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Crystal Flowers

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CRYSTAL FLOWERS

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Sunny Garcia

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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my family. I want to take a moment to thank my daughter for being strong enough to recover. It will be an everyday challenge but taking one day at a time you will succeed. To my wife who stood by my side through depression, anxiety, loss, and family I thank you and will be forever grateful. To my son, I know this was a difficult time, but I am glad that you took it as a learning opportunity and have become such a smart accomplished young man.

CRYSTAL FLOWERS

by

SUNNY LORENE GARCIA, M.A. Ed.

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Abstract

The focus of this project is to illuminate the struggles of having a child addict and how it affects not only the addict but the entire family. Addiction in adolescence is on the rise across the United States. This project investigates the relationships between family members dealing with an addict. The research conducted consisted of finding other familial stories that were similar which had different outcomes. My analysis shows a strong correlation between family members who struggle with having a child addict and the overall results. There are some limitations that appeared with the project and that was not enough training for councilors, the recommendation is to require training throughout school and after to stay up to date with the changes. To conclude, this project covers the emotional trauma associated with having a child addict.

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Crystal Flowers



August 28, 2016, the day that changed everything. Until that day, fear had been an idea, a concept. Now it was real: a feeling Kathryn would carry with her the rest of her life. The day began innocently enough, with Nicole going to school. She was a freshman this year. Kathryn hoped for a fresh start for her daughter. She was hoping Nicole would make new friends and begin doing better in school, now that she had her ADHD medication, Kathryn hoped she didn't have to make as many visits to the principal's office this year and listen about her daughter's behavioral problems. Nicole struggled in both elementary and middle school, with making friends and staying out of trouble.

After a few weeks of being in high school, Nicole was doing well and making a few new friends. The schools have a program online for parents that allows them to view their child's grades and receive messages from teachers. Kathryn checked this program once a week, so she knew that Nicole was progressing in all of her classes. However, one day Nicole complained to a teacher that a girl had been calling her names and picking on her. The teacher responded by telling her to ignore the girl. After this complaint Nicole's grades began to slip, and when Kathryn asked her about it, she explained that the girl who had been picking on her was in every class she had, and she couldn't concentrate. Kathryn called the school that morning to set up a meeting with the principal.

The principal liked meeting after school hours, and Kathryn picked her parking spot with the luxury unseen at that school since it is usually very busy. The entryway had large, vaulted ceilings, black and red carpet and tall windows that let in a significant amount of light. When she reached the receptionist's desk, she was ushered into a back office to wait for the vice principal. Along the beige walls were posters in colorful puff paint reminding everyone to have school spirit, others had fundraiser information on them for sports, band, and cheer teams. Further down the hall there was a bulletin board with school regulation forms. The receptionist stopped at a cherry wood door and opened it ushering Kathryn inside. It was a small square office with a big cherry wood desk and tall backed office chair. The walls were covered with inspirational quotes and phrases like "Be Your Best Self" and "Be Kind, Be Brave" they were all rainbow colored with big bold letters. In between these posters were plaques of awards, and degrees, reminding visitors that the office belonged to an educated person. The chair that Kathryn was asked to sit in was narrow, with metal arm rest and a thin blue cushion. It was clearly made for small high school kids with narrow hips, obviously not for a mother with a large backside. Kathryn shifted uncomfortably in the chair trying to find a position where the chair would hold all of her.

After about thirty minutes of waiting and repositioning Kathryn walked back out into the lobby to the receptionist and asked how much longer she would have to wait. The receptionist looked at Kathryn like she was last night's dirty dishes and spoke into a walkie talkie. Kathryn could not hear the response because the receptionist had on a headset, she said thank you into the black handheld box and told Kathryn to go back into the small office, it would only be a few more minutes. Kathryn walked back into the office and squeezed herself back into the small uncomfortable chair and waited. Another fifteen minutes passed, and Kathryn was quickly losing her patience, taking in large amounts of air, and pushing it back out quickly in a huff. As

Kathryn stood to return to the receptionist, a small woman appeared in the doorway. She had dark curly hair, small frame with large breast that overflowed from her top. She introduced herself to Kathryn as Mrs. Renteria. She pointed to the uncomfortable chair; and once again she managed herself into it with a few wriggles. Mrs. Renteria listened as Kathryn explained that Nicole was being bothered by another student. She asked Kathryn if she knew the other girls name, she replied quickly, Hynaseey Montelongo.

“I know her, and I will make a report of the complaint and speak to her about it.” Mrs. Renteria assured Kathryn. Kathryn stood up and shook hands with Mrs. Renteria thanking her for fixing the problem. She promised Kathryn that Nicole was safe and would be left alone.

Kathryn drove home relieved that she was able to get the issue resolved quickly. When she arrived home, she entered the house and walked to her office. The house is similar as to the other small 1950's stuccoed houses in the rest of the neighborhood with one difference this one; a large fence surrounding the property, designed to keep strangers out. There is concrete as far as the eye can see, no yard, no trees, no plants, only concrete. A few years ago, there were trees, at least two, but now only their stumps remain like a warning for other plants to beware. The other houses have nice green lawns and large leafy trees, fresh cut grass perfumes the neighborhood in the summers when the heat of the day weighs everything down. There is a constant hum of swamp coolers that can be heard at all hours of the day and night, along with the sounds of dogs barking at the police sirens going by.

The house sits second to the left, where there are no lights on at night, like in a small, abandoned ghost town. The only obvious inhabitation are two cars that come and go throughout

the day, and the four small dogs that hide behind a “beware of dog” sign. In this neighborhood no children can be seen playing basketball or riding bikes. It is quiet.

When Kathryn entered the house through the front door with an intricate stained-glass oval window, and gold trim, she hung her keys on the wall and sighed at the sight of the large wall plastered with crooked frames of different sizes, shapes, and colors, all of which reveal smiling happy faces of children at different ages and various adults in awkward poses or shyness hiding behind a hand. She cannot figure out how to keep the frames straight; every time the door opens or closes the wall shakes. On the opposite wall there are two large cut out arches with little colorful dragon figurines hanging from the centers, that which Kathryn collected over the years. Through the cut outs the room beyond can be seen, it has an antique Victorian style chair with a red velvet cushion, and rose carved wood that Kathryn picked up at an estate sale, the kids swear that it’s haunted. There is a faint smell of dust floating about the air. All around the room there are various plants at different growing stages, Kathryn has tried very hard to keep them all alive. They all call this room the library, with its oversized bookshelves, overflowing with a wide variety of books, novels, poetry, textbooks, children’s book, and autobiographies each with their own layer of dust and dog hair.

Kathryn stopped and stared at the paintings her mother made her, there are three large paintings of beautifully constructed sunsets. One uses brilliant blues, greens, and yellows while the one in the middle has deep reds, maroons, and black. The third has the most vibrant colors of blues, purples, oranges, reds, and wisps of yellow, each have a different mountain background, this one is Kathryn’s favorite.

From the library she can see a small dining room and kitchen because they are combined, only separated by a short length bar. Kathryn walked toward the refrigerator, pulled a bottle of water out and took a big drink. She looked around the room, still happy with the new paint colors she recently chose, sea foam green with a white ceiling. She remembered when the entire area used to be a putrid brown, including the ceiling. This gave the impression that the walls were closing in, like being buried alive under the reddish-brown dirt in Arizona.

A small archway from the dining room leads to Nicole's room, painted with teal and brown which are her favorite colors. She likes all things western in style and decorates her room with horses, ropes, and cowboys. It has dark brown curtains to match the walls as well as a single bed that has a teal comforter. There is a dresser across from the bed that has different kinds of make-up strewn about and fake eyelashes stuck to the mirror. Her room has its own small bathroom, pink cabinets make up one wall, it has a low toilet and pedestal sink. There are different photos of Nicole's friends taped to the walls as well as fuzzy teal carpet in the middle of the floor.

The small hallway just passed the kitchen has three doors to choose from. Opening the door to the left there is a small bathroom with blue tiled walls, and a brown topped single counter. The opposite door opens to James' room, Kathryn's youngest, where there is a Lego land mine strewn about the floor. One wall in this room is painted bright red with hints of pink. Clothes are thrown about, with a backpack, shoes and other miscellaneous toys piled anywhere.

The last door at the end of the hallway is Kathryn's wife Stella's office, with file cabinets, and boxes piled high with files. It has the appearance that someone has just moved in, even though they have been here at least six years. When Kathryn, Stella and the kids moved

into the house they chose this room to be the artistic room and used every color from everywhere else in the house and made it rain paint. The walls are splattered with various colors, reds, pinks, greens, purple, browns, and yellows. Through the last door is the master suite complete with walk in closet and a big master bath that has a hot tub in the corner. Chlorine in the air stings your eyes and nose, but always smells clean.

Kathryn walked into her office after setting down her purse on the bar in the kitchen, she needed to prepare for her morning class at the community college where she taught English. Her job was to instruct students how to write a formal academic essay. Grabbing her work bag, she left the house and drove a short distance to the local college. Kathryn was saying goodbye to the last student when her phone started singing the toon to Super Mario Brothers. She scrambled to get her phone out of her bag, which always seems to fall to the very bottom. She quickly answered, seeming to be out of breath. on the other end of the phone the receptionist from Nicole's school said there had been an incident that they could not inform Kathryn of over the phone, she had to be there in person. Frustrated, she rolled her eyes, let out a breath and told the woman that she was on her way. Kathryn threw her bag in the backseat, closing the door she snagged her shirt so when she tried to get into the front seat she was stuck. She released her shirt, slammed the back door and was finally able to start the car. She grabbed the steering wheel with both hands, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She looked at herself in the mirror and said, "calm down, it won't help if I die on the way there."

Kathryn left campus and went directly to the school, hitting every red light on the way there. She screeched into a parking spot and rushed into the building where she was greeted by

the same receptionist she had seen earlier in the morning. This time however, Kathryn was given a smile that seemed out of place from the urgency of the phone call. Kathryn was taken into a conference room with a large round table that took up most of the space. It had big black rolling chairs that were much more comfortable than the others. The walls were painted a cream color but had no decorations on them. Besides the desk and chairs the only other thing in the room was a small phone attached to the wall in the back corner.

A tall man with dark hair, blue button up shirt, and red tie entered the room, followed by a police officer in uniform. Kathryn stood and shook their hands as they introduced themselves to her, Mr. Tafoya, and Officer Vargas.

“Can someone tell me what happened,” Kathryn asked, not hiding the frustration in her voice. “Where is my daughter? Why isn’t she here with you? Is she hurt? What the hell is going on!”

“I’m gonna need you to calm down before we can take you to see her,” Officer Vargas said holding out a hand defensively.

“Do not tell me to calm down! You call me down here and then refuse to let me see my daughter. I will not calm down until I see her and know that she is okay!” Kathryn responded.

“Nicole was in an altercation during the lunch break, she is fine just being checked out by the school nurse,” Mr. Tafoya said. Kathryn’s cheeks turned red and her nostrils began to flare.

“I will speak with you after I see my daughter, take me to her now!” Kathryn demanded.

Mr. Tafoya led Kathryn down a small hallway and opened the door with ‘Nurse’ on the door. Once Kathryn saw that Nicole was unharmed, she calmed down. Nicole didn’t have any

injuries, not a scratch. She only had swollen purple and red knuckles. Kathryn hugged Nicole and insured her that everything would be okay. Kathryn broke free from the hug and took Nicole's face in her hands, turning it this way and that to inspect for injuries. Once cleared of inspection they turned and exited the nurse's office.

The three of them returned to the big conference room and each took a seat. Mr. Tafoya was the principal for the school and explained that the fight between Nicole and the other girl was caught on camera outside the commons area. Officer Vargas who had stayed in the room filling out paperwork, said he had never seen a fight so brutal before. Kathryn creased her brow and looked back and forth between the two men and Nicole. Kathryn asked to see the video but was told that it wasn't allowed because other students were also seen on the video and because of FERPA rules that prohibits it. Kathryn argued that if that was the evidence against her daughter that she needed to see it. The principal continued to deny Kathryn's insistence.

"But Nicole doesn't have any injuries," Kathryn said aloud. Officer Vargas explained that it was Nicole who beat up the other girl. So bad in fact that the girl had to be taken to the hospital. Kathryn sat speechless looking at Nicole. Nicole looked up at Kathryn with tears in her eyes and told her who it was that she fought.

"It was Hynaseey, the girl who was bullying me. I'm so sorry mom, I just couldn't take it anymore," Nicole said looking down at her hands and she picked at the dry skin next to her index finger. Her shoulders slumped forwards as if she was trying to make herself smaller.

Kathryn put a hand on Nicole's leg and patted it softly. She explained to Mr. Tafoya and Officer Vargas that she was there early in the morning to complain about this girl who was bullying Nicole and Mrs. Renteria said she would take care of it. In not so many words Mr.

Tafoya explained that, the vice principal Mrs. Renteria was related to Hynaseey and told her about the complaint. Which led the girl to continue to harass Nicole and during lunch she tripped Nicole making her spill her lunch tray. Nicole retaliated by using her tray to hit Hynaseey in the face several times, and when the tray broke Nicole used her fists instead. As with any school fight other kids formed a circle around the two girls. Several of them had their phones out and recorded the fight. Officer Vargas said that it took three grown men to get Nicole off the injured girl.

“Mr. Tafoya, this is not Nicole’s fault because I filed a complaint with the vice principal. It is her fault for telling the girl about the complaint. She’s the one who made the situation worse, and I want to file a formal complaint against Mrs. Renteria,” Kathryn said taking Nicole’s hand in hers.

Officer Vargas interrupted Kathryn and said that the girl’s parents were pressing charges against Nicole, assault, and battery. Kathryn laughed at him and told them that they would need to press those charges against Mrs. Renteria because it was her fault this happened. He explained that unfortunately that is not how things worked. Nicole was the one who physically assaulted the other girl, resulting in her injuries. Kathryn asked how bad the injuries could be because it happened at school where there are teachers and security guards who could have stopped it before it got too out of hand. Mr. Tafoya told Kathryn that the girl would have to remain in the hospital because she had swelling on the brain and that the teachers and security got to the fight as soon as possible. Kathryn asked about pressing charges against the girl for instigating the fight to begin with when she tripped Nicole. That could be assault as well.

Nicole began to sob, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I don’t know what happened. I walked out of the cafeteria and I was going to sit with my friends and didn’t see her. When she tripped me, I got so mad, I just wanted her to leave me alone. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt her. I don’t even remember what happened. She tripped me and the next thing I know we are surrounded by other people that were yelling and holding out their phones.” Nicole said rocking back and forth, trying to talk between sobs. Kathryn told Officer Vargas that Nicole needed to be taken to the hospital because she too could have some sort of brain injury. Kathryn stood and helped Nicole out of the chair and started walking towards the door to leave. Officer Vargas stopped them, he said that he would have to take Nicole into custody because she was being arrested. Kathryn demanded that Nicole be taken to the hospital to be checked out.

Before they could leave Mr. Tafoya handed Kathryn paperwork to sign. “Are you serious, two-week suspension? Kathryn signed the papers and slid them back across the table and glared at Mr. Tafoya. Kathryn blew out a breath and said, “thank you for all you have done to keep my child safe.” Kathryn wrapped her arms around Nicole and guided her out of the office and down the hallway.

The sunlight was blinding after being in the office for so long, Kathryn had to let her eyes adjust. Once outside of the school however, Officer Vargas put Nicole in handcuffs and put her in the back of his patrol car. “I will be taking her to Memorial Medical Center to get checked out if you want to follow us,” Officer Vargas said while closing the back door of his cruiser.

Kathryn put her hand on the window and told Nicole everything would be okay. She saw Nicole crying before she put her head down using her long brown hair to cover her face. Kathryn raced to her car and started the engine, so she could follow behind the police car. When they arrived at the hospital, Kathryn requested the handcuffs be removed but Officer Vargas refused saying it

was not part of protocol. From the morning to the afternoon Nicole went from innocent victim to dangerous perpetrator, and there was nothing Kathryn could do to help her.

The staff at the hospital checked Nicole in and took her to a specific holding room that they used for prisoners and others with mental disorders. The room was small, rectangular, with pale off white walls and a glooming fluorescent light overhead. The floor was smooth tile that had little speckles of blues, pinks, and yellows in it. It was not like any other hospital emergency room that had trash cans, chairs, and medical things on the walls. This room was bare, with only a single bed sitting in the middle, no monitors, no other chairs, nothing. At first the nurse refused to let Kathryn in the room with Nicole until Officer Vargas said it was okay. Kathryn thanked him as the nurse pushed a straight back chair into the room. It was a heavy chair, one that wouldn't be easily lifted or thrown. That was probably the point, and why they used it for this room.

Kathryn held Nicole's hand and hugged her close while Nicole shook with fear, her face red and blotchy from crying. Another nurse came in and took Nicole's vitals which was difficult with her being handcuffed to the bed. After she finished, she walked towards the door, only turning at the last moment saying the doctor would be in soon. Kathryn took this time to try and figure out what happened with Nicole that led to this. Nicole continued to say that she couldn't remember anything. Kathryn held her hand and sat down in the chair. She watched as the realization of what was going to happen to Nicole washed across her face.

"Oh my god, mom, I'm going to jail. I'm too young to go to jail, I'm only sixteen. Why isn't she going to jail? She started it," Nicole kept asking questions between sobs that Kathryn couldn't answer. "Oh my god, what are James and Stella gonna think about this? My friends?"

Everything is crashing and I don't know what to do. Mom help me. I can't go to jail." Just as Kathryn opened her mouth to say something the door opened and a short man in a white coat came into the room. He introduced himself to Kathryn as Doctor Diaz. He explained to Kathryn and Nicole the test that he was ordering called a computed tomography or a CT scan to check Nicole's brain. He also mentioned as he was leaving the room that this was the second girl of Nicole's age that was getting a CT scan. Kathryn and Nicole just looked at one another and stayed quiet. Kathryn thought about Stella and wished she were there to hold her. She was always good in a crisis. Then she thought about James and wondered how this would affect him. She realized that she hadn't called Stella to let her know what was going on. She didn't want to leave Nicole, but she wasn't allowed to use her phone in the room, so she made a mental note to call Stella as soon as they heard the results.

After the CT scan was complete, the doctor went back into the room with the results. It showed that everything was normal, and Nicole was healthy. Officer Vargas stepped into the room after the doctor and asked him if he would do a drug test to rule that out as well. He explained that a lot of times when teens fight and cannot remember it is because they are on some kind of drug. Kathryn told them both that the only thing Nicole had been taking was her Adderall for her ADHD. Kathryn exhaled loudly letting the doctor and Officer Vargas know that she was irritated that they thought Nicole was on drugs. The doctor agreed with Officer Vargas and stepped out of the room, asking a nurse to run the test. A nurse entered the room holding a plastic cup for Nicole to urinate in, she asked Officer Vargas to escort her to the restroom so she could do the test.

He led Nicole down the hallway to the bathroom and stood outside the door. Nicole noticed that other patients were watching her closely, so she put her head down using her hair once again to hide her face.

“Hello, so something happened today. Nicole got into a fight with that girl whose been messing with her. Well, she’s being arrested because the girl’s parents are pressing charges. I know it shouldn’t have gone this far. Yes, I did, I talked to the vice principal. I will explain everything when I get home. No, you don’t need to come down I think that we will be gone before you get back into town,” Kathryn said into the phone. Unfortunately, Stella worked an hour away, but promised she would be there soon. Kathryn hung up the phone and wiped away tears right before Nicole exited the restroom holding her cup with a napkin. Nicole tried handing the cup to Officer Vargas who stepped back so quickly he stumbled into a nurse passing by.

“Don’t give that to me! Gross! Oh shit, I’m sorry,” he said to Nicole and the nurse he bumped into. Nicole dropped the little cup, it turned on its side and rolled down the hallway a bit. When it hit the ground, it began to leak leaving a yellow streak following behind it. The nurse that was bumped into quickly grabbed a pair of gloves and picked up the cup. She grabbed a few disinfecting wipes and cleaned up the puddle that formed around the cup as well as the trail it left behind it. Officer Vargas led Nicole back into the small solitary room and handcuffed her back to the bed.

“Is that really necessary, she clearly isn’t going anywhere,” Kathryn asked. Officer Vargas again told her it was protocol and had no choice. As he stood there Kathryn studied his face, he had a five o’clock shadow even though it was a little past one. His eyes were a grey color with little gold sparkles like gold leaf had been wiped across his eyes. He had dirty blonde

hair with a few red highlights that showed like copper in the fluorescent lighting. His uniform was so dark blue it looked black, it had his shiny badge as well as a utility belt that held his gun and other stuff. On his right shoulder was a handheld speaker attached by a strap that held it in place. Every once in a while, it would chirp or crackle like an old television set full of static. It was attached by a curled cord that plugged into a radio at his hip. His face was round and still held some baby like features, he couldn't be older than twenty-five Kathryn thought. She couldn't determine his height because everyone towered over her. But if she had to guess he was probably around five-nine with broad shoulders and narrow hips.

Nicole coughed and brought Kathryn's attention back to her. Kathryn watched her baby girl lying in a hospital bed handcuffed to the rail. Her perfect baby, helpless and needing help in a situation that was new to them both.

In the same hospital sixteen years earlier, the day started out normal enough, Kathryn was overdue with Nicole and waddled all around the house trying to clean up and made sure her hospital bag was packed and ready to go. That morning Kathryn wasn't feeling well, every ten minutes or so she had the urge to use the bathroom and continued to have stomach cramps throughout the day. Around two o'clock in the afternoon Kathryn's husband Lee arrived home. "I don't feel very good today," Kathryn said from the big grey sofa she was sitting on.

"What do you mean?" Lee said closing the front door and walking towards the kitchen. "What kind of not feeling good?" They lived in a tan and blue two-bedroom trailer, it had two bathrooms a small kitchen/laundry room and a nice size master bedroom with a walk-in closet. The carpet was a dirty brown to match the off-white walls with brown trim.

“I mean my stomach hurts. I think I might have eaten something bad,” Kathryn said rolling to get up from the sofa. Lee turned and watched her get up from the sofa, laughed and opened a beer.

“You look like Shamu getting up from there. How long has your stomach hurt for? Like days? Hours? Minutes? You gotta be more specific,” Lee said leaning up against the wall in the kitchen watching Kathryn in the living room.

Walking towards the kitchen, Kathryn said, “I don’t know really, a few hours maybe. I try to use the bathroom, but nothing comes out its just cramps.” She opened a cabinet and pulled out a glass and filled it with water, took a few sips and put it down on the counter.

“You’re stupid, you’re in labor,” Lee said looking at Kathryn through creased eyebrows.

“Well, how am I supposed to know, that they don’t tell you what labor feels like,” Kathryn looked at him like an overflowing laundry basket and walked back into the living room and sat back down on the sofa.

“I’ve already done this twice, so I know, just call your doctor,” Lee said sitting down on the opposite side of the sofa, taking a swig of his beer, and turning on the TV. Kathryn got back up from the sofa and walked into the kitchen grabbing the phone off of the charging station and pulled the card for Planned Parenthood off of the fridge and dialed the number listed.

“Hello, I need to speak to Dr. Keller please, I think I’m in labor,” Kathryn said into the phone walking towards the bedroom. She sat down on the bed and leaned back against the wooden headboard.

“Congratulations, can I get your name and date of birth please?” The receptionists asked. Kathryn gave her all the information she asked for and squeezed the phone with each new cramp. “How far apart are your contractions?”

“I’m not sure, I haven’t been counting,” Kathryn heard Lee from the other room yell “It’s because you’re stupid.” Kathryn looked at the wall like she could burn a hole through it and straight into Lee’s head on the other side. She heard him call out again demanding that she get him another beer.

“Kathryn are you still there?” the receptionist asked through the phone.

“Yes, I’m sorry. Um, I think my contractions are about four to five minutes apart,” Kathryn said rubbing her belly feeling her baby move and kick, she smiled and was happy she would soon get to meet her baby girl.

“I will notify Dr. Keller. You will need to get to the hospital and get checked in. They will have all of your information on the second floor.”

“Okay, I will have my husband drive me,” Kathryn hung up the phone and walked back into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and grabbed a can of beer for Lee. Walking into the living room she opened the beer and handed it to Lee. She picked up several empty cans and put them in the trash in the kitchen. “Lee, I don’t want to bother you, but the contractions are getting worse and closer together, could you take me to the hospital soon?” Kathryn said sitting down on the edge of the sofa.

“After the rodeo, I can, Lee said looking only at the television with his furrowed brow and dark brown eyes. “Why don’t you make me something to eat since you have time,” Lee said waving his hand and snapping his fingers towards the kitchen. Kathryn looked at him like he was

a stain on the carpet that wouldn't ever come out. She stood and walked into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and pulled out a steak and set it on the counter. Walking past the stove she turned on the oven to pre-heat. She opened the pantry and pulled out a potato and set it beside the steak. She opened the steak package and seasoned it with Lee's favorite seasonings, garlic, season all, salt, and pepper with a little sprinkle of cayenne pepper. She used a fork and poked holes into the potato covered it with butter and wrapped it in foil. From the living room she heard the television change to a baseball game. She rolled her eyes and let out a breath she didn't realize she was holding.

I'm gonna give birth right here in my own kitchen, Kathryn thought to herself as she placed the potato covered in foil into the oven. She squatted as best she could and grabbed a cast iron pan from the bottom shelf. She placed it quietly onto the stove and set the oven timer for thirty minutes. She paused what she was doing every couple minute's, bending over in pain because the contractions were getting closer together. She gripped the countertop and tried not to make a sound. Standing up straighter she walked to the bedroom and sat down on the bed. She heard Lee calling to her from the living room, so she rolled onto her side to get up. Standing up she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She opened her eyes and took another deep breath and walked out into the living room.

"Katy, baby. Get me another beer. How's dinner coming along?" Lee said reaching his hand out to take Kathryn's hand. She took his hand and stroked the top of his hand with her other hand. He gave her hand a little squeeze and released her hand. Her hand suddenly felt cold after feeling the warmth of Lee's hand. She walked to the fridge, grabbed another beer, opened it, and took it to Lee back in the living room.

“Your baked potato is in the oven, after it cooks for a bit, I will fix your steak. Just the way you like it.” Lee pulled Kathryn closer and rubbed her belly and grabbed her butt. Kathryn tried to pull away, but Lee held her tighter. “Lee please, let me go,” Kathryn asked.

“I am talking to the baby, shut up and let me be,” Lee said grabbing Kathryn’s arm pulling her down onto the couch. Kathryn grimaced as she fell onto the couch, holding her stomach as a contraction hit. “Just sit down with me and let me talk to the baby.” He pushed Kathryn back onto the couch, so he had better access to her swollen belly. “How is my mooshy, are you ready to come see me? It could be a boy, you know, those ultrasound things aren’t always accurate?” Kathryn had no choice but to lean back onto the couch and let Lee talk to her belly. She focused on keeping her breathing steady as another contraction came across her stomach fast and painful. The ultrasound picture they had a frog magnet holding it to the fridge showed a black smudge with an arrow pointing out that the baby was a girl, but Lee refused to believe it. He even said, “I don’t make girls.” After a few minutes Kathryn heard Lee snoring, she rolled him off her stomach easily, so he didn’t wake up. She stood from the sofa and walked into the bedroom. A contraction came on so strong it bent her in half, she had to hold onto the dresser, so she didn’t fall to the floor. She cried out in pain and quickly used her other hand to cover her mouth to stifle the sound. After the contraction was over, she made her way to the bed and laid down.

The timer in the kitchen went off and startled her. She rubbed her eyes and rolled to get up from the bed. She stood and walked into the kitchen to finish Lee’s dinner. When she entered the kitchen, she peaked in on Lee who was sitting with an open beer in his hand watching the TV again. “Shut that damn thing off already,” Lee demanded. “And get me another beer.” Kathryn

opened the fridge to get another beer for Lee but there wasn't anymore. She looked down at the floor and took a deep breath before walking into the living room to face Lee.

"Lee, um, I'm sorry but there aren't any more beers in the fridge. Please don't be mad," Kathryn asked quietly from the doorway. Lee looked up from the television and looked at Kathryn like she was a pebble in his shoe. As he got up from the sofa another contraction came and Kathryn fell to her knees in pain, with one hand she gripped the wall and with the other she held her stomach. "I think it's time to go to the hospital," She said from the floor. Lee stood over her as he had done many times before and pulled her up from the floor. He held her by the back of the neck pulling her hair as he helped her up.

"You need to do as your told," Lee scolded, gripping her neck tighter as though she were a kitten being removed from a clogged rain gutter.

"You know I would if I could. Please don't be angry. Can you please take me to the hospital?" Kathryn begged. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she looked at Lee. He rolled his eyes at her request letting her go so fast she stumbled backwards into the stove knocking the cast iron skillet to the floor.

"Fine, but I expect my dinner tonight when you get home. Let me take a shower and get ready first," Lee said walking past her to the bedroom. Kathryn sighed a breath of relief as he left the room. She walked into the living room and gathered up all of the beer cans and took them back into the kitchen trash. She picked up the skillet from the floor and pulled the potato from the oven and turned it off. Standing at the sink looking out of the window she could see the neighbors leaving their house. "I should run out and ask them to take me away from here."

Kathryn walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa. She laid down and turned onto her side. One contraction after another came with such speed and force Kathryn curled up into a ball and cried. After about thirty minutes later Lee came out of the bedroom fresh and clean. “You’re not even ready yet,” Lee said looking at Kathryn on the sofa.

“I am ready, please just take me now. The contractions are about one to two minutes apart now,” Kathryn said rolling off of the couch, she slipped on her shoes and started walking towards the front door. Lee grabbed his keys from the wall rack and pressed the unlock button on his key fob. He had to help Kathryn into his truck because it was too tall for her to climb pregnant. It was a bright red dually truck that had faded over time to look pinker than red. Lee was proud of his truck and cleaned it regularly, or he would have Kathryn clean it for him while he watched. Thirty minutes later they arrived at the hospital. Lee pulled up to the drop off area and let Kathryn out. “You’re not coming with me?” Kathryn asked raising her eyebrows.

“I have plans with the boys, you just page me when you’re ready to go home and I’ll send my dad for you.” Kathryn barely had time to grab her bag before Lee pulled away from the curb. She walked into the hospital and notified the reception desk person wearing a pink vest that she was in labor. They quickly put Kathryn in a wheelchair and rushed her up to the second-floor maternity ward. Dr. Keller was talking to a nurse with bright red hair and a pierced nose as Kathryn was wheeled off of the elevator.

“I have been waiting here for you, are you okay?” Dr. Keller said, who did not look happy. Her eyes were squinted, and her brow was creased, she looked at Kathryn sideways and pursed her lips together. She had long brown curly hair, that she tries to keep pulled back, but it

seems unruly with strands sticking out in every direction. Her skin was pale and soft but working indoors all the time it's not surprising.

“My contractions are so close together; it hurts really bad,” Kathryn said holding her stomach.

“Alright, let's get her into a room and check her out,” Dr. Keller said to a nurse who took over pushing the wheelchair from the elderly woman in the pink vest. They wheeled Kathryn down the hall and into a room that looked like a hotel room except for the bed of course. It had soft lighting, a comfortable looking chair in the corner, a nice cupboard for the patients clothing as well as a painting on the wall below a hanging television that had an ocean wave crashing down on a tan shore. The nurse leaned over and set the breaks on the wheelchair and helped Kathryn into the bed when a contraction came. Kathryn cried out in pain bent over in the bed and grabbed her stomach. It felt like there was a ton of bricks hanging from her belly button, stuck on the bones of her pelvic bone. Dr. Keller took her place at the end of the bed and checked Kathryn to see how dilated she was.

“Come on people, this baby is coming now,” Dr. Keller said sliding into her blue gown. The small room began to fill up with several nurses and a man who wheeled in a plastic baby bed. The nurse that stood out to Kathryn the most looked very familiar, she had blonde hair, smooth tanned skin, and a small frame. Kathryn focused on the nurse trying to see her name badge, but it kept swinging around with her movements. Another one had a short pixie cut, with brown hair and large breast that strained against her tight scrubs. Everyone moved around the room so quickly that their faces all became a blur. Another contraction came on and it was stronger than any she had felt that day.

“I need to push!” Kathryn cried out. Dr. Keller told her to try and refrain from pushing because she was dry, the baby had absorbed all of the amniotic fluids. Dr. Keller warned Kathryn that by pushing too soon and dry could tear the babies scalp open, but it was too late Kathryn was bearing down hard. Dr. Keller demanded sutures, clamps, and gauze from her nurse that was standing close by. Kathryn felt a headache so strong that it made her nauseous, she started to get tunnel vision where the world narrowed down so small, she had to shut her eyes tightly. “Something’s wrong, I don’t feel right,” Kathryn said as she threw up on the side of the bed. Before anyone could do anything, Kathryn slumped over the side of the bed unconscious.

“Mom has passed out, put her on oxygen and get the smelling salts. We need to get this baby out now!” A nurse broke open the smelling salts and waved it under Kathryn’s nose, but she did not respond.

“It’s not working, she isn’t waking up,” the nurse said turning the oxygen up a notch. Dr. Keller told the male nurse to push on Kathryn’s abdomen to help with the delivery. The same nurse that turned on the oxygen started pushing downward on Kathryn’s stomach when she awoke screaming out in pain. Just then the baby’s head emerged, tearing Kathryn open on both sides. Kathryn’s eyes rolled backwards, and her head flopped back onto the bed. Dr. Keller guided the baby the rest of the way out by turning its shoulders sideways and nodded at the nurse to give another push.

“Baby’s not breathing, get her intubated immediately,” Dr. Keller said handing the baby to one of the other nurses that were waiting by. She took the baby carefully and placed her in a plastic bed with a bright heated light above it. She placed a bulbous blue balloon over the baby’s face until she began breathing. In the meantime, a man in a blue robe used a suction tool to clean

out the baby's nose and throat. "Shit! Mom's hemorrhaging, get me an OR now, and someone call the husband." The team moved quickly, rushing both mom and baby out of the room. The baby was taken in the plastic bed to the NICU which held baby's with special needs. Like those born too early, or with a birth defect of some kind. They wheeled a still unconscious Kathryn down the opposite end of the hall leaving a trail of bright red blood behind. From the nurse's station that they passed by another doctor was checking files when he noticed the blood trail following Dr. Keller's patient to the elevator. He picked up the phone and dialed the custodian's line directly to have the hallway and room cleaned.

The nurse with the blonde hair stopped at the nurse's station to call Lee, Kathryn's husband. She copied the number from Kathryn's chart and picked up another phone to dial the number. Lee answered on the third ring, "Hello Lee, this is Sabrina one of your wife's nurses from the hospital. I wanted to fill you in on what's happening. After delivery, the baby was not breathing, but don't worry she is fine now. Your wife on the other hand is going into emergency surgery for a hemorrhage. The surgery should take about an hour if you would like to come down, the baby is in the NICU where you can stay with her until the Kathryn goes into the recovery area."

Sitting at the bar, down the street from the hospital Lee took a drink of his beer and listened to the nurse talk. The bar had license plates from all over the world plastered to the walls, dollar bills covered the ceiling and several colorful bras hung from the ceiling fans. Behind the wooden bar there was a giant mirror that was as long as the bar. A variety of bottles stood on lit up shelves in front of the mirror. The bar opens up to a small room that had two pool tables with hanging lights that had beer logos on them. The rest of the walls had neon lights promoting different beers and alcohols. Behind the bar was a man using a white towel drying a

glass. He had dirty blonde hair, uncombed, tattoos coving both arms and a Nirvana t-shirt. He was looking around the room not really focusing on anything in particular.

