

A GIRL CALLED BEAN

By

Jacqueline Druga-Johnston

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Dedication

For being the spark that ignited the fire under me to write this book, for your inspiration, I dedicated this book to Chuck

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## Author's Note

This book was conceived so long ago, I can't remember why or how. I only know my original concept was not what you read here. I never had inspiration or desire to finish this book, or actually even write it. I logged it in my journal as a 'spark of a thought'. After all, I wasn't ending the world, or there wasn't going to be massive destruction, so where was the inspiration?

In my mind, there was a link missing, I couldn't find the nitch for the story. Then one day a man walked into my life. Well, rather barreled. His personality was one that intrigued me as a person and a writer, and I told him, 'wow, I could have created you, you are so much like a character I would write in my books.'

Within a week, I saw him as a potential fiction character. But where to put him. Not only did this man make me want to find a fictional home for him, but he hit something in me, immediately unburying the writing monster that got lost in the shuffle of life. The first week I met him, I wrote 100 pages of a book that was dragging, and it wasn't this novel.

Soon the National Writing Month approached and I pulled out this story idea as a possibility. And as soon as I looked at my outline and the sketch of the story missing vital characters, I saw my blanks fill in.

They filled in with him. His unique personality, hard, witty, outlandish, serious and staunch, all rolled into one, slipped with

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ease into the book. I drew upon who he was, and the words just flowed. From the first page forward, I knew Chuck would be forever a part of my life, even if he found me too crazy to stay with, he would be there, in my life, forever etched on the pages of this book.

He rejuvenated my passion to write from the moment I met him. Pages of work, not just this book, but others, have poured from me, and to me, that above all, is and always will be the greatest gift he has given me - The ability to feel like a writer again. I missed it and it's back, it is so back that I could stand on a rooftop and scream.

This book is one way to repay him for that gift, and trust me it's a small dent. He has my indebtedness, gratefulness, love, my heart, and my soul.

Jake

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## CHAPTER ONE

One only needed to look at Beatrice Neal to know she was special. She was creative, bright, and never without a smile. There was an uncanny internal gift about her, one which gave her the ability to bring people together. Or rather, stop them from bickering as her grandmother often said.

She was special.

The way that Bea dressed said a lot as well. Not so much her shirts and jeans, but her hats. She loved wearing hats. Actually, fishing and hunting hats to be exact. And they were filled out with decorations. Fabric, hand cut into flowery shapes, were sewn on each cap that graced her head.

Bea was special.

She was seven years old. But she was a seven year old girl condemned to the body of a growing and maturing fifteen year old.

Bea lived with the only two relates she had ever known. Her father and grandmother. Her mother had abandoned the family when Bea was four. So she never really knew her, not one bit.

To say she was sheltered by her father was a slight understatement. Home tutors, special schools, Bea's contact with the outside world was limited at best. Her days were spent learning, and her evenings spent daydreaming of things to come, writing poetry and creating goofy hats.

The town of Wadsworth, Ohio wasn't large by any means, nor



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was it small, but it had that small town appeal. It was close enough to Akron so that her father could drive to and from work, yet far enough away to shield Bea.

Moving to Wadsworth was thought to be a solid idea, and then the school officials got a hold of Bea's father and talked him into allowing Bea to attend their new and advanced main stream program. It wasn't something he thought of nor was crazy about trying. But Bea adored school, wanted badly to be with other kids, and wanted to try. So they did.

The mainstream program wasn't all that different than most. They kept Bea separated with other kids like her. Then three times a day they were mixed in with the other kids. One was lunch, the other two were when they took Bea and her classmates in the halls to walk.

It was a hard transition for Bea. The first day she kept wandering into other classrooms, so much so they had to seek her out. And on the second day ... She met Ali Cramer.

There was no way, no how Ali was ready for the emergence of Bea into her life. Of course, Ali never realized the open invitation she gave Bea.

A complete contrast, Ali was small, didn't use her creativity, hated school and was a fifteen year old girl in a fifteen year old body.

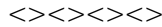
Ali never stood out. She didn't wear what other kids wore, she stuck simple clothes because Ali loved simplicity. She never worried about being who she was, just like she never cared what

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people though about her when she ordered Frizzle Burgers at the school cafeteria.

In fact, Frizzle Burgers were on the menu that day. The day when a girl called Bean walked into her life.



Noisy.

Despite the best attempts of teachers to maintain order and some resemblance of quiet, the cafeteria was noisy. Ali sat at a corner table. One nestled against the divider wall. She sat with Fudge. Not fudge the food, but rather Fudge the friend. Although Ali did find similarities between the two. Fudge had dark hair, and her words kind of melted together when she spoke, and she was sweet.

Wrestling with a packet of relish, Ali slid her chair back when a lone French Fry, laced with ketchup, hurled her way and smacked down on her plate.

“Great. Just great.” Ali lifted her sandwich, and looked up in irritation when a Craig, a bigger kid, kind of lumpy and dopey, walked by laughing. “Good thing I wasn’t eating this or ...” Ali loudly aimed her voice with a slight growl. “I’d throw up!” She tossed a napkin in frustration. “God. I hate him.”

“He’s your brother,” Fudge said in her slow way, snorting a laugh in each pause. “Brothers are supposed to annoy you.”

Ali swung a look Fudge’s way. “Hello! He’s not my brother.”

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“Yes, he is.”

“Um ... no. He’s not. Are you high again? Mr. Holmes is gonna know for sure when you get to science.”

“No.” Fudge giggled. “I’m not.” A snort, and few bounces of her shoulder and Fudge said. “OK. Sorry. Step brother.”

Ali’s hand slammed to the table. “He’s not my stepbrother either. My mother divorced his dad like three years ago. Where have you been?”

“But, like, aren’t you still family.”

After fluttering her lips, Ali shook her head. “Hardly. They weren’t married long enough for us to even be family.” Ready to eat, even though she lost some of her appetite, Ali brought her sandwich to her mouth. Teeth sinking, she grunted, when suddenly she was emerged into darkness.

The hideously annoying laugh rang in her ear.

“Asshole!” Ali yelled and lifted the hat from her eyes. “Now I’ll have static, thank you very much.” She whipped the hat from her head, and before she threw it at Craig, she noticed it. Green and pink cut out flowers were sewn all over the Elmer Fudd style hat. “Oh, nice. Is this yours?”

“No.” Craig laughed. “Kevin took it from her.” He pointed. “The tin kid.”

She looked up to the long arm that indicated behind her, and then Ali turned her body to peer behind the divider wall.

Everyone knew the table. How could they not? Since school had started a month earlier they had come to the cafeteria. It was a

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strictly watched table. Anyone and everyone who remotely interacted with them got in trouble. If Mr. Creighton, the principal heard a soul mutter the term ‘tin kid’ they were slapped with a detention faster than they could defend themselves. Ali actually hated that term, and not that she’d defend someone who used it, but she always felt the school was partly to blame for the invention of that phrase. After all, the school could have made a wiser decision when starting the mainstream program and placed the kids *in* the school rather than an erected tin building attached to the side of the school like some bad addition to a home.

The kids were protected, so much so, Ali couldn’t figure out how Kevin even got close enough to get the hat.

It was easier for Ali to figure out who the hat belonged to. She didn’t know her name, but Ali had seen her with a similar hat. Now the girl saw at the corner of the table, cheeks squashed against the palms of hands as tears rolled down her face.

Eeking out the often used, “Asshole” then, “You guys are so wrong,” Ali marched to the table and to Bea.

Bea raised her eyes.

“Here you go.” Ali gave her the hat. “And if anyone takes it from you again, you find me, OK?”

Bea smiled, nodded her head and extended her hand.

Just as Ali released it, she cringed.

“Miss Cramer.”

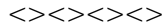
Undeniably, unmistakably, Mr. Creighton called her name. Following a roll of her eyes, Ali looked over her shoulder.

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The big brawny principal curled his finger at her, and then motioned his head. “My office. Now.”

What choice did Ali have? Before doing anything, she went to her table, snatched her books and her sandwich then she followed Mr. Creighton from the cafeteria.



In the world of grammar, the term ‘interjections’ are words or phrases used to exclaim, protest, or command. Usually people will find a comfort zone in what they use, often using the same word when they are angry, or happy. Basically, if it works, it works. The Cramer women were no exception to that rule. They probably used them more than anyone else. Both of them were interjection professionals; there was a science to being effective. Hitting the word hard with a slice of annoyance, accentuating the first consonant so the deliverance had impact.

Ali had it down pat with her often blurted out, ‘God!’. And where her favorite interjection was ‘Asshole!’, her mother had her own personal, and often over used interjection ...

“Fuck!” Cati Cramer fired out, like her daughter Ali, in such annoyance.

“Language,” scolded the female from the other room.

Cati cast a look in the direction of the kitchen, and then shook her head. Born unto the earth Marilyn Monroe Olsen, she was given the nick name Cati when she was just a toddler, and it stuck.

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Admittedly she liked it better than Marilyn. She couldn't fathom being called Mary, it just held to many virginal expectations that would make her neurotic. But she always had to explain the name Cati. Which often was a ridiculous conversation.

'Is your name Katherine?' People would ask.

'No, Marilyn.'

Then she'd get that odd look and Cati felt compelled to explain that she was called that by her mother because she was very cat-like as a two year old. And that's where she left it, she was 'cat like'. People then believed she was quick and sneaky. That worked. Unless her mother, Liz was around then Liz told of how she gained the name 'Cati' because she used to chase herself around in circles. Although Ralph Olsen argued that fact. He laid claim that he was the one that gave her the name Cati at the age of thirteen, because Cati was, well, Catty.

Of course, Ralph Olsen remembered things totally different than anyone else.

There was always a debatable issue in the Olsen/Cramer family.

In her mother's dining room Cati leaned over the typewriter tabbed. She didn't sit. She rushed and didn't take her time. Which was probably the reason for the mistakes.

"Fuck."

Snap! The tail end of a fast rolled, and snapped out towel caught Cati on the rear.

Cati jumped back. "Mom."

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“Language. Next is the soap.” Liz pointed.

Cati raised her hands in question mouthing the word ‘soap?’. Another shake of her head and Catie placed in another envelope. “I don’t know why you don’t move up with the times and get a computer.” She then mumbled. “Or at least an electric typewriter.”

“Life would get complicated,” Liz said. “Why do I need a computer? If it breaks, then I am in the same position as you. Well, not the same position. I’d be sitting instead of standing. Why don’t you just hand write the envelope, it could have been done by now.”

“It’s a submission. I can’t handwrite a submission envelope. My writing gets rejected enough as it is, I don’t need a reason for some editor to toss it aside for a lame reason. I’d like to get published”

“You are published. Daily.”

“Ma, I write obituary specials.”

“It’s a job in your craft. Be grateful.”

“I am,” Catie said. “I just would like see other things in print.” She stood up straight with an exhale. “I give up. Could you type this?”

“Fine.” Liz moved to the typewriter. Her face was an older version of Catie, who was an older version of Ali. Even down to the facial expressions. “Can you check my cookies for me, Catie?” she asked.

“Sure. What are you baking?”

“Carrot Cookies.”

Catie stopped en route to the kitchen. “Why do always bake



carrot cookies, I don't think they're even real."

"They are." Liz placed on her glasses. "And your father loves them."

Cati chuckled. "Daddy doesn't love them. He parented to love them."

"That's what he tells you. I know." Liz settled into the chair. "OK," she said with an exhale. "Is this the address?"

"Yes." Cati returned. "Right there." She pointed to the tablet.

Another exhale and Liz began to type.

Tap.

Tap. Tap.

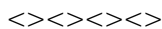
Tap.

"Oh my God are you slow." Cati said.

"Yeah, well, there won't be an error will there?" Liz retorted. "And you won't hear me swearing because I can't do it."

Tap.

Cati wasn't going to argue, nor was she going to stand there and get more aggravated by her mother's slow typing technique. She watched the carrot cookies bake, while waiting for what seemed an eternity for her mother to type that envelope. She just wanted to continue on with her day as hassle free as possible. Go to the post office, drop off the obituaries she wrote and get home in plenty of enough time to make Ali dinner.





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It was a decision that weighed on Ali's mind through the last two classes of her day. She had a choice. She could go to the one hour detention after school and be done with it, or she could blow it off. Blowing it off would mean a two hour detention the next day, which she wouldn't go to either. Not going to that would breed a Saturday, which was out of the question, and blowing that off would mean an eventual suspension from school. Just at the point where Ali opted for the three day vacation, Mr. Creighton got a hold of her and personally escorted her to the detention hall.

It didn't matter that Ali tried to convince Mr. Creighton she wasn't messing with the hat girl. She was at that table, holding the item that belonged to the girl. Ali was guilty.

Punishment served.

She had to take the activity bus and that dropped her off a good distance from her house. Which was better than walking the entire way. The ride home was interesting, Ali thought it was strange at first, didn't see a reason for it, but never questioned why the hat girl was on the late bus. She thought it was her imagination at first that the girl kept darting up and down in the seat every time Ali looked her way.

The bus dropped her off on Fairfield Street and Ali headed to the direction of the park as a short cut.

One street down, Ali kept her pace.

Two streets. Ok, she knew something was up.

But by the time she made it three blocks, and to the park, Ali got worried.

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She stopped, turned around, and caught the hat girl darting behind a tree. Was she following her, or did she just live that close. Ali had to find out; she turned left and almost backtracked. Sure enough ... a quick turn, a look, hat girl dashed.

“OK.” Ali stopped completely. “I see you. Are you following me?”

A giggle rang out.

“Hello!” Ali yelled.

“Hello.”

“Are you following me?” Ali asked again.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“So we can play.”

Ali sighed out. “Well, quit hiding. I don’t want to keep yelling.”

Slowly, Bea emerged from behind the tree. She wore the hunting hat, its flaps dangling down. She giggled.

Ali approached her. “You can’t follow me. Do you live around here?”

Bea nodded.

“What’s your name?”

“Bea ‘N’.”

“Bea ‘N’?” Ali asked. “You mean Bean? They call you Bean?”

“I like being called Bean. Will you call me Bean?”

“Sure.” Ali shrugged. “Bean, do you live around here?”

“Yes. What’s your name?” Bea spoke in an excited voice. Kind of young sounding, with a high pitch enthusiasm.

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“Ali.”

“Ali what?”

“Ali Cramer.”

“Ali-Ali In free.” Bea started to laugh.

“That’s not funny,” Ali said. “Where do you live Bean?”

“1456 Woodlawn Road.” Bea rattled.

“1456 Woodlawn! That’s the other way. You can’t be all the way over here.”

“Yes. I’m going with you. You’re my friend. You’re my new friend right. You got my hat.”

“Yes, I am ...”

“Do you like my hat?” Bea asked.

“Yes, I do, but ...”

“Here.” Bea whipped it off and handed it to Ali. “I have more.”

“Thanks, Bean, but I can’t ...”

“Where do you live, Ali-Ali in free?”

“On the other side of the park. And quit calling me that. Bean ...” Ali tried a patient tone. “Does you mom know you aren’t home?”

“No.”

“Maybe you should go home and check in.”

“OK.” Bea nodded.

“OK? Good. I’ll see you at school tomorrow.” Ali turned, took a few steps, stopped and looked over her shoulder. Bea was just standing there. “Bean? Go home. Your mom is probably worried.”

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“My mom isn’t there.”

“Then your dad.”

“My Dad works until it’s very dark,” Bean said. “My mam is there. She watches Oprah and drinks beer until she falls asleep. Sometimes she leaves the cigarette in her hand, but I get it when I get home. Oh! Oh!”

“What?”

“I have to go. What if she left the cigarette in her hand and I’m not there to take it out. Uh-oh.” Bea turned fast and took off running.

Feeling it safe to go, Ali headed in her own direction until ...

“Ali-Ali in free! Ali-Ali in free.”

Ali stopped. “What?”

“How do I get to my house?”

“You don’t know how to get home from here?” Ali asked.

Bea shook her head. “I was going to your house.”

Ali took a deep breath. “I’ll walk you there, Ok?”

Nodding fast, Bea darted to Ali, grabbed her arm and began to tug her.

“No, Bean, this way.” Ali said and pulled her the other way.  
“This way.”

Bea started running.

“Bea, you have to let me lead if you don’t know which way to go.”

“Ok, but we have to run. Run fast.”

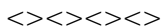
“Why?” Ali asked.

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“In case my house is on fire.”

Head spinning, Ali gave up and gave in and led the mad dash to the direction of Bea’s street.



She didn’t smoke, drink, was only fifteen, and Ali considered herself in pretty good shape. Yet, when they arrived at Bea’s house, she was completely and utterly out of breath. Ali heaved a breath along with her body on to the wooden porch railing in some sort of desperate attempt for the railing to save her and hold her up.

Not Bea. She was full of energy. She darted in the house, then back out, grabbed Ali and tugged her in.

“Too late,” Bea said, and then pointed to the floor.

Ali was busy taking it on. The house was plain and clean. Oprah played loudly, but the noise of the TV was accompanied with another... snoring. In a chair, directly in front of the television was an old woman in a house dress. She was sound asleep, head slumped over, mouth agape, a beer can was tipped over on her lap, and on the carpet, directly under where her hand dangled over the edge of a chair, was a burnt spot.

“See.” Bea pointed. “Too late.”

“You’re lucky it burned itself out.” Ali bent down and picked up the remains of the cigarette.

“My Mam.” Bea introduced. “Mam, this is my friend Ali-Ali in free.” Bea lifted the limp hand, waved it and changed her voice

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some. “Hi Ali in free.”

Ali snickered. “That’s funny. I got to go. Are you OK bean?”

“Yes. Don’t forget your hat.” Bea handed her the hunting cap.

Ali smiled. “Thanks.”

Before Ali could leave, Bea darted from the room. After a few seconds, and another chuckle at the ‘Mam’, Ali turned to leave, hollering out. “Bye, Bean.”

“Wait!” Bea cried out long and loud. “Wait Ali-Ali in free. Wait.”

At the door, Ali stopped.

Arms full and wearing a new hat, Bea ran into the living room. “You forgot me.”

“Bean, I’m leaving.”

“But we’re playing at your house. Barbie’s.”

“I don’t have any Barbie’s.”

“I can share mine. See?” Bea lifted her arms and the dolls fell to the floor. “Please.”

“Oh, Ok. You can come to my house. But you have to wake your Mam or leave a note.”

“I can leave a note. What’s your address Ali-Ali in Free?”

“75 Harland.”

Bea kept muttering ‘75 Harland’ as she handed Ali the arm full of stuff. She ran into the kitchen, was in there for a few moments, and ran back out.

“Note.” Bea held up the paper

“Good. Leave it somewhere it can be seen.”

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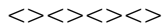


Bea reached to Ali's arms. Intertwined with the dolls was another hat, she grabbed it causing the items to fall from Ali's grip. "Sorry."

"That's ... that's Ok, just leave the note." Ali said, bending down. Picking up the dolls, Ali raised her eyes. She watched Bea lift the old woman's arm, place the note on her chest, then the hat on her head.

Bea giggled. "Mam's pretty."

Ali laughed in agreement, "Yes, Mam is pretty." She snickered again looking at the old woman in the chair, then Ali, handed the dolls back to Bea and they left her house.



Artie Lowenstein was a master of disguises and personalities - at least he thought so. He attributed that to his career as a drama teacher at the high school. An eccentric man with effeminate qualities. His tall body was the only thing masculine about Artie. He made no bones about it, nor any attempt to hide the fact that he truly believed he as a woman trapped in a man's body. He walked it, talked it, and acted it. His days were spent teaching, and evenings divided between reading, and spending time with Cati, the woman he considered his very best friend, and the only person he could talk about hot guys to.

"Four plates?" Artie asked as he set the table. "Why four?"

"Ali has a friend over." Cati stepped from the kitchen and

placed the bread on the table.

“Ali is here?” Artie looked to the ceiling as if magically he would have the vision to see through to the upper floor. “I didn’t hear her.”

“She’s been upstairs making hats and playing Barbie’s.”

The plate nearly fell from his hand. “Making hats and playing Barbie’s?”

“Yes.”

“I know the little princess skipped over the little girl portion of her life and possibly produced testosterone instead of estrogen, but isn’t she a little old to be playing Barbie’s?”

“Barbie’s are ageless.”

Artie just started.

“Ok, well ...” Cati went into the kitchen. “This is a new friend that has taken a liking to Ali and I think Ali took her under her wing.” Again, she returned. “She is in the mainstream program at the school.”

“Really?” Artie folded his arms. “There are some bright kids in that program. Who is she?”

“Bean.”

“A girl called Bean?” Artie rubbed his chin. “I’m not familiar and I teach them once a week. Oh, well ...” He shrugged. “I’m sure I’ll know here when she joins us.” Artie peered to the dish Cati placed down. “Pasta again, princess, what’s up?”

“Grocery money was short.” She shrugged. “Only six people died last week, and since I get paid for each obituary ... hopefully



this week will be better. It's already shaping up to be."

"How many?"

"Four so far." Cati held up crossed fingers.

"You do realize there is something wrong when you are hoping for more deaths."

"It's how I make money."

"Oh, what have we here?" Artie's voice perked.

Cati turned around. Ali and Bea had entered the dining room.  
"Artie, this is Bean."

"Bean?" Artie held out his hand. "I know you as Beatrice.  
Should I call you Bean in class?"

"Yes, please." Bea replied. "Ali-Ali in Free calls me that."

"Ali ... Ali ... in free?" Artie smiled. "I like that."

Ali squeezed through Bean and Artie. "I don't."

"Your hat!" Bea called out. "Ali-Ali in Free, your hat."

With slumping shoulders, Ali whined. "Bean, I don't want to wear a hat at the dinner table. We aren't allowed."

Cati looked at Bean, sadly extending a hat to Ali. "I think it should be a new thing. Don't you, Artie?"

"Hats at the dinner table?" Artie asked. "I love the idea. In fact as a child we always wore hats at the diner table. Put on the hat Ali."

"No." Ali shook her head.

Cati gave a twitch of her head toward Bea. "Put it on."

"Fine." Ali reached out, grabbed the hat and put it on. The long flaps covered her ears and most of her face. "Happy." She

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pulled out her chair and sat down.

Excitedly, Bea, wearing a hat as well, sat next to Ali at the table.

Inching her way to Artie, Cati whispered, “Now we need to find a hat.”

“Have no fear, dear. I have props.” Artie informed her excitedly, and rushed from the room.

“Swell.” Cati’s cringe was quickly replaced with a forced smile when the girls looked at her.

Deemed dinner appropriate, and declared perfect, like the red wine with the pasta, on opposite sides of the table, Artie and Cati sported the large, obnoxious Napoleon hats Artie had ‘just in case’ in the trunk of his car.

Ali didn’t sulk as bad. The giggles stopped as soon as dinner was served and within minutes, the conversation flowed.

“And that’s how it happened,” Ali said.

Artie exhaled a ‘well’, “I will have a talk with that beast Creighton. He needs to know you were doing a good deed.”

“Yeah, but I did the detention, so how’s that help me?” Ali asked.

Artie reached over and patted her hand. “I’m sure we can get you a detention credit. It’s only October, Lord knows you won’t go the rest of the year without one.”

Cati laughed. “A detention credit? I’m curious though how Bean managed to stay after school and not be noticed. That’s kind

of frightening.”

Artie nodded. “I’ll have to check on that. You’re right.”

Ali added. “She was following me home, good thing we went back to her house and left a note. Can you ride her home, Artie?”

“Absolutely. What time does she have to be there?”

Ali shrugged.

Cati asked. “Hasn’t she called home?”

“She left a note.” Ali said.

“Maybe she should call anyhow,” Catì looked at her watch. “It’s eight o’clock and ...” she stopped speaking when the doorbell rang. She saw Artie and Ali standing. “No.” Catì instructed. “I’ll get it.” Napkin down, Catì stood, Napoleon Hat balancing on her head, she made her way to the door.

It wasn’t what she expected to see. Of course, Catì didn’t really have a clue who was there, all she knew that she wasn’t expecting a man in an camouflage uniform. The patches indicating he was Army.

When she opened the screen door, it caught his attention. He was looking around as if checking to see if he had the right house.

“Can I help you?” Catì asked.

He moved up to the stoop and closer to the door. His eyes shifted upward to her head gear, staying there for a moment before making eye contact with her. He looked angry, tense jaw clenching before he spoke. His clean shaven head adding even more intimidation to the angry look he carried. “Are you Mrs. Cramer?” he asked.

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“Oh, my God, did someone die?”

“Excuse me?” he asked.

“Did someone die? I don’t think I know anyone in the service.”

“Um, no.” he spoke short, a hint of ‘hick’ in his voice. “I believe my daughter is here.”

It took Cati a second, then she drew a bright look. “Oh, Bean.”

“Excuse me?”

“Bean. Is Bean your daughter?”

“I don’t have a daughter named Bean.”

“I’m sorry, that’s what Ali called her.”

“I suppose the name thing is another way for your daughter to have fun at my daughter’s expense.”

“I’m ... I’m sorry. Did you just say my daughter was picking on your daughter?”

“I spoke to the principal today. He told me all about it. Now, I’m just gonna let this go, but I would appreciate if you’d let me have my child.”

Cati opened the door wider. “She’s at the table.”

“Thank you.” He stepped inside.

“Can I ask you what you are going to let go?”

Was it a huff? Cati swore she heard a huff of irritation as he came to a halt in the foyer.

He stared right at her. “Where is she?”

In defeat, Cati held out her hand in a point toward the dining room. “We’re having dinner. I’ll be happy to bring her home after

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...” He walked by her down the hall before she finished her sentence. “Excuse me.” Cati hurried to catch him. “Hold on, Mister ...”

He halted. “Sergeant.”

“Sergeant Neal.” Cati corrected herself. “Before you go huffing through my ...”

Again he walked away.

“Stop.” Cati called out. “You know, first off, this is my home.”

“And you have my daughter. Without my permission. You want to discuss that? I had no idea she was here. All I know is that your child gave *my* child a hard time in school today. And now...”

“You know what?” Cati stopped him mid sentence. “Fuck it. Get your kid. I’m not arguing with you.”

He moved with authority into the dining room, held out his hand, and called sternly, “Beatrice. Let’s go.”

Cati leaned against the doorway, arms folded.

Artie stood from his end of the table. “I’m Art Lowenstein. And you are?” he held out his hand.

“Sam Neal.” He gave a single firm shake, nod of his head and faced his daughter. “Bea. Now. Time to go home.”

Bea shook her head. “We’re having ice cream.”

“Now.” He repeated. “Let’s go. Thank Mrs. Cramer and let’s go.”

Artie intervened, “Really, it’s no bother for her to stay and we’ll bring her home when she’s finished.”

“Thank you, but no thank you. Bea.” Sam held his hand to his

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daughter.

Bea had a look of lost on her face; she slid her hat from her head, and slowly stood. “Thank you, Mrs. Cramer.”

“You’re welcome, Bean.” Cati said softly. “Come back anytime.”

In a moping stride, Bea joined her father. “Bye, Ali-Ali in free.”

Ali lifted her hand, waving.

After laying his hand on Bea’s back, Sam turned to Artie. “Mr. Lowenstein.” Inching his daughter to the doorway, he paused speaking in a low voice to Cati. “And I would appreciate you keeping your daughter away from mine.”

With no more said, Sam Neal lead Bea from the home.

The sound of the door closing, singled they had left.

After clearing his throat, Artie reached for the pasta fork. “Well,” he added more to his plate. “He’s not ruining my appetite.”

Cati, still in the doorway, point backwards with her thumb. “Was it my imagination, or was that guy an asshole?”

Artie crinkled his face. “He was a little tense. Probably the uniform was binding or something. Sit. Have more wine. Forget about it.”

Cati shuffled her body to the table, and sunk her body into the chair. “I can’t.” She reached for her wine and took a huge gulp.

“Mommy?” Ali raised her eyes. “Should I stay away from Bean like he said?”

Another drink and Cati looked at Artie and then to Ali. “No, absolutely not. No. In fact ...” she picked up her wine finished it,

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and gasped as she set the glass shard to the table. “I think Bean should come over tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER TWO

Mammy Stevens, or ‘Mam’ as Bea called her gave birth to Bea’s mom late in life, and lost her mind early. Senility set in around the age of sixty, and she slowly and progressively grew worse. Not that she was ever a dangerous senile, but Mam was absent minded.

A woman who slept more than she ever spoke. She had a one-beer addiction in the afternoon that zonked her into such a deep sleep, it made it impossible for Ali to get to know the woman that was always at Bea’s house.

Mam’s habitual sleeping state was probably the reason Bea spoke for her, and made up tales. Actually, it became part of a routine, and inadvertently one of the factors that played a role into the closeness that developed between Bea and Ali.

When Ali invited Bea over the next day, that was all it took. Every day in the lunch room, Bea made her way to Ali’s table to say ‘see you after school Ali-Ali in Free.’ And she’d stay there until Creighton pulled her away.

Every day, Ali would walk to Bea’s house. They leave a note attached to Mam, dress her up while she slept, and head to Ali’s. But Bea never was out later than her father, and was always home before Sam returned.

When Bea went to Ali’s she didn’t always play with Ali. Sometimes Ali had friends over and Bea felt like such a part, other



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times Bea just enjoyed hanging out with Cati and making dinner.

In any case, Bea loved the Cramer's and loved being around them.

About three weeks into the odd friendship, not long before Halloween, it was brought to Ali's attention that perhaps she was confused on her friendship loyalties.

Ali laughed at that. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

Fudge shook her head. "You never do anything anymore."

"Yes, I do. We hang out."

"Bean is always there." Fudge said.

"So what? Bean is like my little sister now."

"But because of Bean you don't do anything."

Ali tilted her head curiously. "Like what?"

"Like ... cut class. Like mess with Old Man Horn's scarecrow. You don't like to get into trouble."

"And that's a bad thing?" Ali laughed with a shake of her head.

"You're scared."

"I'm smart."

"You want to do it." Fudge nudged her.

"Do what?"

Another nudge. "Cut sixth, seventh, and eighth."

"I ... I can't." Ali shook her head. "I go to Bean's."

"See." Fudge instigated. "Blow off your friends."

"I'm not blowing you off because I don't want to cut class."

"You'd do it if Bean asked you to do it, Ali-Ali in Free."

"Don't call me that," Ali said.

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“Why not. Bean does.”

“Bean does it for her own reasons. You do it to make fun of her. Don’t make fun of Bean.”

Fudge huffed. “Fine. I won’t call you that. I’m not making fun of her. You’re too defensive about her. But ... I understand. Come on, Al, come to the tracks. You can be back in enough time to get Bean.”

Ali stared at Fudge, and then looked up to the hall clock that was just about to move to the late bell position. “Ok. Fine. Let’s go.”

“Yes!” Fudge grabbed hold of her and yanked her down the hall.

The late bell rang just as Ali and Fudge made a mad dash toward the gymnasium. Rounding the bend almost out of there, bright sun blasting through the double glass gym door entrance, their salvation in sight, Ali came to a screeching stop when she heard it.

“Ali-Ali in free.”

Ali cringed and turned. She held her finger to her lips. “Shh, Bean. Quiet.”

“Come on, Ali,” Fudge beckoned as she reached for the doors.

Bea was standing by the bathroom. “Ali-Ali in free, where are you going?”

“Um ... to see the trains. We’ll be back. I’ll see you after school, OK?”

“Yes.” Bea nodded.

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“Go back to class,” Ali instructed as she turned and pushed open the doors with fudge.

Free!

They stayed close to the outer wall, inching their way, until out of camera sight. When they reached the end of the walk, they readied to run. In fact, they started to run. Direction in mind, they took off.

“Ali-Ali in Free wait for me.”

“No, Ali,” Fudge said. “Keep on running.”

“I ... I can’t.” Ali stopped and Bea raced to her. “Bean? What are you doing?”

“Coming with you to see the trains,” Bea said.

“You can’t.”

“Why?”

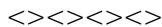
“I don’t know why.” Ali said. “You can’t.”

“I want to go, Ali-Ali in free.”

Fudge whispered in Ali’s ear. “No, tell her to go back.”

“Please?” Bea begged.

Ali grunted. It was a soft grunt mixed with a growl, and she carried it out long. She shifted her eyes from Bea to the school, and after a few seconds of worry, Ali grabbed Bea’s hand, told her it was fine, began to high tail it, and said, “Let’s go.”



It didn’t take a brilliant detective to see what was going on.

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Right after Mr. Creighton spotted Bea on the outside camera running, he sent out his ‘posse’ of high school security guards to find them. He had to send more than one; Creighton was convinced there was safety in numbers, and out of ten guards, one of them was bound to bring Bea back.

After all, Creighton would probably wager that half the guards could care less about their jobs, while the other half were just pain idiots.

The girls made it half way from the school property and they were apprehended. Mr. Creighton was then stuck with the daunting task of calling parents. He hated doing that. He wasn’t a phone person, and admittedly he wasn’t a people person either. In fact, he wasn’t a kid person. He lucked out on the job of principal because his cousin was the school district administrator. Not everyone knew that.

Scott Creighton could have been considered an attractive man at one time. Fit and lean, tall and strong, but that was in his youth. He was proud of that Scott; perhaps that was why he kept that old photo on his desk of him and his wife in front of the Harley. When his hair wasn’t gray and his gut didn’t stick out over his belt. But that picture had a divorce and life time of booze between it and his current stature.

