

# **The Daughters' Baggage**

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## **Dedication**

To Charlie, always.

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### **SORRY, WE'RE CLOSED**

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**WE'RE OPEN, PLEASE COME IN**

## **If These Bags Could Talk**

Joslyn flipped the old-fashioned sign on the front door of her shop so customers approaching from the street would read the “Open” message. She returned to the sales counter to contemplate the unusual little, green suitcase which she’d just acquired. Judging by the size and style, it was meant for a child of perhaps eight to twelve. It was one of those old bags that could be used either as a backpack or as a suitcase on wheels to be pulled along by a handle that extended from the back. Luggage like this used to be quite popular back in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but this one was unique. Which was exactly why she had been attracted to it.

Most antique shops that specialized in baggage preferred classic examples of each style, looking for pieces in pristine condition. Their customers wanted to find a piece that reminded them of one they’d seen as a child, perhaps a piece of luggage that their parents or grandparents had owned. Like the old rolling, “carry-on” bags that people once used when traveling. There used to be an entire industry that manufactured these pieces to fit precisely in “overhead bins” – storage compartments within the passenger areas of jets. She chuckled to herself. The antique photo she displayed above the counter, circa 2020, showing crowds of people pulling rolling bags behind them in an airport always delighted her customers. What a sight!

Other dealers craved well-preserved samples of bags like those. Joslyn cared more about items that carried the unique stories of their previous owners.

“If these walls could talk.” That was an expression she’d heard from her grandmother, but she preferred her own version, substituting “bags” for “walls.” Walls could be witness to lives spent indoors, but a suitcase or backpack or trunk might travel anywhere in the world. Whenever she saw a used piece of luggage, she would begin to wonder. Where has it been? What did it carry? Who owned it? Where did they go? Why?

What is the story behind this bag?

Take this little green suitcase, for example. Joslyn picked it up again, examining it from all sides. Over the years, someone – or multiple owners – had affixed decals to the front. She could tell that there were actually layers of stickers; bits of the earliest ones were torn and faded to nothing. More recent additions were still barely legible and intriguing. Had the owner actually traveled to the far-away destinations displayed, to Dubai and Islamabad, to what was once Afghanistan and to Ethiopia and Vietnam, the top-most stickers? Or were those destinations merely a dream?

Lovely ties had been added to the original zipper pulls. Given the selection of travel decals, she guessed the colorful, embroidered ribbons might be Afghan or Pakistani in origin.

She turned her attention to the item that had originally attracted her interest.

She’d discovered the large, wooden trunk in the catalog for an estate sale. It had clearly been used and abused, with several significant gouges in its outside walls, but a sturdy trunk like this was made to withstand rough treatment. A name was written on the outside on one end of the luggage. Her research had identified it as the signature of a mountaineer and humanitarian who had achieved international recognition for his climbing accomplishments during the first half of

the century. Inside, however, was a delicate surprise, and one that hadn't been visible in the virtual images. That's why it sometimes paid to attend these sales in person rather than judging simply by what was posted online. At the decedent's home – located within reasonable traveling distance from the shop – she'd opened the trunk and made a discovery. A flap of heavy material formed a pocket of sorts inside the lid, a place to stow a few items of clothing, perhaps, that one wanted to protect from other items packed in the gaping, open area of the body of the trunk. Along the opening to the pocket, someone had hand-sewn an embroidered strip of fabric of a similar style to the ribbons on the child's suitcase-backpack piece. Of course, the little green pack she'd discovered at the sale hadn't even been worth listing in the catalog. She'd never have known about it had she not gone in person.

The trunk had another odd feature that she'd not seen before. Around the perimeter of the main compartment, just below where the lid would close, were a series of small holes drilled through the entire wall of the trunk. Were these to let humidity escape? Or to allow air to pass into its interior? She could only imagine.

She rearranged a few displays so the new backpack could be exhibited atop the battered trunk.

If these bags could talk, what would they tell her?

**ONE**

## The Birthday Present

Kayla Medlock tore into the wrapping paper like a starving predator into its kill. Her lip curled in displeasure.

“A suitcase? Grandma got me a suitcase? I told her I wanted a backpack!” She lifted it from the pile of shredded paper and twisted ribbons and turned it over in her hands.

“Oh. My. God. It’s got a stupid cartoon ... *fairy* ... on it.” She thrust the suitcase away as if it were filled with dung.

“Kayla! Stop acting like that. This’ll be perfect for our summer vacation,” her mother said, picking up the gift to examine it herself. “Look. It can be converted to a backpack for school next fall.”

Kayla rolled her eyes. “But look at it! Grandma must think I’m still a kid. I’m practically a teenager. How could she buy me a *kid’s* suitcase?”

Dylan, her older brother by four years, interrupted. “Twelve *is* still a kid, runt. Anyway, Tinkerbell is perfect for you. Flighty.”

“Enough, you two. Kayla, I want you to write Grandma a nice thank you note.”

“But we’ll be seeing her in person. I can—“

“You can write her a note,” she repeated, her tone making it clear that the matter was not open for further discussion. Her eyes surveyed the living room floor. “And clean up this mess, but save any of the bows that you didn’t destroy.”

Her brother snickered. “Help her straighten up, Dylan,” their mother added before marching out the door.

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Later that evening, Kayla peered in at her father in his home office. “Dad, I need your help.”

John Medlock spun his chair away from the computer. “Come on in, sugar. What’s going on?”

She shuffled into the room and sat on the loveseat in front of him. “I’ll just die if I have to drag that little kid’s suitcase around on our trip. Can’t we exchange it or something?”

John took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Look, kiddo, you know Grandma Elsa meant well. She just doesn’t realize how much you’ve grown up. Not like Grandma Marge who gets to see you all the time.”

Kayla scowled. “I know, but I’m still not going to lug around a picture of Tinkerbell.” Last time they went to visit Grandma Elsa, she adored the story of Peter Pan. But she was just a child then – like, ten and a half.

He leaned back in his chair and gazed at a spot high above her head. Kayla held her breath, waiting for her father to think through the options. Finally, she saw his characteristic nod and his focus returned to her. John had worked out a plan that might not upset his mother-in-law, yet could appease his daughter.

“Tell you what. Have you ever seen luggage decorated with decals from places people have visited?”

She nodded, her expression softening. “I could cover the fairy with a bumper sticker?”