“Go figure, I knew she would mess this up,” Lee responded putting his hand to his forehead and closing his eyes tightly. He used his thumb and forefinger to rub both eyes at the same time.

“Excuse me?”

“Never mind, I guess I can come down and see the baby for a few minutes,” Lee said looking up at the bartender, raising his glass for a refill.

“Okay, I will let them know you are coming in. You will need to stop downstairs at the reception area and ask for a badge to get upstairs. Once on the second floor there are doors that have a speaker attached, push the button and a nurse will let you in,” the nurse said hanging up the phone. She rolled her eyes with irritation and picked up another chart to get back to work.

Lee finished his beer, paid his tab, and waved at the guys playing pool. He walked outside and took a deep breath of the evening air. He took his keys out of his wrangler jeans pocket and unlocked the truck door. He climbed inside and put his head back on the window and closed his eyes. He came awake when he felt his pager buzzing on his side. He wiped his eyes and tried to focus on the number. He got out of the truck and walked to the front door of the bar, but it was locked. He checked his watch, and it was four o'clock in the morning. He got back into his truck and started the engine; he drove a mile down the street to the hospital. The whole area was light up with streetlights and lights on the outside of the hospital. To the left of the parking area there was a helicopter landing pad close to the emergency side of the building. The parking lot was empty at this hour so Lee parked as close to the front door as he could get. He

walked into the front sliding doors and looked around for the reception desk. The area was absent of people, no patients, no one working in the admissions office, not one single person. Lee walked behind the reception desk looking for a badge or a phone number to the second floor.

A guard making his rounds noticed a man poking around the reception desk looking for something. The man had dark skin tone, black jacket and pants with a chain hanging down from his side and attaching to what the guard assumed was a wallet in his back pocket. As the guard got closer to Lee his right hand trailed over the taser in his holster. “Can I help you find something, sir?” the guard said getting closer to Lee. “We do not have any drugs in this area. I’m gonna need you to come out from behind the desk, keeping your hands where I can see them,” the guard said unclipping his taser.

Lee saw the guard and held out his hands innocently. “Hey man, I was told to come here and get a badge for the second floor. My wife just had a baby,” Lee said trying to keep eye contact with the guard. The guard had salt and pepper hair, thin build, and a scar across his left eye. He straightened up when Lee explained his reasoning.

“Unfortunately, you have missed visiting hours. The hours are eight to eight so there won’t be anyone to let you up there till then,” the guard said relaxing a bit.

“Oh man, can’t you help me. I mean you have a bushel of keys can’t those get you in anywhere?” Lee asked trying to get the guard to help him. “Okay so here is the truth, my wife was in labor forever, so I went down to Charlie’s bar and had a few drinks to celebrate and fell asleep in my truck. Some nurse called and said there were complications, so I just want to see my family and make sure they are okay. You get it, don’t you?” Lee pleaded.

“Alright, what is your wife’s name?” the guard asked picking up the phone at the reception desk. He dialed the second floor and explained the situation. Reaching into a bottom drawer he pulled out a small piece of white plastic. He handed it to Lee and escorted him to the second floor. Once in the elevator Lee made small talk to keep the mood light so he got what he wanted. The elevator doors opened to the second-floor lobby area, there were chairs a vending machine and a small sofa. Turning the corner there were two hallways to choose from and Lee didn’t know which way to go. He slipped his hand into the elevator before the doors could close and the guard would be gone.

“I don’t know which hallway,” Lee said to the guard shrugging his shoulders. The guard poked his head out of the elevator and pointed to the hallway with room numbers 200-220. “Hey, thanks man,” Lee said and walked towards the double doors. He pushed the speaker button but there was no answer, so he pressed his again and again. A nurse on the other end answered like she was too busy to be messing with a stupid intercom. She buzzed Lee in and told him which room Kathryn and the baby were in. He walked down the hallway into room 210 and found Kathryn sleeping and a tiny baby in a plastic bed. He tip toed across the room and sat in a recliner chair.

Kathryn awoke to the baby crying and hit the call button on the remote the nurse had handed her when they brought her to this room. It was a lot like the other room she was in except this one had a real hospital bed instead of a delivery bed. She was told that she could not lift anything over five pounds and the baby was seven pounds, so she had to call for help. She was still groggy from the surgery and loss of blood and had to put her head back down on her pillow. She talked to the baby calmly until a nurse came in and picked up the baby bouncing her a little as she handed her to Kathryn.

Rolling onto her back Kathryn took the baby and cradled her close. She noticed Lee sleeping in the recliner chair but ignored him to focus on the baby. “Have you thought of a name for her yet?” The nurse asked handing Kathryn a diaper and wipes.

“Nicole Marie,” Kathryn said with a smile looking down at her baby. Lee woke up stretching his arms above his head and yawning. He opened his eyes to see Kathryn and a nurse staring at him. “Good morning,” Kathryn said wrapping Nicole in a tight roll and taking her gown off of one shoulder exposing a breast. She pushed Nicole’s face up to her nipple to feed her and she latched on hard. “Ouch! Hey no one said this would hurt. Hey little girl loosen your grip,” Kathryn said stroking Nicole dark hair.

“Morning,” Lee said from his recliner, he sat up and watched Kathryn feed the baby. Lee stood up and walked the short distance to Kathryn and placed a hand on her exposed shoulder. He leaned down to whisper in Kathryn’s ear so the nurse couldn’t hear what he had to say. “I’m glad you’re both alive. I knew you’d fuck it up though. This baby is not mine. I don’t make girls! You will pay for this,” Lee gripped Kathryn’s shoulder so hard that there were fingernail marks when he let go. The nurse noticed Kathryn stiffen and asked if everything was okay. Lee responded for Kathryn saying everything was fine.

“Can I get you anything? Do you need anything else?” the nurse asked walking towards the door and placed her hand out for the hand sanitizer.

“Yea, I could use a beer,” Lee said showing a lot of teeth when he smiled. The nurse actually blushed at his request.

“I’m sorry but that’s not allowed, and I was talking to the new mommy,” the nurse said smiling looking down at the floor not making eye contact with anyone in the room to hide the

blush in her cheeks. Ashamed, Kathryn pulled the sheet up over her arm to hide the fingernail marks and said she was fine. She knew that if anyone saw the marks Lee left, he would only make more later when they were alone, and then they wouldn't be as small as fingernails.

Kathryn placed Nicole on her shoulder to burp her when she spit up. Just before the nurse left the room, she took one look back at mom and baby and noticed a blood trail down Kathryn's gown.

"Hold on a moment, may I see her for a minute," the nurse asked taking Nicole from Kathryn, she had a little blood spittle on her lower lip that the nurse quickly wiped away with her blanket. She placed Nicole in the plastic bed and listened to her breathing and her heart.

"What's the matter," Kathryn said trying to get out of the bed. Upon standing though she saw little sparkles floating in her eyes and had to sit back down.

"She sounds fine, may I have a look at your breast please?" the nurse asked lowering her voice to seem calm. Kathryn lowered her gown and there was a trickle of blood seeping out.

"Okay, don't panic. Everything is fine, you have not produced milk yet and she made you bleed. No wonder it hurt so bad. We will give her formula for now and keep trying," Kathryn began to cry, I'm such a failure, first I almost lost Nicole before I had even met her and now, I can't even feed her. "I promise you everything will be okay. It's normal for new mommies to feel overwhelmed. It is all a learning opportunity and that's what we are here for."

"Not surprising," Lee said from the chair in the corner, staring out of the window at cars passing by. The nurse pulled out a small bottle with pre-made formula in it and handed it to Kathryn. She picked up Nicole and handed her to Kathryn to feed. After a bit of fussing and squirming Nicole took the bottle and fell asleep.

“Lee, will you call my parents and let them know that she is here?” Kathryn asked holding out the phone attached to the wall by a long curly cord. Lee made the phone call quickly and told Kathryn he would be back later. Before she could argue he walked out of the room and closed the door behind him. The nurse followed behind him giving Kathryn and Nicole some time alone.

Kathryn watched her baby suck on the tiny bottle, she had a full head of black hair, a small head, long arms, and legs. She could hold on to your finger with her long toes and fingers. She had little black hairs all over her body making Kathryn think of a tiny monkey. She has a little curl to her top lip, a round nose where her nostrils flare when she cried and the softest skin as well as the brightest blue eyes. Kathryn smiled concentrating on every detail of the baby. After Nicole was done with the bottle, Kathryn burped her and laid back on her pillow holding Nicole to her chest. Both fell asleep. A little while later Kathryn’s parents barged into the room yelling congratulations waking up both Kathryn and Nicole who began to cry.

Kathryn welcomed them and handed Nicole to her mother Suzanne. She put Nicole down onto the plastic bed and unwrapped her so she could see all of her. Kathryn’s father Joe went to the other side of Kathryn’s bed and kissed her on the forehead. Kathryn looked up at her dad and smiled taking his hand in hers. They both watched Suzanne speaking baby talk to Nicole, counting her fingers and toes. “She’s a hairy baby, isn’t she?” Suzanne said rubbing Nicole’s stomach. Their skin was so different, Nicole’s was smooth and soft whereas Suzanne’s is wrinkled and rough from age. Kathryn smiled at her mom’s comment and nodded her head. Kathryn’s father moved around the bed to get closer to Nicole and Suzanne.

“She’s beautiful, baby,” Joe said, giving Kathryn a kiss on the forehead. Kathryn watched her parents ogle Nicole and laid her head back on her pillow and began to relax. After a half hour or so of passing Nicole back and forth between them Suzanne handed the baby to Kathryn. They congratulated her again and said their goodbyes.

“Let us know when you get settled at home and we will come visit again,” Suzanne said following behind Joe who had already stepped out into the hallway.

“What are we gonna do, little one?” Kathryn said stroking Nicole’s cheek. Nicole opened her eyes briefly and then drifted back to sleep. Kathryn pressed the button for the nurse to put Nicole back in her bed so they could both sleep. Once the nurse placed Nicole in the small plastic bed Kathryn rolled over putting her back to the door and Nicole. A few hours later Nicole began to cry, Kathryn awoke and peeked over her shoulder at the baby. She blew out the intake of air she was holding, grabbed her pillow and placed it over her head to drown out the sound of the baby crying. “Be quiet, I’m trying to sleep” Kathryn said pulling the blankets up over her head and squeezing the pillow tighter around her ears. A nurse walking by heard Kathryn yell at the baby and walked into the room.

“Is everything okay?” she asked calmly walking towards Nicole. “I think she may be hungry; would you like to feed her?” the nurse said picking up Nicole. She bounced her in her arms trying to calm her down. Nicole had been crying so hard that her face was red and sweaty. The nurse put her down and changed her diaper and insisted again that Kathryn hold her and feed her. Kathryn rolled away from the nurse and buried herself deeper under the covers. The nurse took out one of the pre-made bottles and sat in the chair by the window to feed Nicole. Every time she tried talking to Kathryn, she wouldn’t get any response. Nicole fell asleep while sucking

on the bottle, so the nurse suggested that they start giving her a pacifier. Again, Kathryn did not respond. The nurse placed Nicole back into the plastic bed and tried to get Kathryn out from under the covers. “I need to check your incisions, if you wouldn’t mind uncovering for me please,” Kathryn pulled the covers down, rolled her eyes and raised her gown. Kathryn caught a glance at the nurse’s name tag that was hanging on a lanyard around her neck that said Sabrina.

“Sabrina, I don’t mean to be rude but is there some place this baby can go? I mean she keeps crying and waking me up, I had surgery and I need my rest to heal properly,” Kathryn said with raised eyebrows. Sabrina gave Kathryn a strange look, creasing her eyebrows together. “Why are you looking at me like I’m crazy?” Kathryn asked covering herself up with the blankets again. “I’m so tired,” Kathryn said rolling over pulling the covers over her head to block out the light. Sabrina checked on Nicole once more and then walked back out into the hallway closing the door behind her. A few moments later a woman in a blue dress suit walked into the room.

“Good morning, Kathryn. I am Cloe from the hospital’s psychiatric department. I wanted to know if we could have a conversation for a bit. Would that be okay?” Kathryn uncovered her head, yawned, and stretched, she instantly winced from the pain gripping her stomach with both hands. “Are you okay?” Cloe asked genuinely concerned placing a hand on Kathryn’s foot. Kathryn pulled her leg away from this woman and nodded yes. “So, I hear that you don’t want to hold your baby or feed her. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m just so tired, I just want to sleep. Can’t you all just leave me alone and let me rest?” Kathryn responded pushing her hands through her hair.

“We are worried about you and want to make sure you are mentally okay before going home with a newborn. It is our jobs to make sure you are capable of looking after this baby and keeping her safe,” Cloe said in a very monotone voice trying to keep Kathryn calm. Kathryn looked at Cloe as if she were speaking another language and could not understand.

“What are you talking about? I don’t have a baby,” Kathryn said creasing her eyebrows and squinting her eyes. “I just want to sleep, could we do this later?” Kathryn said pulling the blankets up to her shoulders and laid her head back onto the pillow closing her eyes.

“Kathryn, I’m sorry but we have to do this now. Kathryn? Kathryn!?” Cloe was not getting a response, so she moved closer to the bed and placed a hand on Kathryn’s shoulder, giving her a little shake. Kathryn woke up gasping for air and throwing her arms out, her eyes opened as big as they were able and looked around the room. “I’m sorry to startle you, but we need to talk,” Cloe said moving away from the bed and sitting down in the only chair in the room by the window. Kathryn laid back trying to catch her breath. Kathryn could hear the woman’s high heel shoes clicking on the tile floor as she moved across the room.

“What are you doing? You scared me half to death, what’s wrong?” Kathryn said looking around the room once again. Placing a hand on her stomach, Kathryn noticed blood coming through the bandage. “What did you do to me?” Kathryn said and began to cry holding her blood covered hand out toward Cloe. Cloe stood from the chair and quickly called a nurse into the room.

“We need to check her incisions I think she may have pulled a stitch,” Cloe said to the nurse who entered the room. The nurse removed all of the blankets from the bed and lifted Kathryn’s gown seeing the blood-soaked bandage. She removed the bandage just enough to peak

under it to see the stitches. The nurse asked Kathryn to lay flat on her back so she could put in a few more stitches. She left the room for a few moments and when she came back, she was holding a package. She ripped open the package took out a needle with string already attached and gloves. She removed the bandage from Kathryn, cleaned the wound and used a syringe to put in a numbing fluid before adding three more stitches to Kathryn's lower abdomen.

Just then Nicole began to cry softly which soon turned into a screaming fit. Cloe, who was still sitting in the chair walked over to Nicole, put a hand on her stomach and rocked her back and forth. "May I hold her?" she asked Kathryn. Kathryn shrugged her shoulders wondering why this woman was asking her permission. Cloe picked up Nicole and paced the room with her bouncing her up and down trying to calm her. Unfortunately, for Cloe it didn't work, it only made Nicole cry harder and louder. The nurse placed a new bandage on Kathryn and told her to be careful. The nurse then reached her arms out for Cloe to hand over Nicole and suggested to Kathryn that she hold the baby for a few minutes. Kathryn rolled her eyes but took Nicole in her arms. Instantly, Nicole stopped crying and snuggled into Kathryn's arms.

"I've always been good with babies; she'll get used to you soon enough. She is a very beautiful baby, but she doesn't look like you," Kathryn said looking back and forth between Cloe and Nicole.

"That's because she is not mine. She is yours and she looks like you," Cloe responded watching Kathryn's reaction. Kathryn laughed then winced at the pain in her stomach. The nurse stepped in and suggested skin to skin contact which is said to help mom and baby bond. Kathryn looked back and forth between the two with raised eyebrows and pursed lips.

“I think that’s a little strange, since I’m not her mother. Don’t you think that’s weird?” Kathryn said with a confused look on her face. The nurse insisted that it was perfectly normal and that they should try. The nurse took Nicole briefly removing her blanket, onesie, and diaper. She asked Kathryn to lower her gown and placed Nicole on her chest, placing a blanket over them both. Kathryn remained stiff trying not to move. Nicole snuggled her face against Kathryn’s chest and fell asleep. Kathryn watched Nicole get comfortable and after a few moments Kathryn began to cry. She felt a heaviness in her chest and the tension in her muscles release. “Oh my god, she is mine,” Kathryn said as she began to sob, her chest bouncing with every breath she took.

“Yes, you are, and I think you will be just fine,” Cloe said standing from her chair. She handed Kathryn a business card and suggested that she make an appointment soon. The nurse and Cloe both left the room leaving Kathryn and Nicole alone. From that point on Kathryn never let Nicole out of arms reach. Kathryn fed her and changed her and snuggled her. When Kathryn slept, she would keep Nicole tucked in close to her and never moved. It was the best sleep she had ever had.

The next day a woman in a black pant suit went into the room holding a stack of paperwork. She asked Kathryn to sign forms with instructions on how to file the birth certificate and social security card. A man holding a camera went into the room to take a photo of Nicole in the plastic bed and said they would mail them to the address on file. A little while later Dr. Keller went in to check on Kathryn and Nicole. She told Kathryn that they would be discharging them both later that afternoon.

After everyone left the room, Kathryn called Lee from the bedside phone, but there was not answer at home. She hung up and dialed Lee's friends' number but again there was no answer. Kathryn moved around the room packing her and Nicole's things in the bag that she brought with her. Kathryn tried calling home once again.

"Hello," a woman answered.

"Who is this?" Kathryn asked.

"This is Trish, who is this?"

"Where is Lee?" Kathryn asked ignoring the woman's question.

"He's in the shower, want me to leave him a message?"

"Yes, actually, could you tell him that his wife, that's me by the way, and his daughter are ready to be picked up and taken home."

"Sure, thing doll," Trish said and hung up the phone. Kathryn began to pace the hospital room, looking out of the window, looking at the phone, looking at Nicole all while she walked back and forth. A few hours later Kathryn was all packed and ready to go.

"Are you ready?" the day nurse asked pushing a wheelchair into the room.

"We are, I think," Kathryn said sitting in the wheelchair holding her bag. The nurse moved the bag to the back of the chair and handed Nicole to Kathryn. Kathryn snuggled Nicole and held her tight as they began to move down the hallway and into the elevator. When the doors opened up to the lobby Kathryn used Nicole's blanket to cover her a little more securely. "What are they all looking at?" Kathryn asked noticing people staring at her.

“They are looking at the baby, everyone loves new babies,” the nurse said trying to reassure Kathryn. Kathryn used her free hand to pat down her hair and wiped at her nose thinking something must be in there for people to be staring that hard. As they exited the elevator and started their way towards the front doors, the other elevator opened to another new mom. She held her baby, while the man with her held balloons, flowers, all of their bags, and a car seat. Kathryn realized the looks were because she was alone, no balloons, no flowers, no man.

“Smile sweetie, you just had a baby,” one of the elderly ladies with the pink vest said as the nurse pushed Kathryn by them. Kathryn gave them a small grin and looked down at Nicole in her arms. Nicole was asleep and grinning, which made Kathryn’s grin turn into a smile.

“Will your husband be waiting for us outside?” the nurse asked pushing Kathryn through the sliding glass doors. Kathryn took a deep breath and nodded her head.

“I hope so,” she said giving a look over her shoulder at the nurse. She felt a knot in the pit of her stomach making it harder to breath. She took a few deep breaths and tried not to panic. She looked down at Nicole who was still sleeping and relaxed a bit. Sitting in the wheelchair for a few minutes waiting outside the nurse suggested that they move into the shade and wait. “I’m so sorry, if you want to take me back inside, I can try calling him.” The nurse nodded and began pushing them back towards the automatic doors. Just then Kathryn noticed Lee’s truck pulling into the parking lot. She took another deep breath and let it out slowly. “That’s him,” Kathryn said pointing at the truck. The nurse turned the wheelchair and pushed it closer to the curb.

Lee saw Kathryn in the wheelchair and drove towards the patient pick up area. He put the truck in park and got out to help Kathryn and Nicole into the truck. He gave the nurse a wink and said thank you, she blushed and walked back into the building. Kathryn sat in the backseat next

to Nicole who was strapped into her car seat. “What are you doing?” Lee asked Kathryn surprised that she got into the backseat. “Your place is up here next to me, come on now. Let’s not forget things just because we have a baby now,” Lee said holding the door open for Kathryn to exit the backseat and take her place in the front. The drive home was quiet and with every bump in the road Kathryn would look back to check on Nicole. “Relax, she’s fine. They make those new car seats pretty durable now,” Lee said putting his hand on Kathryn’s thigh. Kathryn looked over at him and smiled.

“Thank you for picking us up,” Kathryn said taking Lee’s hand in her own.

“What kind of husband or dad would I be if I left you both stranded?” Lee responded winking at Kathryn, smiling and squeezing her hand. Kathryn smiled back, turned her head, and watched out the window the rest of the way. “I have a surprise for you, when we get home,” Lee said pulling on Kathryn’s arm to make her look at him.

“What kind of surprise?” Kathryn asked quietly.

“You’ll just have to wait till we get home,” Lee said changing lanes to get on the interstate.

“Are you sure you want to take the highway; wouldn’t it be safer to go the long way through town?” Kathryn said looking back at Nicole. Lee squeezed Kathryn’s hand hard enough that her fingers bulged full of blood.

“Do not assume that just because we have a daughter now that anything has changed. Do not tell me how to drive. Ever,” Lee said letting go of Kathryn’s hand so quickly it flung back and hit her in the stomach. Kathryn winced in pain, turned, and faced the window and kept quiet the rest of the way home. Once they arrived home Lee took Nicole’s carrier inside and then went

back out to help Kathryn into the house. “Are you ready for your surprise? Are you gonna be a good girl?” Lee asked taking Kathryn by the hand and leading her down the small hallway and into Nicole’s bedroom.

“Oh my gosh, did you do all of this?” Kathryn said excitedly looking around the room. Nicole’s crib, swing, and rocking chair had all been put together and positioned around the room. The crib was white with little pink and blue daisies painted on it, the bedding had old fashion Winnie the Pooh and friends on it with the same flowers. A few small stuffed animals filled one corner of the bed. Her swing was pink with a soft cushion that every adult wished they could sleep on. The rocking chair was actually a glider moving front to back instead of rocking. The wood frame was a light tan, and the cushions were off white, it had a foot stool that matched. All of Nicole’s clothes were hanging neatly in the closet and her changing table made of the same wood as the glider was fully stocked with diapers, wipes, burb rags and receiving blankets.

“Do you like it?” Lee asked watching Kathryn move around the room touching everything.

“I love it, it’s amazing. Did you do this?” Kathryn said putting her hands to her mouth in amazement.

“I did, well I had my buddy’s girlfriend Trish help me. But yea I wanted to have it ready for you guys to come home to. Do you like it?” Lee said standing in the door frame watching Kathryn’s shock.

“It’s amazing. Thank you so much. I love you,” Kathryn responded walking towards Lee and kissing him on the cheek.

“What kind of thank you is that. Come here,” Lee said wrapping his arms around Kathryn and kissing her deeply. Kathryn winced when Lee pulled her in close but relaxed into the kiss. Nicole began to cry from the living room distracting them from the kiss.

“I guess we should see how Nicole likes the room, it’s time to feed her anyways. Do you want to feed her?” Kathryn asked still holding onto Lee.

“Maybe next time. I’m glad you like, it took forever,” Lee said following Kathryn into the living room. He sat down on the sofa and watched Kathryn take Nicole out of her carrier. “Oh yea, your parents are coming up sometime today.”

“You talked to my parents? When?” Kathryn looked down at Lee, repositioning Nicole in her arms.

“I did, I called your dad to see if he had a few tools I could borrow to put the room together. I told them when I would be picking you up and they said they would come out later,” Lee said reaching for the TV remote. Kathryn raised her eyebrows and shook her head while Lee clicked the TV on. Kathryn carried Nicole into her room, sat down in the glider and gave her one of the pre-made bottles from the hospital bag.

After a few days of building a routine Kathryn figured out how to take care of Nicole and keep up with her chores. One day Lee came home from the bar, drunk and Kathryn had forgotten to clean up her lunch dishes because Nicole had been rather fussy. Lee took the plate and cracked it across Kathryn’s head, leaving cuts with little pieces of porcelain in them. From this moment Kathryn knew that she had to keep up with everything and never forget. Lee still expected dinner to be warm by the time he came home from wherever he was during the day. Kathryn kept up with the laundry even though with a new baby it tripled as well as vacuuming, dusting,

sweeping, and mopping daily. Lee gave Kathryn her car keys on the days where Nicole had doctors' appointments as well as some cash to purchase groceries and formula. Lee reminded her that he wrote down the mileage on the car so if she went anywhere else, he would know. Kathryn promised to only visit the doctor's office and the Albertsons grocery store on the way home.

About six months passed, Kathryn continued her routine making sure everything was finished, Nicole continued to grow and hit milestones as she became more mobile. For the last six months Kathryn used Nicole as an excuse not to sleep in the same bed with Lee, claiming that she would only sleep if Kathryn laid next to her. Lee didn't believe Kathryn at first and then he got fed up with Nicole crying all the time, when Kathryn wasn't holding her. Kathryn carried Nicole all day even while doing her chores so Nicole would become attached to only her. When Lee would try holding Nicole she would only cry and throw fits.

Kathryn asked Lee for her car keys because Nicole was running low on formula, so he gave them to her with strict rules for her to return home soon. Kathryn stuffed Nicole's diaper bag with clothes, diapers, wipes, and a few of her own clothes. Instead of driving to the store Kathryn drove to her parent's house to ask if she and Nicole could move in with them. Joe and Suzanne were happy to have them, and Suzanne started to set up the spare bedroom for them. Kathryn explained to them that she was leaving Lee and never going back.

"I have to get away from him, for her sake. He so controlling and he hits me sometimes. I'm afraid if he comes home one night and she's crying that he may hurt her too," Kathryn said holding Nicole to her chest.

"We thought something like this was going on, but you never complained so we stayed out of it," Joe said from his recliner. "I told your mom you were too young to get married.

Especially since he is five years older than you, I mean who dates a seventeen-year-old girl at the age of twenty-two?"

"I know dad, thank you for letting us stay here," Kathryn said turning toward the hallway and bedroom where her and Nicole would be staying. It was a small bedroom with a bunk bed and dresser, the bunk bed had a futon bed on the bottom and a normal twin on top. Suzanne pulled an old playpen out of the closet for Nicole to sleep in until she was big enough for the top bunk.

"Do you need help unloading the car?" Suzanne asked taking Nicole from Kathryn. Kathryn looked down at the floor as tears began falling from her cheeks.

"No, I only brought the diaper bag full of Nicole's clothes, diapers, formula and a few things of mine," Kathryn picked up the diaper bag and emptied it onto the bed, examining what she actually brought. Nicole had five outfits, three burp rags, a stack of diapers, one box of wipes and one jar of formula. For herself she brought a few pairs of underwear, bra pads with one bra and one pair of pants as well as three tops. The phone rang and Kathryn jumped, the knot in her stomach that she had been feeling got heavier making it harder to breath.

"Good heavens, you turned white. It's just the telephone," Suzanne said putting Nicole's things into the empty dresser drawers and holding Nicole on her hip. Kathryn ran out of the room and towards the phone.

"Please, daddy, if its Lee please don't tell him we are here," Kathryn begged as Joe picked up the receiver to answer.

"Hey Lee, what can I do for you?" Joe said into the phone waiting for a response from the other end. "Actually, yes, she and Nicole are here but they will not be returning to you. I will

come up there momentarily to get the rest of their things,” Joe continued. “That’s fine but if you do make sure you’re in it when you light it up,” Joe hung up the phone and looked at Kathryn, shrugged his shoulders and returned to his recliner.

“Daddy, what have you done? I asked you not to tell him we were here.”

“I know, but I’m not gonna let you take my granddaughter back to him. He doesn’t deserve either one of you,” Joe said glaring his blue eyes at Kathryn. Standing at six feet tall Kathryn had to strain her neck to look up at him which she had done her entire life.

“How am I gonna get the rest of our stuff now? I was gonna wait till tomorrow when he wasn’t home to sneak up there and get some more stuff,” Kathryn said wiping a tear off of her cheek. She sat down on the sofa and considered calling Lee back to explain.

“We can get you what you and Nicole need,” Kathryn grabbed a tissue from the side table and wiped her eyes and nose. She grew up in this house, her parents bought it when she was thirteen, but it was the only place she really considered home. It was a brown stucco house with teal trim, green grass in the front yard and large shade trees. The coat rack next to the front door was always overflowing with different colors, fabrics, and patters of outerwear. The living room where she and Joe sat was a step down from the entry way. There were two dark brown leather sofas and two matching recliners. A large entertainment center took up one wall which held a large TV, pictures, and little giraffe figurines that Suzanne collects. The dining room is only separated by a long wooden rail, in it was an antique oak table, an antique record player and a matching buffet table. On the window seal there were antique oil lamps that had all come from Joe’s great grandmother.

The kitchen was ordinary and had all the essentials. Down the hallway there is a bathroom to the right which Suzanne changed the shower curtain and towels depending on which holiday was next. A bedroom to the left where Kathryn and Nicole would be staying, that used to be her older brother bedroom. The master bedroom on the right just past the bathroom, which had a large four poster bed, mirrored closet doors, an armoire and dresser. Attached was a small bathroom. Across the hall was another room, which was Kathryn's growing up but now is an office, holding a double-sided desk attached to a large shelf. The bedrooms were the only rooms that had carpet, but not soft carpet, it's more like the kind you would find in an office somewhere. The rest of the house had matching tile throughout.

"Yea, you say that now, but I didn't bring anything except a few outfits for Nicole. I thought leaving was the most important first step," Kathryn said quietly.

"We can figure it out. Don't worry. If we have to, I can have a sheriff and your brother go with us to get your stuff."

"I just don't know what to do anymore. I know that we are safer away from Lee, but as for how we will get by I have no idea," Kathryn heard Nicole laughing in the bedroom and put her head down, holding the tissue to her eyes.

"We'll help you, don't worry," Suzanne said carrying Nicole.

"Thanks mom," Kathryn said, taking Nicole from her mom and sitting back down on the couch. "I really don't want anything but my clothes and the rest of Nicole's stuff," Kathryn hugged Nicole close to her and Nicole rapped her arms around Kathryn and squeezed. Joe stood from his recliner walked across the room and picked up the phone. He dialed a number and waited for an answer. Kathryn got up from the sofa still holding Nicole and walked back down

the hallway and into their bedroom. She laid down on the bed with Nicole straddling her and played pick-a-boo with her trying to keep her as happy as possible.

“Hey, I just called your brother, he’s gonna meet me up there,” Joe said poking his head around the corner.

“Wait, you’re going now?” Kathryn said setting Nicole down on the carpet to play with a few toys from the diaper bag.

“Yea, why should we wait. It’s better for everyone if we just do it now,” Joe said looking down at Nicole who looked up at him and smiled. He smiled back and walked out towards the front door.

Kathryn paced the living room walking from the kitchen down the long hallway and back, occasionally looking up at the pictures of herself and her older brother as children. She would stop and watch Nicole playing on the floor and begin pacing again. “What’s taking them so long?” Kathryn asked her mom after waiting for over an hour for her dad and brother to return.

“I’m not sure but you know dad would have called if there was a problem. They are probably just loading your things in the back of dad’s truck,” Suzanne said walking into the living room. “Did you put Nicole down for a nap?”

“Yea, I did, and she went right to sleep, usually I have to lay down with her before she will calm down enough to sleep.”

“You know babies can feel stress, and if the house is too stressful it makes them fussier. Now what should we make for dinner?” Suzanne said opening the refrigerator. Kathryn walked

into the kitchen and leaned on the counter watching her mom move around. The gray in her hair has taken over so much so that the brown that used to be there is non-existent. Her skin had begun to wrinkle around her eyes that hid behind metal framed glasses. Her hands now had little brown spots that didn't used to be there. Kathryn stood watching her mom and wondered when she had become so old. "What are you staring at?" Suzanne asked holding a frozen bag of stir fry vegetables in one hand and frozen chicken in the other.

"Nothing, I was just spacing it for a minute. Sorry. Do you need help? Lee always wanted dinner still warm by the time he got home, if it weren't, I would get in trouble. I mean not trouble but...oh, um... well you know," Kathryn said turning away from her mom to hide her embarrassment.

"You don't have to hide from me, I can see right through you babe," Suzanne said reaching out to hug Kathryn. Kathryn flinched as her mom touched her shoulder, but relaxed when she realized her mom wanted a hug. Kathryn began to cry into her mom's shoulder. Just then the front door opened, and Joe walked in holding a box of her and Nicole's things. Kathryn began to cry harder, so Suzann hugged her harder holding her up. "It's gonna be okay babe, I promise."

"Hey, I thought this was a good thing?" Joe said as he went into the kitchen holding the box out for Kathryn to take. Suzanne handed her a tissue and Kathryn cleaned the tears off of her face. She took the box into the living room to see what they were able to get. Inside, it had her toothbrush, hairbrush, a few hair ties, shampoo, conditioner, her razor, and a box of tampons.

"Is this all of it?" Kathryn asked digging a little deeper into the box.

“No, there’s more in the truck. We didn’t take any furniture, like the sofa or bed, you know the big stuff,” Joe said, kissing Suzanne in the kitchen.

“Thank you, daddy, this is more than I imagined. I didn’t think Lee would give us anything. How was he? Was he there?”

“Oh yea, he was there. He was the one that was filling up the boxes. There was some girl there too. I think her name tag said Trish,” Joe said sitting down in his recliner and popping it open with the button on the side of the chair.

“A name tag?” Kathryn said with raised eyebrows.

“I think your brother said she is the bar tender down at the bowling alley. Why? Who is she?” Joe said reaching for the TV remote.

“I’m not sure, Lee said she was his friend’s girlfriend who helped him build all of Nicole’s furniture while we were in the hospital,” Kathryn said opening up the recliner on the sofa.

“You just gonna sit there or are you gonna get your stuff from my truck?” Joe said, smiling pointing the remote to change the channel on the TV. Even as a child Joe teased Kathryn, he always told her no man would be good enough for his baby. Laughing, Kathryn got up and headed for the front door when Nicole started to cry in the bedroom.

“You go get your stuff I’ll get her,” Suzanne said heading down the hallway. Kathryn nodded her head and opened the front door. She stepped outside into the dark, took a deep breath, looked around and walked out to her dad’s white Chevy pick-up truck. She pulled the handle on the door, but it was locked. Hanging her head, she turned and went back into the house

to ask for the keys. Once back outside she looked in the back of the truck hoping to see Nicole's crib but remembered her dad saying they didn't get any big stuff. She opened the truck door and found three boxes taped closed. She carried them one by one into the bedroom and set them down on the floor.

She locked up the truck and returned inside handing the keys back to her dad. Kathryn walked into the bedroom and sat down on the floor to open the boxes. Nicole was sitting in the playpen playing with a few toys. Kathryn opened the first box and stuff started overflowing out of it, it was stuffed with Nicole's clothes and forced down into the box. Another box had blankets and stuffed animals from Nicole's crib. She handed Nicole a few of them to play with. The last box was lighter than the rest, Kathryn used the scissors and broke the seal of tape on top and opened the box. Kathryn screamed and shoved the box away; she quickly grabbed Nicole and ran for the living room.

"What is that all about?" Suzanne asked poking her head around the kitchen wall. Startled by the scream Joe stood up quickly and started towards the girl's room. He ran into Kathryn fleeing from the room in the hallway.

