

Mystery was all the world seemed to hold for me when I was eight. There was only one thing in my life that wasn't a mystery: Sullivan Miller would be mine forever and he would never leave me. We lay in the open field at the park of our childhood play. We had been lying silently for a long time enjoying the feeling of the sun on our skin. Eventually I dared to let him help me with one of the mysteries I was struggling with. "Sullivan, what do you think love means?"

He rolled over on his side and looked right at me. "That you would give everything in you to protect the good in someone else."

BILSON

December 24, 2014

A moment is never just that moment. It's the culmination of every moment before that moment. We are broken pieces caught in The Butterfly Effect. There's serenity in knowing that we're never really alone.

Inhale. My lungs filled with air. My chest enlarged like a balloon. Ineffective. All the breathing in the world wouldn't make me happy to go into that house. Exhale. Agony. There's so much hate, but it is not the hate that is agony. Hate is simple. The agony is how much I hate her mixed with how much I love her.

Conflicting emotions resonated through every pore of me as I sat in the driveway of my former home in my new Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon X, the fifth Jeep I have owned since I craved the feeling of my hair blowing freely - the one part of myself I could release without any consequences. I considered getting out of my Jeep and running right into the arms of my mother to release all my love for her, but our relationship is too intertwined with mellifluous bristles. Entering that house wasn't always so conflicting, but Christmas Eve had maligned the Annesleys for twenty-five years. I wasn't eager to see the surprises in store for today. I decided to wait in my Jeep until Jocelyn arrives because with Mom and Jocelyn's constantly enflamed relationship, I don't have to feel guilty that I'm causing the pain on Mom's face. Mom and Jocelyn are like a match to gasoline and have been since the Christmas Eve that I was 6, when they were in the kitchen screaming about life's cruelties that I didn't understand - that I wish I never learned to understand. They were throwing dishes at each other, but always carefully missing each other's pretty faces. Jocelyn was 21; despite not understanding the specifics of what Mom and Jocelyn were yelling at each other, I understood that years of tension had finally met its pressure point. Eventually they ran out of dishes and anger and held each other on the floor professing a million apologies. I guess they tried to mend it for a few years, but by the time I was 10 accepted that wasn't possible.

I didn't get to see Jocelyn at all for three years.

Scorched. The only word to describe the lasting effects of those years. I'm scorched. Jocelyn is scorched, but God blessed her with an exterior made of steel and an interior made of impulse. She doesn't visually seem to drop ashes everywhere she walks like I do. Mom would be scorched too, but God filled Mom's interior with love, only love, her exterior with ethereal beauty then matched her with Pop and Susan to ensure a fortress around his most majestic creation.

I was easy prey during those years for someone to drag me down a rabbit hole then throw dirt and worms on top of me. Instead of killing me, someone drilled a small hole for a straw so that I could keep breathing and reliving every day. So that I could stand inside my own life in a glass enclosure helplessly watching pieces of me being taken away, and even five years ago my Sullivan was taken away too. I would have preferred someone kill me than to lose the love of my life who'd been holding my hand since we were a year old, literally the love of my life. At twenty-six years old we had already shared a lifetime together. I never thought I would be able to catch a breath again after he got as far away from me as possible. I couldn't grasp onto an identity for myself without Sullivan. Those days were so dark, desperate, haunting, and if I wasn't scorched before, I certainly was then. Somehow, I woke each day still breathing, still expected to function. Despite how awful it was, it was the one loss that finally initiated a fighting spirit and forced me to start digging out of that damn rabbit hole. A sluggishly arduous process for sure, but I'm getting closer to the surface. I feel right now I'm taking on clumps of dirt at rapid speed. I would eat those worms to get out. Anything to get out. Yet I know I don't have all the pieces to solidify restoration. God blessed me with patience. Sometimes too much patience, I believe.

Healing has consumed me for the past five years, and although I'm not completely whole yet, I am more in control, more powerful over those years that daunted me. Two years I went through torment, and it has incapacitated my soul so far nine times longer than the time I was tortured. *If I linger there, I'm giving those years power when I was doing so well taking some of it back.* I turned on a Snow Patrol CD to keep me company until

Jocelyn arrived. *Ache*. I didn't really want to think of her either. I was running out of options to occupy my thoughts as I sat in my parents' driveway. *Well, I am home*. My eyes shot determinably across Penny Lane to my childhood place of wonderment mixed with the four divinely made pieces that my soulmate was split into to enhance every experience of my life. Susan Miller is my soulmate. Most people think of a soulmate in terms of romantic fulfillment. God, help those people. When those people get to the end of all their magnanimous lust for each other, they will burn each other to the ground and dance on the ashes. A true soulmate always demands the best of someone, and that's who Susan has always been to me. Even when I was being dragged into the rabbit hole, she wouldn't allow me one minute I betrayed the essence of who I am by delivering my hurt with cursed blows onto anyone else - especially the woman she loved who I was indomitable in my mission to release my cursed blows to. Someone dragged Susan down a rabbit hole too, but Susan learned to hold steady and to constantly fight until she met Mom and Pop and learned to love. She couldn't be Mom's soulmate; she loved Mom too much, and sometimes couldn't help herself from letting Mom sweetly take advantage of her. The glow on both of their faces when this happened was undeniable and beautiful. This is why Sullivan wasn't my soulmate; he loved me too much and allowed me to trample all over him. There was no glow when this happened.