Her dad reached out and caressed her cheek. “And throughout the trip, you can put more stickers on your suitcase so it won’t seem to Grandma Elsa when we visit that you’re just covering up Tinkerbell.”

They shared nearly-identical smiles – beaming conspirators. “I’ll get you one for Yosemite before the trip so you can cover her up right away. Then we’ll pick up decals from other places once we arrive. I’ll bet you’ll have three or four before we reach San Jose. How’s that?”

“Perfect, Dad! And you’ll convince Mom?”

John gathered his daughter in his arms for a hug. “No worries, kiddo. I’ll handle it.”

Kayla lay awake that night stewing over the dreadful gift. *I told Grandma I needed a pack for school, she recalled. I can’t carry my school stuff around in a roll-on bag with shoulder straps! Not even one plastered with travel stickers.*

She knew exactly which backpack she really wanted. Actually, any of the styles Chloe Davenport promoted in her ads would do. Kayla snatched her phone from the bedside table, inserted her ear buds, and fired up Chloe Davenport’s Greatest Hits. Posing in front of the mirror, she imagined herself strolling into school with a *ChloePack* hanging low on her back, its leather-like straps and trim looking fine against the denim and black pattern. And she’d have true blonde hair. Maybe it would lighten in the California sun this summer to a shimmering pale yellow instead of what her brother called “rolled-in-the-dirt blonde.” Junior high school – a new start. She had the rest of the summer to work out how to make that happen.

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Kayla glanced furtively at the two girls in the lobby of the resort hotel as her parents checked in. They were obviously snickering at something, leaning close to each other to stage-whisper and gloat. She was almost certain they had spotted her stupid rolling suitcase, now decorated with the original Yosemite National Park bumper sticker that Dad had produced to cover up Tinkerbell as well as new stickers from gift shops in San Francisco and San Luis Obispo.

During their visit last week, when she showed Grandma Elsa the “improvements” she’d made to her gift, Grandma pursed her lips and nodded. “That’s quite clever, Kayla. By the time your summer vacation is over, you’ll have the best-looking book bag in the whole school.”

Grandma still imagined she’d allow herself to be seen with such a lame backpack.

She sneaked another quick glance across the lobby. Yes, the girls were definitely checking out her bag. She decided they must be sisters, one her age, the other a few years older. The older one caught her eye before she could look away and immediately grabbed her sister’s arm, pulling her toward the lobby door as their giggles escalated so they seemed to echo from the high ceiling and marble floors. They both glanced back at Kayla and her luggage before scurrying out the automatic door.

There was no way she could show up at her new school carrying this idiotic bag on her back. Even though Nasty Natalie had moved away (*Yes!*), her cohorts and girls just like her would be on the lookout for a dork to pick on in junior high. Kayla would do everything she could to avoid being that target again.

She shuffled behind her parents into the elevator, trying repeatedly to slide her suitcase close to her brother's to hide it from view.

"Knock it off, runt! Can't you roll that thing in a straight line?" Dylan kicked her bag out of his way and she dragged it on its side into the elevator, glad for the opportunity to try to damage it. If there hadn't been a lady riding up with them, Kayla knew her parents would have read them the riot act then and there. Luckily, their piercing looks had subsided by the time everyone sorted out who was sleeping where. As usual, Kayla was assigned the pull-out sofa bed and Dylan got the single.

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"I gotta go back to the room. I forgot something," she said to her big brother.

"Okay. Whatever." Dylan was far more interested in talking to the two girls in skimpy swimsuits than worrying about watching over his kid sister at the hotel pool. Their parents wouldn't be back from their tour for at least another hour, so no big deal.

Kayla rushed to their room, anxious that Dylan not notice that she would be gone longer than expected. Not that he was likely to care, but still.

A young, dark-skinned housekeeper smiled and nodded at her as she slid the card key to open her room. Kayla nodded back. It seemed like the majority of the maids she'd seen this morning heading to and from breakfast were young and Hispanic. Good.

She snatched the despised suitcase from the back of the closet, careful to leave everyone else's in exactly the position Mom had stowed them. Her next-to-favorite shirt was next. That would be convincing, since Mom probably thought it was still her absolute favorite. She had already earmarked her mother's tube of red lipstick and even her own case of glittery eye shadow. If she had been able to convince her parents once to let her start wearing a little makeup, surely she could convince them again. She added her mother's everyday wristwatch. Her expensive one, along with all their other valuables, was in the room safe. Perfect. She stuffed the selected stash inside the bag and scurried down the four flights of stairs leading to the back entrance of the hotel. Time to act casual, in case anyone happened to be looking out a window or someone from housekeeping was heading to the dumpsters.

The coast seemed clear. She carried the bag rather than roll it — less noise. After one final glance around for observers, Kayla gazed upon the case with an exaggerated frown of disappointment, shook her head for dramatic effect — just in the off chance that someone *was* watching — lifted the dumpster lid and tossed the suitcase inside. She peeked in, wondering if she should try to cover it up in the sparsely-filled container, but decided to leave it as it lay. With another over-acted slump of her shoulders, she trudged back into the building, only dropping her role of sorrow once the door clicked shut behind her in the cool hallway.

The stage was set. When they prepared to leave in a few days, Kayla's part was well-rehearsed. Dismay and confusion at discovering her bag missing. Tears when her almost-favorite shirt and beloved sparkly eye shadow were nowhere to be found. Shock that her mother's belongings had also disappeared. She'd be careful not to be the first to suggest that one of the young maids might have stolen the goods. But, once someone mentioned the possibility, she could add fuel to that fire.

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The next morning Kayla awoke in a still-darkened room to find her father shaking her by the shoulder. “Kayla. Dylan. I have something important to tell you.” He switched on a lamp and she covered her eyes, moaning. “Wake up, Kayla. This is really important.”

She yawned and stretched out her arms, vaguely aware of her brother sitting on the edge of his bed, rubbing his eyes, his hair ruffled.

“Huh?” she mumbled as she propped herself up on her elbows.

“Listen up, you guys.” Their father took a deep, calming breath before continuing. “Grandma Elsa is very ill.”

Both siblings shook off their sleep and sat up straight. “She had a stroke and she’s in the hospital.”

Dylan found his voice first. “How bad is it? Is she going to be okay?”

John swallowed before answering. “We don’t really know. It seems that it was a pretty bad stroke, so all we can do is remain hopeful.”

