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The Chair in the Cane Field

I met Mr. Tito the summer they found that man's body down by the creek. I was cutting through the cane field that day, making my way to the creek bed. I wanted to see the body up close. We didn't have a TV, but the radio said it was a grisly scene, the head nearly severed from the body. I was a 12-year-old boy at the time and nothing more exciting had ever happened within a hundred miles of me.

I stumbled across Mr. Tito as I was trying to climb the sagging fence, the one that marked the end of the Eames family property. I stuck my fingers through the chain link and hauled myself up to the top. I was near skin and bones at twelve and was able to climb pretty much anything.

Mr. Tito called out to me as I was coming down the other side of the fence. His husky voice startled me and I fell, ripping my frayed jeans on the wire. When I stood and dusted myself off I saw that the whole front left leg of my jeans was torn open, revealing my scraped skin underneath. Mr. Tito stared at me as a helicopter flew by close overhead, sending a ruffle of air through the cane. At that age, I still hadn't seen the ocean. But if I had, the buffets of wind would have reminded me of waves.

"Ain't no body down there," Mr. Tito said. His voice was dry and husky. "They came and got it up last night. I saw the police coming through here."

He sat in a white wicker chair, propped up against the fence. The chair itself was coming apart, the cane growing into it, twisting around the arms and legs like it was trying to swallow it. Mr. Tito was unlike any man I'd ever seen. He was big, still taller than me while sitting down. His skin was a brown color with some red in it, like wrinkled leather baking in the sun. He wore his black hair in two long braids that trailed down his back like snakes. I'd never seen a man wear his hair like that. Despite the heat, he had on long jeans and an open-neck flannel shirt with

the sleeves rolled down. The shirt was a light blue and made the exposed skin at Mr. Tito's throat look that much darker. Me, I was already pale as the moon but I looked whiter than cotton compared to him.

"Name's Tito," he said.

I wasn't used to being introduced to adults by their first names. Being raised in a good Presbyterian household, I attached a "Mr." to it.

"Hi Mr. Tito," I said.

"What's your name?" he asked. He had a strange way of grunting when he talked.

"Mason."

"You came to see the body down there, didn't you Mason?"

I nodded, not quite sure whether to be afraid of him yet or not. He stared at me with the darkest eyes I'd ever seen.

"Where you from?" he asked.

"About a mile and a half from here, on the road behind Mr. Miller's gas station. Where are you from? I've never seen you around here before."

Mr. Tito considered a minute. "I'm from a lot of places," he said.

As he spoke, he caught me staring at his braids. He reached back and grabbed one, holding it out in his hand for me to see. The fine black hair was braided neat and tight.

"Why do you wear your hair like a girl?"

Mr. Tito laughed. "My daddy wore his hair like this. And his daddy. And all of the daddies before that."

My own Daddy was an unsmiling man who worked on the machinery over at the textile mill. I tried to imagine him growing his brown hair out to his waist and then my Momma fixing it up for him like she did for my little sisters. It was too wild to picture.

“I heard about the murder on the radio,” I said. “Did they really move the body already?” I couldn’t hide the disappointment in my voice.

“They moved the body alright. But tell you what. How about you come back tomorrow? Come back with a purple Gatorade for me and in exchange, I’ll tell you all I saw.”

I nodded, taking the odd request in stride at the time.

“Alright, get on home then. And let your momma sew up your jeans.”

When I came back the next day, Mr. Tito was sitting in the exact same spot, squinting in the sun. I handed him the purple Gatorade that I bought at the gas station with my allowance money. I sat against the fence, pulling the ball cap I was wearing down over my eyes to shield them from the sun.

Then Mr. Tito told me all about how the state troopers had come in and taped off the whole creek bed with bright yellow tape. They dragged the waterbed with huge cables that had hooks attached to the end, hoping to find an arm or a leg or an eyeball of the victim. They brought in dogs too, big German shepherds who you could hear bark for miles. Soon one of the dogs began yapping and took off. He led one of the troopers to a mound of dirt in the woods and there was the body, buried up to its neck in the dirt.

I sat there amazed while Mr. Tito gulped at the Gatorade, his strong Adam’s apple bobbing up and down.

“So the murderer buried him alive?”

“Not all the way. The killer buried him up to his neck so he could still breathe. And then he took a garrote and squeezed at his throat until it bled dry.”

“What’s a garrote?”

“It’s like a sharp piece of wire. The troopers found it buried close to the body.”

I was too young at that point to be disgusted by the gruesomeness of the death. All I understood was that something big had happened in our town and I was getting the inside story, a fantastic story full of action and excitement.

“How do you know all this, Mr. Tito?”

“Oh, I see and hear a lot. No one knows I live back here. Not even the federal government. I see and hear all kinds of things. And no one ever hears or sees me except for you.”

“You just live out here alone? You don’t have a momma or daddy? No kids?”

Mr. Tito’s eyes turned darker than I had ever seen them.

“No,” he said. “I don’t have any kids. Not anymore.”

“But you used to?”

“I had a daughter. A pretty little thing, about your age. She used to walk through this very same cane field on her way to school. Played down by the creek too.”

“What happened to her?”

Mr. Tito looked at me with eyes that were a thousand years old.

“She drowned in the creek.”

I visited Mr. Tito the next day, bringing him a bologna sandwich as an offering this time. I visited him every day for those last two weeks of summer, bringing him whatever he asked for—a chocolate bar, a pack of batteries, toothpaste, an umbrella, a beer I snuck out of my

daddy's stash in the fridge. And every day, Mr. Tito and I would discuss the murder. When he ran out of details about the crime scene, he told me about famous killers throughout history and how they had (or hadn't been caught). He told me how the police would go about trying to track down the murderer using fingerprints and such. Then he began to theorize about what kind of man the murderer was, what motive drove him to commit such an act.

"My guess is it was a crime of passion," he said one day, reclining in the wicker chair like he always did.

"What's a crime of passion?"

"It's a crime committed because of hate. Or love. Or sometimes both."

"You don't think the killer was just crazy?"

Mr. Tito's eyes clouded over again with darkness. "Could be. Or could be the victim hurt someone the killer loved."

My eyes widened at this delicious theory. "So it could have been revenge! Wow, I never would have thought of that."

"That's because you assumed that the victim was the good guy and the killer was the bad guy." The darkness went out of Mr. Tito's eyes and he smiled. "The real world isn't so simple. From what I heard, that dead man was a bad man. He had a tendency to hurt people. In my opinion, him being dead has made the world a better place."

As summer drew to a close, they stopped talking about the murder on the radio and Mr. Tito all but ran out of new things to talk about and new theories to tell me. School started up and I got busy with baseball. I stopped going to see Mr. Tito as much and the eventually not at all.

Truth be told, by mid-August I had completely forgotten about him. My momma even threw out those jeans I ripped a hole in the day I met him

It wasn't until one day in early September that I heard on the radio that the state authorities had a sudden break in the case and had caught the murderer. I thought of Mr. Tito and took off for the cane field at full speed out the screen porch door, my momma yelling after me. I ran the full mile and a half I was so excited. I couldn't wait to tell him. I tore through the cane, the dead stalks whipping up at me like long slender arms trying to drag me down into the earth. I flew through the field and clamored up the fence, my t-shirt heavy with sweat even though the day was cool. I vaulted over the chain link and landed on the other side with a thud, sending up a little cloud of dust. I looked up and saw the dilapidated wicker chair sitting where it always had.

But it was empty.

I stood there for a long moment until I heard the distant thwack of rotors. I craned my neck and watched as a helicopter in the distance drew nearer, like an enormous dragonfly hovering over the fields. As it got closer and eventually flew by overhead, it sent a ruffle of air through the dead cane. My hair danced in front of my eyes and I felt a gust of air fly up my shirt and make the sweat on my back go cold.

That night as I was sitting at the dinner table with my momma and daddy, they started talking about the arrest. I played with my mashed potatoes and squashed my peas with my fork, pretending to be uninterested.

"I can't believe that Indian man was living in that field the whole time," said my momma. "How many people do you think he killed back there?"

“Just the one, according to the news,” said my Daddy. “He had a personal grudge against the victim is what they’re reporting.”

“What on earth could make you want to kill another person?”

“I could think of a few things.”

“Oh, stop it Don. Not while Sam’s at the table.”

I looked up at the mention of my name. My father was chewing his meatloaf slowly and staring at me.

“Say Sam, you play back in that cane field a fair amount don’t you?”

I lowered my eyes and swirled my potatoes around my plate. “Sometimes,” I said.

“I don’t want you going back there,” said my momma. “Now that it’s a known hideout for murderers.”

I continued to avoid my daddy’s gaze.

“Did you ever see anything suspicious out there? Anything out of place?” he asked.

I thought about Mr. Tito and his purple Gatorade and his garrote and his storytelling and his braids and his anger and his drowned daughter and the sadness in his old eyes.

I looked up and met my daddy’s gaze.

“No,” I said. “Didn’t see a thing.”

Lake Monsters

“Watching a fire being created is like watching a baby being born.”

As soon as he said this, Nathan regretted it. The two guys making the fire, Hunter and Tanner, looked at him in a way that made Nathan wish *he* hadn't been born. He strained his eyes in the darkness, trying to see into the windows of the lake house. The rest of the group had left him here, stranded with these two guys who were friends of friends of friends, or something.

Coming to this party had been a mistake on Nathan's part. He'd hoped it would be one of those warm summer night memories that he would always cherish after college. Fireflies. S'mores. Friends. Music and laughter echoing over the lake. Instead he had found himself with a group of mostly strangers in a lake house that belonged to someone's uncle. The night was pitch black and Nathan had somehow been left outside with two of the guys, Hunter and Tanner, while the rest of the group was back up at the house packing coolers full of beer and pipes full of weed.