Sullivan is one of the four pieces Susan split herself into who make up who I am. Sullivan got all of Susan's purity and ability to offer entirety to the person he loves. He is her youngest, same age as me, and I am the person he loves since we were a year old. Sean is a year older than Sullivan, and Susan gave him her ability to weather the storm. He is the person who holds my hand when I cry and gives me fortitude without demanding explanation. Sarah and Sadie are her twins, three years older than me and Sullivan. Sarah was endowed with Susan's sweet demeanor, and the kindness she has always shown me is riveting (the kindness Sarah shows everyone except one person is riveting). Sadie. My Sadie. I believe Sadie is the other half of me. She got Susan's wild and fierce gorgeous looks complete with the wild side Susan keeps hidden, and along with that, she also received Susan's fierce commitment to me. Sadie doesn't feel the need to keep her wild side hidden, and her disdain for conformity and rules has brought such sweet ardor to my life. Sadie is my *Good morning, Baby Doll* text every morning and my *Sweet dreams, Baby Doll* text every night, and every day it's enough to make me wake up and take on another day. Thank you, Sadie. Sullivan is the love of my life, and Sadie, I don't have words for. She's My Sadie. I've always had them both. I've always had all four of them. Loving as a union of five is how we learned to see the world. If it couldn't be had at Millerland, we didn't need it.

As long as we had the five of us, we had everything we ever needed.

As I looked across Penny Lane, I couldn't help but hear, *that house is an extension of me*, echo inside of me. I spent most of my childhood and adolescence crossing Penny Lane, going from my house to Millerland, and back again. I noticed, like every Christmas for the past five years - we had watched our parents wade through a few Millannese fractures, but we had not experienced one of the five of us until five years ago - that I was the last to arrive as I looked at all the cars spilling out of the Miller driveway and pouring down the street. Susan's four divinely made pieces are now accompanied by three spouses and six grandsons. Are we really old enough to have kids, to be parents? Wasn't it yesterday we rolled out the red carpet for Imagination to lead us around the yard with Mom and Susan watching from Susan's steps to ensure our protection from tripping on too much joy which was the worst of misfortune to befall us in those days? I guess my concept of yesterday and Father Time's concept of yesterday aren't quite as continuous as they used to be when minutes seemed to stretch for days, when I was 8 for ten years, and 10 for a hundred. And 12 ... for twenty excruciating minutes.

Eight is the age that strikes me compellingly when I think of The Best of the Millanneseys. Mom and Susan were happy, which made all five of us secure, happy, thriving. Mom and Pop had found peace which was so beautiful. Mom, Pop, and Susan seemed unbreakable, and we counted ourselves lucky to have three strong, vibrant, and a little crazy (in the best way) parents. These days seemed to unify the three of them too, and it wasn't a union of the five of us and the three of them; this time was a union of eight. Of course, their youngest were at an age that we were becoming self-sufficient, and the oldest had yet to become the dreaded teenagers

(although that would never be how our three amazing parents viewed us; they seemed to revel in every stage of our lives and enjoy having five other souls to share in and witness their unique union). We would have other stages that were the best of the Millanneseys, but those would always be tainted a little by harm and hurt that found its way to us. Again.

Susan and Pop are uncharacteristically athletic, their obsession with sports had given us a preview that all winning streaks meet that one team who has their number. That one team for Millanneseys was Jocelyn; sometimes Mom calls her Unstoppable – I understand why. Ten seemed infinitely long because of the waiting. Waiting to be kissed. Waiting for Jocelyn to come home. Waiting for Mom to stop crying. Waiting for just once Jocelyn would call, and Pop wouldn't have to yank the phone from Mom to hang up on Jocelyn. Waiting for Pop to come home from Wherever, USA because I wasn't as skilled as Pop with the wink and grin that provided the reprieve and made Haddy reemerge. Waiting for Susan to be free, safe, to be Susan again.

And twelve felt short because I only got to be twelve from May to September.

Mom grieved so intensely over whatever Jocelyn was going through during those years. I honestly believe little of what Mom was grieving for was anything Jocelyn did to her; it was all what Jocelyn was doing to herself, and Mom's loving spirit isn't equipped to watch one of her babies self-destruct. That poor, amazing woman has had to watch both of her daughters self-destruct. I watched Mom during those years propel her heartache into a positive outlet: Creativity. Mom is one of the most talented artists I've ever seen. Her drawings engender deep connections like you know her loved ones yourself or you want to be a part of a world where people love and understand each other so intimately, so completely. Her designs are so intricate and detailed you can only stand mesmerized. Mom loved Susan, loved Susan, but I always had a feeling that our house wasn't the best of Mom. During the most turbulent of the years with Jocelyn, because they may see each other now but it is still turbulent, Mom wouldn't allow herself to deconstruct. She started with the first remodel, the first of making this house that she would never leave with Susan across the street, officially Haddy's. Designing and remodeling this house has been one continuous project since then. Our neighbors may find this pretentious. They weren't privy to existing in close quarters with the exuding creativity constantly stirring in Haddy Annesley needing a release that I was privy to. They also weren't privy to seeing a shining example of how not to self-destruct during turbulent times.

I couldn't draw or design like Mom, but I could write.