Kayla blinked rapidly, managing only a whisper. “Is she going to die?”

John sat beside his daughter and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “We don’t know, sugar. We just don’t know yet, but ...” He didn’t finish the thought, but she heard the sorrow in his voice. She nodded fiercely, keeping tears at bay.

“Now, I’m going to leave to drive your mother to the airport in just a few minutes. She’s flying directly to San Jose to go see Grandma. As soon as I get back, I need you to be all packed up because the three of us are going to start driving home today. Okay? Got that?”

They both nodded.

“Are we going to fly back out again to visit Grandma after we get back to Phoenix?” Dylan asked, his face drawn and pale. “Why aren’t we driving to the hospital?”

John paused before answering, his eyes cast downward. “You’re going to figure this out pretty soon, so I’m going to just tell you now. It was a very serious stroke. Grandma’s hooked up to a respirator and she’s in a drug-induced coma. If she makes it, she’s going to need a lot of medical care.”

The children nodded, speechless.

He kissed Kayla on the forehead then crossed the room to Dylan who rose for a back-slapping hug from his father. “You guys going to be okay until I get back?” John asked. His children nodded. “We’ll have lots of time in the car to talk about this. Now, get dressed and packed and we’ll grab some breakfast on the road.”

Seconds after their father stepped out the door, Kayla hurried into the bathroom to throw on the clothes her mother had her set out the night before. Not bothering to even run a comb through her unruly hair, she raced out into the hall. “I’ll be right back!” she shouted over her shoulder as the hotel room door closed behind her.

As she ran full tilt across the brightly-illuminated parking lot to the dumpster, her internal voice was declaring, “Yes! Yes!” Someone had left the heavy lid open, so she wouldn’t have to try to manage lifting it all the way back before trying to lean in far enough to retrieve the suitcase

Grandma Elsa had given her. But then a horrifying thought came to her. “Please, please — don’t let it be empty!”

When she peered inside and discovered the container teeming with trash, Kayla was certain all was as it should be. She deserved the punishment of rummaging through the debris for the bag.

At first, she hoisted herself up so her legs dangled outside while her upper body hung down into the dumpster. She flung cardboard boxes and bags of trash aside, digging deeper.

“I’m so sorry, Grandma! This is my fault. I’ll find it. I’ll find it and carry it to school, and I don’t care what anybody thinks. You’ve got to get well, Grandma!”

By the time someone from the hotel came to investigate, she had climbed down into the piles of rubbish and had abandoned her systematic shifting of contents from one side to the other. The maintenance man was expecting to find one of the homeless people from the area dumpster-diving for recyclables and still-edible food, not the missing twelve-year-old sister of a frantic young hotel guest, trash dangling from her hair and clothes, her nose red and snotty, tears streaming down her face.

“It’s gone,” she choked out as the man helped extract her from the mess. “The suitcase Grandma gave me is gone.”

**TWO**

## Long Hours

“Aaliyah ... baby ... you gotta get up now, girl. I’m leaving in twenty minutes.”

Her daughter moaned and rolled over toward the wall. “Sleep ...” she mumbled.

Ladana Johnson arched her back and rolled her shoulders. She gazed sadly at the back of her daughter’s head. “Aaliyah, you know this is our only time together until Sunday. C’mon, baby. You can take a nap later with the little ones. Miss Vicky won’t mind.”

Thank God for Miss Vicky. They certainly couldn’t afford a real daycare, but there was no way Ladana would leave her girl home alone all day and most of the evening while she worked. Not in this neighborhood.

The girl grunted in response, but rolled onto her back, rubbing her eyes. “Okay, Mama. I’m getting up.”

Ladana pulled back the curtain separating her daughter’s cot from the rest of their tiny, one-room apartment and retrieved a pitcher of reconstituted milk from the refrigerator. “Tell me about your day yesterday. Did you read to the little ones? I’m so pleased that you’ve been helping Miss Vicky so much.”

Aaliyah shuffled the few steps to the small table where her mother had set out bowls and a giant box of generic cereal. “That’s my favorite part of the day, reading to them. Or, like yesterday, we made up stories and had them draw pictures. Well, the ones who are old enough to use the crayons, anyway. But I think even baby Jordy enjoys hearing stories and looking at the books.” She traced a gouge in the tabletop with her index finger.

“I’m sure he does.” Ladana glanced at her watch. “Don’t forget to take that bag of soaps and shampoos to Miss Vicky this morning. That big convention group is checking out today, and they all had those goody bags, so I expect I’ll be bringing home a nice assortment of treats they’ve left behind.”

“Like pens and letter openers?” Aaliyah sighed. “We’ve got enough of those to last a lifetime. Same with soaps and shampoos.”

Her mother frowned at her. “Then we’ll give those away too, to people who need them. There’s always somebody worse off than you.”

“I remember, Mama,” she said, brushing her thick, black hair back from her face and taming it with a bright yellow hair clip. She looked around the efficiency apartment, remembering the times she and her mother moved from one friend’s home to another, sleeping on the sofa or the floor. Before that, there was the homeless shelter they stayed in after they lost their house. She forced herself to think of something else before earlier memories could rise to the surface.

Ladana wrapped her arms around her daughter and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I’m sorry I snapped at you, baby girl. I know you’ve got a big heart.” Her eyes flicked to the framed photo on the wall of herself with Leroy, their daughter on his lap. She loved the deep mahogany color of their skin, the impossibly long eyelashes the two shared. But Aaliyah had her mother’s lush, full lips and brilliant smile. Everyone was smiling that evening, their cozy house behind them, with

its deep red rose bushes in bloom and delicate, pale yellow curtains hanging in the kitchen window. Just before Leroy enlisted and everything changed.

She cleared her throat to get rid of the tightness before speaking. "Look at the time! I gotta get going. Can't be late. Marietta dropped another hint yesterday that they're considering promoting me, so keep your fingers crossed." She finished eating her cereal as she set the bowl in the sink, then turned back to fetch the milk.

"I got this, Mama," the girl said as she stood and cleared the table. "You go on, now. I'll straighten up here."

"You're an angel, Aaliyah. Now, be sure to get yourself down to Miss Vicky's by eight so I don't have to worry."

Her daughter sighed. "I know, Mama." She started to say something else, but stopped.

Ladana paused at the door. "What is it? What were you going to say?"

Aaliyah pursed her lips. "Nothing important. We can talk later. You've got to get to work."

