was something in the way he gazed at me as I confessed my broken feelings. The hurt subsided. He had a timeless quality that was unfazed and unconditional. He was just a cat, but he was a comfort nonetheless.

I scratched his chin and gave him a big kiss. He purred strong and loud. I opened the window, and he was gone. I cried.

I forced myself into my routine one step at a time. If not for Charlie I would have stayed in bed until the last second.

"Time to get up," I said, rapping on his bedroom door. No response. I opened the door, "Wake up."

Charlie cracked open his glued eyes. He looked around disoriented. Sitting up in bed, he looked at the clock. "It's early. What's going on?"

"Yeah, I know, I'm walking to school today." I closed the door and went to the bathroom. Getting ready for the day seemed like an immense task. I had to force myself to do the basic necessities to look alive. I put on extra concealer, attempting to hide the bags hanging from my lower lids. "Oh great." I had broken out on my forehead...probably from stress.

I finished getting ready and indicated to Charlie that the bathroom was his. I grabbed my backpack and headed downstairs. Because I was early, I got to enjoy breakfast with Dad. Oh joy. I prepared cereal for Charlie and myself, and sat at the kitchen table. Dad was deep into the paper, muttering under his breath. I sensed that my presence in the morning was not welcome.

"Why are you here?" he asked without taking his eyes off the paper. Good morning to you, too, I thought.

"I'm walking to school this morning."

"Doesn't that boyfriend of yours pick you up?"

"We broke up last night," I said shallowly, fighting back blubbing. Saying it hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Good!" Dad said with his sick stamp of approval. "You were neglecting your family. It's time you pitched in. The house is filthy."

I did my best to keep it together, controlling everything except my tears; they streamed down my expressionless face. I quickly wiped them away, but the dam had burst.

Dad saw my tears. "I just don't understand teenage girls," he said, getting up. I stayed silent. He got his jacket and left without saying a word. I was glad he was gone. I recomposed myself and looked at my food.

I called for Charlie. Minutes later a very sleepy-eyed Charlie rolled down the stairs.

"Hey," he forced out.

"I want to make sure you're not going to miss the bus. Your breakfast is on the table. When you are done, put the dishes in the sink. And remember to leave the house by 7:15. Please." I could tell by Charlie's expression he knew something was different.

"What's wrong?"

“Chris and I broke up.” I felt the searing pain again. How many times was I going to have to say it? Each time pushed the knife deeper. “Actually, Chris broke up with me.” It was time to be honest with myself.

“But why?” he asked, childlike. The esoteric question reminded me of when he was a little kid and he asked me where mom was. He didn’t understand. There was a sweet sorrow in his question that caused my heart to plunge into the deep end, leaving me emptier.

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s ok... I’m ok.” I had to get used to living in ruins. I was anything but ok.

I watched Charlie eat his breakfast while I got my jacket, hat, and gloves for the ice-cold morning. “Please don’t forget to lock the door when you leave. See you tonight.”

“Ok...Piper?” He tacked on.

“Yeah?”

“Please don’t be sad.”

“Thanks, Charlie.” I darted out the door as copious brine welled up in my eyes. The role reversal of Charlie consoling me was more than I could take. I put my head down and started up the sidewalk.

“Hello my dear.” The greeting took me by surprise.

“Esther! What are you doing out here? It’s freezing.” Esther was out in the yard barefoot, without a jacket. She rarely wore shoes, but the ground was cemented from a long winter. All she was wearing was an old-fashioned housedress. If she caught a cold at her age, it could be her last.

“Have you seen Jazz?”

“Yes, he slept with me last night.” I paused. “I’m sorry. I haven’t stopped over in a couple of days. I’ve had so much going on...”

“No worries my dear,” Esther said reassuringly. She was always so selfless. “Are you all right? Have you been grieving?” My eyes gave me away.

“Chris and I broke up.” I wanted to make a sign and paste it on my forehead: ‘I was dumped’ in big red letters. To my surprise, telling Esther removed the stinger.

“Oh dear, I hope you do not feel too poorly.” She gave me a loving look I felt.

“I’ll stop by tonight.”

“Please do,” she said with a smile.

“Now please, go inside, you’ll catch a cold!” Esther turned and started her slow hobble back.

I headed into the woods. Thankfully the path had dried out from the melted snow. Even though the trees were barren, I started to emerge out of my dark, break-up tunnel looking for signs of spring. The cold air cleared

my senses. I hoped it would refresh my face as well. The impending school day was going to be arduous. I was not looking forward to seeing Chris in Advanced Chem.

I got to school and rummaged through my locker. Lisa came bouncing up.

“Hey you, practice was so much fun last night. I was so excited I could hardly sleep!” Lisa said in her exuberant and animated manner.

“I don’t want to rain on your parade, but I’m not doing the talent show,” I said, slamming my locker shut.

“What?!” Lisa responded in shock.

“Chris dumped me last night.” I started to feel angry. I had been a really good girlfriend.

“No way! Everything was fine last night. You guys seemed...”

“Hold on,” I had to stop Lisa. She was going a million miles an hour down a road that dead-ended. “He said he needed a break, but I think he is full of it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course! Did you know about this?”

“Hell no! I swear. Strange. Guys are strange,” Lisa said, gazing off into her space. “I don’t believe it.”

My cried-out eyes left no room for disbelief.

“Chet and I break up all the time and we always get back together. It will be the same with you and Chris.” I had to hand it to Lisa; she was always positive.

“Chris and I are different.” I didn’t want to insult her and Chet, but they made dysfunctional look like clockwork.

She put her arm around me and we walked to class. I swore I felt everyone in the school looking at me. I had to fight the demons in my head.

“Who needs guys anyways? Will you escort me to the Spring Fling?” Only Lisa would try to turn a breakup into something fun.

“I don’t think...”

“Forget it!” she interrupted me. “You’re going. It’s your birthday.” Lisa was very determined. Her happy face had turned serious. “And don’t even think about not performing at the talent show. You’d regret it for the rest of your life.” In some ways I knew she was right. I had to suck it up and be cool. We had the rest and best of senior year in front of us. Besides, Chris and I were both going to Madison so I could win his heart back. If that didn’t happen, I would still need a friend, as hard as that would be.

The morning inched along. I didn’t care about anything. The lunch bell rang. I contemplated sitting by myself near the teachers. There were

always one or two empty tables between them and the students. Lisa anticipated my move. She met me in the hall outside the cafeteria.

“You ok?” she asked with best friend sincerity.

“I guess,” I said without life. With my appetite long gone, I went to the a la carte line by myself for something small. I walked up to the table, attracting eyes. I wanted to turn and run.

I gave Lisa a look of disapproval. I knew she had told everyone. I should have had it added to the morning announcements. Actually, she was doing me a favor. At least I didn’t have to keep saying the words ‘he broke up with me’. I’m sure the entire school would know by the end of next hour. I sat down and opened my soda. Josh was giving me a pitying look. To no surprise, Jade immediately started in.

“All men are insensitive, self-serving animals. They haven’t evolved much from Neanderthals. Mental illness, menstruation, menopause all start with men,” she continued. I reached into the depths of my being to suppress public tears.

“Sorry about you and Chris,” Josh said with measurable heart. “I want you to know that I’m still best buddies with both of you.” His kindness felt nice. I could tell the breakup was awkward for him. His comments shut Jade up immediately.

“Josh, that is so sweet,” Lisa said, looking at him with adoring eyes.

“Thanks. I know this sucks,” I said, trying to sound upbeat. The rest of the lunch table remained dead silent. Even the popular kids were listening as hard as they could.

This was one time Jade’s obsessive talking came in handy. She started up on the difference in maturity between men and women. The way Josh was looking at her actually made me snicker. Before I knew it, the gawking was over and the familiar murmur of the lunch table resumed.

The last hour of the day approached, twisting my stomach into knots. I didn’t know how to act with Chris; being myself didn’t work. I didn’t want him to see I was hurting. I had done a good job of that last night, to no avail. The bell rang and I headed to last hour like I was going to the dentist to get a cavity filled.

“Hi,” Chris said, like nothing was wrong. “What’s up?”

I felt a million incompatible things at once. I was happy to see him, but angry and hurt. I still wanted him. That pissed me off. A noise came out of me. “Ok...I think.”

“Good! I mean...we are still friends, right?” he asked like what happened was minor.

My well of words went dry. I sat at my desk and buried myself in my notebook for fear of what I would say. Friends! He thinks we can go back

to being friends after severing a two-year relationship. I cried myself to sleep last night. My blood boiled seeing how easy it was for him.

It was uncomfortable being next to him. I turned away to face the windows. This position made it painful to look at the board to take notes, but it kept him out of my peripheral vision.

I completely missed the lecture. If Ms. Weber had said that humans were inorganic, I would have agreed. All I could think about was the end of class. Being so close to something that used to be mine rubbed me raw. I stormed away at the first clang of the bell.

“Piper, wait!” I heard Chris behind me.

I picked up my pace hurrying down the hall. My eyes were so hot that my tears evaporated. I got to my locker as fast as I could. Grabbing my jacket, I blew out the doors. The fresh air hit me with sweet relief. I feverishly walked off campus and into the woods. I stopped to put my jacket on. Leaning against a big oak tree, I let go of my tears, slowly sliding down to the ground.

“Meow.”

“Jazz?” He jumped through the tall, dead grasses landing perfectly on my lap. “What are you doing here? You are so far away from home.” I snatched him up as I stood. He fought to get free. “Come on boy, please follow me.” To my delight, he did, staying just outside of my reach. He ran ahead, stopping with his ears at attention, scanning for prey.

Suddenly, ahead of us a huge badger scurried across the path with its black, ball-bearing eyes fixed on my boy. My heart froze. Dad warned us that badgers have very sharp claws and teeth, and are fierce when threatened. Jazz immediately stood at attention like a soldier ready for battle. The badger hurried into the brush. Jazz took off like a rocket in hot pursuit.

“Jazz, no!” I screamed and ran.

In a split second, Jazz disappeared into the thick bush after the badger. I heard horrible noises: hissing of all kinds, and then dead silence.

Everything happened so fast. I had to save him. I ran to the place he had disappeared. Picking up a big stick and holding it out in front of me like a spear, I cautiously proceeded around the bush, afraid of what I would find.

I stood there mystified. Jazz was taking a drink from a puddle of water. The badger was nowhere in sight. There were no signs of a struggle. I snatched Jazz up to check him out. No wounds or blood on his silver-white coat. I gave him a big kiss. He purred.

For a moment there was no Chris, no hurt. I needed life to fast forward and leave the breakup behind. We walked back to Esther's house. I reached for the doorbell, but the door was already opening.

"Hi Esther, I found this little guy all the way by the school. Can you believe it?" I asked with a disapproving tone.

"Oh thank you, dear. Both of you please come in," Esther said with a cheerful expression. I put Jazz down. He darted in and quickly vanished. "Come my child, please have tea with me." Esther slowly made her way to the kitchen using her cane.

I followed closely. I was afraid she was going to topple. "Esther, I can make the tea. Please sit down."

"No my dear, I may be old, but I can boil water. However, I may forget to turn the stove off," she said with a wink and a chuckle. Her tranquil company was just what I needed. "Please sit." She motioned me to my spot at the kitchen table. Within a second, Jazz curled around my legs. Esther turned on the stove, got out two old mugs, and brought down several containers of loose tea. She mixed her own flavors.

"Jazz, should we tell Esther about the badger?" He sprang up in my lap.

"Oh, how Jazz adores you." Esther spoke like a proud parent. "And he doesn't like many."

"I love my little man." We touched noses. "He had a run-in with a badger in the woods. I was afraid he was going to get hurt."

I gave Jazz long scratches. "It was really strange. He chased it, but thank goodness it got away."

"He is careless at times, aren't you Jazz?" Esther came over and scratched Jazz's chin. He extended his neck for more.

We drank tea while I recounted the last couple of days to Esther. She listened with such a genuine concerned look on her face. She had a way of asking me questions that lead me to my own conclusions. Shedding such heavy burdens left me tired, or maybe it was something in the tea. I relaxed for the first time in days.

A heavy Jazz sleeping in my lap made me even more tired.

"Thank you, Esther. I appreciate you listening," I said sincerely. "I need to get home and make dinner for Dad. He will be home soon."

"I enjoy this more than you could imagine, my dear," she said, pushing herself up from the table.

"Jazz, you're going to have to wake up," I said, placing him on the chair next to me. He let out a distraught meow, stretching with his front paws out before him. I got Esther's cane hanging on the stove handle and brought it to her. I held her arm into the family room.