I screamed. A tap on my window scared me. I turned down the volume and let down the window to find Sullivan smiling at me. Every morsel of me ached for him. I ached to be eight again, and for the days when he looked at me and his eyes only reflected love. Now his eyes reflected love mixed with that feeling of touching a hot stove. Somehow even with black marks all over his fingertips (and his heart) that poor man inhabited purity in his love for me. He clasped his hands around the void left by my window, and I almost caught on fire looking at those piercing blue eyes. He parted his lips to give me his burnt smile then flicked his head a little to toss his delicious waves of black hair out of his eyes to ignite me even more. Then he shifted his tall, muscular body with the sole intention of wafting his Drakkar cologne onto me and almost making me get out to fuck him on my mother's snow-covered lawn in broad daylight with our neighbors, his family, and God watching. I bought him the damn Drakkar; he had no choice but to use it against me. *All's fair in love and war*, and Sullivan and I were enraptured in both. "Merry Christmas, Bilson," Sullivan delivered in his sexy raspy voice.

He had rendered me speechless, breathless. I searched deep within myself to find the ability to breathe and return his smile then said, "Merry Christmas, Sullivan." *I love you more than is possible. I'm doing all I can to have us again.* "I bet you're excited to be home."

He reached in and grabbed my hand. I let him. He had been holding my hand since we were babies, and it was one constant I always treasured. Holding his hand made me feel, for a brief moment, his goodness soaking into me, removing some of the blackness, making me beautiful. "Maybe not as excited as I am about getting to see you, Bilson."

My heart melted. “Me too, Sullivan,” I said with a smile. I was excited to see him. I was elated to see him. I was searching the parts of me to give him my entirety like he gave me, but I couldn’t solidify it yet. I gave him a safe subject for us. “The whole Miller Clan in?” I said, still holding his hand that was strong like all the facets of the interior of Sullivan Miller. I looked from his hand to his handsome face that held all my girlhood secrets that, as promised, he never shared with anyone and never once used any of those against me.

He recognized, understood, and was consistently patient with my frailties and inabilities. “Yeah. Mom said to invite you over for cider. She put something in it this year that is so tasty. You will love it, Bilson.” He wanted to say something else. I could tell. I knew everything about him. Every smile, every raise of the eyebrow, every flick of his hair, every look. I had a lifetime of experience with Sullivan Miller. I knew him better than I knew myself. He wanted to say something else, but he was a gentleman. He would wait until the time was right.

“Susan Miller is the best cook on Earth, but I don’t think I should see your parents before I even see mine. Please tell her thank you, and I will see her in the morning for breakfast.” The pleasantries. The cover-up. I could imagine Mom and Susan had been texting each other as long as I had been sitting in the driveway, balancing the load of their concern for me. Mom probably told Susan to invite me in because Mom was never jealous when I would allow Susan to love me instead of her. She was always glad I had one mother I would allow to love on me.

“How’s life treating you lately, Sullivan?” We had seen each other at Thanksgiving, but that time included everyone. We hadn’t shared exclusive time as a couple since the last weekend in September when we spent the weekend hiking and kayaking in The Poconos like we had spent the last weekend in September for the past eleven years. The first year we were looking for something there - Something from when we were four years old. The true, solid, beginning of Millanneseys. Love. Family. The one time I saw *him*. Only for a second. Mom yanked me to her. Sullivan didn’t see him - Then it became tradition for us because the last weekend in September in The Poconos became the place we could always return to find each other. This year when we returned to find something there, we may have found more than we bargained for. After we expelled our adventurous side, we drank down a bottle of tequila before we expelled our passions for each other. At the precise moment I felt all the pieces of me and us fit for one moment that I could grab onto, Sullivan asked me to marry him. The issue of marriage was our war. When I finally fit, he brought it up again, he didn’t give me time I could hold onto my pieces of tranquility between us. We went back to the battle lines to start anew. Regrettably, I gave him the same refusal I always gave him. He fled back to Syracuse, NY to lick his wounds. I trudged back to my solitary existence in Storrs, CT. Could we get any further away after we got so close?

Storrs is another place that feels like home, not home like Penny Lane but home in a different way, and it is only an hour from my three pillars. The five Millannesey kids (Susan’s four divine pieces plus me, as we were often referred to by Mom, Pop, and Susan) all went to The University of Connecticut, UCONN. We shared one magical year that we were all in college at the same time, all at the same college. Once I left to go to college there, I haven’t lived anywhere else. I stayed in school until I received my PhD, and now I spend two afternoons a week teaching and my nights writing novels. Sometimes I walk the campus and think of our college days we shared at UCONN and try to find a part of myself I lost during that time. I’ve walked every inch of that campus, and still can’t erase the night that took Sullivan away from me. The walking isn’t avoidance. The walking is insurance that if he is mine, completely, I’ll possess certitude that I’m whole enough to never hurt either one of us again.

The war continues. “Mostly good, Bilson, except this girl next door I grew up with who will not marry me,” Sullivan said with pouty lips and puppy dog eyes. When he wasn’t so fucking hot I could barely keep my body off of him, he was so cute I could barely keep my lips off of him.

“Maybe she doesn’t want to taint your happy life with all of her blackness.”