"You sure?"

The girl nodded. It wasn't going to be easy to convince her mother to let her take a job. She needed to plan out her arguments carefully before starting that conversation.

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One of the young housekeepers hadn't shown up for her shift and no replacement was waiting in the wings, which translated into more rooms to clean. Ladana could either work past the end of her shift or work faster. For her, that was no choice at all, with her second job scheduled back-to-back with her hours at the hotel. Forced to take shortcuts, she relied on her experience to make the differences be invisible to guests. Not that she'd ever skip changing the linens or sanitizing the toilet, but anything else was fair game for a quick wipe with a damp towel if it didn't look dirty. She didn't like her options, but couldn't come up with any alternatives.

When she finished cleaning her last room, Ladana's feet were aching and her lower back felt as tight as a drum. "No rest for the wicked," she mumbled as she walked stiffly along the familiar five-block route to Landle's Steakhouse to work the dinner shift. Even with SNAP, or food stamps as they used to be called, it was close to impossible to get by on what she earned as a housekeeper. Tips had been especially sparse at the hotel today. She could only hope her restaurant take would be better, although keeping up a cheerful countenance and hustling from table to kitchen and back would be tougher than usual with the way she felt.

Ladana was short of breath when she stepped into the air conditioned restaurant, and took a few extra minutes in the ladies room to splash cool water on her face and smooth her short, black hair. She gazed at her image in the mirror, noting her color had gone slightly gray. "Suck it up, woman," she ordered her reflection. She attempted a few deep, slow breaths, but that started her coughing. "Damn asthma." She rummaged in her bag and pulled out an inhaler, taking a puff between coughing jags. She hadn't needed the inhaler for almost a week, but today was taking its toll. Maybe the pollution level was up.

"It's show time." She stood up tall, despite the pain in her back, and headed into the back room where she donned her apron and fetched an order pad.

It was a slow night. Mondays often were. Ladana collapsed onto a chair near the back of the restaurant, relieved to have a few minutes off her feet. Miriam, a rail-thin woman with dark blond hair piled into a tight bun, plunked down on the chair beside her. Miriam had only started at Landle's a month ago, but the two had already hit it off. Each had lost a husband who served in Afghanistan. Miriam's loss was her marriage. For Ladana and her daughter, a bullet to the head was the means, but Leroy's PTSD was the cause of their loss.

"Your girl's birthday is tomorrow, ain't it?" Miriam asked, stretching out her legs in front of her and rotating her ankles. Popping noises came from her joints as she worked out the kinks. "How's she doing?"

"Much better than you'd expect, considering. After Leroy came home from Afghanistan, he wasn't the father she remembered. You know, she was only six when he left. Ten when he was discharged. Those next ten months were ... well, I don't have to tell *you* how that war changed people."

Miriam nodded. "No, indeed." She let out a long breath. "No, indeed."

"Sometimes I think losing our house and not knowing where we'd sleep some nights, living in the shelter, bouncing from one friend's apartment to another – that was even harder on her than her father's suicide. But now we've got our own place. Food in the fridge, the bills getting paid down. It's been a long three years, but we're doing all right." *God, I miss the man I married.*

*Café au lait.* The phrase jumped into her mind unexpectedly. That's how Leroy used to describe her complexion. Ladana could almost feel his presence behind her, wrapping his arms around her as she stood at the kitchen counter, snuggling his face on her shoulder and offering soft, sensuous kisses up her neck and onto her earlobe. "I need to have me some *café au lait*, La. Mmm, so sweet and so beautiful." He never used that sort of language when he returned home. More like, "Why you always tryin' to bust my balls, woman?!"

They sat in silence, each remembering her own personal trials and the different paths their spouses had taken upon their return to civilian life.

"Enough of that," Miriam said, her face taking on an attentive, upbeat look. "What about Aaliyah's birthday?"

Ladana nodded. "Enough of that," she echoed, rubbing her eyes for a moment before checking to see if any new customers had entered. "She'll be so surprised to get that present I found her. She always acts appreciative, even if I can only bring her some leftover dessert or another bag of toiletries from the hotel, but this is going to be real special." She smiled, imagining Aaliyah's face when she produces the gift for her. "I even found a pretty bow for it today when I was cleaning."

"That's real fine. Your girl deserves some happiness after all you two have been through. You deserve it, too," she said, reaching over to her friend and giving her hand a squeeze. "I'm glad things are starting to turn around for you."

Ladana puzzled over this comment for a moment before realizing that Miriam thought she had *purchased* her daughter's present. No, she still couldn't afford anything beyond the essentials, but perhaps just the luck of finding the gift the way she had was a sign of good fortune coming into their lives. "Thank you, Miriam. I do believe things may be getting better."

Miriam raised her painted-on eyebrows. "Does that mean you've heard back from the lawyer? Are they reopening your case?"

“Oh, no.” She managed a weak smile of resignation. “Not a word. I’m not getting my hopes up. I’m sure those legal aid lawyers mean well and all, but how much can I expect for free? I don’t expect to get a dime from the VA, not after all this time. Maybe if we had gone for psychiatric counseling after Leroy came home. Or if I had understood about the whole ‘common law marriage’ thing and how it didn’t work like that in California.” She shrugged. “It is what it is. We got through the worst of it, and we’ll keep on getting through.”

“I know you will.” Miriam stood with a groan. “Looks like we got customers. I’ll take this table.”

As she watched her coworker head back into the dining room, Ladana took several deep breaths. The pain and humiliation of her early meetings to apply for survivor’s benefits came flooding back. She could still see that woman’s face, pinched and frowning as she looked over Ladana’s paperwork. “Ms. Johnson,” she said, lifting her chin so she was literally looking down her nose as she spoke, “what you’re basically saying is that you and Specialist Johnson were cohabitating and had your child out of wedlock.”

“But back in Colorado, we knew several couples who ...”

The woman had cut her off. “Ms. Johnson, you did not establish a common-law marriage before leaving Colorado and cannot produce a marriage license from another state. Therefore ...”

“Ladana! You’ve got a table.” The restaurant hostess’s voice shook her free from her unhappy memories. Ladana sprang to her feet, straightened her apron, poured two glasses of water, and plastered a welcoming smile on her face as she delivered them to her customers.