“I’m fine.” She always fussed when I helped. “I’m quite capable of putting one foot in front of the other, that and much more,” she laughed. “Indeed, I am,” she said with a grin and a wink.

I gave her a careful hug as we both smiled. “I feel better. Thanks.”

“Affairs of the heart are vexatious. Although it might not seem like it at the moment, they are transitory. Regret, on the other hand, is venomous. It will take root and remain.” I understood what she was saying and most of me agreed, but I needed more time to pass for me to get over Chris before I could entertain the talent show.

Esther lowered herself into a big puffy, floral chair. It looked even older than she. She pulled out an ancient-looking book with lots of colorful bookmarks in it and put it on her lap. I went to the door to let myself out.

“Bye for now.” I gave her the most sincere look I could muster.

“Thank you for the visit, my dear,” Esther said, cracking open her well-worn book.

I heard Esther’s dead-bolt rotate as I walked across the yard, but she was in her chair, obliviously paging through her book. I stopped, curious. Nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Maybe she had trained Jazz to jump up and turn the lock. My hypothesis made me laugh as I continued home.

My mood swung south walking through the front door. Our house felt black compared to Esther’s. Charlie was doing homework at the kitchen table. I helped him out with a few math problems.

“Is dinner ready?” Dad asked, while rubbing his puffy, slept-on face. I didn’t know he was home. He looked like death warmed over.

“In 15 minutes.”

“Call me.” He went back to his bedroom and closed the door.

“Did you know Dad was home?” I asked Charlie.

“No”

“He must be sick.” I took my notebook out of my backpack to study while I made dinner. I saw that I missed a call. Chris! He didn’t leave a message. I wondered what he wanted. Whatever it was, I didn’t have the gumption to deal with it at the moment.

I set the table and called Dad. He slowly emerged from the shadowy hallway. He sat down and ate; only taking time to cough and clear his throat. The hacking, phlegmy sound turned my stomach, killing my partial appetite.

Charlie reached for his fork and knocked it to the floor. We froze. He was starting the awkward teenage years. He was growing like a bean. It fell near me so I quickly picked it up and put it in the sink. I got him a new one and sat down.

“No harm done,” I said quietly. Dad looked up and snorted, too sick to care.

Dad finished eating and returned to his cave. The second Charlie was done, he bolted to the family room. He was stoked to have full control of the remote.

I finished cleaning up and left the light on above the sink. Charlie was completely absorbed by the flickering images.

“I’m going upstairs to do my homework. I’ll come down when it’s time for bed.” Charlie did not move. “Just nod your head if you understand,” I joked. His head slightly moved.

My phone rang in my backpack as I went up the stairs. My heart beat on the promise of Chris. I hurried into my bedroom and pulled out the phone. It was Lisa.

“Hey Lisa, what’s up?” I tried to sound excited.

“Checking in.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. I wanted it to be somebody else.

“Chris said he tried to call you, but you didn’t pick up.”

“So he tries to call me once and now I’m ‘not picking up’. That is so not true!” I was amazed at how mad I got so quickly. “I was probably at Esther’s.”

“Ok, easy, I believe you. He wants to have band practice Saturday morning. His parents are going to be out for the whole day.”

“Gosh, Lisa, I don’t know.” I wanted to play, but I was totally tangled in upset. The thought of seeing him caused my pulse to throb.

“Piper, please! We have to practice. Plus it might be good for you to see Chris.”

“Did he say he wanted to see me?”

“No...but...” Lisa wanted to stay away from our breakup, not us. “Just do me a favor and call him back,” she said softly “...just this once.”

“I can’t...not yet.”

“Ok, but you are going to have to talk to him eventually.”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks. See you tomorrow.” I ended the call and sat immobile.

I still didn’t understand what went wrong. I wonder if his heart was changeable. Nothing made sense. I threw myself into the logic of my homework.

“Meow,” accompanied tapping at the window.

“Jazz...” I looked over at the clock. 10:13. I hurried to the window and let him in. My homework had taken me longer than I thought.

“I’ll be right back.” I found Charlie fast asleep on the couch. I turned off the TV and all the lights. “Charlie, time for bed.” He woke disoriented.

“You fell asleep in front of the TV. Go upstairs and get to bed. If Dad finds you up this late he is going to be pissed.” He scampered up the stairs.

I looked around to ensure everything was in order. Despite being unkempt and messy, Dad was painfully meticulous when it came to anything I did. Through the kitchen window, I could see directly into Esther’s family room. She was still in her chair reading her book. I wondered if that was my future...barefoot, old, and alone...reading dusty books to pass time.

Jazz watched patiently as I got ready for bed. I crawled in between the sheets, turning off my light, welcoming the moonless dark. Jazz nestled up next to me and started his motor. Crying, I drifted to sleep.

5

Rubble



I tossed and turned all night, causing morning to come early. The lack of sleep took a toll on me physically and mentally. As I moved through my morning routine, I kept trying to figure out my past, present, and future. Answers weren't going to change anything, but I craved reasons.

My dreams laid in ruin. Staying together with Chris after high school was tossed to the side. He was fine, but I was left alone to pick up the shards.

The morning went off without a glitch. Dad was still sick. Charlie must have passed on whatever he'd had, but Dad wasn't recovering as fast. Luckily, I didn't get it.

I gave myself extra time to walk through the woods as a birthday present. I made a point to celebrate Charlie's birthday, but mine went unnoticed - even more now that Chris had bailed.

It was a beautiful day. The sun was shining with temperature of 55 degrees. After a long Wisconsin winter, anything in the 50s felt like a summer day. I took the roundabout path to soak up the impending spring. Most life was still dormant. I looked forward to fragrant crabapple blossoms, lime greens of new leaves, and sounds of frogs emerging from the melting pond.

I got to school and walked past the gym. The student council was feverishly decorating for the Spring Fling dance. Lisa and Chet were hanging up all kinds of decorations. I snuck in and made my way over to Lisa. "It's looking great."

"Hey, Happy Birthday!"

"Thanks." I said unenthusiastically.

"Chet has so many good ideas. He wants to hang stuff off the ceiling fans, but the teachers are freaking out." Lisa was beaming in her element. "What time should I pick you up?"

"Yeah...about that, my dad is sick. I need to stay home and take care of him." I tried to be convincing.

"Wow, you really outdid yourself with that one. Look, you are going. It's your freaking birthday! It's gonna be so much fun," she said, climbing a ladder to hang a gigantic papier-mâché flower on the wall. I took the opportunity to make a quick exit. "I'll pick you up at 6:30!" Lisa announced across the gym.

"What?" I answered jokingly, escaping into the hallway. The previous dances had been magic. Chris and I danced to every slow song. The thought of going to the dance without him made me ill. Everything reminded me of him. I wanted to dig a hole until I was buried deep.

I labored through the day. Lunch conversation consisted of plans for the dance and associated gossip. I wondered if Chris was going. I listened

carefully to see what Josh knew. As usual, Jade was monopolizing the conversation and Lisa was absorbed in Chet. Josh was not himself. He seemed uncomfortable.

“Hey Josh, no date for the dance?” I kidded.

“Nah, you couldn’t pay me to go.”

“What is it with my friends?” Lisa turned sharply. “You guys should support me. I spent so much time on this dance. I did it for us seniors!”

The unusual silence at the lunch table was stifling. Lisa was on student council and had come up with the theme for the dance. She pushed hard against resistance from the teacher’s council. As always, the administrators were concerned about security, underage drinking, and liability.

“Well, I could go for a little while,” Josh suggested to Lisa like a lost pup.

“There’s the spirit! Come on, you guys; this is our year. It’s our last dance at Oak Creek. That alone is reason to party!” Lisa bubbled.

“I’m going!” Jade interjected. No one responded, leaving an uncomfortable void.

“Is Chris?” I couldn’t believe my nosiness just came out of my mouth.

“He said he had plans,” Josh answered sheepishly.

My mind went in a million different directions. What possible plans could he have? I didn’t know. That hurt more than I expected. I couldn’t just text him. It was no longer my business. The pain and anger merged, causing me to fuss. Everyone at the lunch table saw my anguish.

“Hey Piper, let’s buddy up and go to the dance together,” Josh said, breaking the silence. I knew Josh was extending himself. This would be his first dance.

“Excellent! Josh, you can pick Piper and me up at her house at 6:30,” Lisa said with excitement.

“My house?” I nearly fell off my chair.

“I’ll be at your place at 4:30,” Lisa stated.

“What? Why so early?” I asked. “The dance doesn’t start until 7. What about Chet?”

“He’s gonna be hanging last minute decorations,” Lisa said under her breath with a look of whatever. “He’ll be at school until the dance starts. I figured we could get ready together.”

“Really?” I said without any real excitement.

“Yup, lots of girlie stuff. Josh, you can join us if you want,” Lisa dared.

“Ah, no way...I’ll see you at 6:30,” Josh said with certainty.

I turned to Lisa. “What girlie things are we going to do?”

“Oh, it will be fun. We’ll jam, do our hair, makeup.”

“You know we can’t do that at my house. My dad will flip out,” I said in a state of panic. “What about your place?”

“You’ll ditch!” She knew me too well. “Piper, you are a senior in high school. Next year you will be in college. It’s time you stopped living under your dad’s rule.”

I could tell there was no way to stop her. She had the entire evening etched out. “Ok,” I accepted in defeat.

Everyone got up to head out in their separate directions with the bell. I said my goodbyes and walked out with Jade. She shared her complete schedule for the evening. We made plans to meet up. I conceded the dance might be fun. It would be a good distraction from Chris. Like time, life was moving on without pause. It struck me hard that we would not be making memories as a couple anymore. Like waving to a parting train, I was saying farewell to what had been happy in my life. No matter how much I wanted, I could not stop it.

To my surprise, the afternoon flew by. Thoughts of seeing Chris still left me conflicted.

I walked into class. Chris was already at his desk. I quickly took my seat without looking at him. So many things were going through my head. I slowly turned my body to face the front of the room. Pushing stray hair behind my ear, I snuck a peek at Chris. He was staring right at me. I wanted to evaporate.

He spoke to me, but I had no idea what he said. His blue eyes drowned out his words. I wanted to jump into his arms and kiss him wildly. The weight of the situation hit me again. Although I was sitting within arm’s reach of him, there was a chasm between us. What I held once, I could never hold again. I felt my heart crash.

“Uh, what...sorry, what did you say?” I responded like a reflex.

Chris smiled and chuckled. “I hope you can make practice on Saturday.”

I couldn’t help myself. His sunny smile melted the glacier of grief I was under. “Yeah, I can make it.” I fell under his charm so easily.

The bell rang and Ms. Weber jumped into class with a pop quiz. She passed out the tests, giving us 15 minutes. I gazed at the quiz. The questions seemed to swirl in circles. How could I agree to band practice when I cannot control myself around him? A simple smile threw my heart into a dance. But the reality was as bleak as the winter-worn woods. His ambivalence ripped me apart. I sat eviscerated.

“Stop. Pass your quizzes forward,” Ms. Weber announced authoritatively.

“What?” I asked under my breath. The last 15 minutes had gone by in 15 seconds. I looked down at my quiz. All I had written was my name. Cindy turned around to grab my paper. She saw that it was blank and gave me a confused look.

“Piper, the quizzes.” She pointed to the person in back of me.

“Ah...sure.” I turned around, got the quizzes, put mine on the bottom, and passed them to her. I felt all the air leave the room. I was angry with myself. My heart was ruling my common sense.

My concentration flew as haphazardly as a bat. Despite my anger, I still had cravings for Chris. Sharing the same friends made it all the more painful. Part of me wanted Lisa and Josh on my side. I knew that was ridiculous, but it didn’t change how I felt. I didn’t want to pretend to be friends; I wanted to be his first again. Being anything else was insulting. It was like trying to hold water in my hand. How could I turn off my love? I wanted to know how Chris switched off so easily.

The bell rang. Chris got up. “See you later.” He packed up his things and turned to leave without waiting for a response. Before I knew it, everyone was out the door.

“Yeah, see you later,” I said mournfully to myself.

I packed up my notes and headed to swim practice. The water would be a nice distraction. I wanted to drown out all the noises in my head in the silencing water. I wanted to wash all the feelings out of my body.

Swim practice put me in a better mood. Moving my body seemed to expel the negative energy that had built up in my head. Not even Jade’s incessant talking got to me. I took a long, hot shower, trying to wash away my heartache. The bruise on my side was still raw, but the hurt didn’t register past the ache in my chest.