Nathan gazed out at the black lake and considered disappearing beneath it.

He continued to watch as Hunter and Tanner built their fire, making a small teepee out of twigs with a tuft of flint at the center. Working in tandem, they began to layer larger sticks around the teepee in a log cabin design. Pulling out a lighter, Hunter lit the flint and it burst into a tiny, persistent flame.

“Congratulations,” Hunter said. “It's a girl.” The two boys smiled.

Once again working in tandem, they nursed the flame, leaning low over the fire on their hands and knees to fan it with their breath. They fed it sticks just the right size so as not to overwhelm it, like they were feeding worms to a baby bird. The flame never faltered, not even once.

Nathan stood back, mesmerized by the warm pulsing glow of the embers. The fire continued to grow, biting back at the darkness, until it was hungry enough for logs. Tanner thrust a few hefty blocks of wood into the fire pit and sparks flew up into the air and disappeared.

The fire was now full enough to roast marshmallows. To Nathan's horror, Hunter found three suitably long sticks and laid them by the pile of smore supplies sitting on one of several ratty lawn chairs circling the fire pit. *Sticks*. The bonfires Nathan was used to were the ones on expensive back patios with sofas and stone fire pits. Where they used clean wire marshmallow holders, not sticks from off the tick-infested ground. Hunter ripped open the bag and speared three marshmallows before passing the bag to Tanner who passed it to Nathan. Nathan hesitated before taking it. He fitted exactly one marshmallow onto his stick and prayed that the fire would sterilize any germs.

In the light of the full fire, Nathan could see Hunter and Tanner's features much more distinctly. Until this point, Nathan had considered them to be the same indistinguishable person, both inside and out. But now that he could see their faces and their mannerisms more clearly, he discovered that they were actually quite different.

Hunter was dark-haired and broad-shouldered. He was a little shorter than Nathan but so sturdily built that Nathan didn't think his height was ever a handicap. He wore gym shorts and white calf socks and an old Salty Dog Café t-shirt. Tanner was lankier, his hair more of a sandy color where it peaked out from underneath his backwards ball cap. Tanner wore a college hoodie and muddy tennis shoes with black Nike socks.

Nathan was very aware that he himself had worn the wrong thing. Nice khakis, a pastel, and boat shoes were a poor choice. He had dressed for a suburban bonfire, not a lakeside campfire. He flicked a piece of ash off of his cuff and sucked in his breath as it left a smudge.

The fire crackled in the silence.

Nathan tried to think of something to say, *anything* to say that might engage the two strangers roasting marshmallows with him.

“Did you know that marshmallows contain animal hoof material? In the gelatin. A lot of people think they’re vegetarian but they’re not.”

The other two guys stared at him. Nathan had again miscalculated. He assumed that these guys hunted or went hiking and would be interested in things like animal hooves. Apparently, they were not.

Nathan shut up and everyone continued roasting their marshmallows in silence. Nathan always thought you could tell a lot about people by the way they toasted their marshmallows. For instance, he always wanted his soft and slightly flubbery, never burned. He would rotate his stick around, giving even heat exposure to every side of the marshmallow. When he ate it, he was careful not to get any white residue on his chin and he always chewed with his mouth closed.

Hunter charred his black. He would hold it right in the heart of the fire until the whole thing burst into flame and then he let it burn a bit before extinguishing it with a blow. He ate the whole thing, burnt and all, without bothering to take it off the stick.

Tanner also burnt his black, but by accident. He held the marshmallow just above the fire and grimaced when it began to burn, jerking the stick back and blowing on it in a frantic attempt to save it.

The three guys continued roasting and eating in silence, until the sugary gelatin made Nathan feel queasy. He looked back at the lake house and thought he could hear shouting and laughter, but no one came down the path towards the lake. The others were never coming back.

“I’m going to go walk on the pier,” said Nathan. He turned and left, heading towards the rickety wooden dock that jutted out into the water. When he was almost out of earshot, he heard Hunter and Tanner start talking. Their words were indecipherable this far away, but Nathan felt sure they were about him.

He kicked at the fallen acorns that littered the gangway of the small dock. He walked out to the end which was a large wooden square floating in the water. It rolled along with the small swells that lapped up against the shore. An ancient paddleboat coated in mildew was tied to the platform and rolled along with it.

Nathan stared out into the water and envisioned lake monsters surfacing. In his imagination, the water in front of him would boil and churn. An enormous, serpentine-like dinosaur’s head would rise out of the water and high into the night sky. Its neck would tower over him a hundred feet, writhing back and forth. Water would slough off of it in sheets, making the entire lake slosh back and forth. Another one would surface and then another, their heads bursting forth from the lake’s surface faster than could be counted. Soon the entire lake would be full of lake monsters encircling Nathan, staring down at him while their elongated necks swayed in the night breeze. For a full minute, Nathan considered throwing himself to them.

“Hey!”

Nathan turned around to see Hunter and Tanner walking towards him on the dock. His instincts urged him to flee, but there was nowhere to go.

“Everyone else is taking forever,” Hunter said. He eyed the decrepit paddleboat. “You wanna go for a boat ride?”

Nathan looked from Hunter to Tanner, trying to keep his face emotionless despite his rising panic. He ran through several possible simulations in his head, each ending with his own

physical and emotional humiliation. Was this some type of elaborate bullying trick? Hunter and Tanner stood shoulder to shoulder, blocking the way back to the campfire. At least it seemed that way to Nathan. He considered refusing the offer—they probably wouldn't actually physically force him to get in the boat. But if it really were a genuine offer, then Nathan's refusal would be worse than any of the stupid stuff he had said so far.

"Okie dokie," Nathan heard himself saying before he could stop himself.

Hunter and Tanner exchanged a look as the three of them climbed down into the paddleboat one by one. As Hunter and Tanner alighted, the entire thing rocked back and forth, threatening to tip over. Nathan stepped into the boat with much more care, scowling at the mildew he was about to get on his good khakis. As he sat down, he felt the seat of his pants dampen and knew he'd sat in a pool of water.

It was a four-person boat and Hunter and Tanner sat on the same side, packed in tightly. They were much too big for the tiny seats, and their shoulders and hairy legs competed with each other for space. Nathan had a side to his own which was almost worse—he felt like a criminal that Tanner and Hunter were about to interrogate.

Tanner unknotted the boat from the pier and immediately began pedaling with his feet, fighting the rust that had accumulated on the pedals and rudder. Hunter pedaled too, his muscular legs thrusting up and down, his knees almost touching his chest. Nathan wanted more than anything else to be helpful. With some initial awkwardness, he fitted his feet to the pedals and joined in, trying to keep pace with Hunter and Tanner. Nathan pedaled forwards while the other two pedaled backwards.

An object that looked like a gear shift stuck out of the center of the paddleboat and was used to steer. Tanner grabbed it and angled the boat out towards the middle of the lake. Once the

three boys got the hang of it, the boat slid out over the glassy water. The only sound was the chirping of cicadas and the breathing of the boys as they exerted themselves. Nathan focused solely on his legs as they rotated up and down, back and forth in the darkness. It was just like riding a bike, except on water.

They made good progress across the lake at first, but it got exponentially harder the farther they went. After several minutes, Nathan's legs were burning and his shirt stuck to the sweat on his back. From the increased grunts of Hunter and Tanner, Nathan knew they were getting tired too. Pretty soon they all quit pedaling, all at once, and let their legs rest on the pedals. The ancient boat glided through the water like they were in a fairytale. Exhausted, Nathan trailed his hand in the water and inhaled the smell of the earthy, murky-smelling lake. When he turned back and looked at the shore, the bonfire was only a pinprick of light. The boat came to a standstill and rocked with the small undulations of the water.

Nathan glanced at the two guys across from him who were just as enchanted as he was with the isolation of the lake. Hunter stared up at the stars, trying to find a constellation—the Big Dipper or Orion probably. Tanner stared out across the lake at the far shore where the silhouettes of giant trees loomed like a prehistoric jungle. Nathan closed his eyes, feeling more at peace than he'd been in a very long time.

“Shit.”

Nathan's eyes snapped open. He didn't know which of the guys had spoken, but it immediately threw him back into panic mode. Something was wrong, he could tell by their tone. Nathan imagined absurd pranks—they throwing him overboard, them taking his clothes and making him swim back naked, them tying him up off the side of the boat.

Instead, he saw Hunter examine his shoes and then peer closely at the bottom of the boat.

“There’s at least four inches of water in here,” he said.

“You sure that wasn’t in here before?” asked Tanner.

“No, we would have noticed it.”

Hunter pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight. The small beam reflected off of the water that was now filling the bottom of the paddleboat. In the light, the boys could see several cracks and holes in the bottom of the boat that had been letting water leak in while they were paddling.

“That explains why it was getting harder to paddle,” said Nathan.

“We need to bail it all out,” said Hunter.

“No, we need to start pedaling,” said Tanner.

All three of them instinctively looked back at the shore and knew Tanner was right.

With some difficulty, Tanner was able to manipulate the gear stick and turn the boat around. Then everyone began to pedal for all they were worth. It was much harder this go around, the boat having taken on a substantial amount of water. The boys threw their legs against the pedals and pumped their legs as fast as they would go. The paddleboat had flown through the water on the way out, but now it trudged on, sinking centimeter by centimeter into the dark water. The more water the boat took on, the slower the boat went. The slower the boat went, the more water it had time to take on. Nathan realized the futility of the situation, but this only made him pedal harder, his legs becoming a flurry of motion.