He nodded toward my house saying, “This isn’t everything you are.” He was quoting from a different Snow Patrol song than was playing softly in my Jeep. I smiled that he would say that to me. Snow Patrol had practically written the soundtrack of our lives since we left for college. We took our first college spring break

together to Scotland and felt we had discovered them long before they were famous in America. At the time Snow Patrol felt like our own little secret. I have a vase that Sullivan gave me filled with stargazer lilies that is now filled with Snow Patrol concert tickets where we saw America following them around. We often communicated by using Snow Patrol lyrics making them our own little secret even now. Sullivan smiled then he sang for a moment with the one playing in my Jeep, “This is your life. This is your time.” He leaned in and kissed me before saying, “One day, Bills. One day, you’re going to say yes.”

He ran across the street. My heart ran with him.

One day, if I couldn’t solidify healing soon, I was going to read about him getting married to some pretty girl from a good family, and I would never be able to get out of bed again. For now, he was sort of mine. I laid claim on him when we were five, and I had no choice but to pray that claim held through these trying years. We had a fake wedding although to five-year-olds, it seemed very real, and there will forever be a part of me that boastfully glows thinking, *I am Sullivan Miller’s wife*. Jocelyn came home from Dartmouth to be my maid of honor. In a rare moment from Jocelyn, she cried about how fast I was growing up, she was missing all of it, and all too soon I would be getting married for real. Guess that was one thing she’d been dead wrong about. I couldn’t get married for real; I was already married to Sullivan Miller who I loved too much to bring all my blackness into his life. “The Weight of Love” had been playing, but I had been lost in thought until I heard, “A new empire beckons, a new kingdom in the distance.” I aggressively punched the on/off button to shut that off. I considered going inside. Having Mom to myself before Impulse barreled in. Jocelyn couldn’t have that.

Jocelyn’s Hummer pulled into the driveway beside my Jeep. *Her presence is always larger than mine*. She looked over at me through our windows and smiled then winked. I couldn’t help but leave hesitation behind and excitedly go to my sister. We met in front of our vehicles. Blonde hair fell around blonde hair as we hugged and swayed. “Hi, Baby Girl. I missed you,” Jocelyn said into my ear as she placed playful kisses on my cheek. I think she’d called me Baby Girl since May 2, 1983, the day I was born, her 15th birthday. I had always loved her calling me Baby Girl, as much as I loved that we shared our birthday.

“I missed you,” I enthused as I drew her in tighter. We had seen each other at Thanksgiving, but there was always something special about seeing each other where we grew up, or where I grew up and Jocelyn bid two years until she escaped to Dartmouth. Penny Lane on the outskirts of Wallingford, Connecticut became our home when I was one, and Jocelyn was 16. Pop became the girls’ swim coach at Yale bringing us to Penny Lane which is apparently where their lives began because they have never told me anything about who they were before we moved here. Mom and Pop are so accessible and give all of themselves to me, unless I want to know about before I was born then they become tight, tight clams with tremendous aching looks on their faces then I can’t pursue with my questioning. These agonizing looks on their faces left me spending much of my daydreaming time making up stories about who they were before I was born. These stories have helped me to have a big imagination which I find to be an asset as a writer, but I would trade in all my writing talent to know them for real.

Jocelyn came out of the hug to touch my face, “Been waiting here long, Cowardly Lion?”

I relented a smile accepting how transparent I was sometimes. “Guilty,” I admitted as Jocelyn placed her arm around my back as we started walking toward the front door together. I was pleased to recognize, like usual, we were both dressed alike in dark fitting jeans and blue designer tops that brought out the blue in our eyes. Although both blue, very different variations of blue until it almost seemed we didn’t have the same eye color. Jocelyn had dark blue eyes like Mom and Pop; I was the odd one in our family with piercing blue eyes that reflected a scope of blues and violets and seemed to cause an ache for Jocelyn at times. The ache for her was visible, but never audible. While our eye color may have its deafening differences, our sense of style was undisputed replicas of Mom’s unquestionable fashion sense. We both wanted so badly to be that woman, but Jocelyn could only attain a resemblance to Mom by playing dress up. No matter how often Jocelyn and I unconsciously dressed alike, there was always one difference: Jocelyn’s locket featuring a swimmer that Jocelyn’s

neck would have seemed incomplete without. Jocelyn wasn't the sentimental type at all, but this locket meant the world to her.

Before we went in, I really looked at her. There was something different about her. Impulse didn't seem to be coursing through every pore of her. She seemed ... at Peace. I wasn't sure that was a color I had ever seen on my sister. I had to admit it only enhanced her beauty. Jocelyn always looked beautiful. I had always thought my big sister was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen; of course, with the age difference between us, she had been a woman for almost all my life. Well, she was the most beautiful except Mom, of course. Mom was elevated to a class all to herself, and I was grateful that except for my eyes I looked exactly like Mom. Something else about me that seemed to cause an ache for Jocelyn, for Mom sometimes, for Pop sometimes.