I was the last one in the locker room. Moving in slow motion, I dried my hair and bundled up for the cold and solitary walk home.

I walked down the main path of the woods. The tree branches creaked in the howling north wind. The Canadian blasts helped moved the branches to draw the water stored in the roots to the awakening limbs. The anticipation of bright emerald green buds caused a frisson of excited movement in my soul. I could hardly wait for the wild flowers, their only purpose to set the fields a blaze with a plethora of colors.

I got home and started making dinner. Dad was almost back to normal. Still, Lisa coming over was going to push the limit. I served up dinner and ate as fast as I could. I used the extra time to clean up before Lisa’s arrival. Dad grabbed bottle of cough syrup and planted himself in front of the TV.

I looked at the clock. 4:20. Ten minutes to think of something to tell Dad about Lisa and the dance. The doorbell rang. I darted to answer.

“It’s for me,” I said, watching Dad. He fired off a look of disapproval. “It’s Lisa, we are going to the Spring Dance tonight.” Dad began to verbalize his objection when I opened the door.

“Hi Piper. Hi Mr. Walker,” Lisa said in her most respectful and well-mannered voice.

“Ah...hi,” Dad grumbled, exhaling.

Lisa looked like she was about to backpack overseas, she had so many duffle bags strung around her. She didn’t have any makeup on and a hat was pulled over her head.

“Where are you going tonight?” Dad asked Lisa, fishing for discrepancies. The coldness of his look was embarrassing. It didn’t faze Lisa.

“We are going to the Spring Dance. It was my idea,” Lisa said with a proud expression on her face.

Dad shifted his eyes from Lisa to me. He narrowed his look. “What time are you going to be home?”

“The dance ends at 9:00. 9:30 at the latest,” I said, looking back at Lisa with a question on my face.

“Yup, the dance ends at 8:45 and everyone must be out of the gym by 9:00,” Lisa said in a lively tone. Dad was skeptical.

“We are going to get ready. Josh is going to pick us up.” I didn’t wait for his response. I grabbed Lisa’s arm and pulled her up the stairs.

“Is he really that crabby all the time?” Lisa whispered.

“Yes. Always.” I answered sternly.

“How should I do my hair?” Lisa asked, pulling off her hat to reveal volumes of damp and uncombed hair.

“First, let’s get all those bags off of you,” I said, laughing. One by one, I detached each bag from her, counting five all together. “Lisa, what the hell?”

“I couldn’t decide so I brought everything.”

I opened up one of the bags. “Lisa, there is enough stuff here to stock up a mall makeup counter! I cannot believe you own all this! You know my dad will not let me wear half of this stuff. I mean...Fake eyelashes! Really?”

“Oh, Piper, have an open mind. You are single now. We are going to have every guy in Oak Creek chasing you.”

Lisa might as well have taken a red, hot glowing knife and pierced my heart. The twinge of being a single rider rushed into my being. Lisa detected the plummeting change in my mood.

“Hey, come on, we are going to have a great time. We aren’t going to let any boys bring us down. Next year we’ll be at different colleges, millions of miles apart. Please...I already miss us.”

“You are so right. I’m going to miss you like crazy.” Lisa got accepted to Boston University. Obviously we’d be in contact as much as we could, but in a few months these moments together were going to be few and far between. I couldn’t even think about it.

“Let’s start with you first!” I said, feeling the groove. Just then an idea sprang into my head. “Let’s do our hair first, then makeup.” The makeup portion was going to be tricky with Dad home. He wouldn’t let me out of the house after Lisa made me up like a clown.

“Sure.”

Lisa brought every beauty product in her arsenal and then some. I selected items carefully from the bags like a doctor preparing for surgery. I did her hair while we picked through our memories, played tunes, and sang. Dad yelled through the floor a couple of times to keep it down. We were laughing hard so much I could feel my stomach muscles protest.

“Close your eyes.” I spun Lisa around on the chair in front of the mirror. I had fixed her hair in a funky style. I put in a bunch of tight curls and loosely combed through them with my fingers. “Open your eyes and be honest!” I wish I had her hair. Lisa’s eyes sprung open and grew wide.

“Piper! I love it.” She turned her head side to side. “Thank you! So 90s! Your turn. I think we should use hot rollers on you, do you have any?”

“What? You didn’t bring any?” I joked. “Yeah, I have some.” I got them out and plugged them in. We had a heart-to-heart talk about college waiting for them to warm up. Keeping busy kept my mind off Chris, but he would still pop up in conversation, no matter the subject. He was so much a part of everything.

“What do you think will happen next year?” I paused to gather my courage. “With Chris and I both at Madison?”

Lisa started to roll my hair. The heat felt nice with our noses running from the cold house.

“You guys will get back together,” Lisa said like she had a crystal ball.

“You think so?” I wanted to believe that was possible, but I didn’t want to inflate my hopes. The mere thought of Chris and I back together filled me with flutters.

“Yeah, that is why Josh and I are totally staying out of it.”

“Huh?” I wondered what else they talked about.

“You and Chris are both our friends. Josh and I were freaked out when you guys broke up.”

“He broke up with me!” I said with anger on my lips.

Lisa was giving me a look of frustration filled with compassion. “Just give him some time. You guys do everything together, maybe too much? Talking about going to college together, marriage, kids! It probably scared him.”

“That sounds great to me,” I said gingerly.

“Piper, we’re 18! I know you miss Chris, but give him some time. Besides, you might feel differently when you get to Madison. Boys go to high school; men go to college.”

There was dead silence as Lisa rolled up my hair. I understood what she said, but it didn’t make me feel any better. My heart remained severed.

I changed gears, acting like I was happy. “Did you guys finish decorating the gym?”

“Oh my God! It looks so good!” Lisa came back to life. “Wait until you see what we did. It’s so cool.” She added another roller to the mass of tubes on my head. “Ok, you’re all set. Let’s pick out what you are going to wear, and then its makeup time.”

“I was going to wear this black top with jeans.”

“Still in mourning?”

“Really funny. You know my dad is so puritanical about the makeup thing, but I have an idea to get around it.”

We changed into what we were going to wear. The largest of the bags held three or four outfits. Lisa couldn’t decide on any of it. She ended up in my black top. I wore her green vest. The splash of color and tailored fit accented Lisa’s olive skin and figure, but it made me look pasty and thin. We packed everything and headed down stairs. Dad was engrossed in the sports channel.

“We are going over to Esther’s to say hello, and then to the dance.” He looked up from the TV. I could tell by his confounded expression that seeing me in hot rollers was too much. It was the interference I needed to get by without dispute.

“Home by 9:15!” Dad yelled from the couch. We grabbed our jackets and quickly bolted out the door to Esther’s house, laughing the entire way.

We rang the doorbell, shifting back and forth to stay warm.

“Maybe the old lady isn’t home,” Lisa said with misplaced hope. She knew Esther from my stories, but she wasn’t comfortable putting on makeup in front of her the first time they met.

“Lisa. It’s Esther. Of course she’ll be home. She is ancient. It takes her a few minutes to get the door. She is really sweet. You’ll see.”

Jazz sprang from the bushes.

“Hey boy, is your mom home?” Just then, the front door opened up. “Hi Esther. Do you have time for a visit?”

“Hello my dear. What a fantastic surprise. I always have time for you. From all the wonderful stories I’ve heard, you must be Lisa. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Esther radiated with excitement.

“Yeah, hi.” Lisa eked out. It was cute and out of character to see her nervous.

“Please come in and warm yourselves. Is that a new look?” she asked, studying the rollers all over my head. Lisa near busted with amusement.

“Oh no,” I giggled.

Esther was happy to see us. Jazz took advantage of the open door and leaped into the house.

“Thank you, Esther,” I said, following her into the house with Lisa trailing behind. “I have a strange request. We are going to the school dance tonight. Do you think we could finish getting ready here? You know how Dad gets about stuff like this. We won’t be long or make any mess. Don’t let the bags scare you,” I joked.

“Oh, of course, yes, many times over. Lisa, you are very welcome here. I feel a kinship to you. Piper just adores you.” I got another look from Lisa.

“Thank you, Esther. I hope the stories were the nice ones.” Lisa said with reserve and politeness.

“Oh yes. Please. I’ll make some tea for us.”

We took little steps so as not to outpace Esther’s shuffling. She started her routine for making tea. Lisa was out of her element. She had a reserved and gracious look on her face.

“Relax,” I whispered to her. She stood as rigid as board. Esther’s presence had strangely quieted her confidence. We put the duffle bags down near the table.

“The kitchen has nice lighting. Esther, is it ok if we put our makeup on here?” I asked nicely.

“Oh yes dear. Please do whatever you fancy.”

“We can use the outlet here; I actually brought a makeup mirror.” Lisa began to thaw.

“Wonderful.” Esther was beaming with delight.

We settled in and got to work. Lisa started on herself while I chatted with Esther. It didn’t take long for Lisa to open up. She was getting excited for the dance. The out of the ordinary day shifted my somber mood. Esther kept the tea flowing. I often told her she should trademark her formulas. She would laugh in response.

“She really is nice,” Lisa said quietly.

“Told you.”

Jazz paced around our legs looking for attention that I was glad to give. I put him in my lap.

“Oh hello, my little man. Jazz could be my new boyfriend. Promise you won’t leave me or need space? Whatever that means.” Jazz purred so loudly it filled the room.

“Piper, come on, you’re even bringing the cat down” Lisa said with her eyes fixated on the mirror, carefully applying gobs of purple eye shadow.

“Jazz thinks differently.” He answered with a boisterous meow for more love. I gave him a nose kiss.

Esther dropped down a tin of pastries, assorted cookies, and brownies from a long time ago. Lisa turned red holding back laughter, offering me some.

“I think my rollers are ready to come out,” I said with excitement. The tension on my scalp was giving me a headache. I took out what I could reach. Esther made her way over to help.

“That is all of them, my dear,” Esther said.

“So...how does my hair look?” I got up from my chair and flipped my hair forward, and then flung my head back like a supermodel. I pictured perfectly wavy hair with volume oozing from each twist and turn. I stood there with a smile worthy of a reveal. The response was not what I hoped for.

“I don’t understand the kids of this era,” Esther said whimsically. She turned and went back to the sink.

Lisa looked up from her makeup mirror and stopped cold. She had one hand pulling her lower eyelid down and the other hand gracefully poised with a black eyeliner pen. “I don’t believe it.”

I frantically turned Lisa’s mirror to look.

“It didn’t work. Not even a little! I hate my hair. It won’t curl no matter what I do. I have cursed genes,” I said, falling back into my chair.

Esther let out a loud belly laugh. “Oh, dear. You are favored,” Esther said jovially.

“Thanks, Esther, but that doesn’t help my extreme bad hair day. Lisa, we don’t have much time left. Josh is going to be here in 30 minutes and I need to do my makeup.”

“No worries. I’m almost done. Then we’ll focus 100% on you,” Lisa said with confidence.

Anything that ran contrary hit me like a global issue. Looking like I stepped out of the pool hurt like my bruised side. The feelings of emptiness were there, waiting to pounce.

“I’m ready!” Lisa said with sassy thrill.

“You look lovely, child,” Esther said with grandma-like support.

Lisa was ready for the stage.

“You look great. Do you think you can work some magic on me?” I asked earnestly.

“Of course. Sit in front of the mirror.”

Lisa went to work on my hair while I did my makeup. I kept it easy. I knew Dad would be waiting for me when I got home. Being grounded would put me over the edge.

Esther was having the time of her life watching us and doing anything to help. We were deep into the thick of it when the doorbell rang.

“That must be Josh,” I said to Esther. “Do you mind if I get your door?” I wanted to save her the effort.

“Please do,” Esther said graciously.

Lisa and I sprang into action. I saw Josh through the window.

“Hey Josh, you’re early,” I said, opening the door.

“Not by much. Your dad said you and Lisa were here. He didn’t seem too happy.”

“Sorry about that. We’ll be out in a minute. We are just finishing up. Mind waiting in your car?” I didn’t want Esther to think that I was inviting all of Oak Creek High over; although I’m sure she wouldn’t have minded.

“Do you think I’m ready?” I asked Lisa.

“Hardly,” Lisa replied, trying not to laugh. “But it will have to do. Let’s pack up and dance, dance, dance!”

We whisked back to the kitchen. I did a last check in the mirror. Lisa had flawlessly French-braided my hair.