“We’re not going to make it,” Nathan said.

“Yes we are! Just keep pedaling,” shouted Tanner.

“He’s right,” said Hunter.

They were only about two-thirds of the way back to the shore and every pedal now elicited a grunt of effort, an incredible tensing of calf muscles. The lip of the boat had been dangerously close to water level and it now dipped just enough so that water began pouring into the boat.

“Keep going!” Tanner yelled like a captain determined to go down with his ship.

“Dude, we can’t move!” said Hunter.

The paddleboat was really sinking now as the water filled the bottom. No amount of pedaling would help them. The water was almost up to Nathan’s shins. The end with Tanner and Hunter dipped even lower because of the uneven weight distribution.

“Mayday, mayday!” Hunter yelled.

“We’re goin’ down!” Tanner followed.

And then Nathan, feeling a streak of adrenaline, knew exactly what to say. In his loudest, most dramatic voice, he shouted “Abandon ship!”

Nathan made a salute and then bailed over the side, plunging into the dark, monster infested waters. Hunter stood up and leapt high into the air before crashing back down with a splash. Tanner did a roll over the side of the boat and plunked into the water. The three boys bobbed to the surface, dog-paddling. Their legs felt like jelly from all the pedaling. They located the bonfire’s light on the shore and swam for it, leaving the paddleboat almost totally submerged.

Nathan made a break for dry land. He could hear the others’ choppy arm strokes beside him as they swam as a unit, a sunken crew. Nathan kept swimming until he felt warm, pebbly mud under his hands and knew they had reached the shallowest part of the water. He crawled the rest of the way up onto the shore next to the dock, with Hunter and Tanner right beside him. They all collapsed onto the muddy bank and lay there breathing heavily.

After a moment, Nathan heard voices and music coming from up by the bonfire. A girl appeared on the dock, holding a beer and staring down at them as they lay sprawled in the mud.

“There you guys are,” she said. “What were you doing?”

Before anyone could answer, the girl’s eyes wandered down to the dock and she seemed to notice the missing paddleboat.

“You guys are idiots,” she said, and stalked back towards the campfire.

Still laying in the mud, Nathan cracked a smile. He *had* been an idiot, hadn’t he? With Tanner and Hunter. They had all been idiots together.

Me, at the Lighthouse

The lighthouse seemed the ideal place to have her picture taken. It sat atop a grassy hill on the southernmost edge of the island, overlooking the North Atlantic as it swelled and broke peacefully over the black rocks by the shore. Bermuda was breezier and rainier than Charlene expected. Everything always had a wetness about it, pebbled with raindrops that reflected the bright colors of the island with its pink and green houses.

The rainy weather made the feat of taking the perfect picture a little more difficult, but not impossible. This picture had to be brochure-quality if Charlene hoped to impress her coworkers at the finance firm with the exoticism of her first vacation in over five years. Her flight home left early the next morning and she had saved the picturesque lighthouse locale for the last day, the grand finale in which she would secure the nicest picture of all.

She loped around the base of the lighthouse in a circle, the pre-rainy weather bothering her bad knees. Even though Charlene was only 47, varicose veins lined her legs like spider webs and she had to take frequent sitting breaks due to her aching joints.

Charlene clutched the Kodak disposable camera that she bought at a Walgreens and checked the number of photos left. There were twelve. She surveyed the scenery and selected the best place for a picture that would ensure both ocean and greenery were in the background. Extending her arm out awkwardly and flipping the camera around, Charlene attempted to take several pictures of herself. She imagined them looking awful once they were developed. They would probably be off-center and her face would take up the whole frame, her nostrils and cheeks gargantuan. Charlene felt a streak of cold panic as she realized she was going to have to ask someone to take her picture if she wanted even a half-decent one. She had eight photos left.

Talking to people was not Charlene's strong suit. Her comfort zone existed solely between the walls of her small apartment and the walls of her work cubicle. She had been reluctant to take

the vacation in the first place, but now that she was here she wanted a really nice picture to show around at work to prove her trip was enjoyable. She needed a nice picture to show her mother when she visited her in the nursing home. Her mother always complained about Charlene's lack of social skills. And maybe—if the picture was nice enough—Charlene would even use it on that Facebook page she had been thinking about starting.

Charlene glanced at the tourists milling about the base of the lighthouse and spotted an old couple, probably in their late 70s, resting on one of the stone benches. They seemed relatively low risk to Charlene.

"Excuse me," said Charlene, approaching the couple. "Would you mind taking my picture?" The woman, a grandmotherly looking figure wrapped in a sweater, lit up.

"Why certainly," she said.

She stood up and Charlene handed her the camera, immediately regretting it when she saw the instability of the woman's hands, how they tremored with palsy. Charlene stepped back a few feet and put on a nervous smile as the old woman squinted through the camera lens, the entire thing shaking. Charlene stood there for what seemed like forever, a smile frozen on her face, waiting for the woman to take the picture.

"Push the button, Edna," said her husband, still sitting on the bench.

"I did, Dale."

"You haven't taken the picture yet."

"Well it flashed, didn't it?"

"No, there wasn't any flash."

"Well I pushed the button."

"Now you have to slide that little wheel to take another one."

Charlene stood without saying a word, still smiling, until the old woman eventually figured out how to take the pictures. Charlene thanked the couple and hurried away. When she checked the camera, she saw that the woman had wasted a precious three photos. Charlene imagined that they would all probably be blurry, crooked, a withered thumb showing in the top left corner of each. She would have to try again.

Talking to people, even people she knew, was the thing Charlene hated the most. At work, she always wore big clunky headphones that either played “hypnotic beach melodies” or “soothing jungle sounds” that she’d downloaded to her old MP3 player. Music with words sounded too much like someone trying to have a conversation with her. It’s not that Charlene hated people—she just couldn’t read them. She never knew if they were sarcastic or sincere, if they were being genuinely friendly or were putting on a front. So why risk guessing incorrectly and being humiliated?

The distant rumble of thunder warned of an approaching storm, sending a flock of white seagulls off the top of the lighthouse and wheeling into the sky. Charlene watched as several of the tourists scanned the darkening horizon and began to pack up their things and leave before the rain really started coming down. She would have to act fast.

A group of teenagers came spilling out of the gift shop just then, drinking slushies and sharing cigarettes. They were like a pack of lion cubs, careless and lethal to someone like Charlene. She approached them with caution, suddenly self-conscious in her pink and blue knee-length Bermuda shorts. They were the real reason she chose to come to Bermuda in the first place. When her company had begun mandating that employees use at least one week of their vacation time, Charlene had been forced to pick a destination. She had bought the Bermuda shorts at Belk on a whim several months before and had wanted to wear them someplace special,

although she never went anywhere special except for “prom night” at her mother’s nursing home, where all of the old ladies got their faces made up and wore fancy dresses.

Charlene decided that Bermuda would be her special place.

One of the boys noticed her approaching and took her in at a single glance—the shorts, the chunky sandals, the company sun visor, the “I Survived the Bermuda Triangle!” t-shirt she had worn every day of her trip so far. The other kids stared at her too, still sucking on their slushies.

“Could you do me a favor and take my picture please?”

The first boy nodded, but Charlene didn’t move.

“Do you want me to take it with your phone?” he said.

“Oh, my phone doesn’t take pictures. I have a camera.”

She handed the camera to the boy. He was probably around sixteen, and turned the camera over in his hands like she was a time traveler who had just handed him an ancient relic.

“How do you even work this?” he asked.

“You just press the top button,” she said. Charlene felt herself begin to sweat with embarrassment under her clothes, which wasn’t helped by the balminess of the island air. Charlene imagined that she was as irrelevant and anachronistic to these kids as the camera. She took up a spot on the lawn where the lighthouse and the churning sea and a few palms were visible behind her. She stood in an awkward pose, her hands clasped in front of her, a smile pasted on her face again. The boy squinted through the camera and clicked the button in a bewildered manner.

“You have to roll the little wheel thing to take another,” Charlene said.

The boy was dubious. His pack of friends, restless, shifting from foot to foot, began to mock him as he struggled with the camera.

“Having a little trouble there, genius?”

“Dude, come on we’re going to miss the beginning of the movie.”

“Isn’t your uncle a photographer or something? I can tell.”

“Shut up,” said the boy, trying to concentrate.

Charlene mistook the good-natured jabbing of the teenagers for mockery directed towards herself—of her shirt, of her face, of her ridiculous disposable camera. Her ears burned red hot and she hoped they wouldn’t show in the picture. She wanted to shrivel up into her clothes and disappear.

After two more clicks, the boy returned the camera and Charlene muttered a self-conscious thanks before slipping away to the other side of the lighthouse. She decided that even if the pictures were decent, she couldn’t use them. Every time she looked at them, she would think of the group of prowling teenagers, silently laughing at her with their eyes, their red-slushie stained mouths like those of lion cubs toying with a dead antelope.

A crack of lightning split the sky in half and thunder rolled across the horizon like the waves across the shore. There were very few people at the base of the lighthouse now, so Charlene decided that her best chance would be up on the observation deck. That would be a more optimal spot for a nice picture anyways.

Charlene climbed the cramped steps of the spiraling staircase, feeling every one of her 47 years in her knees as she did. She clutched her camera tighter the higher she went, afraid it would slip out of her clammy hands. After 185 steps, Charlene emerged onto the observation deck and took in the view. The sky was gloomy and a misty drizzle had started. The palm trees swayed in a wind that carried the smell of fresh fish and the colorful houses populating the island nestled further into the earth.