"My Beautiful Girls," Pop called as soon as we walked in, and charm and a presence larger than life swirled all around me. There aren't words for how much I loved that man. Sullivan had grown up seeing the man he would have to be to be worthy of me. Paul Annesley was tall, good looking, built muscular and kept muscular by swimming, but as good looking as he was, he was loved because he was the vessel of a gentleman complete with a charming presence that I adored to the core of me. I'd never seen a man who absolutely treasured women like Pop did, and how he juggled all three of the women in his house and the three across the street had been mesmerizing. But today my mesmerized look at My Pop felt soiled. He walked over to us at a slower pace than ever existed for our active role model of health and vitality. He looked older than last Christmas like ten years instead of one had passed. *Thanks, Christmas Eve, surprise of 2014: my man pillar is sick.* Pop made it to us, enveloping his girls in a loving hug. In one instant we weren't 31 and 46 anymore. We were five, simultaneously somehow in my mind. Pop was swinging us around and calling us his little blonde airplanes, and we were giggling. We were happy and safe and loved by Pop.

"My babies," Mom said from the doorway of the kitchen. I turned immediately to look at her. She looked so beautiful. I wanted to run to her and fall into her loving arms and never let her go.

I stayed planted looking at her.

Pop was always gracious in giving us time with Mom. He started back toward his recliner, and I started to have a heart attack. Jocelyn walked over to Mom and threw her arms around her. Mom beamed and affectionately said, "Merry Christmas, My Pain in the Ass."

Previous holidays, Jocelyn went to Mom, quickly kissed her cheek like she thought acid was residing there then traversed into the kitchen looking like she couldn't wait to lacerate the soul out of that woman. Now Jocelyn flung her arms around Mom. They were both smiling, and Jocelyn, as affectionately as Mom had spoken to her, teased, "Merry Christmas, Hard Core Bitch." I had always been fascinated by their nicknames for each other, but that was another part of who they were that originated long before I did, so I was uninformed. I only knew they had always called each other this, and the onetime Jocelyn flung, *You Fucking Hard Core Bitch*, at Mom in a derogatory, vicious manner, Mom almost clawed her eyes out. "I've missed you, Mom." That seemed to hold deeper meaning than from not seeing her since Thanksgiving.

"Oh, Baby, I've missed you," Mom said as they pulled out of their hug and kissed on the lips before Jocelyn happily sailed into the kitchen. Did I bang my head getting out my Jeep?

I shook off their abnormal greeting as Mom supplied all her loving spirit in my direction. She looked hopeful this would be the year I would come over and fling myself excitedly into her arms like I used to. Finally, I walked over. I didn't fling myself into her arms. I grabbed some of her long, blonde hair like when I was a child and twirled it around my finger as our eyes locked and we shared an inaudible conversation. *I missed you. I missed you too, Mom. I never feel complete without you. Bilson, I've never denied you access to any part of me. Take all of me, please. Let me help you to be whole. I'd walk through fire for you, Baby. And I would walk through fire to protect you, Mom. That's why I can't let you in to help me. I'm so sorry, Mom. Please try again*

next year. Please. Mom put her hand on my face. She accepted my silence, but she wouldn't accept not giving me some of her love. I closed my eyes and leaned into the touch of her hand on my face. For one moment I felt at peace too. *I love you, Mom.*

I walked into the kitchen to sit across from Jocelyn at the table. Jocelyn didn't take her eyes off Mom standing at the doorway. I couldn't turn around. I couldn't see the pain on Mom's face. Agony wanting me to talk to her, to be whole, to be the Bilson I used to be who couldn't fathom limitations between us. Eventually I heard Mom release her disappointment in a loud exhale. I didn't turn around, but that didn't keep the exhale from ensuring I pictured her batting her eyes putting away her tears that she would allow in her bedroom later.

"Dinner will be ready in an hour. Please fill me in on your lives," Mom entreated as she took a seat at the table between me and Jocelyn. I can assure you Mom did not make this dinner. I was certain Susan had done it for her and Mom was terrified to leave the kitchen and burn a Susan Miller meal. I wasn't confident in Mom's ability to boil water, but she'd always had Susan and Pop to compensate for her lack of culinary skills. For some reason, that none of us could figure out, she tried so hard for us at Christmas time. Or at least tried to look like she was trying. She was giving Pop a break. He sat back and let her stir. Some Christmases he had to swoop in. If it was completely unsalvageable, Susan was across the street.

"Not much to report, Mom," Jocelyn said knowing I wasn't going to say anything. She started talking and my mind started slipping away glancing around at the brand-new countertops, appliances, and cabinets trying to mask ancient disappointments that still held a leading role in our family no matter how many times she remodeled. The broken dishes and the screaming insults held a starring role in here. *Can you please just once leave me alone? Fuck, Mom, please stop throwing dishes at me! There's a breaking point, Jocelyn. That's not a pain you can ever heal from. I'm sorry, Mom. I'm so sorry.* I didn't know what any of these disappointments and hurts were. They had personified and left their mark on our family long before I was born. Despite my innocence in their creation, my life had been marred by those disappointments all the same. Throughout the years I had imagined several scenarios as *the pain you can never heal from*, but imagination was my only tool in examining the reality of who my family is and what they've been through. Although the house I had lived in left plenty of room to imagine that something, at some point, swallowed all of them whole and spit them out in fragments, trapped together, trying to heal, and injuring each other immensely as they set about that process.

I existed in a state of observation yet pretended to be oblivious.

I learned it was easier than seeing the pained look on her face when I asked questions like, 'Mommy, why do you come in with two gifts on April 22nd every year then lock yourself in that room I can't go into?' Pain. Agony. I caused that pain on her face with my question. 'I'm sorry, Mommy. I didn't mean to hurt you.' Then I ran across the street. 'I didn't mean to hurt her feelings, Susan. Will you see about her?'