“I like it!” I said, satisfied with something other than a ponytail.

The heap of makeup and accessories on the kitchen table made my head spin. Esther sat smartly behind the pile sipping her tea. I was relieved the disarray didn’t stress her out.

“Our ride is here,” I told Esther.

“Does that mean you are done? Will you be leaving now?”

“Yes, sorry if we stayed too long. We’ll clean this all up,” I said apologetically.

“Oh my, no! Stay as long as you like. I’m having a wonderful time. I truly enjoy the companionship.”

In that moment, I realized how much Esther meant to me. I wanted to be like her when I was that old.

“Thank you, Esther.” I gave her a hug. “It was really sweet of you to let us to get ready here.”

“Yeah, thanks for the tea. It was the best I’ve ever had,” Lisa said.

“I hope we can ‘get ready’ again sometime?” Esther asked.

Lisa and I uncorked smiles. “You can count on it,” I answered.

“Look at all this!” I said to Lisa, pointing at all the makeup and more. “We better tell Josh it will be a while.”

“What? No way.”

Lisa held the mouth of a duffle bag just under the table. She scooped whatever she could get in her arms into the bag like poker winnings. A combination of makeup, styling products, and beauty tools clashed into the bag. I started laughing. “Are you for real?”

“Come on, get another bag. Time is wasting.” Lisa stashed and stashed.

“Ok.” I joined her in the mishmash. Esther watched bewildered. Quickly the table returned to the immaculate state with only the old pastries remaining.

“See!” Lisa said with a look of pride.

We put on our jackets and slung the duffle bags over our shoulders. “Thanks again, Esther.”

“Time for the big dance,” I said, walking out the door.

“Have a good time, child. You too, Lisa.” Esther waved standing outside on the porch. We piled into Josh’s car. I knew she’d watch us drive away.

“Is she always barefoot?” Lisa asked.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you could buy her some slippers?” Lisa suggested.

“I’ve tried.”

“Hey Josh, sorry about that,” I said, crawling into the back of the car.

“No problem.” Josh was air drumming to the music.

Lisa tossed all the bags into the back seat with me and then jumped into the passenger’s side. “Hey, did you get the sauce?”

“You bet. Jill came through,” Josh answered. Jill was Josh’s older sister. She kept us stocked up for a fee. “Ok, where to?”

“Well, down to the lake, of course!” Lisa said with a party smile. She reached into a brown paper bag in front and passed back a can of beer. Lisa opened her can, spraying all over as she let out a big scream of laughter. “Sorry, Josh.”

“No worries, she’s a beater.” Josh was too laidback to care.

“Let’s stop at Malts&Shakes on the way?” I suggested.

“And wreck the buzz? No way!” Lisa replied jokingly.

“Might not be a bad idea; I’m starving,” Josh countered.

“I guess we’re going to Malts&Shakes,” Lisa conceded.

I wasn’t against having a couple of beers. I would party with the rest of the crowd, but I always maintained control. If I got busted, Dad would overreact and send me to rehab for disobedient teens.

Lisa, on the other hand, was totally out of control. Her parents were strict, but she was the youngest and took full advantage of it. Josh was always the designated driver. Drinking wasn't his thing.

Malts&Shakes was jumping. I was glad not to be working. Tess was running her ass off.

While we waited for our food to go, I found my thoughts returning to Chris. It was weird for him not to be with me. I knew exactly what he would order.

We got our food and made a run for the lake.

Despite the age of Josh's car, he had an awesome stereo. Lisa got the party started with some P!nk.

We uncontrollably broke into song. I gazed out the window watching the countryside blur into a series of changing washed-out colors.

We found the perfect place to park at the lakefront to kickback, in a secluded area with a phenomenal view of the early moonlight bouncing off the waves of Lake Michigan. The blues of the lake transformed into an endless black field sparkling with light. I loved the lakefront. The infinite calmness was a source of comfort. I wanted to float around in the black void forgetting who I was.

We took turns eating, drinking, singing, and laughing, but I couldn't match the energy of Josh and Lisa. I was already looking forward to the end of the evening. Lisa's cell phone began ringing every 15 minutes.

"Lisa, who is calling?" I finally asked.

"Oh, it's just Chet, he is probably freaking out that I'm not there yet. What time is it?"

"6:47," Josh answered.

Lisa exclaimed shrilly, "We've got to get to the dance ASAP. We are so totally late!" She giggled.

"Don't worry Lisa, the dance won't pick up until later. We're good," I said.

"Here Piper, help me finish." Lisa passed me another beer.

I was already over my limit. Josh fired up the ignition, driving his big boat like a racecar. I cracked open the beer and drank it as fast as I could. The speed made me realize how buzzed I was. The more I tried to drink Chris away, the thirstier I got. I wanted to call him. Beg him to meet me for a last dance. My tortured mind painted a picture of us kissing during a slow ballad. I reminded myself drunk-dialing was so junior year.

Lisa commanded the stereo no matter where we went. "Rhiannon" trumpeted out of the speakers. I went wild. It was exactly what I needed. Riding the notes of the song, I broke away from missing Chris. I belted out the lyrics taking center stage.

The song faded. I opened my eyes to silence. Both Lisa and Josh had turned around, looking at me with matching grins. I had no idea we had arrived and parked.

“You know you are my best friend, right?” Lisa asked like she was serious. “Please don’t drink and sing.” Lisa and Josh erupted in laughter. I had no idea that I sounded that awful. I laughed with them.

“Sorry, I went a little nuts,” I said sheepishly, saving some face.

The parking lot was full to capacity. Lisa was elated with the turnout. She didn’t wait for the engine to stop. “Come on!” she said, already on her way. Josh and I bailed out of the car after her. Upon entering, Lisa turned up her charm, taking control. She instinctually began ordering the other student council members around. She stood on her toes, scanning the crowd.

“Chet probably wants to kill me. I’m going to look for him. Put your cell phones on vibrate. This place is crazy!” she screamed disappearing into the crowd.

Josh and I looked at each other and laughed. I could tell by the look on his face that he didn’t want to be here. That made two of us. At least the strong bass from the loud music felt good pulsating through my body.

There was a steady stream of people walking and in and out of the dance. The fluorescent hallway contrasted heavily with the darkness and flashing colors of the gym. I gave Josh a gentle push.

“Let’s do this.”

“Yeah, you first,” he answered with a guffaw.

We passed a gaggle of cheerleaders. They always seemed to travel in packs. The second they saw Josh and I they immediately stopped talking and watched us.

“Hiii- yiii, Piiiper!” they all said in perfect cheer rhythm.

“Ah...hi,” I stammered back to all of them.

“Now that was weird, right? I’m not that drunk. I swear they all just ‘cheered’ hi to me?”

“Yeah, I think they want you on the squad,” Josh said, smirking.

The music and light faded as we walked into gym. I was disoriented until my eyes adjusted to the dark light. Murmurs of conversation filled the air. I wondered if Chris was somewhere in there.

The DJ came on the speakers, “Time to slow it down for all you love birds out there.” The soft music felt like nails against an old-fashioned chalkboard.

Blue spotlights struck three disco balls hanging in the middle of the gym, creating swirling dots of light. The ceiling was laced with tiny bright lights, twinkling like stars. The effect was beautiful. Two dancing platforms

were set up on either end. The gym had been transformed into a night club. Josh and I locked arms under the backlights.

“This is crazy. I think the entire school is here. Let’s make our way to the bleachers,” I shouted to Josh.

“Good idea,” he nodded.

We sat at the top of the bleachers and watched. The view was spectacular. The couples on the dance floor swayed like reeds in the wind.

So many emotions rushed through my mind and body as I watched. I was happy to be part of the last dance of high school, but missed being at Chris’s side. I was excited for life after high school, but apprehensive about closing the chapter on everything familiar. I had no choice; it was time to spread my wings and take flight. There was no way I could stay at home.

I imagined Chris and me under the sparkles of blue lights racing everywhere. The fantasy left me empty. I was daydreaming so intensely that I didn’t notice Jade until she was on top of us. To my surprise, she bypassed me and went straight to Josh. She whispered in his ear. It was out of character that she didn’t talk to me first.

Jade finally pulled herself away from him. “Hi Piper,” she said loud enough to overcome the music.

“Hey Jade, I hope you and Greg are having a good time,” I yelled.

Josh leaned into me. “Hey, let’s get the hell out of here. Maybe go back to the lake?”

“But we just got here!” I said comically. “Lisa would be so pissed if we left.”

As I listlessly gazed out on the dance floor watching, something caught my eye on one of the platforms. Suddenly everything made perfect sense. Like a strike of lightning, my sad, lonely, and desolate feelings flashed to anger.

6

Twinkling

Everything around me moved in slow motion, but my heart pounded like a machine gun. Heat radiated from the anger ramming its way through my veins. Josh and Jade's words didn't register.

I watched Chris and Stacy Waters, the head cheerleader, dance and kiss on one of the elevated platforms under the beautiful blue lights and celestial ceiling. I wanted to turn away, but froze.

I felt a snap and a wave of energy ripple through my being from the inside out. The rush came from my core and traveled instantly to my extremities causing my ears to pop. My fingers tingled and my head prickled like a used lightning rod. My senses heightened until I was more than alive. My reflexes kicked in, springing me forward like a lioness.

I had to know why. Was she the reason? Despite Josh trying to hold me back, I broke free and flew down the bleachers. I moved faster than anyone around me. I ran my fingers through my hair, ripping out the braid. Like a famished Cheetah sprinting after its prey, I effortlessly navigated through the rock-a-bye couples swaying on the gym floor with precise accuracy.

I stopped directly in front of Chris and Stacy. I recognized the desire in his eyes. The tears poured down my face and dropped to the floor, sounding like explosions.

It felt like hours before Chris noticed me out of the corner of his eye. His expression went from dreamy bliss to erupting animosity. Stacy quickly turned to see what Chris was glaring at. She immediately pushed herself away from him. Her face dropped from lovesick to car-wreck panicked.

By now Josh and Jade had caught up to me. People began to stare.

"Is this why?" I shouted at Chris over the loud, annoying love song. Stacy jumped off the stage and ran.

"Stacy, wait!" Chris screamed. His voice was easily drowned out. He kept his attention glued to Stacy. Someone grabbed my arm.

"Piper, Piper..." I knew it was Lisa, but I didn't take my smoldering eyes off Chris. He shot daggers from his expression, stepping off the stage directly in front of me.

“Back off, Piper,” he commanded. The punch from his voice hit my face, bringing up all kinds of impossible emotions. I felt like I was running full speed to save my life, but going nowhere.

Chris tore after Stacy. I watched motionless as he left the dance floor. I stood without thought, watching the specks of light chase each other on the floor.

“Are you ok? Come on, let’s get out of here.” I looked up as Lisa pushed my hair out of my face. So many things were splattering through my head. Lisa’s eyes spoke her worry. She took my hand and held it. Josh and Jade stood next to her, incapacitated by sympathy. My emotions flat-lined. Everything was so unreal, including me.

I needed to hear it from Chris’s mouth. I took off for the exit like a bat out of hell. Before I knew it, I was at the exit of the gym. I slowed down, walking into the brightly lit hallway. My eyes automatically adjusted in no time flat. Although Chris and Stacy were down the hallway, I heard every one of his pleading words. I marched over. Stacy saw me, left Chris, and started towards me. I didn’t want to talk to her. I wanted to talk to him.

“Piper, I’m so sorry. Chris told me you two had broken up. I would have never...” Stacy stammered.

“We did break up,” I cut her off. “I know this has nothing to do with you,” I said in monotone. I knew Stacy was upset. I tried hard not to direct my copious amounts of anger towards her. She gave me a smile and then hurried away to the safety of the flock of cheerleaders watching from afar.

I approached Chris. He was standing with his arms folded and a look of disgust on his face. His stance upped the ante. Our eyes locked on each other with equal force.

We started yelling at the same time. “Is this why?” I shouted.

“It’s none of your business!” Chris shouted over me.

We paused, locking horns.

“Piper, we broke up. Did you think I was never going to date again?”

“You said we were taking a break. I didn’t know that meant banging the head cheerleader!”

“You are so full of yourself! I didn’t ask Stacy out until after we broke up. I don’t owe you an explanation! I don’t owe you anything!”

Just then Lisa, Chet, Jade, and Josh came rushing over. They all stood there waiting for someone to make a move or say something. The ball was definitely in my court, but with an audience I restrained myself. How could he toss me aside like a used toy for a shiny, new one? The magnitude of hurt inside scared me.