A young woman, in her late twenties, stood in a flowing maxi-dress by the edge of the deck's railing, staring out at the landscape like she was the heroine in one of the pulpy novels Charlene read during her lunch breaks. Charlene couldn't remember seeing a young lady so pretty before. She had thick blond hair tossed by the wind, tan freckled skin, and eyes that looked the exact color of the ocean.

Charlene stared at her like she was a picture in a magazine. How could she possibly ask someone like this to take her picture? Surely the young woman's own prettiness would somehow dull the picture or overexpose it with the brightness of her blond head.

The woman turned around to leave and almost ran straight into Charlene who blurted out before she could stop herself, "Would you take my picture?"

The woman smiled politely. "Sure thing."

The woman waited patiently while Charlene positioned herself yet again so that the correct amount of ocean and palm trees occupied the background. She wanted her coworkers to be jealous of the exotic locale in which she was vacationing and this was the best way to do it. But as Charlene stared at the camera lens, she found herself unable to smile properly. The young woman's smile was so bright, so perfect, that her own (she thought) must pale in comparison.

Charlene had often tried to make herself more aesthetically pleasing. She bought the Colgate extra-whitening toothpaste, used seaweed face masks from Walgreens, and did at least twenty sit-ups every night before bed. She drank milk and used sunscreen and sometimes wore a back brace at work to help her posture. But even so, none of this had made her anywhere near as beautiful as the young woman before her.

Before Charlene knew it, the young woman snapped two photos in which Charlene had been giving a half-smile, half-grimace. The photos would be ruined now. It didn't matter how

perfect the background looked—if Charlene didn’t *look* like she was enjoying herself she would never be able to convince anyone that she *had* enjoyed herself.

The young woman returned the camera with a smile and whisked away down the spiral staircase like a spirit as the humid air began to thicken and the first fat raindrops fell.

A wave of panic swept through Charlene as the other tourists on the deck began to pop open umbrellas and zip-up raincoats. The rain became steadier. Visitors reigned in kids, shouldered backpacks, and shuffled back to the staircase. Those below on the grassy lawn all crammed into the gift shop for cover as lighting sliced the sky open.

Charlene soon found herself alone on the observation deck except for a man in a red, hooded rain slicker coming around the side of the lighthouse. He was clearly a native islander. His skin was black and unwrinkled like a marble. He could have been anywhere from 30 to 50 years old. The back of his rain slicker said STAFF in big white letters.

As the rain grew more persistent, Charlene held out her camera to the man and shouted over the thunder, “Excuse me sir. Would you mind taking my picture?”

“What?” he shouted, his voice accented.

“My picture. Will you take it?”

“I’m sorry ma’am, but we’ve been instructed to clear the deck. The lighting’s too close for it to be safe up here.

“But I need my picture.”

“We’ve got some really great post cards in the gift shop. Better than a picture anyways.”

“But I need one of *me*.”

Charlene imagined what this man must think of her, soaking wet, alone, waving her plastic camera at him like a lunatic. She pushed the thought out of her head as a peal of thunder seemed to rock the entire island.

“Please,” said Charlene.

The staff member considered for a moment, and then snatched the camera and aimed it at Charlene. She did her best to smile amid what was now a downpour. The wind plastered her hair against her wet face and her visor flew off her head. Her t-shirt clung to her body and the rain played frantic, plinking music on the cast iron hull of the lighthouse.

Charlene could see something was wrong. The staff worker tried to take the picture, glanced at the camera in confusion, and then tried again. He yelled something at Charlene, but his voice was lost in the noise of the storm. He motioned for her to take shelter inside the lighthouse, but she shook her head, pointing to the camera. He walked over and placed it in her hands, pointing at the tiny black slot that showed how many photos were left. It read 0.

It rained the rest of that night and the next morning, right up until Charlene’s plane took off back to the States. She returned to her job the following Monday with some nice pictures of the island’s aquatic center and some better-than-average snapshots of the beach and its rocky inlets. She also developed several photos of just the lighthouse and shared them around the office, each of them labeled with the location and date in neat handwriting. She made sure to tell everyone that saw them that she’d wanted to be in those pictures also, but no one else had been at the lighthouse that day to do it.

Monopoly Pieces

The wine was running low so they pulled the old Monopoly board out of the closet to kill the time. Something about board games seemed so quaint nowadays. Having a game night meant you were mature. That you were engaged. That you took the time to interact with your peers in a wholesome setting. Being all young professionals in their late twenties, the four members of the dinner party cared very much about proving that they had real human connections. The quality of these connections was somewhat less relevant.

They'd all been friends since high school—Aubrey, Bradley, Mike, and Jenna. They'd all gone to the same large state school, had all sworn to move out to DC or New York or LA after graduation. But then Mike got a job downtown at a tech startup where he coded for mobile apps and could earn \$70,000 a year. He was dating Jenna, so she naturally stayed in the city as well and found a social media marketing position at a vegan-friendly cosmetic company. Bradley attempted med school for a year but then dropped out and found his calling as junior manager of his father's local cardboard box company. And then Aubrey took a temporary summer internship at an art gallery that turned into a full-time job that she settled into rather complacently. By the time she realized she hated her job, she found herself too scared to leave and venture out into the unknown and uncertain limbo of unemployment.

But it was all a moot point now. Aubrey had lost this job earlier that morning.

She was somewhat relieved that she would never have to navigate the traffic of the swanky part of town and set foot into that uptight gallery again. She would no longer have to wear sensible skirts while trying to explain to tourists how serious art was, leading them through freezing cold rooms and showing them fluorescently lit nude paintings. She hated the sterility of the place, the emptiness, the thick carpet that muffled sound and was plain so as not to clash with the art. At times she found herself wanting to wreck the place, to bash in the sculptures and

streak the paintings with fat red markers, to punch her limbs through the thin canvases. Aubrey had recently discovered within her a new need to be destructive, a new rage fueled by her frustration with having completed no adventures so far in her adult life.

She wasn't sorry to lose the job. But her supervisor's subtle criticisms about Aubrey's "lack of enthusiasm" when she had been let go hurt more than Aubrey had anticipated. Sure, it was all true. Aubrey had been lackluster on the job. But hearing this from someone else, being told that she wasn't competent enough to handle a job she felt was beneath her, had eaten away at Aubrey's already dwindling self-confidence. By the time the dinner party rolled around, there was a hot, gnawing feeling in her gut. Aubrey regretted inviting her friends over.

Mike and Jenna arrived together, early. They looked like they could be brother and sister rather than a couple. They were both dark-haired and slender. Jenna wore a long skirt and a shade of lipstick too dark for her. Tiny piercings climbed up her cartilage and a small Aries tattoo peaked out from the crook of her left arm. Mike wore a dress shirt a size too small so that it clung to his arm muscles and buttoned at his neck, threatening to choke him. His hair was shaved slightly on the sides and coiffed at the top. The couple presented Aubrey with a nice enough cheese platter from Costco with the price tag mistakenly left on the bottom. It had been on sale.

"How've you been?" asked Jenna, squeezing Aubrey into a hug. "Still rocking that outfit, huh?"

Aubrey had opted for her usual jeans and plain, dark purple halter top—the same outfit she always wore for casual special occasions.

"Nice of you to notice," said Aubrey.

“Hey Morgs, how’s it going?” said Mike, holding up a hand for a high five. Mike made it a point to never hug other women out of the delusion that Jenna would become insanely jealous. Aubrey gave his hand a half-hearted whack.

“I love what you’ve done with the place,” said Jenna in a tone that could easily have been sarcastic. Aubrey’s small house lived in the no-man’s-land that lay between child and adulthood. On the adult side, the cabinets had just been painted a mint green, the bamboo counters had been lacquered, and an impressive array of quality chrome pans hung from a metal rack above the stove. However, the décor on the walls consisted of a mandala tapestry and hand-painted canvases with clever quotes—a skill learned during Aubrey’s sorority days and thus stinking of college. The couches didn’t match, the bookshelf was crammed full of textbooks she had never read, and a large Kermit the Frog sticker on the wall now seemed garish rather than cute and whimsical as it had before.

Mike plopped down at the table and busied himself checking email on his phone. Jenna walked around the small kitchen and dining area, observing the many new wine-themed artifacts: coasters with pictures of wine bottles, a dish towel with a wine bottle etched onto it, a wine rack full of cheap brands, a porcelain bowl painted with different types of grapes and their French names. Aubrey always felt like filling her house with wine paraphernalia made it more adult, helped distance it from the days of drinking beer and Red Bull in a dorm room.

“You becoming a wino or something?” Jenna laughed. It wasn’t a nice laugh.

Before Aubrey could answer, the doorbell rang and she opened the door to find Bradley standing at the front steps, his hands shoved into his pockets. He wore a dark green polo and frayed khakis that overlapped his dirty Converse. His hair was the same shaggy mop that it had been since middle school and his body was all gawk and no definition.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said as he lumbered in. Bradley brought no hostess gift.

“What’s up, kiddo?” said Mike, ruffling Bradley’s hair. Bradley instinctively stepped back, annoyed, especially since he was older than Mike.

“Hi Jenna,” he said, drinking her in with his eyes. Bradley had been crushing on Jenna for as long as anyone could remember, and no one knew and delighted in this more than Jenna herself.

“Hey Bradley,” she answered. “Glad to see you’re fashionably late as always.”