“Mr. Creighton, Mrs. Cramer is here,” The secretary’s voice came through the intercom.

Seated behind his desk, Creighton leaned forward and pressed the button. “Send her in, we’re waiting.”

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Cati was ready to combat any argument Creighton gave her, especially about being late. She was in Akron when the call came and she went straight to the school. Opening the door to Creighton's office, Cati would have felt outnumbered had she not spotted Artie standing off to the corner. She gave him a gentle smile and then presented a serious one to Creighton as he rose from his seat.

"Mrs. Cramer." Creighton shook her hand. I know you know Mr. Lowenstein, have you met Sgt. Neal?"

Sam rose slightly from his chair in a greeting.

"Yes," she said. "We've met."

"Have a seat," Mr. Creighton instructed.

Cati did.

"Before we get started, Mr. Lowenstein is here to say a few words," Mr. Creighton introduced. "Artie."

"Thank you. I just ... I just wanted to make you both aware of something," Artie spoke nervously. "As you know I am the drama teacher here and fill in English instructor. Sgt. Neal I work with your daughter. She may be hindered in some learning aspects, but her creative is amazing. I am sure you know how creative Beatrice is. She also has a photographic memory second to none, and she has earned a role in the Christmas play, 'Scrooged'. She will be the ghost of Christmas Future."

"I didn't know this," Sam said. "Don't you mean A Christmas Carol, Scrooged was a movie."

Artie nodded. "Scrooge was a movie; we're doing the stage

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adaptation. Anyhow, Ali surprisingly has joined stage crew. Beatrice wants the part because Ali is going to be there and Ali is going to make her fly. My whole point is, both these girls are doing things neither would have done had the friendship not started.”

Sam mumbled, “You can say that again.”

“Wait.” Cati held out her hand. “I’m confused. Why is Artie saying these things? What does this have to do with Ali cutting class today?”

Artie answered, “Nothing. It has everything to do with why you are here.”

Cati looked lost. “Then I’m confused. Why am I here? I thought it was about Ali cutting.”

Mr. Creighton replied, “Sgt. Neal called this meeting to determine the best route on how to handle this friendship between the girls. Or rather how to sever it.”

Defensive, Cati looked at Sam. “Sever it?”

Mr. Creighton interjected. “As I was telling Sgt. Neal on the phone when I informed him about the misunderstanding with the hat ...” he sighed out in irritation when he saw that hand of Cati’s shooting up to stop him. “What Mrs. Cramer?”

Bodily, she turned in her chair to face Sam. “You knew that Ali wasn’t picking on Bean that day.”

“I found out, yes.”

“You knew and you still didn’t allow your daughter to be with mine?”

“And where are you getting that from?” Sam asked, and then

spoke firmly. “You think I don’t know my child is at your house all the time. You think I am that out of the loop, and that caught up in my own world that I am unaware of what she does and doesn’t do. Hell, she tells me about each day the moment she sees me. About your magic meatloaf, crazy dancing, pictures of recently dead people, and all that other crazy stuff that goes on at your house. I know. You and your daughter are not one up on me, Mrs. Cramer. So don’t think for a single moment you have been or are. If I did not approve of her being with your daughter or at your house, trust me she wouldn’t be there. Period. I am in control of the situation.”

“Wow.” Cati breathed out the word and paused. “Are you a dick, or what?”

“Mrs. Cramer.” Creighton scolded.

“Sorry. Sorry.” Cati waved out her hand.

“Don’t apologize to me,” Mr. Creighton said. “Him.”

“No.” Cati was stern.

“See? Do you see?” Sam spoke out. “This is exactly the type of attitude I’m talking about. She calls me names when she’s the one who has been sneaking my daughter, or thinks she is sneaking my daughter around. This is not a good influence on my daughter.”

Cati huffed in sarcasm. “And a drunken old woman in a chair is?”

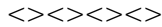
“Excuse me.” Sam stood up. “This meeting is over. Obviously it is going no where and I have things to do. Mr. Creighton I am going to trust that the school will take measures to intervene so her daughter doesn’t drag my daughter into anymore bad situations.

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Have a good day.” Sam moved to the door, nodded at Artie. “Mr. Lowenstein.” And then walked out.

Artie whistled while closing the door. Cati received the ‘what just happened here’ look from MR. Creighton, as she sunk into her chair.



The news announced by Oprah that the hot air balloon would fly over twenty five states for hunger made Ali laugh as she sat on the floor by Mam’s feet with Bea.

“Man, would that be funny if it crashed,” Ali said.

“It would be funny if the balloon crashed?” Bea asked.

“Not funny in a funny way, Bean, but funny ... funny. Get it.”

“No.”

Ali shrugged. “Don’t worry about it then.”

“Thank you for coming to my house with me Ali-Ali in Free.”

“Oh, sure, not problem, Bean. My mom has that meeting tonight anyhow.”

“I’ve never been grounded before. Thank you for making me be grounded. I feel big.”

Ali smiled then lifted Mam’s foot. “I’m done with the left one, what do you think?”

Bea examined the different shade of toenail polish. “It’s very pretty. I like how you did all different colors.”

“I was doing what you did, Bean.”



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“Are you having fun with my Mam?”

“I’m having a blast.”

“She looks pretty today, doesn’t she?” Bean drew up onto her knees. “She needs something else today.” Bea brought her finger to her mouth. “What do you think?”

“Hmm.” Ali got on her knees too. “What about a scarf. She never wears a scarf. Do you have one?”

“In the closet.” Bea pointed.

“I’ll get it.” Ali stood up and walked to the closet. “There’s got to be something in here different.” She opened the closet and stopped when the dress blue inform hanging on the inside of the closet door caught her attention. “Oh, wow.”

“Mam can’t wear that,” Bea said hurrying to the closet.

“I know. This is cool. Is this your dad’s?” Ali asked.

“Yes.”

“Wow.” Ali reached for the jacket, running her hand down the side. “Look at all these ribbons and pins. Did he ear these or do they come with the suit.”

Bea giggled. “No. He got those because he went across the ocean a lot to fight.”

“No shit?”

“No ...” Bea giggled. “Shit.” Quickly she covered her mouth.

Ali laughed. “So, like, if your dad is the cool soldier guy, then why is he a salesman for the Army. Did he get too old or something and they made him do it. Oh, wait, it’s so he can be home with you.”

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“He gets to be with me, yes. But that’s not the only reason.”  
Bea nodded then hit Ali playfully with her hand. “Ali-Ali in free, don’t you know?”

“Know what, Bean?”

“The Army doesn’t make just anyone a recruiter. It takes a good soldier to get good soldiers for the Army. And I’ll tell you, Ali-Ali in Free. Whew ...” Dramatically, Bea breathed out a sigh. “If we have a war here, and we have to fight here. I want my dad to get the men to fight.”

The corner of Ali’s mouth raised in a crooked smile. “Bean, that’s really profound.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means it was really smart.”

“I’m very smart.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“OK, girls,” Cati emerged from the kitchen, not seeing the girls hurriedly close the closet. “Sandwiches are in the fridge, pasta on the stove. Eat when you’re hungry. Ali I’ll get you about eight. And Bean ... please. Please do not tell your father I was here.”

“I promise.” Bea held up crossed fingers.

“Good.” Cati laid her hand on Bea’s cheek, then kissed her and kissed Ali. “I got to go. Be good.” She walked across the living room and paused at Mam. “Wow. You guys even gave her a fresh beer.”

“Doesn’t she look cool?” Ali said.

“Pretty,” Bea corrected. “Oh! Cati-Corner don’t go yet.”

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



Cati snickered. “Cati Corner?”

Ali held up her hand. “My fault.”

Grumbling out a ‘hmm’, Cati shifted her eyes to Bea who darted from the room. She could hear the girl running, and then just as quickly as she left, she returned.

“Here.” Bea handed Cati an instant camera. “Can you take our picture?”

“Sure, Bean.”

Bea grabbed hold of Ali and tugged her to Mam’s chair. “You helped today, Ali-Ali-in free. You have to be in the picture. Please?”

“Ok.” It was obvious in Ali’s voice she thought the request was odd, but she took a position next to the chair. Her on one side, Bean on the other.

It took everything Cati had not to laugh as she raised the camera and took in the vision of the two girls smiling happily along side a sleeping, and clueless sold woman, zonked and decorated as if she could be a lawn ornament. She snapped the picture, and no sooner did it eject, Bea grabbed hold of it.

She flapped it and flapped it, until the image appeared and then Bea laughed. “Look we are pretty and a family.” As Ali and Cati leaned in to see, Bea snuck away with it. “Have to put it away. Shh.” She smiled, reached under the table and pulled out a shoe box. “Don’t tell.”

Cati watched as Bea lifted the lid to the box, and then she crouched down stopping her. “May I?”

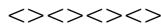
## A Girl Called Bea – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



“You won’t tell my, Dad, right? Mam will get mad.” Bea said.

“I won’t tell.” Cati looked in the box. The recent instant photo was just one of many taken of sleeping Mam all dressed up. Tons of pictures, too many to count were in the box. It was obvious that Bea took a photo every time she dolled her up. And it wasn’t until that second, that Cati knew the reason for Bea’s obsession. The box wasn’t too deep to hide the layer of old photographs. All of them of a young Mam, and in all of them in Mam was in different poses, wearing different outfits. Mam was not only a beautiful woman at one time, but obviously a fashion model. It was evident that Bea’s daily dress up was in some way her tribute to Mam and possibly in Bea’s mind it was her way to help her Mam always feel as beautiful and glamorous as she used to be.

At that moment, as if she wasn’t enough already, Bea became an even more special person to Cati.



“Pigs in a blanket?” Artie said perplexed. “I have never been to an establishment that had pigs in a blanket.” He stared at the Menu in the, in the tavern style restaurant across from Cati. They were there for their monthly writers meeting. They talked it up as if it were a big deal with a big group, when the truth was, it was always only the two of them.

“Connie said it was home cooking.” Cati said. “Are you gonna get them?”

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“No,” Artie shook his head. “I’m afraid they may not settle with my ingesting the atmosphere here.”

“It’s not that bad,” Cati spoke of the large two room establishment which still contained wood paneling., The front room was a bar, and the are where the DJ usually played. The back had a pool table and booths for diners. “I can’t believe we’ve lived here this long and never came here.”

“It may spawn our creative side.”

“Maybe.” Cati said. “What about the potato skins and we share a fish sandwich.”

“Sounds good,” Artie closed the menu. “Now, what do you have for me?”

“Ok, I’ve been working on this short story about a bus driver who has turrets syndrome.”

Artie fluttered his lips with a snorting laugh. “How funny is that?”

“Hopefully, very,” Cati searched out the story.

“Hmm. Perhaps we should play devil in disguise on the jukebox.”

Cati peered up from here writers sachet. “Huh?”

“The beast of a man does have other attire.”

Over her shoulder Cati looked. Sam had walked in. “Oh, great.”

“Quick. Turn. Hide. Maybe he won’t see us.” Artie said.

“Good idea.”

Both of them grabbed menus and raised them high.

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



Sam cleared his throat as he stood before the table.

Cati lowered her menu. “Oh, hello. Look Artie, look who it is. It’s Bean’s dad, the ... marine.”

“I’m sorry,” Artie lowered the menu and acted as if he was so preoccupied. “I was string at the delicious sounding selections.” He stared to his left. “Oh, yes, Corporal ...”

With a ‘yeah-yeah’ nod of his head and, irritated smile, he raised his hand. “Just ... call me Sam.”

“Sam, yes,” Artie spoke.

“I didn’t know you hung out here,” Sam said. “I’m here every Thursday for pool. Never saw you.”

Cati explained. “We’re here for our writers meeting thought we’d try something new. Not that it’s your concern.”

Sam shrugged. “It’s not. Just though I’d be polite.”

Artie mumbled “That’s a switch.”

“Well, I’ll let you two get back to ordering. Everything is good. Though there’s nothing like the triple delight sandwich on there.” Sam said, and walked away toward the bar.

Artie exhaled, lowering his menu. “I thought he’d never leave.” He noticed Cati staring/ “Princess? What is it? Are you checking out his butt?”

“What?” Cati laughed. “No. He said something.”

“What’s that?”

“Triple delight sandwich.”

“What is that?”

“That is a sandwich made out of all the left over meat in my

fridge.”

“Oh, so it’s bread,” Artie said.

“Ha, ha, ha. It just so happens to be the type of sandwich I made for the girls tonight. Excuse me.” Cati stood up and walked to the bar. She watched as Sam downed a shot, and grabbed his beer. “Sam.”

He turned around, mouth ready to take a drink. “What? ‘I’m trying to enjoy my beer’”

“You said something.”

He drank, nodded and set down his bottle. “The sandwich.”

“Yes, then Bean told you I was at your house today.”

“You were at my house?” he asked with such shock.

“You didn’t know. Then how did you know ...”

“I just assumed Bea brought the sandwich from your house. Unbelievable.” He shook his head.

“What is?”

“First you think you’re sneaking my daughter from me, now I found out you sneak into my house.”

“I went because ...”

“I don’t care why you were there. I would appreciate if you wouldn’t hang around my house without my permission.”

It took a lot for Cati to hold back, but she did. She simply nodded. “I can understand that. About this afternoon ...”

“I prefer not to talk about it. It’s done.” He turned.

“Fine. But just know. What I said about Mam’s influence on Bean.” She paused when he turned back around. “Just know that

was wrong. OK? I shouldn't have said that."

A little shocked, and it was obvious he was trying to not show it. Sam nodded once and brought this beer to his lips.

"Ok. That's all I wanted to say." Cati lifted her hands. "Now, you can go back to drowning your pitiful self in that beer." She turned around immediately and walked away. But had she just hesitated, just one second, she would have been able to enjoy watching Sam nearly choke while taking in her words at the same time he took in a huge drink.



## CHAPTER THREE

If it was left up to Cati, they would never occur.

Slumber parties.

Of all the times for her daughter to not want to be a tomboy, it had to be in regards to slumber parties. Cati hated them as a kid and more so as an adult.

So her mother hosted them for Ali.

They teen girls were never out of control, usually there were only four or five. They watched movies, and ate whatever Liz prepared. They didn't do that screaming thing, God forbid, because Ralph Olsen wouldn't have that behavior in his house.

Of course he never said that. And on the occasion that the girls got out of control, he wouldn't say a word. But there was a visible disapproval about him they all knew and feared. He'd sit there, arms crossed and just shake his head with that look of perturbed on his face.

The girls had turned on a scary movie. In fact, because Halloween was a week away, they were having a horror fest. The movies weren't modern, they were classic black and white, such as the Wolf man, Creature from the Black Lagoon.

A group scream emerged, and Ralph cringed as he sat at the dining room table.

Cati came from the kitchen. "God, already. I ain't think they'd start watching until later."

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Ralph shook his head. “What’s your mother doing in there? I’m hungry.”

“She’s getting the hotdogs prepared now.”

“They’re hot dogs. What’s to prepare?” He asked.

“She did that bacon wrap thing to them.” Cati shrugged. “Who knows? She had them in the oven wit the cookies.”

“Carrot cookies?”

Cati nodded.

A facial wince crossed Ralph’s face and he aimed his voice to the kitchen. “Liz, what the hell are you making carrot cookies for? They’re teenage girls. They aren’t gonna eat carrot cookies.”

“What do you know!” she shouted back.

“I know they won’t eat carrot cookies, I tell you.” Another shake of his head. “Christ, since she started that menopause crap all she does is bake carrot cookies. I wonder if there’s a connection.”

“I heard that,” Liz yelled.

“Daddy, you can’t blame menopause on everything.”

“Why not.” He shrugged. “*She* does.”

Liz stormed in from the kitchen. “Oh, I do not. Just the hot flashes. Here ...” She handed a plate to Cati. “Take this in to the girls.”

“See?” Ralph pointed. “Carrot cookies and they’re shaped like pumpkins. Go figure.” He shook his head.

Cati was about to laugh, when she looked down at her watch. “Shit. My watch stopped. What time is it?”

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



“Why? You have some place to go?”

“No, but Bean has to be home.”

Ralph tilted his head. “Why is Bean leaving the party?”

Cati sighed out. “She’s not allowed to stay.”

“Why?”

“Dad.” Catì whined out. “Her father said so, that’s why?”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Yes.”

“No, Catì, I mean talk to him.”

Harder she gave the same reply. “Yes.”

“How?”

“How what?”

“How did you talk to him?”

“I tried to call him at the office. But he was too busy to talk. So I got his email and emailed him.” Catì shrugged. “He said no.”

“Did he say why?”

“Sure. He said he knows what goes on at slumber parties and he’s not gonna take that chance with his daughter.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ralph asked. “Knows what goes on? Like the girls are gonna look at porn or something.”

“No,” Catì laughed. “I think he just heard stories. Sometimes girls do mean things to each other out of spite. Paint each others faces. Shaving cream. Make someone pee. That sort of thing.”

“That doesn’t happen at our slumber parties.”

“Yeah, but he doesn’t know that.”

“Did you try to tell him that?”

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“Daddy>“ Cati huffed out. “The guy is not a nice man. I don’t want to deal with him. He doesn’t like me for some odd reason. I certainly am not gonna beg him to let Bean stay. If he wants to be a dick about it ...”

“Language!” Liz shouted from the kitchen.

Cati finished her sentence. “Then he will. Nothing I can do about it. What time is it?”

“Almost eight-thirty.”

“I better get her home.”

“Can I?” Ralph asked. “I need some air, and the girls are giving me a headache.”

“Sure, “Cati said. “Let me get Bean ready.”

Ralph gathered up his keys and wallet as Cati summoned Bean. Bean was not happy about leaving, in fact, she hugged all the girls and look as if she were gonna cry. Ralph instructed Ali she was taking the ride, she didn’t have a choice, get in the car, and off they went.

Ralph found the Neal home without problems. Ali got him there just fine. He had no intentions of parking the car, until he saw Sam Neal—he assumed—at the door. At that, Ralph shut off the ignition and got out. He opened the back door for Bean.

Sam approached the car.

Ralph introduced himself with a handshake. “You must be Sam. I’m Ralph Ali’s grandfather.”

“Thank you for bringing Bea home.” Sam peeked into his car.

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“Come-on, Bea. In the house.”

“Night Ali-Ali in free,” said Bean, and she rushed from the car, storming into the house without looking at her father.

“Did something happen?” Sam asked.

“Nope.” Ralph shook his head. “She was fine. But, she’s a girl. They get like that. She’s mad she couldn’t stay at the party.”

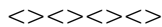
“I had my reasons.”

“I’m sure you did and I’m sure they are valid.” Ralph took a step and stopped. “Sam.”

“Yes.”

“My daughter Cati, she may be a little out there. But one thing she does right is being a mom. And I’ll tell you. She loves that girl of yours.” Ralph gave a single shake of his head. “Would never do anything that would hurt her.” He walked to his side of the car. “Sometimes we got to look at the whole picture to make decisions, instead of just the portion we think we see.” He sighed out. “Don’t know what the heck that means.” Ralph smiled “But it sounded good, didn’t it? Night.” He got in the car

Sam stood there as Ralph pulled away.



Cati had no intentions whatsoever of joining the girls in a carpet fear fest. But when they broke out the classic, “Night of the Living Dead’ Cati couldn’t resist. There was something just so creepy and scary about flesh eating walking corpse.

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The girls huddled together in the dark living room. Dark eyed monsters with blood stain teeth caused them to shiver. But the movie wasn't the thing that caused the huge scream from everyone. It was the unexpected knock on the door.

Catching her breath, and grabbing her chest, Cati stood up and walked to the door. She opened it and to her surprise Sam stood there with Bea.

"I thought Bea would be better off having her stuff if she were staying over," Sam said.

Cati tried to hide her smile. "Yes, she would." She opened the screen door.

Bea ran in, rushed a waist hug to Cati then joined the girls with a long, drawn out, "Ali-Ali in free. I'm back!"

"I'll bring her home after breakfast," Cati informed Sam. "Did you want to come in?" She widened the screen door.

"I ..." Sam hesitated. His eyes shifted to the living room and to the warm and excited welcome Bea received. Everyone hugged her and exclaimed how happy they were that she returned. Bea glowed in their presence. "I'm fine. Just ..." Sam partially smiled as he looked at his daughter again. "I'm fine. Thanks." He lifted his hand in a wave, turned and walked off the porch.

Before returning to the girls, for some reason, Cati stood there the door. She stood there watching until Sam got in his truck and drove away.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The email address had embedded itself into her address book automatically, because of the two email a day exchange.

Cati didn't know when it began, or even how it began a couple days earlier, but it did. A simple analogical term, cause Catì to retaliate the same. Perhaps that's when it started. Not much else was said.

The 'You have mail' told her he had sent it.

The bold faced 'Neal, Samuel J. SSGT' and she clicked on it. The email was brief, as she expected. A simple message that read, 'Rd8 Checkmate.'

"Fuck." Catì sat back. She glanced at the miniature chess board she had picket up from Wal-Mart. The one with very few of her white pieces left. She knew she didn't stand a chance, but was surprised she lasted as long as she did. When he'd make his move, she'd go on line to try to counter act and see what the computer did.

OK, she cheated. But it was better to cheat than to tell Sam Neal she didn't know how to play chess, she only knew the terms as a writer.

"Uh-oh, Checkmate." Artie paused by her computer. "How did you let yourself get into that one?"

"I haven't a fuckin' clue." Catì tossed up her hands. "I'm still baffled that I was able to play this way. Hey, at least the lines of

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communication are open between me and Sam.”

Artie peered over her shoulder, looking at the brief email.

“Yes, I see he is a man of many words.”

“It’s a start,” Cati said. “Look this morning he sent this one.”

Artie read it out loud. “Can we have a meeting about the girls?

Wow. How did you stand reading this long thing?”

“Funny.”

“So why don’t you just call him and discuss what needs to be discussed.”

“I don’t want to talk to him on the phone.”

“Hmm. I don’t blame you. OK, so, I have my pink ballerina outfit prepped and ready to go. Is your mother keeping Ali tonight?”

“Yes, I talked to her this morning. All set. We can hit that party.”

“Excellent.”

“Shit.” Cati jumped up.

“What? What is it?”

“It’s four thirty; I have to finish the costumes. We have been working hard all week. Can you start dinner?”

“What’s for dinner?”

“Hot dogs.” Cati darted for the steps.

“Easy enough. Cati, what’s the costume, you haven’t told me.”

“Oh, wait. Wait until you see. They are so good. I have to finish up a few things. We’re so excited. Ali and Bean are working on the other part right now at Bean’s house.”



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Artie nodded. Cati raced up the stairs. He had to wonder, if Cati was doing the costumes what in the world could the girls be working on?

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“Yack-yack-yack.” Bean wobbled back and forth, raising her shoulders. “How’s that, Ali-Ali- in free?”

“No. Not right. To slow. Try it again,” Ali ducted.

“Yack-yack-yack.” Bea repeated herself.

“No. Still not right. Watch.” Ali walked to the television. “Sorry, Mam, we need to turn off Oprah again.” Ali switched her voice to answer as Mam. “That’s OK, Ali, I like you.”

At that instant, Bea laughed hysterically. She slapped her knee, threw her body and laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Ali asked as she fixed the DVD player.

“Mam likes you. You talked for Mam. Did it again, Ali-Ali in free.”

“No.”

“Come on, be Mam.”

“No, Bean, we have to do this.”

“Please?” Bean tilted her head with a begging look and puppy dog eyes.

“Oh, all right.” Ali cleared her throat and changed her voice. It was a cross between Mr. Ed the talking horse and The Queen Mother. “Bean, Bean, the dancing queen, turn around and watch

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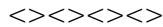
the screen.”

Bea shrieked in excitement then laughed. She turned around as Ali began to play the movie.

Before they got into it, the phone rang.

Bean rushed to the phone, checked the caller identification and smiled “its daddy.” She lifted the phone. “Hello, Daddy. Me and Ali-Ali in free are practicing for Halloween.” She snickered “When we go trick or treating, Daddy.”

Suddenly the smile dropped from Bea’s face. She turned around to Ali looking totally divested.



Cati beeped the horn, staring through the windshield at Bea’s home. “They better hurry,” she said to Artie. “We have eaten. Get dressed and be on the street when the church bells ring at six.” Again, she beeped.

“Perhaps they are making you wait because you’re annoying with that horn.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just so excited. You should see the trick or treat bags Bean made. Oh.. Here they come. Or rather one of them.” Cati smiled as Ali walked to the car. “Hey, you, tell Bean she needs to move it.”

Ali got inside. “Bean’s not coming.”

“Why not? Is she scared?”

“No, she’s not allowed.”

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“Who said?”

Ali only gave a look that said, ‘who do you think’

With that, Cati got out of the car.

When a call placed to his office didn’t work, Cati took matter isn’t her own hands.

“Yes. Yes. Yes!” Bea danced excitedly around, making it almost impossible for Cati to help her with her coat. “Cati-Corner is the president of Halloween.”

Nervously, Artie stood by the door. He wiped his brow. “Cati, this isn’t good. This is ...” he dropped his voice to a whisper. “Illegal.”

“What is?”

“Taking another person’s child.”

“Bullshit. I emailed him. He knew. Not once did he say she couldn’t go.”

Bea looked up to Cati. “Daddy said no. Cati said yes. She’s the president. She has final say.”

“And I can’t believe you told the child that.” Artie said. “What are you thinking?”

“Of the child,” Cati replied. “Once we are home, I need you to get them ready. If I’m not back, start walking down our street. I won’t be far behind.”

“No.” Artie shook his head. “No.”

“Yes,” Cati insisted.

“No, I will not be part of it.” He waved his hand. “Her father

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said no.”

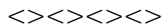
Bea tugged his jacket. “But, Artie, Cati-Corner is the president of Halloween. She is the boss.”

Cati smiled. “There you have it. OK, girls let’s go.” She stride to shuffle everyone to the door.

Bea stopped cold. “Cati-Corner oh, no. What about the candy. Daddy said I had to give out the candy. We have to give out the candy. The children will cry if they come to the house and don’t get candy. What are we gonna do?”

“Go out to the car, give me a minute.” Cati brought her index finger to her lips, tapped a few times and stared out in thought.

It wasn’t supposed to dip below sixty-eight degrees, so Cati felt secure. She tossed on two blankets for added assurance. With a wide witch’s hat, the kitchen broom against the chair, bowl of candy on her lap, and a sign that read, ‘take one’, they parked an unconscious Mam on the porch and drove off.



Cati was angry enough as it was, the road construction only fueled her and the fact that she was gonna miss the start of trick or treat made her even more mad. But she had to do it.

Country music was kicking loud when she walked in the tavern and sure enough, just as she expected Sam Neal was there. He was bent over the pool table, getting ready to take a shot.

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Cati was certain he didn't see anything else around him and his view was strictly on that cue ball, that was why she snatched it up, and his cue stick hit air,

"Hey!" he shouted. "Put that back down."

Cati held the ball. "Do I have your attention?"

"Yes."

"Good." She took a step to him. "How dare you?"

"How dare I what?"

"How dare you do that to your daughter?"

"I didn't do anything to my daughter, now if you'll excuse me I am in the middle of a game."

"And if you'll excuse me, I don; give a shit."

Jaw clenching he locked into a stare. "Say your peace and get it done."

"You knew. You knew all week how hard we've been working. All three of us."

"This isn't about you and your kid."

"No, it's about bean!" Cati shouted. "You knew, you let her believe it was all right and you pulled the rug out from under her at the last minute. You never let me know. I wouldn't have built her hopes up."

"She is too old to be trick or treating."

"She is not too old. She is a child! A child is never too old to enjoy things. And this isn't about her being too old this is all about it being convenient for you. You don't have to worry about going with her, or helping her. As long as she stays at home safe and

sound, you can hangout here with the loser drunks of Wadsowrth shooting pool without a worry in the world. You're wrong on this one. You should have let her go."

"Do not proceed to tell me what I can and can not do with her."

"And no not proceed to speak down to me again." Cati folded her arms. "You're wrong. So shoot your pool. Drink your life away all night long. I don't care. I have her."

"Excuse me?"

"I got her. I took her. She's going out trick or treating in the costume she made."

"Oh, I don't think so. You better take her back home right now."

"No." Cati was adamant.

"That is my child. You will take her home."

"Or what?" Cati taunted.

"Or I will call the police."

"You know what?" Cati gave an 'up to her chin. "Go ahead. Call them. Do what you need to do. You think it's that wrong? Call them. I don't care. But make no bones about it. One flashing light, one cop ruining our good time, and in my first breath of freedom, I will drive to Akron, find your office, and park my ass out front with a big old sign that says join the fuckin Marine Corps. Have a good night. I'm ... going trick or treating." After a dramatic spin of her body, Cati made her exit.

Breathing heavily, Sam looked at the table, and then huffing

out a ‘Fuck’, he tossed his stick. “Fuck.” He ran his hand over his head in frustration. “She took the cue ball.”

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The handcuffs weren’t that tight, but Cati supposed had she resisted arrest or fought some, she would have sustained a wrist injury.

“Known you all your life, Marilyn.” The sheriff escorted Cati into the precinct. “You’ve had your share of strange trouble. But it’s always been minor, stupid shit. This is stupid shit, but it’s in big trouble.”

Cati didn’t mind being led into the station. Dressed up drunks in Halloween costumes lined the walls. They didn’t bother her. The sight of Sam did.

He stood by the counter, as if waiting.

“Oh, you’ve been warned,” Cati said to him. “Wait.”

The sheriff shook his head. “Do I need to add theorist threats to the laundry list you have?”

“What laundry list?” Cati asked.

“Kidnapping, corrupting a minor, theft.”

“Theft!”

The sheriff held up the cue ball.

“Oh, that was an accident.”

“Did you take it?” The sheriff asked.

“Yes.”

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“Then theft.” He took her to the back. “Jennifer here is gonna book you.” He set Cati down in a chair.

Sheriff Nichols made his way to the counter, and stood across from Sam. He pulled a clipboard forward, adjusted his paperwork, and lifted a pen. “How are you tonight?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” Sam answered.

“You know, I have been sheriff in this town a long time. Never in my day have I arrested anyone for taking a child trick or treating. Is it against your religion?”

“No, sir, it is not.” Sam replied. “I felt she was too old.”

“Uh-ha.” Sheriff Nichols nodded. “How old? Fifteen? My son went for candy until he was eighteen. But that’s your choice. Any idea why she would kidnap your child? I mean, I can see if she had some deep seeded psychotic behavior that made her want to take a child trick or treating, and she didn’t have one of her own. But she does. Any reason?”

“She and my daughter made the costume and they had plans to go trick or treating. When I said no, she took matters into her own hands.”

The sheriff wrote down. “So she is familiar with your daughter.”

“Our daughters are friends.”

The sheriff stopped writing. “Your daughter and her daughter are friends. She helped your kid make the costume. So it’s a safe assumption that your daughter doesn’t fear her.”



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“Oh, no, not at all.”

“Do you think she would hurt your child, cause I have known her a long tike and I don’t think ...”

“No.” Sam said. “No physically.”

“Can I ask you something/”

“Sure.”

The sheriff rubbed his chin in debate before speaking. “Did she turn you down for a date? Maybe you guys were lovers and ...”

“What! No!” Sam took offense. “No. Why would you ask this?”

“Because this seems rather vindictive.”

“Her kidnapping my child?”

“No, you pressing charges for taking your child trick or treating. My onion, it’s lame. Did your daughter have a good time?”

“I ... I don’t know. I suppose.”

“Bet she did. She wasn’t in danger. Granted, what Marilyn did wasn’t right. She shouldn’t have taken your kid against your wishes. But it was with all good intentions.”

“It was still a crime.”

Sheriff Nichols nodded. “Fine. You’re right. If you want to pursue, we’ll pursue. Will it stick? She’ll get a slap on the wrist. But she’ll be marked for life. Is it worth it? Your choice. I say ... drop the charges and let this go. Be the bigger man. Let this go.”

Sam peered around Sheriff Nichols and to Cati. When Cati caught him staring, she flipped him off. Sam grunted.

“Sam?” The sheriff asked. “What will it be?”

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Sam stared at the Sheriff for a moment. “Book her.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

His CO had called to say he had heard rumors regarding it, but Sam assured him it was under control and no concern. Not that it really was, it was irritating more than anything else. But the longer it went on, the more distracting it became and Sam had to do something about it. He was surprised that the mall, where his office was located, hadn't done a thing about it yet.

He got up from behind his desk and walked out. "OK. I don't get it. I dropped the charges."

Cati turned around. She wore a huge sign that read 'join the marines instead'. It hung around her neck as she sipped a coffee house beverage. "Yes, you did. Three days later. But you still did. Thank you."

"Why are you doing this then?"

"I told you, ruin our trick or treat and I was doing this."

Sam growled.

"Did you see?" Cati held up her cup. "The nice Marine guy bought me a latte. Isn't he sweet?"

"A gem."

"The marines over there are all nice. . .I may have a date with one. Don't know. He asked." She shrugged. "Then he bought me the latte."

"Do you think he got you the latte, because you're doing them a favor?"

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“Could be. Who knows? Don’t let me hold up your day.”

“Oh, you aren’t. I’m just wondering when you’re gonna leave.”

“When I get it out of my system. I don’t know. I know it’ll be until I finish my latte. I don’t want the marine to think I’m rude.”