It was impossible *not* to overhear the man with a booming voice at Miriam’s table as he fired questions at her about items on the menu, prep times, and possible substitutions. “And the kids are thirsty, so bring the drinks right away,” he announced to the entire room.

Ladana was relieved to be serving only the quiet couple, who made eye contact with her when she told them of tonight’s special and who both opted for the same selection. No special instructions – couldn’t be easier.

“Damn,” Miriam said when she dropped the ice scoop on the floor. “Can you take the milks?” she asked as she headed to the back to grab a clean one. “I’ll get the other drinks in a sec.”

Ladana picked up the two filled glasses and headed to table five. As she set the milks in front of the children, the mother hissed, “Don’t touch those,” before sliding each one to her using a napkin-covered hand. She wiped the outsides meticulously, grimacing as she delicately held the rim of the glasses with her fingertips, and returned them to their original locations. No one ever glanced up at her.

She considered how she might reassure them of the restaurant’s cleaning regimen in a polite manner, but decided it wasn’t worth the effort. A moment later, Miriam arrived with iced drinks for the parents. “Here we go. Can I get you anything else while you’re waiting?”

“No, thanks,” said the woman, smiling politely at Miriam as she reached past the loud-mouthed husband to set down her beverage. She immediately picked up her Diet Coke and took a sip. Her husband nodded at Miriam appreciatively as he managed several swigs from his glass. Ladana headed back toward the kitchen, but Miriam was called back with a thunderous “Miss!”

The woman kept her voice low. “Miss, we’d prefer that *you* wait on our table. No one else. If you need to make an extra trip, that’s okay. We can wait.”

“I heard what she said,” Ladana whispered as they waited by the kitchen for the orders to come out. She shook her head and scrunched her mouth to one side. “And I thought she was just a germ freak when I delivered those milks.”

Miriam frowned, her brows lowered over her eyes. “Sorry, I’m not following you.”

With a sigh, Ladana shook her head and attempted a smile. “Never mind. It’s not important.” She had no energy left tonight to try to explain.

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She’d had a hunch Aaliyah might still be up when she returned home from work. Good thing she’d stashed the present in the hallway before opening the door. Then again, maybe tonight would be a better time to celebrate her birthday. Her girl was always so groggy in the early mornings when she’d get her up to share a little time together before her long day. Let the child sleep in tomorrow morning as a treat for her birthday.

“Mama! Guess what!”

Not only was Aaliyah still up, she was positively energetic for this hour. “I’m too tired to guess, baby,” she said as she sank into a chair. “You’ll just have to come out and tell me.”

“That lawyer, Mr. Burbank, called.” As if there might be any other lawyer calling here. “He says they’re going to reopen your case!”

Ladana’s hand went to her mouth. “Oh, my.” Her eyes sparkled with tears. “Oh, my.”

“So maybe we’ll get those benefits and you can quit your jobs and go back to nursing school.”

Her mother reached out for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “That’s great news, baby, but let’s not get carried away. They can still decide ‘no’ again like before. Anyway,” she added, “I’m still going to need to work even with survivor’s benefits. Maybe just one job, though.”

Aaliyah sat in the chair across from her mother. “So, Mama ...” She paused.

Hmm. Perhaps this is the topic her daughter started to broach this morning. She raised her eyebrows, prompting Aaliyah to continue.

“Maybe I can ... help out.” She began fidgeting with a paper napkin, folding it in smaller and smaller sections.

“Help out?” Ladana sat back in her chair. “How do you mean?”

Aaliyah mirrored her mother’s posture. “Well, since I’m fourteen now—“

“—in the morning,” Ladana inserted, a hint of a smile forming on her lips.

“Right. Since I’ll be fourteen in just a few hours,” she continued, glancing at the clock, “I think it’s time I got a job.” She nodded her head, emphasizing the rightness of her statement.

“Oh, baby, you’re already helping out. Miss Vicky tells me you’re such a help to her with the little ones that she’s not willing to take even a dime in payment any more. And you know I don’t want you here by yourself all day and well into the night. It just isn’t safe.”

“But I don’t need to be in daycare like a child. I’m fourteen—“ She glanced at the clock again. “—almost. Miss Vicky can get by without me. There’s Adele – she’s eleven and she can help read to the little ones.”

“Aaliyah, there’s different worries about a fourteen-year-old alone all day and evening in a neighborhood like this. Or going off to a job. How would you get to and from work?”

The girl sat up straighter. “On the bus, just like you. It’s only a block to the bus stop and I’d be walking in daylight. And it lets off just a block from the office.”

Ladana’s forehead creased in wonder. “What office? You sound like you already have something figured out. Come clean, girl. Don’t make me solve a riddle here.”

“Mr. Burbank’s office. You know – Legal Aid. I’d be making copies and filing forms and bringing people coffee. Stuff like that.”

Her mother’s head nodded up and down repeatedly. “Yes, I *still* know who Mr. Burbank is.” She sighed and closed her eyes a moment. “Baby, I’m too tired to talk about this tonight. Let’s sit down on Thursday when I have the night off and figure out what’s what.”

Aaliyah grinned. Mama hadn’t come out and said no, so there was hope. Just like the VA reopening their case. Hope.

Rising from the chair with a groan, Ladana walked to the door and reached for something in the hallway. “Since we’re both still up, I think we should start to celebrate your fourteenth birthday tonight.” She turned back toward her daughter, clearly holding something bulky behind her back.

“Happy birthday, Aaliyah,” she said as she handed over the gift, decorated with a single, yellow bow which was only slightly flattened.

“Mama! A suitcase!” She held it in both hands, turning it around and admiring every side. “It looks like new, Mama. How could you …?”

“Afford it?” she said. “I just got lucky. I stopped in at Nearly New and they were just bringing out a rack of items to put out on the shelves and I spotted it. So don’t you start worrying about the cost. It wasn’t a problem at all.” Ladana didn’t want to admit to her daughter that she’d been dumpster diving. They’d done enough of that in the beginning and she’d promised Aaliyah that they’d never be forced to dig through people’s trash again. But this was such a gem of a find, when she spotted it sitting atop the bags of trash, she had to take it.

“I can’t believe someone would give such a nice roller-bag away. And look at this, Mama. It converts to a backpack. I can use it to carry my books when I go back to school.”

“I know, baby.”

Aaliyah’s eyes lit up and her smile filled her face. “This is karma, Mama. These travel stickers? They mean someday we’ll go visit all these places. Yosemite. San Luis Obispo. San Francisco.”