The dinner that Aubrey prepared was average. Dry grilled salmon. A lemony kale salad with walnuts. A no brand name couscous bought at a cramped organic grocery store uptown where people glared at you if you used plastic bags. The wine was by far the best part of the meal, a nice Côtes de Provence full red that tasted bitter on Aubrey’s tongue.

The four young adults labored through the proper motions of a dinner party. About ten minutes into the meal, the conversation inevitably turned to work. Aubrey almost groaned out loud. She knew that this would happen, that eventually the news of her new unemployment would be squeezed out of her somehow.

“You guys should see the new line of moisturizers my company is putting out. They’re letting me head up the marketing campaign and I had this great idea to package them in boxes made from recycled elephant poop. It sounds kind of gross at first, but it’s totally clean and sustainable.”

Aubrey watched as Jenna speared a forkful of very unsustainably caught salmon, and appreciated the irony of the moment.

With her mouth still full, Jenna added, “It’s just nice to be making a difference, you know? Like really helping people. I don’t want to be one of those people who has to go into an office every day and do the same old thing until I’m fifty.”

Aubrey knew for a fact that both Bradley and Mike went into offices every day and did the same thing. She could see that Mike felt the need to defend himself, not to be one-upped by his significant other.

“The start-up’s really taking off too. Right now we’re working on an app that allows you to tell time based on the position of the sun.”

“You mean like a sundial?” asked Aubrey.

“Yeah, but for your phone,” said Mike.

“Why would you need the sun to tell time if you have your phone with you?” asked Bradley as he chased some of the couscous around his plate with a fork.

“It’s more of a specialized thing. There’s a market for it, for sure. For example, people that aren’t like you and actually go *outside*.”

Mike smiled at this jab directed at Bradley, feeling like he had been really clever.

“You’re right, I don’t go outside. That’s because I’m working almost fifty hours a week. And I got my dad on my back the whole time, looking over my shoulder and criticizing everything I do.”

“How hard can it be?” said Mike. He downed the rest of his wine. “You just fold boxes, right?”

Mike winked at Aubrey like they were in on some secret game that involved insulting Bradley’s manhood. She did not smile back.

“I don’t know man, it takes a lot of commitment,” said Bradley.

Mike stiffened at the word. *Commitment*. Mike and Jenna, who had been dating for four years now, had a lot of bad fights regarding commitment. Aubrey and Bradley overheard many of these intense arguments over the years, the general gist of which was that Jenna wanted a ring and Mike hadn't given her one yet.

"Well I think your dad's company should really look at some more eco-friendly options. The world is evolving, you know," said Jenna, trying to change the subject.

"We'd need a whole herd of elephants shitting non-stop to meet our production quota," said Bradley. "But I love the idea," he tacked on, seeing that Jenna was a little hurt.

"You men are so shortsighted when it comes to innovation," she said.

"Hey, I innovate all the time," said Mike.

"Not like women do. Especially those in the workforce." She turned to Aubrey for approval and Aubrey had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes.

"I might be a little less in the workforce than you're anticipating," she said. "I quit my job today." The table looked at her in silence.

"I just didn't feel like I was reaching my full potential. I wasn't growing, you know?"

Aubrey hated the words as she said them and wondered if any one actually believed her.

"If you're looking for something temporary, I could see if we have any internship openings at the startup," said Mike. "They're not too keen on hiring girls, but I can put in a good word for you."

"I can see if we have something too," said Bradley. "I mean you'd probably be miserable at the box company, but hey, it's something."

Aubrey chugged her wine so she wouldn't have to answer. Jenna smiled politely but her eyes were full of smugness. She certainly wasn't going to offer Aubrey a job of any kind.

The conversation dwindled into tedious small talk as the group finished picking over their plates. Aubrey and Jenna fulfilled the obligatory task of discussing which of their mutual acquaintances had gotten engaged, while Mike tried to explain the state of the stock market to Bradley who sat and listened like a martyr.

With all of this satisfied and gotten through, there remained a customary one to two hours which needed to be passed with some sort of group activity. But Aubrey wanted them to leave, all of them. She hated the way they treated her and treated each other. For the first time, she consciously wondered what on earth had made her remain friends with these people for so many years. That same irrational destructive impulse, the one that always made her want to destroy the artwork, returned and sat in the pit of Aubrey's stomach. It didn't mix well with the wine.

When Aubrey checked her hallway closet, she found a variety of board games that she'd forgotten about crammed in beside the vacuum cleaner. She looked over her options as if she were selecting the deadliest weapon: Taboo, Cards Against Humanity, Settlers of Catan, Seven Wonders, and Monopoly.

Monopoly.

A few moments later, the four were sitting in the tiny living room, the Monopoly contents dumped out onto the coffee table. Mike cracked the board open and it released the musty smell of neglect. The game was an old one, *vintage* you might call it. But the dice still made a nice clacking sound when rolled together. The colored bills were still crisp. The tiny silver pieces glinted in the light. The group's glasses gurgled as the rest of the wine was poured out.

Mike picked up the yellowed instructions and began reading, trying to re-familiarize himself with a game that none of them had played since probably middle school. Jenna sat next

to him on the couch, peering over his shoulder while Bradley sat sunken in an old leather armchair, eyeing them.

Aubrey pulled up a chair from the kitchen and set it in the living room where she could see everyone's faces clearly. She watched as Jenna and Mike were already arguing about the game's instructions, while Bradley glared not a little jealously.

"I have an idea," said Aubrey. "How about we play a different type of game?"

"What else you got?" said Bradley.

Aubrey picked up the seven silver game pieces and set them up in a neat little row in the middle of the board. Altogether there was a car, a boat, a dog, a wheelbarrow, a shoe, a hat, and a thimble.

"Let's guess which pieces everyone would pick," said Aubrey.

"What do you mean?" asked Bradley.

"I mean let's literally guess which pieces we think everyone would pick to use for the game. You have to write it down and then justify it."

Dubious looks all around.

"Come on," said Aubrey. "A kind of psychological game, right? Like one of those who-would-eat-who-first-on-an-island thought experiments. To see if we really know each other as well as we think we do. It'll be fun."

Aubrey looked at Jenna as she said this. She knew that if Jenna agreed to something, both of the boys would be in. Jenna could jump headlong off a cliff and they'd be arguing as to who got to jump off first after her.

Jenna sat back on a pillow and sipped her wine.

"Alright, this could be kind of interesting."

Feeling like a teacher passing out an impossible exam, rigged from the very start to produce failure, Aubrey gave scraps of paper and pens to everyone.

“Write down what piece you would pick and then what you think everyone else would pick. And remember, you have to say why.”

The four of them stared at the seven Monopoly pieces in silence, having already accepted the challenge. They glanced up at each other occasionally, as if to weigh some thought against each other’s faces. Mike leaned far forward, his brows creased, determined to pick the right answers. Jenna smiled to herself as she scribbled on her scrap paper. Bradley chewed on the end of his pen and kept scratching out his answers and replacing them with new ones. Aubrey stared at the tiny silver pieces, searching for hidden meanings and patterns among them. She jotted down her answers and spent the rest of the time watching the others struggle to play within the parameters of her game.

After they all finally made their decisions, Aubrey made them flip their papers right side up on the table so they could all study them:

Aubrey	Mike	Jenna	Bradley
Me: wheelbarrow	Me: car	Me: dog	Me: shoe
Mike: car	Jenna: thimble	Aubrey: thimble	Mike: boat
Jenna: dog	Bradley: boat	Bradley: hat	Aubrey: dog
Bradley: shoe	Aubrey: shoe	Mike: boat	Jenna: thimble

Aubrey sat and waited for the first spark to ignite.

Jenna was the first to take issue.

“Mike,” she said frowning. “You and Bradley both had me picking the thimble. Why the thimble? That’s like the most boring piece.”

“I guess it’s just because you’re small. Petit.”

“But the thimble isn’t even the smallest piece,” said Jenna.

“But it’s the smallest object in real life,” said Mike.

“Maybe it’s a housework thing,” said Aubrey, pretending to really study the thimble.

“Thimbles, sewing, all that. You planning on proposing soon Mike? Gonna get you a good, old-fashioned housewife?”

Aubrey said it like it was a joke but the laughter elicited from the group was slightly nervous. Jenna didn’t laugh at all. Mike looked back at the list in an attempt to divert the conversation.

“Hey Bradley, that’s funny. You and I both thought each other would pick the boat. What was your reasoning behind it?” The innocuous question somehow had the edge of a challenge in it.

Bradley twisted his fingers around. “I don’t know, you just seem like a boat guy to me,” he said.

“What does that mean?” asked Mike.

“Like you’d want the biggest, most powerful piece.”

Mike grinned. “Glad to know you think I’m big and powerful, buddy.”

“I didn’t say that you *were* it. I said you *wanted* to be it.”

Mike realized that what he thought was a compliment might have actually been an insult. He looked to Jenna for some type of backup, a look that said, “No honey, that’s not you at all.” He didn’t get it.

“Why’d you put me as the hat?” Bradley asked Jenna.

“I don’t know. You’re quirky. Quirky people wear strange hats” said Jenna.

“Quirky? God, is that how you describe me to people? That’s like the worst euphemism in existence.”

“I can’t help it if you’re quirky.”

“Stop calling me that—”

Aubrey thought that the fire was burning nicely now.

“Well why did you put me as the thimble?” asked Jenna. “Am I just a housewife to you too?”

Bradley’s face flushed bright red at the truth of Jenna’s statement. “Of course that’s not true,” he said.

“Why did *you* put me as the boat?” Mike asked Jenna.