“Will you leave if I buy you two latte?” Sam asked.

Cati giggled. “Are you trying to bribe me?”

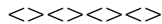
“Yes.”

“Two Lattes?”

“Yes.”

Cati shook her head. “Nah, what would I do with two lattes? Thanks, but no thanks. I’m fine. I’m just gonna go back to doing my thing.” She turned her body slightly and held up the sign to each person that passed.

Sam wasn’t happy about it. He knew damn well he wasn’t going down without a fight, but he also knew at that moment he just didn’t feel like dealing with it.



It was an afternoon at Ali’s house and Grandma Liz brought over carrot cookies and pizza squares for Bean and Ali while they did whatever they deemed fun for the day.

They felt free. Cati had told them she would be gone most of the day, something to do at the mall.

They stayed in the dining room. Ali on the computer, Bean next to her reading from sheets of paper.

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“Ali-Ali in Free, listen to this.” Bean said.

“Go on.”

“This William guy had five children.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Bean said. “Bill, Tom, Sarah, Ann and Michele. They sound nice don’t they?”

“Yes, Bean they do.”

Bean continued. “Oh, Ali-Ali in free. William was in the rotary club for thirty years.”

“That’s nice.” Ali stayed focused on the computer.

“He saved over fifty dogs from being put to sleep. Wow, he is a dog hero.”

“How about that?”

“What’s it mean to view him?”

“Huh?” Ali asked.

“Your mom writes good stories. Will she tell me about the view thing?”

“It’s not a story, Bean. Neither was the one about Jennifer. Or the one about Elizabeth.”

“Yes, they are, Ali-Ali- in Free.”

“No Bean bag, they’re obituaries, that’s what they are.”

“Are obit ... obit ...”

“Obituaries.”

“Yes, are they a type of story.”

Ali hesitated. “You know what? They are. They are stories about great people who died.”

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“Wow.” Bea shook her head once. “Wow. And your mom writes them very good.”

“Yes, she does.”

“Want to hear the story about Fred?”

“Um, not right now, I’m thinking.”

“What are you doing, Ali-Ali in Free?” Bea scooted her chair closer to Ali.

“You really want to know.”

Bea nodded.

“Ok ... you have to promise you can’t tell.”

“I won’t I swear I won’t you know I keep very good secrets.”

Ali smiled. “Yes, you do. Anyhow ... Fudge’s mom is not a very nice woman.”

“She isn’t?”

“No.” Ali shook her head. “In fact she isn’t pretty either.”

“She is ugly and mean.”

Ali gave Bea a bright look. “Exactly. But ... even being ugly and mean, she still managed to find a boyfriend. In fact, she is marrying him. Now, want to know how?”

“Yes. Yes. How?”

“This.” Ali pointed. “Date-a-rama. It’s an on line dating service. You put your picture up there and things about your self and men look at you. They ... they ... shop.”

“Men shop at the date-a-rama?” Bea asked.

“Yes, they shop for a girlfriend. But they can only get a woman who is on here.”



“Does my dad shop there?”

Ali really wanted to answer, probably not’ but instead she replied. “I don’t’ know. Ask him.”

“I will.”

“Good. So what I was saying is, my mom needs a boyfriend. And I thought if I put her in the store, we might find her one. Or not.” Ali shrugged. “At the very least this is fun.”

“You put Cati-corner up for sale?”

“In a way. But she doesn’t know. So don’t tell her.”

“Ali-Ali in free? What if a man want to be her boyfriend. How is he going to take her on a date is she doesn’t know.”

“We’ll figure that out later. Right now, I’m sorting through. I figure .... Weave through. Find the best one and hope my mom goes out with him.”

Bea started giggling.

“What’s so funny?”

“What if my dad shops there and buys your mom.”

Ali looked seriously at her. “That’s not funny. Your dad, my mom ...” She shook her head. “Nah.”

“Nah. You’re right. But it would be funny.”

“Wanna hear funny?” Ali turned the computer. “Listen to what this guy wrote. He wrote...’Dear feline’” Ali explained. “Feline is the date name I gave my mom.” She continued to read. “You are beautiful. I want to make you my queen. I have my own business and would like to get to know you. Write me back if you are interested.” Ali moved the mouse. “And we click here and we can

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see what he looks like.” Ali clicked.

At the same time, the same way, the same speed, both girls tilted their heads.

“Not bad,” Ali said. “For an old guy.”

“Not bad.” Bea repeated. “Ali-Ali in free, he wants your mom to write him. How is she gonna write him if she doesn’t know that he wrote her?”

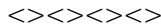
“Easy.” Ali said. “I just pretend I’m my mom.”

“Oh, good idea. What are you gonna say.”

Ali thought for a moment, smiled, hit reply and then typed. “Dear SOSLOVER. You are very cute. I would like to get to know you better. How much money do you make?” Ali nodded with a there. “What do you think? Works?”

“Works.”

“Good.” With a hard strike, Ali hit send.



Sam listened. Cati didn’t have a soft voice, and it did carry. It helped that he moved to the desk nearer the door and cracked it open.

Sergeant Lewis had returned and asked Sam if he wanted mall security to take care of. Sam just said ‘no’, because after some thought, Cati was attracting attention. As the Saturday, big mall day progressed, so did the traffic in front of the recruiting station. And considering she knew even less about the Marine Corp than the



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Army, it worked in his favor.

Actually, Cati didn't say anything negative about the Army. About Sam ... yes.

Her replies probably turned into stock replies, because Cati was asked the same questions over and over. But even though she gave the same answer, she still had the same enthusiasm.

"Are the Marines telling you to do this?" someone asked.

"Oh, no." Cati would reply. "I'm doing this on my own."

"What did the Army do to you?" Was an often asked question.

"Nothing. My father was in the Army. It's that guy in there," Cati would say.

Sam had a lot of thoughts while watching her. How long would she do it? Wasn't she tired? Did she actually enjoy the attention as much as she was projecting? And why was Sgt. Falcon of the Marines always talking to her.

He did his other work, the busy work along with emails. In fact, he was caught up in answering an email when he heard it.

"And I was in debate today," the young man's voice said. "Thanks, I'll go to the marines instead."

Just as Sam went to stand—no way was she stopping him from getting a possible new recruit—he heard Cati call out. "Wait."

She stopped him?

Sam leaned forward to peek; Cati had her hand on the young man's arm. Was she whispering to him? 'Goddamn it,' Sam thought. 'Of all times for her not to be loud'.

Then the door opened and the young man walked in.

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“Hey, Son, can I help you?” Sam asked.

“I’m here to speak to him.” He pointed at Sgt. Lewis.

Sam nodded, motioned his hand to Sgt. Lewis, and watched as they greeted each other. Granted, Cati cost *him* a possible new recruit, but the station wasn’t losing the prospect, and that was a bright side.

But it had to stop. As much as it wasn’t doing any harm, Sam wasn’t getting his work done. She wasn’t going to go on her own, and the more he pressured her, the longer she’d stay. Obviously a bribe wasn’t going to cut it, not when the Marines would easily ‘one up’ him.

Pen in hand, Sam leaned back and sunk into thought.

“Oh my God,” Cati smiled at Sgt. Falcon. “I love these chocolate chip cookies. Thank you.”

“Are you ready for another latte?” he asked.

Cati shook her cup. “As a matter of fact, yes I am.”

“I’ll be back.”

“You’re too sweet.”

He smiled at her, and then smiled again. The second one was obviously not directed at her. Had Cati turned around a few seconds earlier, she would have seen the look Sam gave in regards to Sgt. Falcon’s sweet behavior.

The irritated, rolling eyes, ‘get a life and find something else to do’ type of look.

“OK, here’s the deal,” Sam said. “You’ve proved your point.”

“I’m not done. And what are you doing?” She looked at the two chairs he had right outside the door.

He held up a hand, went back in the office and came back out with a small table. On it was a chess board.

Cati laughed.

“Seeing how you are the Chess queen.”

“I never said that.”

“No, you wrote that in an email,” Sam said.

“Ok I did.” Catì folded her arms. “What’s your point?”

“My point is, you’re not quitting so easy. But you strike me as a competitive person.”

“I am.” Catì nodded.

“Good. So here’s the challenge. Play me in chess. You win ...” Sam shrugged. “You stay out here as long as you like, sending recruits to Sgt. Hair gel in there, promoting the marine Corp and flirting with Sgt. Falcon.”

“I am not flirting with ...”

He held up his hand to silence her. “If I win. If I win.”

“I go home?”

“Not just yet. If I win, you have to stand for one hour, with a sign I give you, and stand where I put you. Deal?”

Cati looked at the chess board.

“You’re not scared right. I mean if you aren’t up to the challenge ...”

“No, no. I’m fine. I’m the chess queen.”

“Good. Then shall we?” He held his hand out to the chairs.

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



Cati was apprehensive, and she was pretty certain that it showed. She hid her cringe well and didn't blurt out her thought of 'I'm fucked'. That was a positive thing. Taking her seat, Cati drew in a sense of confidence. She felt good. Felt sure she would remember how to play, and felt positive about the fact, that she really could beat him.

She didn't have her latte anymore, nor the chocolate chip cookies. And although Sgt. Falcon tried not show how pissed he was, Cati could wager money on the fact that he wasn't going to take her out on that date.

Sam beat her and he beat her fast. Within four moves he had her. But the loss of the challenge wasn't as hard to take as the fact that she had to shift her body a few feet down toward the Marine Corps office and for one hour hold a sign that read, "Army Sgt. Sam Neal is hot."

## CHAPTER SIX

Her mother was far from domesticated, but on Thanksgiving, it was a different story.

Not that Cati got up early to stuff the turkey; actually, Cati bought the turkey partially cooked. But everything else was homemade.

The house smelled of the feast, warm and inviting, and Ali hated to leave it. But she had to go to Bean's house. Bean and her father were going to a co workers house for dinner, and Ali wanted to see her before they did.

She had some things to show her.

The one guy from Date-a-rama was certainly taking more of an interest in Cati, and Ali printed up the newest emails he sent. Plus there was a new guy that saw her ad, and Ali wanted to share him with Bean. He wasn't bad looking. He had weird hair that was kind of puffy on the sides, but he looked like he made a lot of money.

She explained it to Cati that she wanted to see Bean, and left out the minor details of the date-a-rama men. Ali didn't understand why Artie offered to drive her, it wasn't that far, and insisting on walking Ali prepped to go.

The second she opened the door, she saw the reason for the concern and the comments to bundle up.

It started to snow and snow hard. The street were already covered and it came down at a steady pace.

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Ali donned her hat, coat and gloves, and began her journey. The whipping snow pelted her face, freezing it and making her nose run.

She must have sniffled a hundred times in that first block.

Making in about a block and a half, Ali turned around and went home. Artie had one of those vehicles that went in all weather, and she took him up on the offer of the ride.

She arrived at Bean's house, and it was oddly dark. Sam's car wasn't there, and Ali actually thought that maybe Bean had left in the short time she had spoke to her.

Artie waited until he saw Bean open the door and then he drove off.

"Good thing you didn't walk, Ali-Ali in free." Bean said.

"Where's your dad, Bean?" Ali asked. "It's thanksgiving."

"One of the guys he works with broke down." Bean said. "He went to help. Come on in. You are so lucky."

Ali stepped inside, took off her hat. "Why's that?"

"You get to go out in the snow?"

"Maybe we'll take a walk, Bean. Would you like that?"

"Oh, yes, Ali-Ali- in free. I would." Bean smiled.

Her nose was a little runny, and Ali sniffed in as she took off her gloves. Her face crinkled when she saw Mam in the chair. She was covered with a ton of blankets. "Why is Mam so covered, Bean?"

"She very cold." Bea said.

"Really?" Ali took off her coat.

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“I painted her finger nails and put turkey’s on the, Ali-Ali in free.” Bea walked over to Mam. “See?” She grabbed Mam’s hand.

Ali saw it the second Bea lifted it. Not that Ali knew anything, but the sight of how her hand looked wasn’t right. She was scared to death, locked into a stare, and at that moment, her insides shook. She walked over to Mam, and the second she touched her hand, she knew. “Oh, Bean.”

“What?” Bea asked. “You don’t like?”

Ali just stared.

“Ali-Ali in free, what’s wrong?”

“Bean, hurry and get your coat on. Let’s go on a snow adventure.”

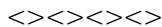
“Am I allowed?” Bea asked.

“Um, sure. I’ll tell my mom to tell your dad. But go get your coat, gloves, and everything OK?”

“Ok, Ali-Ali in free. It’s gonna be fun.”

“Yeah, but hurry,” Ali said her eyes still transfixed on Mam. “I’ll call my mom.”

When Bea had exited left the room, Ali walked to the phone. She shivered as she dialed and spoke in a whisper. “Mommy, I need your help.”



When Cati got the all from Ali, she told her daughter that a snow adventure was a good call, and to head home. Artie would

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pick them up en route, and then return to the house with them to watch dinner.

Cati took her own car and headed straight there. She had to check it out, and Ali getting Bea from the house as best.

She felt it. She really felt it when she walked in. The eerie silence, the ominous chill. And then she saw Mam.

The settled blood was deep and dark on the palms of her hands, and it spread out on her cheek where her head tilted. That's all Cati needed to see to know her daughter's assessment was correct.

She walked to the phone where she knew the phone numbers were listed, and she saw Sam's cell phone number.

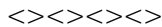
For the first time she placed a call to that phone.

Sam obviously thought it was Bea because he answered the phone, "Hey, Pumpkin, I won't be much longer."

Her voice cracked when she spoke, "Sam, this is Cati."

Concern laced his tone immediately. "What's wrong?"

"Bea's fine. She's at my house. Sam, you need to come home," Cati said. "Mam has passed away."



It was a situation Cati never had to nor wanted to face. But she told Sam she'd get things started while he made his way back home.

She called the paramedics because Liz told her, the coroner



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couldn't come without an official proclamation of death. The paramedics and police arrived about ten minutes before Sam.

Cati wanted to stay, but felt it was best to get back to the girls, and put on a good front. Because agreeing to Sam's request, Cati was saying nothing to Bea.

Understandable. He had to be the one.

It was difficult to pull off a Happy Thanksgiving, but Artie helped with that. So did Bea for that matter being so excited about eating with the Cramers.

But it was painful when Bea brought up 'Mam' and how she wanted to take her some turkey

Cati swayed the conversation elsewhere.

The house as quiet. Artie had gone home, and the girls were in Ali's room watching a movie. Dinner was done and Cati had just finished the dishes and packing up the leftovers when there was a knock at the backdoor.

A back door arrival was odd, considering not many used it. Drying her hands, Cati saw Sam. She opened the door.

"I hope you don't mind me coming this way," Sam said softly, stepping inside. "I saw you in the window when I pulled in."

"No, not at all. How are you?" Cati asked closing the door behind him.

"I'm doing. I'm sorry I'm so late and that it took so long. I just wanted to get everything done."

"It's not late, Sam. Did you get it all done?"

Sam nodded. "It's taken care of with the coroner, and I

stopped at Burkes to make arrangements.”

“You dragged the funeral director in on Thanksgiving.”

“He didn’t mind,” Sam gave a partial smile. “It was a sale.”

Cati returned the partial smile. “I’m sorry about all this.”

Sam shook his head. “Thanks for taking care of Bea and going over there.”

“Not a problem. I’ll go get Bea for you.” She turned, and Sam reached out to her wrist, stopping her.

“Can you ... can you hold off?” he asked. “I need to take a moment and ingest this before I face her.”

“I understand. Hey ... uh, did you eat?”

He raised his eyes.

“Dumb question. Sorry. Would you ... can I fix you a plate. I bet you’re starved.”

“I don’t know if I could eat ...” He paused. “You know what? That’s sounds great. Thank you.”

“Why do you have a seat in the dining room? I’ll get it for you.”

“If it’s not any trouble.”

“Please.” Cati pointed. “Go.”

He was in a quiet mode, understandably, and after nodding once, he walked into the other room.

He was looking at her pictures, when Cati returned with his food. She fixed Sam a full plate and poured him a glass of wine.

“This ... this looks great. Thank you.” Sam opened his napkin.

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“Sam ...” Cati sat down at the table. “Look. I know you and I don’t see eye to eye. And I know we don’t get along, but ... if you need anything. You need help in anyway. Making calls, watching Bean, and getting things ready. Let me know. OK? I’m more than willing to help out.”

“I appreciate it. Problem is, right now I just need to figure out how to handle this with my daughter, and I don’t think anyone can help with that.”

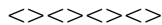
“It’s a tough situation. And I’ll... I’ll leave you to your meal and your thoughts. I want to check on the girls.” Cati stood up.

“Cati?”

She paused before she left.

“Thank you,” Sam said.

Her response was a sympathetic smile, that was all she could do, and then Cati left Sam alone to work things out.



The debate ended up being not ‘how are when’ to tell Bea, but rather where Sam would break the news.

He gave it great thought. He thought about taking Bea home, getting her settled and then letting her know what happened. And then he remembered Cati. There was a bond between his daughter and her, and on the chance Bea needed a different type of support than he could give, he opted to tell her at Cati’s house.

It was a good plan.

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



Tell Bea, see how she was. If she wanted to go home, she'd go home, if she wanted to stay the night, Sam would allow her.

Ali was settled into a movie with Cati, affording Sam alone time in the living room with Bea.

He didn't even know how to broach the subject. He sat on the couch with his daughter, his fingers fiddling with her hair. Bea kicked her feet up, staring proudly at her father.

"Cati-corner made the best turkey," Bea said. "Didn't she?"

"It was very good."

"Too bad Mam couldn't be here. Are we taking some turkey home to Mam?"

"That's what I need to talk to you about, Sweetie."

"Mam doesn't want any turkey?"

"I don't think so," Sam said. "Bea ... you know how Mam likes to sleep?"

"Yes, and drink beer."

Sam smiled. "Well, sometimes when people get old, like Mam, they'll go to sleep and ... and they won't wake up."

Bea stared confused at Sam.

"When they don't wake up, the angels come and take them to heaven."

"They die." Bea said. "I know what that means."

"Good. Because today ... today Mam went to sleep Bea, and she didn't wake up."

"My Mam died?"

"I'm afraid so."

## A Girl Called Bea – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



“How, Daddy? How could she die?”

Sam didn’t know how to answer her, or at least answer in a way she would understand. “Sometimes people, they just get ...”

“No, maybe she I just sleeping. Maybe she didn’t die.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie.” Sam rested his hand on her head. “She did.”

Bea’s eye grew wide; she pulled back slowly and stood from the couch.

“Bea? What is it?”

Bea shook her head, turned and with a bellow out of ‘Cati!’ she took off running up the stairs.

In defeat, Sam lowered his head.

Admittedly Cati was having a hard time writing. She wanted to watch a movie but couldn’t concentrate. She thought sitting before her computer would do it. It didn’t.

What was going on down stairs? How was Sam handling it? The side of Sam she got to know wasn’t the side needed to handle the situation. She kept telling herself it wasn’t her business and she had to not worry. As her father, Sam would do fine. But as a woman who loved Bea as much as a mother, Cati worried.

Although Cati wanted to help out, it was a tough situation and a part of her preferred to stand back.

When she heard the desperate call of her name, Cati knew at that instant, she didn’t have a choice.

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



Sam waited only a minute. He felt bad. His insides ached and he just couldn't shake the overwhelming sensation of feeling like he failed his daughter. It was his job to make her feel better, his job to be there, to tell her, but there he was, stranded in the living room while his daughter ran into the arms of another parent.

The running into the arms part, he could only assume. That was why he decided to follow his daughter.

But he did it quietly, and slowly so as not to be heard or alarm Bea. If he wasn't what she needed, then Sam would have to accept that and step back.

However what could Cati offer he couldn't?

The bedroom door was ajar, and Sam heard the voices flowing. He moved closer to the door, opening it slightly, and his presence wasn't even known.

Cati sat on her bed, Bean rolled up next to her, head buried to Cati's chest.

"You'll get your chance, Bean," Cati said. "Everyone gets their chance to say goodbye. In their own way."

"But why did she have to die, Cati. I didn't want her to die."

"No one wants anyone to die, Bean. Especially when they are loved like Mam. But, see, Mam ... you know how Mam slept all the time?"

Bea nodded.

"Well, that's because her body was wearing down. She couldn't help but sleep. Do you think she wanted to sleep all the time?"

"Didn't she?"

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“No,” Cati answered. “She wanted to run free. Be happy, laugh, talk, and make jokes.”

“Mam hasn’t done that since I was very little.”

“See?” Cati stroked her hair. “Now she is.”

“What do you mean Cati corner.”

“Mam is free. Right now, she is running around chasing kids. Seeing people who she loved that had died. Taking in all the beauty, smelling flowers. She is happy, Bean. She is so happy right now because she can do all the things she had to stop doing. What was something Mam liked to do?”

“Watch Oprah.”

“Oh, well, let me tell you. There’s a huge TV up there, bigger than any TV you up there and she watches Oprah all day.”

“Is it bigger than a movie theater?” Bea asked.

“Much bigger. What else? What else did Mam like to do?”

“Mam loved to look beautiful.”

Cati fluttered her lips. “Right now Mam is more beautiful than she ever was. And I bet she’s wearing one of your hats.”

“She looks pretty in my hats.”

“Yes, she does.”

“Cati-Corner. I was reading your stories. I read the story about the dog hero.”

Cati looked down at Bea with some confusion.

Bea said. “You write stories about great people that die. Will you ... will you write a story about my Mam, Cati? Please?”

oh, absolutely, Bean, you betcha’ I will.”

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Bea hugged Cati tight, and Cati returned the embrace.

Sam stood in the doorway through that entire conversation, unnoticed until the moment Cati peered up and made eye contact with her. He wasn't angry about the talk, or the comfort Cati was giving his daughter. In that doorway, through a sad smile, and soft wink, Sam conveyed his gratefulness to Cati.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

In all the talks they had with Bea. All the conversations that set the girls mind at ease and made her actually happy for Mam, went out the window because neither Sam nor Cati thought to explain the funeral home. How that escaped them, they didn't know.

When Bea asked, "Where are we going all dressed up?"

And Sam answered, "To see Mam."

He didn't think twice or pick up on the fact that Bea insisted she wasn't sleeping.

They pulled up to Burke's and the first thing Bea asked was, "What's this place?"

"This is where we're gonna see Mam."

"Was Cati wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"This is a nice house and all," Bea shook her head. "But there isn't much room for Mam to run around. I thought heaven would be bigger."

"No, No, Bea, this isn't heaven. This is a funeral home." When he received that look from Bea, he muttered out, "Shoot. How d I miss this conversation."

He explained everything he could to Bea. About the coffin, the morning viewing. To which she interjected she heard about that before. The afternoon burial. He placed a call to Cati to make sure her and Ali were going to be there. As much as Sam wanted to do

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it on his own, Ali was the one that had to be with Bea when she walked in the room and saw her Mam lying in a coffin.

“Can you do this?” Cati asked Ali in the lobby of the funeral home.

“Yes. You’re not coming in?”

“No, I’ll wait.” Cati said. “The first viewing is very private> Sam needs you there for Bean. Are you sure you can handle see her like this?”

“Mom,” Ali leaned in closer to Cati. “Not to sound disrespectful or anything, but I’m pretty sure the only difference between now and when she was a live is she’s lying down.”

Cati closed her eyes at the off beat remark of her daughter. She tried not to laugh, and was glad that Sam and Bea showed up.

Mr. Burke did his thing, put on his sad face and consoling voice, explained a few things then led Sam, Ali and Bea to the closed doors for the pre-viewing.

“Wait.” Bea stopped him then turned around. “Can me and Ali go first?”

“Honey,” Sam said. “We’re all going in at the same time.”

“But, Daddy, I want to make sure she looks right. I always make sure she’s pretty.”

Sam nodded his approval and Mr. Burke opened the door for the girls, when they slipped through, he closed them.

Sam turned to Cati. “They’re gonna scream.”

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“No, they’re gonna be just fine.”

Quiet.

No music. No sound. Just quiet.

The room seemed so big to Ali and Bea as they stood near the door huddled.

“Ali-Ali in free, you’re shaking.”

“I’m a little scared.”

“Why?”

“Because Mam is dead and we’re in here with a dead body without a grown up.”

“She’s not dead Ali-Ali- in free. She came back to say goodbye.”

“No, Bean, this is her body. She’s dead. She’s not gonna sit up and talk.”

“She’s not?”

“No, I hope not.”

“Why?” Bea asked.

“Because if she sits up, we’re running. Remember that movie Night of the Living Dead? You saw what the dead people did when they started walking again.”

“Maybe we should get my dad.”

“No,” Ali exhaled bravely. “I’m pretty sure we’re fine. Besides, we can run a lot faster than the walking dead. You saw how slow they moved.”

“That’s true.”

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



They held on, inched a few steps. Stopped. Inched closer until the coffin came into view.

The moment Bea caught hint of the sight of Mam she raced to the casket.

“Bean.” Ali hurried to catch up. “Are you OK?”

Bea stood on the kneeler. “Oh my God, Ali-Ali- in Free.”

Ali stood next to her. “What?”

“It doesn’t look like Mam.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Are we sure this is her? They have her hair all puffy.” Bea reach down and patted the hair.

“Bean, don’t touch the body.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, it’s just weird.”

“And they have lipstick on her. It’s too red.” Bea reached again.

“Bean, please don’t.”

“Ali-Ali in free. Touch her.” Bea pressed her index finger on Mam’s cheek.

“No.”

“Oh, you have to touch her.” Bean reached for Mam’s hand. “Feel Ali.”

“No, Bean.”

“You have to feel how she feels. It’s hard.”

“No.”

“Please?” Bea begged.

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



“Fine.” Ali reached down. The moment her fingers touched Mam’s hand, both girls shirked and giggled.

Elbows on the side of the coffin, Bea propped her face in her hands. “You do know, Ali-Ali in Free. Mam wouldn’t like this.”

“No one does, Bea.”

“We have to do something about it.”

“Like what?”

Bea smiled.

The funeral director gave them the time after Bea and Ali returned with the bag of stuff they needed.

When the director prepared Mam, he do so from a photograph where Mam attended a retirement party. She had her gray hair done up curled and big, and the dress she wore in the photograph was the same one Sam provided.

Actually, Burke did a great job with her. She looked remarkably like the photograph, but until Bea and Ali were finished with her she didn’t look like Mam.

Bea gave up her favorite hat. The fishing one with the green brim. She had decorated it with pink flowers she cut from a shower curtain. They brushed down her hair, parted it on the side, put on her blue sweater and covered her feet with the patch work quilt. Not only did they paint her fingers nails various colors, they topped off the entire ‘Mam’ look with a can of beer resting in her hand.

Cati commented that she felt it was sort of morbid, the girls

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redoing all the work. She was even creeped out some when Ali expressed interest that working with dead bodies and making them pretty might be a career choice she might be interested in.

The viewing wasn't long, a couple hours and a few people stopped in. Not many. They were new in town, and not many people knew them. Mam never left the house, so for sure no one knew her. But in every town there are curiosity seekers and those who were just funeral dwellers. People who liked to go to funerals. Burke put out the word and they stopped by, paying their last respects. This made Bea feel good. The dwellers though didn't have a clue on how to answer the question, 'how long were you friends with my Mam?'

Some answered just to pacify her, some just smiled and walked away.

It was cold and snowy and made impossible to hold a grave side service. The cemetery had a mausoleum and they held the final prayer service in there.

Cati took notice, how could she not. There were ten people in the mausoleum and the woman standing far in the back away from everyone really stood out. After the priest said his final prayer, Sam made his way to Cati.

"Can you take the girls to the car for me?"

"Sure." Cati said. "I can do that."

He handed her the keys and Cati walked Ali and Bea to the car. She started it, to warm it, and as she secured the girls inside, she

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noticed.

Sam was talking to the woman. Standing with a hint of a lean, his left hand in his coat pocket, his right hand kept moving in short, cutting strokes. Not drastic, but enough to tell Cati the conversation was intense.

Who was she?

The conversation went on and a few minutes had passed. Cati didn't even realize how long she was standing outside until Ali called her name to come in to the car, and then Bea added that she wanted to go home.

"I'll tell him," Cati said, then closing her coat, walked toward the entrance of the mausoleum where Sam stood talking.

It was evident he was finishing up his conversation, because he took a step back, looked over his shoulder and spotted Cati. After a nod, he turned, held his hand in front of his body as if to tell Cati to wait, and he moved quickly her way.

Cati eyed the woman. She still stood by the entrance. When she shifted her eyes to Sam she saw he was tense. "Everything OK?" she asked. "Do you need me to take Bean for you?"

Without saying anything, Sam stepped directly to her, and kissed her on the cheek. He stayed near to her, and whispered in her ear. "Don't move."

"Ok. Why? And why did you just kiss me?" Cati whispered back.

"I wanted her to see."

"Are you trying to pass me off as a girlfriend?"

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“In a way.”

“Ah,” Cati nodded. “I see. Is this someone you were trying to get rid of? Maybe an old ...”

“No.” Sam said short. “Is she still there?”

Cati shifted her eyes. “She’s leaving now.”

Sam breathed out. “Good.”

“Sam? What is it? What’s going on?”

“Just shit I don’t need.”

“I don’t understand,” Cati said. “Who is she?”

“Trouble.”

“Sam?”

“That woman...” Sam peered over his shoulder, just to double check that she was leaving. He returned to Cati. “Is Bea’s mother.”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

“**N**o, Bean, I am not sitting in that chair.” Ali said firmly.

“Come on, Ali-Ali- in free. Be Mam.”

“Mom!”

Cati shook her head as she carried the rolls out to the dinner table. Liz insisted she make dinner for Bean and her father and after the service, Liz and Ralph brought the partially prepared items over to the Neal home.

Sam opened a beer as he stepped from the kitchen, tossing the cab into the trash.

Cati had wanted to talk to him. But the girls were in the car, and the matter of Bean’s mother couldn’t be brought up.

For some odd reason it gnawed at her. The second Sam informed her who the woman was, Cati’s insides churned. She couldn’t figure out the logic, she knew one reason was jealousy. Jealous over another woman being in Bea’s life. But the woman didn’t say anything, and that irritated Cati more.

“Cover the rolls, Cati,” Liz instructed as she carried the dish of butter to the table.

“Mrs. Olsen,” Sam said. “Thank you. This wasn’t necessary.”

“Yes, it was. You have a lot on your mind and the last thing you need to worry about is feeding your child and yourself. It’s been a rough past few days.” Liz laid his her hand on his back.

“Know that I appreciate this. We both do.”

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Cati watched and listened to the brief exchange of words. Could she pull him aside and ask him? Cati wondered. She really wanted to know about Bea's mom, but a part of her felt if she asked, it was out of line.

She was kind of in a limbo. She didn't know where to go, where to sit. Sam was just sitting there staring at his beer, rolling the bottle between his hands. There was an awkward silence. Actually, she felt very stupid just standing there. She had to make a decision. The girls were in the living room with Ralph and Artie, Liz in the kitchen. Just as she decided the lesser of all evils was to hit the living room, Ralph entered the living room with his coat.

"Where's your mother?" he asked.

"Where do you think? In the kitchen cooking. She won't let me help."

"We're hungry. Artie and I are taking the girls for a snack," Ralph said. "We'll be back in fifteen minutes."

"Dad, dinner's gonna be ready in fifteen minutes," Cati said.

"Fifteen minutes your mom time is forty-five minutes to everyone else. We'll be back. Want something?"

Cati shook her head.

"Sam? Need anything?"

"No," Sam said. "Thanks."

With a jingle of his keys, Ralph left.

Cati listened to the sounds of them shuffling around and then ultimately leaving.

In the silence she paused, looked at Sam and gripped the back

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



of one of the hairs. “Can you talk for a second?”

“Sure. What’s up?” Sam looked up to her.

Cati pulled out a chair and sat down. “I ... I wanted to ask you something.”

“Go on.”

“Bean’s mom.”

With an ‘ah’, Sam nodded his head.

“She didn’t approach Bean ...”

“I wouldn’t let her. She wanted to. But ...” Sam shook his head. “No. No way.”

“And Bean didn’t recognize her? Or do you think she did?”

“How? There’s not a picture of her in this house. She hasn’t been in Bea’s life since she was two years old.”

“I thought she disappeared from the face of this earth.”

“Her mother lived with us. How much of a disappearance did she make?”

“So you talk to her?”

“Why is this important? And why are you asking?”

“Just curious,” Cati said.

“No, I do not talk to her. Her mother hasn’t talked to her. But I kept track of where she was at. And thank God, that’s in Utah.”

“So she came in for her mother’s funeral.”

“And then some. She’s in town for a few days.”

“Does she want to see Bean?”

“Yes,” Sam sighed out. “I don’t think Bea is ready for that, or that she could handle that. Hell, I’m not even sure I want her to

even meet her. But, unfortunately I may not have a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

“She thinks its time to take Bea.”

Cati laughed at the ridiculous notion. “You told her ‘no’ right.”

Sam only looked at her.

“Sam? You can not be serious,” Cati still had the chuckle of disbelief to her voice. “Really? I know Bea loved Mam. But Mam didn’t do all that much. I can help in anyway. I’ll watch her after school, feed her ...”

“Are you ... are you insinuating I am thinking about giving up Bea because I can’t handle her alone.”

“Well, isn’t that it?”