"There's a snake in that box!" Kathryn screamed, shaking all over trying to get passed Joe in the hall. She wanted to be as far away from that thing as possible. Nicole started crying with all of the commotion. From the kitchen Kathryn tried calming Nicole while her dad took care of the snake. Joe came out of the bedroom holding the snake by the head, walked through the house, and put it in the back yard. "What are you doing? Kill it!" Kathryn demanded.

"It's only a little garden snake, it won't hurt you," Joe said closing the back door. He handed a little piece of paper to Kathryn. "This was in there too. That son of a bitch," Joe said

walking towards the living room. Kathryn unfolded the paper and recognized Lee's handwriting. She was trying to read the note, but Nicole kept grabbing at it making it impossible.

"Mom, could you hold her a minute please," Suzanne turned around from stirring a pot on the stove and took Nicole onto her hip. Kathryn read the scribbled note that said:

Dearest Kathryn,

I hope you're happy with yourself. Good luck raising that baby on your own because I know she's not mine. Hope you don't ruin her. Come crawling back to me and you'll pay for it. From now on pretend everyday of your life could be your last, because one day it will be. Enjoy the new pet.

It was time for a change,

Lee

Kathryn sighed, handed the note to her mom, and took Nicole from her. Suzanne read the note aloud so Joe could hear it as well. "Well doesn't he have a way with words. So charming. You certainly picked a good one babe," Suzanne said handing the note back to Kathryn. Joe began to laugh until he had tears rolling out of his eyes. His laughter made everyone laugh including Nicole who had no idea what was so funny.



Back in the bare hospital room, Kathryn's phone chimed that she received a new text message. She looked up to see Nicole's face still blotchy from crying. They were still sitting in the hospital room waiting for the CT results. Kathryn picked up her phone and checked the message, it was from James asking how her day was going. He did this most days when he was on his lunch break at school. He had a later lunch because of the way the school's schedule was and he liked to check in with her. She quickly replied that everything was good because she didn't want him to worry.

"Mom, I'm so sorry. I don't want to go to jail," Nicole said as she tried to move her hair from her face but couldn't because of the handcuffs. Kathryn blinked her eyes and looked at her daughter remembering the promise she made so many years earlier. Just then the doctor opened the door followed by Officer Vargas.

"I have the test results from the drug test. It shows a low level of THC, but what we didn't find was the Adderall that she is supposed to be taking. Is there a reason she has stopped taking it?" Kathryn looked at Nicole with raised eyebrows and large eyes.

"You told me that you were taking your meds. Oh, and THC that's marijuana, right?" Kathryn asked.

"Don't be mad, I stopped taking my meds because they make me feel weird and I don't like it. I didn't smoke weed, mom, my friends were smoking around me," Nicole said trying to defend herself. She pursed her lips together and raised one eyebrow, which Kathryn has figured out this happens when she lies.

“Don’t be mad? Are you kidding me? What does this mean in terms of her arrest?”

Kathryn asked Officer Vargas.

“Well, I can’t charge her for it since she does not have any in her possession. However, it won’t look good on her record.”

“Oh my god, Nicole, you have a record,” Kathryn said as she began to cry. Nicole sat quietly in the hospital bed looking back and forth from her mom to the doctor to the officer. She began to shake all over, rattling the handcuffs on the rails of the bed. Kathryn looked up from the floor and noticed the shaking and stood. She wrapped her daughter in her arms and tried to comfort her. “I got you baby; we will figure this out.”

A moment later officer Vargas took the handcuffs off of Nicole. She rubbed her wrist and looked up at him confused. “What’s going on?” Kathryn asked. Officer Vargas handed her a card with a case number on it and some paperwork.

“This is called Kids Court, since this is her first offense, she qualifies for it. What you will need to do is call this number here, and he pointed to the phone number on the bottom of the page, they will set up an appointment for you to go fill out paperwork and get her scheduled for court.”

“I have never heard of this, so does that mean she’s not going to jail today?” Kathryn asked wiping away a tear.

“Yes, that is what this means. She will still have to go to court for it, but she will be judged by her peers, kids her own age who have also had run ins with the law and they will determine her punishment for the crime.”

“Oh my gosh, thank you so much. I can’t believe this; this is wonderful news,” Kathryn hugged Nicole again.

“Yes, thank you.” Nicole said quietly.

“Just make sure you stay out of trouble. The next time we won’t be so lenient, and you will go to jail. I’ll leave you this information, but make sure you call the number and get things set up,” Officer Vargas said as he walked towards the door.

“So, can we leave then?” Nicole asked scooting towards the edge of the bed to stand.

“You have to wait for the doctor to come back and discharge you, sit tight, it shouldn’t take too much longer. Remember what I said, stay out of trouble,” he said closing the door behind himself.

“Oh, Nicole this is great news. We will call and get this set up as soon as we get home. Now let’s talk about your meds. How long has it been since you stopped taking them?” Kathryn asked crossing her arms over her chest.

“I know mom, I just don’t like them they make me feel like my head foggy, so I stopped taking them.”

“Okay, so why didn’t you come talk to me? We could have made an appointment to get them adjusted or get a new medication. It is dangerous to just quit taking them without letting your doctor know, then they can instruct you on the best ways to quit,” A nurse opened the door and walked in with paperwork for Kathryn to sign. She explained the discharge instructions and told Kathryn that the doctor recommended Nicole get back on her medication as well as see a therapist. Along with the paperwork there was a list of therapists who specialized in teens, that

had addresses, phone numbers as well as what insurances were accepted. Kathryn raised her eyebrows at how thorough the list was and thanked the nurse.

“Let’s go Nicole, we have a lot to talk about, plus I need to fill in Stella on the situation.” Nicole scooted off the bed and walked towards Kathryn, the nurse held the door open for them as they walked through.

“Bitch,” Nicole whispered under her breath as she passed the nurse who was giving her a look like she had just murdered the girls dog or something. Kathryn turned around just in time to see the look and pulled Nicole in front of her tugging on her arm to keep her quiet. The two walked down the hall towards the exit ignoring the nurse’s response.

Once in the car, Kathryn called Stella on her cell phone to let her know they were on their way home so she could meet them there. The car ride home was quiet as neither Kathryn nor Nicole knew what to say about the situation. “You know we are gonna need to talk about this when we get home, right?” Kathryn said holding on to the steering wheel with both hands. She glanced over at Nicole who was sitting with her head down using her hair to cover her face and fidgeting with her fingers in her lap. She looked up briefly and nodded in agreement. When they finally pulled into the driveway Nicole took a deep breath and let it out slowly before reaching for the door handle. Kathryn turned off the car and sat for a moment gathering her thoughts before picking up her purse and phone. Stella’s car was already in the driveway and Kathryn let out the breath she didn’t realize she was holding.

Nicole opened the front door and Stella was standing in front of her pulling her into a hug. “I was so worried about you, are you sure you’re okay? You’re not hurt? What happened? Here, come, sit down,” Stella said ushering Nicole towards the kitchen table. “Let me look at

you,” She said turning Nicole’s arms over and over, looking for any injuries. “Not a scratch. Oh, I’m so happy you weren’t hurt. Tell me what happened,” Stella said taking the seat across from Nicole at the table. Kathryn hung up her keys and put her purse down on her desk, listening to the conversation. She took the seat next to Stella who was holding Nicole’s hands across the table inspecting her knuckles. Kathryn and Nicole shared what had happened in the meeting before the fight with Mrs. Renteria, what happened to start the fight, what happened during the fight, and what happened after. Kathryn pushed the paperwork she had to sign across the table so Stella could look them over. “Suspended for two weeks? That seems a bit harsh since she didn’t start the fight,” Stella said sifting through the papers.

“The school has a no toleration policy now, where both parties are suspended from school no matter who started it,” Kathryn said.

“It’s so stupid, I didn’t do anything but protect myself,” Nicole said pulling her hands away from Stella, putting them in her lap.

“You mentioned that they had a recording of the fight, did they let you see it?” Stella asked turning in her seat towards Kathryn.

“No, they denied me access saying that because there are other students on the video, they could not by law show me.”

“That makes sense, it’s because of FERPA.”

“Yea, and normally I know that but today all it did was piss me off more,” Kathryn said. “Nicole, do you think you could get it for us from someone who was there today?”

“I can check around,” Nicole replied. “So, am I in trouble?”

“Stella and I need to discuss this in private and then we can all sit back down again and talk about it later,” Kathryn said pushing herself away from the table and standing. “Go get cleaned up and put stain remover on your shirt. If you have any homework you can work on that for now.” Rolling her eyes Nicole pushed away from the table, grabbing her bookbag and walking into her bedroom, shutting the door behind her. Stella and Kathryn stood watching her walk away, grabbing Kathryn’s hand Stella pulled her into a hug and held her for a few moments before pulling away. Kathryn pulled back and wiped away a tear that slid down her cheek.

“Maybe we should go in the other room to talk about this before James gets home from school,” Kathryn said walking towards the living room. Stella followed close behind and sat down on the sofa next to Kathryn. Placing a hand on her thigh, Stella leaned in for a kiss, brushing Kathryn’s hair to the side.

“I am so sorry I couldn’t be there today. I tried to get back to town as fast as possible. I was so worried about both of you. Are you okay?” Stella asked rubbing Kathryn’s knee.

“I wish you were there too; I am always calmer when you are around. I may have lost my temper a few times towards the principal and the officer that was arresting Nicole,” Kathryn placed a hand on top of Stella’s on her knee.

“That’s understandable, they need a better system for letting parents know what’s going on. A phone call without any information is a sure way to upset any parent. And then making you wait forever to hear from anyone is just rude,” Stella said squeezing Kathryn’s hand. “Now, what are we gonna do about Nicole? She did get into a fight at school and that is not tolerated. Should we ground her?” Stella asked leaning back into the sofa, putting her head on the back.

“For defending herself,” Kathryn interrupted. “The other girl started it, and we were always taught that if a fight starts, we finish it,” Kathryn said sitting up a little straighter on the sofa, shifting a little more to look at Stella in the eyes.

“I know love, we were taught the same thing as kids, that’s why I’m asking what we should do about this situation.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I hate this, I wish the school would have done something before this got out of hand,” Kathryn said shifting again in her seat. “It was their responsibility after I filed that complaint. I blame that stupid woman Mrs. Renteria. Did I tell you she is related to that girl and that’s what escalated the situation?”

“Yes, I think you did mention it when you called me. That makes me so mad. I agree this should have never gone this far. Speaking of Nicole has the next two weeks off from school. What are we gonna have her do around here to keep busy?” Stella asked closing her eyes.

“I don’t know maybe just regular chores, instead of Sunday clean day she can keep up with it all during the week,” Kathryn replied. “What are we gonna tell James?”

“Well, the truth I guess since she will be here before and after school,” Stella said standing up from her seat. “I need a drink, how about you?” Stella stood reaching a handout to Kathryn and helped her up from the sofa. They both walked towards the kitchen, Stella opened the fridge and took out a beer and a bottle of wine for Kathryn. She popped the cork while Kathryn pulled a glass down from above the sink cabinet.

“Did I also tell you that Nicole hasn’t been taking her meds? Oh yea, and smoking weed. I know I forgot that part,” Kathryn said filling her glass of wine to the rim. Stella took a step back taking a long draw on the beer bottle.

“What the hell,” Stella said, choking on her beer a little, leaving a little foam on her bottom lip. “Where would she get that from?”

“A friend I guess, I don’t know. We haven’t talked about that part of things yet. I was definitely waiting for you to talk to her about this.”

“Well, that sort of makes sense since she’s been irritable lately. I thought something was going on, but then I never know if it was something, I said that made her mad. But this makes more sense.” Taking another drink from her beer, Stella opened the fridge and pulled out another bottle. “We will have to talk to her about this soon. Do you want to do it before James gets home or wait till after dinner when he is in the shower?”

“I think we should wait till after dinner. I don’t want him to know that his sister is doing drugs. You know,” Kathryn said putting her glass of wine down on the kitchen counter next to her as she leaned back into it. “Speaking of dinner, what are we going to make?”

Later that evening, Nicole and James worked together to finish washing the dishes. He splashed water at her and she put bubbles on his head while they washed and rinsed the dishes. Laughing and playing around in the kitchen while Stella and Kathryn sat on the sofa relaxing. After a few glasses of wine Kathryn felt relaxed enough that she wouldn’t overreact to the discussion they were about to have with Nicole. She leaned her head back on the back of the sofa and closed her eyes, smiling while she listened to the kids playing together. This is a sound that is rarely heard in the house now that kids are older. They really don’t spend enough time together anymore. She has her friends, and he has his hobbies like his large Lego collection. A five-year difference wasn’t so bad when they were little but now it feels more like a decade between them.

The more time passes the more space comes between them. “Listen to them, they sound so happy,” Kathryn whispered to Stella.

“Ouch! You little jerk! Come back here! I’ll get you back for that,” Nicole screamed from the kitchen, as James came running into the living room holding the dish towel laughing.

“I knew it wouldn’t last long,” Stella said laughing, putting her arm around Kathryn.

“Come on guys, cut it out,” Kathryn said as Nicole came around the corner with her own dish towel. “That’s enough, someone is gonna get hurt.”

“I already did! Look at the back of my leg,” Nicole said turning her leg so everyone could see the welt building.

“Ouch. James apologize to your sister,” Kathryn warned. “Nicole finish the dishes; James go take a shower,” Kathryn patted Stella on the leg signaling that it was time to talk to Nicole. They both stood and walked into the kitchen. Kathryn opened the fridge and pulled out the almost finished bottle of wine and filled her glass once more. Raising her eyebrows at Stella to ask if she wanted another beer, Stella replied with a nod. After Nicole dried the last pan and put it away Kathryn called her to the kitchen table. Nicole turned around to hang up the dish towel, rolled her eyes and pushed the air in her lungs out in a huff. Taking in a deep breath Nicole turned to join Kathryn and Stella at the table, letting her breath out slowly. Nicole took her seat across from Stella and sat with her head down, hands in her lap.

“We have discussed the situation and decided that you will be grounded for the next two weeks. This means that you will do daily chores and you are restricted from the phone and friends,” Kathryn said sternly. “We want you to know that you are not in trouble for defending yourself, you are however in trouble for smoking marijuana and not taking your medication. I

will call tomorrow morning and figure out when we can see your doctor again to find a medication that fits you. Hopefully, we can find something that doesn't make you feel funny. In the meantime, I want you to bring your pills out here and I will give it to you every morning until then."

"That's not fair, I only smoked weed one time with my friend. If I'm not in trouble for the fight, then why can't I use my phone or talk to friends?" Nicole demanded, letting her hair fall back away from her face.

"It is fair since you have been lying to us about taking your meds and for doing illegal drugs," Stella affirmed. Nicole pushed herself away from the table quick enough that the chair almost fell behind her. She caught the chair pushed it into the table and stomped off, slamming her bedroom door behind her.

"Well, that was a little bit of an overreaction. I guess we're done talking about this for now," Kathryn said sipping the last few drops of wine from her glass.

"You mentioned this thing called Teen Court, what is it all about?" Stella asked, playing with a bottle cap. Twirling it this way and that, making it spin across the table. Kathryn took the bottle cap and put it into her pants pocket, smiling at Stella.

"I'm not real sure about it, the police officer gave me this number to call tomorrow. He didn't give me any information about it, so I guess I will know more tomorrow. I was thinking I might cancel class tomorrow so I can get all of this situated." Kathryn pushed herself away from the table, took her glass to the kitchen and then walked into the living room.

"I think that would probably be for the best. I wish I could but I'm giving an exam tomorrow," Stella replied, walking towards the living room.

“It’s all good love, I will figure it all out and fill you in tomorrow. Wanna watch TV until James is done with his shower?” Kathryn asked handing the remote control to Stella. About halfway through their favorite crime fighting TV show, James came into the room. “How was your shower?” Kathryn asked, watching her baby boy enter the room on his long sturdy legs. His hair still dripping from the shower and leaving a wet v shape down the back of his t-shirt.

“Why don’t you dry your hair better? Every night you leave it dripping and when you lean down for a goodnight hug, I feel like I took a shower,” Stella asked with a grin.

“I don’t know, I use my towel on it,” James said flinging his hair to get Stella more wet, laughing.

“Oh, come on! Quit it!” Stella shouted laughing and trying to dodge the water from James’ hair. “Go dry your hair better, geeze kid,” Stella continued. James left the living room and came back with his towel wrapped around his head. The three discussed the situation that Nicole was in and all agreed that James would continue his normal routine.

The next day after helping James get off to school and saying goodbye to Stella, Kathryn called the number given to her from Officer Vargas in regard to the teen court program. The call didn’t take too long since all they needed was to make an appointment. After this meeting was scheduled Kathryn called Nicole’s doctor to find out what to do about Nicole taking her meds. She briefly described the situation to the receptionist, who responded quickly trying to make Nicole an appointment as soon as possible. Having taken the day off to take care of all of this Kathryn was left with was to finish up some grading. After a few hours of working in her office Nicole came in rubbing her eyes.

“Nice of you to join us. I thought about waking you up but thought you might need some sleep. But I didn’t expect you to sleep past noon, you must have been really tired,” Kathryn said looking up from her computer. Taking a closer look at Nicole she noticed a little bruise under her left eye. “That girl must have hit you at least once because you have a black eye. Does it hurt?”

“No, I didn’t even know it was there,” Nicole said rubbing the eye Kathryn said was bruised. “I’m gonna find something to eat. Did you call that place already?” Nicole said walking out towards the kitchen. Kathryn stood from her desk and followed Nicole to tell her about the appointments.

“Yes, I did, and you have two appointments set up for later this week. I didn’t get much information from the teen court lady; she just gave me the appointment time. As for your doctor they are gonna put you on the cancellation list and try to get you in sooner,” Kathryn replied taking the loaf of bread out of the cabinet to make a sandwich. “Don’t forget you have to do chores today. At least one per day to keep yourself busy,” Kathryn reminded. Nicole rolled her eyes with her head down so Kathryn couldn’t see it. After lunch Kathryn went back to her office to work, while Nicole went back into her room.

A few hours later, Nicole came out of her room holding clothes and her bath towel. Kathryn finished working and was reading when she noticed Nicole walk by the living room. “Hey kiddo, what are you doing? Have you done your chore yet?”

“I was gonna take a shower, but I guess it can wait till after my chores,” Nicole replied snidely turning back towards her room, letting out a huff of air. Kathryn heard the sarcasm in Nicole’s voice and shook her head in disappointment. A few minutes later Nicole came back out of her room closing the door behind her. She grabbed the broom out of the closet and began

sweeping by the front door. Listening to her music through headphones she danced around the area with the broom. As soon as she was finished, she put the broom and dustpan back into the closet, grabbed her stuff from her room and rushed in to take a shower.

While Nicole was in the shower Kathryn inspected the area and found that Nicole had just pushed the dirt and dog hair under one of the shelves that held picture frames, and plants. Kathryn creased her forehead and shook her head while walking towards the bathroom. She knocked on the door and yelled at Nicole to sweep again after she was finished. She didn't get a response because Nicole was playing her music too loud. Kathryn returned to her office to work a bit more for her classes and once Nicole got out of the shower Kathryn confronted her about the dirt and dog hair.

"I just showered; I'll get it later," Nicole responded closing her bedroom door behind herself.

"Nicole don't argue with me and do it now. You are not gonna get away with doing things half ass."

"Geeze mom chill out. Fine I'll do it now," Nicole said opening her bedroom door, stomping towards the closet, and pulling out the broom and dustpan again. She swept up the area and threw the mess in the trash, returned the broom and dustpan, and walked back into her room slamming the door behind her.

"Don't get an attitude, I will not tolerate it today," Kathryn scolded, opening Nicole's bedroom door.

"Get out! This is my room! You cannot just come barging in here."

“I own all the rooms in this house, including yours. I can go where I want when I want,” Kathryn responded standing in Nicole’s doorway. Nicole stood up from her bed and walked towards the door grabbing the side of the door trying to close it on Kathryn.

“What is the matter with you? You cannot close the door on me. Stop that! Nicole, I am warning you. Do it again and I will smack you.”

“Do it, I dare you!” Nicole responded standing up a little taller, staring Kathryn directly in the eyes.

“I cannot deal with you when you’re like this. You need to calm down and back off. I am still your mother and I will not be treated like this,” Kathryn warned, staring back at Nicole waiting to see what she would do.

“Just leave me alone!” Nicole demanded lowering her voice and speaking very slowly. Kathryn saw the anger building up behind Nicole’s eyes because the color was changing from her usual baby blue to a darker deep ocean blue. She learned through the years that when this happened it was better to walk away and leave her alone. Kathryn backed away from the door holding her hands up in surrender. She turned and walked towards her own bedroom. As soon as Kathryn let go of Nicole’s door it was slammed closed so hard that it rattled the picture frames on the opposite side of the wall. Kathryn paused momentarily listening for any crashes from any frame falling off of the wall. When nothing crashed, she continued to her room where she pulled out her phone and called Stella. Laying back on the bed she began to cry while explaining the morning to Stella.

“I just don’t know what to do with her anymore. She had the nerve to try and close the door on me. What should I do?” Kathryn asked through tears.

“I know honey, for now just let her sit in her room and calm down. Pretend she’s not there and go about your day like usual. I think that’s the only thing you can do for now,” Stella responded over the phone.

“Okay, thank you love. I just wish I could talk to her without arguing, you know. She does things half ass and then gets mad at me for making her do it again. If she would have just done it right the first time all of this could have been avoided. Why does she do this?”

“I don’t know honey. Maybe when we get her meds fixed her attitude won’t be as bad. It’s really the only thing I can think of. I have to go to class now, I love you, I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Okay, I love you too,” Kathryn responded hitting the end button on her phone and tossing it aside on the bed next to her. She laid back with her legs hanging off the side and took in a deep breath letting it out slowly. There were only a few more hours until James returned home from school so Kathryn took this time to close her eyes and relax.

“Mom? Nicole?” James called through the house. Entering Kathryn and Stella’s room he saw Kathryn laying on the bed asleep. He walked quietly towards her and put a hand on her shoulder. “Mom, I’m home,” He noticed the tear stains on her cheeks and a few tissues on the bed, “Are you okay?” He asked concerned. Kathryn opened her eyes and saw the concern in James’ face. She sat up and quickly responded that she was fine, pulling the tissues together in a pile. Unconvinced James climbed up on the bed and hugged Kathryn.

“Awe baby, I’m okay just had a bit of a rough morning. Really, I promise I’m fine,” Kathryn said hugging James back and holding him in her arms like when he was little. “How was school? Did you get a snack already? What time is it? I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

“School was boring, same thing as yesterday and the day before that. I just got here and was looking for you,” James responded sliding towards the edge of the bed to stand up. “I’m gonna go eat now.”

“Okay babe, I’ll be out in just a minute,” Kathryn said standing up from her bed and walking into the bathroom. She blew her nose once more, cleaned her face with a washcloth and patted her face dry. Looking at herself in the mirror she could see dark circles under her eyes and a crease in between her eyebrows. Pushing her hair back she noticed a few more gray hairs on the sides by her ears. Letting out a sigh she put the towel down, straightened her shirt and walked out of the bathroom.

She found James at the dining table slurping Ramen noodles, making a mess all around him. Kathryn grinned and watched him try to fit as much as possible into his mouth. Nicole came out of her room behind him, glared at Kathryn and said hello to James rubbing the top of his head as she walked by. Grabbing her own Ramen noodles, she started to unwrap them to cook. Kathryn took the chair across from James, pretending to ignore the look from Nicole. “So, tell me more about school. Why was it so boring?”

“It’s just the same stuff every day, we don’t get to do anything fun. Math, boring, English, boring, Science, not as boring, History, definitely boring, even PE was boring because we are just running laps,” James said through a mouth full of noodles dripping on his chin.

“History was my favorite subject,” Nicole said from the kitchen.

“Oh really, I didn’t know that. What part of History do you like the most?” Kathryn asked looking at Nicole through the little bar area.

“I used to hate PE when we did laps too,” Nicole said ignoring Kathryn’s question.

“What about art? Aren’t you doing something for that?”

“Oh yea, that’s my favorite class. Today we used clay to sculpt little pots, we are gonna glaze them tomorrow once they are dry,” James said raising his eyebrows. Kathryn noticed that Nicole was ignoring her, so she decided to let it go and continue to talk to James about school.

“You know, I have done a lot with clay sculptures and pottery. It is one of my most favorite hobbies. I just wish I had access to it and a kiln more,” Kathryn added.

“I know, but I’m not as good as you mom. But it’s still a lot of fun. I like the clay and painting we’re gonna start that next week I think,” James said slurping more noodles into his mouth. Nicole brought her bowl of noodles to the table and sat down next to James. She stared down at her bowl without making any eye contact with either James or Kathryn, using her hair as a black out curtain.

“You’re gonna get your hair in your noodles, why don’t you pull it back to eat?” Kathryn asked. Ignoring her again Nicole continued to eat without moving her hair or acknowledging that Kathryn has spoken to her. “Nicole, please don’t ignore me. I am trying to help you. I know you took a shower earlier and probably do not want soup in your hair.” Nicole let out a huff of air and moved her hair without looking up. Kathryn just sat and watched as her kids both ate their noodles thinking about how different they are. Nicole is so headstrong, and James is always eager to please, she is quick to anger, and he is able to talk through his feelings.

“Why are you staring at us mom?” James asked.

“Because I am amazed that you are both my absolutely beautiful babies,” Kathryn responded with an amused grin.

“Oh my gosh, mom,” James said putting his head down pretending to blush.

“You guys are weird,” Nicole said leaning a shoulder into James giving him a little nudge. Kathryn let out a little giggle at the two of them. Nicole finally looked up at Kathryn and grinned. Kathryn gave her a slight nod acknowledging the action. It was their way of letting one another know they were in a truce. Just at this moment Stella came through the front door greeting the dogs that rushed towards her. She put her stuff down and walked into the dining room seeing all three seated at the table. She took her seat next to Kathryn and leaned over for a kiss hello.

“Ewe, gross,” James said playfully.

“How is everyone today?” Stella asked raising an eyebrow at Kathryn questioningly.

“We are okay, James was just telling us about school,” Kathryn replied placing a hand on Stella’s knee giving it a little pat in response.

“Mom was crying earlier. I asked why but she didn’t tell me,” James added. Nicole rolled her eyes and stood to take her bowl to the kitchen. She placed her bowl in the sink ran some water into it and left it. She returned to her room and closed the door behind her. “I don’t know what’s wrong with her, but she’s always cranky,” James said.

“Well don’t worry about mom, she’s better now and as for your sister we just need to be patient with her for a little while,” Stella responded. “When you’re done why don’t you put yours and sisters’ dishes in the dishwasher?”

“Okay, and then since I don’t have homework can I play the Xbox?” James asked standing up from his seat at the table. Stella gave him permission to play until dinner after he

cleaned up all of the dishes. She and Kathryn walked into the office that they share each sitting down in their own chairs. Letting out a sigh Kathryn pushed her chair closer to Stella so she could touch her hands.

“What are we gonna do? I cannot take every day off of work to stay home with her, but at the same time I don’t want to leave her alone,” Kathryn said looking up at Stella.

“We will have to take it one day at a time for now. When are her appointments set for?”

“The teen court is this Thursday at 5pm, and the doctor is gonna try to get her in tomorrow or Wednesday. They put her on the cancelation list to make sure she can get in even sooner.”

“So, what is the teen court thing? What do they do there?” Stella asked.

“I’m still not sure they only made the appointment but didn’t tell me anything about the program or what to expect. She gave me the day and time along with the address of where we need to go and that’s it.”

“That’s interesting, let me see if I can find something online about it.” Stella responded turning on her computer. Clicking the keys quickly she pulled up a website that had some information. She explained to Kathryn that it said the first-time offenders go to this teen court to be judged by their peers.

“What does that mean?” Kathryn asked scooting her chair closer so she could look over Stella’s shoulder.

“It says that instead of going to court with adult peers in a jury these teens will be judged by other teens. They also have to serve on the jury for others. This might be lucky for us and she might not go to jail after all,” Stella mentioned.

“Well, that’s a cool idea. I think that it might be better for Nicole as well as for me. I like this idea that she will be judged by other teenagers who might have been in the same situation. Does it mention what some of the punishments might be?” Kathryn questioned leaning in closer.

“No, it doesn’t I guess that’s something we will have to wait and see,” Stella added, scooting her chair back a little so Kathryn could get a better look for herself. She removed her hand from the mouse so Kathryn could take over scrolling through the website, moving in even closer. Stella pushed her chair back and out of the way so Kathryn could have full access to her desk and computer.

“Dang, I wish it had something so we would know what to expect,” Kathryn said as she continued to scroll, searching for more information.

After searching the website for answers Kathryn returned to her own desk letting Stella have access to hers again. They both worked on class stuff for a little over an hour when James came in requesting dinner.

“Didn’t you just eat noodles a little while ago?” Stella asked scooting back from her desk. She looked at him standing in the doorway and remembered when he was smaller, he would always jump and try to touch the door frame missing by a lot and now he can almost touch it without jumping.

“That was like two hours ago, geeze,” James responded holding the wall and reaching up to touch the door frame barely missing.

“Okay babe, we will come and make dinner. What should we have?” Kathryn asked pushing away from her own desk, turning to face James in the doorway. They all cooked dinner together and sat down at the dining room table together to eat as they did every night regardless of what had happened during the day.



A few days later Kathryn's received a phone call from the doctor's office letting her know that there was an opening for that day. She told the receptionist that they would be there. She knocked on Nicole's bedroom door and let her know that she had an appointment in an hour and needed to get ready. The last few days had gone by pretty quickly, Nicole remained hidden in her room watching TV or napping while the rest of the family went about their daily routines.

At the doctor's office Kathryn told him what had happened at school and mentioned that Nicole had stopped taking her meds and started smoking marijuana. Doctor Alvarez responded without any emotion, he asked Nicole a couple questions, wrote down a new prescription for her and told Kathryn to make another appointment in one month. The entire appointment lasted less than fifteen minutes. "I thought maybe you might suggest someone that she can talk to. She seems to keep everything bottled up and doesn't talk to us about anything." Kathryn mentioned stopping in his doorway before returning to the lobby. Wiping his eyes under his glasses with his thumb and index finger, he looked at Kathryn then back down at his desk. He shuffled through some papers and pulled one out handing it to Kathryn. She looked at it with a creased brow, it was a list of therapists in the area that accepted their insurance.

"Just take this to the front and see who is available. They will make the appointment in the lobby," Dr. Alvarez said standing to close the door after Kathryn stepped out into the hallway. Baffled at his behavior Kathryn slung her purse over her shoulder and took the paper to the lobby where she made the future appointment and asked the receptionists about the list. They found an available therapist and scheduled the appointment for Nicole to start therapy. While in

the lobby Kathryn asked if there was someone, she could talk to about Dr. Alvarez' behavior. Unfortunately, the office did not have a manager at the time, so complaints were taken down in writing and left with the receptionist. She did mention that it would just go in a file and probably ignored because the doctor's in the office don't really care, they are only there for the money. Kathryn let out a breath of frustration and motioned to Nicole that it was time to leave. Nicole was sitting by the exit staring at her phone waiting.

On their way home Kathryn was still upset about how uninterested Dr. Alvarez was in regard to Nicole's care. "How dare he treat us like that. This is serious and he acted like we were wasting his time. Ugh, that makes me so mad."

"Calm down mom, it wasn't that bad. Maybe he was busy. Or maybe he had something else on his mind. You never know," Nicole said turning the radio up.

"Well, I will call the Better Business Bureau and complain about him," Kathryn said turning the radio down.

"Oh my God mom, you always make things worse than they are. You're so dramatic," Nicole responded turning the radio back up again.

"That's rude, don't talk to me like that. I don't appreciate it. And leave the radio alone it's too loud," Kathryn said reaching for the radio knob to turn it down. Nicole took a deep breath, slumped into her seat, and stared at her phone silently the rest of the way home. Once they arrived home Nicole returned to her room and Kathryn got ready for her afternoon class. Gathering up her bag and purse Kathryn knocked on Nicole's door to let her know that she was leaving for work and reminded her that she needed to do a chore. Hearing a small grunting sound Kathryn assumed that Nicole heard her and left for work. It was a short drive to the classroom

where she always arrived early to get the class ready for the day's lecture. After class Kathryn put all the homework collected into her bag and locked the classroom behind her. She drove to the pharmacy they use to drop off Nicole's new prescription and decided to wait for it. As soon as it was ready, she picked it up and drove home.

Pulling into the driveway she noticed the side door was open, which was always locked. The only use for that door was to take the trash out to the bins. She thought that maybe Nicole had taken it out and forgot to close and lock the door. As Kathryn was opening her car door, she noticed a person standing in the side doorway.

"Hi babe, I'm home from class," Kathryn pulled her bag and purse out of the backseat and walked to the front door. Once entering the house, she noticed two different voices coming from the laundry room, off of the dining room where the side door leads outside. She threw her bag down in her office and went to inspect who was talking. There she found Nicole closing the door and locking it. "Who were you talking to?"

"Nobody, I just took the trash out," Nicole replied moving past Kathryn to leave the small room.

"I heard voices though," Kathryn responded with a creased brow and pursed lips.

"Well, I don't know what to tell you. I'm the only one here," Nicole said walking towards the kitchen opening up the refrigerator and pulling out the orange juice. Taking a swig from the jug she walked to the cabinet and got a glass.

"Don't do that, you are not the only one who drinks that. That's gross and I taught you better manners," Kathryn said sternly. "I'll be in my office grading if you need me for anything. Are you ready for court tomorrow?"

“Yea, I mean I don’t really know what to expect so I guess I’m ready,” Nicole said taking a sip from her glass.

“Oh yea, I got your knew meds. I will leave them here on the bar and make sure you take them every day,” Kathryn said placing a prescription bottle on the counter. Rolling her eyes Nicole nodded her head and went back into her bedroom. Kathryn let out a sigh and walked into her office and pulled out the homework that she needed to grade. She sat down at her desk and graded in silence. After a few moments she heard loud music coming from Nicole’s room and decided not to tell her to turn it down. She stood and closed the office door, shutting herself away from potential conflict. Placing her elbows on her desk she placed her head in her hands wiping at her eyes.

Later that evening after James finished his homework and both Kathryn and Stella were finished working for the day, they decided to watch a movie together. Stella knocked on Nicole’s door and invited her to join them but didn’t get any response. She knocked again a little louder and still did not get an answer, so she opened the door slightly and found Nicole asleep on her bed. Closing the door behind her she went to the living room to watch the movie.

The next day went as usual with everyone following their own routines. However, that evening was Nicole’s court time. Kathryn could see the nerves in Nicole’s face, and she was fidgeting with her hands, and shifting in her seat on the way there. “It will be okay, I promise,” Kathryn said placing a hand on Nicole’s knee in the passenger seat. Once they arrived at the courthouse, they both sat in the car taking a minute before entering the building. “Okay, you ready?” Kathryn asked turning the car off and grabbing her purse. Nicole responded with a nod and opened her door.

When they entered the building there were several other teens with their parents waiting in the small lobby, and a short woman walking around with a clip board. She stopped Kathryn and Nicole before they could get any further into the building and asked their names and the purpose for their visit. Kathryn answered all the woman's questions and signed in on the clip board the woman handed her. Nicole stood holding her hands in front of her and used her hair to hide her face from the other teens.