Before Jenna could answer, Bradley butted in, “Do you really have to ask that, Mr. 70,000-a-year-right-out-of-college? You literally brag to everyone about it like you’re some kind of millionaire.”

“Just because I’m doing well for myself doesn’t mean you have to be a dick about it,” said Mike.

“If anyone has a right to be mad, it’s me,” said Jenna. “You guys stuck me with the most stereotypically female piece. Like what the hell?”

“Oh please,” said Bradley, still smarting from Mike’s comment. “You can’t make a living selling animal shit.”

The group devolved into a mass of chaotic bickering, of hurtful things slung back and forth. Aubrey was enjoying it, but when she checked her watch she saw that it was past eleven-thirty. She was tired and this party needed wrapped up so she could go to bed and sink into the coolness of her sheets.

“Everybody shut up,” she said. The group hushed in surprise as Aubrey picked up the papers, studying them closely. She set her wine glass on the coffee table.

“Not that anybody cares, but I guessed each of you correctly,” she said. “I knew Mike would want the car, Jenna would want the dog, and Bradley would want the shoe.”

The others seemed somewhat astonished when they saw that Aubrey was right.

“You want to know how I knew?” she asked. The silence in the room was answer enough for her. She took a deep breath.

“Mike, you want the car because you think it’s the most macho of all the pieces. Your insecurities and hyper-masculine tendencies make you an arrogant asshole who tries to assert yourself over everyone else. You always want to be the smartest in the room, but you never are. Instead of committing to Jenna, you belittle Bradley and think it makes you more attractive to her. Your delusions of grandeur only allow you to be friends with people who are weaker than you or who have something to give you.

“Bradley, you want the shoe because it’s the odd object out. A shoe without a mate. You’re pissed because you think everyone else in the world is out to get you, so you whine and complain literally all the time. You want people to pity you and give you sympathy so that they don’t realize how lazy and unambitious you really are. You act like a victim when your problems are easily solvable if you’d just put in a little effort and take some responsibility. You can’t play the hero, so you just pretend you’re some saintly martyr who is destined to suffer.

“Jenna. You pick the dog. You associate dogs with loyalty and happiness and kindness—things you know deep down that you’ve never had. You act like the whole world was made for you entirely. You think that if you put on an act, that people will like you. But in reality, people still don’t like you even when they can’t quite pin down why. You spew out all this nonsense about ‘progressivism’ and ‘innovation’ even though you’ve never had an original thought in your life. You’re a hypocrite and your only real talent is seeking attention.”

Aubrey took another breath and examined the shocked faces staring back at her. There was absolute silence except for the refrigerator humming in the kitchen.

“And me,” Aubrey said, “I pick the wheelbarrow. You know why? Because I’ve been carrying around all your baggage and bullshit since high school and pretending like we haven’t all grown into people we dislike. I didn’t quit my job today, I lost it. Because I’m the same kind of spoiled, self-absorbed, mediocre person that you all are. I’m just like you. And I hate it. I hate it more than anything.”

Aubrey drained the rest of her wine and set the glass back on the coffee table with an air of finality. The others all sat there, not making eye contact with each other. The fridge still hummed in the kitchen, a clock ticked slowly on the wall. The beeping and swooshing of evening traffic came through an open window somewhere.

Aubrey felt like something should be happening. Either the others should leave, or she should leave, or someone should start yelling hysterically. But no one made a move. The four former friends still sat in the living room, each silent and staring off into space, as the dinner party dragged on into the night.

Hurricane Pools

Aaron sat up on the tall lifeguard chair like a bronze god looking down on all of the world—if all of the world were a swimming pool and all of the people in it were screaming seven-year-olds. Aaron watched the swim meet carry on into the hot afternoon of the July day. The pavement was searing, so every kid under the age of fifteen wanted to run more than usual. Aaron imagined their cracked skulls on the pavement, their brains sliding out and cooking on the hot ground. He imagined paramedics loading their tiny bodies into ambulances, and never bringing them back. Aaron tried to convince himself that he was the only one preventing these tragedies from happening, but he saw right through his own self-inflated sense of purpose. The hard truth was that lifeguards at crowded swim meets were pretty useless.

Aaron yelled and threatened and blew his whistle and used his sternest lifeguard voice as he patrolled the pool like a restless deity. One kid especially, Caleb, only about six, was really trying his patience. He ran every single time down the length of the pool as if in an act of defiance.

It felt strange sitting so high up, like sitting above the clouds and looking down at the swirling hurricane below. He had the best vantage point out of everybody, could see the entire pool complex in all of its animated detail.

Aaron couldn't believe he was still here, sitting in this lifeguard chair like he had for the past six summers. Summer jobs were fine when you were still in college. But as soon as you graduated, everyone expected you to have a real job, to begin a fulfilling career, to start making something of yourself. But even after four years as an undergrad, Aaron still didn't know what he wanted to do. He'd bounced from economics to journalism to global studies and had been average in them all. Aaron felt that his time in college had been rather unimpressive and now

he'd been thrust into a world where unimpressive people weren't wanted. *Unimpressive people aren't wanted*. Aaron's dad had actually said that to him the day he signed up to lifeguard again.

Aaron swept his eyes over the pool complex, trying to distract himself. Swim meets had a way of packing about two hundred people into a pool area that should have held fifty, parents struggling to set up lawn chairs in cramped spaces beside coolers full of popsicles and string cheese and cut grapes in little ziploc baggies. Kids swarmed everywhere, girls and boys alike in matching tie-dye swimsuits, their backs and legs sharpied with "eat my bubbles!" and their arms fake tattooed with fish.

The bright little flags strung out above the pool flapped in the wind that carried the heavy scent of sunscreen and burgers that were being cooked on the huge grill over in the grassy area and sold for two dollars at the concession stand along with sodas and ring pops. The announcer's voice introducing the next event competed with screams and laughter, the two almost indistinguishable. The moms in their sensible sun visors and tennis skirts and dangly earrings dished out towels and hunted for missing goggles. Dads in their athletic polos stood at the end of the pool lanes, coaching their children whose limbs were hardly strong enough to keep them afloat, but nevertheless they always butterflyed or freestyled towards their dad's voice out of some instinctual impulse to please him.

Aaron sat there, observing all of this swirling life around him and felt oddly disconnected from it. Everything felt like it was happening in both slow motion and hyperspeed at the same time. Aaron stretched out his fingers, studying the way the light glanced off his cuticles, his knuckles, the veins in the back of his hand. He wondered what all of his college friends were doing at this very moment. They were probably travelling the world or finding cures for obscure diseases or cracking the secrets of the stock market by now. They were all *go-getters* (another

term Aaron's dad loved to throw around) in one way or another, and Aaron knew that none of them were babysitting at what was little more than a kiddie pool party.

Out of the corner of his eye, Aaron saw Caleb run by the lifeguard chair again. Aaron blew his whistle and Caleb looked up at him, half a cheeseburger stuck in his mouth, his little belly pooching out.

"Quit running, Caleb. You're going to choke on your burger if you're not careful."

Caleb grinned and held out his half-chewed burger.

"Do you want some?" he asked.

The man over the speaker announced the five and six-year-old boys backstroke race and Caleb took off for the diving blocks, speed walking, being very careful not to run.

Aaron watched him go and remembered his own cheeseburger that he'd hardly been able to finish earlier that day. Lately everything had begun to taste like unsalted mashed potatoes, everything too bland and his appetite nonexistent. Eating took effort, as did everything else, and little by little Aaron had ceased all activities that were non-vital. The predictions that he was going nowhere in life (made explicitly by his dad and implicitly by the disappointed looks from family friends and professors) had made Aaron draw up into himself. He confined himself mostly to his room now and when he did attempt to eat, he often found himself staring at his food, willing himself to take small bites so he didn't lose noticeable weight.

Now he gazed out at all of the people floating below him, these people from all over the neighborhood and from other neighborhoods, suburbanites with their own little lives to live out.

How were they supposed to know that he hardly left his room now, even on beautiful summer days like this? He was Aaron the Slacker Lifeguard to them, carefree and happy for all they knew, without a mortgage or private school tuition or cranky in-laws to worry about. He

was not Aaron Without a Future, whose mom had to beg and plead for him to leave his bed. The only impetus that propelled Aaron into the outside world now was his commitment to work. But every time Aaron sat in that chair, he knew he wasn't supposed to be there. He was supposed to be off doing adult things, not here, guarding no one, helping no one, doing nothing.

When Aaron had to venture out for swim meets, the sun struck him as a hideously powerful thing and the chaos of the meets was nearly overwhelming. Life just went on like this all the time, people eating and swimming and being loud and living. They didn't care about him, they didn't care about the purposelessness that swirled about him. They sometimes made little comments like, "I see you're still working here," or "Haven't you graduated?" or "What are you plans for a job going forward?" But none of them actually *cared*.

Aaron picked out Caleb among the nearly identical group of kids crowding behind the diving blocks, waiting their turn to race. Caleb had a lime green swim cap on and when he took off from the block, his motion wasn't clean but he chopped at the water with a boyish intensity that Aaron marveled at. His form sucked even for a six-year-old but what was incredible was that Caleb didn't care—none of the little ones did. None of them cared if their form was perfect or if their time improved or if they won or lost whatever random race their coach had signed them up for. It was more about the doing of the thing, the being at the place.

Caleb finished in dead last and popped his head up from the water, beat his chest a few times, and then climbed out dripping like he'd just won the world. A delivery guy balancing twenty precarious boxes had just arrived at the pool's front gate and was being attacked by little maniacs who had a sixth sense for knowing when pizza was near. Caleb was there in an instant, snagging a piece of pepperoni from an open box while an adult paid the delivery man.