“No, that is not it.” Sam said firm. “Like I said, I may not have a choice. Cati, I am in the service.”

“You work long ...”

His hand shot up to silence her.

Cati edged back.

“Can I finish?” He asked. “Mam had custody of Bea, not me. You can not be active duty and be a single parent. That’s the rule. There are exceptions to the rule, and I’m sure I can find it, but in the meantime an immediate solution has to be found.”

“And that would be sending Bean to Utah?”

“Yes.”

“Sam, that’s bullshit. You can’t send Bean away. You can’t. We love her. We need her ...”

“And what am I supposed to do Cati? Huh? Am I supposed to

give up my career?”

“If it means keeping your child.”

Sam laughed. “Right. It doesn’t work that way. Like it or not, the way Bea is now, is the way Bea will be for the rest of her life. And I have to take care of her for the rest of her life. If I have to live without her for a few years, it’ll break my heart, but it is what I have to do. Some of us like not living pay check to pay check. Granted, I could start over, and do just fine, but until I get a foothold, what? Do what? It might surprise you to know that unlike you I don’t feel like getting creative with my meals because I can’t always afford to buy groceries.”

Cati spoke, trying to hide her offense, “Some people do what they need to do.”

“Yes, they do.”

“Sam, Bea is so special to me, like she is my own child. I just think ...”

“It doesn’t matter what you think, Cati. It doesn’t. As much as you claim to care for my daughter, she is not your daughter, and in this situation, your opinion doesn’t count.”

They reacted first. Cati’s lips. Despite her best attempts they twitched with a quiver, and before she showed anymore physical signs of her reaction to his words, she stood up with an ‘excuse me’, grabbed her coat off the chair, said into the kitchen, “Mom, I got to go,” and walked out of the house.

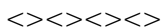
Sam breathed out heavily and lifted his beer bottle. As he went to take a drink, he saw Liz standing in the dining room.

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



“I didn’t intervene in that conversation,” Liz spoke soft and stern. “Because it wasn’t my place. Granted your business is not my daughter’s business, but she has a good heart, and means well. If I ever hear you speak to her like that again, well .... I’ll hit ya’. And trust me; you’ll feel it as much as she just felt those words of yours. Now, if you’ll excuse me. I have carrot cookies baking.” Liz turned and left the room.

Sam took a drink, swallowing not only his beer, but Liz’s words.



She was pretty certain she wasn’t going to return to the Neal home. Even if it meant missing her mother’s meatloaf. Cati was on her second glass of wine when Ralph stopped by to drop her off a plate and say that Ali and Bean were having a slumber party. He told her Sam was fine with it, and Cati just grunted at that.

“Are you drunk?” Ralph asked. “Not good to drink alone.”

“I’m fine. And not drunk. Thanks.”

Third glass of wine, and Cati turned on the television before settling into writing. There was movie on and the first individual to pop on a screen was a soldier. Cati shut it off. Playing around on the internet sounded like a better idea. Lifting her glass and standing, prepared to venture upstairs, a knock came at the door.

Convinced it was Artie she flung open the front door.

It was Sam.

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She took a huge gulp of her wine. “What.”

“I’m ... I ...” Sam sighed out. “Can I come in?”

With a shrug, Cati opened the door wider and stepped aside.

Sam walked in. “Thanks.”

Cati shut the door less than gently. “What’s up?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“Shoot.” Cati said. “No. Wait. You may actually do that to me. Lord knows you have given me no mercy.”

“I know, and that’s why I’m here. Cati ...” Sam took a breath. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I took that stance with you.”

Cati was taking a drink at that second, and paused. “You’re apologizing.”

“Yes.”

“You came over to apologize.”

“Um, yeah.”

“Wow.” Cati walked to the couch and sat down.

“Wow?” Sam asked. “I apologize and I get a ‘wow?’” He sat down next to her.

“What do you expect me to say, Sam? I didn’t deserve that. I didn’t. You pissed me off and ... made me cry. I hate that.” She gulped her wine and immediately poured another glass.

“I’m sorry for that.”

“So you said.”

“I didn’t realize I made you cry.”

“Yeah, well, you could have fooled me. Because I could have sworn that may have been your goal.”

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“It wasn’t. I’m upset and stuck between a rock and a hard place. Can I have some of that?” he pointed to the bottle on the table.

“Be my guest. But I’m not getting you a glass. I was cordial and nice to you once. That’s it. I’m done.”

Sam stood, walked to the kitchen. “As I was saying, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.” He spoke loudly from the kitchen.

“Fuck, Sam, I can’t hear you.”

Sam returned. “Sorry. I was saying. I’m stuck. And the fact that I am not totally in control of the situation. That drives me nuts. I didn’t mean to come down on you; it’s just a tough call on what to do. My options are limited.”

Cati noticed he stared at her. “What? I hope to God you aren’t expecting me to offer advice. I tried that. It failed. You slammed me.”

“And I apologized.”

“Fine. What are your options?” Catie huffed out.

“You’re not drunk, are you? I’d rather not discuss ...”

“No! I’m not drunk. What are your options?”

“One, give her to Gretchen for three years.”

“I’ll assume that’s her mother.”

Sam nodded. “Two, the fact that her mother is alive and well, presents a problem. I have to notify my commander, which he already knows. I could file a family plan with a long term care giver, which is detailed, and has to include all sorts of shit about living



arrangements should I be deployed. It has to be reviewed and approved. Which can mean squat because she has a mother. They are gonna make me exercise that option first. I can leave the service. That's a ..."

"You're rambling."

"I am."

"What about ... what about getting married?" Cati asked.

"I would keep her. But it would have to be within thirty days. And to be honest, my dating track record isn't that great."

"Oh, gees, I wonder why."

Sam chuckled out a. "What? Look who's calling the kettle black, miss 'date-a-rama'."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You. You're so desperate for a date you use the internet."

"I do not!"

"You do too." Sam argued. "Bea told me. She showed me emails. Told me you want men to buy you there."

Cati gasped. "That is so untrue. I do not."

"Saw you."

"Excuse me."

"I went on line and looked you up, because I didn't believe Bea. Sure as hell, there you were Feline 745."

"Then there has to be a mistake. It's not me."

"It is you. Is your computer running?"

"Yes."

"Let's go look." Sam stood up.

“Absolutely, I’ll show you.” Cati led the way to the dining room and to the computer. She loaded the internet. “What the site’s name.”

“I’ll pretend along with you. Date-a-rama. All one word. WWW.”

As soon as Cati started typing it in the address bar, the address completed on its own.

“A ha,” Sam nodded. “Why’s it in your computer.”

“I don’t know.” Cati watched the site pull up.

“Search profiles. Type in feline 745.”

Cati did. The search indicator came on and then popped up a link to that name. Cati clicked on it and screamed.

“See.”

“I did not do this!” Cati said.

“No need to be embarrassed. The site claims over ten thousand people found happiness.”

“I would admit I did this, if I did it. I didn’t. I certainly would use this picture and I ... oh my god! I certainly would start my profile by saying, ‘I have Needs’.”

“Yeah, saw that. I figured that was the line that made you so popular.”

After one more shriek, Cati closed out the site. “Well, I didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“You still want to make sarcastic comments about my dating record? Even with Ali putting you on there, that still says something about ...”



“Whoa. Wait. Why did you just say that?” Cati asked. “Why did you blame Ali?”

“Because Bea told me she did it to find you a man.”

“You knew she did this! Oh my God. And you still played it off as if you thought it was me.”

“It was funny. Besides, the point is, you can not make fun of my track record when your own daughter felt it was so desperate she went to extreme measures to get you a date.”

“My situation is not desperate.”

“Oh, yeah. How long’s it been since you had a date.”

“None of your business.”

“A long time, huh?” Sam joked.

“You know what? Yes. And that is exactly where I was going with it. Had you let me get that information on my own you’d know.”

“What the hell did you just ramble on about?”

“My dating track record,” Cati said. “It’s not good and neither are my prospects. I was getting to that.”

“Went?”

“When I was going to say to you that I love your daughter. I may not like you, but I love your kid. You need a solution. I have a solution. I have no prospects. You have no prospects. I’m nice. You’re not. You have health insurance. I need my sinuses scraped. Screw giving Bean to her mother. It’s only three years. I say let’s get married.”

Sam laughed. He laughed loud and hard.



“What? You think that’s funny. I’m serious,” Cati said.

“I know you’re serious and yes, it is funny. You and me get married? And make it last for three years? Cati we can’t be in the same room for three minutes without arguing. You are way too disorganized and out there for me.”

“And you are way too miserable and serious for me.”

“Exactly. So as much as I appreciate the offer.” Sam shook his head with a chuckle. “It’s out of the question. No way. No how will you and I ever get married.”

## CHAPTER NINE

“Do you suppose it’s too late to claim I was drunk when I made the suggestion?” Cati stood before an oval full length mirror. She stared at her reflection as she wore an off white evening dress. Behind her, appeared Liz.

“Yes.” Liz said, straightening the long dress. Liz, all dolled p and wearing a huge corsage, stood straight and clenched Cati’s shoulder from behind. “Your father and I have been waiting too long to see you get married. You didn’t marry Ali’s father. Understandable. But when you married Carlos, you just ran off. We need this.”

“Mom. Please.”

“Why do you think we worked so hard to get a wedding together so fast. You’re getting old, if we don’t do it now, we won’t see it later.”

“Oh my God.” Cati’s head lifted at the sound of organ music. She ran her hand across her stomach.

“Nervous.”

“Yes.”

“It’ll be fine.” Liz fiddled with Cati’s hair.

“I can’t believe I am standing in a church.”

“You want it to look real, don’t you?”

“We don’t need a wedding and reception to make it look real. We just need a certificate of marriage.”

## A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



“Like with Carlos? See how long that lasted.”

“Mom, this only needs to last three years.”

“You never know,” Liz said. “It could last longer. You don’t need passion to make it work. Look at me and your father.”

Cati laughed.

“You look beautiful, Cat.”

Cati faced the mirror again. “I do look good today.”

“It’s gonna be fun.”

A knock at the door brought the preacher’s wife. “We’re ready when you are.”

When she left, Liz darted a kiss to Cat. “I’ll see you out there. I’ll go get your father.”

“For what?” Cat asked.

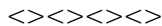
“To walk you down the aisle.”

“Mom, I don’t want to walk down the aisle.”

“You have to walk down the aisle.” Liz moved to the door. “And your father has been waiting for this day. He’ll walk you.” Liz opened the door and stepped out.

“Fuck.”

“Language.”



When Liz asked Cat, “Can I plan your wedding?”

Cat simply replied, “Absolutely, I’ll get the dress you tell me where and when to be.”

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And that was how it went.

Cati didn't pay any attention to the plans. She knew Reverend Barnes was marrying them, and that they're be a dinner following.

She had no idea how extreme Liz went in such short time. When she stepped into the church, her wanting to apologize to Sam went out the window when she saw how many people were on his side of the church.

"Dad?" Cati whispered in their walk up the aisle. "Why are all these people here?"

"They were invited."

"Oh my God. Did Sam know?"

"You're marrying him, didn't he tell you about the list he gave your mother."

Cat stopped walking. "He gave her a list?"

The organist struck a hard chord.

"Keep moving." Ralph smiled and escorted his daughter. "Your mother told him to give her a list of fifty people. He did."

"Why wasn't I allowed?"

"You didn't want a part."

They arrived at the sanctuary. Cati stepped up to Sam who wore his dress blues.

"Wow," she said. "You look really cool."

"Thanks, so do you."

"My breast look big."

Reverend Barnes cleared his throat.

Cati hunched. "Sorry."

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The reverend went through his opening prayer and statement, gathering all together and finishing with, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man.”

Ralph stated, “More than you realize, I do.” He looked at Sam. “Take her.”

Cati choked out a laugh, which was buried beneath the laughter in the church.

The ceremony was simple and short, and actually very nice. Liz cried through the entire thing, while Ralph kept huffing in irritation, and shaking his head.

No one really expected when Rev. Barnes announced, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride.”

For Sam to say, “Since this is the ultimate partnership, we prefer to shake hands.”

“What ever floats your boat,” said Rev. Barnes as Cati and Sam gripped hands in a firm shake.

Somewhere in it all, the fact that it was a marriage of convenience partially escaped them both. They got caught up in the reception, the music, the booze, and played the part of the spotlight couple well. Even though they rarely were together.

A chemical reaction occurred in both Sam and Cati when they consumed large amounts of alcohol. They became friendly, upbeat, and fun people. Laughing a lot.

Cati liked that side of Sam and actually contemplated keeping him drunk the entire three years they were married.

Little did she know, Sam was thinking the same thing?



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There weren't a ton of gifts, but too many for a car. When Ralph asked if he could use Sam's truck, Sam said no problem. Ralph left a tad early to handle the gifts, but didn't return, leaving Cati and Sam to walk.

It wasn't far; the reception was in town, a good six blocks. The weather was mild, but the card box, designed like a big church, was awkward to carry.

The staggered a bit in their walk and talked loudly, laughing about some of the guests at the reception. It was their echoing voices that caused attention, and a squad car pulled over. The officer inside was going to cite them for public intoxication until he realized they just got married. To which, he drove them home to Cati's.

Sam's truck was parked in the driveway. When they stumbled through the front door they were surprised that Ralph wasn't there.

Sam put the car box on the table. "Can we open them tomorrow?"

"Are you tired?" Cati asked,

"No, I'm drunk," he walked to the dining room. "And I want to do the thank you cards as we open them. Whoa."

"What?" Cati joined him in the dining room. The gifts were on the table along with a bucket of champagne.

"Are you sure your parents know this isn't a real marriage?"

"I told them. Trust me."

"Want some?" Sam asked.

"Why not."



“I can’t believe people bought us stuff.”

“I can’t think of anything I need.”

Sam chuckled. “Cati, you need everything.”

“I have stuff.”

“It’s old.”

“It works.”

Sam paused before lifting the champagne bottle and fiddled with his ring. “It’ll take some getting used to.”

“Never wore one?”

“Never wore one. Looks good.” Sam held out his hand, and then grabbed the bottle. “How about you?”

“I did for a short span when I was married to Carlos. But that didn’t last long and when we broke up I hocked it for grocery money.”

Sam laughed at the same time he popped the cork on the bottle. He grabbed the awaiting glasses and poured. “Why didn’t you marry Ali’s dad?”

She thanked him when he handed her the glass then answered, “I was young. And I knew it wouldn’t work. How about you? Why didn’t you marry Bean’s mom?”

“I was young. Same reasons. She wasn’t the marrying type. In the service, it takes a special kind of woman to handle being a military wife.”

“Am I?” Cati asked as she sipped.

“I think you’re gonna give new meaning to being a military wife.” He clanked his glass to hers. “Where are the girls?”



“My mom has them.” Cati replied.

“Gees. You’re parents either want this to be real, or are loving the fact that we are forced to be alone.”

“Anything that tortures me.”

“Oh, come on. Am I being torturous?”

“No, you’re drunk. You’re actually being human,” Cati said.

He pointed his glass as he spoke. “Your breast actually do look large in that dress.”

“It’s deceiving.”

Without warning, Sam reached forward, pulled out the top of her dress some and peeked. “Yep. You’re right.”

“Uh!” Cati stepped back. “I can’t believe you just looked at my breasts.”

“Oh, stop it, I’m allowed.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you think because you’re my husband you’re allowed to see my breasts?”

Sam raised his eyebrows a few times.

After a silent pause, Cati laughed. “That sounded funny.”

Sam set down his glass on the table. “It was a really nice time tonight. Your parents went above and beyond. And for hits.”

“I guess they figured this is lasting three years which is longer than my one and only marriage.”

“You looked ...” Before he finished, Sam cleared his throat. “OK. So. What do you want to do? It’s still early. We’re drunk. Both in a great mood.”

“Are you asking of we’re going to have sex?”

“What! No!” Sam barked out. “Why would I say that?”

“You didn’t think it?”

“No.” Sam paused. “Did you?”

“Ok, don’t think I’m strange, but there were a few times tonight I got caught up in the moment. I’d look over at you. You looked so good. I just ...” Cati bit her lip.

“Yeah, me, too. I was doing the same.”

“And it’s not real. It just seemed very real tonight.”

“Kind of strange for two people who barely know each other.”

“Let’s change that. Let’s do that, Sam.” Cati said brightly.

“What fool around?”

“No. No. Well ... no.” She shook her head. “Get to know each other tonight. We’re gonna be living together, raising the girls together ...”

“Stop. Raising the girls together?”

“Is that wrong thing to say?” Cati asked.

“No, I just assumed that you really wouldn’t want me to be a part of Ali’s life.”

“We’re all gonna be living under the same roof, that’ll be impossible.”

“True.” Sam lifted his champagne and finished it off. “I think that’s a great idea. Let’s do it. Kick back and ... and talk.”

“An original idea for a wedding night. Hey, we’re the couple that shook hands.”

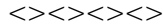
“That we are.”

“Let’s go.” Cati, holding her glass, reached out and grabbed his

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hand, and led him to the living room.



Somewhere around two in the morning, after hours of discussing childhood stories, teenage angst and adult horror tales, Cati fell asleep.

She yawned a few times. Made the announcement that she was sleepy, then slid to her side, placed her head on Sam's lap and fell fast asleep.

Sam did want to move. He sunk into thought about the day, and events that led them there. The years ahead and how difficult it was going to be. Even though they tried to get to know each other, the truth was, Sam and Cati didn't. Unlike most couple that got married they didn't have the basics.

Maybe that was actually a bonus.

He found himself pulling out the hair pins so she wouldn't poke herself while she slept. Once they were all out, he ran his finger through her twisted hair, straightening it.

After a short time of just sitting there with Cati on his lap, Sam knew it was time for bed. He lifted her head and slid out from under her. As she stood, he realized he couldn't just leave her there. He had two choices and opted for the latter. He scooped his arms under Cati, and lifted her. Her dress draped over his arms and as soon as he adjusted her, her head fell into his chest, and Sam carried her up the stairs.



Her bedroom was easy to find, and Sam too her in there laying her down. She immediately rolled to her side and Sam grabbed the quilt from the bottom of the bed and covered her.

Her hair fell in her face and Sam cleared it. Hand reaching down to her face, he paused and leaned closer. “Night, Cati. Thank you.” He brought his lips to her cheek, hesitated, then pulled back. Trailing his fingers down her face, Sam stepped away from the bed and to the door. As he reached it, he heard the soft, all of his name.

“Sam,” she whispered.

He turned around, and Cati snuggled with a slight moan. She was still sleeping. After one more look, he stepped from the room and pulled the door closed.

## CHAPTER TEN

Cati awoke with a start and a humongous headache. She was still wearing her wedding outfit, and couldn't for the life of her figure out how her hair got out of the pins. She searched the bed and couldn't find a single one. She didn't recall taking them out.

The it dawned on her. She didn't recall even going to bed.

All she knew was at that moment, she was feeling pretty awful. Grabbing some fresh clothes she headed for the shower.

It was odd not having Ali home on a Sunday morning. Cati was used to the church routine. Wake up, get Ali up, and have her ready for when Liz and Ralph showed up to get Ali for services.

There was just an entirely new feel to the day. Aside from her head—which was starting to feel better—everything else, including the shiny gold band on her left hand, was a fast reminder she was married.

Married to a man she started to get to know, but fell asleep.

While she brushed her teeth she thought about it. While she towel dried her hair, and combed through that ... she thought about it. As if her mind was a tape recorder, Cati was rewinding and playing Sam's conversation.

He laid claim that he was much more sensitive than he let on. That his 'matter of fact' approach was just left overs from his job, and as she got to see him outside of that, then she would see a

different Sam.

They compared themselves, and oddly enough they had a lot of the same interests. Where they differed was emotionally. Cati was always one to freely give out her emotions, not hold back in the name of love or relationships, where Sam he was blunt about the fact that the only female to ever get his heart was his daughter. He didn't foresee that ever changing, because Bea took it all.

When Cati suggested it was a defense mechanism, a way for him not to get hurt.

Sam was blunt again with a simply one word answer of, "probably".

Cati didn't recall, exactly what point she said she was tired, or who was talking. She knew the subject was dogs.

Everything else faded like a blur. Did she rudely just stand up and go to bed. Or did she pass out on the couch. If that was the case, then she pulled a pretty good sleep walking stint, one that included taking down her hair.

"You didn't bore me," Cati said as she entered the kitchen.

"What's that?" Sam asked as he stood by the stove.

"I fell asleep. It wasn't because you bored me."

"Oh, I know. You were tired, had too much to drink. How do you want your eggs?"

"I don't have eggs."

"I went to the store."

"Oh. Cool. In that case. Anyway you feel like making them."

"In that case ..." he handed her a plate.



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“Oh, look at this.”

“They’re eggs.”

“But they look so good.” She brought her nose closer to the plate.

“Eat them.”

“I will.” She grabbed a fork. “How did I get to bed last night?”

“I carried you,” Sam stated matter of fact.

“Really? Thanks. Did you also take down my hair?”

“Yes, the pins were jabbing into my leg.”

“Excuse me?”

“You fell asleep on my lap.”

Cati was taken aback by that, maybe even slightly embarrassed.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? Go sit down. Eat. You have lots of work to do today.”

“I do?”

“Uh ... yeah. You do. So do I.”

“Like what?” Cati asked and walked to the dining room.

“Like this.” He set the card box, shaped like the church on the table. “I got the rest of me and Bea’s stuff to pack up. I’ll get the gifts. You get started on these.”

“I can do that. I like money.”

“I bet.”

Cati looked up to him.

“And ...” He slid a bag to her. “Thank you cards.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

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“There are a ton more cards than gifts. You’re getting off the hook here.”

“If you aren’t done when I get back, I’ll help.”

“OK.” Cati nodded.

“But ... It’ll be easier if you write them out as you open each card.”

“But it will take forever to do it that way.”

“Cati, if it takes you two hours to write out thank you notes. What difference does it make if you do it a minute at a time, or all at once?”

“I’m not talking about the cards,” Cati said. “I’m talking about it’ll take forever to find out the money total.”

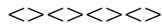
“Do it the way you want, this is just my suggestion.”

“Ok.”

“You’re gonna open all the cards first and save the thank you cards so I can help. Aren’t you?”

Cati looked up and smiled.

Sam turned and went back to the kitchen.



Bubby’s Hardware and Hobby shop was convenient all the way around. It was located center town of Wadsworth, it was open on Sunday, it wasn’t expensive and it was a place to get a birthday gift for Ralph.

Liz gave Ali twenty dollars so she and Bean could shop for

Ralph, and he dropped them off in town after church and told them if they needed a ride to just call.

They had no intention of asking for a ride, after all, he'd know they shopped for him.

It was the first time Bean had been in the hobby hardware store, and she overflowed with enthusiasm.

"Look at all this stuff, Ali-Ali- in free."

"I know, Bean."

"What kind of present are we getting Mr. Olsen? Oh!" Bean said brightly. "Ali-Ali in free. He's my grandfather now. Isn't he? Isn't he my grandfather now?"

"Yes, he is." Ali led the way through the aisles.

"My very own Pap Oh boy." Bean gushed. "Oh, Ali, do you think he will let me call him Pap?"

"I know he will Bean."

"Oh, then I'm gonna start calling him that right away. Pap." She stated. "Pap."

"And you can call grandma, grandma. Look what do you think about this." She held up a flashlight key chain.

"Oh my God!" Bean covered her mouth as she gasped.

"Bean it's not that bad or great."

"No, Ali-Ali in free." Bean giggled. "I didn't think of that. Grandma. Grandma fudge."

"Huh?" Ali turned around.

"Fudge." Bean pointed across the store. "She's with the boy who stole my hat."

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Ali shook her head. “Then we’ll keep our distance.”

“He’s not a very nice boy, is he?” Bean asked.

“Not at all.”

“Why is he here in the Bubby Booby Hobby-Hobby Hardware shop?”

Ali laughed. “Why did you call it that?”

“It’s much better, don’t you think.”

“I do.”

“So why are they here?”

“Probably to shop. And this will work. Let’s pay and go.” Ali nudged Bean to move it along; she waved out of courtesy to Fudge and Kevin, then went to the register and paid for her item.

Ali explained to Bean how really cool the gift was in more than one way. They walked down the main street. It was just a plain cool gift, it was small, pap would like it, and it was cheap enough to give them change so they could hit the diner for French fries.

Bean liked that idea; she had never been to the diner either.

“And ...” Bean rambled as they entered the diner. “You’re my sister Ali-Ali in free”

“And your mine, Bean Bag.”

“Oh, Ali.” Bean hugged her. “I have a sister.”

“Thanks,” Ali chuckled.

A waitress approached them. “You girls eating here?”

“Yes,” Ali answered.

“This is my sister.” Bean boasted. “My sister Ali-Ali in free.”

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The waitress smiled. “That’s nice. You can take a booth.”

“We get to take a booth, sister,” Bean said. “Let’s take a booth.”

“Bean, you are way too excited.”

They sat in the booth across from one another.

“I can’t help it Ali. I have a family. I have a Pap and a grandma, and a sister and ....” Loud, very loud, Bean screamed out. “Oh my god!”

Ali hunched. “Bean shh.” Especially when everyone looked.

Bean hurried and covered her mouth squishing her face. “Oh my God.”

“What is it?”

“I have a mother now.” Bean grinned from ear to ear, extended her arms and proudly cried out, “I have a mother now!”

“Bean. Quiet.”

“Sorry.”

“But, yes, you do.”

“You know what that means, right?”

“No Bean, what’s that mean.”

“You have a daddy. My daddy is your daddy. Isn’t that great Ali-Ali in free? Isn’t that perfect. I never had a mother. You never had a dad. Now we do. Oh, Ali, you can call him Daddy.”

Ali chuckled with a shake of her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Yes, Ali-Ali in free. You can. He won’t mind.”

“I know he won’t mind, Bean, I just am not gonna do it.”

“Why?” Bean asked.



“I don’t know.”

“You have to.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Call him Daddy.”

“No,” Ali was firm.

“Dad?”

“No.”

“Please. Please. Please ...”

“All right I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you. He will like that. I bet he always wanted another daughter. Oh! Ali! We can tell people we’re twins. Can we do that?”

“Sure, Bean.”

“My twin sister, Ali-Ali in free.” Bean turned her head when she saw Fudge and Kevin approach the table. “Company.”

Ali looked.

Fudge arrived first. “Hey ... Al. How come you didn’t wait for us?”

“We were hungry.”

“So are we.” Fudge slid in next to Ali.

Bean gushed. “This is my twin sister, Ali.”

Kevin replied “I can see the resemblance.” He said as he slid in the booth next to Bean. “I guess one of you got al the intelligence, huh?”

“Hey!” Ali shouted. “That’s not right. Go away.”

“I’m joking.” Kevin said and grabbed Bean’s coat which she still wore. “Nice jacket.”

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Bean, unaware that he was poking fun, smiled. "Thank you."

Ali grimaced in her tone. "I mean it. Leave. Ok, it's not cool and I'm getting really pissed right now that you ..."

"Afternoon kids," The male voice intruded first and then he stepped to the table. Sheriff Nichols.

Bean perked up. "Hi, Sheriff."

He nodded. "You four kids been at the Hobby hardware store this morning?"

Bean answered. "Yes, we were all there."

"That's what I heard. Bub said he saw you all there, and that all four of you were the first and only customers he had in the store today. That's why he's sure."

"Sure of what?" Kevin asked.

"Mr. Williams called and asked if blue fin Norma Lure he ordered was in. Bub was planning on leaving so he set it on the counter to Mary wouldn't have to look for it. Sure enough, after the store was empty, it was gone. You four didn't see the blue fin Norman Lure, did you?"

Ali shook her head.

Bean shook her head; too "We bought a flashlight."

Sheriff Nichols nodded. "Here's the deal. He's pretty damn sure one of you four lifted that Lure. Next to positive. He just wants it back. Me, I'm not that nice. How about you four emptying your pockets."

"How about not?" Ali snapped. "Not that I have anything to hide, but this can be considered an unlawful search and seizure,

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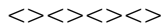
which is in violation of our civil rights.”

“I’m not searching you. But, while you’re tossing out rights, young lady, why don’t you educate yourself on the Ohio Stop and Frisk law, a direct result of Terry Vs Ohio, 1968. Which states, an officer of the law ... me. If he has reasonable belief a crime has been committed... I do. To stop our show his authority... I am... to the suspect ... you and has the right to frisk the individuals. Which... I have not done nor plan to do if you empty your pockets.”

Ali was getting ready to argue again, when she saw Fudge, Kevin and Bean complying. Giving up she reached in her own pockets when the sheriff called out, “Stop.”

Ali looked up.

Sheriff Nichol’s had Bean’s wrist, and sure enough, in her hand was the Blue Fin Norma Fishing Lure.



Sam had brought in a load of clothes from the truck, and sought out Cati to see if she would give him a hand. Not that he expected her to, but he thought he’d at least try.

He heard the water running in the kitchen, and as he walked through the dining room, his foot hit it a pile of empty envelopes.

His eyes scanned.

Table. Church box. Stack of cards ....envelopes on the floor.  
“Cati?”



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Cati came from the kitchen drying her hands. “Oh! You’re home.” She said excitedly.

“Did you get all the thank you cards done?” Sam nodded. “I’m impressed.”

“Huh? No. No. Gees. But I opened all the cards.”

“Cati, you’re supposed to do the thank you cards as you open your cards.”

She waved out her hand. “Sam that’s dumb. You aren’t gonna believe it.”

“Dumb?”

“Yes. Dumb. Guess what?”

“Ok, Cati, I give. What?”

“We made three thousand seven hundred, twelve dollars and thirteen cents.” She nodded proudly.

“We made that much? How?”

“From our wedding cards.”

“How in the world was there thirteen cents.”

Cati giggled. “Artie. He is so funny. He wrote out a check for twelve dollars and thirteen cents.” She saw Sam just staring. “Get it. Twelve thirteen. Our wedding.”

“Ah, where is it?”

“Here.” Cati handed him the envelope.

“Thanks.” Sam turned.

“Wait. Whoa! What are you doing?”

“Taking this to your parents.”

“For what?” Cati asked.

“To give them this money.”

“Why?”

“Cati, you can’t possibly with a clear conscious want to take this money when your parents put out for our wedding.”

“Yes, yes, I can.” Cati said. “No problem.”

“Well, I can’t.”

“Well then give them your half of the money and I’ll keep mine.”

“It doesn’t work that way.”

Cati scoffed. “Bullshit it doesn’t. You can do what you want with your half of the money.”

“Our.” Sam corrected.

“No, your half. My half.”

“That’s not what you said a minute ago.”

“What are you talking about?” Cati asked.

“When I came in you said, ‘we’, ‘we’ made three thousand dollars’. You used the word, ‘We’ Cati. Meaning ours. Meaning together this money goes to your parents.”

“No, Sam. No.”

“Why do you insist ...” Sam stopped talking when his phone rang. “Excuse me.” He lifted his phone.

“Thank God.” Cati reached out and snatched the envelope from his hands.

“Hey!” Sam bit his bottom lip, and then answered the phone. After his cordial hello, he drew up a quirky look. “Who is this again?” his eyes shifted to Cati. “OK, be right there.”

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“What’s wrong?” Cati asked.

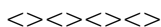
“Get your coat.”

“Where are we going?”

“To the police station.” Sam put his phone away. “Seems our daughters were arrested for shop lifting.”

“There has to be some mistake. That can’t be right. The girls don’t steal.”

“Well ...” Sam handed Cati her coat. “That’s what the sheriff said, and we have to head down there.” He was still wearing his jacket, so Sam was ready to go. After pulling out his keys, he opened the door.



Ali sat in the chair at the police station. He nose was red, lips big, and eyes puffy. It was obvious that she was crying or at least had been.

Cati was at the counter, waiting on Sam who had gone to the back. She wasn’t getting anything out of Ali, and was trying her best to get something out of Sheriff Nichols.

“Are you blowing me off?” she asked him.

“No, I am not blowing you off. The matter is done. Resolved. Bub is not pressing charges. A stern warning.”

“That’s nice he is not pressing charges,” Cati argued. “But what about the principal of it.”

“What principal of it? What’s the principle?” Nichols asked.

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“You know, Fudge and Kevin were there. Kevin Anderson. Come on sheriff he’s bad news and you know it. He could have put that lure in Bean’s pocket. Anything. I don’t buy it for one second.” Her eyes lifted to Sam who came from the back room.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked, as he pointed to a chair for Bean to sit.

Bean sat next to Ali.

Cati said, “I was just trying to make Sheriff Nichol’s see that even though Bub is not pressing charges, there has to be a mistake. I mean, Kevin was ...” she stopped when Sam shook shi head. “What?”

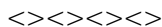
“Be grateful that Bub isn’t pressing charges.”

“Sam, this is ridiculous.”

“No, Cati, you’re being ridiculous.”

“Excuse me?” She said offended.

“You heard me. Drop it. No need to continue.” Sam looked at his daughter then back to Cati. “Bean confessed to doing it.”



The car wasn’t the place to discuss it. Besides, the ride home was short and by the time they got into anything they would have been home.

Ali and Bean were quiet. Not saying a word. Cati was still fuming about Sam calling her ridiculous.

On the first day of being a family, not even one by want, they

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were being put to a test.

Sam entered the home last. He watched as Bean just seemed oblivious to everything that had happened, and grabbed the remote control, heading to the couch. “Just a second.” He took the remote. “You and I have to talk.”