They were all escorted into an auditorium with a podium in the front and seats all around it. They were told where to sit and wait until Nicole's name was called. A few moments later a man entered from a backdoor and sat down in the big chair behind the podium. He introduced himself as the judge for the days hearings and gave the teens instructions on what was about to happen. The kids were told to gather together in a group and were taken into another room across the hall. The judge called a name to the podium as the others left. Once the charges were explained as well as the possible punishment for the crime the others were brought back in and told to sit in a specified area. Once they were all seated the judge explained to them what happened and what the charges were. He let the teen at the podium explain his side of the story and then asked the group to leave once more and decide together what the teens punishment should be and gave them a list of possibilities. After about five minutes the group returned and gave the judge a piece of paper with the results of the punishment. The judge read the punishment, signed a piece of paper, and handed it to the short woman that brought them in. He explained what the expectations were for the punishment and gave the teen a time limit on when it needed to be completed.

The judge called Nicole's name next and it was the same process, the group left the room while the judge explained to her what was about to happen. Once the group came back into the

room, Nicole was shifting from one leg to the other standing at the podium and heard the crime and possible punishment. They left and about ten minutes later they returned with another piece of paper. After handing it to the judge they all took their seats and waited for the judge to explain the punishment.

“As per the jury of your peers, you are required to give your mother a heartfelt apology for your behavior, and thirty hours of community service. Do you have any questions?”

“No sir, thank you,” Nicole said looking up at him from the podium.

“Mom, if you wouldn’t mind joining us down here. They requested the apology done here in person,” the judge called out.

“Oh, okay, sure,” Kathryn said standing from her chair in the back of the room and walked down and stood next to Nicole at the podium. “Okay, Nicole you may begin.”

“Mom, you know that I am sorry for what I did, and I agree that my behavior wasn’t good, and I am sorry for that too,” Nicole said turning and looking at Kathryn in the eyes. Kathryn noticed Nicole purse her lips together to hold back a smile or laugh and Nicole quickly looked down at the floor and used her hair to block her face from the judge and jury. She gained her composure quickly and looked up at the judge., “Is that good?” The judge looked at the jury questioning if that apology qualified for what they expected. One girl in the front nodded her head in agreement while another shook her head no. The judge asked them to raise their hands if they thought it was a good enough apology and when the majority ruled in agreement, he signed a piece of paper and handed it to the short woman again.

Nicole was instructed that she needed to rejoin the group to be a part of the jury on three more cases which all ended the same, except for one teen who was sentenced to juvenal hall.

After they were all judged Kathryn was told to speak to the woman in the office and get paperwork for the community service. Once they picked up the paperwork and left the building Nicole let out a laugh, “That was the dumbest thing I have ever been a part of. Can you believe this place?”

“Well, I think it’s better than the alternative which is you going to jail. I think this worked out well for you. You’ll be able to do your community service after school and put this whole thing behind you,” Kathryn said starting the car.

“Yea, I guess,” Nicole responded with a smirk still across her face. Once they arrived home Nicole returned to her bedroom and closed the door. Kathryn took the paperwork into the office where she found Stella working at her computer.

“How did it go?” Stella asked turning away from her computer to face Kathryn.

“Well, she got lucky, I think. They made her apologize to me in front of everyone, and she got thirty hours of community service to be completed in three months,” Kathryn responded handing the paperwork to Stella so she could look it over.

“That’s it? Really? How did she do?”

“She acted like it was a big joke, she was trying really hard not to laugh during her apology. Afterward’s she said it was the dumbest thing ever. I am very disappointed.”

“Oh man, I’m sorry honey. I wish there were some way that we could help her understand the seriousness of this,” Stella said handing the papers back to Kathryn who put them down on her desk. “I have dinner warming in the oven if you’re ready to eat.”

“Thank you love, you’re the best. You keep me from falling apart. I love you,” Kathryn said leaning down for a kiss. “I guess we should feed the kids, how’s James this evening? Did he have a lot of homework?”

“I love you too. He’s good only had math and I helped him with that. He’s in his room building a new Lego set I picked up for him. It’s an architecture one, he’s building the Louvre,” Stella said standing up from her desk chair. They both walked into the kitchen where the smell of baked salmon and broccoli filled the air.



A few weeks later Nicole returned to school and everyone in the house started to get back into their routine until Kathryn received a phone call from Mr. Tafoya requesting that she go to the school once again. Letting out a deep sigh and placing her index finger and thumb in her eyes rubbing hard, she agreed to be right there. Kathryn sent Stella a text message letting her know that the school wanted to see her, and she would let her know what it was about afterwards. Once she arrived at the school, she parked her car, took a deep breath let it out slowly, checked her face in the mirror, wiped at her eyes once more and turned off the car. She walked slowly into the building where she was met by the same rude receptionist who once again took her into the conference room. There she saw Nicole sitting in a chair sobbing uncontrollably. She was shaking, her face was red, her nose was running, and she had a constant stream of tears falling down her cheeks.

“Oh my God, what’s wrong? Baby girl look at me, what happened? Are you okay? Are you hurt?” Kathryn said dropping her purse in the doorway and kneeling next to Nicole’s chair pushing the hair away from her face.

“It wasn’t my fault. I’m sorry mom,” Nicole managed to say in between breaths.

“What is going on?” Kathryn asked standing to look at Mr. Tafoya who just entered the room with Officer Vargas.

“Please have a seat,” Mr. Tafoya said reaching towards a chair and pulling it out for Kathryn to sit next to Nicole. Kathryn took the seat and reached over and took Nicole’s hand into hers and rubbed it calmingly.

“Take some deep breaths baby girl,” Kathryn said focusing on Nicole. “What happened?” Kathryn asked looking up at Mr. Tafoya.

“There was an issue between Nicole and one of our male math teachers. Now before you think the worst it is nothing sexual. I want to make that clear from the beginning. It was brought to our attention a little bit ago that there was an altercation between Nicole and her math teacher. A Physical altercation, where they each pushed the other. As it was explained to me, he took her phone away because she was not paying attention for which she stood and demanded it back. When he refused and shoved her back and she responded by shoving him back into the blackboard. After this she left the room and came directly here to the office. We are in the middle of investigating, where we will be asking students in the class what they all saw, as well as interviewing the teacher once again. We have already taken Nicole’s statement, however since this is her second altercation within a month she will be expelled from school.”

“What? Wait? One of your teachers put his hands on my child and she’s the one getting expelled! What about him? I want him fired! Kathryn demanded standing up from her chair shoving it backwards.

“Ma’am you will need to calm down and take a seat,” Officer Vargas said putting his hand out in a calming motion.

“Oh, what your gonna arrest me for taking care of my child? Do you have any children Officer?” Kathryn asked still standing putting a hand on her hip.

“No ma’am I do not have any children, but that does not matter right this moment. I need you to calm down and have a seat.”

“Well, of course you don’t otherwise you’d be just as pissed off as I am about this,” Kathryn said sternly with a creased brow. Nicole sat in the chair breathing normally, not making eye contact with any of them. “So again, I will ask what about the teacher? What will happen to him? He shouldn’t be teaching students if he can’t control himself.”

“The administration office has been notified of the situation, but I cannot give you any information about that part of the incident. I can only fill you in on what Nicole’s part in it was and what her punishment will be. Now if you have a seat, I will go over the paperwork that explains the punishment. I will also need your signature on the last page,” Mr. Tafoya said taking his own seat and pulling paperwork out of a manilla folder with Nicole’s name on it. Kathryn took her seat and pulled the paperwork towards her so she could read it without Mr. Tafoya explaining it.

“You will see that since this is her second physical altercation within a month, the punishment is listed as expulsion. Once the paperwork is signed, we will file it with administration where they will keep all of the records. Later, they will hold a meeting with you to determine the length of expulsion. Unfortunately, she will no longer be allowed to return here, and with that she will not be allowed access to any extracurricular activities as well. Meaning that she cannot attend any football games, volleyball games, baseball, basketball, etc. If she is caught on school property she will be arrested for trespassing, unless escorted by a parent,” Mr. Tafoya explained.

“That seems a bit extreme don’t you think? I mean come on she has friends that play sports, and now she can’t go cheer them on. That’s ridiculous! What about her behavior and grades for the first semester, doesn’t that count for anything? I mean she’s a good kid, she just needs help with how to deal with her emotions. Isn’t that what we are supposed to teach them as instructors? I just don’t understand any of this, I think that the only one who should be punished is that teacher who put his hands on a teenage girl. I think that calls for extreme action, not taking it out on a young girl who has her whole future ahead of her. Come on, guys really?” Kathryn argued pushing her hair behind her ears so she could look at Mr. Tafoya in the eyes.

“I am sorry, but these are the rules and policies we must follow, which clearly state that after the second physical altercation within the same school year the punishment is expulsion. I know that she is a good kid, I have seen her around campus usually pretty happy. Unfortunately, there is nothing else we can do here. If you would sign the last page, I will go make copies for you to keep in your records.” Mr. Tafoya said standing up from his seat waiting for Kathryn to sign the paperwork.

“What if I get a lawyer to fight this?”

“If you say you are getting a lawyer, we are no longer allowed to speak to you, and you will have to refer to the administration office for future information. The school board will have their lawyer contact yours, all we need is the name a phone number to give to administration.”

“Well, I don’t have a lawyer, but I might get one. I don’t know yet, I need to speak to my wife first,” Kathryn added.

“Okay, then our meeting is finished, and we can no longer discuss this issue with you. Please sign here,” Mr. Tafoya said pointing out the line that needed Kathryn’s signature. “I will

be right back with your copies.” Kathryn looked at Nicole who stayed silent throughout the entire meeting, her head was hanging down looking at her hands in her lap.

“Don’t worry baby we will get this figured out. Do you have all of your stuff with you?” Kathryn asked looking around for Nicole’s backpack.

“I have my bag, but they took my phone, and I haven’t gotten it back,” Nicole said through a curtain of black hair.

“Excuse me, officer can we get her phone back please?” Kathryn asked Officer Vargas who was standing in the hallway.

“Let me see if I can get that for you.”

“Thank you, I would like to leave here soon. So, if you wouldn’t mind getting that to us,” Kathryn said turning her back to the officer and facing Nicole still sitting in the tall chair.

“Here you go ma’am,” Officer Vargas said handing the phone to Kathryn through the opened door. Mr. Tafoya entered the room and handed the paperwork to Kathryn who was already standing to leave. She put a hand on Nicole’s shoulder to let her know it was time to leave. Nicole grabbed her backpack off of the floor next to her chair took her phone from Kathryn and put it in a side pocket. She swung it across her shoulders and exited the room. Kathryn looked back at Mr. Tafoya and gave him a dirty look shaking her head before leaving out into the hallway.

Once in the car Kathryn pulled out her cell phone and pushed the auto dial to call Stella. She explained what happened and what the school did as punishment. Nicole sat quietly in the

passenger seat looking at her own phone. After Kathryn was finished telling Stella what happened she hung up and pulled out of the parking lot. “Are you okay babe?”

“I don’t know, it doesn’t seem real. I don’t know what happened. I was gonna text you that I wasn’t feeling good and the next thing I know he snatched my phone out of my hands. I asked for it back and told him he had no right to take my things. When he still wouldn’t give it back, I got really angry and got in his face. I never put hands on him until he shoved me backwards into the desk. Then I don’t know what happened, I shoved him back and he fell into the blackboard, and I just left. I ran to the office to tell them that he hit me and the next thing I know they are putting me in a room with Officer dumbass. I freaked out and was yelling that I wanted to call you, but they wouldn’t let me. They just said I had to sit in there till they figured out what happened. I just got scared,” Nicole said as she started to cry again.

“I am so sorry this happened to you. It is never okay for a man to put his hands on you no matter the reason. I promise you I will handle this. It will be okay; we will figure it out.” Kathryn said pulling into the driveway. Once inside, Kathryn pulled Nicole into a hug and held her, Nicole began to cry again. Rubbing her back Kathryn held Nicole until she stopped crying and pulled away. Wiping at her nose she turned and walked into her room closing the door. Kathryn watched as Nicole closed out the world once again. When Stella and James got home later that day Kathryn sat down with them at the dining table and explained the day, and how it affected Nicole. “We are gonna need to be patient with her for a bit, she’s had a hard month and a lot has happened very quickly. We are gonna give her the space she needs and when she’s ready she will come out of her room and join us again.”

“Poor Nicole.” James said looking back at her closed door. “Why did that teacher do that? That’s not okay.” He continued.

“The same goes for you too kiddo, no teacher man or woman should put their hands on you in anger or at all really,” Stella added.

“But sometimes our teacher hugs us or gives us high fives.”

“Well, that is okay. As long as they are not touching you inappropriately,” Kathryn said standing up from her chair and walking into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of wine. She popped the cork and poured a full glass. She walked back to the table and sat down to finish the discussion. “Dammit, I’m sorry honey did you want a beer?”

“No, I’m good thank you I have tea,” Stella responded putting a hand on Kathryn’s shoulder squeezing the tension out.

“Okay, now how was your day James?” Kathryn asked after taking a big drink of wine.

“It was the same, I guess. Oh, but I saw a fight in the hallway today. Two girls started yelling by my class and before I knew it, they were on the ground pulling each other’s hair. It was awesome.”

“That’s not awesome son, it is never okay to fight with anyone,” Stella added holding Kathryn’s hand on the table.

“Oh, I didn’t know that. I thought it was funny cause Nicole used to tell me I fight like a girl and now I know what that means. Middle school is definitely harder than Elementary though, now instead of one class I have seven. It’s too much to remember and I’m still getting lost in the hallways. They all look the same, it’s confusing.”

“You’ll figure it out. It took me forever to figure out which way to go when I was in college. At least all of your classes are in the same building. Just wait till college and then you will have classes in different buildings spread across a large campus,” Stella said smiling at James across the table.

“I guess we should start thinking about making dinner, what you guys want?” Kathryn asked standing up from her chair and pushing it back in. Holding the back, she looked back and forth between James and Stella waiting for a response. Both of them raised their shoulders in answer. “Well, that’s not helpful. Geeze guys help me out here,” Kathryn said carrying her glass of wine to the kitchen. She opened the fridge and stared into the abyss not really focusing on anything in particular. She closed the refrigerator door turned around and suggested they order something.

“Can we have Chinese?” James said raising his eyebrows in excitement.

“What do you think honey, Chinese sound good to you?” Kathryn asked Stella who was still sitting with James in the dining room. Stella nodded her head and pointed to Nicole’s door indicating that they should ask her opinion as well. James jumped up and knocked on Nicole’s door yelling that they were getting Chinese for dinner.

“Fine,” Nicole said through the shut door. James frowned that she didn’t open the door to him, and he turned around and sat back in his seat at the table.

“Don’t let her get to you, remember we need to give her some space. She’s had a rough day for sure,” Stella said patting his hand on the table. “Do you know what you want? I’m gonna call it in.”

“Yes, duh. Orange chicken, spring rolls, noodles, pot stickers, and California rolls,” James said closing his eyes with a grin like he could already smell the food.

“Are you sure your gonna eat all that?” Kathryn asked from the kitchen.

“Heck yea, it’s my favorite food,” James responded pushing Stella’s phone closer to her so she could call sooner. Stella placed the order and paid over the phone, while Kathryn poured another glass of wine and rejoined them at the table.

The next day Kathryn called a lawyer who gave her the number for another lawyer that would be better suited for the situation. She called the new number and spoke to a woman about what happened and asked what she thought they should do about it. She responded by telling Kathryn what her retainer was and when she would be available for a meeting. It would cost two thousand just to have the meeting and then another thousand after the court date was set. Kathryn let her know that she would need to discuss the cost to her wife and would call back with an answer later in the day. After hanging up Kathryn called Stella on her cell and told her about the lawyer’s cost. Stella was shocked at the cost of just having a meeting about what to do. She told Kathryn that she would call around and see if she could find someone cheaper. Kathryn called the lawyer back and explained that the cost was too much for them right now and thanked her for her time. The lawyer responded by telling Kathryn that she had a friend that dealt with the school board a lot and gave her his number.

Kathryn called the number and left a message explaining their situation and left her number for him to call her back. While Kathryn was in class her cell phone rang and she excused herself to the hallway to answer it. It was the new lawyer getting back to her. He explained that

with these kinds of situations court could go one of two ways. One, the teacher could get off because of Nicole's previous incidence with anger and outburst leading to physical altercations. On the other hand, he explained that there was a chance that they could get Nicole back in school since it was a teacher who started the altercation by placing his hands on a student. Because there wasn't any real guarantee of either side winning, he suggested that Nicole take the year of expulsion and start at a new school the following year. Kathryn thanked him for actually speaking to her about their situation and called Stella as soon as she hung up.

"Hi, honey. Sorry I have to be quick I'm still in class, but I wanted to fill you in on what the lawyer said," Kathryn explained what the lawyer said and they both agreed that maybe since they couldn't guarantee Nicole going back to school that they should take the advice and let her take the year off. Neither one wanted to create more stress for Nicole, so they agreed and hung up. Kathryn rushed back into her class and finished the lecture. Once returning home Stella was sitting at her desk in the office. "Did you talk to her yet?" Kathryn asked placing her bag on the floor next to her desk.

"No, I thought I would wait for you to get home and we could talk to her together," Stella said pushing away from her desk and standing. She pulled Kathryn into a hug and held her for a few moments before taking a deep breath. "You ready for this?"

"I wish I could say yes but no I am not. This is going to break her heart; she won't be able to see any of her friends. What are we going to do with her here every single day?"

"I don't know, maybe we can talk her into getting a part time job. That's something that will keep her busy. It will also help keep her mind off of things right now," Stella added pushing aside Kathryn's hair and kissing her on the forehead.

“That’s a good idea. Fingers crossed. Right,” Kathryn said pulling out of the hug. She walked out towards Nicole’s room, took another deep breath, and knocked on the door.

“Yea,” Nicole shouted through the door.

“Can you come out for a minute I need to talk to you about a few things,” Kathryn added waiting for the door to open. A slight crack in the door opened up and Nicole stood looking though it but not opening it up fully or coming out as requested. “Come on babe I need to talk to you, and I would like you to look at me,” Kathryn added pulling the door opened all the way.

“Fine, what is it?” Nicole said standing in the hall.

“Will you join us in the living room so we can all sit and be comfortable?” Stella added motioning towards the living room with her hands. Nicole rolled her eyes let out a breath and walked past Kathryn into the living room and slumped down on the couch.

“Thank you. Now that wasn’t so hard was it?” Stella continued, sitting in one of the recliners. Kathryn sat down in the other recliner and positioned herself to where she could see Nicole better. Kathryn explained what the lawyer had said and told her that they agreed, and she would be taking the year off. Stella suggested to her about getting a job so she wouldn’t be bored all day while her friends were in school. She added that any money Nicole earned was hers to do with what she wanted. Nicole raised an eyebrow at the idea but didn’t say anything, she sat quietly looking at her hands like usual.

“Well, what do you think? Aren’t you gonna say anything?” Kathryn asked watching Nicole closely.

“I mean, I don’t know what you want me to say. Yay, I’m not in school anymore, but dang now I have to get a job. I mean, what really is there to say?” Nicole responded without looking up.

“You misunderstood; you do not have to get a job. It was just a suggestion that could keep you busy during the day, instead of hanging out here all day bored,” Kathryn insisted shifting in her seat.

“Who said I was bored?”

“Well, I just assumed since you are in your room all day with nothing to do in there,” Kathryn said looking to Stella raising an eyebrow insisting that she say something.

“Yea, um maybe having a job would be fun. You never know till you try it,” Stella said winking at Kathryn. Kathryn rolled her eyes at Stella and tried to explain it better to Nicole.

“Mom, I get it. I am not allowed to go to school for a year and you both think that it would keep me busy if I got a job,” Nicole said finally looking back and forth between Kathryn and Stella. Kathryn nodded her head in agreement leaning further back into her chair.

“Exactly,” Stella added with a grin. “You know I have worked since I was your age, maybe even younger. In fact, I don’t remember a time where I didn’t have a job. And I know your mom has always worked. Right honey?”

“No, actually I didn’t start working until I moved out of my parents’ house. School was our priority back then,” Kathryn said wincing at her last statement wishing she could take it back.

“Its fine, I can look for a job. I’ll start tomorrow. Are we done now?” Nicole said standing up from the sofa.

“Yes, we’re done I guess,” Nicole didn’t wait for another response and walked back into her room and shutting the door. Kathryn took Stella’s hand and held it while she finished her glass of wine. “You ready for a beer now?”

“Absolutely,” Stella said taking the glass from Kathryn for a refill while she grabbed a beer from the fridge. “Is James spending the weekend with his dad?”

“I think so, that’s what he told me this morning before he left for school. He said his dad was gonna pick him up after school. He already packed his bag this morning too, so he is ready as soon as his dad gets here,” Kathryn said leaning her head on the back of the recliner. She pulled the lever on the side of the chair to pop out the foot stool and pushed her head back to open it fully. Stella returned to the living room and handed Kathryn her glass of wine and did the same in her own recliner.

James returned home a little while later, rushing through the front door yelling hello through the house and racing towards his bedroom. Kathryn sat up from her recliner and followed him to his room. “How was your day babe?”

“It was awesome, look here’s my pot that I made. You can have it, I made it for you,” James said pulling his little purple coil pot out of his backpack.

“Oh, thank you. It’s so pretty. You did such a good job,” Kathryn said turning the pot around in her hand looking at every detail. On the bottom it had James’ initial carved into it with the date. “I know just what I will use this for.”

“What?” James asked shoving shoes into another bag.

“I’m gonna use it on my dresser for my earrings. It’s a perfect little jewelry pot,” Kathryn added.

“Cool. Has my dad called yet? Is he on his way for me yet?”

“I haven’t heard from him yet today. Do you want to call him and ask him what time he is coming for you?” Kathryn added pulling her phone out of her pocket and handing it to James. Taking the phone James dialed his dad’s phone number and waited for a response.

“Dad! Hi, when are you coming for me?” James said excitedly into the phone. His smile faded quickly as he handed the phone back to Kathryn. “He wants to talk to you.”

“Hey, what’s up?” Kathryn said into the phone. After a few minutes she hung up the phone. She hugged James tightly and explained that his dad wasn’t coming because he had a work thing. James dropped the bag he was holding and stood while Kathryn held him in a hug. “Hey, maybe we can go see a movie this weekend just us. What do you say? It could be a mommy son date,” Kathryn insisted trying to cheer James up.

“Sure,” James responded sullenly, pulling away from the hug and sitting down on his bed. Kathryn sat down next to him and patted him on the leg.

“I know it’s hard when people let us down. But sometimes we have to remember that everyone has their own lives and unfortunately sometimes those lives get in the way of spending time with family and friends. It doesn’t make it hurt any less but I’m sure he’ll make it up to you soon.”

“Yea, maybe,” James said pushing his way up onto the bed, reaching for his TV remote. He clicked it on and started watching cartoons. Kathryn stood, kissed James on the forehead and left him alone for a while. She returned to the living room where Stella was snoozing in her chair.

“You won’t believe this jerk.”

“Let me guess, he’s not coming? What was it this time, work? Date? Or too tired to drive?” Stella said watching Kathryn walk into the room through the slits in her eye lids.

“He claimed it was a work thing, but I’m sure it was just him being lazy and not wanting to drive down here to get James. I hate it when he does this. He has no idea how bad this shit hurts the kids. Nicole is old enough to not really care anymore but James still get excited, and he lets them both down every time,” Kathryn said slumping down in her chair next to Stella. “It’s so frustrating.”

“I know love, but as long as the kids know that we will always be there for them no matter what, things will work out in the long run,” Stella added leaning over to take Kathryn’s hand.

“I guess it’s gonna be a quite weekend for us just not the way we thought it would be. I’m sure Nicole will stay in her room and now that James is upset, he will too. I asked him if he wanted to go on a date with just me, like maybe to see a movie or something. So, I might do that for him tomorrow after I check the movie times.”

“That will be fun, I’m sure he will love just having you there with him. Maybe I can convince Nicole to do something with me tomorrow,” Stella added.

“I think that would be good for you both, actually. You need to spend more time having fun with each other instead of always having to be the bad guy,” Kathryn said squeezing Stella’s hand and giving her a wink. “It’s a plan then, I will take James and you take Nicole and then maybe the next day we can switch.”

“If this turns out good, we should make it a habit I think the kids would appreciate more one on one time with us.”

“I agree.”



A few weeks went by and as Kathryn was talking with a student in the hallway when her phone rang. It was an unknown number, so she ignored it and continue to talk about a homework question with the student. Again, her phone rang and again she hit the ignore button. As the student was walking away her phone rang once again. This time Kathryn answered not hiding the frustration in her voice.

“Hello?” Kathryn said hurriedly, pulling her bag a little further up on her shoulder. It was Nicole calling from the mall security office. “What’s the matter? What happened?” Kathryn asked waiting for a response. After a bit of silence on the other line she demanded Nicole tell her what was going on.

“I need you to come get me,” Nicole said on the other end of the line.

“Okay, well tell me where you are, and I’ll be right there,” After Nicole told Kathryn where she was Kathryn rushed to the car and drove directly to the mall. Nicole was outside the food court waiting pacing back and forth. Pulling the car up next to her Kathryn rolled the window down and called for Nicole. Nicole quickly got in the car, pulled on her seatbelt, and stayed quiet the entire ride home. Kathryn asked Nicole several times what happened and finally once they got home, Nicole said she was raped, in the bathroom at the mall. Tears were streaming down her face and she rocked back and forth. “Oh my god! Okay, do not move. Just sit there for a minute while I call the police,” Kathryn said pulling her phone out to dial 911. She explained to the operator what had happened, and she said they would send a unit over as soon as possible. Kathryn led Nicole inside and sat her down at the kitchen table, she ran through the

house and found Stella and James in the back yard. She called Stella inside and told her what happened and that they were waiting for the police if she could keep James outside.

Kathryn held Nicole while she cried and shook all over. “I got you baby girl,” Kathryn said over and over until the police officer arrived. A blue police cruiser pulled into the driveway behind Kathryn’s car. A young woman in uniform got out of the car holding a note pad and flipping it open. Once Nicole told her story, the police told Kathryn that she would need to take Nicole over to the hospital, to the CARE unit and have a rape kit done. Kathryn agreed and grabbed her keys and purse. She unlocked the car and opened the door for Nicole to get in. Kathryn started the car, paused, and then opened her door running inside to tell Stella where they were going.

At the CARE unit, a woman interviewed Nicole then collected her clothing and completed the rape kit. When they were finished the woman told Kathryn about some of the therapy programs that they had. She agreed to enroll Nicole in one the next day. Nicole came out of the exam room wearing pink scrubs that they held in the back. The woman came back into the lobby waiting area and told them what to expect from the report. It would take a few months to process the clothing and the kit because they had to send it off to a lab where they are back logged. In the meantime, the police have the report and will follow up with them later. Kathryn sat holding Nicole in disbelief and listened to the woman give them instructions. The woman handed paperwork over to Kathryn along with a prescription for medication. One was for the morning after pill and the other was for antibiotics just in case Nicole ends up with an STD. Kathryn sucked in a deep breath looking at the prescriptions in shock. She quickly composed herself to show Nicole that she was calm and could take care of things. After leaving the clinic Kathryn drove directly to the pharmacy and waited for the medicine. Once she got back in the

car, she opened the packages and handed two pills to Nicole with a bottle of water that she had purchased.

When they arrived home, Stella was waiting by the front door for them. Kathryn hadn't had time to call or text Stella while they were gone. Nicole tried to walk past Stella when Stella pulled her into a tight hug and apologized for not being there. Nicole pulled out of the hug and walked towards her room wiping away more tears. Kathryn walked inside holding the pharmacy bag, kissed Stella as she passed and walked straight back to their bedroom. Stella followed behind closely.

"I can't believe this. I had to take my baby to get a rape kit. Oh, and then I had to give her these," Kathryn cried holding up the pharmacy bag and shaking the pills. Kathryn slumped down on the bed letting her purse and the pharmacy bag drop to the floor.

"I know honey, I am so sorry. I can't even imagine what you or Nicole are feeling right now. But I'm here for you, anything you need you just let me know," Stella said sliding up onto the bed next to Kathryn. Stella pulled on Kathryn's arm until she leaned into Stella so she could hold Kathryn while she cried.

"Someone violated her. I swore to myself that I would never let anything like this happen to my kids. Not after what I went through. I hate this. I feel so helpless," Kathryn cried into Stella's shoulder. Turning a little Stella laid down still holding Kathryn while she cried out her questions. After sobbing heavily for a while Kathryn was finally able to take a normal breath, still laying close to Stella. Stella stroked Kathryn's hair until she was finally calm. "We will need to get her into therapy as soon as possible."

“I agree, do you still have that list that Dr. Alvarez’ office gave you? Maybe someone there will finally be available,” Stella asked putting her lips on the top of Kathryn’s head.

“Yea, but the woman at the clinic gave me a list that specialize in helping rape victims.” Oh my God! I just called my baby girl a rape victim, Kathryn said and began to cry again. Stella pulled her in closer and continued to hold her until Kathryn fell asleep. Once asleep Stella pushed herself off of the bed and picked up Kathryn’s bags off of the floor. She carried the bags to the bathroom and set them down on the counter. Walking through the house Stella turned off lights and locked up the front and backdoors. She opened James’ door to see him sleeping half on and half off of his bed. Smiling she backed out of the room and closed the door. She walked to Nicole’s room and tapped softly on the door.

“Come in,” Nicole said quietly from inside the room. Stella opened the door to find Nicole sitting in the middle of her floor crying. She walked over to her sat down on the floor and held her in a hug.

“I am so sorry this happened to you, and if I knew where to find the asshole, I would kill him,” Stella said rocking with Nicole still in her arms. “I promise you that if he is ever found I will make him pay,” Nicole continued to cry and let Stella hold her until she was so exhausted that she had to sleep. Stella helped Nicole up off of the floor and gave her another hug before returning to her own room to sleep.

The next day Kathryn cancelled her classes so she could spend the day trying to find a therapist for Nicole. After she said goodbye to James and Stella for the day, she began making phone calls, until she finally found a place with a woman who sounded like she would be perfect for Nicole. Kathryn explained the past few months and told her that Nicole’s psychiatrist

recommended someone, but they weren't available for some reason, so they have been waiting to find someone. Her name was Angela Quartz and she scheduled Nicole for later in the afternoon claiming that she needed to start talking as soon as possible. After going over the insurance information they agreed on a time and Kathryn told Angela that she would be there later today. She thanked her for her quick response in getting Nicole in and that she appreciated it. After they hung up Kathryn walked to Nicole's room opening the door slightly and peaked in to see if Nicole was awake yet. Kathryn didn't see Nicole in her bed so she called out to see if she was in her restroom but there wasn't an answer.

"Nicole? Honey?" Kathryn called out through the house. She finally found Nicole asleep in the living room on the sofa under a pile of blankets. Walking closer she put a hand down on top of the blankets and gave them a little shake calling out to wake Nicole up. Startled Nicole shot up without any warning and hit Kathryn in the face with the back of her hand.

"Ouch! Nicole, calm down it's me," Kathryn said trying to calm Nicole down by talking to her in a quiet tone.

"What? Where? Oh my gosh mom, I am so sorry. You scared me," Nicole said cautiously, putting her arms out in a defensive motion.

"It's okay, come on sit down. Really, I'm alright," Kathryn said motioning for them to sit together on the sofa. Kathryn pushed the pile of blankets to the side and sat down next to Nicole and told her about the therapy appointment she had later in the day.

"I don't need a therapist; I am not crazy," Nicole responded, putting her head down.

"I know that, that is not the reason you're seeing a therapist baby girl. It will help with the healing process believe me. I've been to therapy before after I left your father, and it was

super helpful. I just think that if you give it a try it might help, but if you hate it, I won't make you go back."

"You promise?" Nicole asked looking up into her mother's face.

"I promise," Kathryn added patting her on the shoulder. Kathryn told Nicole what time the meeting was and that she had taken the day off to spend it with her.

"I'm gonna go take another shower. I'll be ready so we won't be late," Nicole added standing up from the sofa and walking out leaving Kathryn sitting alone in a pile of blankets. Kathryn kept her fingers crossed hoping that the therapy would help Nicole. She picked up a blanket and started to fold them mindlessly. Pulling another one up she held it up to her nose and it smelled like her baby girl. Taking another deep smell, she began to cry into the blanket, sliding down onto the sofa. A little while later Nicole came back into the room clean and fresh wearing clean clothes and saw Kathryn crying on her blankets.

"Mom, it'll be okay. I will be okay," Nicole said moving closer to Kathryn on the sofa.

"Oh gosh, I'm sorry. I know baby," Kathryn said wiping away her tears and sitting up on the sofa. Standing she pulled up the blanket and began folding it. Nicole grabbed the other side and helped her fold.

Later, after meeting with Angela Nicole decided to stay and have a chat with her to see how things would be. Kathryn sat in the lobby and made notes in her phone about what changes she needed to make to certain assignments trying to keep her mind from wandering. Moments later she couldn't think of anything else, so she stood and began to pace the lobby. Another woman was sitting reading a book in the corner and looked up at Kathryn. Taking this as a sign

Kathryn sat back down in her seat and waited patiently. After an hour Nicole came out of Angela's office smiling saying thank you.

"Everything good?" Kathryn asked noticing the smile on both their faces.

"Yea, everything went good today. I think we agreed to meet twice a week for the next few weeks and then go from there," Angela said patting Nicole on the back.

"It was good mom, don't worry," Nicole added moving out of the doorway.

"Great, okay then twice a week. Wow, I mean that's awesome," Kathryn said moving closer to Nicole.

"I gave Nicole my card with all my numbers on it just in case she needs to get ahold of me any other time. I also gave her a schedule with our dates and times highlighted so you can put it up on the fridge or something."

"Oh, okay great. Thank you," Kathryn said while Nicole handed her the calendar page.

"See you in a couple days. Remember to breathe," Angela said as she turned to walk back into her office. Kathryn waited till they were in the car to ask about the session and what all they talked about.

"Mom, the point of these meetings is for me to talk to her about stuff. There will be a time when you will be invited in but not yet."

"I know, oh, well, I wasn't trying to pry. I was just asking how it went. You know, like if you like her and will continue talking with her. That sort of thing," Kathryn said stumbling over her words.

“Okay mom, well she said I don’t have to talk to anyone about what we talk about if I don’t want to and for now, I don’t want to,” Nicole added pulling her seatbelt across her. Kathryn looked at her with big eyes and agreed not to push the subject. She was just happy that Nicole agreed and liked this Angela woman and planned on continuing to talk with her. Once home Nicole returned to her room and shut the door. Kathryn let out a breath and continued into her office. Stella was home in between classes and was on the phone when Kathryn entered. She quickly ended the phone call and asked how it went with the new therapist.

“Apparently it went well. She has agreed to see this woman twice a week for the next couple weeks. Look she even created a calendar page for us to put up on our fridge,” Kathryn said with a sarcastic grin, as she handed the calendar page to Stella to look at.

“So, what’s the matter then?” Stella asked raising her eyebrows at Kathryn.

“I don’t know I asked Nicole what they talked about and she wouldn’t tell me saying it was private. I am her mother why can’t she talk to me?” Kathryn added sitting down in her desk chair.

“Honey, we agreed that it would be best for her to see a therapist. She knows she can talk to you but maybe for now it’s best to just let her talk to this girl instead. Maybe they made a connection or something. I don’t know what to tell you really,” Stella said sliding her chair across the room to be closer to Kathryn.

“I know I’m being silly. It’s just that I always had this image of what kind of mom I would be and what kind of relationship me and my daughter would have, and this isn’t it. This isn’t even close to it. I just don’t know what I’m doing wrong. You know my relationship with my parents were shaky at times and I wanted better for my own kids.”