They laughed together, savoring the fantasy of being able to travel again on a vacation like they did before everything fell apart.

“Look inside, baby. I got a special deal.”

The blouse fit her slim frame perfectly and Aaliyah was pleased to now own a watch so she could be on time to catch the bus to work, assuming Mama approved. She could carry her lunch to work in the pack. She’d try out the glittery eye shadow and red lipstick tomorrow, but right now, both of them were fighting to stay awake.

“This is my best birthday ever. Thank you, Mama. I love my presents.”

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She checked her reflection in the mirror and nodded in approval. Aaliyah didn't mind that the straps on her new backpack weren't long enough to allow the bag to hang so low down her back that it hit her butt, like some of the kids wore them. This was more comfortable and it looked just fine to her. Not like her old pack which was so ratty and torn that she was embarrassed to keep using it. Plus, it had decals from exciting places.

“What a cool pack. Do you like to travel?” she said aloud, pretending to be one of the girls at school talking to her as she took it out of her school locker.

She tried to act like she was approachable, always hoping someone would strike up a conversation, or at least say hi. Mama always nagged her to take the initiative and talk to someone else first, but she couldn't ever think of what to say.

“You need to make friends your own age,” Mama would tell her.

But she felt more comfortable being friends with the little ones at Miss Vicky's daycare. Or even with Miss Vicky herself, or with Mama's friends. They were easy to talk to. Except the ones who knew her back when Papa died. It was just a matter of time before they'd make some reference to “that tragedy with your father.” Same with the kids who knew her in grade school and remembered her absence for a week. When she'd returned, it was obvious that the teachers had told her classmates about Papa's death and given them instructions on how to treat her.

How many times had someone come up to her and said, “I'm sorry about your father”? Even close friends like Jenna and Rose had used the same phrase and didn't seem to know what else to say to her. Still, if that's all her classmates had said, it would have faded away in time and things could have gone back to some semblance of normality.

Aaliyah had sensed something else was going on before she realized what stories were being passed around. Several times she'd approached a cluster of friends in the school playground only to have the conversation stop abruptly when she arrived. But when she spotted a small group glancing her way, she understood. One boy actually pointed across the yard at her, using his other hand to draw small circles beside his head – the universal sign for *crazy*. He wrapped up his sign language by forming the shape of a gun with his hand and shooting himself in the head. The others laughed.

Kids were talking about her father's death, all right. Sympathy was no longer part of their motivation.

Aaliyah realized she had been gripping the edge of the bathroom sink and released her hold. “Be strong,” she told her reflection, “for Mama.” It had been her mantra for the past three years. Other than a very brief and silent showing of tears at his funeral, Mama had stayed strong. She'd fought off the creditors and even outwitted the repo men a few times before they eventually towed the car away. Spent hours on the phone with the VA and with the banks and who knew how many others, trying to keep the wolf from their door. Toted her from the shelter to a quiet hideaway at the edge of a park, ever watchful for people trying to do them harm.

She never saw her mother shed another tear.

Aaliyah swiped a hand across her eyes which were threatening to overflow. Looking at her new pack again, she smiled bravely. This year would be different. Somebody would come talk to

her who knew nothing about her father's suicide or the times when they were living on the street, and they would become friends and take walks together and laugh and watch TV and hang out at the mall.

## The Intern

Iris, one of the legal secretaries, made it her duty to “adopt” the new intern. Aaliyah reminded her of her favorite niece when she was that age – long-legged like a filly, slender and wide-eyed. Except Aaliyah would be the black or dark bay horse; her niece a much lighter buckskin, like Iris herself.

“You sure brew up some fine coffee, girl. You sure your Mama didn’t teach you?”

Aaliyah’s mouth curled into a smile. “No. Only you. You must be a great instructor.”

The woman chuckled. “In that case, come sit by me while I type up these documents. If you think I know everything there is to know about coffee-making and photocopying, wait till you see what I can do on a computer.”

Iris offered pointers as she worked. Minutes after she started, Aaliyah was summoned to serve coffee to Conference Room B. She scooted to the coffee maker and prepared a tray to take to the lawyer, Miranda Moore, and her clients, pleased with herself as she delivered the beverages unobtrusively. She still cringed at the memory of spilling hot coffee on the conference table her second day on the job, the dark liquid seeming to attack every paper and briefcase within its reach. It was nerves. Now that she’d been at the job for a month, she was calm and efficient.

As she cleaned up following the meeting, Miranda stepped back into the large room. “Alisa, is it?”

“Aaliyah.” Most of the people in the legal aid office were good with names. Miranda seemed to be able to recall the names of clients and lawyers, but struggled with those of the secretaries, couriers, and especially the interns.

“Right. Anyway, I need ten copies,” she said, setting a fat folder on the table, “collated, stapled. Rush-rush, so leave *this* for later.” She swept a hand, indicating the rest of the used coffee cups and other detritus of the meeting.

“Yes, ma’am,” the girl answered to the lawyer’s back as she strode out of the room.

Despite the attitude of a small minority of the adults working in the office, Aaliyah enjoyed the hustle and interaction with people. Far more treated her like Iris did, showing her how to operate office equipment, explaining legal terms, demonstrating how the physical packaging of a report might make it appear more professional.

If only she wasn’t working for free.

When Mr. Burbank (she couldn’t bring herself to call him Phil, despite his protests) brought her in for her interview, Aaliyah was speechless when she learned that an intern didn’t actually earn money. But there were other perks.

She arrived at the office each morning with her special, green pack strapped to her back, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich for lunch tucked inside. Iris was the first to notice that her selection never varied. Eschewing the regular order of delivery pizza that many on the staff participated in, Iris often had one of the couriers pick up a large salad for her lunch.

“I need to watch my diet,” she’d explain.

She could never eat more than half of her food and would insist on giving Aaliyah the rest.

Others would wrap up leftover pizza and store it in the fridge. At the end of her work shift, Mr. Burbank or Randy or Stephanie or Ramona would suddenly decide that they didn’t want their bundle of food after all, so Aaliyah should take it instead. People would also send her home with pens and pencils, partially-depleted legal pads, three-ring binders, and an assortment of other supplies that she could possibly use when school started again in the fall. Her backpack was seldom empty for the trip back home.

Aaliyah watched for times when Mr. Burbank wasn’t busy. About once a week, she’d approach him at the coffee machine or when she’d spot him standing near his desk, stretching his arms or massaging his lower back.