“Can we talk after the ...”

“No.” Sam was firm. “I’m mad Bea, really mad about this. Do you know what you did?”

“Yes.” Bean nodded. “I do.”

“I know you know it was wrong.”

“OK.” Bean walked back to the couch.

“Bea.” Sam was even more firm. “I’m not joking.”

“I know, Daddy. Oh! Daddy, Ali-Ali in free’s gonna call you Daddy isn’t that great.”

Sam ran his hand down his face in frustration.

Cati leaned into him. “Maybe you should ...”

Sam shook his head. “Bea. You know what? This was wrong. What you did was wrong. I can’t let this go.”

“Bub did.” Bean said.

“I know he did, but I won’t. So ... I’m afraid I’m gonna have to tell Artie you’re out of the play.”

Cati stepped forward. “What?”

Ali stood up. “No.”

“Daddy, no. I worked really hard. Daddy I’m the star.” Bean argued.

“Stars shine. You think you’re shining very brightly over this?”

Sam asked her. “No go to your room. Now.”

Bea walked to the stairs, took a step and stopped. “I don’t have a room yet.”

“Find one.”

“Which one?” Bean asked.

“I don’t care. Any one.”

“Daddy.”

“Bea. Go. Now!” he barked.

Cati snapped. “Sam.”

“Don’t.” he turned sharp to her. “Stay out of this.”

Cati held up her hands and stepped back. “I give up.”

Ali walked to Sam. “You can’t do this.”

“Do what?” Sam asked. “Punish her?”

“Yeah, Sam, you can’t.” Ali argued. “It’s wrong.”

“And you don’t think what she did was wrong?”

“She didn’t do anything.” Ali said. “I’ve been trying to speak all morning. No one will listen. The sheriff didn’t listen. I haven’t been able to speak. Well I am now. Don’t punish Bean. She didn’t do anything wrong. I did. I stole the lure. Not her. OK?”

Sam shook his head in disbelief. “Ali don’t try to cover for ...”

“I’m not. I took it. I put it in her picket. I wanted us to have money for the diner and have something nice for Pap. I took it. Not Bean. So now you can tell her she can be in the play.”

Sam shook his head. “Nope. Because she knew you took it and lied. Sorry.” Sam widened his eyes and looked at Cati. “Your kid. Your problem. Your turn. Deal with it. I got shit to get form the

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house.” In a hard turn, with an air of anger, Sam left the house.

The door slammed.

Cati jolted.

“Sorry, mom.” Ali said.

Folding her arms, Cati tilted her head. “Did you take the lure, Ali? Be straight with me.”

“Yeah, I ...”

“Ali, pap doesn’t fish.”

Ali sighed out. “No.”

“OK. I’m not gonna say anything more. You really wanna take the blame?”

Ali nodded. “I have to Mom. But it doesn’t seem to make a difference. He said she can’t be in the play.”

“I’ll have Artie talk to him,” Cati said with a wink.

“Thanks.”

“Ali, why would Bean steal the lure? Do you really think she did?”

Ali shrugged. “She said she did. I don’t know. Maybe she just didn’t know it was wrong.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m gonna go talk to her, if that’s OK. We’ll get our room all set up.”

Cati nodded. “Go on.”

“Thanks.” Ali darted a kiss to her cheek and ran up the stairs.

Cati took off her coat and brought it to the closet. As she went to hang it up, she saw the envelope in the pocket. After hanging

the coat, with a smile, she removed the envelope, grinned at the money, and before Sam returned, she decided to hide it.

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Ali heard the sniffles, muffled sounds of tears and she followed them to her bedroom. The door was slightly open and Ali walked in. “Hey, Bean.”

Bean was lying on the floor, on her stomach; she rolled over and wiped her eyes. “I don’t have a bed to lie on yet. The one in the small room isn’t made yet.”

“We’ll have to move that in here,” Ali said and sat on the floor with her.

“That’s not my room?” Bean asked.

“No, it’s your dad’s.”

Bean sat up. “Why is Daddy sleeping in a different room? I watch TV, Ali-Ali in free. He’s supposed to sleep with our mom.”

Ali choked a laugh. “Don’t think my mom would like that.”

“Doesn’t she want to be like the families on TV?”

“Oh, sure she does, Bean. But no one is like that. That’s TV. In real life the don’t sleep in the same room. Is that why you’re crying, Bean? Because you don’t have a bed.”

Bean shook her head. “I’m not gonna be in the play.”

“Sure, you are. Your dad will change his mind. I’m sure of it.”

Bean kept shaking her head. “I am in so much trouble.”

“Bean ... did you really take the lure?” Ali asked. ‘I’m not





gonna be mad at you if you did. I just don't understand why you did it."

"I didn't take it. It was in my pocket."

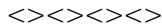
"Then why'd you tell the Sheriff you took it?"

"Because, Ali-Ali in free. I don't know how it got in my pocket. Maybe I took it by accident and didn't know."

"It didn't get in your pocket by accident, Bean."

"Then how?" Bean asked. "If it wasn't an accident, how?"

Ali grumbled out. "Kevin."



There wasn't much snow left, mounds here and there, but there was enough on the ground right where she stood. Chunky snow, near ice. Enough for Ali to make a fist size ice ball and power wail it at Kevin the second she saw him on the street. It nailed him in the face.

"Asshole!" Ali yelled and then charged at him.

"What the fuck was that for?" Kevin rubbed his face.

With both hands Ali slammed right into him. "You put that lure in Bean's pocket."

"Yeah so."

Ali shoved him again. "Asshole."

"Hey! Quit pushing me."

"I'll push you. I can't believe you did that. She got blamed you know!" Ali yelled.

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“Can I help it she’s so much of a tin kid she took the blame.”

Nailed. Ali revved back her fist and slammed it into his gut. To bad he was wearing his coat or it would have impacted him more. As she went to hit him again, in defense he pushed Ali back. She landed in a mound of snow.

Kevin laughed. “Can’t believe you hit me.” Using his foot he lofted a hunk of icy snow on her.

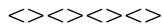
Ali slid when she tried to get up.

He kicked more snow, laughing.

A honk of a car horn caught both of their attention.

Ali peered up.

The car window went down and Sam, stern, called out. “Get in the car.”



“I don’t know, Bean.” Cati tied the hat on Bean’s head. “We’ll go looking for her.”

“Are you worried, Cati corner?”

“We’ll find her.”

“Are we gonna be late?” Bean asked.

“We might be. But that’s OK.” Cati zippered Bean’s coat all the way up. “As soon as I get on my ...”

The front door opened and Ali stormed in. Sam right behind her.

Cati turned. “Ali, where were you?”

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Sam answered. "I'll tell you where she was. Hanging out with that Kevin."

Bean grew excited, clapping her mitten hands. "Did you do it, Ali-Ali in free? Did you fix it? Oh, Daddy, I'm gonna be in the play, Ali-Ali in free fixed it."

Sam shook his. "What are you talking about?"

Ali spun hard to him. "If you would listen to me! I was trying to help Bean. She didn't take the lure. Kevin put it in her pocket."

"So that's the story, now." Sam said. "You tell me you took it, and then Kevin took it. What am I supposed to believe?"

Ali replied, "Doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe your daughter didn't steal that lure."

Cati stepped in. "OK. Enough. Ali. We have to go."

Bean jumped up and down. "Daddy, we're going. Am I going to be in the play in two days? Huh?"

"Wait." Sam held up his hand. "Where are you taking my daughter? She's punished."

"I'm taking her with me," Cat said. "It's important and any punishment doesn't count on this one."

Sam squeaked out a 'what'. "We aren't married one day and you're superseding my punishment."

"That's right." Cat put on her coat. "It's my father's birthday. We have dinner and decorating the tree."

"Oh!" Bean called out. "Cati when do we get our tree. Will we decorate it too?"

Ali answered. "No, Bean. Santa brings our tree. When we wake

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up Christmas morning, it's here from Santa."

"Oh my god!" Bean screeched. "We're special> Santa brings out tree!" Excitedly she turned her body back and forth. "Oh, what great year! Oh my God!"

"Bea!" Sam shouted. "Enough."

"Sam!" Cati yelled. "Leave her alone."

"Don't tell me to ..."

"I'll tell you anything right now." Cati said firm. "Girls. In the car. Sam will you be there?"

"I don't know." Sam shook his head.

Cati opened up the door. "Girls."

Bean gave a Sam a hug. "What about the play, Daddy? I can tell Artie I can be in the play, right?"

Cati answered nudging Bean out the door. "Yes, Bean, you're in the play."

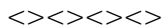
"Oh my God, I'm back in the play!" Bean ran out the door. "Come on, Ali-Ali in free! It's Pap's birthday!"

Cati was the last one out. She was just about to leave when Sam said, "You mind telling me what that was all about?"

"Sure." Cati shrugged. "You're daughter is back in the play. She's pretty excited about Christmas. She didn't steal the lure. Her father is a dick. Anything else?"

Sam just stared.

"Didn't think so." Cati walked out with a slam to the door.



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It had been a long standing tradition with the Olsen's. Actually, since Cati was a child. No matter what day it fell on, Ralph's birthday was the kick off. Even late in the month of December.

They'd make ornaments, have dinner, sing happy birthday, and then decorate the tree.

A tradition never varied or broken.

Except with the emergence of the carrot cookie.

Liz thought it would be a great idea to make the carrot cookies in different shapes. She used less sugar, so that the cookies were extra hard. They painted them and glue on the hooks.

Bean was so excited. On every cookie she decorated, she placed a name.

"This is great!" Ralph boasted as he held up the flashlight. "Thanks, girls."

Bean darted a kiss to his cheek. "We had fun shopping. It caused us to get arrested. I didn't steal the lure."

"I know you didn't," Ralph said.

"Ali-Ali in free went after Kevin," Bean nodded. "Said she was going to beat him up."

"Is that what she said?" Ralph asked.

"Yep." Bean said proudly. "Told me she was going to make him pee blood."

Cati coughed and shifted her eyes to Sam who didn't look too thrilled. "Ok! Wow. I love the gift. Great choice girls. Sam have a drink." She pushed the bottle of wine to him.

Bean continued, "Can we decorate the tree now? Oh! Pap, I

can call you Pap, right?”

“That’s right Bean.”

Bean looked at Liz. “And I can call you grandma.”

Liz winked. “Yes, you can.”

“Ali-Ali in free is gonna call my Daddy, Daddy. Right Ali.”

Ali only peered up from her ice cream.

“Right Ali-Ali in free.”

“Bean, I told you I’d think about it.”

Bean giggled. “Oh! The most important.” She turned to Cati.

“I never had a mommy. Can I call you Mommy, Cati corner?”

Cati smiled and spoke peacefully. “Oh, Bean. Of ...”

“No.” Sam interjected.

All eyes went to him.

“Sam?” Cati questioned. “Why?”

“Because it’s not a good idea.” He turned to Bean. “It’s not a good idea, Bea. I just don’t think you should. No.”

“But Daddy, Cati corner wants to be my mommy.”

“Wanting to be your Mommy and being your mommy are two different things.”

Ralph saw it. The pucker on Bean’s face the growing confrontational look on Cati’s. He gave a clap to his hands and stood. “Let’s do that tree. Come on, girls. Liz.”

“Good idea.” Liz stood and pushed in her chair. “Cati.”

“In a minute.” She stayed focused on Sam.

The second everyone left the room, Sam, tired of the stare down snapped, “What.”

“What the fuck, Sam. Why do you have to be such an asshole sometimes?”

“Why am I an asshole?” Sam asked.

“She wants to call me mom.”

“Yeah, so and I told her no.”

“Why?”

Sam arrogantly chuckled. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Um, no, so why don’t you explain.”

“Cati. The girls spent her life without a mother. I’m not giving her a temporary one.”

“How am I temporary?” Cati asked.

“Hello. This marriage isn’t real.”

A shriek of shock. But it came from Bean.

Sam turned around.

“I saw you get married!” Bean said. “I saw it. How come it’s not real? Is it because you won’t share a room? Don’t you love Cati? Is that why she can’t be my mom. Daddy, it has to be real. Didn’t you get her on date-a-rama?”

Sam slightly tilted his head with a close mouth smile. “Don’t worry Bean. It’s real. I was just saying it wasn’t real because it’s so new. It doesn’t feel real. And you’re right. I did buy her off a date-a-rama. She’s mine.”

“Is that why I can’t call her Mommy because you bought her?”

“Yep,” Sam said as he stood. “I own her. She’s all mine. That’s why. Now let’s go decorate that tree.”

Bean giggled as she grabbed Sam’s hand. “Daddy, you have to

learn to share.”

“Some day I might.” Sam looked back at Cati. “You coming?”

“I’m just gonna hang back for a second and take in the glory of being your new major purchase.”

“You do that.” Sam nodded and walked out.

The second Cati whispered out, “Asshole.” Sam darted in a stern look then retreated to the living room.

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There were papers encircling Sam as he sat in the living room floor with his lap top. That didn’t bother Cati. She was far too engrossed in enjoying the latte she made with the cool cappuccino machine she got as a wedding present.

She bragged about the perfect foam to Artie and moaned in delight at the taste.

After gloating, she continued to read him the story she wrote. She paced, read, talked, read some more. Caught the annoyed glance at Sam. Then when she had enough of feeling like she was intruding in her own living room, she walked up stairs.

She continued in her conversation, reading her words out loud, phone wedged between her shoulders and ear. Cati reached her room, turned on the light, stepped inside and was just about to read a really cool paragraph and ... BAM

Her feet caught something, her body spun, and down to the floor she went.



First she cried out from the fall. Then she cried out from the vision she took in around her.

“Let me call you back, Artie.” She hung up just as Sam burst in the room.

“You OK?” he asked.

“No, I’m not. I fell.”

He held out his hand to her, helping Cati to her feet. “Are you hurt?”

“Confused.”

“Why?”

“What is all this stuff?”

“My stuff,” Sam said.

“Why is it in my room?”

“Our room.”

“My room.”

“No, Cati, our room,” Sam corrected.

“No, Sam, you’re room is down the hall.”

“That would be Bea’s room.”

Cati laughed. “I think you’re confused. When did this become our room? When you bought me?”

“Yes.”

“Uh!”

“Cati. I hate when you do that.”

“And ask me if I care,” Cati said. “When did you decide this is our room?”

“When Bea made a comment about it.”

“Well, tell her something else. You can’t share a room with me.”

“Yes, I can.”

“And where are you sleeping?” Cati asked.

“Here.”

“No. Where am I sleeping?”

“Here.”

“Yeah, right.” Cati chuckled. “I don’t think so. I am not sharing a bed with you.”

“You don’t go to bed until five. I get up at five to do PT.”

“How do you know I don’t go to bed until five?” Cati asked.

“Bea told me that’s the reason Ali’s always late.”

Cati gasped. “Why do you know so much about my life?”

“If my daughter doesn’t tell me it’s on your date-a-rama diary. You update daily. Events of your life and so forth ...”

“I do not. I’m killing Ali. And what happens if I want to go to bed early.”

“We’ll work something out,” Sam said.

“No. You can not.”

“Yes, I can. I have every right.”

“How do you figure?”

“I figure ... because since I am paying for half the expenses, from this day forward making sure your daughter is not a truancy case, and may I add, and putting one of the four food groups, meat back in her diet, I can do that.”

“And at what point should I expect you to instruct me to bend

over a piece of furniture so you can have your way with me.”

“I figure that will happen in about two months.”

“Uh!”

“Stop that. I hate that.” Sam winced. “And I’m joking.”

“Oh, I know you’re joking.”

“And it’s too late. Bea’s already in that room. If you weren’t cackling on the phone like a girl, you’d know this.”

“I can’t help it. I am a girl.” Cati, frustrated, grunted and sat on the bed. “Look at all this stuff.”

“I’ll put it away.”

“When?”

“So we’ll do this.”

“What choice do I have?”

“None. Really. I don’t want my daughter upset.”

“Oh, sure, but you’ll tell her she can’t call me Mommy,” Cati said.

“I have my reasons.”

“They’re dick reasons.”

“I’m gonna get a complex.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Cati said sarcastically.

“How about this? What’s in this closet? I can put some stuff fin here.”

“I use that for storage.”

“Good.” Grabbing a box, Sam carried it to the closet. He opened in and paused at the bag sitting on the closet floor. “What’s in here?”



“Ali’s Christmas presents.”

“Can I put them with the others?” Sam asked.

“Other what?”

“Ali’s other gifts.”

“There are no other gifts. That’s all of them.”

Sam snickered and opened the bag. “Not very much. Didn’t you feel like shopping?”

“Hey, Sam? Do me a favor?” Cati said with some edge.

“What’s that?”

“When you aren’t working and you’re here. Can you consume large amounts of Alcohol please? You’re much less of a dick that way.”

By the time Sam turned around, Cati, with tightly folded arms had stormed from the bedroom. He spoke out softly. “What did I say?” Shaking his head, he returned to his task and the bag of gifts caught his attention. When he saw it, it sunk in, and he knew instantly what it was that caused Cati’s reaction.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Artie was praised up and down that it was the best school Christmas pageant ever. He accepted the flowers from the Mother's association, and bowed proudly on the triple encore.

Bean was perfect. She generated the laughs from the audience, and never missed a beat. On cue, she stole the show. She, too, would have enjoyed bowing for the triple encore had she not had to make an immediate trip to the emergency room for stitches when Ali sneezed, lost control of the rope and dropped Bean five feet to the floor.

Luckily she landed on Billy Conner, the kid that played Frank Cross. The audience never knew it wasn't planned or in the script. Bean didn't miss a line, even as the blood dribbled down the side of her face. The audience didn't notice until Billy gagged and vomited.

Still Bean didn't miss a beat. "Frank Cross, answer me," she tried to cover. "This is your future."

Instead of Billy screaming and running off stage as rehearsed, he gagged and vomited again.

End of scene. It worked. The curtain closed.

"Bean, you're bleeding, dear," Artie told her, bringing a towel to her head.

"I am?" Bean asked. "How did that happen?"

"Didn't you hit your head when Ali dropped you?"

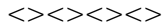
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“Oh, no, Artie. I hit my head when Ali put me down on Billy Conner. Am I really bleeding? It doesn’t hurt.”

“It’s the adrenaline. And yes, you’re really bleeding see?” he showed her the cloth.

Bean passed out.



Artie hosted the post show, cast party at his home and themed it for the kids. He dressed as a big Elf, and served finger foods. Liz was there with the carrot cookies. Jen Conner, Billy’s mother was there. She was formally Jen O’Neil when Cati went to school with her. Jen was still the same. It was a cast party, why was she there? Cati knew why she was there, Artie was one of her best friends. But Jen had no place being there. Aside from flaunting and bragging about all the great things her senator husband has done, Cati supposed Jen was there to nit pick about Ali dropping Bean on her son.

And Jen did. She bragged about her husband, asked Cati about her writing, making it a point to ask her if she was published yet. And she made her Ali comments. Nothing as subtle as Cati expected.

She’d comment, “Wasn’t the climax wonderful, too bad Ali dropped Bean on his head.” Or “Mr. L, great egg rolls, I’m glad Billy has his appetite back after Ali dropped Bean on his head.” And after the comment, “Of course I kept the program to the

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show, silly. I almost lost it when Ali dropped Bean on Billy's head."

Cati chose to leave. Liz was there to keep things under control and shove carrot cookies at Jen. Liz also made Ralph go and rent the movie *Scrooged* and they planned on watching it simultaneously with Ralph's video taking of the play.

Cati looked at it was a free evening. It was still early, not only could she get some writing done, but she could get a jump on the Christmas surprise while no one was home.

On her way out the door, Sam walked into the foyer with Bean.

"Cati Corner, I got four stitches see?" Bean pointed to the bandage.

"Wow, you OK?" Cati asked running her hand down Bean's face. "Does it hurt?"

"Nope." She hook her head.

"It will," Sam said. "When the Novocain wear off. She's fine. I got your voice mail. I couldn't answer the phone ..."

"Yeah, I know." Cati nodded. "No phones in the hospital. I didn't hear from you and just wanted to let you know we were thinking of her."

"Thanks. You leaving?" Sam asked.

"Yeah. I have stuff to do, and I think my mom wants to have the girls tonight to do some show comparison. She'll tell you about it." Cati started to leave.

"Do you need a ride?" Sam asked.

"No, I'm fine. I'll walk. Grab some food. See ya' guys." Cati

slipped through them.

Sam watched.

“Daddy.” Bean tugged. “Can we go in?”

“Um ...” Sam snapped out of his stare. “Yeah. Bean did she seem OK to you?”

“You think she’s sick?”

“I don’t know.”

“Maybe you should go check on her Daddy.”

“We’ll see. First, your party.” Sam placed a leading hand on his daughter’s back and brought her into the festivities.

<><><><>

Why it was Cati didn’t know, but the basement was always so warm. Aside from giving her the room she needed to work on her project, it gave her the privacy as well.

She heard Sam return shortly after she did. He walked around, moved about, obviously took a shower, Cati heard the water run. He never said anything to her, just went about his business.

One thing Cati wasn’t very good at was arts and crafts. She never could work with glue without getting it all over her. Like feathers to tar, the cotton adhered to her finger tips and she picked of pieces when the basement door opened.

“You down here?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Cati answered.

The second she heard the footsteps she shoved the items



behind her.

“What are you doing?” Sam gave a quirky look.

“I’m just working on something for Christmas. No big deal.”

She shrugged, hiding her messy fingers.

“I heard about Jen Conner and her brag fest as Artie called it.”

Cati gave a tilt to her head and started picking at her fingers.

“You have a splinter?”

“No. Glue. And I’m used to Jen.”

“Your mom has the girls, or ... at least is keeping them. She told me about the movie versus the play.”

“I don’t know what it is, but those girls love it at my moms.”

“She has meat in her fridge,” Sam said.

“What is it with you and meat?” Cati chuckled, and then finally noticed as he stepped further into the light. “Wow.” She remarked. Not that he was dressed up, he wasn’t. But dressed nice. Newer jeans, a black turtle neck and he wasn’t wearing his combat boots. “You look very nice.” She sniffed. “Smell nice, too.”

“Thanks.” Sam smiled. “I’m ...” he pointed backwards with his thumb. “Heading out.”

“Oh, Ok. Have fun.”

“I have a Christmas party to go to.”

Cati looked at her watch. “Are you late? It’s almost nine.”

“Nah, just started. I’m sure the buffet will still be out.”

“Beats the egg rolls and mini weenies.”

Sam chuckled. “Anything beats that.” After that comment, Sam just stood there. As if waiting.

“Is there something you wanted?” Cati asked.

“No. No. Good night.” He turned, took a step, paused, and then turned back around. “Yes.”

Cati looked up. “Yes?” she asked.

“I know you said you were doing something ... but... the girls... they aren’t here. Would you ... do you want to go?”

“To the party?”

“I honestly would have told you about it sooner, but I forgot and ... I got the reminder call, and I thought it would be something nice.”

“Yes. I would love to go,” Cati said. “Can you give me ten minutes to make myself look presentable?”

“You look fine now.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Ok, no ... you don’t. But, sure, that’d be great.”

Cati stood and walked to the steps. “I won’t be long.” She started the ascent. “Sam, don’t look at that, OK? I don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

“Sure. Go get ready.”

The moment Cati was up the steps, curiosity started getting the best of Sam. He thought about leaving it be, but he couldn’t. A few steps into Cati’s work area, he figured just a peek wouldn’t hurt. And he got a peek. He had to wonder what the hell Cati was talking about when it came to ruining the surprise, because for the life of Sam, he couldn’t figure out what kind of surprise Cati was making with a box of cotton.

“I can’t believe you peeked,” Cati said in the car as they pulled up to the restaurant. “I said don’t look.”

“And I thought that was the female way of saying you wanted me to peek.”

“Why would I do that?”

Sam fumbled for words, “Maybe your way of letting me know you were doing something for me so I would do something for you.”

Cati’s mouth opened in gasp. “You mean you thought I was prodding for a gift. To make sure you brought me one if I got you one.”

“Yes.” Sam opened his door.

“Well, I have ...”

“Stop.” Sam said.

“What?”

“Don’t open your door.”

“Why? Aren’t we going in?”

“I’ll get it,” he said with a nod of his head toward the windshield and got out of the car.

Cati looked. An older gentleman and woman were at the door, getting ready to go it. When her door opened she took his hand. “Playing gentleman, I see.”

Sam grumbled.

“And to continue ...” Cati said.

“Can we not.”

“No. We will.” She stopped walking and faced him.



“Christmas is about giving. Period. And for your information, Mr. Smarty Pants.” She poked him in the chest, “The surprise is a family surprise. Not a Sam surprise. So there.”

“Done?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s go.” He took her arm and led her to the restaurant.

“Are we playing the happily married couple? I need to know.”

“Cati.” He reached for the door. “We’re fuckin’ newlyweds, we better be happy. People won’t understand if you don’t act it.”

“I think if anyone knows you, they’ll not question at all.”

“Thanks.”

It wasn’t what she expected. Maybe because the first couple that caught her attention, outside of the party, were dressed fancy, and Cati, who mocked the dress code of Sam, was fearful she was underdressed. Until she walked into the place, saw the home feel establishment and found out that the older couple had just returned from the opera.

It was nice. There were a lot more people there than she thought, and it was one heck of a Christmas party.

The place was closed for the private party, buffet set up, and there was an area dedicated completely to dancing with a DJ.

Only a few people graced the floor, but Cati figured that would change once the alcohol flowed more freely and people loosened up with the effects of the booze.

What was it about Sam?

Was it alcohol alone or was it the combination of alcohol and large groups of people.

He definitely was at his best when others were around. He had introduced her as his wife, which she was, and after he felt secure that she had found someone to talk to, he mingled more, leaving her to fend for herself.

Cati didn't mind that at all. She had no problem talking to people, whether she knew them or not. She actually was grateful Sam had brought her to the party.

The food was good, booze was free, and music kicked butt. Sam did a clock work check on her, either with his eyes, or he sent her a text message. Simply conveying his need to know if she was 'Ok'. She'd nod, he'd go on doing what he did. Mainly talking, laughing and showing a side she rarely experienced, or a side he rarely let her experience.

The dancing began to pick up and Cati found a comfortable spot near the railing, leaning against it, watching the others.

"Sgt. Neal's wife, right?" A woman joined her.

"Yes, Cati." Cati extended her hand to the younger woman.

"Beth, Sgt. Lewis' wife." She shook hands. "I had to work the night of the wedding. Sorry I missed it."

"No, that's fine."

"I have to tell you." Beth pointed to Sam. "I have never seen him happier."

"He seems to like parties. He's happy at them."

"No," she giggled. "In general. When I come to the office,

everything. He's happier now."

Cati laughed. She really did. She wondered if anyone really knew the reason behind the marriage.

Beth's eye shifted up ward and she smiled "I love this song. Will you excuse me while I find my husband to dance?"

"Sure." Cati smiled and brought her drink to her lips. She watched Beth join her husband. The brevity of the meeting with Beth was typical of the party. No 'real' lengthy conversations. Finishing off her drink, Cati turned to get a refresher and slammed right into him.

She didn't look, all she felt was the 'wet' hit her chest when a drink splashed on her and she arched back with an 'ah, shit'

"I am so sorry." Instantly he placed a beverage napkin toward her.

"It's Ok, my fault." Cati looked up.

"Cati?" he said with surprise. "Wow."

"Aaron." Cati grinned. "What are you doing here?"

"My dad returned this year and my mom couldn't come. I am so sorry about the drink."

"That's OK."

"Here, let me help." He laid the napkin on her chest and rubbed the small wet spot.

"It's fine, really." She laughed. "It's a dark shirt."

A clearing of the throat caused Cati to turn her head while Aaron paused, hand on napkin, resting on her sternum.

"Sam," Cati said.

“Everything ...” eyes on Cati, as if he weren’t thinking of his action, he reached out and removed Aaron’s hand. “All right?”

Aaron produced a slightly embarrassed smile. “I’m sorry; I bumped into her, wasn’t thinking and was just drying. Sorry. You are.”

Cati introduced. “Sam.”

“Her husband,” Sam said. “You are?”

“Aaron Mitchell. I work with Cati at the paper.” He shook Sam’s hand. “Nice to meet you.”

Cati, focused with seriousness on Sam, turned with a smile to Aaron and extended her glass. “Would you be a sweetheart and get me another Manhattan?”

“Um ... sure.” Aaron took the glass.

“They’re free. You don’t have to pay,” Cati said.

“I think he knows that,” Sam said.

“Just reiterating in case,” Cati defended.

Aaron chuckled. “I’ll be right back. Nice to meet you Sam.”

Sam nodded.

Cati faced him.

“Sweetheart?” Sam asked.

“Husband?”

“I am.”

“And that means what when I’m talking to someone.”

Sam didn’t react to that.

“Sam?”

“It means I am your husband when you are talking to another

man at my work function.”

Cati nodded. “Shall I hold out my leg now for you to piss on it, or would you rather wait until we get home.”

“Nice. Very nice.”

“Sam.” Cati sighed out his name. “I understand where you coming from.”

“So what was with the comment?” Sam asked.

“You’re being possessive.”

“Uh, hello. Another man is fondling your breasts at my ....”

“Oh, he was not. Stop it.” Cati started to laugh.

“This is funny?”

“You’re being funny. Ok. Ok.” She held up her hand. “I will not let another man fondle my breasts again, and I will not do anything that looks out of line here. But I’d like to talk to him. I know him. I’m fine. Go talk to your friends.”“

“No flirting, Cati. It doesn’t look good for me.” Sam started to leave.

“I promise.” Cati held up her hand. “And if I get out of line you have my permission to march over, and play your ownership card.”

“I will.”

“Oh, somehow I don’t doubt that.” Cati chuckled and as she turned back around, Aaron was there extending her drink to her with a grin.

Disgrulexed.

Not a real word, but it was the hybrid look Sam carried. A



combination of disgruntled mixed with perplexed as he watch Cati drink her Manhattan and talk with Aaron at the dance floor railing.

He tried. He really tried to return to the conversation with Lewis and a few others by the far bar. But his attention and focus drifted elsewhere.

They talked about football. Sam made a comment that was off base, and about a quarterback who had retired a decade earlier.

“Sam?” Lewis chuckled out his name, and when Sam answered with a ‘huh’, he let it go.

Sam was fine or at least a little fine when they were by the railing.

Two. Was it her second drink that Cati had finished, Sam wondered. He got her one when they arrived and the Aaron guy got her one, but he knew she was definitely on her third when they went to the bar.

He grew uncomfortable with them at the bar; people were bumping into them both. He sighed out when he saw them walk away, and rejoined the conversation which had moved on unknown to Sam.

“Last year,” Sam said. “Wasn’t it?”

Lewis laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“That race, it was last year.”

“Uh, Sam, we’re talking about sitcoms now.”

“Shit. Sorry.” Sam shifted his eyes. Cati and Aaron had moved to a table. Not only were they sitting there, but they were laughing. Leaning into each other with each outburst.

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“Sam?”

He muttered out ‘pissing time’ handed Lewis his drink and walked off.

Falcon was the editor in chief at the newspaper and they cynically nicknamed him hawk for his keep ability to miss things.

Cati laughed about the latest mistake that made it into the paper, where a simple type went from stating the mayors wife was fronting a ‘Tot Drive’ to she was fronting a ‘Tit Drive’.

Mid laugh, she brought her drink to her lips. Just as the liquid passed into her mouth, the drink was removed.

She choked. “Sam.” She looked up wiping her mouth. “You made me spill.”

“I’m sure with the amount of alcohol you’ve consumed; people are expecting you to dribble now.”

Cati gasped.

Sam grabbed her hand and looked at Aaron. “Excuse us.” He gave a gentle tug of Cati’s hand indicating his intentions to have her follow him.

She did. “Where are we going?”

“We’re gonna dance.”

Cati laughed.

“IS that funny?”

“Uh, yeah, you dancing.”

Sam stopped, snapped a glare, turned around and led her to the floor.

They began to slow dance.

Cati giggled. “You do know I’m not buying this?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sam said.

“Right.” Cati inched closer, following the lead he gave. A firm hand on her back, not letting her go. “He’s gay.”

“Who’s gay?”

“Aaron.”

Sam cocked back his head. “What is it with you and gay men?”

Cati shrugged. “It could be said that I don’t attract men who sleep with me. Who knows? Anyhow ... you can stop it. I’m not buying what does it look like bit. You’re jealous.”

“I am not.”

“Yes, Sam, you are.”

“Why would I be jealous?”

Cati stared at him. “You like me.”

“You think?”

Another shrug and Cati moved her cheek near his. “You can play your high school antics, Sam,” she said playfully. “I know.”

“Well, for your information it has everything to do with the fact that you’re getting tipsy. I know what you’re like when you’re tipsy.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Our wedding night. Hitting on me. Suggesting we have sex.”

Cati gasped, pulled back and looked at him. “You brought it up first.”

“I did not.” Sam pulled her back to him.

“In any case, it still adds up to jealousy. You can deny it all you want. You find me intriguing, exciting, big breasted.”

Sam fluttered out a laugh.

“You just don’t know how to admit.”

“Cati .... Where is all this coming from? The booze?”

“You don’t like me?” she asked. After she felt the clenching of his hand on her back, she softened her voice. “For as masochistic as this sounds. I like *you*, Sam.” He held just a bit tighter. “Even when you’re yelling, or being ... you, I like you.”