Jocelyn and Mom hugged when they saw each other. I looked from imaginary shards of glass to my sister, tuned into what she was saying. "...Then I fired her. She made a scene, but I tapped into my inner Haddy, and she left immediately," Jocelyn said with a wink, a wink identical to a Pop wink, as she compared herself to Mom. Someone dispensed superglue in this kitchen. I made sure not to slip away again.

"An inner Haddy can be quite an asset, Jocelyn," Mom said with a smile making it impossible to take my eyes from her. She never looked her age. 72 seemed to be something Haddy Annesley was laughing at, like every other convention.

I had slipped away looking at Mom, but I slipped back in as Jocelyn said, "In my line of work, I am grateful for an inner Haddy. Of course, the nature versus nurture freaks would have a crazy field day with my chosen profession."

“What came first the chicken or the egg? What came first Jocelyn’s disappointed mother or the need to be a successful CEO who takes no prisoners? You mean that kind of go crazy?” Mom said as she laughed a little. Gave Jocelyn the sexy wink that always made Jocelyn glow.

“Yep, that would be the one,” Jocelyn said as Mom placed her hand, for just a moment, onto Jocelyn’s, and, for just a moment, there was harmony in the Annesley home. *Wow, Christmas, you do still have some miracles up your sleeve.* Jocelyn’s face lit up as she smiled at Mom, and I was so happy for Jocelyn to feel happy even if it was fleeting. “Well,” Mom stammered, embarrassed. She pulled her hand from Jocelyn and went to the stove pretending to check on dinner.

It takes a long time, and many pieces that fall into the water, to build a bridge.

“Bilson, why don’t you go watch the game with Pop? I’m going to help Mom with dinner,” Jocelyn said excusing me from something that was about to go down between her and Mom. I did as Jocelyn told me. If the knife throwing competition was about to start, I was better off with Pop in the recliner, a place I had retreated to numerous times avoiding their fights.

After dinner I was in my room sitting in my chair reading, sort of. My bedroom embodied the essence of all of me, Mom designed it that way, and I couldn’t help but soak it in. When I started high school, when I was 14, I requested Mom get me new furniture (except my beloved chair that was also Mom’s beloved chair that she would never part with) and redo my room. I was requesting a new start for Bilson now that someone was leaving me alone. I was stupid enough to believe a new room would make the reliving disappear. It didn’t disappear, but being in my room surrounded by Mom in every crevice helped immensely. *Thank you, Mom.*

Every day while I was at school, Mom was painting my new room, my new start. I believe this painting was as healing for Mom at the time as it was for me. I didn’t know much, but I knew at that time she had not painted for a very long time. Possibly fifteen years.

Haddy Annesley doesn’t do anything in a conventional way. She donated my furniture, and I slept in Jocelyn’s room until Thanksgiving as Mom poured herself into giving me a new room. She started with black paint covering every wall then each day she set about making one of my favorite books come to life on a small surface of the wall, or a beloved part of who I was come to life. There was one spot with me and Jocelyn ice skating at Rockefeller Center when I was three, there was me curled up sleeping with Pop in his recliner, there was a spot where I looked about eight and me, Sullivan, Sean, Sadie, and Sarah were playing in the Miller yard. There was me and Susan reading a book – I was small in this representation of me and Susan, but Susan looked like she did when I was fourteen, like Mom intentionally immortalized the healthy Susan. Her Love. Susan even wore a ring in this painting.

In all of these it was mesmerizing to see how we all looked through Mom’s eyes and seeing how much she loved all of us which shined through every intricate detail she painted.

My eyes left one mother to go to another. My absolute favorite spot in this room was me and Mom feeding the ducks. As I stared at me and Mom feeding the ducks, I couldn’t help but think about another time when I was 12 that Mom drew me and her feeding the ducks:

I could still feel the loathing in both of our eyes as I yelled, “I’m becoming a woman, and you haven’t even noticed!” She was trying to recover from a phone call where Jocelyn had set about lacerating the soul out of her, and as much as my heart broke for her, some broken, irrational part of me couldn’t stop yelling at Mom. She was barely functional after all Jocelyn said to her, but she tried to remain calm and filter through to a semblance of rationality in all I was screaming. She endured as long as she could then out of sheer desperation begged me to please stop and walk away. She even offered assurance that we could talk the next day. I didn’t need her the next day. I needed her then, right then, my need for her was as desperate as her need for me to walk away, and if I had to scream to have her, so be it. The screaming went on for a while before I got in her face and yelled, “I hate

you!” She slapped me so hard I felt my teeth rattle and every good thing in me rattle with them. Then there was no more screaming. No more sounds. No more life in our house. I stood there holding my cheek. She stood there staring at me.

Tears started down her face, and I knew she would have given every part of herself to take it back. I couldn’t bear her tears and my burning cheek at the same time. I turned away and walked out the front door. I was careful to control myself and close it gently. I heard her collapse on the floor with a loud thump that shook the foundation of all me and Mom were and the mother Haddy Annesley wanted to be. I sat on the other side of the door for an hour listening to her wails, knowing I should go in and stroke her hair. I should apologize. I should tell her what was happening to me. I knew if I went back in, I wouldn’t be able to give her veiled screams, I would see how broken she was and give her the truth. If I told the truth, then someone was going to hurt My Mom; that was a clear threat that I knew wouldn’t only be a threat if I talked.