“Piper, let’s get the hell out of here,” Lisa said quietly, putting her arm around my shoulder. Her steady embrace made me realize I was trembling.

I released Chris from my stare and ran to Lisa. I could see her concern through my water-logged eyes. Everything was out of order.

Knowing why Chris ended us left me senseless. There were no more questions or hope. Chris and I were over. Done. The change had come with the quickness of a thief.

“Hey, come on now,” Lisa encouraged. The cold March night air hit me like an alarm clock after a sleepless night. Josh ran up and flanked my other side, giving me the sweetest look of support.

“Thank you,” I said tenderly, wiping my face.

“For what?” Josh asked bewildered.

I stopped walking and took in a deep breath. The arctic air rushed into my lungs. I closed my eyes for a second to clear my mind. I opened them to see Josh and Lisa standing in front of me with uneasy anticipation.

“Thank you guys for being such good friends!” I gave them both one big hug. The warmth of friendship brought support to my crushed spirit. More tears sprung forth. I silently screamed on my emotional rollercoaster.

“Hem, Ah Piper...” Josh eked out. “You’re...crushing...us!”

I immediately let go and stood back in surprise. “Was I...hurting you guys?” I asked in disbelief.

Lisa coughed. Nearly tipping over, Josh put his hand on Lisa’s back to steady her.

“Girl, you got some major...” She grabbed another breath. “...adrenaline running through your body.” She shook her head. “I think you knocked the wind out of me,” she sputtered out.

“I’m so sorry!” I stepped toward Lisa and Josh. They both backed up in reflex. “I guess my emotions are getting the best of me. Maybe I’m still drunk.” I tried to fake a laugh.

“You moved really fast back there.” Josh said.

“When did you redo your hair?” fashion-first Lisa asked.

None of what they said made any sense. I grabbed my hair and pulled it front so I could see it. I didn’t know what happened, but my hair was wavy. “I guess the rollers took time to work. I don’t care.” None of it mattered. I wished they could see the gashes, scrapes, and cracks on my heart.

“Well, if you could bottle whatever made you move like that, you’d make a fortune,” Josh said playfully.

“Let’s get out of here. Chet is going to handle the rest of the dance and clean up. Josh, back to the lake!”

“You bet. Let’s go.” Josh obliged.

We walked to the car in silence. As much as it hurt, I couldn't stop replaying what I saw. I admitted to myself Chris did nothing wrong, but it sucked being replaced.

Lisa skipped ahead, opening the car door. "Come on, we'll all sit in the front. You go in the middle so we can surround you with lots of love and make you all better." That was so Lisa. I put on the best fake face I could muster up and slid in the big bench seat

I turned to Josh, "Any place...Anywhere...please just make it fast!" I wanted to put space between me and what had just gone down. I wanted to be far away from Chris smoothing things over with Stacey. More than the distance, I wanted time to leap ahead and be someone else, someone incapable of being hurt.

Josh made a quick getaway from the school parking lot, squealing his tires. I appreciated his urgency. There was calm quiet inside the car, with only the whine of the engine singing. I closed my eyes and put my head back. I felt different and it wasn't just that Chris and I were done. My body, my senses, my awareness...were all heightened.

Josh continued his drag race down Clement Avenue. I knew exactly where we were without sight. Lisa put her hand on my arm. In that instant I felt what she was feeling. Her pure heart was pouring compassion into my being. It was beautiful. My tears were so big they forced open my eyes.

"I know. It's going to be ok, I promise," Lisa assured me quietly.

I blinked and blinked. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. No darkness! I could see everything...the road, the trees, and even the ripples in the creek that ran parallel to the road. My mind did somersaults. I felt confused and sick to my stomach.

Everything had a subtle glow. It wasn't like a full moon or a midday sun. All things emitted light and feelings. The light carried harmonious vibrations describing life in a new language. I thought I was going to lose it. My brain went into overdrive.

I scanned all around. Did I drink too much? Was I going crazy? Was I having a breakdown?

Surprisingly, I did not feel panicked. I literally existed outside my mind.

Josh was driving fast, really fast. I felt the speed. I had senses that didn't exist. Direction, acceleration, orientation were second nature.

I perceived time in discrete moments, multidimensional frames. My brain labored to make sense of it. What was happening to me? I should be petrified, but felt composed.

I looked over to Lisa and freaked. She was looking right at me forming my name in ultra-slow motion. "P...i...p...e...r..."

Lisa had a glow emanating from her body, forming an aura around her. Rays of pink and yellow flames radiated out from her in all directions. The light was beautiful, like the aurora borealis, magnetic storms in the polar skies. Hyper colors without names blended together, creating rivers of light.

As she finished my name I quickly turned to Josh. My mind whirled faster. Josh also had an incredibly complex and breathtaking aura surrounding him. Like Lisa, it started from within and extended all around his body. I could detect the same palette, but Josh was tinted in shades of purple and orange. I could feel and see his intense concentration on the road and exhilaration brought on by breaking the speed.

I whipped back to Lisa again. Everything rushed back to normal like a switch had been flipped. I was disoriented. "Are you ok? You keep twitching," Lisa said. She looked like herself again, no longer a glowing alien.

"Not really. I think I lost my mind," I replied seriously. I turned my attention back to Josh. He looked totally normal, no radiating aura.

"Track time!" Josh yelled with devilish excitement. We jumped the train tracks all the time. The road formed a quick ramp up to the rails. It was an incredible rush. We would brace ourselves with our hand against the roof of the car and fly over the tracks marking 'air time'. The feeling of free falling was exhilarating, but not tonight. All I wanted to do was get home, forget the evening, and cry myself to sleep.

Before I could protest Lisa screamed out in excitement, "Go for it!" Not what I wanted to hear. The engine roared, accelerating to jump speed. Closing in on the tracks, it happened again.

7

Brake Lights

Time slowed down to a crawl as we flew faster. Surges of apprehension quickened my breathing and accelerated my heart. My attention was drawn out the windshield and into the dense darkness. Abruptly, my sight turned on as though everything had a light bulb within. My focus sharpened enough to discern the tiny water droplets dancing in the currents of air from the lake fog. Unexplainable fright mounted as the car, time, and speed inched forward.

Scanning the distance with telescopic power and microscopic precision, I saw the reason for my dread. A deer stood on the railroad tracks. She glowed like sunshine compared to the lit surroundings. With geometrical accuracy I calculated our trajectory. We were locked into a crash course.

I could feel the deer lock her muscles freezing in fright!

My attention snapped back inside the car. Lisa and Josh burned brighter in excitement. Lisa smiled big, bracing her hand against the roof of the car. Josh piloted the thundering car with Formula One exhilaration. Neither of them knew of the fatal impact rapidly approaching.

“Josh! Deer!” I screamed out as time resumed and the glows faded. Josh went from race car arrogant to instant panic.

“Piper, I don’t see...”

Suddenly he saw the deer in the pools from the headlights. Extreme fear permeated my core. The deer was mesmerized by the light. Josh jerked the wheel, slamming the brakes in reflex, but it was too late. The accident was already happening.

The momentum flung the screeching metal beast up and into the air. Adrenaline flooded my body. Electrical surges screamed to the end of my nerves and exploded.

The car flipped like a projectile off course upon launch. Lisa screamed bloody murder. Josh clutched the wheel with a death grip. We were in the midst of a chaotic end. Why didn’t time slow now! As fast as I thought it, it happened. Milliseconds stretched into minutes. This time, I embraced the weird shift.

Everything looked weightless, but the deadly forces still pushed and pulled. I saw Lisa moving in slow motion towards the windshield. It flashed in my mind that we didn't have on seatbelts since we bolted out of the dance...because of me! Josh began flying forward despite his white knuckles and ridged arms.

Something gave way inside me like a dam bursting. A new kind of survival instinct let loose. I felt the exact orientation of the car. We were upside down and tilted. The ground was above us. Strangely, I wasn't disoriented.

My first thought was for Lisa and Josh. Lisa's hair began to brush against the windshield. Immediately, a gush of energy moved through me cementing us to the seats. My thoughts had force!

Lisa and Josh lost consciousness as the car sailed over the deer. I could feel the pregnant doe's heart pulsate, launching her into a flight response.

Suddenly I felt a burning sensation. The front right nose of the car met up with the pavement. The friction ground brilliant sparks, spraying molten metal. I felt the strain on my bones as the weight of the car fell into the road.

My self-defenses kicked in. A surge of energy poured out of me, creating a visual disturbance. Thick panes of fluid light flowed with my intentions of protection. The ghostly brilliance screamed around us, enveloping the car and lifting us off the ground.

We sailed forward upside down, off balance. I leveled the car with a commanding thought. I was in control of the car like I had a master joystick in my mind. Although it felt we were moving at the pace of a sleepy snail, I knew we were rocketing. I registered thoughts to slow the car. We stopped, suspended and upside down, as time resumed its normal trot. The scene was unreal. I let out a breath. Whatever had just happened was over and we were alive.

Josh started making noises. I rotated the car right side up.

"Josh...Josh, wake up" I gently shook him.

He woke in panic, turning the wheel and pumping the brakes.

"Hey! Calm down!" I said more sternly. Josh's brain was still flying through the air. He kicked open the door and fell out. I slid over to the door and gasped! The car was still three feet in the air.

With a quick thought, I lowered us to the pavement. Josh caught the tail end of this unbelievable sight, tumbling over. He shook his head looking confused.

"Josh, help me with Lisa." He sat spaced out. "Lisa!" That brought him back to reality.

“Is she ok? Are we ok?” He stood up. “What the hell happened? The deer! Last thing I remember...”

Josh walked over to the car.

“She is waking up.” We slid towards Lisa. I grabbed her hand and touched her face. “Lisa?”

She mumbled while her brain synched. “What happened? Are we dead?”

I let out a laugh in relief. “I think we came close, but we are safe. Are you with me?”

“No, I’m not with anything right now.” Lisa’s eyes aligned.

“Check it out.” Josh said, walking to the front of the car. The nose of the driver’s side glowed ghostly orange. “How the hell did this happen?”

Lisa and I got out of the car. I steadied her on her heels towards Josh. The front nose of the car smoldered so hot it rippled, permeating the night with a foundry smell.

“Last I remembered we were airborne, but not in a good way.” Lisa quickly regained her reason. She and Josh looked at me like I had answers. I had no idea! They didn’t see the brilliant lights or feel what I did. All I saw now were misty black shadows painted by the moonbeams.

Something supernatural had occurred and I had caused it, although I didn’t know what it was. Whatever it was, it felt like a reflex, but it wasn’t controllable or repeatable.

“I don’t know,” I said in frustration. I was always good for the truth. I swore all the weird things were as real as the ground beneath our feet. The scorched car bore witness to it. We stood there dazed and jumbled.

Suddenly beams of colorful lights started flashing around us. I didn’t know if I was causing it. Josh and Lisa had absolute panic on their faces. Something was wrong, but time did not lapse. I turned around and my heart sank without time for an SOS.

The police lights created illumined red and blue beams in the semi-opaque air. We stood still and silent in the bust. I couldn’t even blink my eyes. With so many unexplained occurrences this evening, getting in trouble with the police would be the worst. Dad would ground me until I went to college. My high school life just ended. Lockdown began.

“Lisa, are there any beers in the car?” I whispered.

“Only empty ones,” she muttered.

The cop was talking on his radio. “What are we going to say? I cannot get into trouble. My dad will kill me! Same page now,” I said to Lisa and Josh without moving my lips.

“I think I’m going to puke,” Lisa said, white as a ghost.

Just then a bright searchlight pierced the murky air, lighting us head to toe. Josh and Lisa grimaced from the shock. My eyes immediately corrected to the intense light. I could see everything just fine. It wasn't normal, but at the moment I didn't care.

The officer cautiously approached us with the eyes of a prosecutor and his hand on his gun. He put the focus of his flashlight on the damaged corner of the car. The rising heat still swirled in the foggy air. "Are you kids all right?"

We nodded slowly.

"Who is the driver of this vehicle?" The cop delivered his inquires with precision and aggressive resolve.

"It's my car, officer," Josh replied submissively.

"I asked who is the driver of the vehicle," the cop stated with increasing intensity.

"Sorry, sir. Josh Hanson, I'm the driver and owner of the car," Josh said promptly.

The cop walked over, getting into his face. I felt my anger boiling to frightening temperatures, causing my fingertips to prickle. I repeated 'control yourself' over and over in my mind. I wasn't sure what would happen if I overreached.