“I’m not that bad.”

“No, Sam,” she whispered. “You aren’t. And for the record, neither am I.”

Sam breathed out, his mouth close to her ear. “No, you aren’t. Far from it.”

Cati closed her eyes. Firm, she clenched her fingers around his hand, moving slow within the dance. “Why do you act like I am?”

“High school antics.”

Cati chuckled softly and pulled back. She locked into the look on his face. A serious one, almost nervous.

Sam smiled gently.

“Ok, so here we are,” Cati said. “Dancing nicely. I like you. I think you like me. Hell, we’re already married. What do we do about this?”

Sam didn’t respond.

“You look nervous, Sam.”

“I am. A little.”



“Why?” she asked.

“Because I’d ... I’d really like to kiss you right now.”

“What’s holding you back? Are you having a hard time determining if it’s the romantic song, or if it’s me?”

“Oh, it’s you, Cati. It’s definitely you.”

“Then how about I just kiss you?”

“How about we just meet halfway.”

Cati smiled and Sam lowered his head slowly to her, bringing his hand to her face. His lips inched in and he hovered his mouth over hers in hesitation. So close. A breath away. Tiny exhales slipping through their slightly parted lips swirled in a heat around their mouths. Inviting.

And then ... the music stopped.

Almost there and the music stopped. As if startled into the shock of the sudden silence. They both pulled back. Before they could recapture the moment, Sam was summoned by someone else. He began to move away.

“Sam?” Cati asked, holding his hand. “Where are you going? We were just ...”

“I know.”

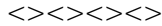
“Well? You changed your mind? What?” She stepped to him. “Sam?”

“Maybe ... maybe we should take it as a sign we shouldn’t.” He slowly shook his head. “I’ll catch back up with you.” He moved away, then switching to an upbeat, joking demeanor, he pointed as he walked backwards and said, “No flirting.”

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Cati shook her head, pretending to be jovial as well, smiling a forced smile. But the truth was, he left her on that dance floor. Not just alone, but confused to what all had just transpired and why.



The topic of the ‘almost kiss’ could have been brought up during the ride home. In fact, Cati tried. But after three attempts and having each diverted, she gave up. They discussed other things.

The thing that didn’t cross her mind at all was what would happen once they arrived home. It wasn’t a typical work night, the girls weren’t home, and she and Sam would be alone.

It was a good thing she had stopped drinking, and started to sober up, because that gave her the out she planned on anyhow.

Sam tossed his keys onto the table by the door as soon as they walked in. He finished his story about the time he was seventeen and got drunk at his father’s company Christmas party, chuckling at his own youthful stupidity.

“What did your father do?” Cati asked, taking off her coat.

“Surprisingly, not much.” Sam took her coat and brought it to the closet.

“Wait. Don’t hang that.”

“Why?”

“I’m leaving shortly.” Cati said, shaking a chill. “I’m gonna grab some coffee and head out.”

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“Did I do something?”

She snickered. “Sam? No. Why would you say that?”

He looked at his watch. “It’s almost two in the morning. Can I ask where you feel the need to go at two in the morning?”

“Sure,” Cati said. “Shopping. Wal-Mart is open. Christmas is in two days, I want to get some last minute stuff done.”

“Oh.” Sam sighed out. “I thought you were mad about something.”

“Sam, don’t be silly.” Cati set her purse on the back of the couch, and began rummaging through. “Why would I be mad?”

“Because I ...”

Cati paused in her searching. She didn’t need to turn around to face him to know he had moved closer. And what was it about his hand. The second it touched down upon her shoulder, it sent a shock through her. Was it the surprise of it or the feel of it? It caused a chain reaction of shakes with her body and her purse tumbled down to the couch. The contents spilled upon the cushions.

“Shit.” Cati reach down.

Sam stopped her, edging her around to face him. “Because I fell short.”

Cati tilted her head. “With what?”

“Kissing you.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“You just said that.”

“Maybe because you are being silly.”



“I’m never silly.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“You are.”

“I am what?” Cati asked.

“Mad.”

“No, I’m not, Sam. Look I’m mature. If you don’t like me. You don’t like me. If you don’t want to kiss me. Don’t fuckin kiss me. If you want ...”

Silenced.

His hand gripped her arm, and without warning, Sam brought his lips to Cati’s. They stayed there, pressed in a firm gentleness to hers. Not moving. Just waiting. Waiting for something from Cati to tell him it was all right to proceed.

The tiniest of sighs escaped Cati and in turn was the spark that ignited the fire behind the kiss.

The immobile lips parted, and the connection ensued. The grasped not only with the kiss, but to each other as well.

The slight moan that came from Sam sent shivers through Cati’s body and she returned the intensity.

But despite the longevity of the moment, and the desire not to stop, Cati pulled back to catch her breath.

Sam laid his hand on her cheek. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head, biting her bottom lip.

“No? No, you don’t like the kiss or no nothing’s wrong.”

Cati smiled. “Nothing’s wrong, Sam. That was ... that was nice.”



“Wow.”

“What?” she asked.

“I was striving for a little better than nice.”

Cati laughed. “Better than nice could get us in trouble.”

“That’s true.” Sam said with false seriousness. “I’m your husband. You’re my wife. I wouldn’t want us to get in trouble. Lord knows that kiss totally crossed all barriers.”

After a laugh, Cati did turn serious. “Sam, really. If you think about this relationship. It kind of did.”

Closed moth, in agreement, Sam nodded.

“Ok. So ...” Cati sighed out. “What now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean ... to be honest with you, Sam. I like that kiss. I liked it a lot. And I’m not gonna lie to you. I don’t want it to stop. And I’m afraid, if we stand here, this close any longer. I’m not gonna stop. It’s not a problem for me, but out of respect for the reasons we got married, any progression should be ... slow?”

“I agree.”

“Good. So what now?”

“How about ... you were going shopping. Why don’t we go together?”

Cati smiled. “I’d like that. I have to get something upstairs, I’ll be right down.”

“Sounds good.”

He watched Cati go up the stairs and then Sam retrieved his coat. He placed it on, grabbed his keys and looked to the steps

when Cati came back down.

“Sam, did you see envelope on the dresser?”

“The one with the money from the wedding.”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

Nonchalantly, Sam replied, “I gave it to your parents.”

“You what!” Cati blasted.

Her tone and volume level caused Sam to pause mid adjusting of his collar. “I gave it to your parents. We agreed.”

“No, Sam, we did not agree. You wanted to do that. I did not.”

“What’s the big deal, Cati? They were really grateful that I gave that to them.”

“Who cares!” she yelled.

“What the hell, Cati?”

“No, Sam, I needed that money. I needed it,” Cati blasted. “It wasn’t right. You had no right to do that.”

“And you have no right to profit off of this marital arrangement.”

“And you had no right to ruin my Christmas.”

“What does that money have to do with ruining your Christmas?”

“Don’t play stupid, you aren’t that dumb.” Cati said. “I wanted to use some of that money to make this a really special Christmas. I wanted to at least go get some extra things for Ali so she doesn’t feel like she’s having a loser Christmas when she sees how much you got Bean.”

“IS that why you wanted to money?”



“Yes, isn’t that good enough.”

“Cati, you don’t have to worry ...”

“Oh, you would say that. You would. Wanna know why? You don’t care. You don’t care about anything, Sam. Sure you can make your remarks that my kid had nothing in her Christmas bag. You can do that because you bought out the whole store for your daughter. Did you ever stop to think how my kid is gonna feel when she sees that? No. You didn’t. And you killed my one and only chance to give her a special Christmas.”

Sam huffed. “I already ...”

“You already gave the money to my parents? I know this!”

“Can I finish? Can I talk!” Sam blasted.

“No. No, because I don’t want to talk to you again. I really don’t have anything further to say to you. Not now. Not ever. Except this. Fuck you Sam for doing this to us. Fuck you.” Wrath marked every pounding step Cati took back up the stairs, all the way to the bedroom where she slammed the door.

Sam whipped off his coat in his frustration, crashing it into the front door. He had options. He could go up stairs and try to talk to Cati, or he could find something else to do to take his mind elsewhere. He chose the later. For as much as it would gnaw at him not to resolve the problem, fighting and creaming with Cati wasn’t worth it. It just wasn’t worth it.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Sam reflected.

It was along night of pacing, and trying to read. He finally went to sleep in Bean's room about six am. The morning was quiet, even when the girls got home. Cati wouldn't speak to him or look at him. She spent a good bit of time in the basement.

The snow started to fall again, wet heavy flakes that dropped fast and furious. It was going to be a long day, Christmas eve or not. Sam hoped for a diversion, like going to Ralph and Liz's, but they went to an Aunt's house in Akron. Cati declined going, she had things to finish.

Then the second fight with a Cramer woman occurred. The second seemed to bother Sam more, and just like with her mother, the one with Ali didn't resolve itself.

It started innocently enough. He heard the girls giggling and making noise. They'd laugh, scream, and giggle.

When Sam went into the dining room to investigate, he saw Bean by the computer huddled with Ali. Bean kept covering her mouth in between her 'Oh my God, Ali-Ali in free' comments.

"What's going on?" Sam asked.

"Look Daddy." Bean pointed to the computer. "The man has worms coming out of his bum."

The girls laughed some more.

Sam took a close look after asking, 'what' and when he saw he

reached down and shut off the computer.

“Hey.” Ali defended. “Why did you do that?”

“Why would you show her that stuff.”

Bean giggled. “Daddy, it’s finny. Ali put it back on. I want to see the worms.”

“No, Bea.” Sam said firm. “Ali?”

“What?” Ali asked clueless. “It’s a gross me out site, Sam. That’s all.”

“And you don’t think it’s wrong to show her?”

“No,” Ali said. “Why do you?”

“Because I’m her father. I don’t want her looking at that stuff. She doesn’t understand it.”

Bean laughed hard. “Daddy, I know he had worms coming out of his ...”

“Enough!” Sam barked. “Ali, I want you to use more responsibility next time.”

“Ok.” Ali shrugged.

“I mean it.”

“I said OK.”

“That means you can’t take her on the internet and show her things that you like,” Sam stated strong. “What you like and she likes are not on the same level.”

“And I said ...” Ali raised her voice. “OK. I understand. God! Chill.”

“Chill? Chill? Do you even comprehend what you’re showing her.”



“Yeah,” Ali said. “I’m showing her a gross picture.”

Bean giggled. “Of a guy with worms coming out of his bum.”

Ali ‘shushed’ Bean.

Bean didn’t get it. “Can we print it up now, Ali-Ali in free? Oh my God, we can print it up and show Pap.”

“No,” Ali answered.

“But you said we would put it on their fridge.” Bean said. “Won’t it be funny when Pap gets his coffee and sees the picture of the man with worms in his bum?”

“Bean,” Ali warned. “Shh.”

“You know what.” Sam snapped. “I don’t want you on the internet with her at all. Not at all. In fact, keep being a bad influence and you won’t hang out with her at all.”

“I am not a bad influence.” Ali argued.

“Daddy, no,” Bean called out innocently. “You can’t do that, silly. We’re sisters. We have to hang out.”

“She’s not your sister,” Sam said.

“Yes she sis. My twin.” Bean argued.

“No, Bean, she’s not.”

“Yes, Daddy she is. I’m her sister. You’re her Daddy.”

This time Ali responded, “No, Bean he is not my Dad. He will never be my dad/” She stood and gave a sharp look to Sam. “Thank God.”

And then, like her mother, Ali stormed off. She didn’t just storm off, she yelled to her mother she was going to Fudge’s house and then she left.

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After a few minutes, and that was all it took, Sam realized he was wrong. Not so much about the internet, but in the way he handled it. He was allowing his frustration with Cati to get the best of him in his dealings with Ali.

Using the excuse he wanted to hit the store before it closed, Sam left. His intentions were to find Ali.

And he did. She was about three blocks away and nearly at Fudge's when he pulled over and got out.

"Ali. Stop. I know you saw me."

Ali stopped walking. "What?"

"Get in the truck. Come home."

"I don't want to come home."

"Look. I know I was wrong about yelling at you."

"I don't care. Doesn't matter," Ali said. "I don't want to come home. Even when you're not yelling you're mean and never have anything nice to say. No wait. I'm wrong. You say nice things. But to Bean. Then again, she's your kid and that's all that matters to you."

"I'm trying, Ali. This is all new."

"Doesn't matter, Sam." Ali tossed up her hands

"Look, I'm not gonna stand on the street and argue with you."

"Don't. Go home. I'm going to fudges."

"No, Ali, it's Christmas Eve. Come home. This is a day for family. Your mom doesn't deserve for you ..."

"I'm mad at my mother right now," Ali said.

"For what?"

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“For marrying you. And as far as family goes. We aren’t a family, Sam. Bean may be fooled. But I know the truth. We aren’t a family, we’re an arrangement. And I don’t have to hang around an arrangement I don’t like on Christmas Eve.”

Sam let her go. Fudge’s house wasn’t far. Maybe the walk and the visit would cool her down.

That’s what Sam reflected on. But the longer Ali was gone, and the later it got, the more he reflected.

The fight wasn’t that bad. There was no need for Ali to stay away, carry on like she was. He ran through the past couple months that he knew Ali, trying to determine if he was always short with her.

Cati grew increasingly agitated with every phone call to Ali asking if she were ready to come home. The last couple Ali didn’t answer.

“How long you giving it?” Sam asked.

Cati ignored him and instructed Bean with the icing on the cookies. “Put the eyes up higher honey.”

“Cati?” Sam drew for her attention. “Ali missed dinner. She isn’t home and not answering. How long are you giving it?”

Cati didn’t answer.

Bean looked up. “Cati Corner how come you aren’t answering my Dad?”

“Did he say something?”

“You didn’t hear him?” Bean asked.

“Actually, no. Once a month women get a male ear clog.



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Which means, once a month we can't hear anything a man says."

"Oh my God!" Bean shouted. "What am I gonna do when that happens to me. What will I do when I can't hear my Daddy?"

"BE grateful," Cati mumbled.

"What was that?" Bean asked.

Cati shook her head.

"Cati Corner, when are we gonna get Ali. Santa's coming tonight. She should get to bed."

Cati checked out the time. "You know what, Bean. I'll try again. If she doesn't answer, I'll go get her." She picked up the phone and dialed, no sooner did she hit the last number, and Sam's phone rang.

Bean laughed "Cati you called Daddy."

Cati hung up when she heard Sam say, "Ali". She looked at him with question.

"OK," Sam said. "I'm on my way."

"What's going on?" Cati asked.

"Um, Ali needs a ride."

"I'll get her." Cati said.

"No, I'll get her. She called me." Sam walked to the door.

"But she's my daughter. I want to get her."

"And she called me," Sam said firm. "I'll go get her."

"Did she say why she called you?"

Sam grabbed his coat from the tree and put it on. "Something about the way you drive in the snow."

"Are the roads getting bad?" Cati hurried to the window. "Ok,

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they are. You go.”

“I won’t be long.” He lifted his keys and walked out.

After seeing the roads and knowing how her daughter complained about her snow driving, Cati didn’t give it a second thought. Ali was coming home and everything was fine.

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“You’re gonna have to post bail<” Sheriff Nichols said. “Magistrate isn’t hearing cases tonight and ...”

“It’s Christmas Eve.” Sam said. “Come on, Sheriff. You’re not really gonna press charges are you?”

“Sgt. Neal, you’re step daughter was drinking. Not only is she charged with underage drinking, but public intoxication.”

“Was she alone?”

“Nope. Other kids ran. She was the one grabbed.”

“Did you do a breathalyzer?” Sam asked. “To determine how intoxicated she was.”

“She was drinking. Period. She admitted it. Period. She broke the law.”

“Period,” Sam said. “Yes, I know. But it’s Christmas Eve.”

“And that supposed to mean, what? I allow the law to be broken?”

“No, it means you should issue a warning, allow me to handle this, and go home Sheriff. Go home, save yourself some paperwork.”



“I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can,” Sam said. “Trust me I will handle it. You have her locked up in the back. You don’t think that’s gonna scare her away from doing this again.”

“She’ll do it again.”

“OK, and if she does, you can take it to the fullest extent. As for now, it’s ...”

“Christmas eve.” The Sheriff grumbled. “I know. I know.” He breathed out heavily, a sign of his thoughts. “I’ll go get your kid.”

“I’m sorry, Sam,” Ali said humbled as she got in the truck.

Sam shut the door, walked round and got inside. He started the engine and let it idle. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry. I throw up twice if that helps.”

“Why were you drinking, Ali? That doesn’t sound like you.”

Ali shook her head. “It isn’t. Fudge’s grandfather made homemade wine and we snuck some. I had two glasses. That’s it. I just didn’t realize how strong it was.”

“Ali, if you were drunk why did you go out.”

“We wanted to Christmas Carol.”

“You ... you of all people went out Christmas caroling?”

Ali nodded.

“Ali ...”

Sniff.

Sam looked over. Ali’s head was down, her shoulders bounced.

“Ali.”

“I didn’t mean to get in trouble. I didn’t mean to get arrested. I didn’t even mean to drink.”

“Ali, some times ...”

Ali sobbed, “I didn’t mean to do it. I swear, Sam, I won’t do it again. I didn’t even mean to cal you.”

“Then why did you?”

“Scream at me, Sam. Yell. Beat me. Throw me to the curb. Tell me not to hang around Bean, but don’t tell my mom. I’ll do anything.”

“I don’t understand, Ali. Your mom isn’t that strict. Why don’t you want her to know? I would think ...” He fluttered his lips. “You would be more fearful of me than her.”

“I’m not scared of my mom, Sam.” Ali turned her face and looked at her. Her eyes were red and lips puffy. “I don’t want to make her sad or disappoint her. I promised her I never, ever would drink until I got older. I promised.”

“Ali, all kids get curious. I’m sure ...”

“No, Sam, I promised her because her brother died when he was sixteen from drinking.”

This made Sam stop. “Your mom had a brother?”

Ali nodded. “He died ten years ago. I remember him. I swore from then on, I wouldn’t drink and I did. Now I’m sick, Sam. I’m sick, too.”

“It’s just ...”

“Tell me I’m not gonna die.”

“You aren’t gonna ...”

“Am I gonna throw up in my sleep and die. I threw up, Sam. I threw up already. Oh my God, I’m gonna throw up ...”

“Ali!” Sam snapped.

Ali shrieked.

“God, you’re as bad as your mother not letting me talk.”

Ali burst into tears again.

“Stop. OK? You aren’t gonna die. I’ll ... I’ll keep checking on you. Will that work?”

Ali nodded.

“Ali, how did you get caught? I’m curious. All your friends got away.”

“I threw up.” She trailed off her last word in a sob.

Sam winced. “Is that how. Someone saw you throwing up?”

“We were singing and I threw up ...” Another cry. “On the sheriff’s front porch.”

“You ... threw up on the sheriff’s porch.”

“We were singing Frosty the snowman and I vomited.”

It was an odd sound Sam made. A cough combined with a snort as he tried to refrain from laughing. He bit his bottom lip, shook his head with a hidden smile, and put the truck in gear.

“What are you gonna do, Sam?” Ali asked.

“I’m gonna take you home, Ali.”

“Sam?”

“Yeah.”

“Thank you.”

Sam responded with a peaceful smile.

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“Sam?”

“Yes, Ali.”

“Can you stop the truck; I have to throw up again.”

With a breath of a chuckle, Sam pulled over.

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Sam was grateful to see Cati sipping from a glass of wine when he walked in. He had taken longer than expected. He stopped with Ali at the store, got her a big bottle of water, made her drink it and suck on some peppermint, then he took her home.

Ali fell fast asleep in the truck, which didn’t help in explaining why not only were they late, but why Sam carried her as well.

“Sam?” Cati rushed to the door, setting down her wine when they walked in. “What’s wrong with my daughter?”

“She’s fine. Can I have a sip?” Sam asked. “I’m perched.”

“Now? Right now?” Cati asked.

“Right now.”

“Why is Ali sleeping? What’s wrong?” Cati asked carrying the glass.

“Fudge’s mom made fish and it didn’t set right with a few people.” Sam supposed his chin. “Can you ...”

“You want me to feed you the wine.”

“Just a sip.”

Cat sighed out bringing the glass to his mouth. He took a drink. She watched him in oddity as he swished it around his

mouth then swallowed.

“Thanks.” Sam headed toward the steps.

“Sam. IS she all right.”

“Yeah, she just threw up a couple times. I think someone gave her Dramamine or something, she fell asleep in the truck.”

“Should we take her to the doctor?”

“Nah, she’s fine. Let’s see how she is in the morning.” Sam carried her up the steps.

Cati followed. When she arrived at Ali’s room, she was lying on her side and Sam was taking off her shoes. He tossed them to the floor and propped her on pillows.

Cati walked to the bed and kissed her daughter on the cheek. She stayed there. “Sam, does she smell like alcohol to you?”

“Probably Cati,” Sam said. “When you gave me a drink, it spilled some on her.”

“Oh.” She folded her arms and stepped back.

“She’s fine.” Sam covered her. “I’ll check on her later.” He moved to the door.

“What’s up with this?” Cati asked.

“What?”

“Carrying her, checking on her. Why are you suddenly being nice to my daughter?”

“You know what? I resent that question,” Sam said. “And I won’t even justify that with an answer.” Saying no more, Sam walked out.

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He ate the last cookie intended for Santa, then carefully dusted the crumbs on to the plate. He downed the milk, leaving some in the glass and ... gagged. The warm drink didn't mix well with the beer Sam had been drinking.

Wiping the back of his hand over his mouth, he looked down to Cati on the floor. He had been so engrossed in his lap top that he didn't see what she had created. A huge Snow Man, made of cotton and felt, perched in the middle of the living room. It was surrounded by a white cottony blanket, on the left was a small stack of gifts, on the right were three. How ironic that he noticed her erected snowman at the moment he gagged, when Ali heaved on the sheriff during a snowman song.

"You made that?"

"Yes." Cati stood up. "And it's four in the morning. I'm going to bed. Bean is pretty excited about Santa, so I expect her to be up early."

"She will be."

"When you place out Bean's gift would you put them on the right of the Snowman with the gifts I got her. And maybe spread them out some."

"What about under the tree? I see you have gifts there."

"Those aren't the girls gifts. Those are other peoples. My parents and so forth."

"I see. I have to take care of some stuff ..."

"Good night, Sam." Cati began to walk the stairs.

"Cati, we'll resolve this soon, right?" Sam asked. "We have a



long haul ahead of us to be miserable and silent.”

Cati nodded, hand clenching the railing. “It will resolve soon, Sam. I just need to resolve some stuff within myself first.”

“I understand.”

“Good night.” She took a few more steps.

“Night, Cati, Merry Christmas.”

After a pause, she looked back at Sam. “Merry Christmas,” then returned to walking up the stairs.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Cati thought she heard it, then again she could have been dreaming. But the running footsteps and calling out “Santa Camel!” Told Cati it wasn’t a dream. Bean was awake.

Knock-knock-knock

“Santa Camel!” Bean yelled.

Thump-thump-thump her feet pounded on the hallway floor. “Ali-Ali in free, Santa came! Oh my God, did he stop by. We are so special!!”

Cati smiled. Her snowman must have really hit the mark. Lying on her stomach, hugging her pillow, she lifted her head and turned her body to face her nightstand.

Seven AM.

It wasn’t too early. Her parents were arriving at eight for breakfast and they’d open gifts together. That was tradition.

Cati listened to Bean run about. It was obvious she kept going up and down the steps. A bit cold, Cati pulled the covers over her shoulder. She figured she’d lie there a few more minutes until she had to get up. Just as she closed her eyes, they popped open when she felt the hand on her hip.

She looked down. Yes, it definitely was a hand, attached to a very hairy arm. Her eyes followed it up as she turned some.

Sam.

“Sam,” Cati called out. “Sam.”

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He was sound asleep. And during his sleep, he not only gripped her hip tighter, with a groan, he inched to her, pulling Cati to him at the same time.

She was trapped within his snuggle hold.

“Sam.” Cati smacked his hand. “Let go.”

He moaned again, this time his forehead pressed to her shoulder.

“Great. You’re doing this on purpose. Bet me you’re awake.”

There was a single knock on the door and it burst open.

“Mom.” Ali charged in. “Uh-oh!”

Bean flew in. “Santa came!”

Sam lifted his head. “Hey ... what time is it?”

Cati whispered. “Time to quit spooning me.”

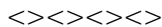
“Huh?” Sam’s head sprang up. “Shit.”

“Exactly.”

“Ali-Ali in free, look they’re like the people on TV, what a Christmas!” Bean screamed out. “Let’s go downstairs.”

“Mom, seriously,” Ali said. “Santa was here. He really was.” Ali took off running.

Thinking, ‘wow my snowman must have really been impressive’, Cati sat up. She actually filled with excitement about going down stairs. It had been a while since anyone was enthused about Santa, and with the enthusiasm of Bean Cati got a taste of that again.



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Cati wanted to take a shower before her mother and father arrived, but first she wanted to get some coffee. Plus, she had to allow the girls to open a couple gifts.

The second she emerged down the stairs and the living room came into full view; Cati knew it wasn't her snowman. If she were a child, she too would be shouting out "Santa came" when she saw the living room filled with gifts.

She stopped cold on the steps.

"Merry Christmas," Sam paused to whisper in her ear as he walked by her.

Cati just couldn't move.

Even though the girls just wanted to plow into the presents, they had to wait for Liz and Ralph. Cati allowed them to open two.

Ali knew exactly what she was going to open. After unveiling what was a pair of slipper socks, she grabbed a box. When she tore off the paper, she screamed, which in turn caused Bean to scream.

Doing a Bean, Ali shouted out. "Oh my God!"

"Oh my God!" Bean copied.

"Bean look!"

"Ali-Ali oh my God!"

"I can't believe this. I really can't believe this." Ali said with excitement.

"Me either Ali-Ali in free. What is it?"

"It's the newest video game unit, Bean," Ali gushed. "You can hook it up to the internet and play with everyone in the world."



Bean screamed.

“Mom,” Ali shook her head. “This is so great.”

Cati produced a sad smile. “Don’t look at me, Ali, I wasn’t ... I wasn’t the one responsible.” She stood from the couch and walked away.

“Yeah ...” Bean nudged Ali. “Santa brought it.”

“Yep,” Ali’s eyes shifted to Sam. “Santa brought it.”

Sam smiled, but in seeing Cati leave, he decided to follow her.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked, stepping into the kitchen.

Cati finished pouring her coffee. “Nothing, I wanted more before my parents go here.”

“Are you mad?”

Cati shook her head. “Embarrassed.” She set down the cup. “Thank you Sam. Thank you. And I’m really sorry. I came down on you ... I know you probably felt guilty after giving the money back.”

“No, Cati. I gave the money back after I went shopping.”

“You did this before the money?”

Sam nodded. “Your parents even asked when I brought it over if you needed it for gifts and I said I had it covered. Do you want your present now or later?”

“You got me something, too?”

“Sure.”

“Great, now I feel even worse.”

“Really?” Sam asked.

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“Yeah. I feel horrible.”

“Good.” Sam walked out.

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The idea to shower before her parents arrived was tossed out the window when Christmas morning took her by surprise. She had to toss her hair in a ponytail, and wait until after the morning rush was over.

By one in the afternoon, Liz and Ralph had left to get ready for dinner, and the girls fell asleep.

Bean crashed on the couch with her headphones on, while Ali fell asleep playing a video game.

Sam returned to picking up wrapping paper, a task he gave up on when it was never ending during the gift exchange.

Cati took a shower.

She was in the bedroom combing through her wet hair when Sam knocked on the door. He opened it.

“What if I wasn’t decent?” Cati asked.

“Then wouldn’t I be surprised.” Sam stepped in the bedroom and placed a box on the bed. It contained small wrapped gifts.

“You might. I cover well. Wow.”

“I didn’t know what exactly to get you, so I got a bunch of stiff. Your mom helped.”

“Wow.” Cati commented. “Can I open them?”

“That’s why I gave the to you.”

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“Wait.” Leaning back, Cati reached under the bed and pulled out a box. “For you.”

“Why did you hide my gift?”

“In case you didn’t get me something I didn’t want you to feel bad. Even though I firmly believe feeling bad isn’t something you do.”

“Please. I’m sensitive.” Sam sat down on the bed next to her. “Can I?”

“Yeah.”

Sam began to unwrap. “Cati, this great.”

“It’s a military honors display case.”

Sam chuckled. “I see that.”

“It’s for all those medals and ribbons you stick in baggies. Now you can display them.”

“This is ... this is great. Thank you.” He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. But Sam didn’t pull back.

Their eyes shifted to connection in their close proximity and Sam brought his hand to her cheek. His fingers trailed against her skin as his nose brushed softly against her.

“I never wanted us to fight, Cati. I like where we were going.”

“Me, too.”

“Can we try to pick up where we left off?”

“And where was that?” Cati asked.

“About here.” Sam brought this lips to hers and he began to kiss her. Cati responded.

It didn’t increase in intensity. It just kind of stayed at that one

point, soft and meaningful.

“Mom.” Ali came into the room. “Uh! Sorry.” She turned her back.

Cati giggled. “What is it, Ali?”

“I was looking for Sam.”

After giving Cati a smile, Sam peered over his shoulder. “What’s up?”

Ali turned around. “There’s some woman at the door. She says ... She says she’s Bean’s mom.”

“Sam. Sam wait.” Cati rushed to follow him when Sam, with angry urgency stormed from the bedroom.

“What?” Sam turned around just as he hit the top step. “I am going to deal with it.”

“Be ... congenial.”

“What? No. Fuck that.” He looked at Ali. “Where is she?”

“On the porch.”

“Good girl.” Sam went down the steps. “Keep Bean in, in fact, when I step out, wake her up and get her upstairs, will you do that for me?”

“Sure thing, Sam.” Ali said.

“Sam.” Cati grabbed him. “Listen. Right now flying off the cuff with her is not the thing to do.”

“Cati, this is not your concern.” Sam took a step forward.

“Bullshit.” Cati snapped.

Sam stopped. “Bullshit?”

“Bullshit Sam.” Sam continued down stairs and Cati followed.
“It is my concern, I am your wife.”

At the bottom of the steps, Sam stopped cold. “Why are you playing that card with me?”

“Don’t want me to play that card?” Cati shrugged and spoke smug. “Fine. How about this one. Bean is my stepdaughter. So she is my concern. All of this is my concern. Don’t even imply that it isn’t. I want in on this one, Sam. Close to me or not, if it effects you and her, it effects me.”

“How can you even stand there and insist on that.”

“How can you not want me in on this one? I am your number one ally in this whole thing.”

“I’m not making rash decisions; I’m only getting rid of her.”

“For how long. You want to nip this in the bud, let me help you.”

Sam stared. He took a deep breath, turned to Ali and instructed her to get Bean. After telling Cati to give him one second, Sam went outside.

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“Gretchen, this is my wife, Cati.” Sam introduced.

Cati shook her hand. “Would you like to sit down?” Cati asked, ignoring Sam’s glare.

“Yes, thank you.” Gretchen produced a pleasant, yet shy smile. She wasn’t a small women, nor petite as Cati would have expected.

When she last saw her she was wearing an over coat which hid her figure. Average height and weight, she dressed in a nice casual.

Bean definitely got her curly hair from Gretchen.

“Would you like some coffee?” Cati asked.

Sam shot a look her way as if to say, ‘will you quit offering her things’

“No, thank you,” Gretchen replied. “I won’t be staying long.”

Sam paced as he spoke, “I told you before, and I didn’t need for you to take Bea. It’s under control. Cati and I upped a wedding date.”

“And I’m happy, and I’m not here to take Bea,” Gretchen said. “I am here to ask to be a part of her life, Or at least get to know my daughter.”

“You haven’t tried in eleven years,” Sam said. “Why bother now?”

Gretchen found solace in Cati and focused on her when she spoke. “Did Sam tell you the story of me?”

Cati was grateful that Sam answered, ‘no’, because she didn’t want to be the one to let it on that her husband didn’t share things.

“No, I didn’t.” Sam said. “You weren’t in the picture, that’s all that mattered.”

Gretchen continued. “I was young when Bea was born. I wanted to be an actress and I left to pursue that. I just up and left. I started out, you know, calling every day. Then once a week. Then soon the monthly visits were every other month, than yearly, until I just stopped coming. It became easier to not be a mom than to be

a mom. And Sam, he was on the move all the time. It was better that way. We decided. I've moved on with my life. I have a husband now, and I have two little boys. Four and six."

"Where is this going?" Sam asked.

"I didn't ... I didn't tell my husband anything about Bea. Nothing. When I came for my mother's funeral, that was why I would be firm about when I'd take her Sam. It wasn't that I didn't want her and it wasn't time, it was, how do I tell my husband about a daughter he had no clue about."

Cati said, "So I'm assuming you did."

"I told David, yes." Gretchen nodded. "And he thinks that the boys need to know their sister and Bea needs to know her brothers. I'm not here to take her, only to meet her and talk to her, and let her know who I am. I'm willing, Sam to take it one step at a time. I am. I'm not here to intrude on your lives. I just want to make up for the lost years and get to know my daughter."

Sam nodded. "Duly noted."

"Sam." Cati whispered out.

"Cati." He snapped. "Don't."