“Mr. Burbank? Do you have a moment?” she asked.

“Sure, Aaliyah.” He’d given up on asking her to call him Phil. “It’s about your mother’s case again, isn’t it.”

Of course it was. After the first week, she’d learned to go to Iris with any questions about the job.

“Nothing new to report. I’ll give your mother a call as soon as I hear anything from the VA.” His exact wording varied slightly each time, but the message stayed constant. As he promised, he delivered the bad news by phone directly to her mother shortly after her appeal of their ruling against her claim for survivor benefits was denied. That door was officially closed.

Burbank sought out Aaliyah the next time she came to work. “I’m sorry things didn’t work out. I wasn’t sure if you’d come back here.”

Her expression remained neutral as she gave a slight shrug. “I guess it wasn’t that big a surprise. They turned us away before. Thanks for trying.” She attempted a smile, her eyes still reflecting disappointment. “When you hired me, I said I’d work till the end of summer. I like to keep my promises. So ... I think I’d better check on the coffee.”

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Walking into the high school for her first day in 9th grade, Aaliyah held her head high, proud of her new outfit – a real find at the thrift shop. The pale, green blouse looked good with her backpack, which was soon filled with textbooks handed out in each of her classes. She didn’t know anyone, but hadn’t expected to. She and her mother had moved to their miniscule apartment just as school let out the previous spring, and her old school was in a different district.

A small number of students seemed relatively well-off, brand new book bags hanging low on their backs, brightly-colored clothes announcing that repeated laundering hadn’t affected their hues yet. Many other teens carried their school supplies in grocery bags or in packs so tattered that they looked like they’d dump their contents at any moment. Aaliyah felt proud of her green backpack. She’d treated it with care all summer and it remained in near-new condition.

Come lunchtime, she found a seat at a nearly-empty table and pulled out the ubiquitous peanut butter sandwich from her bag. The two older boys seated at the far end glanced her way for a moment, then resumed their conversation. Aaliyah pasted a pleasant expression on her face – one she’d practiced frequently in the mirror – hung her pack on the back of her chair, and

ate slowly, trying to make eye contact with other girls as they walked by, searching for a place to sit. If anyone looked back, she'd smile subtly and nod at an empty seat. She wasn't bold enough to speak up, suggesting that a girl sit with her.

When a petite, extremely young-looking girl finally took her offer, her heart raced and she suppressed an enormous smile threatening to spoil her role of "friendly, but cool freshman willing to meet a stranger."

"Hey. I'm Aaliyah."

The girl's answer was so quiet, Aaliyah had to ask her to repeat it.

"Tanya," she muttered, glancing up for an instant before focusing on her tray of food and plunging into her macaroni and cheese. She shoveled her meal into her mouth, taking each new forkful before her mouth completely finished the last. She never made eye contact again and never spoke a word.

Aaliyah couldn't think of anything to say to open up a conversation, so she nibbled at her sandwich, watching the feeding frenzy across from her in silence. The moment the girl finished chewing her final bite, she grasped her can of soda pop, took a swig, and hopped to her feet. With a slight nod at Aaliyah, she picked up her tray and scampered away.

Aaliyah took in a long, slow breath and exhaled. Maybe she'd have better luck making friends in her classes.

## What's for Dinner?

The new housekeeper looked underage, but it wasn't Ladana's place to question her supervisor's hiring decisions. Just to help train this child, who couldn't be much older than her own daughter. For all she knew, young Yasamin could be a single mother, too, trying to make her way in the world.

Of course, training a new hire meant that each room would take even longer than usual to clean, but she was still expected to finish her quota for her shift. At least the girl had previous experience working at another hotel. Still, there were so many special touches unique to the Crown Apogee Resort — features that Yasamin certainly would not have encountered at the low-end chain. She'd have to make up time by using some of the tricks she'd picked up during that first semester of nursing school. And if Marietta really came through on the promotion she'd hinted at, perhaps she could pay off the rest of the bills and start saving up some money. If she could build up some savings, perhaps she could quit her second job, go back to school ...

Ladana shook off the thoughts. Good to have dreams, but don't get your hopes up, she admonished herself. She knew quite well how dreams can be destroyed.

"Missus Johnson, ma'am," the girl said while arranging six pillows on each bed, "do Americans sleep sitting up tall? I think it is not easy to sleep like this."

The older woman chuckled. "I imagine most people choose one or two pillows of their liking. That's why we find so many on the floor when we come in to clean." She smiled, watching the girl moving quickly on to wiping the tables clean. "And Yasamin, I told you — just call me Ladana, not Mrs. Johnson. I must say, you are certainly a polite young lady!"

The girl seemed bright and eager to make a good impression. So many of the young women who came to work here accepted the opportunity — limited as it was — as a blessing. Most were immigrants, like Yasamin, although this young woman with her unusual accent clearly wasn't Latina like so many of the others.

"Where do you come from, Yasamin?"

The girl lowered her golden-brown eyes, her dark eyelashes fluttering. "Asia," she muttered, turning away to pick up a bundle of used towels.

Ladana considered this a moment. Judging from Yasamin's features, she guessed the girl wasn't from the far east, such as China or Japan. She let a few minutes pass as they worked before asking, "What part of Asia?"

Yasamin's eyes darted from side to side and she didn't answer for a few beats. Finally, she set her jaw, looked directly at her trainer, and answered, "Tajikistan." It wasn't a total lie. During her escape, she was fairly sure they had passed through a section of rugged, mountainous territory just inside the Tajikistan border before doubling back and making their way into Pakistan where she was finally reunited with her brother.

"You live in California for a long time?" she asked, anxious to move the focus of their conversation away from herself.

The girl's discomfort with the subject of her origins was apparent, so Ladana let the topic drop. *It's not my job to check these girls' green cards*, she thought. Everyone had a story, many even more difficult than her own. If this girl didn't feel comfortable sharing her story, so be it.

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"Aaliyah, this is Yasamin, my new friend from work."

Ladana escorted a young woman into their tiny apartment. She'd been talking about Yasamin for the past two weeks, explaining that the girl needed to make some American friends and how her daughter would surely enjoy having a friend closer to her age than the children in Miss Vicki's daycare. She had become quite fond of the girl, pleased with her work ethic and delighted with her positive outlook and her drive to learn more about American life and to improve her English.