The cop shined his flashlight directly in Josh's eyes.

"I'm only going to ask you this once, have you been drinking?"

Josh fought closing his eyes, looking away. "No sir, not a drop."

The cop lowered his flashlight. "Then you won't mind taking a Breathalyzer?"

"Gladly, I have not been drinking."

The cop turned to Lisa and me, putting the same interrogating spotlight in our faces. I smelled something awful coming from Lisa.

"Where are you kids going?" Lisa trembled in the spotlight. I couldn't blame her. By all rights, we should all be dead on the side of the road.

Lisa and I answered at the same time

"Going to the..."

"We were..."

Lisa let out a nervous laugh.

The cop immediately went for Lisa like a shark.

"Have either of you been drinking?" Lisa's beer breath filled all of Oak Creek. "The second I smell a lie, I'm hauling all your asses down to the station!"

"No!" Lisa pleaded. "We haven't been drinking; we just left the school dance because I'm not feeling well," Lisa said with what charm she could muster.

“Nobody move or talk,” the officer demanded.

He aimed the flashlight’s accusing glare on the still-roasting part of the hood. He looked up at me. “What happened here?” He shined the light directly in my face.

I was hyped up; even my perspiration felt sharp. “Ah...the car...it...well...” I was trying to make up something reasonable on the fly and was failing miserably.

“Honestly officer, we don’t know,” Josh answered.

“Is the car drivable?” The cop asked with a note of anger.

Focusing on the tossed about car, I melded with it. I felt the frame ache from the impact, the battery being drained from the lights, and the cindered hood felt like road rash.

I focused on the engine, moving through the various components and systems. I involuntarily reached out my hand towards the car. With the ease of playing flute keys I toggled the pistons, firing up the engine with a roar.

A shiver of excitement flashed through my body. I wasn’t crazy. I literally jump-started the car.

“The car is fine, sir. It’s ready to roll!”

Lisa puked. Ignoring my best friend losing it in front of the law, I looked back at the cop with enthusiasm.

“Get in the squad car. I’m taking you all in. I don’t know what kind of games you are playing or what she’s on, but your parents can help us sort this out,” the cop said in a sarcastic tone.

Whatever was going on, I knew I had to keep it to myself until I could figure it out. The fear of Dad smacked me. The unknown putrid odor stunk in the air again, but this time it came from me.

“What? Why?” I asked loudly.

“Come on, Piper, we are in enough trouble the way it is.” Lisa looked absolutely dreadful. She took my hand, pulling me towards the cop car. Josh complied, following the orders. Picturing Dad picking me up from the police station pushed me over the edge.

I felt another snap. I didn’t know what I was doing, but couldn’t hold my tongue. A fizzing sensation jumped around my left hand.

I broke free of Lisa. “Leave us alone...” I thought aloud.

As I said the three words, a bracelet of liquid silver light formed around my wrist and shot into the cop’s eyes.

My heart raced. The silver glow persisted around my wrist, outshining the hazy moon. I moved the spectacle closer to my face. My breath gave way at the sight. The bracelet was made up of tiny dragonflies of light attached head to tail, buzzing around in a perfect circle.

“Piper, please! You are making it worse,” Lisa said, completely oblivious to the silver glow. She grabbed my arm through the dazzling bracelet. I could see the sublime light reflected in her eyes.

I was in a state of intoxication, blinded by the beautiful, rotating metallic light.

“Do you see that?” I asked completely entranced.

“See what? Piper, please just shut up and do what you are told,” Lisa pleaded.

“Go straight home, and don’t forget to drive defensively,” the cop said, turning his flashlight off. He returned to his squad car as if under orders.

We stood there, confused. The darkness consumed the beams of red and blue in a second. I heard the officer radio back ‘no incident’ like he was standing next to me. In total disbelief, we watched as the police car taillights receded into the fog like a pair of red eyes.

“I know I’m repeating myself, but what the hell just happened?” asked Josh.

“No idea,” Lisa said, coming back to life with a perplexed smile. She released her snake-like grip on my arm.

I heard a fizzing sound. The tiny silver dragonflies disbanded, flying off in corkscrews and shedding sparks, fading away to nothing.

I stood there trying to figure out how I made an irate policeman leave.

“Come on!” Josh said without waiting. We jumped into the car like it was the last safe place on earth. We took off in the opposite direction.

“Piper, I’ve got to get you home. It’s past your curfew,” Josh said, putting his head back on.

“Hey, that is nothing compared to what should have happened,” Lisa said, exhilarated. She had a good story to tell, but I needed time to think and make sense of everything.

“I don’t know where to start,” Lisa said with large, thrilled eyes. “I cannot wait to tell Chet. There is no way he is going to believe this!”

“Lisa, please, just put on your seatbelt and be cool. We should keep this to ourselves,” I said firmly.

Josh immediately chimed in. “That’s the part I don’t get. Keep what to ourselves? What the hell happened?” he repeated, this time with a laugh, finally believing we got away. “It’s all a blur. I slammed the brakes and cranked the wheel. That is the last thing I remember until I fell out of the car...I think.”

“I have no idea. I passed out. It doesn’t matter anyway,” I said, diverting all questions to the endless scenarios that all ended in make-believe.

“I think we all blacked out,” Josh said. “Man, I cannot wait to tell Chris!” Silence tore through the car. “Sorry Piper, I...”

“No harm done, Josh,” I said with a dismal smile. My emotions were tapped.

Lisa turned around with a befuddled look on her face. “I don’t know what to say. A good night’s rest will make everything look better. It might suck for a while, but you’ll get over him.

“Yeah, I don’t know.” I responded, depressed. “That’s if my dad doesn’t kill me first!” We rounded the corner onto Laketrail Drive. The lights were off in the house.

“Josh, drop me off here. I’ll walk the rest of the way.” The neighborhood was peacefully asleep. I checked my cell. 10:21! I was an hour over my curfew. I had two missed calls, one from Dad and one from Chris. I slid out of the back. “I really appreciate you guys taking care of me,” I whispered.

“Anytime...what are sisters for?” Lisa quietly got out of the car. “I knew my green vest would look good on you. It brings out your color,” she said, giving me a hug. Josh signed off with his usual goofy goodbye wave.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” I gingerly closed the door. I watched them drive off, another set of red eyes running into the night.

It was dead calm out. The damp fog chilled me to the bone. The bizarre evening had caught up to me. Every ounce of my body was heavy, my senses were worn, and my heart moaned from Chris moving on. Walking the rest of the way felt like sprinting a marathon.

I stopped on the sidewalk. The house was silent. No sign of life from the kitchen or the bedrooms upstairs. Maybe Dad got tired and went to bed. Maybe he passed out from drinking. The thought of dealing with him was too much to comprehend.

Just then I heard steps running up from behind me.

8

Amethyst Glow

With the unexplainable and unexpected events of the evening, I wasn't sure who or what was running at me. I heard multiple footsteps, but saw no one. The banks of lake fog dissolved the maker.

At riveting speed a pale, blue blur flew out of the bushes. A super charge rippled through my body. I instantly jumped back five feet landing on the tips of my toes. My right arm stretched out and my left hand cocked in close to my chest in perfect balance. A fizzing sensation ran down my fingers.

Jazz landed directly in front of me. I rolled off my toes. "Jazz!" I yelled with a whisper. "You scared the hell out of me."

"Meow!" He roared with clout.

"Shhh..." My hearing was on steroids. I picked up a change in Dad's characteristic whistling snore. Jazz sauntered over and rubbed up against me. My scratches elicited an instant purr. "Meet in my room later."

I crept up the stairs to the front door. Jazz sat in a pensive pose. I intensely listened one more time before reaching for the doorknob. Both Charlie and Dad were fast asleep. I faintly made out their heartbeats through their breathing.

A blasting clamor tore through my head. I winced. Jazz's meow was louder than a clap of thunder. Dad snorted and fabric rustled. I spun around like a freshly wound top. Jazz trotted towards me crying out ear-splitting meows. My apprehension took off.

"No boy." I lifted my hands to shoo him away. My jaw dropped as an invisible force swirled the fog, stopping him in his tracks.

I felt a jolt of resistance as Jazz flicked his tail. He pushed forward, meowing like crazy. A whimper from Charlie filled my ear. Although I wanted to figure out what was going on and how it was happening, the most important thing was to get in bed undetected. That meant no more foul feline cries.

Funneling my concentration, a sudden gush of energy blew out of me. Jazz slid a good seven feet away. I could see his claws make scores in the dirt, fighting against my will. He fell forward as I let go of my thought.

Jazz stood sideways with his tail puffed out. "I'm sorry..." I muttered.

He let out a hefty hiss and sprung into the darkness.

"I'll make it up to you," I whispered under my breath.

I focused my attention on sneaking in. Dad sounded too close for him to be in his bedroom. He must have crashed on his chair in the family room. I slowly opened the screen door and softly turned the front knob. Carefully putting my shoulder against the door, I pushed down my rising fear and nudged it open. I stuck my head in the house and immediately stopped. Sure enough, Dad was facing the door, asleep in his recliner. Waking him up would be like waking a hibernating grizzly. For once, his addiction worked to my advantage.

As quiet as a church mouse I closed the door behind me. I latched the lock out of habit, making a loud click that sent shock waves through my body. Dad made a funny noise. I stood there like the doe on the railroad tracks, paralyzed.

The house was dark. I conjured thoughts of seeing light, but no such luck. I kept my eyes on Dad as I crept away.

Our old house was not good at keeping secrets. The first stair let out a howling creak. Dad mumbled unintelligent words. My blood rushed and heart slammed in my chest, sounding like a surging pipeline. Currents of fear wrapped around me like fast rapids.

Dad started twitching. I bore down in concentration. My vision flickered. The shadowy, foreboding house was momentarily illumined with an inherent glow. I sprang up the stairs with the speed of my heart and the grace of a ballerina, taking huge strides over multiple steps. My weight shifted effortlessly as to not make a peep. Just as I got to the top, Dad struggled out of his chair. I jumped towards my bedroom. I curled around midair, grabbed the blankets, and landed gracefully in bed without a sound.

I lay in the bed petrified, facing away from the door with nervous eyes fixed open. Dad lumbered up the stairs like an elephant walking on wooden planks. He rarely came upstairs with his bum leg, but tonight he made an exception. My throat went dry.

The stairs cried with each step. I was totally aware of Dad's location. His mounting anger felt like needles. He came into my room disregarding my privacy. The room churned with his scent. I felt him reaching for the bed. I still had my jacket and shoes on. I lay perfectly still, barely breathing.

My attention was pulled to the window. Obscured by the fog, Jazz was shaking his hindquarter with intentions to jump onto the windowsill. All the

hairs on my body stood on edge with such muscle tension; I raised off the bed a tiny fraction. No, Jazz, I silently broadcast. Curiously, he raised his head, dismissing his hop.

The tension was heavier than my winter blankets.

Dad's hand closed in, stopping just above the covers. My heart beat so fast I was vibrating.

A painful eternity passed before he backed away. I breathed motionless. Charlie's door creaked next. He stood in the doorjamb for a while. Although I had no view, I could see him as if a camera was projecting his whereabouts. I picked up on his feelings as though I touched his soul. I detected the pain in his hip from pulling himself up the stairs, but sensed a deeper hurt. An intense sadness gnawed at him like a parasite.

Finally, Dad waddled down the stairs.

A massive thud hit the window like an unsuspecting bird. My hearing remained hyper-sensitive. Jazz had finally made the leap, and not a moment too soon. He sniffed around the window, probing for a way in. My door was still open. A meow would bring Dad storming back.

My heart skipped a beat watching Jazz. His eyes glowed a slight amethyst color. The effect was beautifully alluring, but I dared not move.

Dad's bedroom door slammed closed. Relief washed over me like a summer deluge after a heat wave. As calm returned my courage, I carefully closed my bedroom door.

"Meow," blasted through the pane. His purple eyes blackened his shadow. I tip-toed to the window and let him in. He sauntered around and jumped onto the bed. I held him as fast as I could.

"Jazz, there is so much to tell." Tears ran down my face and rolled off his furry coat. They hit the ground and thumped on the carpet. Jazz fussed. "Let me see your eyes? Did you know they glow?" I kissed his forehead repeatedly.

He licked my tears and cleaned my face. Jazz's rough, spiky tongue against my red, swollen cheek felt like sand paper scraping fresh skin, but the sentiment bandaged my busted heart.