I forced myself off that door then climbed into Sullivan’s window for the first-time seeking solace and his need to protect the good in me. I hoped there was still some good in me left to protect. I camped out at Millerland for three days before Mom called to tell Susan to send me home. When I walked back into Annesleyland, we locked eyes. She got up from the couch to come to me. I bolted up the stairs to my room and slammed the door. I pulled out construction paper and crayons that I had previously used to write her sweet cards of love when I was little and she deserved my love. I wrote: Bilson Hates You! I taped it to her bedroom door. She left it there.

A week later I came into my room to find my bed covered with stuff. There were new bras that were lacy and colorful, new jeans, and new dresses. There was Midol, tampons, and pads. I hadn’t started my period yet, but she was definitely trying to listen. There was chocolate. There were three DVDs in a rubber band with a Post-It that read: These are my favorites. I became obsessed with Bette Davis after I watched All About Eve. With the elevated use of language and witty repartee I could see why this was one of Mom’s favorites. I loved If a Man Answers, Hang Up. I watched it over and over. I invited Sadie over to watch Steel Magnolias. With all of that on my bed, my favorite item was a card with a mommy and little girl on the front that looked exactly like me and Mommy. They were sitting by a pond feeding ducks which had been a treasured pastime for us when I was small. I knew she had drawn it herself. Inside was a note in Mom’s handwriting: I’m so sorry, Bilson. Mommy loves you.

I walked to her door and removed my message.

My thoughts of that day and scanning the paintings on my wall were interrupted by a knock on my door. Mom came in with a loving smile saying, “Hi, Baby.” I waved at her. I couldn’t often talk to her since the slap. As much as it hurt her, she was as understanding as she could be, but she had her ways of getting me to talk. “What are you reading?”

“*Gone With the Wind.*” I couldn’t help myself but talk about books with her. Since I was twelve, she’s read every book I was reading with me to facilitate a way I would communicate with her. Sometimes I highlighted lines in her copy of the book we were reading. Hints. Love letters. Sometimes lines I knew would make her smile that radiant Haddy smile that Pop and I would walk to the ends of the earth to produce. This new form of communication that started when I was twelve wasn’t the initiation of Mom’s love of books. Mom loved books almost as much as I did, but she had been excited that around that time I started selecting real books instead of the boring obligations she had to read to me when I was younger. She did it, hated it, and as often as possible she pushed that responsibility off to Susan who’d dedicated her life to the literature that engendered imagination and possibility in children. I never felt slighted. Susan read with all the voices and passion, and I loved having Susan all to myself. My Soulmate. However, since the summer I was fourteen, I shared Susan in the reading arena with Mom and Sadie. We started a secret book club, and we still email incessantly about books, and they all read every book I’m reading and, without fail, every book I write. *God, I miss our summer days. Please find a way to give those back to all four of us. The moms would love it as much as me and Sadie.*

"Is this your first reading of it?" Mom asked.

"More like my twentieth."

"You must really like Ms. Scarlett."

"I enjoy petulance without apology." Mom smiled at me. I smiled at her. One moment we truly found each other until I said, "So what brings you by my neck of the house?"

The quick back and forth discussing a book vacated the room, and staggering words filled with staggering awkwardness took over. There was a long time of her staring at me before she finally said, "I wanted to tell you that I am really glad you are home." In the charred fragments that had become mine and Mom's relationship since that slap, moments like these were longed for, but as much as I had longed for something like this, I had no idea how to respond. Written communication was my strong suit, not verbal. Finally, Mom decided to fill the silence. "Bilson?" I continued to look at her. She was having a battle inside of her as to whether or not she could get the words out. Then she released, "Could I please give you a hug?"

It broke my heart that she had to ask. I slid my bookmark into my book and got out of my chair. I walked slowly toward her, and when I got there, she put her arms around me. At first, we were both stiff, awkward, embracing but not really. Then she seemed to relax a little, wrap her arms around me a little more. Moments passed as we slightly continued to increase the tightness and sentiment filling us through the embrace. There are not words for how complete it felt to be in my mother's arms. Tears stung my eyes. I heard her whimper then she released, "Merry Christmas, Bilson," as she pulled away and retreated quickly from my room closing my door.

I stared at the door for a few moments feeling the wetness in my hair left from her tears before I whispered through my own tears, "Merry Christmas, Mom."

January 22, 1996

"Bilson?" I was standing at the foot of her bed with tears streaming down my face. I was battling everything in me but making sure not to cry out loud, so I didn't wake her. She must have felt me there. "Bilson, come here." I stayed where I was tears still streaming. "Bilson, come here, Baby." I stayed where I was tears still streaming. She started to get out of bed.

Tank top and underwear. "Don't come near me!" I screamed.

She sat back in the bed looking terrified. "Will you let Susan hug you?" I nodded. She picked up the phone. "Susan, Bilson is really upset, and she will not let me hug her. Could you please come hug her? We're in my room."

Susan pulled me into her arms. "What's wrong, Darling Girl?" I couldn't answer. I fell into her completely though and let Susan's goodness soak into me. She held me for a while.

Eventually Mom started to get up to come to us. "I told you not to come near me!" I screamed.

Susan picked me up and carried me to my room and slammed the door. She got right in my face. "Don't you ever yell at her like that again! Do you hear me?"