“I know honey. I felt the same way when we got together. I always hope I am a better mother than my own. And you are, you are a great mother, and the kids adore you. Right now, though Nicole just needs someone unbiased who she can talk to about things,” Stella reassured Kathryn by pulling her out of her seat and onto Stella’s lap so she could hold her.

“Oh honey, I know I am being silly. And I know I’m a good mom. I just wish I could have done a better job of protecting her. You know?” Kathryn said leaning back into Stella.

“I know and in time things will get better. Maybe this woman will help Nicole be able to talk to us better. You know what I mean. Like maybe she will help Nicole work through some of her anger issues and other emotions,” Stella added. Standing up from Stella’s lap Kathryn went back to her own chair and sat down. “It will be okay. I promise,” Stella continued.

After a few more sessions with Angela, Nicole’s attitude began to change for the better. She didn’t spend as much time in her room and even started playing video games with James after his homework was finished. Kathryn was excited that for the first time in months her family started to feel normal again. Nicole began talking to her about things and opening up more to both her and Stella. Kathryn was able to relax a little more and was able to have conversations with Nicole that didn’t turn into an argument. When Kathryn would ask Nicole to do a chore it would get done without any eye rolls or deep sighs. Kathryn and Stella continued to work every day while Nicole would stay home and do her chores.

“Mom, I’m gonna need a ride tomorrow. I have an interview at Caliche’s. I’m so excited I can’t wait,” Nicole said through a giant smile.

“Of course. I didn’t know you applied. When did you do that?” Kathryn asked sitting down at the dining room table for dinner.

“Applied online, followed all the instructions and answered all the questions. It was pretty easy to apply. I have to meet with Carlos tomorrow for the interview,” Nicole said taking her own seat at the table. Stella and James joined them and began to talk about their days. It was a nice family dinner.

“How exciting. I’m proud of you kid,” Stella added moving the food around on her plate.

“Have you called about the community service yet? Don’t you only have a month left to get it done?” Kathryn asked taking a sip of her wine.

“Geeze mom, way to kill my mood. I called but one place I couldn’t go to because of the charges, and another one said they would call me back,” Nicole added stabbing a piece of chicken with her fork.

“Well, I just want you to keep that in mind before working you should probably get that finished first. Don’t you think?” Kathryn asked looking to Stella for support.

“Right, I mean a job is great but remember you have other obligations to handle first,” Stella added.

“Fine, I’ll call around again tomorrow and see what I can find.”

“Do you want me to help you call places?” Kathryn asked politely.

“No mom, the note said I have to do this part myself as part of my punishment,” Nicole said stuffing mashed potatoes into her mouth.

“Can I have more potatoes?” James asked with both cheeks full.

“Finish your chicken first,” Stella answered, putting a bite of chicken in her own mouth.

“And eat some of your veggies first,” She continued. After dinner James took a shower while the others cleaned up the kitchen.

The next month passed and Nicole loved working at Caliche’s which a small custard drive in. She had to memorize the entire menu which Kathryn helped her with. It was difficult finding a place where Nicole could do her community service, so Kathryn called in a favor with her sister-in-law. She ran a small rodeo for kids just learning how to ride and rope and so Nicole volunteered there on the weekends. Unfortunately, she did not meet the hours required by the jury in the allotted time. Kathryn drove Nicole down to the courthouse on the day she was supposed to turn in her fully signed hours slip. Once there Nicole explained that she had got a job and couldn’t finish the hours. The same little, short woman told Nicole to bring in a box of canned goods and they would count that as completion. So, Kathryn and Nicole went to the closest store bought a box full of canned good and took it back. The little, short woman signed paperwork, asked both Nicole and Kathryn to sign it, made a copy and handed it to Nicole.

“That’s it, it’s over?” Nicole asked looking at the paper.

“Yep, that’s it. You have completed the punishment to the satisfaction of the court. Have a nice day,” Kathryn was astonished that even though Nicole didn’t actually finish the punishment, that with a box of canned good she was in the clear. However, she was not going to argue with the process. She accepted the way things were done there and ushered Nicole towards the door before they could change their minds. Once outside Nicole let out a scream of excitement. Kathryn shooshed her since they were still in ear shot of the office woman. When

they drove home, Nicole turned up the music and Kathryn let her jam out the whole way. She smiled at Nicole and joined in the dancing and singing during the drive.

“Where are we going mom?”

“We are going out to your grandparents house. Poppa has a surprise for you,” Kathryn said flipping on her turn signal.

“Really? What is it?” Nicole asked bouncing in her seat.

“You’ll just have to wait and see,” Kathryn said focusing on her driving. Nicole continue to beg for information about what the surprise was, but Kathryn wouldn’t tell her. When they arrived at Kathryn’s parents’ house there was a small grey Chevy pick-up parked in the driveway with a bow on it.

“Oh my god! Is that for me? Is this for real?” Nicole asked trying to undo her seatbelt even before Kathryn put the car in park. As soon as Kathryn parked the car Nicole opened her door and jumped out sprinting towards the pick-up.

“Hold on, now that might not be for you. Let’s go inside and see Yamma and Poppa first,” Kathryn said walking past Nicole and her dancing. Nicole couldn’t say grandma when she was little, so she named Kathryn’s mom Yamma and all of the grandkids now call her that. When they got inside Kathryn’s parents were sitting in their recliners watching the Game Show Network. “Hi mom, dad. How are you guys?” Kathryn said putting her purse down on the table next to the sofa and took a seat. Nicole came bounding in behind her still excited at the thought that she might be getting a truck.

“We’re good. How are you guys?” Yamma said pushing her legs down to close the recliner. Poppa did the same sitting up a little taller.

“Did you see your surprise in the driveway?”

“Oh my gosh! So, this is for real. I can’t believe I got a truck,” Nicole said showing a toothy smile.

“Well, let’s go look at it,” Poppa said handing the keys to Nicole who snatched them out of his hand in excitement. They both walked outside and began talking about the pick-up and all of the repairs Poppa had done on it. He showed Nicole how to open the hood and check her fluids, how to check the tire pressure and had her start it. As soon as she sat in the driver’s seat, she started playing with the stereo changing the stations. Kathryn watched as Nicole played in her new truck, standing back, and taking pictures with her phone. Nicole let out a scream of happiness that startled Kathryn, making them all laugh. “Alright, let’s go inside and discuss the details.” Nicole jumped out of the truck and followed behind Poppa and Kathryn. Once inside they all went to sit at the dining room table where Yamma had paperwork to show to Nicole.

“Okay, babe sit down and look at these.” Yamma said pushing papers towards Nicole to look at.

“What are these?” Nicole asked.

“Well, this is the title to the pick-up, meaning that we own it. But we paid for it in full so you will start making payments to us for it.” Kathryn watched Nicole’s face as it went from super excited to confused. The smile faded when Nicole realized that it wasn’t a gift, and she would have to buy the truck from her grandparents. “We just thought that it will help you prepare for any future purchases. Especially now that you have a job.”

“Okay, well how much do I have to pay?” Nicole asked pushing the papers around on the table.

“I paid \$1500 for it, so you will make monthly payments. I was thinking maybe \$100 dollars a month, if not more. This will make it to where you will pay it off in fifteen months.” Yamma said pointing to a spreadsheet she created. “We will keep a record of your payments on this so you can see the progress.”

“Oh okay.” Nicole said looking at Kathryn. Kathryn wanted to pay for it and just give it to Nicole but couldn’t afford it, so she agreed to her parent’s terms before telling Nicole.

“Look babe, you got a truck!” Kathryn said trying to remind Nicole that this was all good news, and she had her own vehicle. “You won’t have to ask for a ride anywhere anymore. Isn’t that exciting?” Nicole looked up at Kathryn and gave her a small smile.

“When you pay it off, we will take you to change the title into your name. Then it will legally be yours. We will pay for the insurance on it and include that as part of your payment.” Poppa said putting a hand on Nicole’s shoulder standing behind her. Nicole turned around to look up at him and smiled. Leaning back, she put her head on his waist.

“Thank you, guys. This is awesome.” Nicole said reaching over and hugging Yamma.

In unison Yamma and Poppa said, “You’re welcome.”

“We should get going, what do you think kid?” Kathryn asked looking at Nicole and standing up pushing in her chair. “You ready to drive your truck home alone?”

“You know it!” Nicole replied jumping up from her seat. She hugged her grandparents again and ran outside to get into her truck and start it.

Once outside Kathryn walked over to Nicole's open window and asked, "Do you have your license with you? I forgot to check before we left earlier."

"Yep, got it right here." Nicole said pulling it out of her back pocket.

"Awesome, then see you at home. Do you want me to follow you?"

"Um, no I think I can manage. Maybe I can follow you just so I know what roads to turn on." Kathryn patted the window seal and gave Nicole a smile.

"Okay, I won't drive too fast then so you can keep up." Kathryn said walking towards her own car. The drive home went smoothly, and Nicole did good at following Kathryn. When they arrived home, Kathryn congratulated Nicole once again. Nicole parked her pick-up in front of the house and honked the horn to get the attention of James and Stella so they could go outside and see the truck. James was the first one out the door and he ran towards the truck, Kathryn was standing at the passenger side window while Nicole was still in the driver's seat. Stella opened the door and watched the excitement in the front, finally making her way outside to look at the truck.

"Can you take me for a ride?" James asked pushing past Kathryn to get in the passenger side. He climbed up onto the seat and sat bouncing. Nicole started laughing at him giving him a poke in the side making him giggle.

"Can I mom?"

"Sure, I don't see why not," Kathryn agreed, reminding both to put on their seatbelts. Being an older pick-up, it had a bench seat and only a lap belt. Kathryn helped James find the buckle that had flung over the side of the seat. Kathryn and Stella took a step back and watched

as Nicole pulled away from the curb and drove away. Walking hand in hand Kathryn and Stella went back into the house. Half an hour later Nicole and James returned home still laughing and poking fun at one another.

“Hey mom, can I go hang out with my friend Gaby?” Nicole asked poking her head into the office where both Stella and Kathryn sat working at their desks.

“Who is Gaby?” Kathryn asked turning her chair around to face Nicole.

“She’s a girl that I met at work, she’s pretty cool.”

“I think it should be okay. Just be home by seven,” Stella answered. Nicole bound into the room giving each Stella and Kathryn a kiss on the cheek before leaving again. Kathryn looked at Stella giving her a nod before turning back to her computer.

Half past seven Stella started pacing the living room, while Kathryn sat with her phone in her hand waiting for a call or text from Nicole explaining why she was late. “Where is she? I knew that this would happen if she got that truck,” Kathryn said hitting a button on her phone to make the screen bright again.

“She’s been late before babe, even without having the truck,” Stella insisted looking down at Kathryn.

“Yea, but now she is in a box on wheels. What if she got into an accident or something? Why isn’t she answering her phone?” Kathryn said holding her phone to her ear calling Nicole again. A few minutes later Nicole came through the front door.

“Hi guys, I am so sorry I’m late. We lost track of time,” Nicole said walking into the living room with a young girl following her. “This is Gaby.”

“I am sorry she is late, it’s my fault. I wanted to finish watching the movie we were watching at my house,” Gaby added reaching a hand out to shake hands with Stella and then Kathryn.

“Nice to meet you. Where do you live?” Kathryn said giving Nicole a stern look before looking back at Gaby.

“I have an apartment a few blocks from here.”

“Oh really, hmm. And what do your parents do?” Stella asked giving Kathryn time to take Nicole into the other room.

“My parents died in a car accident a few years ago. My grandmother gives me an allowance to live on my own,” Gaby said taking a seat on the sofa.

“Oh, I am sorry to hear that. How old are you?” Stella asked turning to face Gaby. Meanwhile Kathryn took Nicole into the dining room to talk to her about being late.

“Bringing your friend home to get you out of trouble will not work. You were given a time to be home and should have come home on time. I was worried sick. On the first day you get your truck you take advantage of us,” Kathryn scolded. Nicole stood with her head down with her hands in her pockets.

“I’m sorry mom. It won’t happen again,” Nicole said briefly looking Kathryn in the eyes before looking back down at the floor. “Can I take her home?”

“Are you serious? You come home late and then ask to leave again, are you kidding me?” Kathryn said giving Nicole a look of amusement and sarcasm.

“Well, it’s dark. I just thought I will give her a ride back home.”

“You knew what time you had to be home, so you thought it was a good idea to bring her home with you and then ask to take her home?” Kathryn exclaimed. “I will give her a ride home, so I know where you are hanging out.”

“Mom, really. It’s not that far. I can take her and be back in like two minutes,” Nicole added shifting from leg to leg.

“No, you are grounded. No friends and no truck for a week,” Kathryn scolded. “Gaby, I’m gonna take you home now,” Kathryn called into the living room. Gaby stood up said goodbye to Stella and follow Kathryn towards the front door. When she passed by Nicole, she gave her a little hug and an apologetic smile. When the door closed behind them Nicole stormed off to her room and slammed the door behind her. Stella sat in the living room giving Nicole time to cool off. After a few minutes she stood and went to Nicole’s door tapping lightly.

“I don’t want to talk right now,” Nicole responded through the door.

“Okay kiddo. I just want you to know that I’m here for you if you need to talk,” Stella replied standing with her head close to the door listening for any response. When she didn’t get one, she walked back into the living room and continued watching TV. Kathryn arrived home a few minutes later, putting her purse down in her office and making her way towards the living room to talk to Stella.

“Well, that was interesting. Did you know that this little girl lives alone in an apartment? She’s only seventeen. What kind of parent does that?” Kathryn said sitting down in her recliner.

“Her parents died in a car accident, so her grandmother gives her a monthly allowance to live on.”

“Oh, poor kid. I didn’t know that part. She said she’s been working at Caliche’s for a few months, same as Nicole,” Kathryn added pulling the lever on her chair bringing up her legs to relax. “Must be hard to be on your own at such a young age. I’m glad that she and Nicole became friends. I just wish that they had better time management skills. I grounded Nicole for a week, with no friends and no truck. Do you think I was too harsh?” Kathryn asked looking over at Stella.

“I know I was thinking the same thing. I don’t think that’s too bad of a punishment, especially since it’s the first night she had her truck, and she was late. I don’t know about bringing the friend home to bail her out, but it was an idea, I guess. Not a good one but it was I guess worth a try.”



A few weeks later, Nicole got used to running errands for Kathryn, like going to the store for milk or eggs, picking James up from school sometimes and driving herself to therapy. Kathryn enjoyed the freedom Nicole's driving gave her and she felt less burdened with trying to remember everything all the time. By helping out Nicole was allowed more freedom as well. She spent a lot of time with Gaby, especially on the weekends. Kathryn and Stella were impressed with how much better Nicole did with curfew that they allowed her to stay out a little later as long as she continued to do her chores, go to work on time, and continue therapy.

"Hello?" Kathryn said answering her phone.

"Kathryn? This is Angela Quartz. I was wondering if Nicole was coming today. Her appointment started thirty minutes ago, and I haven't heard from her yet."

"That's weird because she left here almost an hour ago saying she was on her way to see you. Let me call her and find out what's going on and I will call you back."

"Okay great, thank you," Angela said hanging up. Kathryn dialed Nicole's number, but her call was sent directly to voicemail. She sent a text to call as soon as possible. Kathryn sat at her desk staring down at her phone waiting for a response and after a few minutes she tried calling again and once again was sent straight to voicemail. Kathryn hung up and dialed Angela's number.

“Hi Angela, it’s Kathryn. I don’t know what’s going on or where Nicole is but I’m gonna say that she won’t be making it today. I will have her call you as soon as I hear from her.”

“Oh okay, well I hope everything is okay. Thank you for calling me back and letting me know,” Angela responded and hung up. Kathryn hit the end button on her phone and quickly redialed Nicole’s number, still no answer. She hung up and texted Stella who was in class that Nicole wasn’t answering her phone and she should try to get ahold of her when she had a chance. Kathryn turned to her computer and tried to focus on work until her phone chimed with a new text received. She quickly picked up her phone to check the messages, it was a response from Stella saying she tried to call and got no answer, so she sent a text as well. Kathryn stood from her desk holding her phone and paced the room. James was at school so she didn’t have to worry about him for the next few hours, but her mind started racing about what could have happened to Nicole.

Stella arrived home an hour later to find Kathryn clutching her phone standing next to the sofa. When Kathryn heard the front door open, she jumped to her feet hoping it was Nicole. When she saw that it was Stella, she sank back down to the sofa like her heart sunk in her chest. Stella took the few steps across the room and pulled Kathryn up into a hug. “She’ll be okay love. She’s probably hanging out with Gaby and they lost track of time again.” Stella said trying to comfort Kathryn.

“Oh yea, I hadn’t thought of that,” Kathryn said pushing away from the hug and walking quickly towards the office where she picked up her purse. Turning back, she asked “Are you coming with me or staying here to wait for her?”

“I think I should probably stay here just in case she comes home. And James will be home in less than an hour,” Stella responded following Kathryn to the front door. Kathryn turned and gave Stella a quick kiss and jumped into the car pulling out of the driveway quickly. She drove directly to Gaby’s apartment complex. However, she couldn’t remember which unit it was since it was dark the last time she had been there. She drove around the parking lot until she spotted Nicole’s truck and parked next to it. She started walking towards the building when she saw Gaby on a small balcony holding a beer and dancing.

“Gaby!” Kathryn called out looking up. Gaby startled and dropped her beer bottle over the edge almost hitting Kathryn. “Where is Nicole?” Kathryn demanded, she could hear several people talking and laughing.

“Oh shit! Dude it’s your mom!” Gaby yelled into the apartment. Tripping over something Gaby stumbled back into the apartment calling out to Nicole. “Hey! Your mom is outside! Your so busted!” Gaby continued to yell through the apartment. After a few minutes Nicole opened a door and started walking down the stairs towards Kathryn. Tripping over the last step Nicole fell forward onto the ground scraping her hands and tearing the knee in her jeans.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, are you drunk?” Kathryn said trying to help Nicole off of the ground, by pulling on one arm. Nicole tried pushing herself up off the ground with her mom’s help but then she dropped her phone and when she reached down to pick it up, she fell down again. Kathryn helped her up again and drug her to the car by her arm. “Give me your truck keys,” Kathryn demanded holding out her hand to Nicole. Nicole stretched in the passenger seat of Kathryn’s car and pulled out her keys tossing them to Kathryn. Getting into the driver’s seat

Kathryn started the car after putting Nicole's truck keys in her purse. Reaching over Nicole turned up the radio really loud. Kathryn muted the radio using a button on the steering wheel.

"Awe man, it's broken," Nicole claimed turning the knob back and forth until it came off in her hand.

"Leave it alone, dammit. Look what you did," Kathryn yelled trying to focus on her driving. Holding the knob in her hand Nicole put it up to Kathryn's cheek and tried turning her down.

"I mute you, look beep," Nicole said falling back into the seat laughing. Grabbing the knob Kathryn put it back onto the stereo trying to keep Nicole from touching anything else. When they arrived home, Nicole fell out of the car when she opened the passenger door. Stella heard yelling and walked outside to see Kathryn trying to pick Nicole off of the driveway.

"She's drunk. Help me get her inside," Kathryn asked noticing Stella coming outside. They both put an arm under Nicole and helped her walk into the house. "Let's put her in her room for now, I guess," Kathryn added leading them towards Nicole's room pushing her bedroom door open. They walked to the bed together turned around and laid her down backwards. When Nicole was laying on her bed, she turned towards the wall pulling her pillow closer and closed her eyes. "I left her truck at Gaby's. They were partying and drinking beers. When I got there, I saw Gaby dancing with a beer until she fell and almost hit me in the head with the bottle," Kathryn said standing in Nicole's room watching her snuggle her pillow. Stella put an arm across Kathryn's shoulders and led her out of the room closing the door behind them. "What are we gonna do about this?" Kathryn asked letting Stella lead her out of the room.

“I don’t know, but I remember drinking at her age. As a parent I have no idea how to handle this. Should we ground her from her truck again?”

“Probably and grounded from visiting Gaby for a while too,” Kathryn added. The two walked arm in arm into the living room and they each sat down in their own recliners. “Is James home already? I don’t want him to see his sister like this.”

“Yea, he’s watching TV in his room, he said he didn’t have any homework so I told him he could watch till dinner.”

“I think Nicole will sleep the rest of the day and night hopefully, so he won’t have to see her like this. Let’s not mention it to him,” Kathryn added.

“What happens if she doesn’t sleep and comes out of her room still drunk? What do we tell him then?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t want him to think his sister is a drunk. You know? I just think it would be better if he didn’t see her like that.”

“Okay, then we will work together to make sure he doesn’t see her,” Stella agreed.

“I’m gonna go say hi to him and let him know I’m home,” Kathryn said standing up from her chair and walking out of the room. She walked down the hall and lightly tapped on his door pushing it open at the same time. “Hey kiddo, how was school today?”

“Hi mom, where were you? I got home, and your car was gone,” James said looking up at Kathryn.

“I was picking up your sister from her friend’s house. She wasn’t feeling well so I brought her home and she’s sleeping now.”

“I hope she feels better soon, and she better not get me sick.” James added. Kathryn walked the short distance and sat down next to James on his bed, looking up at the television.

“What are you watching?”

“It’s a new anime, it’s about this guy that fights these things called titans. So far, it’s really good,” James said hitting the pause button on his remote, so he didn’t miss anything while they were talking.

“Well, that sounds interesting. I just wanted to let you know that I was home. I love you, kiddo,” Kathryn said leaning over and kissing James on the forehead.

“Love you too mom,” James said wiping the kiss off of his head hitting the play button on his remote. Kathryn walked back down the hall stopped at Nicole’s door and cracked it open so she could peek in. Nicole was asleep with part of her body hanging off of the bed. Kathryn smiled at the thought of sleeping like that and how uncomfortable it must be. She opened the door and walked in. She pulled Nicole’s legs onto the bed and threw her blanket on top of her. Pausing she left her hand on Nicole’s shoulder for a moment before backing out of the room. She pulled the door closed quietly and walked back into the living room where Stella was still sitting watching TV.

“She’s still sleeping so that’s good.” Kathryn said taking her seat next to Stella. “I hope this is the last time she does this. You know what I mean.”

“Yea, me too. I’m glad that she’s sleeping it off. Hopefully when she wakes up, she will have a horrible hangover. I’m gonna make eggs, biscuits, and gravy, oh yea and bacon for breakfast. We’ll see how she feels then. I hated working at the café after a night of drinking it was so bad cooking the eggs,” Stella said throwing her head back laughing.

“Oh man, that’s gonna be awful for her. I love it,” Kathryn said joining in on the laughing. “And we will tell her in the morning that she’s grounded. I don’t think waking her up to tell her now would be a good idea.”

The next morning, Stella made a very big breakfast making as much noise in the kitchen as possible. She banged on the pans with a spatula for even more noise. Since Nicole’s room is closest to the kitchen the noise would bother her the most. Kathryn heard the commotion in the kitchen while she finished getting dressed and laughed. James bounded into the kitchen excited for biscuits with gravy and bacon.

“Oh man, it smells so good. My mouth is watering. Is it almost ready?” James said dancing around behind Stella to get a better look at what was cooking. Kathryn walked in, fixed herself a cup of Earl Grey, and sat down at the table. “I’ll get the plates and forks,” James continued dancing around the kitchen gathering plates and forks carrying them to the table. “Is Nicole still sick? Should I wake her up?” James said pausing at Nicole’s door.

“Go ahead, wake her up, because it’s ready,” Stella responded carrying dishes with food to the table and placing them in the middle of the table. Kathryn watched over the brim of her mug as James knocked on Nicole’s door. Everyone heard a growl come from the other side of the door. Stella and Kathryn looked at each other and laughed.

“Nicole! Breakfast is ready, hurry up come on,” James yelled through the door. Pounding on the door James called out to Nicole again.

“Cut it out! I’m coming!” Nicole yelled from inside the bedroom. Happy with himself James sat in his chair and started loading his plate with food. Nicole opened her door and

squinted at everyone sitting at the table. “Oh my god what is that smell?” Nicole said turning back around and running into her bathroom.

“I guess she’s still sick. Can I have her bacon?” James asked shoving a biscuit covered in gravy into his mouth.

“Give her a few minutes, she might come back out,” Stella said smiling over the brim of her glass of tea.

“Should I go check on her?” Kathryn asked scooping up a piece of egg onto her fork.

“No, she’ll be fine. This might do her some good.”

“Why would being sick be good for her?” James mumbled with a mouth full of food.

“Well, that’s not what I meant, I just mean that maybe instead of joining us to eat going back in her room might be better,” Stella stammered. Kathryn patted Stella on the shoulder and stood up from the table. She walked into Nicole’s room and knocked on the bathroom door.

“Are you okay babe?”

“Ugh, go away,” Nicole said quietly. Kathryn knocked on the door again, opening it just a crack to peek in on Nicole who was sitting on the floor with her head laying on the toilet.

“Oh sweetie, let me get you a wet washcloth to put on the back of your neck, it helps with the nausea,” Kathryn said backing out of the room and walking down the hall. She opened a cabinet and pulled several washcloths. She walked back into the bathroom and used the sink to wet one of them while she placed the others on the side. She handed the wet one to Nicole who placed it under her hair on the back of her neck.

“Thanks mom,” Nicole moaned from the floor.

“You should drink some water, that’s why you feel this bad. Alcohol makes you dehydrated so drinking water with help with the headache and the nausea will go away soon,” Kathryn said turning to leave the room. Walking back into the dining room she raised eyebrows and smiled at Stella.

“Mmm this is so good Stella, thank you for breakfast,” James said scooping another bite into his mouth.

“You’re welcome kiddo. I’m glad you like it. You can probably have one of your sister’s bacons I don’t think she will mind.”

“Really! Awesome,” James said snatching another piece of bacon from the plate and put part of it in his mouth. “Thank you, Nicole!” He yelled back towards her room. Giggling Kathryn reminded him not to talk with food in his mouth, and to not stuff his mouth so full. After breakfast Stella and Kathryn talked to Nicole about her punishment.

“We are going to get your truck right now. Help James clean up the kitchen,” Stella asked while walking towards the front door. Kathryn was already waiting with her purse and keys in her hand. Putting on her sunglasses she opened the front door and stepped out of the house.

When Kathryn arrived at home the side door was open, and a young man was standing by it holding it open. She parked her car in the driveway and opened her car door calling out to him. “Hello? Can I help you?” Kathryn said getting out of the car and walking towards the side door. “Hey, what are you doing over there?” Getting closer Kathryn saw Nicole standing inside the door smiling.

“Calm down mom, this is my friend Cayson. You remember him, you went to high school with his mom.”

“Vaguely, hello Cayson. Can I ask what you are doing here?” Kathryn said putting herself in between the two teenagers.

“Hello ma’am. How are you today? My mom wanted me to say hi and give you her new number,” Cayson said stepping away from the door to let Kathryn walk inside. Stella pulled up in Nicole’s pick-up and parked in front of the house. Noticing the young man, she too walked up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Can I help you?” Stella said as he turned around. She noticed Kathryn and Nicole standing on the inside and relaxed a bit.

“Honey, this is Cayson he’s Diana’s son. We’ve met him before, but he was much younger,” Cayson put his hand out for Stella to shake hands. She shook his hand and took a step back.

“Okay, now we know who you are. What are you doing here? And why aren’t you using the front door?” Stella insisted moving closer to the door. As Stella got closer, Kathryn took a step back making Nicole step further back into the room. From where she was standing, she could no longer see Cayson.

“Oh, um well, I just stopped by to see Nicole for minute on my way to work.”

“Okay well, you said hello now I think it’s time to leave. Next time you come around you better be a gentleman and use the front door,” Stella continued. “Nicole say goodbye to your friend.”

“Bye Cayson,” Nicole called from inside the house. Kathryn turned and escorted Nicole back into the dining room with Stella following after she closed and locked the side door.

“What was that? So now your sneaking boys over when we’re gone somewhere.” Kathryn exclaimed. “Where’s your brother? Did you lock him in his room so you could rendezvous with this boy?”

“Moms calm down it isn’t like that. We didn’t do anything he even stayed outside. James if fine he’s in his room watching that Titans show. Why can’t you trust me? Agh!” Nicole yelled as she stormed past Kathryn and into her room slamming the door behind her.

“Come back here young lady!” Kathryn screamed following Nicole to her room. “We need to talk about this right now. Don’t you slam the door on me!” Kathryn yelled getting closer to Nicole’s bedroom.

“Honey come on let her calm down. Neither of you will help anything right now while you’re both angry.”

“I am angry, I don’t know why you’re not. I mean come on, she’s sneaking boys over while we’re gone and that doesn’t make you angry?” Kathryn yelled slamming her purse down on the dining room table.

“I am furious but yelling and screaming at each other will not help the situation.”

“Fine!” Kathryn answered lowering her voice. She picked up her purse walked into her office and put it down, she pulled her chair out and sat down. Moving her mouse and bringing her computer to life she began looking through her classes. Stella entered the room and Kathryn turned in her chair and glared at her in the doorway. “I need to be alone right now,” Stella turned

around and walked back out of the room. Kathryn sat at her desk taking deep breaths trying to calm down but the more she thought about it the angrier she became. Standing she shoved her chair back into the bookcase and walked back towards Nicole's room. Knocking on the door she said, "Nicole we need to talk about this, can you please come of your room please?" Kathryn asked calmly. Nicole opened her door and walked out to face Kathryn. "Thank you, now have a seat," Nicole pulled the chair out and sat down without looking up.

"I'm sorry mom, I didn't know that he was coming over. He just showed up. I made sure he stayed outside, and James didn't know he was here," Nicole claimed fidgeting with her fingers.

"I want you to know that I am very angry. Angry at the fact that there was a boy here when we weren't and angry that you blew up at me. I am also angry that he used the side door, how did he know to use that door? You must have told him which door to knock on otherwise a normal person would use the front door," Hearing talking coming from the dining room Stella walked in and sat down opposite of Nicole.

"I know, I just get frustrated and lose my temper. I hate being blamed for things I didn't do. Like him coming over and all. As for the side door, I had his sweatshirt that he let me borrow at Gaby's so when he came for that I told him to use that door."

"And when was this?" Stella asked turning her head towards Nicole giving her a furrowed brow.

"It was a few months back," Kathryn sat back in her seat and remember seeing the side door open one day and when she asked Nicole about it, she claimed it was nothing.

“You lied to me. That day when I asked you who was here you said nobody. I saw the side door open, but no one was standing by it. That means he was inside this house when we weren’t here. Are you having sex with him? In this house?” Kathryn demanded to know.

“No mom, it’s not like that. We aren’t even dating he’s just a friend,” Nicole exclaimed. “I’m sorry for lying I didn’t want you to freak out, like you’re doing now.”

“Your grounded! For life!” Kathryn yelled standing up from the table and walking towards her bedroom. Nicole sat stunned looking at Stella for help.

“You’ve gotta believe me. Can you talk to her please? I hate when she gets like this. It’s like she stops listening,” Stella nodded her head and pushed herself away from the table following behind Kathryn towards the bedroom.

“Honey, I believe that she’s telling us the truth. I don’t think anything’s going on between them,” Stella said sitting down next to Kathryn on the bed. Kathryn clinched her fist full of the blue comforter on her bed and tried to keep from screaming.

“I was her age once; I know what goes on when the parents leave, and a boy comes over,” Kathryn said through gritted teeth. Her face was turning red and the tops of her ears looked like they were gonna blow off because they were so red. Taking in a few deep breaths Kathryn tried to calm herself.

“I know honey, but our baby girl knows better. I think she’s too afraid to do anything like that. At least here,” Stella said hesitantly placing her hand on Kathryn’s thigh. Pushing her hand away Kathryn stood up from the bed and walked into the bathroom. She ran the water in the sink and splashed some on her face. The cold of the water shocked her making her take in a deep breath. She splashed more water on her face and placed a wet hand on the back of her neck.

After a moment, she stood up dried her face and hands and walked back into the bedroom. Stella continued to sit on the side of the bed watching Kathryn in the bathroom.

“I’m sorry love. I just get so mad at her. I just want her to be smarter than me when I was that age. I guess I blow things out of proportion sometimes,” Kathryn said taking a seat next to Stella, taking her hand, and holding it while they spoke. “I will go apologize to Nicole.”



The following weekend Nicole had asked to hang out with Gaby for a few hours. Stella gave her permission while Kathryn was at her mom's looking through old photographs. When Kathryn arrived at home, she carried a shoebox full of pictures into the house and set them down on the table. "Hello? I'm home," She called through the house looking for Stella. James was spending the weekend with his dad, so it was going to be the three of them. "Honey?" She called out once more.

"Back here," Stella hollered back. She was in the backyard watching the dogs play. Walking outside Kathryn saw Stella sitting in one of the patio chairs holding a beer. She made her way closer and leaned in for a kiss. "Hi. How did it go at your moms?"

"It was fine. I brought home baby pictures of me and the kids. Where is Nicole?" Kathryn asked taking a seat next to Stella.

"I let her go to Gaby's for a few hours. She will be home for dinner," Stella said taking a swig of her beer. "You want me to fix you a glass of wine?"

"Yes, that would be lovely. Thank you," Kathryn said watching the dogs wrestle in the yard. Stella stood up from her chair kissed the top of Kathryn's head and walked into the house. A few minutes later she came back outside holding a full glass of wine and another beer. "Oh man, this is nice. It's been a while since we had the house to ourselves. It's so quiet. I could get used to this," Kathryn said taking the glass of wine from Stella. They both sat quietly sipping and

watching the dogs for about an hour before Kathryn's stomach started to growl. "I'm hungry, what should we have for dinner?"

"How about some burgers, I can throw them on the grill really quick."

"That sounds perfect, and I don't have to get up," Kathryn said holding her glass out to Stella for a refill. Stella took the glass and went inside to get the burgers from the freezer and refill the wine glass. While inside Kathryn's phone chimed notifying her of a text message. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and checked the message. It was from Nicole saying she would be a little late coming home and asked if she could eat dinner with Gaby. Kathryn responded and thanked her for letting her know and allowed her to eat dinner with her friend. When Stella came back outside Kathryn told her about the text. "We have even longer time to ourselves," Kathryn said winking at Stella and taking the newly refilled glass of wine.

After dinner and desert Kathryn and Stella sat in the living room watching television waiting for Nicole to come home. Several hours past and Kathryn started getting worried. She pulled out her phone and dialed Nicole's number, it went straight to voicemail. "Not again," Kathryn said "She's late and not answering again. Should we just drive over there?"

"No, let's give her a little while longer. I'm sure they were watching movies again and lost track of time," Stella said leaning further back into her chair. Kathryn tried calling again and the call went straight to voicemail, so she stood up and started walking towards the front door.

"I think I'm gonna drive over there, just to check on them," Kathryn said grabbing her keys off the rack by the front door.

"Hold on babe, I'll go with you," Stella said closing her recliner and slipping on her shoes. Once in the car Kathryn drove straight to Gaby's apartment complex and around to

backside where she had found Nicole's truck parked before, only this time it wasn't there.

Kathryn parked the car and walked towards the building with Stella following her. She took the stairs up to Gaby's door and knocked loudly. There was no answer, so she knocked louder. The door to the apartment next door opened with a man rubbing his eyes looking at Kathryn and Stella.

"If you're looking for the girls, they're not there. Gabs told me they were going out of town for the weekend. They should be back Sunday sometime," The man said closing his door behind him as he returned to his apartment.

"What the hell? Out of town? Where could she be?" Kathryn said with a shaky voice. Stella wrapped her arms around Kathryn and reassured her that everything would be okay. They would find Nicole and she would be safe. "What should we do? I mean she's missing right; shouldn't we call the police?" Kathryn asked over Stella's shoulder.