"Where do I start?" I curled up next to him. "I cannot even tell you. Saying the words might confirm I've lost my mind." Jazz chatted. He settled outside of my reach, chin down, ready to hit the hay.

The only real, bankable thing coming out of the strange night was that my relationship with Chris was over. Jazz flicked open his camera eyes. We joined in an extraordinary way. The violet light coming from his irises beat to the rhythm of my heartbeat creating the loveliest calm. I did not fight the bliss nor would I even fathom trying. My eyes grew heavy as I willingly stepped into unconsciousness.

9

Hatched



I didn't know where I was, but felt no worry. It was unlike any place I had ever been. The sun was shining brilliantly directly above. It cast rays of semi-translucent light through the rustling trees making it difficult to see. The sunbeams had a visible motion. They showered down strands of tiny golden pearls flowing in perfect harmonic waves. I could actually see the miniscule light drops peacefully cascading to a splash landing creating subtle tones. The silk filaments of pastel light softened everything.

I was in a forest surrounded by huge trees. The ground was alive with soft, lime-hued moss. I heard life all around me. Birds sang in the canopies, water rushed over rocks, and the gentle breeze made music with the leaves. A plethora of pleasing notes made me feel as if Mother Nature was my muse. Everything around me flickered with light. It was similar to my visual occurrences last night.

I started towards a giant redwood. I tripped out. I didn't move. The tree and surroundings moved toward me. I was in reach of the huge trunk. The bark emitted a sweet chocolate color that begged for my touch.

A strange, low growling noise came to my conscience. I could not make it out. I pushed the distraction out of my head focusing on the gentle titan. As I went to touch the bark, the noise intensified rapidly to the strength of a whistling train. Whatever it was, it was moving faster and louder. The brilliant sun started to fade. A sudden wind picked up thrashing the trees. The tiny jewels of light were whisked away and replaced by a smoky, opaque mist. The ground rumbled and quaked. The constant siren consumed me. I put my hands over my ears in an attempt to muffle out even a fraction of the sound. Panic scattered my senses. I closed my eyes, screaming.

I gasped opening my eyes. I immediately slapped the blaring alarm clock off. That was the most realistic dream I had ever had. Jazz was at the end of the bed staring at me in a regal pose with totally normal, unlit eyes.

"Did last night really happen?" I asked him. I felt rested and capable - but like the Wisconsin weather, that was bound to change. Jazz jumped off the bed and sauntered his way over to the window. He stretched out as long as an evening shadow. "Shazam!" I declared to the window. My mom used to say that when she opened anything. I focused all my brainpower to lift the window, but it stood still, taunting me. The more I replayed the evening, the crazier I felt. The only thing real was that Chris was with Stacy, and I was with history. I went over and opened the window.

"Okay boy, time to go." The morning air was crisp and clean. Jazz didn't budge. He stared at me through deliberate blinks. "Come on." He meowed harshly in protest when I picked him up. I put him on the

window sill. In a fraction of a second he was coasting down the tree to Esther's. I grabbed my morning stuff and headed to the bathroom.

"Hey Charlie, time to get up," I said without enthusiasm.

I dodged a major bullet sneaking past Dad last night, but I knew he remained loaded. I heard him downstairs getting ready. Whatever the cost, I had to avoid him this morning. I had broken curfew. There would be a price to pay, but not right now. Chris had left my soul black and blue. My head was still reeling from last night's uncontrollable and unexplainable events. I felt fragile and vulnerable, yet extremely volatile. Standing in Dad's crosshairs was the last place I needed to be.

I turned the shower on to pull the hot water up from the basement. If my outside matched my inside, I must look horrible. I reached into my basket of products to see what could be done. I looked in the mirror. The explosion from my basket hitting the floor sounded like dynamite. I stood flabbergasted and stunned.

"Hey! What's going on up there?" Dad yelled from the bottom of the stairs. I couldn't take my eyes off the reflection; they were stuck in total disbelief. "Piper!" I heard Dad hobbling up the stairs. No matter what, there was no way he could see me like this!

"Ah, sorry Dad, I knocked over my basket, everything is okay." Everything was so not okay.

"Be careful! You better not damage my floor!" he bellowed up the stairs. I heard his grumbling receding back to the kitchen. "You're in deep water for last night!" he yelled.

I cautiously touched my face watching my reflection do the same.

"Okay, you are me..." I watched my mouth saying it quietly to myself. "...but what happened?" I turned my head slightly side to side scrutinizing each angle of my counterpart in the mirror. The weirdness of the evening continued. I stood there entranced.

"Whoa, what happened to you?" Charlie asked, standing outside the bathroom with a surprised look on his face.

"Nothing!" I slammed the bathroom door and put my back against it. I tried to think. The doorknob turned.

"Come on, Piper, I have to use the bathroom!"

"Go downstairs," I fired back.

"What's your problem?" Charlie complained, walking away.

I locked the door, attempting to collect myself. Slowly I approached the mirror. I cautiously filled the reflection with my face. It was still me, but beautiful. My splotchy skin was a gorgeous alabaster hue and perfectly clear, but I still had my freckles. A soft rose color adorned my cheekbones. My thin lips were full and blush wine in color. My fine dishwater blond hair was

now radiant strawberry blond, with curl. My eyelashes were long and strong. My eyelids were deepened to a perfect mocha tint. My lifeless hazel irises were a brilliant jade outlined by a thick circle of midnight blue. I pinched myself to make sure I was not lost in another real-life dream.

I didn't remember looking like this last night. If Dad saw me, he would have a raging fit. I jumped into the shower, frantically reaching for the makeup remover and washcloth. I soaped up my face, scrubbing the washcloth back and forth until it hurt. I went to shampoo my hair, but something felt strange. My hair was not getting wet. It repelled water! I grabbed the ends to take a closer look. I didn't remember Lisa putting anything in my hair to cause this. Like duck feathers, the water cascaded off my thick, wavy curls. The hot tap was full throttled spewing more steam than liquid, but the water felt tepid at best. Waves of steam tossed around my dry hair like desert wind.

"Piper, come on. I need to brush my teeth!" Charlie knocked on the door with aggravation. I turned off the water and started to dry off.

"Coming..." Even my body seemed different. I was more defined and curvier. My bruise was totally gone. Oddly, I looked older. I got to the fogged-up mirror. I reached my hand up to wipe off the moisture. I hesitated. "What is happening to me?" I could not think of something so strange. I took a deep breath and I ran my hand across the mirror..."I can't believe it!" My face was exactly the same after the shower. There was no question; I wore no makeup.

"We are going to be late." Charlie pounded on the door.

"Piper, I want to talk to you!" I heard from downstairs. When Dad was angry his voice was like a saw, sharpened by fear. It cut to my root today. I tore myself away from my reflection and gathered up my stuff as fast as I could. The sunlight streamed through the window, illuminating the steam. Water drops floated gracefully like in my dream. I tossed on my bathrobe and made a quick dash to the door, taking one last eyeful of the person in the reflection. She was someone I knew, but didn't recognize.

As I opened the door, Charlie was raising his fist to pound again. The sunshine and warm, moist air hit the cold morning in the dark hallway, blinding him.

"It's all yours." I made a break for it. I closed my bedroom door as Charlie closed the bathroom door.

"Piper!" Dad yelled my name with provoked impatience. I cautiously opened my door a crack. I could see him from the waist down, shifting on the first step. He had his lunch, car keys, and jacket.

"Yes?" I replied with less attitude.

"I got to go to work. We'll settle up tonight!" he huffed.

“Okay, I have swimming practice.” I narrowed my bedroom door.

“I’ll be waiting. Clean up before you leave!” he ordered, slamming the door tight.

“Sure.” If I had been a cat, I would have just used one of my lives. A feeling of relief washed over me for a second. I ran to my bedroom mirror. “Wow...” I focused on my new exterior. It was me, but fine-tuned. I was too freaked out to be remotely happy. The anxiety of the upcoming school day caused shivering pain in my head. I could not explain the events of last night, and even less my new appearance. I hoped I could stay cool. For now I was going to enjoy my temporary victory of avoiding Dad. It gave me time to deal.

I got dressed. My clothes didn’t fit. They were tight in strange places and looser in others. My teenage body had been replaced by an athlete’s. I ran my hand down flat abs and curvy hip. I felt the touch, but the outline disconnected with my memory.

“Piper, what am I eating for breakfast?” Charlie screamed from downstairs.

“Ah...” I shouted back, rummaging around the room for clothes to cover up my new assets. My eye movement was brisk and focused. I scanned my closet like a laser, honing in on my baggy jeans. I grabbed a grey sweatshirt on the way.

“Cereal...pantry...second row.” I pulled the grey sweatshirt over my head. My hands and fingers moved differently. Their movements were graceful and fast. My fingernails were perfectly shaped, long, with no cracks or splits.

“I’m headed out.” I heard Charlie open the coat closet. I detected the noise and vibration in the wood floor like a spider’s web.

“I’m freaking out,” I said out loud. I grabbed my backpack and glided down the stairs. The fast moves felt as basic as walking. I rounded the corner of the banister, pushed off the last stair, and jumped through the hallway, landing silently behind Charlie putting his jacket on.

“Don’t forget your gloves,” I said.

“Aaaaaaaah, what the...” Charlie screamed, falling into the closet. He slowly emerged from the dark. The light cautiously moved across his face. “You look...beautiful.”

“You’re so funny.”

“What happened?” Charlie stood motionless, studying my face. I grabbed his hat from the closet and pulled it over his face.

“You’re going to miss the bus.” I turned him and pushed him to the door. He pulled his hat off with giggles. “See you later.”

“Yeah, okay,” he said, already over my baffling new appearance. I stood there and watched for an extra second. “Piper?” Charlie asked, turning to me. “How are you getting to school today?”

Dread flooded my brain. The school was a brisk twenty-minute walk from our house. The clock showed 7:19. Being late after a major dance where I caused a scene was not what I needed. I did a quick turnaround to check the house. My mouth hung open in shock. The kitchen was a total disaster. Dishes were stacked high in the sink, the counters were in need of a good wipe down, and the kitchen table looked like a pig trough. Frustration charged my fingertips with carbonation. Since I was going to be late, I might as well take the time to clean the kitchen.

I hustled around the house as fast as I could move. I rinsed the dishes, loaded the dishwasher, and cleaned the sink. The water from the faucet fell like syrup. I wiped down the stove and counters. Not the best, but good enough to pass. I looked at the clock and it said 7:24. Only five minutes had passed!

A crazy spark of hope went off in my brain. If I could move this fast, I could get to school on time. I busted out the door fueled by this plausible chance. I lassoed my backpack and broke into an effortless run, taking off like a missile. I felt the drag of the backpack against my chest breaking into an insane stride.

The arctic air ushered in a crystal clear morning. I knew I was running faster than humanly possible. The cold front pushed against my face, but did not sting. The chipper sun was energizing, shining something more precious than warmth.

My vision had changed. I didn't have to squint. My eyes had built-in shades. I opened my eyes as wide as possible, taking in all the light. I felt a painless pressure that corresponded with the intensity of the brightness.

I rounded a bank at a forty-five degree angle. The trees slowly swayed in the wind with choreography. What I once saw as random tossing of branches and falling leaves was now more like a well-orchestrated dance creating beautiful patterns.

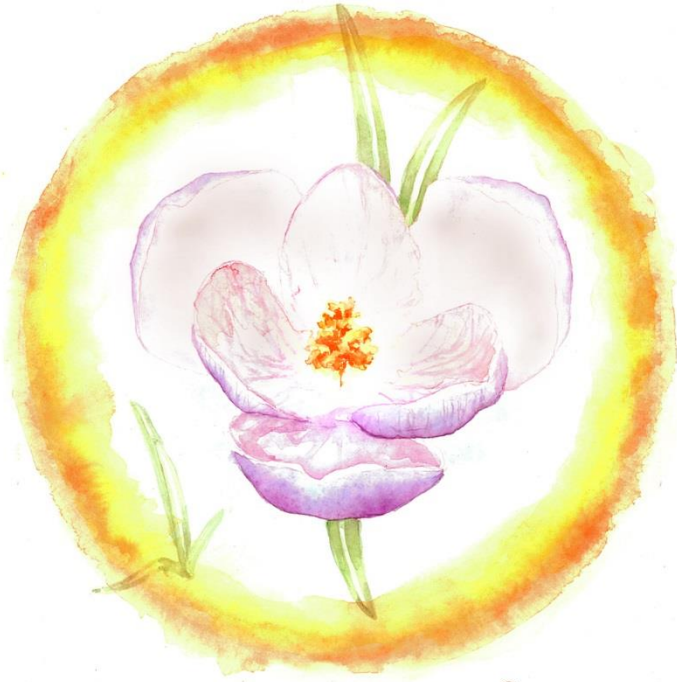
Exhilarated, I was making great time without feeling any drain. In fact, the more I ignored my doubting mind, the faster I moved. I took in my surroundings at lightning speed while navigating through the woods with minor shifts in balance. I started laughing. I ran on instincts, faster than the wind, clipping big trees and dodging decapitating limbs. I saw a bird moving too slow for flight. I darted to catch up to it. It took her some time to see me and react. She dipped her wing, sailing away with sluggish elegance.