The two teenagers greeted each other politely and their visitor removed her scarf. "Yasamin lives just two stops past ours. It's so funny how we discovered that," Ladana said. "A few Thursdays ago – you know, when I come straight home from the Crown – I was waiting for the bus and realized that the girl I had barely noticed before was my trainee, Yasamin. She was wearing her scarf over her head and I'd never really looked into her face until that day."

Her daughter smiled and nodded. Mama had told her this story weeks ago. No doubt she'd told Yasamin as well. So this was Mama's way of breaking the ice. Only, in this telling, she was leaving out the part about thinking the brown-skinned girl with a long scarf wrapped around her head was probably an Arab.

"She's from Asia," Ladana continued. "Tajikistan." She nodded in Yasamin's direction. Their guest's eyes were lowered and she was smoothing her scarf repeatedly. "Right?" she prompted.

Yasamin reacted with a start, her gaze shifting rapidly from one person to the other. "Oh, yes. Yes. I come from Tajikistan to America." She nodded vigorously.

"Come have a seat," Ladana said as she crossed the room to the small refrigerator. "You must be starving! I know I am." She pulled a bag from the refrigerator and began unpacking the take-home containers. "We can't let last night's special from Landle's go to waste. I don't know where all our usual customers were, but they sure didn't show up for dinner. I swear, if that place doesn't start picking up again, it's going to end up closing down." She shook her head as she spoke, spooning food from the cartons onto plates and into bowls.

"Their loss, our gain," she added. "Grab a plate. This is going to be buffet style."

Aaliyah chuckled. "'Cause there's not enough room on our table for all this food." She handed a dinner plate to Yasamin, who had remained standing, uncertain of the protocol. "Help yourself – guests first," she told her, sweeping a hand toward the countertops filled with food.

Yasamin took a step toward the counter, but stopped. "Missus Johnson, you must take food before me."

"Now, Yasamin, remember that we're friends now. You just call me Ladana." She repeated her daughter's gesture toward the platters. "You told me you want to learn American customs. You're our guest, and we'd like you to go first."

The girl nodded without a word and stepped forward. She spooned a portion of the roasted potatoes onto her plate, but paused when she came to the shredded meat.

“Please, may I know what this is?”

“That’s the most tender, delicious pulled pork you’ve ever tasted. The barbecue sauce is to die for!”

“Pork?” she said in a voice almost too low to be heard. She dished up another portion of potatoes onto her plate, then repeated the process with the cole slaw.

Ladana sucked in her lips and caught her daughter’s eye before she could say anything. “I’ll explain later,” she mouthed, hoping Aaliyah could read her lips. When she noticed Yasamin studying the bowl of baked beans, she spoke up.

“That’s *pork* and beans. Sorry. I should have brought home some of the chicken, instead. It didn’t dawn on me that you don’t eat pork.”

“Oh, no, Missus ... that is, Ladana. It is not a problem. Where I grow up, many times we do not have any meat at all. The vegetables are very nice. It is a lovely dinner.”

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“So, I was telling Yasamin that the best way for her to continue to improve her English, which is already excellent, by the way,” Ladana added, nodding in their guest’s direction, “is to make friends with some American kids and hang out together. She’s taking ESL – English as a Second Language – but wants to advance faster so she can enroll in more academic classes.”

Yasamin was writing a note on a small spiral pad she kept tucked in a pocket. Aaliyah peeked at her notes and managed to read “hang out” followed by a script she didn’t recognize. She grinned.

“I’d enjoy hanging out with you, Yasamin. I really envy all the amazing places you’ve seen. That’s one of my dreams – traveling to distant lands, learning about different cultures, seeing the world. Check this out!” She jumped up from the table and fetched her birthday backpack from under her cot. “Some day, I’m going to go visit each of these places and I’ll travel to a bunch more and add stickers to this suitcase until it’s totally covered with them.”

Yasamin sat quietly, her face serious. “I tell you, some places are not so good to travel,” she said, her tone subdued. Seeing Aaliyah’s disappointment, she added, “But to travel in America, that is a good dream. I, too, have that dream.”

Aaliyah observed her new friend for a moment, deep in thought. “Maybe some day you’ll tell me about the places that were not so good to travel. When we know each other better.”

They looked into each other’s faces. “Perhaps,” Yasamin said, and no one spoke for a minute.

Ladana broke the silence. “So, Yasamin, do you have any family nearby?”

She smiled. “Oh, yes. My eldest brother, Faraz, is living here with me. He is a very excellent ... *mountaineer*.” Her look was triumphant. She hadn’t required her notes to remember the word. “He is a climbing guide.”

“Does he guide groups here in the Sierras?”

The girl’s pride was obvious. “Oh, yes. And also in Washington and in Oregon, in the Cascade mountains. But soon, he is going to Karakoram again to ... to ...” Her eyes darted back and forth, but she did not consult her little notebook. “To guide. Yes. To guide a group.”

Aaliyah spoke up. “Where’s Karakoram? Is that near Tajikistan?”

“Oh. Karakoram mountains. Yes, near Tajikistan, but more near Pakistan and China. Do you know K2?”

“The second highest mountain in the world!” Aaliyah replied, as if answering an oral exam in class. “Second only to Mt. Everest.”

“Yes, yes. That is right. K2 is in Karakoram mountains.”

“And your brother’s going to climb K2?” Aaliyah’s eyebrows shot up.

“Oh, no, no. But another mountain nearby. You would not know its name.”

“How exciting. But it sounds dangerous. Are you worried about his trip, Yasamin?” Ladana asked.

She bit her lip and nodded. Her voice softened. “Yes, it is quite dangerous and I worry. But it is very important, so I pray for the safety of him and the others. But, if the trip is good, I will then see my younger brother, Ramesh, so that is very good.”

“Ramesh is a climber, too?”

“I think, yes, he will be.” Her face filled with worry. “Yes, I think it is so.” She glanced at the clock over the stove. “It is time I must go. My brother, Faraz, he worries about me. Thank you for the dinner. It was most lovely.”

Potatoes and coleslaw wasn’t much of a dinner, Ladana thought, but at least there was plenty. Next time she’d be more aware of her guest’s cultural and religious taboos.

“I’ll walk you to the bus stop,” Aaliyah said as Yasamin arranged her scarf over her head again.

“Yes, I like that. Thank you, my friend.”

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