"I don't know. Maybe we should go home and wait for a little while longer," Stella said escorting Kathryn back down the stairs and into the passenger's seat of the car. Stella drove them home while Kathryn stared out of the window. The time glared brightly in the dark blinking eleven over and over again. Kathryn watched the time blink the whole way home. Once they arrived at home Kathryn got out of the car but wouldn't go inside. She sat on the front patio step holding her phone. Stella sat down next to her and put an arm across her shoulders.

Once midnight rolled around Kathryn yawned still sitting outside. She shivered in Stella's arms who rubbed her arms up and down trying to keep her warm. "Why don't we go inside and warm up for a bit. Maybe call it a night. I'm sure wherever Nicole is she's fine. When

we wake up, she will be here,” Stella said convincingly helping Kathryn up off the step and walking her inside.

The next day Kathryn shot out of bed and rushed to Nicole’s room, she opened the door and found an empty bed. Slumping to the door still holding the doorknob she began to cry. Stella had been up for a few hours and anticipated this reaction. She walked in behind Kathryn and pulled her up from the floor holding her. “I think that now we should call the police,” Kathryn said through sobs, holding onto Stella tightly. Stella agreed that they should call and walked Kathryn into the living room. She helped her sit down on the sofa and walked into the bedroom to retrieve Kathryn’s phone. She carried the phone into the living room and handed it to Kathryn. Kathryn took the phone and hit a button to light it up and check for messages. There weren’t any notifications, so Kathryn dialed Nicole’s number.

“Hello?” A groggy voice on the other end answered.

“Hello, Nicole? This is mom. Are you okay? Where are you?”

“This is Julian, I don’t know where Nicole is,” The voice said quietly.

“Can you please find her please,” Kathryn said into the phone and listened for a response. She heard the voice say, “babe, wake up. It’s your friend’s mom on the phone. She sounds pretty upset. Here go take this to her,” Kathryn could hear footsteps until finally she heard a girl call out Nicole’s name. Kathryn could hear whispering before Nicole came on the line.

“Hello?”

“Nicole?” Kathryn asked waiting for a response.

“Yea, its me.”

“Where are you? Why didn’t you come home last night? What were you thinking? How could you do this?” Kathryn yelled into the phone.

“Mom calm down and stop yelling at me. I am fine, I will be home later today,” Nicole said and hung up the phone. Kathryn heard the click of the line going dead and threw her phone at the wall. Stella came running into the room when she heard the crash and found Kathryn’s phone in pieces on the floor.

“Well, that works too, I guess. I assume you talked to her?” Stella asked squatting down to pick up the pieces. Throwing her head back Kathryn let out a scream of frustration, as she ran her hands through her hair pulling it back tightly.

“I never thought I’d see the day that you actually pull your hair out. I always thought it was just an expression,” Stella said trying to lighten the mood. “What did she tell you?”

“She didn’t answer, some guy did. He gave the phone to some girl who then gave the phone to Nicole. Can you believe she hung up on me? That little shit! Oh, she is so grounded! I’m gonna call my dad and tell him to sell that truck!” Kathryn said still holding her head in her hands.

“Okay love we need to calm down and not make any rash decisions. Selling her truck would be a bad idea. It has been so helpful with her driving.”

“Yea, but it wasn’t till she got that damn truck that she started coming home late or not at all this time. What’s next she’s moving out?” Kathryn exclaimed.

“Only part of that is true, she would come home late even when she didn’t have a car.” Stella reminded.

“Okay fine we won’t sell her truck, but she’s not using it for a long time. I’m sorry about my phone.” Kathryn said and moved to help Stella pick up the pieces off of the floor.

“It’s time for an upgrade anyways. Nicole is fine wherever she is, and James won’t be home till tomorrow should we go replace this now?” Kathryn looked down ashamed of her behavior and agreed to go get a new phone.

A few hours later with a new phone in hand Kathryn dialed Nicole’s number from inside the car on the way home. Nicole answered and told Kathryn that she was already home waiting for them to get back. Kathryn asked her not to leave and filled Stella in that Nicole was in fact at home waiting for them. When they arrived home, Kathryn entered the house first and found Nicole sitting at the dining room table. Nicole looked up when Kathryn came walking into the house and took a deep breath preparing herself. Kathryn entered the dining room and placed her phone down on the table carefully while Stella followed behind. They each sat down and stared at Nicole in disbelief.

“First thing, I am glad you are home and safe. Second thing, I am going to try to stay calm while we discuss this situation, and lastly we will discuss your punishment,” Kathryn said calmly. Nicole swallowed, stretching her neck to help her saliva go down. She was noticeable nervous which helped Kathryn stay calm.

“I am sorry. I won’t ever do it again,” Nicole said holding her hand in her lap fidgeting with her fingernails.

“I’m gonna stop you right there. I am tired of hearing ‘I’m sorry.’ By saying that, you mean to change the behavior but until this changes please stop apologizing,” Stella added.

“I agree,” Kathryn said shaking her head in agreement with Stella.

“Okay, then I guess I’m not sorry then. But I can promise it won’t happen again,” Nicole said looking at her lap.

“Let’s discuss your punishment. Grounding obviously isn’t working so here’s what we’re gonna do. You will lose all privileges including your phone, truck, and friends. You will not have contact with any of them for the next two weeks. Please hand over your phone and truck keys,” Kathryn said holding out her hand. Nicole stood up from the table and walked into her bedroom. A few moments later she returned placing her phone and keys into Kathryn’s hand. Closing her hand around the phone and keys Kathryn pulled her hand back across the table and placed them in her pocket. “I think that’s all I have to say about this,” Kathryn said pushing herself away from the table and walking towards her bedroom. Stella gave Nicole a nod and followed Kathryn to the back of the house.

Stepping into the bedroom Stella said, “That went well, I’m proud of you for keeping your cool. You did a great job honey. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you, now help me try to open her phone. Do you know the password?” Kathryn said swiping at Nicole’s phone trying to figure out the design to unlock the phone. Stella sat down next to Kathryn on the bed and took the phone from her.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Give it back, help me or get out,” Kathryn said sternly. Stella handed the phone back to Kathryn and put her hands in the air showing defeat. Kathryn continued to swipe the screen until she finally figured out the combination. The phone sprang to life with messages and notifications. Kathryn began reading through Nicole’s text messages from names she didn’t

know only to find that most of them were pretty normal just friend talk. But she found Cayson's name and read through the text. They talked about sex and previous adventures that they had had together. Kathryn held up the phone to Stella and said, "see this is what I was talking about, this is why I wanted to see what she had in here. Oh, and she has Snapchat where she sends pictures to boys. You know why they use that program right? It's because once the photo is sent it disappears and cannot be recovered. Now tell me that's trustworthy," Kathryn said snidely.

"Okay, I'm sorry," Stella said sitting down next to Kathryn again so she could look over her shoulder as they read through Nicole's private messages. Kathryn scrolled through Nicole's messages, photos, and social media accounts for hours until Stella said, "Okay honey I think that's enough. I cannot sit here anymore. Are we gonna confront her about this? I only ask so I can mentally prepare myself," Stella said standing up from the bed and stretching her back.

"I don't know yet. I think if we say anything it should be about her having sex. I want to get her on birth control soon," Kathryn said turning the phone off.

Kathryn let a few days go by before talking to Nicole about getting on birth control. She never mentioned going through Nicole's phone to obtain information. She casually started talking about how bad her periods used to be and Nicole sometimes has the same problems. Kathryn told her that being on birth control helped with the pain and regulation and suggested that she be put on it. Nicole agreed with Kathryn never suspecting that they had gone through her phone, finding out about her sex life.



When Nicole was finally ungrounded, she jumped up and down when she got her phone back. Kathryn handed the phone and truck keys over to Nicole since it had been the full two weeks. Nicole hugged Kathryn still jumping up and down excitedly, jostling Kathryn back and forth. “Okay babe, I know your happy. You’re welcome. Remember our deal though, you follow the rules, and you will have more freedoms,” Kathryn was glad the two weeks were over since she’s had to drive Nicole to and from work and therapy appointments. Nicole ran outside, unlocked her truck, and jumped inside, putting the key in the ignition she started it and wallowed in the engine rumble.

Kathryn watched Nicole through the office window happy that Nicole was finally smiling. The past two weeks she had been sullen and pouty. Kathryn took several occasions to not say anything about the attitude that was driving her nuts. That night Nicole asked if she could visit Gaby because she hadn’t seen her in so long. Kathryn agreed and gave Nicole a curfew to follow strictly. Reminding her that if she were late this time, she would lose her truck permanently.

“We have James’ award ceremony tomorrow, do you want to go with us?” Kathryn asked Nicole before she left. Nicole nodded her head in agreement as she rushed out of the front door.

“Bye mom,” Kathryn heard faintly as the front door closed behind Nicole. She heard the pick-up engine roar to life and then the sound faded as Nicole pulled down the street. Kathryn sat down at her desk and worked for a few hours while Stella and James watched a movie in the living room. Another hour passed and Kathryn began looking at the clock wondering if Nicole

was gonna make it home on time. At five till Nicole walked through the front door and walked into the living room where Kathryn, Stella and James were watching TV.

“Right on time, great job kid,” Stella said looking up from her phone. Nicole gave her a big smile and sat down next to James on the sofa.

“Thank you, babe for being on time. This builds trust. Good job,” Kathryn said putting her phone down to talk. Nicole leaned into James and made him fall over on the sofa, laughing. The four of them finished watching TV and said goodnight.

A few days later Nicole asked if she could spend the weekend with Gaby and since she had made curfew the last few times, Kathryn agreed and told her to be home Sunday by dinner time. Nicole quickly packed her bag, called Gaby to let her know she was on her way over and left saying goodbye on her way out. Kathryn didn't have class on Friday's, so she caught up on grading while James was at school and Stella was at class. Kathryn's phone chimed notifying her of a text from Stella asking if she wanted to have lunch in an hour. Kathryn typed in a response accepting the lunch date. “Nicole's gonna stay the weekend with Gaby. I figured it would be okay since she's been doing so good with curfew. I told her to be home Sunday by dinner time. That means it's just gonna be the three of us for the weekend, what should we do?” Kathryn said to Stella sitting across the booth.

“That works. I'm gonna take James to the Home Depot workshop tomorrow morning, he really enjoys building things there.”

“Awesome, I can sleep in tomorrow while you're gone,” Kathryn said with a wink. Stella smiled and nodded her head. After lunch Stella went back to campus and Kathryn went grocery

shopping before returning home. James wouldn't be home for a couple hours, so Kathryn picked up her book and sat in her favorite comfy chair and began to read.

"Hi mom," James said walking through the front door. He walked straight to his room and threw his backpack on the floor, kicked off his shoes and stretched his toes. Kathryn startled in her chair knocking her book onto the floor, she had dozed off while reading. Picking her book up off the floor she stood from the chair, placed the book in the seat and walked towards James' voice.

"Hi sweetheart, how was school? Did you do anything fun today?" Kathryn asked standing in his doorway.

"Nope, but it's Friday! Can I play the Xbox? Please?" James asked holding his hands in a praying position towards Kathryn.

"Do you need a snack first?"

"No, my friend bought me Cheetos after school, and I ate them on my walk home. So, can I?" James asked again. Kathryn smiled at his Cheeto stained fingers and told him to wash his hands first but then he could play. James excitedly ran past Kathryn into his bathroom ran some water over his fingers, wiped them dry quickly on the hand towel and hurried to the living room. Kathryn followed behind him and grabbed the now dirty hand towel off of the rack and carried it to the laundry room. Grabbing a clean one she took it to the bathroom and hung it up for the next person.

Sunday evening Kathryn was finishing up dinner, while James set the table and Stella poured drinks. Sitting down to eat Kathryn kept looking from her watch to the clock on the wall

wondering if Nicole was gonna be home soon. “Stop worrying, she’ll be here,” Stella insisted placing a hand on Kathryn’s thigh, patting lightly.

“I should have given her a specific time to be home instead of telling her dinner time. I mean she knows what time we have dinner but still I know that she can use ‘dinner time’ as an excuse to be later,” Kathryn said looking down at her watch again, picking up her phone to check for messages.

“Hey, no phones at dinner,” James scolded.

“I know son, but I’m worried about your sister since she’s not home yet,” Kathryn added.

“Where is she?” James asked shoving food in his mouth.

“Mom let her stay with Gaby for the weekend. She’ll be home soon,” Stella exclaimed giving Kathryn another pat on the thigh. After dinner was finished Kathryn paced the office, looking back and forth from her watch to her phone and then peering out the front window waiting for Nicole to pull up to the house. Meanwhile, Stella and James cleaned up the dishes and put the leftovers away. An hour later, Kathryn watched through the window as Nicole climbed out of her truck using it to hold herself up and watched as she stumbled to the front door. Nicole came crashing through the front door stumbling and knocking pictures off of the wall. Kathryn met Nicole at the front door and stood staring with her hands on her hips.

“Howdy mother. Honey, I’m home!” Nicole screamed through the house.

“Are you drunk? What the hell Nicole?” Kathryn said grabbing Nicole by the arm and pulling her towards her bedroom. Kathryn helped Nicole sit down on her bed where she fell over backwards with the weight of them both. “Dammit Nicole!” Kathryn said shoving her aside to

stand back up. “You are so lucky James is already in bed. I do not want him to see you like this. What were you thinking? Honey?” Kathryn called into the other room for Stella to join her in Nicole’s room. When Stella walked into the room, she saw Nicole laying on her bed babbling to herself and Kathryn standing over her. “She’s drunk again.”

“Not just drunk. Duh!” Nicole said with her hands dancing above her face.

“Are you high?” Stella asked getting closer to check Nicole’s eyes. “Were you smoking weed?” Stella continued.

“I cannot believe this, where did you get that shit from? Drugs? Really? How stupid are you?” Kathryn hollered pacing the room with her hand on her forehead.

“Oh, come on, it’s just meth,” Nicole said rolling over on her bed to look at Kathryn.

“Meth? Like Methamphetamines? What the hell? It’s just meth, she says!” Kathryn said with her eyebrows lifted in shock. Shaking her head back and forth Kathryn stopped pacing and stared at Nicole. Stella put a hand on Kathryn’s shoulder to keep her still.

“What do you mean ‘it’s just meth,’” Stella asked calmly.

“Duh! Oh my God you guys are so lame,” Nicole said sliding to the floor and rolling onto the carpet in front of her bed.

“Where did you get it? How did you ingest it?” Kathryn demanded, pointing a finger at Nicole.

“Deep breath in, deep breath out, deep breath in, deep breath out,” Nicole stammered over and over again.

“What does this mean?” Kathryn asked staring at Stella waiting for answers. “Do you know what she’s talking about?”

“I’m not sure, but I think you smoke meth. So, maybe that’s what she means,” Stella answered promptly.

“Come on, get up!” Kathryn screamed grabbing Nicole by the arm and trying to pull her up off of the floor. Stella took Nicole’s other arm and together they helped her sit down on the bed. “Help me get her into the car, I’m taking her to get checked out at the hospital,” Stella helped Kathryn put Nicole in the car and put her seatbelt on her before jumping in the passenger seat. “You should stay here just in case James wakes up and wonders where we are,” Kathryn reminded. Stella nodded her head in agreement and got out of the car. She gave Kathryn a kiss and walked back into the house.

At the hospital Kathryn explained what happened and what Nicole said, she asked if they could check Nicole and make sure she was okay and not gonna overdose. The receptionists asked them to take a seat in the lobby until they could be seen. After three hours of waiting and Nicole drooling on Kathryn’s shoulder from sleeping, Kathryn stood and walked towards the little window to speak to the receptionists again. “Excuse me, um, how much longer is it going to be? See, we’ve been here for several hours and I need to find out what drugs my daughter is on. Right now, she’s sleeping and I’m not sure how long drugs last in your system so if we could get seen soon that would be great,” Kathryn said quietly but sternly.

“I’m sorry ma’am but we’ve had several emergency cases come in through ambulance and they take priority. Drugs last for a few days in the system, so even though she’s sleeping we will still be able to figure out what she’s on. Please take a seat and we will call you when we

have a room available,” Rolling her eyes as the receptionist closed the window Kathryn turned and returned to her seat grabbing a magazine and flipped through it without reading it. After another two hours a nurse wearing rainbow scrubs called Nicole’s name. Kathryn nudged Nicole awake and told her to follow the nurse. Kathryn followed behind Nicole making sure she wouldn’t run into anything. In triage the nurse took several vials of blood and checked Nicole’s temperature, blood pressure, and oxygen levels. Everything was normal, so the nurse led them down a hallway and into a room with chairs and a curtain.

“Have a seat in here, the doctor will be in shortly,” Rainbow scrubs said turning around and walking back out of the room. The room was small with two sides divided by a curtain that was falling off of the rack that was holding it. There were four chairs on the side Kathryn and Nicole were escorted to and people sitting on the other side of the curtain with a small crying child. Nicole groaned as she took a seat and curled into a ball placing her head on the arm of the chair and closing her eyes. Kathryn took the seat next to her and placed her hand in her lap. She pulled her phone out of her pocket and texted Stella letting her know that they had just been taken to the back and would let her know when they were on their way home. A little time later and young man in a white coat came in holding a file, walked into the room and shook hands with Kathryn.

“So, it appears from the results here that Nicole has been using Methamphetamines, marijuana, and alcohol. We are required to call Child services when we see a minor that tests positive for drugs. What this means is there will be a woman who comes down from Child services who will interview you both about the living situation at home. I am also going to give you some paperwork about rehab, I think that she would benefit from being there,” the man in

the white coat said, handing out a stack of papers and colorful brochures. Kathryn took the stack and shoved it all in her purse looking at the doctor with a tilted head and confused eyes.

“Wait, so, I bring my daughter in because I am concerned, she may be on drugs and you call child services on me. I don’t understand. I am obviously a concerned parent; I am not providing her with the drugs. She came home this way. Oh my god why is this happening?”

Kathryn cried standing up from her seat and walking around the room. Nicole was asleep on the chair and didn’t hear any of the conversation. “Nicole! Come on! We’re leaving,” Kathryn said shaking Nicole awake.

“I’m sorry ma’am but we cannot permit you to leave until after the interview from Child services is completed. It’s only for the safety of the child. I hope you understand that we are not accusing you of anything. We just want to check on the child. Please calm down and have a seat,” the doctor said holding a hand out to stop Kathryn from leaving. Kathryn sat down and slumped back in her seat. The doctor turned and walked out of the room and Kathryn saw him whisper something to the security guard in a blue uniform who moved closer towards their room.

“This is ridiculous,” Kathryn whispered to herself pulling her phone back out to text Stella. Another hour later and a short woman with black curly hair splattered with grey came into the room and introduced herself as Martha Sanchez with child services. She interviewed Kathryn about the living situation, did she work, how many kids in the house, was she married, what her annual income was, what her sexual orientation was, and how punishment was administered to the children. Kathryn answered all of the questions without hesitation or thought. Martha thanked Kathryn for her time and woke up Nicole. She asked Nicole to follow her to another room to complete the interview. By this time, Nicole had slept off the booze and drugs and was

groggy. “Why are you taking her somewhere else? Why can’t you ask her questions in here?”

Kathryn asked with concern in her voice. Martha explained that children look to the parents for answers and moving them away from the parents they can answer truthfully. Kathryn rolled her eyes and crossed her arms watching as Nicole followed Martha out of the room.

A few minutes later Nicole returned to the room and sat back down in the chair next to Kathryn. Martha followed in after her and told Kathryn everything checked out so Nicole would be getting discharged and sent home with instructions to continue therapy and maybe think about rehab. Handing a few more papers to Kathryn, Martha turned and walked out of the room. The nurse came in a little while later with a clip board and pen, she handed them to Kathryn and asked her to sign the discharge paperwork. Kathryn signed everything quickly, handed the clip board back to the nurse and stood to leave. She patted Nicole on the shoulder to wake her up and helped her to the car.

Once home, Kathryn helped Nicole out of the car and into the house. Leading Nicole to her room Kathryn opened the bedroom door and let Nicole walk in alone. She said goodnight and reminded Nicole they were going to talk about everything in the morning before stepping back and walking to her own bedroom. Stella was snoring asleep, so Kathryn tried to be quiet removing her clothes and getting into bed. Stella rolled over when Kathryn got into bed and opened her eyes. “How did it go? What’s she on?” Stella asked sluggishly.

“Methamphetamine’s marijuana and alcohol, but we can talk about it tomorrow. It’s late and I just want to be done with this day,” Kathryn said stretching out in bed and closing her eyes.

“Good morning guys, the sun is up. Come on get up lazy heads,” James said jumping in the middle of Kathryn and Stella’s bed, shaking them both awake. Kathryn opened her eyes momentarily, rolled over covering her head with her pillow and moaned good morning to James. “Stella can you make me a breakfast burrito. Sausage and egg?” James asked bouncing up and down on the bed. Stella yawned and stretched sitting up and in bed and turning to put her feet on the floor.

“Let me use the bathroom and get dressed and then I will,” Kathryn pulled the covers up over her head under the pillow and pushed James onto Stella’s side of the bed. He laid down next to her and poked his finger under the covers until he could see Kathryn’s face. He used his index finger and poked her on the nose until she opened her eyes and stared at him. Giving him a grin, she jumped over and grabbed him and held him in a warm blanket hug. James let out a screech and then started laughing leaning in closer to Kathryn. Closing her eyes again Kathryn remember the night before and didn’t want to get out of bed. Staying in bed all day sounded like a much better idea, so Kathryn snuggled James a little closer and closed her eyes relaxing in the warm bed.

“Okay bud let’s go cook breakfast,” Stella said from the doorway. “Let’s let mom sleep a little longer. She deserves it,” James rubbed Kathryn’s arm and then jumped out of the bed leaving a cold spot where he was in Kathryn’s arms. Snuggling deeper under the covers Kathryn closed her eyes and fell back to sleep.

After a quick shower, Kathryn dressed and walked into the kitchen to make her some hot tea. Realizing how quiet it was, Kathryn walked around the house noticing that Stella and James were gone, then she remembered that Stella was taking James to Home Depot. Taking her cup to

the living room Kathryn sat down in her recliner and sipped her tea carefully. Enjoying the quiet Kathryn pulled the lever on her chair to recline it and pulled out her phone to scroll social media. A minute or two later Nicole came walking into the living room rubbing her eyes. “Hi mom,” She said as she laid down on the sofa. “Man, I have such a headache. What happened last night? How did I get home?”

Taking a deep breath Kathryn replied, “You have a hangover from doing drugs and drinking all night. I took you to the ER last night, so I know what you’ve been doing. Oh, and as for how you got home, you drove yourself!” Kathryn snapped sitting up and closing her chair, placing her elbows on her knees, and staring at Nicole. “I hope you enjoyed having that pick-up because it’s gone!”

“What? You can’t do that; I am paying for it. Having my truck is between me and my grandparents!” Nicole argued.

“Actually, as your mother I have the right to take it away from you. You can only push me so far before I break, and this was it! You drove home and could barely walk. Do you realize how many lives you endangered by doing that?”

“Well, I made it home and didn’t wreck. That should be something,” Nicole said sitting up on the couch.

“What? Like I should be proud of you for making it home? Are you kidding me?” Kathryn yelled giving Nicole a sarcastic smile baring teeth.

“I mean not proud but I’m just saying like happy or something,” Nicole continued.

“You’ve got to be kidding me. I haven’t even started in on the drugs yet. What the hell were you thinking smoking meth and weed, plus drinking on top of that. Do you want to die? Is that it? Are you suicidal?” Kathryn asked never looking away from Nicole.

“No, geeze mom, you’re overreacting. It was one time and won’t happen again,” Nicole said breaking the eye contact and looking down at the floor.

“Well, when Stella gets back, we are going to talk about rehab. I think that you should prepare for it.”

“Oh my God! I do not need rehab! I’m not a drug addict!” Nicole yelled standing up and walking out of the living room towards her bedroom.

“Don’t you walk away from me! Nicole! Get back here!” Kathryn yelled following Nicole out of the room. Just as Kathryn was going to reach out and turn Nicole around the front door opened and James came running through holding up a colorful flower pot he made. Nicole grinned at Kathryn and slammed her bedroom door closed.

“That’s beautiful honey, can you got put it on my desk please,” Kathryn instructed James who turned on his heel and walked into the office. Stella came through the door holding James’ jacket, book, flower pot box, and his apron. “Did he forget all of this in the car?” Kathryn asked taking the jacket and book from her.

“No, he left it on purpose. You know carrying the flower pot was a lot to hold,” Stella responded sarcastically.

“James, that isn’t nice. You need to carry your own stuff and make sure you get it all out of the car,” Kathryn called into the office. James let out a laugh and came out of the room taking

his things from Kathryn and Stella. He walked down the small hallway and entered his room throwing the pile on the floor.

“Can I play?” James asked walking back into the dining room where Kathryn and Stella were standing. Kathryn nodded her head and James ran into the living room.

“Put your headphones on today kiddo. Okay?” Kathryn suggested not wanting him to hear the conversation. James nodded his head and grabbed his over the ears headphones and put them on while his game started loading. Kathryn told Stella what was going on with Nicole and what had been said back and forth before they came in the door. “I wanted to ring her neck, I cannot believe she said those things to me,” Kathryn said shaking her head in disbelief. Stella pulled her into a hug and suggested they wait to talk to Nicole until they had both calmed down. “I think we should send her to rehab, before this gets out of hand,” Kathryn mentioned to Stella as she held her close.

“If you think that’s for the best then I agree but we should take her soon,” Stella said pulling away from the hug to look Kathryn in the eyes.

“Now is good for me,” Kathryn responded pulling out a chair at the table and sitting down holding her head in her hands. Let me call the kid’s dad and see if he can come get James for a little while. Stella took a few steps closer to Kathryn and held her head close, Kathryn reached around and held onto Stella by the waist. Letting go, Kathryn sat up in her chair and pulled out her phone dialing the kid’s dad’s number. He agreed to come get James and keep him for a few hours while they took care of Nicole. Kathryn told James that his dad was on his way for him he jumped up and turned off his game excitedly and sat patiently by the front door. “You

have to give him time to get here, silly,” Kathryn reminded watching him from the dining room chair.

“I know but this is where I want to wait for him,” James responded looking over his shoulder at Kathryn. Stella laughed, sitting next to Kathryn at the table.

“He’s such a good kid,” Stella added rubbing Kathryn’s back with one hand. Once James left with his dad, Kathryn knocked and opened Nicole’s door stepping into the room.

“Get in the car, I’m taking you to rehab,” Kathryn demanded watching the shock cross Nicole’s face.

“What? I’m not going to rehab! You cannot make me,” Nicole yelled while she sat painting her fingernails on the bed.

“I can make you and we are going right now. So, let’s go,” Kathryn yelled back. Stella stepped into the room and sat down next to Nicole on the bed.

“I think this is what you need right now, kiddo. You may not see it now, but this is getting a bit out of control. Your behavior, the drugs and drinking are getting to be too much. Especially since you are driving around like that,” Stella said calmly putting a hand on Nicole’s back patting lightly. Nicole began to cry and agreed to go with them and check it out. Once at the hospital Kathryn parked the car, took a deep breath, looked in the review mirror watching Nicole.

“We got this baby girl, and we’ve got you. We are only doing this because we love you so much and don’t want to see you get hurt,” Kathryn said staring in the mirror hoping Nicole would look up. Nicole stared at her hands in her lap fidgeting with her fingers. Kathryn saw a

tear fall from her face and turned around in her seat to face Nicole in the back seat. “I promise this is for the best.” Kathryn added patting Nicole on the knee. “We can do this; you can do this.”

“I know this is hard kiddo, but just remember that your mom and I are always here for you and we will do everything in our power to keep you safe. Even if that means taking you to rehab for a little bit,” Stella said looking in the back seat through the visor mirror. “Okay, let’s do this,” Stella said opening her car door. Kathryn patted Nicole on the leg again and turned around to exit the car. Nicole sat for a minute took in a few deep breaths and opened her door. The three walked into the building after the receptionists buzzed them in. Stella and Nicole took a seat in the lobby while Kathryn talked to the receptionist about why they were there. The receptionist handed her a clip board with papers that needed to be filled out as well as visitor name tags. Kathryn took a seat next to Nicole who stood and walked across the room to sit in another chair.

“It’s okay honey,” Stella said stopping Kathryn from saying anything or starting an argument. “She’s fine sitting over there. She’s just upset and it’s understandable under the circumstances,” Stella continued placing a hand on Kathryn’s knee. Kathryn let out a deep breath and continued to fill out the paper work, looking up at Nicole every few moments. When she was finished filling out all of the paperwork, she carried the clip board back to the receptionist, who responded by saying someone would be with them shortly.

A minute or two later a tall blonde woman came out through a door behind the receptionist and called Nicole’s name. The three of them stood and walked towards the woman, who led them into a little room off of the lobby. She asked them to all sit down as she shifted through the paperwork Kathryn had filled out. She introduced herself as Maggie Bustamante and

held her hand out to Stella first then Kathryn and lastly Nicole who didn't look up from her chair.

"I see here that you said she is using drugs and alcohol, I am gonna ask you to be more specific and tell me which drugs she is on," Maggie asked pointing to a line on the paperwork.

"Don't talk about me like I'm not in the same room!" Nicole said loudly catching everyone off guard.

"Oh my. I am so sorry Nicole. You are right I should be asking you what drugs you are currently on. Please forgive me, it won't happen again."

"Nicole! Don't be rude," Kathryn scolded giving Nicole a dirty look with creased eyebrows. Stella placed a hand on Kathryn's thigh squeezing slightly. Kathryn took a deep breath and stayed quiet.

"I tried meth, I smoked some weed and had a few drinks last night. It's nothing to freak out about. I am not a drug addict and don't need to be here," Nicole said staring Maggie directly in the eyes.

"Okay, that's understandable. How many times have you tried meth or smoked marijuana? And on average how many drinks do you say you have over a weekend?" Maggie asked never breaking the eye contact.

"I don't even know, I smoke weed when I can get it, drink with my friends sometimes, but who keeps count. And the meth was one time this weekend. It's no big deal."

"Well, actually it is kinda a big deal. You see these drugs specifically are easy to do and so people become addicted to them very quickly. So, even one or two time of trying it and you

could already be addicted. Our program helps you figure that out, providing you with a space where you can feel safe while the drugs leave your system,” Maggie said still talking directly to Nicole. Nicole shifted in her chair finally breaking the eye contact looking down at her lap and turning her head, so her hair covered her face.

“Do you think this would be a good place to try that?” Kathryn asked reaching over to hold Nicole’s hand. Nicole pulled away as Kathryn touched her hand and turned in her seat pointing her back towards Kathryn and Stella. Kathryn pulled her hand back in shock. She opened her mouth to say something when Maggie turned to them to discuss the duration of the stay.

“Since this is her first time here, we have a shorter two-week program that will give her the steps on how to get sober and stay sober. We have a longer program, but I don’t think she needs that right now, so I’m gonna suggest the two-week program to the psychiatrist on staff who will prescribe her some medication to help the drugs leave her system more smoothly. If you will wait here for a few moments I will be back shortly,” Maggie said standing up from her chair, she gathered the paperwork together in a folder and walked out of the room closing the door behind her.

“I think you find this is better than you think baby girl,” Kathryn said trying to sooth Nicole who still had her back turned to them. “I want you to know that we love you and only want what’s best for you. It’ll go by so quick you won’t even notice the two weeks,” Kathryn added. When Maggie entered the room again, she had more paperwork for Kathryn to sign, meanwhile she put little paper bracelets on Nicole with her name, date of birth, and ID number.

When Kathryn finished signing the paperwork Maggie gathered them up and put them in a file with Nicole's name on it.

"I'll let you say goodbye briefly and then take her back," Maggie said turning to walk out of the room. Nicole stood and stopped her before she could close the door behind her, waving at Kathryn and Stella.

"I'm ready now," Nicole said following Maggie out of the room.

"Come give me hug. Please," Kathryn requested but Nicole shook her head no. Maggie looked at Kathryn and Stella shaking her head up and down.

"I promise she is in good hands," Maggie said trying to reassure Kathryn that she was doing the right thing. Maggie turned and walked towards the door behind the receptionist and held it open for Nicole. Kathryn sat in the chair and began to cry, with Stella trying to calm her down. Nicole never looked back as she followed Maggie down the hall, that Kathryn watched through the window. Stella helped Kathryn stand and walk out to the car and helped her into the passenger seat, where she sat sobbing.

"I can't believe we left her there. I failed her as a mother. What kind of person leaves their kid here? I feel like we abandoned her because things got too hard. What kind of mother does that?" Kathryn sobbed struggling to catch her breath. Stella held Kathryn in the car while she cried, until they were both crying. The drive home was completely quiet except for the occasional sniff between sobs. Glad James wasn't home yet once Kathryn entered their home, she let out a scream and crumpled to the floor crying. Stella followed her into the house and sat down on the floor next to her holding her. Kathryn felt like someone had ripped out her heart and left a hollow spot.

The next two weeks Kathryn wasn't able to contact Nicole, not through phone call or visitation. The rehab facility had strict rules where only the child can reach out when they are ready. They used a point system where Nicole had to participate in activities to earn them. When she earned enough, she could trade them for a phone call or visitation time.

Kathryn took a week off from work and walked around the house like a zombie in a grave yard. Stella had to take care of James and explained where Nicole was. Kathryn would sleep, cry, and sleep some more. Most days she wouldn't get out of bed, other days she would sit in Nicole's room and cry, holding her pillow that still smelled like her. On a few occasions she held James when he would visit her in her bedroom. He would lay with her while she slept just so she wasn't alone when Stella had class. When James was in school Kathryn would sleep the whole day, barely speaking to anyone. The second week Kathryn went to work like normal but made the classes shorter so she could return home. When she would return home, she would change clothes and lay back in bed.

On the day of Nicole's release, Kathryn rushed around the house to make sure everything looked nice. "Come on guys. It's time to go," Kathryn said anxiously looking at her watch, standing by the front door. James came around the corner pulling on his jacket, with his shoe laces trailing behind him. "Tie your shoes bud, you're gonna fall," Kathryn said pointing down to his shoes. Stella walked towards the door with a smile ready for Nicole to be home again. On the drive there they jammed out to some of Nicole's favorite songs. "I can't wait to see her." Kathryn said turning the radio down a bit.

"Me too. I hope she's doing good," Stella said turning to look at Kathryn. James sang along with the music and stared out the window at traffic going by. When they got to the rehab

facility they waited to be buzzed in and walked to the receptionist desk. Kathryn told the woman why they were there and filled out their visitor name tags. They took a seat in the lobby and waited for Nicole to be brought out.

A few minutes later, the door behind the receptionist opened and Maggie came out with Nicole following her. Nicole had on blue scrubs and carried a trash bag full of her other things. Nicole closed the distance between herself and Kathryn and pulled her into a hug. Kathryn held on tight and began to cry. “Don’t cry mom, I’m good. Look, I’m smiling, in a good mood,” Nicole said trying to pull out of the hug, but Kathryn wouldn’t let her go.

“Can I get in on that?” Stella asked hugging Nicole from behind. James crammed his way in and hugged all of them. Nicole stood in the middle of the hug and laughed dropping her bag on the floor. Stella pulled away from the hug and suggested that they all go home.

“Yes, please!” Nicole said picking up her bag off of the floor. James tried to carry it but dropped it and then tried to drag it across the floor before Nicole took it away from him. Stella, James, and Nicole all walked out to the car after being buzzed out while Kathryn stayed with Maggie in the lobby signing discharge paperwork.