Aaron sat and watched him eat three pieces, incredible for a guy so small to be able to hold so much food in that little stomach of his. Aaron rubbed his buzzed-cut head and cleaned his sunglasses. It was getting hotter and he could feel the sweat dripping down his back under his tank top that was cut all the way down both sides so you could see his abs and ribs, muscular, but a little less muscular than before because of the eating thing. Caleb passed by Aaron's chair again and looked as if he were about to break out into a sprint. The boy's eyes darted up to the lifeguard stand and he stopped dead and smiled when he saw Aaron watching him.

"Don't even think about it," said Aaron.

"What?" Caleb smiled like a mischievous devil.

"I could see it. You wanted to run, didn't you?"

"No. You're a goofball."

Caleb backed away slowly from the chair, smiling and daring Aaron to blow his whistle. Aaron watched as the kid got back in line. Aaron acted annoyed but was grateful for Caleb as a distraction. He was a focal point, a set thing to focus on in the whirlwind of chaos and noise and motion that descended upon the pool every week for the swim meet. Not to mention the whirlwind of chaos and noise in Aaron's own mind.

The next race was the five and six-year old boys butterfly. Aaron watched through tinted sunglasses as Caleb set up awkwardly on the block, adjusting his cap and goggles about four times each. The horn blew and eight little bodies splashed into the water as if they were trying to make the biggest waves possible. Caleb hacked his way towards the other end of the pool.

Aaron seemed to know it would happen before it did.

It was only about fifteen seconds later, midway through the race, when Caleb got too tired to continue. Aaron could see it in Caleb's arms and legs, in the way his body began to tilt

vertically and his neck craned upward. Too many races that day, too much excitement, too much pepperoni pizza probably. Whatever the reason, Caleb floundered and then sank like a stone, right in the middle of the race. The poor little guy was too short to stand in the five and a half feet depth of the pool and his arms were too short to grab onto the lane coils.

There was no real emergency. There were dozens of people watching the race and enough of them would have been more than willing to jump in and grab the sinking kid. But this was Aaron's job, this is what he was here for, and he was the first to perceive what was happening.

In one fluid move, Aaron slipped the whistle off his neck and tossed it to the side. He jumped into the water, jumped down into the hurricane, plunged into the water that was warm but cooler than the day had been, felt the water encase him like a giant insect in amber, felt his muscles pull against the water resistance.

In three swift strokes, he was right by Caleb and scooped the kid up in one muscular arm, holding him above the surface. Caleb coughed and spluttered while Aaron whacked him on the back.

"You're okay buddy. Calm down, it's okay. Just a little dunk was all."

The poor kid clung to Aaron for dear life, his shaking limbs tight around Aaron's neck and waist.

"You're alright buddy."

Half of the onlookers clapped while the other half looked bewildered as to what had just taken place. A worried looking woman was waiting at the edge of the pool, clutching a Transformers towel, most likely Caleb's mom. Aaron waded over to her, the water barely above

his waist. When he reached the edge of the pool, he tried to hand Caleb up to the mom, but the spindly arms and legs were still wrapped tight around him.

The mom spent several minutes cooing and coaxing, trying to disentangle Caleb from the lifeguard's strong arms. She looked at Aaron in apology.

"I think he's still just rattled," she said, a bit frazzled.

"I understand," said Aaron. He understood. "I hope this doesn't make him quit swimming. That would be a shame."

"Oh, he'll bounce back. You know kids. He'll be swimming again by tomorrow. Hopefully a little more carefully next time."

"I don't mind holding him for a few minutes."

The mom smiled at Aaron and seemed to relax a bit. "I'm glad you were here," she said.

Aaron bounced up and down in the water slightly, rocking Caleb back and forth, wondering if he was really holding Caleb or Caleb was holding him.

Freefall

Allison accidentally dropped the Mickey Mouse watch, the one her father had given her, out of the plane. She'd been unstrapping it from her wrist so that she could zip it up into her vest pocket, where it would be safe during the sky dive. But in an ironic twist of fate, the wind had ripped it right out of her hands. She lunged for it, throwing herself off balance and headlong out of the plane as well. Before she knew it, she was freefalling towards the Wyoming desert, alone, at a break-neck pace of 200 kilometers per hour.

She was surrounded by an immense, cloudless blue canopy that stretched out in every direction. She had imagined that skydiving would be like tumbling through the air or being sucked down into a vortex. She thought that her stomach would flip-flop like it did on roller coasters. But it wasn't like that at all. Rather, she kind of hovered, suspended, her limbs outstretched like those of a flying squirrel and her ponytail standing straight up against the wind. On the ground, the day had been hot but the rush of wind up here was loud and cold as it whooshed in and out of Allison's ears. Time itself seemed to slow down, leaving Allison frozen in the sky.

But Allison knew that time wasn't really frozen—she was hurtling towards the earth from 12,000 feet, accelerating with every passing moment. All for a Mickey Mouse watch—her father's prized possession—that he'd given to Allison on his deathbed. The watch meant a lot to Allison, the first and only piece of physical evidence proving that her dad had loved her. The watch was also the reason that Allison and Mia, her older sister, hadn't talked in the six months since their dad's death. The watch was important, but at that moment, Allison hardly thought it was worth her life.

In light of current events, Allison decided it was fortunate that Mia had talked her into doing the Accelerated Free Fall Level One jump instead of the tandem jump. In the tandem

jump, you were harnessed to an instructor who deployed your shared parachute and did all the work for you. This is the option that most first-time divers chose and was by far the safest.

The Accelerated Free Fall Level One jump, on the other hand, allowed you to work your own parachute while two instructors dove beside you to make sure you didn't screw up and kill yourself. This method was trickier and required a six hour training course, but it was a more authentic skydiving experience (or so the brochure said.)

Initially, Allison protested, not wanting to sit in a hot classroom for six hours on a Saturday. But since Mia was paying for the whole thing, Allison couldn't very well dictate what kind of jump they were going to do.

Now, 10,000 feet in the air and dropping fast towards the cracked desert floor, Allison was grateful for the stuffy classroom and ancient blackboard that had made her feel like she was a 16-year-old taking driver's ed. She extended her arms and legs as wide as she could, remembering that the more surface area you had exposed to the wind, the slower you fell and the more time you had to freefall before the parachute was absolutely necessary. The sound of flapping was overwhelming—every inch of excess fabric on Allison's highlighter yellow jumpsuit snapped back and forth under the immense force of the wind. She felt tears forming at the corners of her eyes under her goggles as the wind pulled out all of the moisture.

Allison tried to refocus. In her estimation, she had been freefalling for about 10 seconds at this point. The instructors had told them not to deploy the parachute until 60 seconds of freefalling or the whole thing could go south—the air resistance might not be strong enough to open the shoot or something. That gave her approximately 50 seconds to save herself.

Allison wish she had paid more attention during the class. She'd been too distracted by her conversation with Mia. But now she had to remain calm and think. *Think. Remember.* She

had to take her mind back to the classroom where she and Mia had sat next to each other only a few hours before, already dressed in their jumpsuits.

They sat at the back of the darkened classroom with about twenty other skydiving hopefuls as a cheesy instructional video from the 90s played on a monitor. The two women didn't even look related. Allison was 28, tall and sculpted with thick black hair braided down her back. She still had traces of that tomboy phase from childhood that she had never quite grown out of. Mia was 33 and stockier, blonder, rosier. She looked more reasonable, more responsible, but a lot less fun. The sisters sat in silence as the video droned on. Mia glanced at Allison's wrist.

"I see you wore it," she said.

"Why wouldn't I?" asked Allison. "I wear it all the time."

"Is that your way of gloating?"

"It's not like you didn't get anything. He left you everything else in the will."

"It's not the same thing and you know it."

Allison glanced sideways at her sister. Then she slipped the watch off and laid it on the tiny desk she was sitting at. There was nothing particularly special about it to the average outsider. It was old and cheap and a dirty white color. An early version of Mickey Mouse was the backdrop of the watch face.

"It's stupid to let something like this bother you. Especially for this long," said Allison as she fingered the watch. Mia looked at her with fiery eyes that were startling in contrast to her pleasant, slightly plump face.

"You wouldn't be saying the same thing if you were in my position—"

“Excuse me, ladies,” said the instructor, talking over the video. “But you’ll want to pay close attention to this part. It could potentially save your life.”

Mia nodded like an obedient child who’d been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Allison rolled her eyes, annoyed at the instructor, the blazing hot classroom that was making her whole body sweat under the jumpsuit, and at her sister’s compliance with everything.

After a moment, Allison started the conversation back up.

“Okay, Mia. Yes. He gave it to me. We just have to come to terms with that. It doesn’t mean he loved me more.”

It definitely meant he loved her more. The watch had been their dad’s favorite possession since he himself was a kid. He’d been wearing it when he hit his first homerun in Little League. He’d worn it all through high school and had retired it once he reached college, when his wrist became a little too thick for it and the cheap leather had cracked. However, he still broke it out for special occasions—his MCAT, his wedding day, the birth of his daughters, their mother’s funeral. When he wasn’t wearing it, he kept it displayed in a shadow box in his office next to his medical degrees.

“You could have at least let me be the one to speak at the funeral,” said Mia. Allison could see that tears were beginning to brim at her eyes. “You could’ve at least let me do that.”

The funeral was the last time the sisters had spoken until the skydiving trip. It was still and cold that day. Rainy mist hung in the air. Black-clad family members huddled together under umbrellas on the bright green turf of the church’s cemetery lawn. Allison and Mia had driven separately and avoided each other as much as could be managed at a small family funeral. At one

point, they'd found themselves face to face as they made their ways to their dripping plastic chairs.