"Well, I'll just ..." Gretchen stood. "I'll leave. I'll let you enjoy your Christmas. I'll be in town two more days. I'd appreciate if you'd think about letting me see Bea." She laid a business card on the table. "Call me either way. Merry Christmas."

Cati walked her to the door and saw her out. When she turned back around, Sam had folded his arms and paced. "Sam?"

"At least she's gone."

“What are you gonna do?” Cati asked.

“What choice do I have? I’m gonna tell her to go back to her life and husband.”

“Without seeing Bean?”

Sam nodded. “Exactly.”

“It’s her daughter.”

“She hasn’t been around Cati.”

“But she’s here now. I think she’s being sincere.”

“Oh, I do too.” Sam said. “But I still can’t do it.”

“Can I ask why?”

“Bea. I haven’t a clue where to begin on this one and if she’d even begin to understand.”

“That’s a good point,” Cati said. “And I’ll let you alone to give it some thought. I have food to make and I know you can use the think time.”

“Cati?”

“Yes?”

“What do you think I should do?”

“Wow, really? You’re asking me for my advice?”

Sam tilted his head. “Serious please.”

“Serious.” Cati nodded. “I think you should let them meet. Granted, I feel very threatened right now. Very.”

“Why is that?”

“You won’t let Bean call me mom, and that’s fine. But I have taken that role and I don’t want anyone to hone in on it. But ...” Cati sighed out. “Gretchen is her mom. She has a right to see her

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daughter. A small right, but a right nonetheless.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

When Cati left, Sam sunk into the couch and into thought.

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Pap Ralph’s computer was extremely out of date. The operating system was nearly a decade old and his idea of having high tech internet was a dial up modem that processed at a very low speed.

Santa was very good to Ralph and bought him a new home computer. Not that Ralph even used his computer that much, but the new one beckoned his curiosity. He just didn’t know how to go about setting it up.

While Liz prepared the ham, Ralph watched an old movie, Cati helped and Sam worked on setting up the computer, getting it ready for when the cable internet guy came to hook them up.

Ali was trying with diligence to figure out one of her gifts from Liz. Liz in wonder shopping had found retro toys. Pretty much the same toys that her mom had growing up. The only problem with the battery operated hand held game gadgets was no one knew how to use them.

The tiny lights on the football field were supposed to be players. It was hard for Ali to fathom considering her video game looked as if she were watching TV.

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“Ask Sam,” Cati suggested.

To Ali that was a good idea.

“You have a second?” Ali asked as she knocked on Ralph’s office door.

“Sure, what’s up?” Sam turned from the computer.

“Before I get into why I’m here ... I didn’t get a chance to thank you.”

“For what?”

“For everything. For bailing me out. For not telling mom... everything.”

“You’re welcome.” Sam rocked some in the swivel chair. “It was nice, Ali and I told you I was trying you know. I may not do things right all the time, but if you and your mom want to give me helpful hints I’ll listen.”

“Why?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why?” Ali asked. “This is just an arrangement. Why do you want to do that? Is it because you want it smooth for three years?”

This caused Sam to stop rocking. “Actually, there are ways to keep things smooth for three years. But if the truth be known and ... can you keep a secret.”

Ali stared. “I can say I can keep a secret.”

Sam chuckled. “Good enough. Truth is, Ali ... I kind of like things the way they are and only want them to get better.”

“I think my mom does too, or else she wouldn’t be kissing

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you.”

Sam smiled. “Now, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“Bean’s mom showed ...”

“Oh my God.”

“What?”

“You called her Bean. You never call her Bean.”

Sam snickered. “You guys are brainwashing me. Anyhow, her mom showed up. In a nutshells she hasn’t spoke to Bean in forever. Bean hasn’t a clue who she is and that she even exists. She wants to meet Bean. How do you think Bean will handle it?”

Ali stared in thought.

“Ali?”

“To be honest, Sam. I don’t know. I know Bean well, but this is new. Are you gonna do it? Are you gonna let her see he mom?”

“I don’t know.”

“Want me to feel it out for you?”

“How do you mean?” Sam asked, attention caught.

“Just feel it out, see where her mindset is. I can do that without letting on.”

Sam puckered his lips in debate, swishing them from side to side. “Is that cheating?”

“Nah, it’s a girl thing. It’s not cheating; it’s giving you some help in making your decision.”

“Then I would appreciate if you’d feel it out.”

“Got it.”

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“Ok, so what did you have to ask me?”

Ali laughed and stepped closer. “You’re old.”

“What?”

“You are Sam. You’re older than me. Grandma found this retro hand held football game and ... I haven’t a clue what the heck to do wit the dots.” She handed the game to Sam.

Sam nearly shrieked when he grabbed it. “Holy shit. I had one of these.”

“My mom figured as much.”

“I was the champ on our block.”

“How?” Ali asked. “They’re dots.”

“They’re players.”

“But they just bleep and bing,” Ali said.

“But there’s a way to play this. Come here.” Sam grabbed hold of the back of Ali’s belt look, scooted over in his chair and pulled her closer. “Sit down. I’ll show you.”

“Really.”

“Yeah, it’s a blast.”

“They’re dots.”

“Ali, you have to reply on skill and imagination. You’ll never go back to your video games again after this.”

Ali looked at him. “Some how I doubt that.”

“Me, too.” Sam laughed and turned on the game. Ali showed a huge level of enthusiasm over learning and was enthralled at his knowledge. It was a good moment. Sam proceeded to delay the set up of the computer for that time with Ali. Sharing a chair, sharing



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his knowledge of the hand held game and sharing a moment he wouldn't trade for the world.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**B**leep. Bleep.

Bing.

“Hey!” Ali yelled when Sam snatched the retro football game from her hand.

“Go get ready,” Sam instructed.

“For what?” Ali asked.

“Ali, you know what for.”

“For the lunch with Bean’s mom.”

“Yes.”

“There’s no need to get ready, Sam. I won’t be there.”

“You have to be there.”

“No,” Ali shook her head. “We’re not going.”

“Who exactly is we?”

“Me and mom.”

Sam chuckled. “Your mom is going.”

“No, really she isn’t. As her.”

“I will.” Sam walked away.

“Hey, can I have my game.”

“No. Get ready.” Sam instructed s he walked up the steps.

Ali was right. They had to leave in ten minutes and Cati was still in her old writing jeans and sweatshirt.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked.

“Oh, I’m just getting laundry ready,” Cati answered.

“We have to leave.”

“I know.”

“Get ready,” Sam told her.

“I’m not going, Sam.”

“Yeah, you are. Why wouldn’t you?”

“Why would I?”

“Quit answering my questions with a question. You’re going.”

Cati shook her head. “It’s not my place.”

“Bullshit. It was your place to suggest this; it’s your place to go as well.”

“Sam.” Cati paused in what she was doing. “I don’t feel comfortable being there during the happy reunion. I don’t. My feelings will be hurt”

“I’m not understanding.”

“What if Bean is very excited. What is she is overjoyed.”

“Ok.” Sam nodded.

“No, Sam, It’s not OK in the sense you think. All well and fine that Bean gets excited about her mother> I’m happy in that aspects. But for the past several months it’s been me. It’ll make me feel bad when I go from number one to forgotten.”

“Do you really think that will happen?”

Cati shrugged. “I’m not willing to take a risk on witnessing it if it does.”

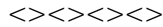
“All right, I understand. You don’t have to go.”

“Thank you, Sam.”

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“We won’t be long.” Sam left Cati alone to do her thing. As he told her, he understood her reasoning. It didn’t stop him though from really wanting and needing her to be there.



“Bean this is Gretchen Graves.” Sam introduced as they met at the coffee shop.

Bean was polite. She extended her hand to Gretchen and shook with firm confidence just like her father had taught her.

Ali and Cati didn’t go, and Gretchen’s husband was seated a few tables away.

Gretchen began the conversation with her life, how she worked at a movie theater.

Bean thought that was exciting.

She told Bean about her sons, her house and car. What her husband did for a living. Then she started about how she met Sam.

Bean fidgeted with excitement in her chair over meeting someone who had known her father for so long.

Then Gretchen produced a picture. The picture was of a very young Gretchen but a very pregnant Gretchen. She then showed a picture of her holding a baby. After that, she pushed the picture aside and simply told Bean.

“That baby is you.”

Sam inched back and watched. Perhaps it was instinct, he didn’t know.

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Bean looked at Gretchen in confusion. “What do you mean, Mrs. Graves?”

Gretchen smiled. “I mean, the baby in my belly was you. You’re my daughter, Bea. I am your mother.”

What would she do? Sam wondered. Would she scream in anger? Excitement. In any event, in all the scenarios Sam played in his mind, her reaction was not what Sam envisioned.

Bean folded her hands, tilted her head with a thinking, ‘hmm’

“Beatrice?” Gretchen questioned. “You are saying anything.”

“I’m thinking,” Bean said.

“About?”

“About what you said.”

“Are you confused?” Gretchen asked.

Bean shook her head. “You said you’re my mother.”

“That’s correct.”

“Daddy? Why is she telling me this?”

Gretchen answered. “I wasn’t a very good mother, Bea. I stayed away because I didn’t know how to be a mother. Now I do. Now I would like very much to get to know you, spend time with you and be a mother to you.”

Again, the same way, Bean tilted her head and said, ‘Hmm.’

Gretchen looked at Sam. Sam only lifted his hands.

Bean held up a finger. “Let me get this straight. You want to be my mom, right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to start calling you Mommy?”

“If you’d like.”

“Are you wanting to act like my mom, do things like a mom and so forth?”

“Yes, yes, I would.” Gretchen smiled.

“That is very nice of you. You seem very nice.”

Gretchen, again, smiled. “Thank you.”

“But I have to pass.”

“Excuse me?” Gretchen asked.

“Pass. Thank you. I thank it is a very nice offer, but I have a mommy. Cati corner is my mommy.”

Gretchen shook her head. “No, Cati is not your mom; she is your step mom.”

“I know what a step mom is. I have read Cinderella.” Bean scoffed. “Cati Corner is not that. I haven’t scrubbed a floor yet.” She nodded.

Gretchen chuckled “That’s not what I mean. I mean, just because she married your dad doesn’t make her your mother.”

“I’m not mean, Mrs. Graves. So I am sorry if this sounds mean. But ... but just because I was in your belly doesn’t make you my mommy either.”

Sam hid it. The raise of the corner of his mouth in a smile of pride over how smart his daughter was.

Bean continued. “Cati corner kisses me, tells me she loves me. She tucks me in, tells me stories, and makes my dinner. She talks about girl things and hot boys. She told me about feminine products and my period when I got it ...”

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Sam shot a fast look. “You ... you got your period, Bean?”

“Yes, Daddy. Right before you got married.” Bean shook her head. “I told you. I said I am a woman and you said that was nice.” Sam fluttered his lips. “I thought you were referring to your gender.”

Bean snickered. “Daddy, don’t be silly. But, see Mrs. Graves. Cati Corner does all that for me, and she gives really good hugs. Plus, she loves my daddy. It wouldn’t be very fair to Cati corner to all of the sudden say you’re my mom.”

“But is it fair to me to say I am not?”

“Yes,” Bean said. “It’s fair. I think it is very nice of you to ask to spend time with me. I would like very much to be your friend and get to know you, Mrs. Graves. But I think I am going to stick to Cati as my mommy.”

Gretchen smiled. “Bean you can have more than one mother.”

Bean shook her head. “I’m not greedy. All I ever wanted was one Mommy. I got one. But thank you for offering. I’ll let Cati Corner know you wanted to help with her job. She would appreciate that. She works hard. Ask Daddy.”

Sam smiled. “Yes, she does.”

“Oh! Daddy!” bean said excitedly. “We have to remember to get Cati Corner a latte with extra espresso. She loves those. We can’t come here and not get her one.”

Sam winked. “We’ll get her one, Bean.”

“I like that you call me, Bean, now, Daddy.” Bean smiled.

Gretchen, appeared disheartened, but tried not to project it.

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“Bea ... I mean Bean. Could we spend some time together now? Maybe have some cocoa and go to the store. Would you do that for me? One hour.”

Bean looked at Sam for approval.

Sam nodded.

“That will work,” Bean said.

“I’ll give you some time.” Sam stood up; he kissed Bean, and walked across the coffee shop.

He watched for a minute as they started to talk, and then Sam sought out something to do for an hour.

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Sam regretted it the moment he opened his mouth. At the drug store, trying not to make a scene, he pulled the phone from his ear.

“I can’t believe you did that!” Cati yelled.

“Cati ...”

“Anything could happen, Sam. Anything. How long has it been? A half an hour. God, they could be half way out of the state by now”

“They aren’t out of the state.”

“How do you know?”

“I know and ...”

“You have no one to blame but yourself!” she blasted. “Parents kidnap their kids all the time.”

“It’s not the case, here, Cati.”

“Oh. Oh. Ok. I get it. They bonded, right? She’s embraced her as her mother and ...”

“Cati.”

“No, never mind,” Cati said. “I understand.”

“I don’t think you do, and I’ll explain it all ... no wait, I’ll have Bean explain it all when we get home. OK?”

“Al right,” Cati mumbled.

“What was that, I didn’t hear you?”

“All right!” she screamed.

With a wince, Sam pulled the phone from his ear. “And why didn’t you tell me my daughter got her period.”

“I did.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, yes, I did I even recorded the conversation.”

“You recorded the conversation? Why would you do that?”

“Because you weren’t playing attention when I first tried to tell you, and I knew it’d come back at me, so I got my phone, hit voice memo and told you.”

“You really recorded it?”

“Yes, do you want to hear?”

“No. No ... I’m ...I’m gonna get going.”

“See ya’ when you get home.”

“Cati ...” Sam called out before she hung up. “Would you like to go out tonight?”

Silence.

“Cati?”

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“Are you asking me out on a date, or are you asking if we can all do something.”

Sam paused. “You know what? It was gonna be a date, but I think... I think for tonight going out as a family sounds best. What do you think?”

“I think we’re making progress.”

“Yeah. Me, too. Bye.” He hung up, but before he put his phone away, Sam tapped it against his lips with a peaceful smile.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Not that the history test was difficult, but having one after three days back in school made concentration tough. Ali didn't want to take the test. They would have taken the test before Christmas break had it not snowed and the last day was cancelled.

So there she was.

The civil war.

She knew the major players in the civil war and the whys and what's. But at that moment in time, Ali was stumped.

Being distracted wasn't hard.

Billy Conner burped really loud, that made Ali stop.

Ashley finished her test. That angered Ali. Rob kept tapping his pencil, she wanted to shout out, 'Quit it'

But she didn't. She trudged on.

She was nearly done with page two of the three page test when the knock at the door distracted her. Something inside told Ali that Mr. Creighton was there about her, she didn't know why, she hadn't been in any trouble. But surely, if she was needed, Mr. Henderson would tell him he had to wait until after the test.

No such luck.

"Miss Cramer."

Ali looked up.

Mr. Creighton was wiggling that finger at her.

"I'm doing my test," Ali said.

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“We’ll make an exception,” said Mr. Henderson. “Mr. Creighton needs to see you. I’ll take your test for you now.”

Amongst the taunting ‘oohs’, Ali stood and walked to the door. Mr. Creighton led her into the hall.

“What did I do?” Ali asked.

“Where is the cutout?”

Although she tried to muster up a look that said she hadn’t a clue what he was talking about, it showed on her face. The ‘cutout’ was where a lot of the kids went when they cut out of school.

“I don’t know.” Ali shrugged.

“You’ve never been there?”

“Nope.”

Mr. Creighton sighed out. “I’ll pretend that’s correct. Now, tell me something, what sort of trouble would Fudge want to pull your sister into?”

“Fudge doesn’t pull my sister into trouble. I don’t even let her hang around her.”

“OK, then it’s safe to assume that when the video picked up Bea and Fudge leaving school with Kevin through the side door, that they were ... I don’t know, going for a burger?”

All expression dropped from Ali’s face.

“She’s not in school. She’s with Fudge. I’m about fifteen minutes away from having to call your stepfather on her. I’d like to find her and assure she’s safe. I’d like you to help me.”

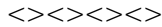
Ali fumed. Not by the request of Mr. Creighton needing help, but by the sheer fact that Bean went with Fudge. Something was

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up, and Ali knew it. Fudge didn't bother with Bean and Ali was pretty certain it wasn't a strong desire to form a new friendship.

After telling Creighton, 'let me get my coat', Ali took off for her locker.



A simple giggle told Artie a lot. Cati had whipped out her phone following the beep, and before he knew it she was diligently moving her fingers across the keypad of the phone as her and Artie walked down the main street.

"What is so funny?" Artie asked.

"Sam."

"Sam is not funny."

"No, but when they compete with the marines he is." Cati sighed out.

"Don't you think lines of communications would go smoother, let alone faster, if you just picked up the phone and speak to him?"

"No. I like this." She smiled when her phone beeped again.

"Wow, he's being fast today."

"And I only have an hour for lunch."

"Sorry." She finished her message.

"Things seem like they are going well."

"With?" Cati asked.

"You and Sam."

"Oh, sure, we don't even fight anymore."

“Do you do anything else?” he asked.

“We talk. We play chess. I’m getting better. Um ... last night we did dishes together.”

Artie just stared at her.

“We get along.”

“You haven’t slept with him yet?”

“Oh my God, no.”

“Why?”

Cati shrugged.

“You don’t like him.”

“Yeah, actually, I do,” Cati said. “And we’ve kissed.”

“That’s progress.”

“But that’s it. We haven’t even made out. I’m beginning to think Sam is asexual, or doesn’t like physical contact.”

Artie laughed. “He’s a man. Of course he does.”

“Then maybe it’s me.”

“Maybe it’s something else,” Artie suggested.

“Like?”

Artie gave a thinking sigh. “Maybe it’s a closeness issue.”

Cati snorted a laugh. “Um, we’re married.”

“Um ... it’s a marriage of convenience and maybe he wants to make sure it stays that way.”

Cati slowed down in her walking. “Why would he do that? I mean if we get a long, why fight it.”

“What happens if it doesn’t work out? The average couple reaches a relationship plateau at thirty months. If a couple has what



it takes they stay together, if not, they move on. Princess, you two didn't get married for the right reason, emotionally. You need to remember that. Perhaps the last thing he wants is for there to be any bad over this."

"That ... that makes sense."

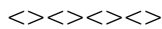
"Or you can test it. Throw yourself at him. Find out for sure."

"That's a thought." Cati took in a deep breath, turned for the door of the restaurant and stopped. Her eyes drifted out toward the street.

"What's wrong?" Artie asked.

"Why is my daughter riding down the street with Mr. Creighton?"

Artie spun fast. "I don't know. But ... let's find out."



Mr. Creighton's car was parked along the side of the road. When Cati and Artie arrived they weren't surprised to see Mr. Creighton, they were surprised to see Ali wasn't with him.

"Where is she?" Cati charged. "I saw you drive here with my daughter. Where is she?"

He held a finger to his lips, and then pointed. He tugged Cati aside. "Beatrice left school today with Fudge. Ali came with me to find her in the hiding spot. This was the only way Ali would do it, if she went and got Bea on her own."

"Why would Fudge take Bean with her?" Cati asked.

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Artie shook his head. “I’m sure Mr. Creighton doesn’t know, but whatever the reason, it’s trouble.”

Ali emerged from the trees into the area where the railroad tracks crossed and the vacant yardmaster hut stood like a monument.

She heard the giggles and whispers, and followed them to the hut. After peeking through the boards, Ali opened the door. “Where is she?”

“Oh, hey ... Ali,” Fudge giggled. “Who?”

“Come on, you know who I’m talking about. Bean. Where is she?”

Fudge snickered. “She’s playing a game with us.”

“Yeah,” Kevin added. “Let her go. She’s fine.”

Ali saw it, the shift in Kevin’s eyes and she, looked out the boarded window. She couldn’t see Bean entirely, but the big, bright pink hat was unmistakable as Bean stood a distance away. “Why is she out there?”

Kevin answered. “Helping us.”

“Assholes.” Ali reached for the door.

“Ali, stop.” Fudge said. “Come on. Let her pick it up. She can be trusted and no one thinks twice.”

“I can’t believe you have meeting your drug guy.”

“Who said anything about drug?” Kevin asked. “She could be getting us something else.”

“Yeah, right. Next time, do it yourself or find someone else.

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Leave my sister alone.” Ali charged out, and raced to Bean.

Bean just stood there, swaying back and forth, seemingly in her own world.

“Bean.” Ali called out.

“Oh my God! Ali-Ali in free.” Bean held out her hands. “Guess what I’m doing?”

“Bean, you shouldn’t be doing anything. You should be in school.”

“Yes, I know, but Fudge said I was going to be part of a secret plan. I was going to make a secret purchase. Look.” She held up her hand. “I have money.”

“Bean ...”

“Wait until I tell Daddy about this.”

“No. Don’t. Just ... don’t. OK?”

“Why?”

“Just don’t. You’ll get in trouble. If you tell your dad he’ll know you left school.”

Bean brought her finger to her mouth.

“Yeah, and stop hanging around with Fudge and Kevin.”

“But Fudge is your friend.”

“If she keeps taking you she won’t be.”

“Ali.” Bean sighed out. “Are you not sharing your friend like Daddy doesn’t share Cati corner?”

“Not at all, Bean. Fudge isn’t always good. Neither is Kevin. He’s a worm.”

“A worm.”

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“Yeah, in fact, he’s all the worms that came out of that guys butt.”

Bean shrieked.

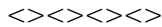
“Exactly. So don’t listen to them. OK?”

“OK.”

“Let’s go.”

“But, Ali-Ali in free. What about the money.”

Ali reached out, took the money, threw it on the ground, grabbed Bean’s hand and led her from there.



Lunch was a bust, and Cati never did get to eat. Artie had to return to school and Cati followed Mr. Creighton as he returned the girls to class.

“When do you plan on talking to Fudge?” Cati asked, as she sat across from Creighton.

“When she returns. I’m more concerned about why they took Bean.”

“Did you ask Bean?”

“I’m hoping you will or maybe find out from Ali.”

Cati nodded. “Alit isn’t going to say anything to you.”

“No, she isn’t. but she may to you. We have to find out what was going on.”

“Well, at least you know about it and can put a halt to it in school.”

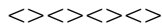
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“In school, yes,” Mr. Creighton agreed. “But I can’t control out of school. And I think that’s where our concern should lie.”

“Why do you say that?”

“If these two teens have ulterior motives when it comes to Bea, then more than likely, they’ll find a way to do it outside of school. They took a chance taking her for a reason. A good reason in their eyes. It wasn’t to be buddies or friends, they were using her. We just need to find out what for and stop it from happening again.”



“Drugs,” Ali said.

“Are you sure?” Cati asked.

“No. But I’m close to being sure. Or else he was just messing with her.” Ali folded her hands on the dining room table. “She had money and was standing at a distance from the track. They told her someone was going to give her something. Sounds like it to me.”

“Well, what kind of drugs does fudge do?”

“I know weed,” Ali said. “I don’t know if there’s anything else.”

“Ok, we’ll really have to keep an eye out then. Do you know why Fudge would pick Bean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Bean would do it without knowing. And if they got busted ... well, Bean wouldn’t get in trouble.”

Cati nodded. She hurried a ‘shh’ when Bean came in the dining

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room.

“Ali-Ali in free, our daddy’s home!” Bean screamed. “Early!”

“He’s your dad, Bean.”

“Our Dad.”

“Bean ...”

“You said you would call him Daddy.”

“No, I didn’t. I said I’d think about it.” Ali said. “And remember; don’t say anything about today to him.”

“I won’t.” Bean held up her right hand.

“Promise.”

“I swear.” Bean covered her mouth.

“I mean it.”

Bean added her other hand to her mouth. She stood like that, wide eyed when Sam walked in.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked, setting down his briefcase.

Bean shook her head and ran out.

“Cati?” He questioned.

“Who knows. She’s a girl.” Cati stood. “You’re early.”

“I was tired. Ali, can me and your mom have a minute?”

“Sure.” Ali stood up. “I want to make sure Bean’s not stealing my batteries.”

Cati chuckled and watched Ali leave. “What’s up?”

“What happened today?” Sam asked.

“With?”

“With Bean leaving school.” He saw the immediate look of shock. “I’m gonna assume that you were waiting until after dinner

to tell me.”

“You could assume that” Cati said. “But that would be wrong. I wasn’t going to tell you.”

“Can I ask why?”

“I handled it. There’s was no need to upset you. I would have eventually told you, but I wouldn’t have told you it as a problem. Make sense?”

Closed mouth, Sam shook his head. “None at all. I should have been called.”

“You’re right. Bad judgment call on my part. I’m going to make dinner.”

“Wait. Stop.”

“Problem?”

“Uh, yeah. You just gave in.”

“Yes, I did. I don’t want to argue. Obviously if you know about what happened, someone called you and someone told you the details, meaning I don’t have to tell you anything, and I’d rather not fight with you.”

“Did I do something?” Sam asked.

“Nope.” Cati shook her head. “I would just rather not argue with you. You have that tense eyebrow, I’m a dick, look tonight and I don’t want to deal with it. I’m in a good mood. Five people died today. This is my best week in a long time.” Bubbly, Cati turned and went into the kitchen.

Sam stood dumbfounded, scratching his head. Did she really just snuff a fight? It was unlike her, and it felt unfinished. Sam

followed her to the kitchen.

“Why are we not fighting?”

From the stove, Cati faced him. “Why is it important to fight?”

“Because, Cati, I stewed. I stewed all day and all the way home. So much so I couldn’t stay at work. So much so, I had to come home and ...”

“Yell.”

“Yes.”

“Go on.” Cati nodded.

Sam took a deep breath; he opened his mouth, and exhaled with heavy irritation. “I can’t. You took the wind out of my sail.”

“Would it help if I yelled first?”

“Are you feeling inspired?”

“Not particularly.”

“Ok, so now we’re stuck.”

“Are you still feeling unresolved.”

Hands on hips, Sam nodded. “yes.”

“Give me a second.” Cati tapped her foot and looked up to the ceiling. “Would you like to know why I didn’t tell you Sam?”

“Yes. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It was a woman thing. You have absolutely no understanding of women. How we feel. What we think. I couldn’t tell you because you wouldn’t understand.”

Silence.

Cati asked. “No?”

“Nope. Won’t work.”

“Fuck.”

“Try again.”

“Sam ...” Cati whined out his name. “Do you really want to fight?”

“I want to yell, Cati. I have it in me. It won’t come out.”

“Like gas.”

Sam laughed.

“Ok, call me Gas X.” Cati cleared her throat. “I didn’t tell you because you’re a dick and wouldn’t get it.”

Sam shook his head. “You call me a dick so often it has lost its impact.”

“I didn’t want you to be there when I talked to Creighton.”

Sam made a scoffing face. “OK and that would make me mad how?”

“I ... I think Creighton’s hot and I wanted to flirt.”

Sam said nothing.

“And ...” Cati continued. “It worked. He was verbally all over. Even complimented my breasts.”

“That’s not even funny.”

Cati snickered. “Someone appreciates my breasts.”

“I appreciate your breasts.”

“From a distance.”

“What other way is there to admire them, Cati?”

Cati fluttered her lips. “up close and personal.” She looked at him. “You really looked confused.”

“You act as if I should be fondling your breasts, Cati.”

“Have I missed something or do you move really slow?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve kissed.” Cati waved out her hand. “Natural progression, here, Sam. Kiss. Make out. Fondle. First, second, third base, home run?”

“We’ll get there if it’s meant to be, Cati. I’m not gonna force the issue. You act as if you want me to take advantage of our situation.”

“Why not?”

“Why would I want to?”

“You know what? Forget it. You wanted a fight you got one. I don’t understand you, Sam Neal. I don’t want to. I thought we were heading somewhere. Our closeness, our touching. You said you liked where we were headed.”

“I do. We are. I just haven’t figured out where.”

Cati nodded hard. “Boy, were we on different wave lengths.” She moved hard from the kitchen. “Excuse me.”

Once again, Sam stood there, dumbfounded. He missed something or else he worded things wrong. Before finding Cati and straightening out the mess, he took a moment to replay the conversation in his mind.

She had to make an impact, so Cati stomped extra hard, told the girls to ignore her, stormed to her room and slammed the door.

It was when she spun around that she noticed the wind of the closing door caused a folder of papers to fly up and scatter about

the floor. Couching down, Cati began to pick up the papers. Her hand paused when she saw what they were. Immediately, she began to skim through them double checking. Her heart sunk, and she grew a sickening knot in her stomach, not at what the papers where but rather by the date of three days earlier.

How long was she on the floor reading the papers in a frozen state? Minutes? A single knock startled her, and Sam entered. “Cati, I was thinking about what I said and...” he stopped when he noticed her.

Cati was still in a crouched position, her one hand holding the folder, the other holding the papers. “Sam?”

Sam sighed out, running his hand down his face.

“I was going to ask you if this was a mistake.” Cati stood with the items. “But it’s not is it?”

Sam slowly turned his head.

“You can’t even look at me.”

“Cati ...”

“It’s a family plan, Sam. A complete family plan, down to the most miniscule detail. Estimate job hours, after school care ...” Cati huffed out in disbelief. “And the special school you’ll send Bean. Where is this place, Sam?”

“Phoenix.”

An airy huff escaped her. “Phoenix?”

“I got offered a promotion and they want to move me to station commander in phoenix.”

“When did you plan on telling me?”

“Tonight actually. I have to leave in a few days to find housing. I’ll be out of town.”

“Why ... why do you need a family plan?”

“To take care of Bean.”

“I’m not mentioned in this at all. Did I miss something? Were you just gonna say, see ya’ Cati, I’m taking Bean. Have a good life. Thanks for the time?”

“Why are you getting so upset about this?”

“How can I not? Sam, I love that little girl. You’re pulling out without telling me. Are you pulling out?”

“I’m moving to phoenix. Yes. Cati, in the Army, you don’t always get choices.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. You didn’t even think about me and Ali going?”

“To be honest I didn’t think that was a consideration or an option.”

“Fuck you.”

“Excuse me.”

“You heard me. Fuck you.”

Sam bit his bottom lip. “I can not believe you just said that to me.”

“Me! How can you say it wasn’t even an option? Not a consideration! We started something here.”

“Yes, I know. And if you’re upset because of the money or the lifestyle. Cati, I won’t leave you high and dry. I want to keep helping you and Ali. You can still have health insurance and ...”

“Did it ever occur to you, Sam, that I don’t want your help? Your money. That maybe perhaps I just want you.”

“Yes.” Sam replied with a knotted throat, choking out the word.

“And it means nothing.” Cati shook her head.

“You don’t understand.”

“I understand everything. Go to Phoenix, Sam. Go soon. Find your housing. Find your life. Take your family plan and shove it up your ass. Do it all as soon as possible. I don’t need this. I don’t need the hurt. I don’t need you.” She shoved the papers hard into his gut, and stormed out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Cati closed the door to the bedroom that fateful night early in January, she closed the door to everything. Closed off to all conversation, emotions, hope. All she saw in her mind when she thought of Sam or closed her eyes, was that Family plan.

Since the moment she had laid eyes on Sam, there was something about him. She fought with him to fight the instant attraction she had. She didn't know why, or what caused it, but she had it. Instantly she was drawn to helping him. From taking care of Bean to helping with the funeral. She felt she was there for months. Laying ground work for better things.

The marriage to him went so smoothly, with little adjustment, Cati felt that had to mean something.

And when he kissed her for the first time, her heart dropped. Not since she was in school had anyone caused her heart to beat harder and her stomach to kick.

Sam did.

But it was one sided. It had to be. Were the kisses his way of appeasing her? Or perhaps his way of seeing if he could draw upon something to make the three years of marriage tolerable? Maybe get close to Cati and enjoy the time instead of biding it. When he realized that there wasn't an attraction, and when the three years would be too long, Sam sought out other options. In Cati's mind, Sam saw the marriage as no less than a mistake and he was politely

bowing out.

Three days after their argument, Sam left. As he said he went to Phoenix to secure a place to live. It was a week into his trip out there that he called.

“It looks as if I have to be out here sooner.” Sam said on the phone that night.

“How soon?” Cati asked.

“Soon.”

“All the better.”

A pause.

Sam said, “I can come home, but I have to go back out again. Being out here for the first month or so is gonna be tough and a lot of work. The station is in trouble. I’ll be working a lot of long hours.”

“Doesn’t fit into your family plan does it, Sam?”

“I’m not going to have the time to handle the schooling aspects and child care things until after I get settled. So, yes, the plan isn’t going as I thought. Not at all. At least not the plan I hoped for.”

“Sam, where is this going?”

“Cati, this is the first instance you have talked to me...”

Her heavy breath silenced him.

“Forget it. Forget I said anything.”

“You didn’t say anything at all.”

“I just need to know if you can take care of Bean until things are settled.”



“When are you gonna tell her Sam? When are you going to tell your daughter you are taking her away?”

“When I can figure out a way to do it without it hurting her.”

“Well, I got news for you, Sam,” Cati said. “There will be no way. She’s loves us and our family life.”

“I know.”

“I’ll take care of her, Sam. That’s not even a question. Just ... just keep us posted to what’s going on.”

Click.