I rounded the last corner, bringing me to the school grounds when the most stunning vision halted my rapid movement. I was drawn like a moth to a brilliant flame on a black night. I abruptly stopped directly in front of this curious occurrence just a couple feet off the path.

“How could anybody miss this?”

10

From the Isle of Crete



R 13

I knelt in front of the intriguing magical splendor. This had to be the first crocus of the season. The pioneer had pushed its way through matted winter grasses and icy leftover snow. I was captured. The petals were soft, white angel wings with pulsating veins of purple. In the center, the orange ruffled stamen erupted marigold colored light, encompassing the flower. The simple and delicate life sang with sweet beauty.

I reached down to touch the living miracle. When my hands came into my view, I fell back. My hands, arms, legs, and body had some kind of internal sunshine. Unlike the illumination during last night's flip and fly, this time my brain held what I saw. I twirled, disorientated, as my head spun and my stomach churned. My vision wildly oscillated from bright fuzz to crystal clear in a kaleidoscope of colors. I rubbed my eyes.

I took control of my eye's aperture. My dizziness left as the blurry lights sharpened to a crisp edge. My eyes had been opened. I fell through the rabbit hole without moving. I waited for Alice to fall from the sky. I could see outside of the visual spectrum, both high and low frequencies. Life was more extraordinary than my wildest dreams.

I slowly turned around, soaking in everything while grappling with my never-before-experienced view. There was sunlight everywhere. The surrealism of last night was here to stay. I questioned my sanity.

Everything was brilliant. The woods were painted in light, but not from the sun. Life beat inside the muted trees. New feelings shot through me like finale fireworks. This time, tears came from childlike wonder. I looked directly into the sun without pain or consequence. I could see so far away. The perfect circle of light was freckled with spots like me. Halos of metallic light encompassed the glowing ball of burning wonder. The sunshine never looked or felt so nourishing.

Everything around me was alive with feelings. A flock of birds flew by, hooking my attention. They were surrounded by sunlit auras that glistened with intensity compared to the surrounding winter landscape. A rabbit with a furry outline of brightness foraged around a pile of dead branches. Even the decaying limbs of a resting oak murmured with a light purple aura.

A group of pines stood out amongst the low-lit bare trees. Their auras were spectacularly different. They emitted a misty shine that was near-opaque, blanketing the sky with color. I went over for a closer look.

Like stacks of dishes hitting the floor, the school bell rang. Responding like Pavlov's dog, I pulled away from the spectacular view.

I had evidence it was real. Even Charlie thought I looked different, but reasons were nowhere in sight, even with my enhanced vision. Whatever was happening, it had taken root. I focused my thoughts on acting normal. It sucked.

I rounded the school to the front door at a normal pace when I was wowed again. Two juniors, John and Robert, were running into the school at the last second for the countless time this year. We stood there staring at each other with no one making a sound for what seemed like a school hour. They were radically different. They looked the same, but they had a most incredible light encompassing them. I could see it overlapping in brightness, concentration, flow, and most of all...color.

“Come on, John, we can’t be late again,” Robert said. They both started to laugh, creating a swarm of firefly lights dancing around them as they uncontrollably stumbled through the door.

“When did she get hot?” I heard Robert say to John. I could aim my ear cavity to funnel whispers giving me bionic hearing.

In comparison to the tardy boys, my aura looked like a squirrel’s or tree’s. I gave off no color, just sunlight. These guys emitted so much more. One thing was for sure; laughing was beautiful. I trailed them as long as I could, carefully observing with my new sight.

I needed Lisa. I could spill my marbles to her. She could tell me whether I needed to be committed immediately for observation or declared a freak of evolution. I didn’t know what the difference was anyway. At this point, all bets were off.

I spun around the corner of the hallway. Even the walls had a dynamic illumination.

I rushed to class. Bright forms of all kinds, shapes, and colors darted into the classrooms. I found Lisa and Jade in hallway. Both of them were talking to each other at a feverish pace. Lisa was annoyed. Not just by the tone of her voice or skittish movements, but the energy she radiated. Her aura flashed fast with cherry colors broadcasting her mood. Jade flickered an endless collage of uncomplimentary colors.

Like most, their chests were brighter. More interesting was the interaction between their auras. Small electrical storms of light ebbed and flowed between them in amazing complexity.

“Hey,” I said like I did every day, while taking in the surreal light in secret. Both Lisa and Jade stopped with words in their mouths. They looked at me with shock. Their faces changed and their auras shifted in perfect unison. I recognized Lisa’s expression. I had seen it this morning when I first saw myself in the mirror.

“Come on. The bell is going to ring.” I shuffled around them and headed into class.

“Piper, what the...” Lisa began, as the clanging bell promptly signaled the start of a long and laborious day.

“Girls, to your desks now!” I heard Mr. Miller command without patience.

I briskly sat in my desk at the end of the back row with my head down. I heard Lisa calling my name under her breath. It was hard to ignore, being that it sounded like she was right in my face.

At least I knew I wasn’t totally crazy. Lisa and Jade’s reactions proved I was still somewhat sane. I got my notebook out and plopped it on my desk.

An epic adrenaline rush gushed through me as I looked up. Almost every face was turned towards the back of the room staring at me. No one said a thing. The only noise was the bubbling aquarium. Lisa was mouthing something to me that I ignored. My heart immediately started to pound. I felt my eyes dilate.

Auras surrounded all my classmates. It was insanely beautiful. Each person radiated a unique light.

“Okay, eyes up front!” Mr. Miller growled. One by one, my classmates turned, whispering to each other. Not only could I hear the commentary clearly, but I was able to process all the conversations happening at once. My eyes rapidly danced from source to source.

“She dyed her hair,” from a mostly green Sara.

“Chris dumped her,” from a bluish Dave.

“She’s messed up,” from a low-lit yellow-orange cheerleader.

“It’s for Chris,” came from a strawberry Jade.

“I would do her,” came from a very bright Brian.

“I’m not asking again! The next person that makes any noise is getting a detention,” Mr. Miller added for weight. His aura was different. His light was more defined than the students and carried more strength. He amassed hot reds while writing on the whiteboard. I summoned up the courage to peek at Lisa.

“What is going on?” she mouthed. Lisa looked at me with concern. I didn’t know what to say. The classroom whispers rose back to life. Mr. Miller’s shine was becoming distracting. Everything around me moved like any day, but nothing looked like anything I had ever seen.

“Piper,” Lisa said with more determination to get my attention. “Piper!”

A foreboding feeling washed over me like unexpected rain. Mr. Miller spun around as time tripped into slow motion. The blood-red color in his aura collapsed in a flash, exploding in bright crimson. My senses engaged. A wave of brick-red energy burst forth from Mr. Miller in every direction, hitting the first couple of rows of students. Pinpricks of light crackled on

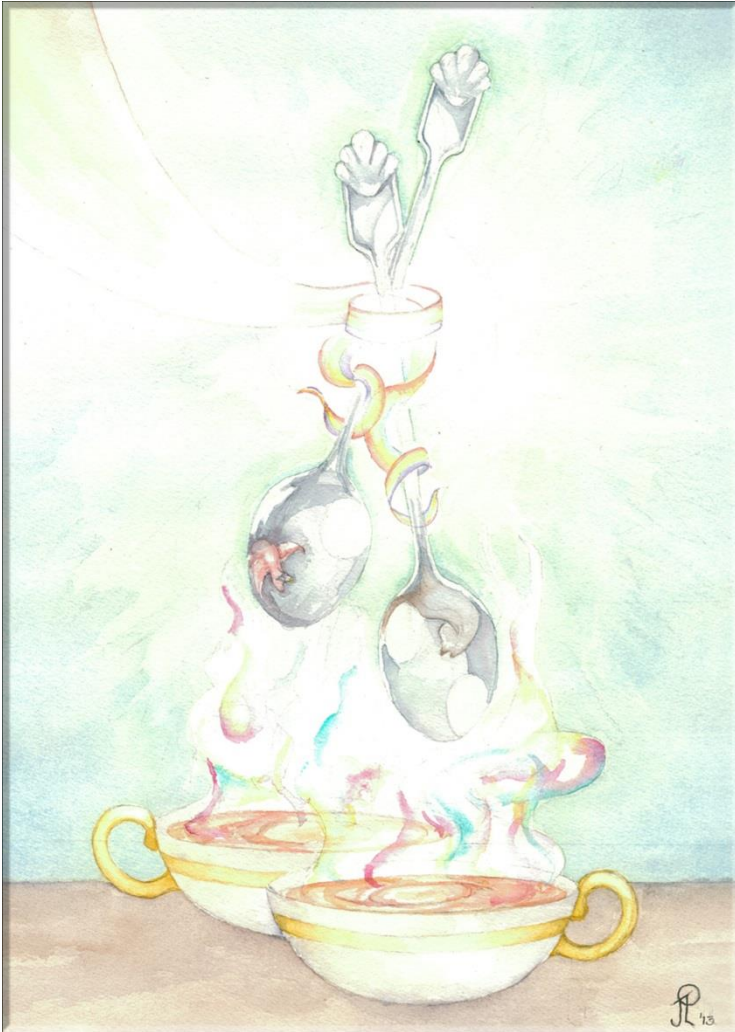
their aura like hot ashes. The fish darted as the wave of anger screamed through the tank.

My instincts bucked like last night. It was happening again, but this time I had an audience. My fear fueled my defenses to the approaching front of rage. My uncontrolled emotions had way more force than a focused thought. I raised my arms in defense. In an instant, a layer of glassy light covered me. I closed my eyes, bracing myself in the chair. I heard a noise like a guillotine followed by a loud thud.

I opened my eyes. For the second time in the period, the entire class had their eyes on me.

14

Reunion



15

Damselfly



20

Spirit in the Sky



24

Fina's Heir



26

Gold



27

Cycles



28

Predator and Prey



29

Do You?



35

Aftermath



39

Revelations



40

Birth



III

Metaphase



The second phase of mitosis in which the cell's chromosomes align themselves along the equatorial plate of the cell through a cellular tug of war. The parent chromosomes, which have been replicated and are called sister chromatids, remain joined at a central point called the centromere

Coming Soon

Thank you for spending your time reading Prophase.
I sincerely hope you enjoyed the tale.

M. Street

About the Author:

M. Street is an avid storyteller with an innate passion for fiction writing. He was raised in rural Wisconsin near the shores of Lake Michigan across from a small forest that became his second home. As an adult, M. Street has lived on the East Coast in Boston, on the West Coast in San Jose, and now resides South, in the great city of Austin, TX. A love for nature, art, spirituality, and science has been his foundation. He has been fortunate to have been adopted by cats, dogs, birds, frogs, turtles, and Monarch butterflies. His professional background is rooted in Engineering having earned a graduate degree in Computer Engineering from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is technically published (under a different name). He is currently creating Metaphase, the follow on to Prophase, part of the Mitosis series.



Mitchel Street and Piper

"A Present Tale by Mitchel Street is a beautifully crafted masterpiece of a story that perfectly bounces between the real world and a mesmerizing new reality....the type of novel that gives you a thrilling reading experience and leaves you with a beautiful, indescribable feeling when you turn the last page."



Faridah Nassozi for Readers' Favorite

"This rather extraordinary book is one of the most impressive coming of age tales I've read. Street writes beautifully, with a poet's gift for creating light, color and song with words and the illustrations that grace the front of most chapters are inspired and pair magnificently with the story".



Jack Magnus for Readers' Favorite

"The creative joy that went into writing this book is evident; you can tell that Mitchel Street put a great deal of time, energy and everything else into this book. Anyone who enjoys reading about fanatsy and new worlds with a group of characters they will grow to love is going to enjoy Prophase."



Kathryn Bennett for Readers' Favorite

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