“Don’t take this wrong but I hope to never see you again,” Kathryn said to Maggie as she handed the paperwork back to her. She shifted her purse on her shoulder she waited to be buzzed out and walked confidently towards the car. Kathryn paused to watch the other three putting Nicole’s things in the back of the car, happy that they were all together again. The ride home Nicole filled them in on what she had been doing for the past two weeks.

“I had group therapy, we each had to take turns talking which was kinda boring. But then we would have free time for a while before school. They had us taking Math and English classes

every day. It was alright I guess; the Math was hard though I wish Stella were there to help me,” Nicole said reaching forward and patting Stella on the shoulder in the front seat. “I was only two points away from earning phone time and I planned on calling but discharge came first. I did make each of you a drawing. I will give them to you when we get home and I unpack. It’s funny going in with nothing and coming out with a full trash bag. I have new socks, underwear, PJ’s, and several pairs of scrubs. Oh my gosh they are so comfy,” Nicole continued.

“That’s a lot of stuff,” James added.

“I’m glad they supplied all of that because I was worried when you didn’t call to ask for clean clothes or anything else for two weeks,” Kathryn said slowing down for a stop sign. A few blocks later Kathryn pulled into the driveway and turned off the car. Everyone piled out of the car and unloaded Nicole’s bag.

“Can I play?” James asked following closely behind Kathryn.

“We just got home with your sister, don’t you want to hang out with us and talk for a bit before playing?” Stella asked as she checked her phone to check the time.

“It’s okay he can play, I thought we could take this time to talk to Nicole privately,” Kathryn said setting her purse down on the bar and then walked into the kitchen opening the fridge and pulling out a bottle of water.

“Yay! Thanks mom,” James said turning on his toes and heading off towards the living room. Stella gave Kathryn a stern look and raised an eyebrow.

“What? I just thought that it would be better if he were pre-occupied with something while we talk,” Kathryn replied to the look. She carried her water to the table and took her usual

seat. Nicole came out of her room and sat across from her at the table. Stella closed the living room door to close off James from their conversation, then crossed the room and took the seat next to Kathryn.

“This won’t take long but I just thought we needed to have a conversation about things since we didn’t really get the chance when we took you to rehab. I want to explain why we did it, and then talk about the future,” Kathryn said looking across at Nicole who was looking up and listening.

“I know but I first need to apologize. I am sorry for my behavior, it was uncalled for, it was disrespectful, and it won’t happen again. I understand that doing drugs when I am stressed or at all is not healthy and I can choose to say ‘no’ to my friends,” Nicole said calmly holding her hands still on the table.

“Thank you for your apology, I appreciate it and I know your mom does,” Stella said shifting in her seat.

“Yes, I do appreciate it. I was hoping that the two weeks would help you figure out that you had other options instead of drugs. But now that you’re home, we need to talk about the rules here. You will be responsible for your chores, and I have enrolled you in GED classes so you can get a diploma. Also, you will not be allowed to drive your truck. We took it out to Yamma and Poppa’s so it will be out of sight and not be a temptation. I will take you to all of your appointments. Unfortunately, you missed two weeks of work, so you will need to call them tomorrow and figure out what’s going on there. I have your meds and will give them to you every night. You will have a curfew where you will be expected to be showered and in bed by the time it rolls around. Same as James. Just for a little while until you get a routine at home,”

Kathryn added looking to Stella for anything she might have missed. “Well, that’s all I wanted to say, I am super happy your home and healthy. Welcome home baby girl.”

“Thank you, mom, I am so glad to be home. Thank you for understanding that I will need a little help through this. I appreciate you guys so much. I love you guys,” Nicole said reaching across the table to touch Stella and Kathryn’s hands.

“High five on team sober!” Stella said holding her hand up. Kathryn and Nicole high fived all together and then laughed when they missed.



After running errands around town, Stella pulled her car into the driveway and Kathryn said, “Where is my car. Kathryn stared at the empty spot where her car should have been, got out of the car and looked up and down the street hoping to see it parked somewhere. “What the hell! Where is my car?” She grabbed a few bags of groceries from the back of Stella’s car and carried them inside. “James? Nicole?” She called out.

“Yea, I’m watching TV in here.”

“Where is Nicole?” Kathryn asked from the living room doorway where she watched James sitting on her recliner.

“I don’t know. She was in here earlier, maybe she’s in her room sleeping,” James continued never looking up from his television show. Kathryn walked the short way across the room and knocked on Nicole’s bedroom door. The door slid open, so Kathryn stepped in to see it empty.

“Anything?” Stella asked carrying an armload of groceries seeing Kathryn coming out of Nicole’s room.

“No! She’s gone! James is in there watching tv. But Nicole is gone, and my keys are not hanging up on the rack by the door,” Kathryn said putting a hand on the back of her neck and squeezed. “She stole my fucking car!” Kathryn added staring out of the open door. Stella pushed past making several trips to the car to get the groceries. Kathryn took a step outside and looked

around again, then walked to the back of Stella's car grabbing a few more bags. After unloading and putting away all of the groceries, Kathryn pulled her phone out of her pocket and dialed the police to report her car stolen. She quickly hung up before the call connected. "Should I call the police?" Kathryn asked Stella standing in the kitchen.

"I think that we should give her the benefit of the doubt and see if she just went to the convenience store down the street. If she's not back in an hour, then I think we might not have any other option but to call," Kathryn took a deep breath, let it out slowly and walked towards the back of the house. Entering her bedroom, she plopped face down on the bed flipping her legs straight out. Kathryn let out a scream into her pillow and threw her hands and legs up in the air. She punched the bed several times before turning over onto her back, staring at the ceiling. Stella stood in the doorway and watched as Kathryn took out her anger on their mattress. She waited until Kathryn stopped wriggling on the bed before laying down next to her.

"I don't what to do anymore. We explain to her why we do things and she still has to be defiant. Stubborn ass!" Kathryn added.

"I don't know either love."

Several hours later, Nicole and Kathryn's car were still missing so Kathryn decided to call the police and report her daughter as a run-away. She decided not to tell them that Nicole stole the car and hoped it came home safe when Nicole was found. A patrol unit parked close to the house and an officer started walking towards the house when Kathryn met them on the patio. The office asked several questions like, how old Nicole was, what she was wearing, where she might be and her date of birth. The officer wrote all the information down inside a pocket

notebook, handed Kathryn a business card with an ID number on it and told her to call if she heard anything.

“We’ll be in touch if we hear anything as well,” the officer said walking back towards her car. She got into her car and pulled away from the curb. Kathryn stood on the patio holding the card and tried to memorize the number, hoping she was doing the right thing. Stella opened the safety door and stepped out of the house, once she saw that the officer was gone, she walked over to Kathryn and pulled her into a hug.

“That was quick.”

“I know she only asked me a few questions about Nicole, handed me this card and then left. I hope that I gave her enough information.”

“Did you give her the license plate number?” Stella asked pulling back to look at Kathryn in the eyes.

“Um, no. So, here’s the thing. I didn’t actually tell them that Nicole stole my car, only that she had run away,” Kathryn said looking down at the ground.

“Are you serious? What about your car then? You should have told them; they would have looked for the car and found her sooner. Now they’re just looking for a run away and not the car,” Stella added sternly.

“I know honey. I just couldn’t bring myself to say that she stole my car. You know, cause then they would arrest her from grand theft auto and I don’t want that. I’m just trying to protect her,” Stella pulled away from Kathryn’s hug and took a few steps backwards. She put her index finger and thumb under her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I just don’t know what to do. I’m in shock, I’m pissed off and scared all at the same time. And even then, I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel,” Kathryn replied trying to defend herself.

“I know honey, I’m sorry. I don’t know what to do or how to feel either,” Stella closed the space between them and hugged Kathryn again. “Not really anything we can do now, let’s let the police do their part. We need to fix dinner for James, so I’ll start on that, why don’t you go take a warm shower and try to relax,” Kathryn pulled out of the hug, kissed Stella on the lips and walked inside the house. Stella followed her rubbing the tension out of her shoulders.

Two nights later, Kathryn heard a knock on the front door and opened it to find Nicole drenched, standing in the rain waiting for someone to answer the door. “Oh my gosh, come in,” Kathryn said ushering Nicole in and towards her bedroom. She left Nicole standing in the middle of her room while Kathryn grabbed a towel. She wrapped the towel around Nicole’s shoulders who flinched, falling to the floor crying. “What’s the matter, what happened?” Kathryn asked while trying to dry Nicole with the towel. Nicole collapsed onto the floor and sobbed until her entire body was shaking with every inhale and exhale of air.

“I was raped! I was held in a shed for two days,” Nicole called out from under the towel.

“Oh my god! Okay, let me get my phone. Stella!” Kathryn yelled out the bedroom door. James came around the corner and saw Nicole sobbing on the floor.

“What’s wrong? What happened to her?” James said trying to peak past Kathryn who put herself in the doorway.

“She’s okay, I just need to take care of her for a minute okay. Can you go get Stella for me please?” Kathryn asked. James turned around and ran out the backdoor calling out Stella’s name the entire time. Kathryn turned back to Nicole who was still wearing her wet clothes, her hair still dripping, and started rubbing Nicole’s back. Stella walked into the room and saw the two on the floor and panicked.

“What’s going on?”

“Get my phone, she was raped!” Kathryn said pointing towards the door. Stella walked into their office, peaked out of the window looking for the car and carried the phone back to Kathryn.

“Where is mom’s car?” Stella asked handing the phone to Kathryn.

“What?”

“Where is your moms’ car?” Stella asked again.

“Don’t worry about that right now. We can find it later,” Kathryn said and dialed the police. They instructed her to meet them at the CARE unit again. This time there was evidence of some brutality, it was all collected, and the same woman handed Kathryn the same paperwork, explaining the therapy again. Not hearing anything yet from the first time, Kathryn asked a few more questions making sure that this case would progress, and the person would be caught. The woman suggested that Nicole continue therapy and gave Kathryn another list of names that they could choose from. Driving Stella’s car after the meeting with the CARE unit, “Now that you are calmer, where is my car?”

“It’s parked at the Walgreens up the hill,” Nicole said holding her head down hiding behind her hair. Kathryn drove them both home, told Nicole to take a bath to relax, gave her some Tylenol and hugged her.

“I am so sorry this happened to you again, baby girl,” Kathryn said still holding Nicole. “I guess as a parent I do have to ask, were you using?”

“No mom,” Nicole said pulling out of the hug pushing Kathryn further back. She turned walked into her room and closed the door. Kathryn found James in bed sleeping, and Stella in bed watching tv.

“How did it go?” Stella said pulling the covers back for Kathryn to join her. Taking off her clothes Kathryn climbed under the covers and relaxed briefly before telling Stella what the woman found. “It appears that a foreign object was used this time. She had some tearing but nothing that needed stitches. They found mud on her clothes but since she was out in the rain, they aren’t sure if they will find anything useful off of them. I told her to take a bath and try to relax but then I pushed too far and asked if she was using, so she got mad at me. Oh yea, my car is parked at Walgreens up the hill. At least it’s safe for now, we need to go get it tomorrow,” Kathryn said snuggling further into the covers, repositioning her pillow.

“Poor kid, does she know who it was?” Stella said looking down at Kathryn.

“No, she can’t remember where it happened either. The only thing she remembers really is that they kept her in a shed and brought her Kool aid to drink. It was probably laced with something, dirty fuckers,” Kathryn said sitting up in bed, moving her pillow behind her.

“For reals? That’s awful. What kind of perve thinks that a teenage girl is appealing? That’s sick! What can we do for her?”

“I’m not sure, just be there for her, I guess. Cut her some slack, baby her. I don’t know, definitely taking her to therapy. I wish I knew,” Kathryn added.

The next morning, Kathryn got up from bed, took a shower and planned to spend the whole day with Nicole. She fixed James breakfast, gave him a ride to school and picked up donuts on the way home. Stella was in the office preparing for work when Kathryn came in holding the pink box. She pushed herself away from her desk and followed Kathryn into the dining room where she placed the box of donuts.

“Nicole?” Kathryn said knocking lightly on Nicole’s door. Nicole answered with a moan and rolled back over covering her head with her blankets. “I brought donuts,” Nicole waved a hand at Kathryn letting her know that Nicole was not ready to get up, let alone see anyone. Kathryn shut the door behind her and took her seat at the table opening the box. She picked out her favorite Boston Cream, grabbed a napkin and began to eat. Stella isn’t a fan of donuts, so she walked into the kitchen and started making scrambled eggs with sausage. After breakfast, Stella drove Kathryn up the hill to pick up her car before work. Kathryn leaned over and kissed Stella before exiting her car to get into her own. Kathryn turned up the music and drove home to hand out with Nicole.

Once home Kathryn knocked on Nicole’s door again, except this time she didn’t get any response. She cracked the door open to see Nicole still asleep, so she went into her office to work on her classes. She called the number on the card that the officer had given her to let them know Nicole had returned home.

A few hours later Nicole came out of her room barefooted, rubbing her eyes. “Hi mom,” Nicole said from the office doorway.

“Morning, well afternoon. How are you feeling today?” Kathryn said softly, hitting the save button her computer she closed her screen and pushed away from her desk.

“I’m alright, did you say donuts earlier?” Nicole asked looking around the room. Kathryn stood from her chair and pointed to the pink box on the kitchen table.

“Help yourself,” Kathryn said grabbing a napkin for Nicole.

“MMM these are my favorite,” Nicole said holding up a Boston Cream donut.

“Mine too, that’s why I get more of that one then the others,” Kathryn added, pulling her own donut out of the box. Kathryn and Nicole spent the day together watching movies, baking cookies, and relaxing. Nicole never mentioned what happened the last few days and Kathryn was afraid to ask so they focused their conversation on other things.



Sitting at the dining table waiting to have dinner James said, “Where is she? She’s always late for everything”

“I don’t know, I told her we needed to talk and to be home by six,” Kathryn said taking her seat at the table.

“This smells amazing, honey,” Stella said placing her plate on the table and taking her own seat.

“I bet it taste good too,” James said sarcastically.

“I promise, we can eat as soon as your sister gets here,” Kathryn reminds him.

“She’s always late, mom. Can’t we just eat and then when she gets here, she can eat?” James replied pushing around his mashed potatoes on his plate.

“No, your mom already said we need to have a family discussion, so we need to wait for Nicole to get home,” Stella responded.

“It’s already three minutes past six, can we eat now?” James asked impatiently.

“Would you want us to wait for you if you were on your way home?” Kathryn asked taking a sip of her wine.

“Yea, I guess so,” James said scooping his potatoes up on his fork and then letting them plop back down on his plate.

“So, tell me what you did in school today?” Stella asked trying to distract him.

“Same thing as every other day, went to class, went to another class, went to practice, came home, did homework, practiced outside, played with the dogs, took a shower, and now I’m waiting forever to eat dinner,” James added rolling his eyes.

“I know you’re hungry just give her a few more minutes,” Kathryn suggested, looking at her watch.

“I just don’t understand why we are always waiting for Nicole, she’s never home and when she is, she’s ignoring all of us,” James said his frustration showing more and more with every crease of his eyebrows.

“Because she is your sister, and we would do the same for you,” Kathryn reminded.

“What is so important that we need to discuss? Can’t we talk about it and then again when she gets here?” James said staring at Stella.

“We just need to have a family discussion, so we will wait for Nicole as long as it takes,” Stella responded.

“Fine!” James said crossing his arms across his chest, sitting further back in his chair.

“Calm down James, you’re being rude and impatient,” Kathryn warned taking another sip of her wine.

“I’m sorry I just have the hangries.”

“It’s okay, but as a family we need to be able to have patience with each other,” Stella said sternly, patting Kathryn on the knee nodding her head towards James, asking if James could just eat.

“Go ahead. Eat your dinner,” Kathryn suggested finishing off the last of her wine in the glass. She stood from her seat and walked into the kitchen to refill her glass. After dinner was cleaned up James gave Stella and Kathryn hugs before bed.

“Do you think she’ll come home tonight?” Kathryn asked Stella still sitting at the dining room table.

“I don’t know honey, I hope so.”

“I guess we will just have to wait and see then,” Stella said putting a hand on Kathryn’s thigh rubbing softly back and forth. After another glass of wine Kathryn yawned and rubbed her eyes. Getting up from the table they both walked into the living room and sat down. Stella turned on the TV and found something for them to watch.

“Where have you been?” Kathryn said as Nicole came walking through the front door a few hours later. “It’s been four hours since you were supposed to be home.”

“Oh mom, calm down. You’re so high strung. Relax. You need a massage. Here turn around I will rub your shoulders. And pull that stick out of your butt,” Nicole said laughing at her own jokes.

“You’ve had us worried about you all night. Where have you been?” Stella said as Nicole tried turning Kathryn around.

“Stop. Are you high?” Kathryn said pushing Nicole’s hands away and turning back around to face her.

“What is high? What is not high? What is normal? What is not normal,” Nicole said turning in circles in the hallway and letting her head flop to one side.

“You are high. What did you take? What are you on?” Kathryn asked putting both hands on Nicole’s arms trying to hold her still.

“I’m on life. I took a big dose of life and I’m in love,” Nicole said pushing past Kathryn and Stella, making her way towards her room. She turned and fell backwards onto her bed letting her weight bounce.

“What are we gonna do?” Stella asked Kathryn still standing in the hallway.

“I don’t know honey,” Kathryn said following Nicole into her bedroom.

“Why so sad, guys?” Nicole asked. “It’s happy hour, let’s go get a drink. Ooh I know, let’s have some of this,” Nicole said reaching into her pocket and pulling out a little bag with white powder.

“What the hell is that?” Stella asked grabbing the baggie out of Nicole’s hand. Turning it over and over in her hand Stella suggested, “I think it’s meth or cocaine. I’m not sure.”

“Hey, that’s mine! Give it back!” Nicole yelled standing up and reaching for the bag.

“Sit down Nicole!” Kathryn said pushing back on Nicole’s arm making her sit back down on the bed. Nicole raked her nails across Kathryn’s arm causing small cuts to open up. Kathryn winced and jumped back holding her arm.

“What is wrong with you?” Kathryn asked looking down at her arm. The cuts were not deep but little red spots started to pool in the creases.

“Give it back!” Nicole said standing again pushing Kathryn back a few steps.

“Sit down baby please, let us help you,” Kathryn said putting a hand on Nicole’s shoulder. Pushing off her hand Nicole reached into her pocket and pulled out a pocket knife. After struggling to open it she pointed it at Stella and Kathryn demanding they give the baggie back to her.

“What the fuck! It’s mine! Give it back!” Nicole yelled swinging the knife in the air.

“Quit! Nicole! We are not giving this back to you!” Stella yelled back.

“You can’t take my shit! That’s mine! Give it back or else!” Nicole demanded swinging her knife towards Stella.

“Are you serious? You would really hurt me? After all I have done for you?” Stella shouted taking a step back.

“What are you doing?” Kathryn yelled getting in between Nicole and Stella. “We are trying to help you,” Kathryn continued, reaching towards Nicole.

“Get away from me! Give me my shit!” Nicole screamed louder taking another swipe through the air. Kathryn jumped back but not before she caught the knife in her forearm creating a deep cut down her arm. Blood began to drip right away leaving a pool at Kathryn and Nicole’s feet.

“Just give it back to her before she kills one of us,” Kathryn said backing away and holding her arm dripping blood across the floor. Stella handed the baggie back to Nicole who snatched it out of her hands. Nicole pushed past Stella and ran out the front door.

“Nicole! Get back here!” Kathryn called out still holding her arm. Stella took a few steps closer to Kathryn pulling her away from her body to see how deep the cut was.

“You need stitches.”

“No, we need to follow Nicole. Come on,” Kathryn said pushing past Stella and out the front door. Nicole was nowhere to be seen. “Quick, she must be walking so she couldn’t have made it that far,” Kathryn continued.

“Honey, stop. Look,” Stella said pointing to the blood trail that Kathryn had made through the house following after Nicole. “We need to take you to get stitches.”

“Fine, let me call my mom to stay with James. And then we can go get it stitched,” Kathryn said walking back into the house grabbing her phone off of the bar. She called her mom briefly explained and then let Stella drive her to the ER.

“How did this happen?” the doctor asked cleaning up the cut with gauze.

“Um, well...” Kathryn shuddered.

“Our daughter is a drug addict and came home high I took her baggie away from her and she pulled a knife,” Stella said watching Kathryn sitting on the gurney.

“I see, okay well let’s see how bad this is,” the doctor said pulling the gauze away from the cut. Blood began to drip on the floor in front of him and he quickly replaced the gauze. “Hold this here tightly, please.”

“It wasn’t as bad as she made it out to be. Nicole didn’t want to hurt us I just got in the way,” Kathryn said quietly looking down at the red spots on the floor.

“Well, it needs stitches so let me grab my nurse and have her prep the area,” the doctor said pushing his little stool away from Kathryn. Kathryn looked up at Stella with a creased brow and shook her head as the doctor left the little room.

“I’m sorry honey, but I needed to tell him the truth,” Stella said meeting Kathryn’s look. A moment later a police officer in a blue uniform knocked on the open door introducing himself as officer Jacobs as he entered the room.

“I was informed from the doctor that you might have been assaulted. I’m gonna need to ask you a few questions about what happened,” Office Jacobs said pulling out a notepad from his pocket.

“I don’t want to press charges,” Kathryn said staring at the officer who pulled a chair from the corner and sat down in front of her.

“I understand that but, in some instances, it is not up to the injured party whether charges are filed or not.”

“I’m not sure you understand officer...um Jacobs,” Stella said sitting next to Kathryn on the small bed.

“Yea, this was an accident. Nothing to worry about, a few stitches and I will be fine,” Kathryn continued.

“May I speak to you alone?” Officer Jacobs asked Kathryn tilting his head towards the door for Stella to step out.

“Um...I guess so. Honey can you get me some water from the machine in the lobby?”

Kathryn asked giving Stella a reason to leave the room.

“Of course, love,” Stella replied kissing Kathryn on the forehead before leaving the room.

“I need to ask you a few personal questions. Is that okay with you?” Officer Jacobs asked turning the page on his notepad. Kathryn shifted on the bed waiting for the questions.

“Sure,” Kathryn said looking down at the floor.

“Okay, now the doctor gave me a little information, but I just need to clarify some of it. He said that this was your daughter. Is that correct?” the officer asked looking down at his notebook.

“Yea, but you don’t understand. It was my fault, really. She didn’t mean to hurt me,” Kathryn continued.

“Can you explain that to me, please.”

“You see she has a problem with um...she has a problem and when she came home earlier, we made her mad by taking her um...taking something from her and she overreacted. That’s all,” Kathryn said. A nurse in green scrubs walked into the room pulling a metal tray closer to Kathryn.

“Oh, excuse me. I can come back. Just push the button when you’re finished,” the nurse said quickly walking back out of the room.

“So, you’re saying that your daughter has a problem of some kind, you took something of hers and she overreacted? By stabbing you in the arm. Is that correct?”

“I told you everything. It was an accident. I’m fine really,” Kathryn added trying to defuse the situation.

“Our daughter is a drug addict. She came home with drugs on her and I took them away from her, and she tried to attack me, and Kathryn stepped in front of her and got hurt instead,” Stella said standing in the doorway holding a bottle of water.

“Thank you, and your name and relation?” Officer Jacobs said turning in his seat to see Stella better. Stella gave him her information and handed the bottle of water to Kathryn. “Can you explain what kind of drugs you took from her, and do you still have them?” Officer Jacobs asked still turned in his seat.

“It was a small baggie of white powder, but not like anything I’ve seen before. Unfortunately, we had to give it back to her after she hurt Kathryn even worse,” Stella added putting an arm around Kathryn on the bed.

“I see, so she has the drugs on her person. As well as a weapon?”

“No, I mean well yes, but she’s not dangerous,” Stella continued.

“She just means that we shouldn’t have taken her stuff and she wouldn’t have gotten so angry. It was our fault,” Kathryn said patting Stella on the knee.

“Thank you for this information. I need to step out for a moment, but I will be back. Go ahead and push the button to call the nurse back in,” Officer Jacobs said standing from his chair and walking out of the room, speaking into his walkie talkie.

“Why did you tell him all of that?” Kathryn asked turning to look at Stella in the eyes.

“Honey, we had to tell him the truth. We can’t hide this from them. You got hurt and it could’ve been so much worse. She needs help,” Stella responded calmly.

“I know she needs help, but we have to be the ones to do it,” Kathryn replied and pushed the button to call the nurse. The same nurse in green scrubs walked into the room asking if Kathryn was ready. She took a syringe off of the metal tray and began to put shots strategically numbing the skin around the wound.

“I’m gonna put a few of these around the wound and then call the doctor to do the stitches.”

“I can’t feel it, just do the stitches please. I need to go home,” Kathryn said watching the needle enter her skin.

“Are you sure?” the nurse asked. She put the syringe down on the metal tray, took a few steps out of the room and called the doctor who was standing at the nurse’s station. He turned at the call of his name and walked into the room.

“So, you’re ready for stitches?” Turning to the nurse he asked, “did you numb the area? I see the full syringe here, what happened?”

“I don’t feel it, like I said before. I just need this finished so I can go home,” Kathryn said again getting more and more impatient. Stella rubbed her back trying to calm her down.

“There could be some nerve damage here. I’ll go ahead and stitch it up but I’m gonna give you a referral to a neurologist to check for damage. They will do what’s called an electromyogram which will determine whether there is damage to these nerves or not.”

“I’m sure it will be fine, really,” Kathryn said looking at the bleeding wound in her arm.

“May I see the other side please?” the doctor asked Kathryn turning her arm over and inspecting the scratches. “It looks like there is something in there, nurse irrigate the wound please.” The nurse picked up a large syringe without a needle and squirted clear fluid onto the scratches cleaning them. “Hand me the forceps please,” using a large pair of tweezers, the doctor pulled something out of the wound which began to bleed. “It looks like a fingernail, I thought you said it was a knife that caused the wound?” the doctor said holding up the fingernail with the tweezers.

“It was but she may have scratched me before using the knife,” Kathryn stuttered. The doctor put the tweezers down on the tray and put in a small stitch in the scratch.

“It’s a good thing we got that out, it would have become infected and caused a much more serious wound,” the doctor said looking up at the nurse. As they were finishing officer Jacobs re-entered the room and handed Kathryn a card.

“I wanted to give this to you before you left. It is my card with the case number on it,” Officer Jacobs said handing her the card.

“Wait, why does it need a case number?” Kathryn asked looking at the card.

“Yea, we already said it was accident and we aren’t pressing charges,” Stella added turning to look at the officer.

“I know and I apologize, but with the information you provided, we have determined that your daughter is armed and dangerous as well as being under the influence of drugs. We have other officers out looking for her now. Do you know where she might be?”

“But that’s not what I wanted,” Kathryn interrupted scooting off of the bed. The nurse was still trying to bandage her wounds while she was trying to leave.

“I need you to be still ma’am so I can finish with the bandages, without them the wounds will be exposed and will get infected,” the nurse said pulling on Kathryn’s arm slightly.

“What will happen if you find her?” Stella asked the officer.

“She will be arrested and taken to the jail. Once there they will determine what drugs she is on and how to handle the situation. Because there is drugs, she will be put in solitary isolation until that determination is made,” Officer Jacobs said standing in the doorway of the room.

“You can’t take her to jail! She needs help, not jail! She is not a criminal,” Kathryn yelled pulling her arm away from the nurse and standing to leave.

“Honey, please let them finish with your arm. Maybe this is the only way Nicole will learn. Maybe this will help her,” Stella added with a hand still on her back.

“We have to save her from them,” Kathryn said as she began to cry falling to the floor. “I failed her,” Kathryn cried sitting on the blood-stained floor.

“Nurse help me get her back on the bed,” the doctor said leaning down to pick Kathryn up off of the floor.

“I failed her,” Kathryn whispered before losing consciousness.



A month later, Kathryn had a follow up appointment with her doctor to get the results of all the test they had done. She was suffering from depression, anxiety and panic attacks that were so bad she hyperventilated and passed out. Because of this her doctor put her on several different medications to help her. During the past month Stella had noticed a decline in Kathryn's health and in her desire to be a part of anything. Kathryn kept herself closed off from the rest of the family and spent a lot of time in bed. Stella convinced her that she needed to be seen by their doctor especially after the hospital incident.

Nicole returned home a few days after Kathryn left the hospital and no charges were ever charged against her. Kathryn was happy to have Nicole home, but she couldn't break the feeling that things were not as good as they seemed. Stella and Kathryn tried to get Nicole back into rehab but unfortunately, they didn't have any available room for her. Instead, they continued to monitor her closely and made sure she went to therapy three days a week. After a few weeks of good behavior Kathryn and Stella decided to give Nicole back her truck as a show of trust between them.

"Can I go camping with some friends this weekend?" Nicole asked Kathryn who was sitting at her desk typing. Kathryn swung her chair around to face Nicole and crossed her hands in her lap.

"I will have to discuss this with Stella before I give you an answer," Kathryn said standing up from her seat and walked past Nicole who followed after her. Stella was sitting on

the back patio watching the dogs and looked up when the back door opened. She smiled when she saw that it was Kathryn walking towards her. “Hey babe. Nicole wants to know if she can go camping for the weekend with some friends. What do you think, she’s been doing really well these last few weeks? It might be a nice gesture and show her that we are starting to trust her again,” Kathryn said placing a hand on Stella’s shoulder, standing over her.

“Well, what are your thoughts about it?” Stella asked putting her hand on top of Kathryn’s rubbing gently.

“I’m worried, but I think that’s expected. But at the same time, she’s been doing really well so I kinda want to let her.”

“Well, then let’s let her go this time. It might be good for her to get out of the house for a bit,” Stella responded. Kathryn nodded her head and gave Stella’s shoulder a squeeze before turning around and walking back inside. Nicole was standing just inside the door, shifting from leg to leg waiting for an answer.

“Well?” Nicole asked as soon as Kathryn opened the door. Kathryn gave her a smile and nodded her head yes. Nicole jumped up and down then swung her arms around Kathryn’s neck and squeezed her in a tight hug. Kathryn flinched when Nicole came towards her and then relaxed into the hug putting her arms around Nicole and hugging her back. Stella poked her head inside the door and grabbed the shed key hanging on the wall next to the backdoor. Opening up the shed the smell of dust is almost suffocating. Stella moved stuff around until she found a sleeping bag, a small lamp, and a single person tent. She carried them to the patio table and started cleaning them off for Nicole to use on her trip. After the dust was cleared away Stella carried it all into the house and put it next to the front door.

“Thank you so much!” Nicole said noticing the pile of stuff Stella had brought out for her.

“You’re welcome kiddo. I want you to have fun this weekend,” Stella said from the entryway. Nicole stood in the doorway watching Stella put things down for her. Kathryn had gone back to the office and continued to type. From the entryway in the house, you can hear the continuous click of the keys as Kathryn’s fingers flew over the keyboard.

“She’s been working a lot lately,” Nicole said turning towards the office.

“Yea, I know. She’s just trying to stay busy,” Stella responded moving closer to Nicole putting an arm across her shoulders. “Let’s get some ice cream,” Stella said ushering Nicole towards the kitchen. “James, we are gonna have ice cream, do you want some?” James came running into the kitchen from his room and slid across the floor on his socks.

“Heck yea! Will you make mine like mom does it?” James asked Stella looking at her with up turned eyes begging.

“With the peanut butter and chocolate syrup?” Stella asked pulling the vanilla ice cream tub out of the freezer. Nicole pulled three bowls down from the cabinet and put them on the counter next to Stella. James scooted in front of Stella, opened the drawer, and pulled out spoons. “I think that can be managed, Nicole do you want the same thing?”

“No thank you, I think that’s weird,” Nicole responded wrinkling her nose.

“It’s the best! It taste like a Reese’s peanut butter cup,” James argued sticking Nicole with an elbow. Stella gave him a stern look and continued to dish up the ice cream. “Do you think mom wants some too?”

“Why don’t you go ask her kiddo?” Stella said struggling to scoop the ice cream out of the tub.

“MOM! You want ice cream?” James hollered from the kitchen.

“I could have done that!” Stella scolded. “That’s why I said go ask her, not yell it at her.”

“Yea butt face,” Nicole added taking her plain vanilla ice cream to the table.

“Cut it out, you guys,” Kathryn said turning the corner into the kitchen. “I don’t want any but thank you for asking me. I will sit with you while you eat yours though,” Kathryn continued and took her seat at the table. “Nicole, tell me a little more about this camping trip. Like, where will you be and who exactly are you going with.”

“We are gonna go to the lake and it’s gonna be me, Crystal, Jasmine, and Patricia. We are gonna take my truck and sleep on the beach.”

“Okay, so how old are these girls you’re going with? And what do you plan to do for food?” Kathryn added, watching Nicole sitting across the table.

“Well, Crystal is in charge of food, Jasmine is in charge of fire wood and Patricia is in charge of gas. All of us have our own tent and sleeping bags,” Nicole responded confidently sitting a little taller in her seat.

“Impressive, I’m glad to see you guys have this all planned out. Well done,” Stella said putting a bite of chocolate covered ice cream in her mouth dripping chocolate on her chin. Kathryn smiled picked up a napkin and wiped away the trail of chocolate syrup off of Stella’s chin. Taking the napkin Stella said, “thank you honey.”

“When do you plan on leaving?” Kathryn asked turning back towards Nicole and James.

“I wanna go camping,” James added dribbling ice cream across the table.

“Not this time, this is a girl’s weekend.” Nicole said watching the mess James was making with his ice cream. “Clean up your mess,” James rolled his eyes at her and put another bite in his mouth. “Don’t be gross,” Nicole continued. “We are gonna leave in about an hour if that’s okay?”

“That sounds like a good plan,” Kathryn said putting her hands together on top of the table. She shifted a little in her seat and watched James and Nicole eat their ice cream. It was nice to see them together smiling. Pushing her bowl away Stella stretched her arm out taking Kathryn’s hand in hers. Kathryn looked over at her and smiled holding her hand a little tighter.

An hour later Nicole loaded her truck and said goodbye. “Please be careful and call if you need anything,” Kathryn said hugging Nicole tightly.

“Have fun kiddo,” Stella added taking her turn getting a hug. “Don’t forget, Sunday by six.”

“I’ll be here and on time. Thank you guys so much. This means a lot to me. I will not let you down,” Nicole said pulling the door behind her and walked to her truck. Kathryn and Stella stood in the doorway arm in arm and watched as Nicole pulled away from the curb.

“Are you sure this was a good idea?” Kathryn asked snuggling into Stella more closely.

“She’ll be fine,” Stella added squeezing Kathryn tighter. Releasing the hug Kathryn walked back into the dining room and sat down across from James again. His mess was cleaned up and he was scooping the last bit of ice cream out of his bowl.

“What are we gonna do this weekend? Now that Nicole is off having fun, we should do something fun too. What do you think?” Kathryn asked James with raised eye brows and a smile.

“We should play video games and go out to eat,” James responded putting his spoon down inside his bowl. Kathryn smiled looked at Stella and nodded her head.

“Where do you want to go?” Stella asked sitting down next to Kathryn at the table.

“Subway. It’s my favorite. Oh, and can we play Halo?” James suggested pushing his chair away from the table. He picked up his bowl and carried it to the sink, rinsed it and put it in the dishwasher.

“I think we can do that,” Kathryn added pushing herself away from the table and walked into the living room. “You guys play, and I will watch for a while,” Kathryn continued sitting down in her recliner, pulling the lever, and opening up the foot stool. She pushed her chair back and laid-back relaxing into the soft leather.