"Those aren't dressy enough," Mia said, referring to Allison's black, ripped jeans. "It's our Dad's funeral for god's sakes."

"At least I look like I'm from this century," said Allison.

Mia flushed, self-conscious about her plain, ankle length black skirt. The sisters took their seats, the air between them chillier (and not just because of the rain.)

After delivering a short speech, the pastor said, "And now, here to share a few words about Keith, is his lovely daughter."

Mia and Allison both stood up, seeing each other in their peripheral vision. In shock, they realized that they never discussed which of them would be giving the main eulogy. They both sped-walked to the platform, reaching it at the same time. The pastor smiled and glossed over the awkward moment by suggesting that Mia go first and Allison follow.

Mia's speech was sweet, but predictable. She said all of the things a daughter should say about her dead father, reading them off of the typed page she'd brought with her. She teared up at the appropriate moments. She talked about her dad's contribution as a doctor and his strong moral values as a father. It was all very nice.

But Allison's speech was different. She didn't read, she just talked. Talked about the warm summer afternoons playing baseball with her dad at the rundown ballpark next to their house. The time she and her cousins played muddy tackle football and he'd hosed them all down as they laughed and screamed. The time she broke her arm skiing and he carried her down the mountain instead of waiting for help. The day she went on her first rollercoaster at Disney World and he bought her a Space Mountain t-shirt.

Mia had not done any of those things. She'd never liked baseball, had hated the mud and anything dirty for that matter. She was too clumsy to ski and was afraid of heights (ironic now that the skydiving had been her idea.) Mia had never had those moments with her father and began to cry as Allison spoke. As Allison gesticulated with her hands, the Mickey Mouse watch became just visible under her long-sleeve black shirt. When Mia saw it, she cried harder.

Their dad had given Allison the watch on his literal death bed. Kidney failure had kept him in and out of the hospital for months before the doctors finally said there was nothing more to be done. Mia was the one by his bedside during that time, taking time off of work to hound the doctors and rub his back and read to him in the evenings. She made him eat his applesauce and wear socks and take his medicine. For some reason, good doctors like their dad were so stubborn when it came to their own medical care. But Mia was faithful and patient and helpful. Always had been.

Allison dropped in from time to time and it hurt Mia to see the way their dad's eyes brightened at the sight of her. Allison had a way of swooping into people's lives and lighting them up before leaving the next instant. She was spontaneous and spunky and boyish in a way that made their Dad feel like he almost had a son. Her personality slotted her to be a favorite right from the beginning.

On that very last day, Allison and Mia both knew that their dad wouldn't make it through the night. They both sat close, one on either side of his bed, watching his chest struggle to heave up and down. His eyes were jaundiced and his arms and legs swollen. He was hooked up to a dozen clear tubes either pumping liquid in or out of him. But that familiar stubbled jawline was still sharp and those eyes still black and judging.

He reached over to a little stand beside the bed and fumbled for a small box. Allison handed it to him and he opened it, revealing the Mickey Mouse watch. He picked it up slowly, examining it one last time, then handed it to her. He took Allison's other hand in his own.

"I'm so proud of you baby girl," he said. "I want you to have this. I want you to remember me when you're off doing great things, you hear?"

Allison stared at the watch as if it was made of solid gold. She didn't cry, but Allison never cried. Instead, she squeezed her dad's hand and held his gaze, their eyes saying everything else that hadn't been said. After a moment, their dad turned to Mia. It clearly took effort for him to tear his eyes away from Allison. He glanced up at Mia, but began coughing before he could speak, his whole body shuddering. In a raspy, barely audible voice, he said to Mia, "Get me a glass of water." Looking worried, Mia hurried over to the sink and filled a glass, her hands shaking as she did so.

But when she returned to the bedside, their father was dead.

He had died in the twenty seconds it had taken her to walk across the room and fill a cup with water. He'd stopped breathing just like that, with no warning or fanfare. Now there would be no reconciliation, no gratitude, nothing to make Mia feel like her sacrifice as the lesser-loved daughter had been worth it. The last thing he had said to Mia had been an ordinary command while Allison had gotten a benediction. There was nothing left of their dad now, except the Mickey Mouse watch, and Allison had that too.

Allison and Mia stared at each other over their father's dead body. Allison could see that Mia desperately wanted her to say something, anything, to comfort her. But Allison wasn't that kind of person. She didn't know what to say or how to say it. It wasn't her fault that their dad had a favorite.

Very carefully, Allison slipped the Mickey Mouse watch over her wrist and buckled it tightly. Mia closed their father's eyelids.

"He did love you more," said Mia. The instructional video had ended and a quiz was being passed around to everyone in the class. "I don't blame you for that, it's not your fault. But you didn't have to love him more than me also."

"He didn't love me more. He just liked that I was more like him," said Allison.

"Isn't that the same thing?"

Allison took a quiz from the man beside her as she struggled to formulate an answer to her sister's question. She pretended to study it to avoid her sister's piercing eyes.

#1: What part of the parachute apparatus must be deployed first?

"Are you even hearing what I'm saying?" said Mia.

A) the drogue

"What do you want me to do about it? I can't change the past," said Allison.

B) the ripcord

"I'm not asking you to do that. I'm asking about the present. The future," said Mia.

C) the closing pin

"Why do you even care so much?" said Allison.

D) the bridle

"I was okay with having half a dad. But I don't want half a sister. We're all we've got, aren't we?" said Mia.

E) the pilot chute

Allison turned to Mia and suddenly saw something that she'd forgotten. Or ignored. She saw Mia patching up her bloody knees with band-aids after she slid into home plate. Saw Mia running a warm bath for her that day she'd played muddy football. Saw Mia waiting hand and foot on her while her leg was in a cast from the skiing accident. Saw Mia telling her to be brave on her first rollercoaster and squeezing her hand, promising her it would be a great adventure and there was nothing to be scared of.

Allison stared at Mia while Mia looked down at her quiz, biting her lip so she wouldn't cry again. Allison didn't know what to say.

"I think the answer to number one is 'e'," said Mia.

E. The pilot chute. Allison needed to throw the pilot chute into the air. Allison pulled herself out of her memories, back from the hospital, the funeral, and the classroom, until she was once again airborne, rocketing towards ground. She had been falling for going on 45 seconds now, which meant she had 15 to throw the pilot chute.

The pilot chute was a little pouch attached to the bottom of the parachute pack Allison was wearing. Instead of pulling a ripcord like in the movies, Allison had been instructed to detach the small pilot chute and throw it up in the air. The force from its inflation would slow her fall, while simultaneously pulling the main chute out of the pack.

Allison reached her hand around to her lower back and fumbled with the little sack of nylon that she felt attached there. It was a difficult task to free the small pilot chute without looking. It took her a precious ten seconds to manage it. Once Allison was holding the small piece of wadded up canopy that would save her life, she torqued her body around, flipping onto

her back in midair. Enormous gusts of wind pummeled at her back muscles as she looked back up towards the plane.

Several dark figures were in a straight nosedive toward her, like huge black locusts descending from the sky. No doubt the instructors had jumped out after her once they realized what had happened. They jumped too late though—Allison could see that. She would have to throw the chute and hope for the best.

Before she did though, she noticed another figure higher up in the sky. This one wore a bright yellow jumpsuit, the one that all the paying divers were wearing. With a sense of astonishment, Allison realized that Mia must have jumped out after her. It would have been an instinctive move, motivated by some primal protective urge. Mia had seen her sister in trouble and reacted immediately, stupidly, desperately.

In that moment, with less than five seconds to throw the chute, Allison wanted to tell Mia that she was wrong, that their father had loved them both equally. She wanted to tell her that he had bragged about Mia when she wasn't around, that he had secretly favored her all these years. But that wouldn't be the truth. The truth was that their dad had been pretty indifferent towards Mia, despite her best efforts to please him.

For the first time, Allison realized how wrong her dad had been about Mia. Her dad, her best friend and idol for so many years, had been wrong. He'd been unintentionally cruel. He'd been flawed and ungracious. And now he was gone. And Mia was still here. Allison saw one of the instructors deploy Mia's chute for her and Mia shot up into the air like a slingshot. She was safe.

Time had run out, and as Allison thrust the pilot chute up into the air, she felt glad that she'd dropped the Mickey Mouse watch which was now gone forever, buried in the desert.

The little nylon sack flew upwards and inflated. Allison was flipped violently back onto her stomach and slung upwards as the wind resistance caught the canopy. After a series of automatic pullings and releases on Allison's harness, the main chute billowed out and up behind her in a display of orange and gold and green. Allison felt the straps of her harness dig into her thighs and shoulders and hoped they would hold.

Little by little her acceleration slowed until she was floating at a rather leisurely pace. She was vertical now and looked down past her feet at the rocky ridges that looked like dragon spines jutting up from the ground. She couldn't see above her because of the open parachute, but she could hear the plane circling and assumed that the other instructors had pulled their own chutes now that she was safe.

They were going to give her such a hard time once they all reached the ground. Allison knew that for a fact. She would be rebuked and scolded, maybe even banned from the skydiving center. Her sister would be crying and apologizing and hugging her tightly all at once. The instructors would ask her why she did it and Allison would have to explain that she dropped something she didn't even want anymore. She'd have to explain to Mia how she didn't care about the watch and she didn't care about their dead father's favoritism. She had to somehow explain all of this.

Allison had approximately four minutes left to figure out what to say.