She didn’t hear him call her name. She didn’t hear him try to stop her. Had Cati just not cut him off, she would have heard Sam tell her that he, too loved the family life. Cati had an uncanny ability to never let Sam finish a sentence. She also never let him explain when he said something wrong. But this time was different. There was no room to let things cool. No time either. Each day that passed, made the distance between them further and that was not how Sam wanted it.

When he hung up the phone that day he hung up the phone with his left hand.

His wedding ring caught his attention. Never in his life would he have imagined that he could slip into a marriage of convenience and do so with such ease, that it felt right. It just felt as if it were meant to be. It went smooth, it went comfortable and it felt good.

Sam had every intention of making it work. He wanted to take it slow. They started out backwards. He had missed all those little

steps in between, and Sam wanted to enjoy those. That's all he was doing, enjoying the steps they had skipped.

He wasn't avoiding moving forward, he was just being slow. That night when he said he didn't know where it was going, he was being honest. It wasn't a relationship to lead into marriage, they were already there. Why would he want to take advantage of their situation like she suggested when all he wanted was for the situation to be the best advantage to them.

That was all. He never got that out.

Good communication was not their forte.

Then came the sudden promotion. From there things just cascaded into something out of control. One thing about Sam, he never let things get out of his control for very long. And the Cati situation was going to be a priority in getting under control. Whether she liked it or not.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cati squeaked her finger against the pane of glass as she cleared the condensation in just one spot. The snow fell at an incredible rate. She could see it through the fogged window, but she wasn't looking out. She was just standing there.

There was a feel of aftermath, and the house finally quieted down. Sam was planning on returning, but got held up yet another day. He had been gone over a week.

Each breath released in thought caused the cleared spot to fill again with steam.

Thinking back to only an hour before hand when Sam found his opportunity. He told Bean they wouldn't have to worry about snow anymore. They were moving to Phoenix.

"Oh, my God, Ali-Ali in free!" Bean shouted. "We're moving to the desert."

Then a wave of silence swept over and Bean lost all enthusiasm.

"What do you mean, Daddy?" She asked. "Daddy, they have to come. Ali is my sister. Cati is my Mommy. No! Then I will not come. I'm not coming, Daddy."

And she hung up.

"Tell me Cati corner, tell me I'm not moving without you."

"I can't, I just can't tell you that."

"Why won't you come, Cati?"

A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



What to tell her. Cati was clueless. Did she tell her the truth? That Sam didn't want them to come. She certainly didn't want to take the blame. All she could tell Bean was to wait to talk to Sam and he would tell her.

Bean flew from the room crying.

Sigh.

Cati sought the sanctity of her own room, allowing Bean to cry it out and perhaps think clearer in a bit.

Ali tried her hardest, Cati could hear that. But Bean didn't want to hear.

"I'm just gonna hang out in my room with my football game," Ali said.

"Are you OK, Ali?" Cati asked.

"Is Bean really leaving?"

Cati nodded.

"Why?"

Cati shrugged.

"That sucks. It really sucks."

It was a house of little words. Sam's lone phone call brought an end to a cheerful day. School had been canceled, the girls were playing twister, Cati was laughing, and then came the call.

From up to down in a matter of minutes.

The snow plow moved down the street and Cati cleared an entire section of the window to watch. It didn't really make a dent in the covering of the room, why they plowed was beyond her.

Beep.

A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



It startled Cati, and she spun from the window. Her cell phone bounced on the bed from the vibration.

Text message.

She picked up the phone.

From Sam.

Cati hit 'read'

'how are things?' the message read.

Cati replied. 'how do you think?'

A minute passed, and the phone beeped again.

'I am not gonna call. You don't let me talk. I need to tell you something.'

Cati scrolled own. That was it? Irritated, she returned a message of 'go on'

What was he texting? Minutes had passed.

Beep.

"God, Sam, just pick up the phone." She hit 'read'

'This is ridiculous. Bean is upset. I am upset. Nothing came out right. Things were said. Taken out of context.'

End of message.

Cati was in the middle of typing her response when another message came through.

'Do you know how much I miss you guys? All of you. This is killing me. I have wanted to say so much to you. You need to know how I feel. You never give me the chance to tell you. So this is my chance.'

End of that message.

A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



Cati wanted badly to pick up the phone and dial. What was going on? Where was Sam going with his messages? Her heart beat stronger with each message he sent, and she held her breath waiting for the next.

“Mom!” Ali burst into the room.

In the startle of the intrusion, the phone toppled from Cati’s grip. Her hand shot to her heart. “Ali, you scared me. What’s wrong?”

“Bean’s gone.” Ali held up a sheet of paper. “She ran away.”

Quickly, Cati read the simple note. It didn’t state much: “I ran away. If I can’t live with you, I won’t live in Phoenix.”

Tossing the note, Cati called out a let’s go, and rushed from the room with Ali. She was in such a hurry; she never bothered taking her phone.

On the bed it beeped.

It vibrated and beeped with the message she never saw.

Cati was disheartened to see that Bean had left without even taking her coat. She instructed Ali to call ‘Pap’ and have him come in from the other direction. Then Cati took off. It didn’t take Ali long to catch up to her. She followed her mother’s tracks like Cati followed Bean’s. The snowed fell hard and Bean’s footprints on the walk were nearly covered. They followed the sloppy tracks up the sidewalk. Bean had to be running. The tracks scuffed together. She couldn’t have been gone that long, or made it too far.

About two blocks up the street. The tracks just stopped.

They didn't go right, or left or in any direction. They just stopped.

<><><><>

"Fuck," Cati felt her pockets of her coat they had finally hit center town... "I left my phone."

"I have mine," Ali said handing it to Cati.

"How long have we been out here, Ali?"

"Not long, Half hour."

"Oh, God." Cati held back her bangs. She jumped and filled with hope when she heard the car horn. Turning, Ralph pulled up. She placed the phone in her pocket.

"Any luck?" He asked.

Cati shook her head.

"I stopped at the Sheriff's station, he's aware," Ralph said. "Get in the car. We'll look."

"no." Cati replied. "I'll stay on foot. God, Daddy, what if someone kidnapped her?"

"No one took her, Cati. She's somewhere. We'll find her," Ralph assured.

Cati nodded. No convincingly and watched her father pull away. "Think, Ali. Think. Where could she have gone?"

"We stopped at all the houses." Ali said. "She wasn't there."

"Someone had to pick her up. But who?" Just as Cati asked that question, her head turned slowly watching the old brown car

drive down the road. “When ... when did Kevin start to drive?”

“He got his license at Christmas,” Ali said.

“That was him. And his car doesn’t have any snow on it. Either Kevin was diligent about cleaning his car, or he’s been driving around awhile.”

“You don’t think he picked her up, do you?”

“I think that’s our best guess. Let’s go.”

They were on foot, and Kevin drove slowly, that enabled Cati and Ali to follow him with ease for a short while. They eventual lost sight and had only his tire tracks to go by.

Ali had an idea on where he was heading, in fact when they saw him turn down the one road he could only be going to one place, the cutout.

Cati had taken that route by foot before, with Artie when they chased Creighton’s car. It bred an eerie feeling then, and even worse one at that moment. Cars barely drive that road to begin with, add snow and a blizzard, and it was desolate.

That was how it was. Desolate, snow covered and quiet. Quiet with the exception of the howling wind that blustered up occasionally.

When they finally arrived, they saw Kevin’s car parked off to the side of the road. Cold, wet, and tired, they filled with a last bit of adrenaline to run to the car. As they approached, they saw Kevin come from the woods.

“Kevin!” Cati called out.

He looked panicked. Turning his head, seeing them, mouth open he grabbed his car door.

“Shit, he’s taking off.” Cati moved as fast as she could.

“Should I go down and check the cut out?”

“Go,” Cati ordered. “I’ll check his car.”

Ali veered off to the woods; she immediately began to call out as loud and long as she could. “Bean! Bean where are you! Bean.”

Kevin started his car. Cati neared, she saw him peering through the rear view mirror.

His tires spun.

Stuck.

A saving grace.

She made it to his car and grabbed his driver’s door. “Open up!” she pounded on the window.

Kevin shifted his eyes, then shifted the gears.

The tires still spun.

“Where is she? Have you seen Bean? Kevin.” Cati pulled on his door. “Please I just need to know if you seen her.”

Kevin ignored her. And that was when Cati saw it. The red of the lock on the passenger’s side door. It was unlocked. Pretending as if she were giving up, Cati stepped back. Looking at his right front tire she saw he was dug in, and then quickly she headed around the car.

“Mom!” Ali’s voice called out in the distance.

Cati could barely hear her over the spinning tires.

“Mom!”

Cati halted, her feet sliding in the snow. Her hand slammed down on the passenger side hood of the car to catch he balance, and she turned her head.

“I found her! Mom, she’s Ok. Cold. But Ok..”

Muttering out a “Thank God.” Cati charged back toward the direction of the woods, just as she stepped forward, Kevin’s tire broke free. Cati heard it. With a turn of her head, she only caught a glimpse of Kevin as his car rammed forward.

“And you’re sure you’re OK, Bean?” Ali asked, adjusting her coat on Bean.

“I’m cold Ali-Ali in free.” Bean shivered.

“Well, no kidding, Bean. It’s cold out. Kevin didn’t hurt you, did he?”

Bean shook her head. “No. He picked me up. I told him I was running away and he said this was a good hiding place. He said if I stayed here, you’d find me. You did, Ali-Ali in free.” Bean hugged her. “But I still don’t want to move.”

“We’ll discuss that later.” Ali tugged the coat. “Don’t ever run away again, Bean. We were worried.”

“I promise.” Bean smiled then giggled. “You look funny Ali-Ali in free with snow on your head.”

“Mom does too. Let’s go.” Ali took Bean’s hand. “She’s probably yelling at Kevin right now, and I don’t want to miss it.”

“Is Cati-Corner mad at me, Ali-Ali in free?”

“No, Bean, she loves you and was worried.”

A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



Ali tugged faster, bringing them through the section of the woods to the road. When they emerged, it wasn't what they expected.

Had Ali walked at an angle? Come up at a different spot? She wondered because she expected to see Kevin's car. It was quiet. She looked to her right, just as she looked to her left, Bean screamed.

Ali saw. At least she thought she did. It was hard to tell, because it looked like a black ball on the side of the road.

Before Ali could comprehend what her eyes lay upon, Bean took off running. Reality sunk in about the same time Ali's heart sunk to the pit of her stomach. She seeped out an aching, "Mommy." As she, too, took off running.

It was horrid, loud and painful. The aching cry Bean released as she dropped to her knees by Cati.

Circles of steam encased Ali's mouth as she huffed out heavy breaths of emotion. "Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Mommy."

Cati lay there on her side, rolled into a partial ball. A fresh layer of snow began to cover her, as the snow around her head glistened with the red of her blood.

"Ali-Ali in free. She won't answer me." Bean looked up. "She won't answer. Wake up. Please wake up." Bean wiped the snow from her face. "Please Cati-Corner wake up."

Ali's lips quivered and slowly she dropped down to her knees. "Please God, please let her be alive." Her trembling hand reached out. She didn't need to touch her mother to know, the second Ali

saw the tiniest bit of steam emerge from Cati's noise, Ali heaved out a breath of relief.

"She's hurt, Ali, she's hurt bad."

"I know." The words wept out of Ali as her entire body trembled. "We have to get help, Bean. We" She reached for her phone. It wasn't there. She recalled she gave it to her mother, and carefully, but quickly Ali checked Cati's pockets.

Empty.

"What is it?" Bean asked through her tears.

"We have to call for help. The phone. I need the phone..." Ali stood, she began to look around. Where was it? Where was the phone? "There." Ali called out and ran into the road. It was covered by a thin layer of snow, and as soon as Ali lifted it, she knew calling for help would be a vain attempt. The phone fell into pieces. "Oh, god." Ali threw the remains and screamed out. From her gut, wrenching and loud she released a scream, tossing out her hands as she looked upward to the sky. The cry turned into sobbing and her head dropped, and shoulders bounced.

She wept for a few seconds, then shivered a snuffle, wiped her hand across her face and raced back to Bean. No doubt she was overcome with panic. What to do? The snow fell harder and the road showed no signs of traffic.

"We should scream for help, Ali-Ali- in free. Scream real loud." Bean said then shouted. "help! Someone help us!"

Ali shook her head. "No. Stop."

Bean kept shouting. "Help us!"

A Girl Called Bean – Jacqueline Druga-Johnston



“Bean!” Ali snapped. “no one will hear us! No one!”

“we have to get her help.”

“I know.” Ali crouched down. “Bean, listen, I’m ... I’m gonna run into town. I’m gonna run for help. OK?”

Bean nodded.

“you stay here. You stay here with her.”

“I will. I will.”

Ali leaned forward and laid her lips on Cati’s cheek. “I love you, Mommy. I’m gonna get help. I’ll be right back.” Ali stood. “Watch her, Bean. Watch our Mom.”

Ali took off running.

Bean was alone. She watched Ali disappear into the whiteness of the snow. Looking around, the silence nearly frightened her. “It’s gonna be OK, Cati-Corner.” She wiped the flakes from Cati’s face, as she spoke shivered and quick. “It’s gonna be fine.” Trailing her fingers over Cati’s cheek she noticed the slight blue color to her lips. “You’re cold. I’ll get you warm. Don’t worry.” Bean took off the coat and laid it over Cati. Then after kissing Cati on the cheek, Bean leaned forward. On the side of the road, crying her eyes out, Bean hovered and embraced Cati with her body and her soul.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Liz kept it together. Ralph's eyes held a glaze of sadness. How long had they waited in the emergency room. Waiting to hear something. Hours.

Ali had barely made it to town when she was picked up by Sheriff Nichols who was out looking for Bean. He radioed for an ambulance and headed out to Cati.

Help arrived, but they had to transport her to Akron.

And there they waited.

Ralph extended a cup of coffee to Liz. "Hospital has a family room. Why don't you get some rest?"

"No." Liz took the coffee. "It's only nine o'clock. I'll wait. I'm not leaving. I'm not leaving my daughter."

Ralph sat down next to his wife and grabbed her hand. He looked at Ali who just stared out, her legs folded close to her body and she hugged them. Bean was in the chair next to Ali. Her head on Ali's shoulder.

"In case I don't tell you girls enough," Ralph said. "You both did very well."

Neither of them responded.

They were all like zombies. No movement, no emotion, waiting for any news at all.

How many times had they all done it? In Unison. The doors

from the back of the emergency room would open, a doctor would emerge and they'd all turn with hopeful eyes that he'd be giving them news about Cati. Only to be disappointed when he went somewhere else.

Finally, a doctor did emerge and he looked around. The second he stepped toward Liz and Ralph, they stood up.

He extended his hand, and introduced himself as the resident neurologist, Dr. Manning.

"Would you like to go somewhere else to speak?" he asked with a motion of his head toward the girls.

"No," Liz answered. "They'll be told anyhow. How is she? How is our daughter?"

"She defiantly is suffering from hyperthermia Which actually worked in her favor or the blood loss. Aside from superficial wounds, abrasions and so forth. She has a fractured clavicle and she has a costochondral separation of the third and fourth rib on the left side. A pneumothorax has occurred. Which is a deflated lung. But its minor, we don't see a need for surgery. But ..." he sighed out. "That's not where our concerns lie. Those are minor, and if they were the only injuries we'd be sending her home in a few days. Unfortunately, your daughter has suffered a fracture to the parietal portion of the skull." He indicated by his temple. "Just above the temporal line. When an individual suffers a head injury, the brain jolts. It shakes around causing swelling and hemorrhaging. At this point, with the swelling she has it's hard to determine exactly where and if the damage to the brain occurred."

Ralph spoke up. “So it’s possible she could just recover without damage.”

Dr. Manning nodded. “Possible but ...”

Liz finished his sentence. “not probable.”

“It’s hard to say. Right now she isn’t responding at all. She hasn’t woken, or showed any signs of stimuli. I hate ... I hate to use the age old saying, but the next forty-right hours are crucial. Very crucial.”

“What does this mean?” Liz asked. “I don’t understand. Crucial to what? Her full recovery. What?”

“If she doesn’t wake up or respond in forty-eight hours, it will be pretty much safe to assume she won’t wake up from the state she is in. Meaning she will have slipped into a coma. Problem with everything is, her head injury is affecting her vital signs. They are low. They’re actually very low. Does she have a living will?”

Ralph whispered out an emotional ‘oh my God’ as he turned his back.

Liz shook her head.

“Do you know her views on it?”

Confused, Liz’s head went side to side. “I would assume she would only want to be on life support if it is a means to aid her recovery.”

Dr. Manning nodded. “That’s what we need to do. We need to place her on life support, and hope for the best. Hope that her body is just resting. She may turn around, wake up and make a full recovery.”

“What do you think?” Liz asked.

“I have seen all kinds of cases.”

“But what do you think?” Liz asked stronger.

“In my opinion, and I hope that I am wrong, I don’t foresee her making it through the forty-eight hours.”

An emotional wheeze came from Liz.

“Her chart says she is Catholic, we have a priest on call if you’d like to have him come up and ...”

Liz interrupted his sentence with a nod. A single nod. “Yes. Yes. Please.”

Dr. Manning nodded. “I’ll get someone to take care of it. I’m sorry.” He laid a hand on her shoulder. “We’re going to be moving her to ICU. When she gets there, we’ll let you know.”

Liz only shivered her acknowledgement as the doctor walked away. She turned.

Ali looked horrified and shocked at the news, and Liz reached out to both her and Bean, drawing them in and close. Lowering her head to theirs, Liz, held on to the girls. She just held on. That’s all she could do.

<><><><>

How did her grandmother do it? Ali wondered. They had moved Cati to a corner room, a private one in ICU and Liz planted herself at Cati’s side. She sat there in there chair watching. Intravenous lines ran into in her arms, wires across her chest,

hospital tape kept the tube in her mouth.

Hiss, click and beep.

The only noises in the room ringing with sadness were the hiss, clicks, and beeps of the machines that monitored her and kept her alive.

Ali didn't want to leave her mother, not at all. If she had to, like Liz, she'd stay the entire forty-eight hours.

Ralph took Bean to the family room to get some rest. Ali heard him tell Liz that he would get some sleep so he could stay with Cati if she needed the break.

"No break," Liz said. "I'm here. I won't leave. If I need sleep. I'll close my eyes."

Ali felt the same way. But she needed a break. Liz didn't want anything, and Ali really wasn't hungry, so she sought out a drink.

She had change in her pocket and wandered from the ICU ward to the hall with the coffee machine. That would do.

Ali put her money in and selected cocoa. She pressed the button. Nothing happened. She pressed it again. Suddenly the failure of a simple mechanical device sent her into a tizzy. Harder she pressed, over and over, increasing in intensity until she hit the machine with all she had.

It banged and still didn't work. In defeat of the day, succumbing to the moment, Ali leaned against the machine and began to cry.

A single footstep caught her attention, and wiping her eyes Ali turned. At the end of the dark hall she saw a figure, the light from



behind made him a mere silhouette. But Ali didn't need to see the face to know who it was. The way he walked and moved was all she needed as confirmation, and Ali charged, full speed down the hall to him.

"Sam." She sobbed.

There was no hesitation. Sam took her immediately into him, wrapping his arms all the way around her, holding Ali close, cradling her head as her body shook in her tears.

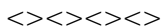
"I got here as fast as I could. It's gonna be Ok."

"No. No it's not." Ali cried. "They gave her last rites, Sam."

Sam closed his eyes and swallowed hard.

"What are we gonna do? What am I gonna do if my mother dies. She can't die, Sam. Please she can't die."

Sam didn't have a response. Even if he did, nothing he could say would make it any better. All he could do was close his eyes tighter, and embrace Ali tighter.



The moment Sam received the call about Cati he headed home. Arrangements weren't as easy as he had hoped or as easy as they started out. He got a flight out right way. But when he landed in Indianapolis and found out Akron and Cleveland Airports, he rented a car and drove the rest of the way.

No one answered any phone calls, he expected that, so he was in the dark as to what had happened. All he knew was Liz called,

Cati was hit by a car and was on the way to the hospital.

Not even in his pessimistic thoughts, did he conceive the fact that Cati would die. Hearing she had received last rites was a knife through his soul.

Ali led him to the ICU unit and the room. Sam paused by the glass window when he got there. He could see Cati inside on the bed. His hand pressed against the glass and he tried with everything he had to portray strength. He kept it in check. At the very least for Ali. Holding his hand, Ali brought him in the room.

There was something too painful about seeing Cati like that. So strong, Cati was at the mercy of machines and the prayers of those who loved her. The beeping monitor beep slow, too slow.

“Grandma.” Ali whispered.

It was airy and filled with relief when Liz stood and called his name. “Sam.” She embraced him. “I’m so glad you got here.”

“I ... I wouldn’t ...” Sam had to stop. His throat closed up and he choked. His eyes locked in on Cati. “Can I ... Can I have a minute with ...my wife?”

“Yes, absolutely.” Liz replied. “I need to get some air. Ali?”

Before Ali left, she gave a quick hug to Sam and walked out with Liz.

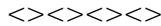
It took only a second and Sam switched gears. He allowed his heart to sink to the pits of his soul while his hands and body shook. He reached over closing the door just slightly for privacy then he moved to the bed. There he lowered the side railing and didn’t even bother with the chair, he fell to his knees in desperation,

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grabbing onto Cati's hand and clenching it for dear life. His lips met her skin first, pressing hard, and then he lowered his head to her arm.

"Cati," he spoke with a cracking voice. He rested his chin on her arm, eyes lifting to her. "Why didn't I pick up the phone and call you with what I had to say. I'm sorry." He lowered his head. "I'm sorry."



Just before dawn, Sam headed home. He wasn't going for long, a shower, and perhaps some items that would produce happy energy for Cati. Items he would place by her bed.

Twenty-four.

Cati's heart rate jumped from a mere nineteen beats per minute to twenty-four and stayed there steadily without dropping again. Sam took that as a sign, where others didn't see it as that hopeful he did. A stronger beat was better than a weak one.

Ali took the ride, and Sam didn't mind. He felt she could pick items probably better than he could.

He was getting to know Cati, but he hadn't gotten to where he wanted to be. Why couldn't he have just moved faster? Moved on what he wanted. He thought his plan was a good one. He thought he had time.

There was a strange feel to the house along with a strong burning smell. The coffee pot was still on and the contents had

burned down to a crisp layer at the bottom of the pot.

Sam removed it from the burner and set it aside.

He dreaded going upstairs. He couldn't put his finger on it. Cati's energy was all about the house, strong and lingering, both he and Ali absorbed it.

"I have pictures in my room," Ali said. "I'll get them."

"Do that," Sam nodded then took on the task of steeping into the bedroom. Cati's pajamas were still on the floor, the bed was made, but the room had the 'just left' feel to it.

What to take?

Ali had pictures, that was good. There was a footprints poem in a frame on Cati's dresser, Sam grabbed that, and on the nightstand was her Michael the Archangel prayer card. For sure he'd bring that. Cati was easy; everything that meant something to her was in plain view. On the dresser or nightstand, and Sam grabbed them. Setting the items on the bed, he saw it. Cati's cell phone. The flip top was still open and the screen read, 'message received from Sam'

It made his heart sink. She hadn't got it. She hadn't received his last message. Cati left the house, and the most important thing he had said all week lay within the confines of a cellular phone.

With a chuckle of sadness, Sam pressed read.

'I need you in my life. I need you here. I want you here. Please think about it.' He shook his head as he pressed the down arrow, to expose what the last line. 'I love you.'

Sam closed his eyes and a lump formed in his throat.

“I can’t do this,” Sam said out loud.

“Sam?” Ali spoke into the room.

He closed the phone and sniffed. “Hey, Ali, did you get them?”

“Yeah, did you get the stuff you wanted?”

“Yeah.” Sam placed the phone in his pocket and gathered up the items on the bed. “we’ll grab a bag downstairs.”

“How come ... how come you grabbed her phone, Sam?”

“I sent her a text. She never got it.”

“Was it important?”

“I thought so.” Sam whispered. “I thought so.” Walking to the archway of the bedroom Sam wondered if he overrated that message in his mind. Was Cati done with him, like she portrayed or was it act? Was he as strong on her mind as she was his? Shutting off the light, and taking one last look back in the room, Sam got his answer.

The street light shined through the window like a beacon. But it didn’t just cast a light in the room; it cast a light on something else.

The dark room in contrast with the light from outside allowed for him to see that not only had Cati been drawing in the condensation of the window, but she had written something.

A single word. A confirmation to him of her thoughts before she left the house.

On pane of glass, written in a slanted manner was the name ‘Sam’.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Bean wanted badly to place a special flowered hat on Cati's head, but knew she wasn't allowed because of her injury. So instead, to make Cati pretty, she gave her the big, giant, fluffy, pink Panther slippers.

When Sam returned to the room, the sight of the slippers poking out from under the sheets greeted, that and his daughter painting Cati's nails.

"Bean, what are you doing?" Sam asked.

"Making Cati-Corner pretty, Daddy. Cati always worried about being pretty. I don't want her to worry that she doesn't look good laying in the bed."

"I don't think when she wakes up she'll care."

"She'll care, Daddy. Trust me. Right Ali-Ali in free?"

"Probably, Bean." Ali walked into the room. "Should I put this stuff out, Sam?"

"Yes, please."

Liz asked. "What did you get?"

"Just some items from our room."

"done," Bean announced. "Pink. Like the slippers." Bean stood up. "Daddy, when the nurse came in she called Cati-Corner my Mommy. I ... said she was. Maybe if I call her Mommy, she'll hear and get very excited and wake up and say thank you."

"Maybe." Sam said. "Um ... I have something I want to say to

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Cati. Can ... Can I get you guys to give me a minute? I'm sorry."

Liz stood. "No, no, that's fine. Come on, Bean."

"Don't touch her hands, Daddy," Bean said. "The paint isn't dry. And speak in her ear so she can hear you over the beeping."

"I will." Sam placed his hands in his pockets. He watched Ali.

Before she joined her grandmother, Ali set the items on the heater, then walked to her mother and kissed her. She faced Sam. "Are you gonna make her mad, Sam?"

"Who?"

"My mom."

"Why would I do that, Ali?" Sam asked.

"To make her angry enough to wake up and fight with you."

"You think that will work?"

"It might."

Sam smiled. "What I'm telling her right now is more for me. I just need to say some things to her. Things I should have said before the accident."

"I understand." Ali walked to the door. "Sam? Just so you know. If you had wanted us to go with you to Phoenix, we would have."

"And just so you know, Ali. I did want you guys to go with me to Phoenix."

"Did my mom say no?"

"We never got to the point where I got to ask."

"I'm sorry, Sam."

"Me, too."

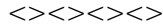
Ali nodded, gave a sad smile and walked out.

Sam walked to the bed. He pulled up a chair close to Cati and sat down. “Did you hear?” Sam said, grabbing on to Cati’s hand. He inched close to her ear, and kept his voice at a passionate whisper. “Ali ... Ali said I should piss you off. Maybe make you angry enough to fight. But ... what Ali doesn’t know is you don’t fight fair, Cati. You don’t fight fair at all. You ... you cut me off before I can explain, assume what you want, get the last word and never let it resolve. Which is fine, because after a span of time, you and I resolve it. But this time ... This time you pulled the ultimate. You’re making it impossible here to resolve this. You know that, don’t you?” he sighed out. “They’re not thinking you’ll come back. I don’t buy that for a second. You’re too strong and too stubborn. I know, I know I haven’t made it easy. I know I give you a hard time. I’ve made you feel bad when I shouldn’t, and not appreciated you when I should. But I think you know where my heart is. I should have told you. I didn’t. I had it in my mind that because we skipped over all the important parts of falling in love, we could capture them during our marriage. I wanted to enjoy each and every one of those with you. I still do. I plan on it. And you know, every time I tried to tell you this over the last week we’d fight. Well, I have a request. I need one more fight out of you. Just one more. Fight this. Fight to wake up. Then I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to make sure you don’t have to fight for anything the rest of your life. Do this for me, Cati. For me, your parents, our kids. We all need you. We do. We’re selfish, see. We’re

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very selfish. You're just too special to let go of. Do this... please.”
On his final word, Sam brought his lips to her and kept them there.



They were an army of hope and vigilance, and Sam had joined the ranks of Liz, Ralph, Ali and Bean, in the plight to not leave the room until Cati surpassed the danger zone.

Artie stopped by. He brought cards from the kids at school, and told about how heartbroken Creighton was over the incident. He gave her some gossip, but didn't stay too long. Aside that it was hard for Artie, the hospital kept pitching a fit about the number of people in Cati's room at all times.

Just after the twenty-six hour mark, Sheriff Nichols stopped in to inform them that they had arrested Kevin but wasn't sure how long they could hold him. There were no witnesses to what had happened, only Cati, and since she suffered a head injury, the chances of her even remembering the accident were slim to none. If she woke up. Their only hope was for Kevin to confess and that didn't look as if it were happening.

For some reason, maybe it was concern for Cati, Kevin's conviction was not important. It wasn't discussed much after the sheriff left, nor dwelled upon.

Around Ten pm, Ralph deemed it too much for the girls, and decided to take them to the all night diner for a late bite to eat. It didn't matter if they were hungry; he wanted to get them out of the

hospital.

Liz and Sam stayed behind.

They talked some. Liz told of Cati childhood stories, things Sam was glad to hear about. Then she took to reading, and Sam, chair next to Cati's bed, holding her hand, fell asleep with his head resting against her arm.

How long had he been asleep? The brightness of the room caused him to open his eyes. No way had he slept so long that the sun came up. But a split second of waking made him realize it wasn't the sun, but the overhead lighting. And as Sam quickly caught his bearings, he realized it wasn't the brightness that woke him, but the commotion in the room.

What was happening? Still holding Cati's hand, he lifted his head to see the nurse undoing the tape around Cati's mouth. A shift of the eyes, brought he vision of Liz, tears in her eyes, wiping a tissue under her nose.

"What's going on?" Sam stood up. "What are you doing?" he asked the nurse in a panicked.

She pulled the tape off completely. "I'm removing the respirator."

"Sam ..." Liz spoke softly.

"No." Sam shook his head. "Stop it. Please."

The nurse worked with the tubing in Cati's mouth. "Mr. Neal your wife Your wife is breathing on her own."

Every ounce of his emotions seemed to bellow out in the form

of an uncontrolled breath that heaved from his body as he looked to the monitor and saw her respiration had increased.

“We had to do this quickly,” the nurse explained. “We didn’t want her to choke. She’s showing signs of responding.”

As if he needed the reiteration, Sam turned to Liz and she nodded.

“How could she not?” the nurse said. “She had all of you pulling at her.”

“Cati,” Sam whispered out. “I am so proud of you.” The second he said that, his eyes lit up and widened. “She grabbed my hand. She just ... she just grabbed my hand. Look.” He lifted his hand some to show Cati’s fingers clenched tight to his. “She’s holding my hand.”

Liz rushed to the bed. “Cati. Cati, honey.”

The nurse backed out of the way, “It may take a few hours, she may not wake up right away.”

On those words, Cati’s eyelids fluttered.

Liz called again. “Cati.”

Her eyes fluttered once more then slowly she opened them.

Both Liz and Sam gasped.

It took a second or two, and her eyes seem to not want to focus. They were glossy and dark.

Sam leaned closer, “Hey,” he whispered with a smile.

It was hard to understand, raspy and barely a whisper, but Cati spoke out a ‘hey’, then closed her eyes again.

She was out. But that was OK. She was breathing on her own,

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responding, and woke up even briefly. That was enough. It was something. Something other than her hand for Sam to hold on to.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It took three days before Cati could keep her eyes open for longer than a few seconds, or even mutter out more than a few words. And when she was finally able to stay awake for a short period, she was out of it.

After week of being in the hospital Cati was more alert. Staying awake for extended periods of time, having normal conversations, and less pain. She didn't recall what had happened. In fact, most of that morning was a blur. Only bits and pieces were there. The last thing Cati remembered was watching a snow plow drive down the road.

It was obvious by her hospital stay that a horrible accident occurred. What exactly it was and how it evolved would forever be a mystery, but to Cati it wasn't all bad. After all, she had Bean calling her mom, and Sam constantly holding her hand.

How many times did he say to her, "I thought I lost you."

How many times did Cati reply, "You aren't getting rid of me that easy, Sam Neal."

In the blink of an eye she may have almost lost her life, but in the same breath her life had changed.

Two weeks of bad food, doting parents, and begging, produced permission for Cati to return home.

The day she was released, Sam had to go to Phoenix.

She was alright with that. She really was. Because this time

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when he left, he left asking assurance that Cati wouldn't be far behind.

She couldn't promise a time frame, she could only promise her presence.

There was so much to do, packing, planning, preparing. Too much for her to handle before she was well.

Recovering afforded her not only the time to get better, slowly get things ready, but also to reflect.

Everything was different.

She felt strong one day, about three weeks after the accident. Strong enough to venture into the bedroom closet and sort out what she would take and what she would leave behind.

It was that day that she found it and it brought it all into perspective.

The Elmer Fudd style hunting cap with pink flowers. Bean had given that hat to Ali for helping her. It was the hat that produced a friendship between the girls. Cati examined it. Different things sewn together, not everything was perfect, but as a whole, it was a pretty good piece of art. Ironically, just like the family they had created together.

That hat would forever be special. It was symbolization and a reminder. The day that hat came into her life was the same day her life began a journey on a path that she loved. A path that all started with a girl called Bean.

The End

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