“But I want us all to play,” James added handing a controller to Kathryn.

“I don’t think we can, kiddo. But we can take turns, how about you and mom play for a bit and then you and I can play after,” Stella suggested watching James’ face turn from sad or disappointed to happy again. He smiled showing teeth and plopped down on the sofa with his own controller.

They each took their turns playing with James and after dinner he went to build more Lego’s in his room. Kathryn and Stella relaxed with the dogs in the living room and watched TV until bedtime.

Sunday evening, Kathryn watched the clock as she cooked dinner moving around the kitchen like a dance with an old friend. Everything was where it was supposed to be, and Kathryn made cooking look easy. Stella helped and they both had a rhythm that anyone could see that they are familiar with not only the kitchen but with each other. Putting a pile of plates on the counter Kathryn took a deep breath as she looked at the utensil clock on the kitchen wall. “It will be okay, she’ll be here,” Stella said hearing the release of air from Kathryn.

“I know, I’m just worried. She texted yesterday saying that they were having fun, but she hasn’t texted at all today,” Kathryn added looking up at Stella.

“Have you texted her?” Stella asked stirring the sauce in the pot.

“No, I didn’t want to bug her,” Kathryn said with a shy grin pulling out her phone and opening it up to her text messages. She clicked a few keys and hit the send button.

“You texting your daughter is never a problem.”

“I know, I guess that was silly of me,” Kathryn responded still holding her phone waiting for a response. Stella drained the noodles and poured them into the sauce mixing them around.

“James, dinner is ready. Please, wash your hands,” Stella called out. James bounded across the hall and washed his hands in his bathroom. He picked up the plates off of the counter and took them to the table. Stella scooped the spaghetti into a serving bowl and carried it to the table and put it down in the middle. Handing his plate over to Stella she put a big pile of spaghetti on his plate. Kathryn walked into the dining room carrying a basket that had garlic French bread in it and put it next to the spaghetti on the table. James pulled the towel away and grabbed two pieces of bread and put them on his plate.

Kathryn's phone chimed with a text message, she pulled her phone out of her pocket and checked the message. It was from Nicole saying that she was fine and would be home on time. Kathryn sent a smiling emoji back to her and put her phone down on the table. After dinner James did the dishes while Kathryn and Stella sat watching TV in the living room. The closer to six it got however Kathryn began to get worried about Nicole. James went back to his room and watched TV in there while Kathryn continued to stare at her watch in the living room.

"She said she would be on time, honey. I think you can stop worrying," Stella said taking Kathryn's hand and holding it in between the two recliners.

"I know, I just can't stop worrying. I know what she said in the text but until she comes through the front door, I am gonna worry," Kathryn responded. Fifteen minutes before six Kathryn's phone began to ring. She stood from her chair and walked back into the dining room where she had left it on the table. She checked to see who it was from before answering.

"Hi babe, what's up? Are you almost home?" Kathryn said into the phone. On the other end of the line was Nicole who seemed upset. "What's wrong?" Kathryn asked.

"Okay, so don't get mad. We were in a car accident; we are all fine just a little bruised up. But I need gas money to get home."

"What do you mean, car accident? Are you sure you're all okay? Can you drive your truck? How bad is it? Where are you? Do you need us to come get you?" Kathryn asked without taking a breath.

"That's where the don't get mad part comes in. We are in Española. We got hit from the side and my door doesn't close all the way. I just need some money so we can get gas and then come home."

“What the hell are you doing in Española? That’s a five-hour drive Nicole! That is not the lake. If your truck door doesn’t close how do you intend to drive it home on the highway?”

Kathryn said raising her voice. Stella heard Kathryn say Española and walked into the dining room quickly to find out what was going on.

“It’s fine we can use duct tape to keep it closed, I just need money for gas,” Nicole pled.

“We will come get you, find a place in a parking lot with a lot of lights like a Walmart or something till we get there,” Kathryn demanded. “Do not talk to anyone, do not go anywhere else and try to stay out of trouble. We will be there as soon as we can.”

“How are we gonna get her truck home?” Stella asked watching Kathryn hang up her phone and put it down on the table.

“We’re gonna have to call my dad and see if he can pull the trailer up there for us. Let me call him and see what he says,” Kathryn said picking up her phone off of the table. She dialed his number and explained the situation and he agreed to take them to pick up Nicole and her truck.

Leaving town at seven put them in Española around midnight, they found Nicole with three friends parked in a Walmart parking lot. It was not the same friends Nicole had said she was going with, however. Gaby, Espy, and Jose were waiting whispering between themselves.

“Are you high?” Kathryn asked taking a closer look at Nicole’s eyes. She laughed and turned her head away denying that she was on anything. “You’re high, you all are. What did you take?” Kathryn demanded but none of the kids would speak up. With a red face Kathryn told them to get into her dad’s truck and wait until they loaded Nicole’s truck on the trailer. The five-hour trip home was quiet, the kids were too afraid to say anything and Kathryn, Stella and Kathryn’s dad were too angry to say anything.

Shifting in her seat Stella turned around to face Nicole who was glancing back and forth between her friends giggling. “What is so funny?”

“Nothing, I mean it’s just that you guys are all so mad. You should see your faces they are so red. You can almost see the smoke coming out of your ears,” Nicole replied with another laugh. Kathryn snapped her head around so fast that Nicole winced and sat back in her seat.

“This is not funny! This is horrible, do you realize you could have all died! You shouldn’t have even tried to drive that truck after the accident, pieces are falling off of it. What the hell were you thinking, ‘send me gas money’ are you serious?” Kathryn was about to say something else when she noticed Nicole smirk and almost went over the seat to smack it off of her face. Stella caught Kathryn before she could swing a hand in Nicole’s direction.

“You guys are lucky, when I was your age if I did anything like this my mom would have blistered my butt,” Joe lectured while driving and looking in the rearview mirror. “You’re lucky I don’t pull over and let your mom whoop your ass,” He continued.

“Me too,” Stella chimed in. “I cannot believe you did this, why would you even come here?”

“So, I met this guy in rehab and really liked him so we thought we would come up here to visit him. Turns out though his family is crazy,” Nicole said nonchalantly.

“You met a guy in rehab, and you thought it would be a good idea to lie to us and drive five-hours away to visit him? You must be on drugs because I cannot believe you are this stupid,” Kathryn said turning in her seat to see Nicole’s face again. She was looking out the window using her hair like a curtain to hide her embarrassment from her friends. “What about you guys, do your parents know where you are or what you’ve been doing?”

“My mom knows that I’m with Nicole for the weekend,” Espy replied quietly from the darkened back seat. The boy sitting next to her nodded his head but didn’t look up from his lap. Espy put her hand on his thigh and rubbed gently, he took her hand and interlocked fingers and held hands the rest of the ride home.

“When we get to my house you guys will have to call your parents for a ride home,” Joe insisted setting the cruise control.

“No, they will need to call their parents before we get there and have them meet us because I am not waiting around for their parents before we go home,” Kathryn added looking over at her dad driving.

“I’m gonna have to air out my truck tomorrow, these kids stink like weed and booze.” Joe said looking in the rearview mirror again.

“I’m sorry dad but thank you so much for helping us get Nicole and her truck home,” Kathryn said quietly.

About a half hour before they got to town Kathryn had the kids call their parents to have them meet at the house. “What about Gaby? She doesn’t have her car I picked her up,” Nicole said from the backseat.

“She will need to figure that out, I am not giving her a ride after this,” Kathryn responded sternly.

“It’s fine, I can have my boyfriend come pick me up.” Gaby responded from the backseat.

“Please make sure they are there when we arrive, I do not want to have to wait. I am tired, hungry, and pissed off,” Kathryn replied.

When they arrived at Kathryn’s parents’ house there were several cars running with smoke billowing out of the exhaust pipes. Joe parked the truck with the trailer, and everyone got out. As Stella and Kathryn got out of the truck one of the parents walked toward them to find out what happened. Kathryn explained what the kids told her happened and she told them about the kids being high on something. Each parent gathered their child and left in a slow line down the road. Gaby was still waiting for her boyfriend, so her and Nicole waited outside while Kathryn, Stella, and Joe went into the house. “Thank you, dad. I really appreciate it. I don’t know what we are gonna do about Nicole. I guess we will have to send her back to rehab again.”

“It’s okay babe, we do what we can for our kids,” Joe responded putting an arm around Kathryn in a side hug.

“What are we gonna do about Nicole’s truck?” Stella asked following behind them into the living room.

“Well, it’s totaled so she won’t be driving it anymore. That’s too bad because she was almost done paying it off,” Joe said taking a seat in his recliner. Kathryn’s mom came out from the hallway yawning. She was wearing pajama’s with little giraffes floating on clouds. She took a seat in her recliner next to Joe’s and leaned back.

“I’m glad you made it back, is everyone okay? James is asleep in the other bedroom.”

“Thank you so much, mom. I think we are gonna leave him here and I’ll come out in the morning to pick him up if that’s okay,” Kathryn said watching her mom walk across the room.

“The truck is totaled but the kids are all fine with no injuries,” Joe responded pushing himself back to recline. Nicole came in from outside letting Kathryn know that Gaby had left, and they could go home. Kathryn hugged both her parents, goodbye and they walked out to the car and drove home. The car ride was quiet the entire way, Nicole because she was scared of the consequences, Kathryn because she was too angry that she was afraid she would say or do something regrettable, and Stella because she tired and cranky.

“When we get home, we are going directly to bed, with no arguments. We will discuss this tomorrow,” Kathryn said sternly looking in the rearview mirror at Nicole. Nicole nodded her head up and down while staring out of the window. When they arrived home, Nicole went straight into her room and closed the door behind her. Kathryn and Stella walked through the house to their bedroom and changed out of their clothes getting ready for bed. “I can’t believe this girl. What the hell was she thinking?” Kathryn said pushing the toothbrush to the side of her mouth.

“I know love. I’m not sure what to do anymore, she is pushing the limits really far. We need to think of James and how all of this will affect him,” Stella said leaning up against the sink watching Kathryn brush her teeth.

“I am so tired of worrying. Hell, I’m just tired in general,” Kathryn responded putting her toothbrush in the cup by her sink. The two walked the short distance and climbed into bed, kissed goodnight, and turned their opposite ways.

The next day Kathryn got up early and went out to pick up James before school. When she got to her parents’ house, he was still sleeping. “Mom, I told you he had school today. Why did you let him sleep? Now he’s gonna be late,” Kathryn said stomping down the hall. She

knocked on the door and heard a small moan, so she opened the door to see James rolling away from the door. “James! Come on get up. You’re gonna be late!” Kathryn picked up James’ t-shirt off of the floor and tossed it on the bed. James sat up in bed and looked around seeing his mom and grandma rushing around the room.

“I’m sorry Kathryn but I thought I would let him skip school today because he obviously needs rest. I also thought that he could hang out here today with me and Poppa so you could talk to Nicole about last night.”

“What happened last night? Is Nicole okay?” James asked pulling his t-shirt over his head.

“Nothing happened, she’s fine. We just had to go pick her up remember, but she’s home now. Come on we’re gonna be late,” Kathryn said picking up a shoe and tossing it at James. She put an arm across her mom’s shoulders and escorted her out of the room and into the room across the hall, closing the door behind them. “Thanks mom,” Kathryn said sarcastically. “We are trying to keep his life as normal as possible. We don’t want him worrying about what his sister is doing, so we don’t tell him.”

“That’s silly, he has to know something is wrong. What did you tell him about her when she went to rehab?”

“We told him that Nicole got caught smoking weed and had to go see a special doctor to help her quit,” Kathryn said quietly.

“Are you kidding me? He is old enough to understand what’s going on Kathryn, and keeping him in the dark isn’t gonna help,” Suzanne scolds crossing her arms in front of herself and leaning back on one leg.

“Well, like I said we are trying to keep his life as simple and normal for as long as we can. What good will it do him to know the truth? It’s not like he can do anything about it so why worry him?” Kathryn responded putting her hands in her pockets and rocking back and forth on her heels.

“I don’t know but lying to him will come back and bite you in the ass later, Kathryn. Just you wait and see,” Kathryn walked over to the door and opened it almost bumping into James who was coming out of the room across the hall.

“Whoa!” James said raising his arms in defense and move sideways down the hall out of the way.

“Sorry babe. You ready?” Kathryn asked following James down the hallway glancing behind her to give her mom a look to keep quiet.

“Yea, let me grab my jacket. Bye Yamma, bye Poppa,” James said hugging them both before walking out the front door.

“Thank you both, so much for helping us out,” Kathryn said giving her mom a kiss on the cheek and pulling her purse strap over her shoulder.

“You’re welcome. Bye bye, now,” Suzanne said closing the door behind them. Kathryn and James got in the car, James turned on his music and they drove to his middle school. Kathryn dropped James off at school and told him to have a great day before returning home to deal with Nicole.

Kathryn parked the car in the driveway took a few deep breaths and walked into the house. It was quiet, not even the dogs were barking. Kathryn walked through the house looking

for Stella and found her in the bathroom. “Hi honey, I’m back. Have you seen Nicole yet? Do you know if she’s awake or not?” Kathryn asked leaning on the door.

“I don’t know. I was working in the office and didn’t see her come out,” Stella said turning on the water to wash her hands. She dried her hands and opened the door making Kathryn fall forward. Stella outstretched her arms and caught Kathryn by the shoulders.

“Oh dear. I’m sorry,” Kathryn said as she stumbled forward. Kathryn smiled and leaned into the hug from Stella. She smelled clean like freshly dried linen and Kathryn took a deep smell before pulling away. “You smell so good.”

“Thank you. So, do you want to skip the day and stay in bed with me or do you want to wake the dragon?” Stella said putting her arms around Kathryn’s waist and pulling her closer.

“Well as appealing as the first offer is and I would love to, but I think we need to talk to Nicole about her options,” Kathryn responded shyly. Stella pouted and kissed Kathryn before letting her go. “I guess I get to wake the dragon then huh?” Stella nodded her head and followed Kathryn to the dining room. Standing outside Nicole’s room Kathryn put a hand on the door knob and took a deep breath before knocking and opening the door.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“I need to report my daughter as a run-away.”

“Okay, we will send an officer out.”

Kathryn hung up the phone and put it on the table. She stared at the wood table and let her eyes glaze over not really seeing anything. Nicole was gone again, and the same fears consumed Kathryn. “Where is she? Who is she with? Is she alive? When will the day come that

she does too much? Why does she need to do drugs? Why won't she talk to me? Will she be able to overcome this? Can't she see what this is doing to our family? Can't she see what this is doing to herself? How much more can we take? Is there anything we could do different? What did we do to make her need drugs? Does she know how much we love her? Does she know that we will never give up on her?" Questions without answers kept running through Kathryn's mind as she stared at the wood grain. Tears welled up in Kathryn's eyes and began to roll down her cheeks.

"Honey, it will be okay. She will come home, or they will find her," Stella said sitting down in the seat next to Kathryn. Stella put a hand on Kathryn's arm and rubbed it softly making the little hairs stand on end. Rubbing her arm and holding Stella's hand Kathryn nodded her head up and down. The doorbell rang and jolted Kathryn out of her seat as she ran for the front door. She opened it excitedly until she saw that it was a female officer ringing the bell.

"Hello, ma'am. I was told that you needed to report your child as a run-away, is that correct?" Kathryn's face fell as she escorted the officer into the house.

"Yes, that's us. Come inside, please." Kathryn said moving out of the way for the officer to enter the house. They went through the usual questions, how old is she? What was she wearing? Who does she hang out with? Etc.... The officer wrote everything down in one of those little pocket notepads that must come standard issue because every officer they had spoken to carry the same kind. After giving the officer the information, she called it into the radio, she wrote the case number on the card and handed it to Kathryn.

"We'll be in touch and if she comes home please call the number on the card and let us know," The woman officer apologized to Kathryn and Stella before leaving. Kathryn closed the front door behind the officer and turned and leaned her back up against it.

“What are we gonna do?” Kathryn cried slumping to the floor. Stella sat down on the floor next to her and let her cry. Kathryn’s phone alarm started going off and getting louder with each time. “Help me up please,” Kathryn said holding her arm out for Stella to take. Stella helped Kathryn off of the floor and walked the short distance to the dining table. She picked up her phone and turned the “Pick up James” alarm off. “Was that only this morning I dropped him off at school?” Kathryn said staring at her phone.

“Yea, I’ll go get him. Why don’t you go lay down and try to rest?” Stella said pulling Kathryn into a tight hug. Kissing Kathryn on the forehead Stella left to pick up James from school. Kathryn walked to the back of the house and entered her bedroom where she laid down on the bed.



Day 3, Nicole was still gone, and no one had seen her or heard from her. Kathryn wondered through the house like a phantom, never really doing anything she would walk into a room, stare at something and then turn around and walk into another room. “Are you okay honey?” Stella would ask her, but Kathryn would either nod her head or say nothing at all. She would say hello and goodbye to James whenever he was in a room but didn’t really speak to anyone. When she wasn’t wandering the house, she was sleeping or crying. Stella explained to James that Kathryn was not feeling well and needed extra rest.

Day 5, Nicole was still gone, and still no one had seen or heard from her. Kathryn went from wandering the house to pacing and she would pace night and day. “Would this be the time she overdosed?” She thought. Stella had tried to help her by making her eat and drink, but even that was a struggle. Kathryn wasn’t even sleeping anymore; she would sit at the dining room table all night watching the front door until James would wake up in the mornings. She would say good morning to him and goodbye when he left for school but wouldn’t speak to anyone directly. “Will the police find her before it’s too late?”

“Honey, you need to eat,” Stella insisted handing her a piece of cut apple. Kathryn shook her head no and push the food away. She laid in bed and cried for hours leaving a wading pool in the bed. Stella would change the sheets on the bed every day and sometimes needed to let the mattress dry out before adding new ones. Stella would help Kathryn walk to the living room and help her into her chair because she had no energy. On several occasions Stella would lay in bed with Kathryn and they both would cry. Stella was getting up every day to make sure James was

fed before school and changed her schedule so she could be home for him every afternoon.

James only asked one time where Nicole was, and Stella explained to him that she was hanging out with some friends for the week because Kathryn was ill.

“Mom, can I lay down with you?” James asked next to Kathryn’s bed.

“Yes, of course baby,” Kathryn replied as she swept away the pile of Kleenex that had been collecting all morning. “I’m sorry I haven’t been helping you lately, I’m just so tired that I can’t get up. I will try to do better, I promise.”

“It’s okay mom, Stella has been helping me. She wakes me up every day for school and makes me eat breakfast even though I eat at school. I get two breakfast a day, it’s awesome,” Looking down and frowning he said, “Is Nicole ever coming home?” Kathryn began to cry again reaching for the tissue box.

“I hope so baby.”

“I’m sorry mom, I didn’t mean to make you cry,” James began to cry as well so Kathryn held him closely and pulled the blankets up to cover them both. Soon they both fell asleep and slept for hours. Stella walked in to remind James that it was time for school but saw both he and Kathryn sleeping and decided James could miss school. While Kathryn’s world was crumbling out from under her Stella worked hard, making phone calls to everyone she thought might know where Nicole might be. She even made a Facebook flyer and asked everyone to share it to get the word out. While Stella was on the phone with her family in Idaho, Kathryn got up, took a shower, and walked into the kitchen leaving James asleep.

As soon as Stella saw Kathryn walking in, she quickly said goodbye to her mom. “Are you okay, honey? Do you need something?” Stella asked.

“I need my daughter home!” Kathryn screamed.

“I know love, I am working really hard to make that happen,” Stella said walking towards Kathryn for a hug.

“No, don’t hug me or I will fall apart again. I need to do something to find her.”

“Okay, well this is what I have been doing for the last week. Look at the Facebook flyer, it has been shared over five hundred times. Together we don’t have five hundred friends on Facebook, so the word is out,” Stella said pointing to her computer. There was picture of Nicole at a family get together with information included like how much she weighed, how tall she was, what color eyes she had etc.

“Thank you,” Kathryn said kissing Stella on the cheek. Kathryn called the rest of the family to let them know that Nicole had been missing for five days already. They all responded with “I’m sorry and let me know if I can do anything,” although Kathryn knew they wouldn’t reach out to them unless they themselves needed something. Kathryn then called James’ dad to let him know but tried to keep him from worrying too much since he was weak from the chemotherapy he was getting for his leukemia that they found earlier that year. He raised Nicole since she was about two years old. He and Kathryn met when Kathryn moved into the small apartment complex after her divorce. They were neighbors then friends and then more.

“Just let me know when she come back, I’ll ask around and see what I can find out.”

“I need you or your mom to keep James for a few days, so we can drive around a post flyers around town,” Kathryn requested.

“That’s fine, I’ll come get him right now,” He responded.

“Okay great, thanks,” Kathryn said before hanging up the phone. She walked to her bedroom and woke James up to tell him his dad was coming for him and he needed to pack a bag. That afternoon Stella, Kathryn, and a couple of Nicole’s aunts on her dad’s side drove around town putting up flyers. Kathryn and Stella drove downtown and started handing out flyers to people in the crowd. They all worked until dark and made plans to do it again the next day. Kathryn called and texted Nicole and still there was no reply.

Day 6, “Hello, may I speak to Kathryn please. This is the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. We were notified by someone on Facebook who saw that you had posted about your missing daughter. We would like to offer our help in finding her,” The woman on the other line said. It was in this moment that Kathryn realized that six nights ago might actually be the last time she saw Nicole alive. Crying Kathryn tried to respond into the phone. No words.

“I appreciate all the help you can give us,” Kathryn gave the woman all of Nicole’s information including what she was last wearing color of her eyes and hair as well as medications, mental stability, and much more. Every detail exposed to a stranger that didn’t know Nicole. To them she was just another poster on the wall, but she was Kathryn’s everything.

“We will put her in our national data base that goes out across the country and to every police department in the U.S. and we will notify you as soon as any information comes available.”

Day 7, the next day Kathryn and Stella visited the local police department to obtain any information. Kathryn spoke to the woman behind the window who insisted that there wasn’t a detective assigned to the case. Baffled, Kathryn demanded to speak to a supervisor. It had

already been seven days and the police weren't even looking for Nicole. Kathryn screamed Nicole's name and the woman hiding behind a small piece of Plexiglas. "Try to calm down honey, they won't help us if we yell at them," Stella said putting her hands-on Kathryn's shoulders. Just then an officer walked into the station, he glanced over at Kathryn before entering a door and coming around to the other side of the glass.

"Hello, I'm Officer Harrison. I overheard you claiming that your daughter is missing. Let me see if I can help you, let me get some information about her," He said pulling out his little notepad. Kathryn gave him all of the same information that she had given to everyone else. He walked out of the little room with the window and walked down a small hallway. Kathryn paced the lobby while Stella sat in one of the chairs. Kathryn noticed a wall with different police badges from all over the state, she read each one but could not tell you where any of them came from.

Officer Harrison walked out of the same door he went in with and told Kathryn and Stella that he was finally able to work with Nicole's cell phone provider to ping her phone to obtain a location. He told Kathryn and Stella to go home and he would meet them there. Kathryn drove straight home and paced the entryway waiting for news. Officer Harrison said he had a location of where Nicole's phone was and hopefully she was there too. "But what if she wasn't with her phone? What if she lost her phone? What if she sold it for more drugs? Or worse what if she overdosed?" Kathryn began to panic, "I can't breathe, what if he can't find her?"

"He will, honey I promise," Stella said with outstretched arms walking towards Kathryn.

"Do not hug me right now I cannot hold still, if I do, I will lose it," Kathryn said holding her hands out.

Two hours later Officer Harrison pulled into the driveway. Kathryn stood at the door to see if Nicole were with him, but the sun was glaring off the windshield and she couldn't tell. Officer Harrison got out and opened the back door letting Nicole out. Kathryn screamed in delight and as soon as Nicole walked through the door, Kathryn grabbed her and hugged her, Stella went around to the other side and hugged them both.

"Mom that hurts can you let this guy take these fucking things off of me?" Nicole demanded.

"You know you have family here that loves you and were very worried about you," Officer Harrison said while removing the handcuffs. At that moment James walked into the house, looked at Nicole the officer, Kathryn and then Stella. He walked past all of them and into his bedroom.

"What happened, why did you bring him home now?" Kathryn asked the kids dad.

"I'm sorry, he said he needed to get something from his room. I didn't know," Stella walked down the hall to console James while Kathryn talked to the officer and the kid's dad.

"James wants to stay home," Stella said returning from James' room.

"Okay, damn I am so sorry, he shouldn't have seen that," To Nicole he said, "I'm glad you are home safe, I love you."

"I love you too dad," Nicole said as he walked to his car. Officer Harrison was still there asking Kathryn questions about whether there was going to be a confrontation between her and Nicole once he left.

“No, I’m glad she’s home,” Kathryn could only stare at Nicole, memorizing every eyelash, every freckle, every hair on her head.

“Take me to jail!” Nicole yelled at him.

“I don’t think you need jail. I think you need help and that is why I brought you home,” He told Stella and Kathryn that Nicole was on something, but she wouldn’t tell him what it was. She also had drugs on her so he could have pressed charges for possession but didn’t think that would help her.

“I think you’re right, Officer Harrison, thank you so much for bringing her home. I am very grateful for your help,” Kathryn said ushering Officer Harrison towards the door, he turned and looked from one of them to the next.

“I’m sorry the other officer didn’t file the complaint correctly on the first day. It should not have taken us this long to locate her. Good luck Nicole,” He said as he walked out of the front door. As soon as the front door closed Kathryn turned around and walked quickly towards Nicole.

“Do you have any idea what we have been through this week? Do you even care about anyone besides yourself? Kathryn yelled, with her face turning red.

“Do you even care about me and what I’ve been through?” Nicole retorted blowing out a deep breath of air. Stella walked in between the two and reminded them to calm down pointing down the hall to James’ room.

“Go pack a bag!” Kathryn yelled. “You’re going back to rehab! I will not let you kill yourself,” Kathryn said walking closer to Nicole. Nicole turned and walked into her room and

tried to close the door, but Kathryn was following too closely behind her. “I’m not leaving you alone for one second.” Stella stood in the doorway and watched as Kathryn helped throw clothes into a backpack. “Will you stay here with James and tell him I will explain when I get back?”

“Of course, love. I love you, kiddo,” Stella said pulling Nicole into a stiff hug. Nicole let her arms drop to her sides and did not hug back. “That’s okay I know you love me,” She said before walking out of the room. Kathryn put a few more pairs of socks into the backpack and ushered Nicole towards the front door when James came running out of his room and into Nicole’s arms. He hugged her so tightly that she could barely catch her breath.

“I love you sister,” James said as tears started running down his cheeks. Nicole hugged him back and promised that she would be better soon.

“Okay guys, it’s time to go,” Kathryn said holding the door open. Nicole gave James a smile, brushed her fingers into his hair and said goodbye. Kathryn gave Stella a kiss and hugged James before walking out of the house.

The drive to the rehab center was quiet as neither Kathryn nor Nicole knew what to say. Once they arrived at the hospital, they waited to be buzzed in through the glass doors and signed in at the front desk. Kathryn sat down in the chair next to Nicole’s and sat quietly together. The same woman they saw the last time took them into the same little room and filled out paperwork. “Are you on anything right now?” She asked Nicole who nodded her head yes. “Okay, then Kathryn I’m gonna need you to take her to the ER so that we can figure out what she’s on. They will not admit her not know what she’s taking.”

“What if she tells you what she’s on?” Kathryn asked.

“We need to medical records; it has to be documented by a physician,” Kathryn agreed and drove across town to the closest ER and got Nicole seen by the on-call doctor. It was a busy night in the ER, so Kathryn and Nicole waited over five hours before they had the results of the bloodwork. Kathryn thanked the doctor and took Nicole back to the rehab facility. Once there, Nicole was admitted into the long-term program that lasted six months. Kathryn thought about it and realized that Nicole would miss Christmas, New Years, and her seventeenth birthday in March.

“What about visitation and phone calls because the last time she was here we didn’t get either one?” Kathryn asked signing more paperwork. Maggie explained that they had specific visitation days and phone calls were up to Nicole since she had to earn phone time. Maggie handed a pamphlet to Kathryn with the visitation schedule as well as a list of things they are allowed to bring during the visits. It also had a list of things that were not allowed during visitation. Kathryn stood and hugged Nicole for a few minutes until Maggie insisted that it was time to go. “I love you, Nicole. Please remember that,” Kathryn said before walking out into the lobby. She watched through the window as Nicole and Maggie walked down a long hallway. Nicole looked back and gave Kathryn a wave with a smile. Kathryn smiled and waved back as tears began to flow down her cheeks. The receptionist handed her a tissue and she wiped away the tears and waited to be buzzed out of the front doors.

The first few nights of Nicole being gone were stressful for Kathryn, because Nicole needed very specific things like, alcohol free shampoo, conditioner, body wash, mouth wash, toothpaste, and deodorant, shoes without laces and a hoodie without the string. Kathryn spent hours at the store searching ingredient labels on everything she picked up. She also purchased several pairs of pajama sets, making sure that they didn’t have any loose strings. After she paid

for everything, she drove up to the rehab facility to drop it all off for Nicole. She held her bags and waited to be buzzed into the building where she had become familiar with the receptionist. Kathryn, Stella, and James went to every visitation available and became champion UNO players.

Some visits were shorter than others depending on how Nicole was feeling. The first couple were short because Nicole was going through withdrawal from the heroin, meth, and other drugs that she was on. She would sweat, sometimes shake and other days she would be sick to her stomach. After two weeks Nicole was finally feeling better and happy that she was in rehab to get clean. However, after about a month or so she really wanted to go home and would cry and beg Kathryn to take her home.

“Please, mom. I’m better. I don’t want to be here anymore,” Nicole said sitting in the cafeteria during their visitation.

“You know I can’t do that baby. You are doing great, and you can do this, I promise. We are so proud of you and how far you’ve come. Just think about what you plan to do when you get out instead of focusing on how much time you have left,” Kathryn said putting an arm across Nicole’s shoulders and holding her while she cried.

Christmas time Kathryn and Stella wrapped all of Nicole’s presents and delivered them to her. She wasn’t allowed to keep any of it with her unless it was a blanket or clothes so when Kathryn and Stella went Christmas shopping, they made sure to get things that Nicole could use, as well as a few thing she could use when she got out. James was excited to give Nicole the present from him, he had asked Stella to take him shopping where he bought her a necklace with two hearts the broke apart and when they were together, they made a complete heart. He wore

one of them and gave the other to Nicole. She smiled when she opened it and gave James a bear hug. That day Nicole got a special visitation to get her presents, so they were the only ones in the cafeteria, and she opened all of her presents with a smile. Leaving her after such a wonderful day was hard on Kathryn, who when she returned home started crying because she wanted to bring Nicole home so badly. Stella wrapped her arms around Kathryn and held her in a hug until she stopped crying.

A few months later and Nicole's birthday was a few days away, she would be turning seventeen in rehab. Kathryn felt bad for Nicole having missed Christmas and now her birthday, but she knew that it was for the best. Nicole had surpassed all of the facilities expectations for recovery and were helping her plan for her future. She made plans to go back to school and get her diploma as well as making plans for college afterwards. Kathryn called the facility and set up a special visitation much like they did for Christmas, but this time Nicole got a few hours off the campus because she had earned the time. Kathryn and Stella planned a picnic in the front of the facility. When they arrived, Nicole was in shock to see her friend Patty, they were best friends for many years before Nicole started using drugs and Kathryn thought it would be good for them to reconnect. They ate sandwiches on the picnic table under a tree in the front grassy area of the building. Kathryn decided that it would be too hard to take Nicole back if they were to leave the facility for a few hours, so they stayed close instead. Saying goodbye was difficult for Nicole and Patty who both cried and hugged one another tightly. Kathryn wrapped her arms around both girls and hugged them and before long James and Stella joined. What started with tears ended with laughs as they were all entangled with one another.



“We have to be there at 2:30 to pick up Nicole. Do you want to go with us?” Kathryn asked James who was eating a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table.

“Yes and no, I want to see her because I miss her a lot, but I don’t because I’m still mad at her for what she did,” James responded letting milk drip down his chin.

“It’s alright to be mad at her baby, we all are in some way. But today is a good day and we need to stay positive.”

“I’m still mad at her too buddy, but I miss her more and she’s finally coming home,” Stella added with a toothy grin.

“Six months in rehab is a long time, hopefully she will be better. I am super excited for her to come home,” Kathryn added handing James a napkin.

“Okay, I’ll go then,” James said wiping his chin. Kathryn continued to check her watch and paced the house until it was time to go.

“It’s time to go, hurry up,” Kathryn said quickly. “I’ve been reminding you both to get ready for an hour and now it’s time.”

“James get your shoes on; mom wants to get there a bit early,” Stella said from the office where she was working. Kathryn was already in the car when James and Stella exited the house ready to go. “Calm down honey. I know you want to get there but rushing is dangerous,” Stella reminded putting a hand on Kathryn’s shoulder.

“I know I’m just excited that she’s finally coming home,” Kathryn said adjusting her seat belt. Traffic was backed up making Kathryn more anxious, but she focused on her driving and made it safely to the facility. They all placed their phones in their hiding spots and walked to the front door, where they were buzzed in.

“Hi, how are you guys today? Are you here to see Nicole?” The receptionist asked.

“No, today is discharge day! We get to take her home today!” Kathryn said excitedly with a big smile.

“Oh, that’s great. Let me call to have her brought up with all of her stuff.”

“Thank you,” Kathryn said pacing in front of the window. Stella and James took a seat in the lobby and waited quietly. “I see her, oh my gosh,” A nurse on the other side of the door unlocked it and let Nicole walk through, as she followed with a stack of paperwork. James ran past Kathryn and plowed into Nicole knocking her back a few steps and holding on tightly in a hug.

“Hi, James I’m glad to see you too. I missed you,” Nicole said smiling down at him. She walked towards Kathryn and Stella who were waiting patiently for James to let go. After a few minutes of James holding on Kathryn decided to just hug both of them and Stella followed in.

“Oh, baby I’m so happy you’re coming home,” Kathryn said hugging everyone tighter.

“Kathryn, I need you to fill out this discharge paperwork, and then she is free to leave,” The nurse said placing the paperwork on the receptionist counter. “Nicole do you want to take your stuff to the car while your mom signs these?”

“I can help,” James said trying to pick up the overflowing trash bag.

“I will help her with the bag, but you can hold the door for us,” Stella said to James as his face was turning red from trying to pick up the bag. Stella took the bag from James and flung it over her shoulder and waited to be buzzed out.

“Okay, sign here, here, here and initial here and then sign down here.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of signing,” Kathryn said picking up the blue pen off of the counter.

“We went over all of this with Nicole this morning, it refers to her discharge care outside of the facility. She will need to see a therapist, and a psychiatrist for her medications,” The nurse pointed out.

“Yea, we have all of that set up already and she will be meeting with them both next week,” Kathryn said signing all of the pointed-out areas.

“Here are a few brochures to look over, she will also need to attend AA and NA meetings. Unfortunately, there are not as many as we need in this town but what is available, she will need to go,” The nurse said handing Kathryn a stack of brightly colored brochures.

“Thank you,” Kathryn said walking towards the exit. Once she was buzzed out Kathryn stopped short of the car and watched as Stella was turned in her seat talking to Nicole, and James was snuggled up against her. Kathryn was so happy to see them all together on the outside of the facility that she began to cry. They were finally going home together, to start over.

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Vita

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