I stared at her. "Yes. I'm sorry."

She stared back. "I'm not the one you need to say that to. Slap me."

I was so shocked. "What?"

"Slap me, Bilson. I've been slapped before. I can take it. Slap me."

"I don't want to slap you, Susan."

"Do you want to slap Haddy?"

I stood there crying before I finally said, "No."

"I understand how degrading it feels for someone to hit you. You were given your chance to do to someone what was done to you. You didn't want it. I've never done to anyone what was done to me. You're a strong person, Bilson. I admire that, but you're not going to pay her back little by little by yelling at her. I will not allow that. You either go in there and slap her and get it out of your system, or you make peace with it. You will not torture her little by little. She regrets it, you know that, don't you? She'd give every part of herself to take it back which is why she has allowed you to yell at her. Well, she can allow it out of her guilt, but I will not. Do you understand me? Haddy told me about the slap, not you. Says something about her character, doesn't it? She begged you to stop yelling, and you wouldn't. You told her you hate her, and still when she told me about it, she took full responsibility for all of it. If you hate her because of everything that is going on with Jocelyn right now, then that is valid. Everyone in this house is miserable, and despite the fact that Jocelyn doesn't physically live here right now, she still lives large here, and she's miserable too. I get that, but you know you were wrong that night. You knew she had been through hell with Jocelyn that night; that is not your responsibility, but when someone asks you to please stop and walk away, that is your responsibility. I understand how upset you are about not getting to see Jocelyn. I understand that you are hurting and don't understand any of it, and your hurt is valid. Your confusion is valid. Your desire to see Jocelyn is valid. But your actions lately have not been. The moment you can't walk away when someone asks you to, you've become a bully. Every bully thinks their actions are valid because they need to feel big or heard. No bully is ever valid. Is that who you want to be, Bilson?"

That was NOT who I wanted to be. She was right; I needed to find a way to make peace with everything, so I didn't bully the person I loved most. Susan was honest with me telling me things that Mom usually would have but had been walking on eggshells around me because of her guilt. Susan even validated my feelings and showed me the difference in feelings and actions. I could make peace. Susan would always demand the best out of me. "No, Susan. I don't want to be a bully." I made sure to stop yelling at Mom, and talking, which ensured there would be no slips of the truth and putting My Mom in jeopardy. I compartmentalized. Sealed all that was happening to me in a vault. Other than not talking, I seemed like a normal teenage girl, well, as normal as Bilson Annesley ever could be.

I walked to my closet, pulled green construction paper and a red crayon and wrote:

Dear Mom,

I felt complete in your arms. Thank you for the hug and for never giving up on me. I know I've told you before all the problems are something in me and nothing to do with you, but I know that doesn't make it easier on you. I'm so sorry, Mom. Merry Christmas. Bilson loves you.

Unlike previous times when I've written Mom notes like this, I didn't stash it in a box hidden in my closet. I left my room and walked into Mom's room. She was on the bed crying. I handed her the note then sank to the floor with my back resting against her bed while she read. Mom finished reading and sank down beside me. I laid my head on her shoulder. She laid her head on my head. I drifted into a peaceful sleep, so peaceful, the kind of sleep I never got to enjoy without drugs, and even that wasn't a peaceful sleep. It was a forced shut down of the brain with my eyes closed, but it wasn't like the peaceful sleep of being on Mom.

September 25, 1995

Bilson came in from school as I was coming down the stairs and gave me a big smile. "Hi, Mom. You look nice."

"Hi, Bilson," I said as I was coming down the stairs putting on earrings. "Susan and I are going to the movies and to dinner. I'll be home about 8:30, but I need to talk to you about something."

She put down her bookbag and said, "Okay."

"I don't think we have ever encountered a time you were over there that Susan wasn't." I paused then blurted it out before I lost my nerve, "I don't want you over there if Susan isn't there. I don't mean tonight. I mean anytime. I'm not saying anything bad about any of you kids, I'm just saying ..."

Bilson smiled, "I get what you're saying, Mom. I'm reading To Kill A Mockingbird in my advanced readers class. I really like it. I was looking forward to reading tonight anyway. I'm glad to see you go out and do something, Mom. You've seemed so sad lately."

"I'm sorry I have, Bilson. I appreciate you understanding about me going out and not going over to the Millers. Susan sent you lasagna, and we have vegetables for a salad. We can discuss To Kill A Mockingbird when I get home if you like." Whenever I was capable, I tried to give her the best of me. Bilson always seemed to adapt to whatever place I seemed to be in. I loved her dearly for it. These past few years have been rough on all of us.

"I would like, thank you, Mom. Have fun."

When I came in, Bilson's door was closed, so I decided to shower then have our book discussion. I was standing in the shower with my eyes closed enjoying the water on me when Bilson scared me by stepping into the shower with me. She was completely naked, as was I since I was already in the shower. I was extremely uncomfortable, but I didn't want to overreact. "Bilson, what are you doing in here?"

"I need you to see me, Mommy." She had not called me Mommy in years.

"Honey, I'm uncomfortable with you being in here."

She closed her eyes tight. "I won't look at you, Mommy. I just need you to see me."

"You want me to see you naked? Are there changes in your body that you have questions about?"

"No, Mommy, I don't need you to see me naked. I need you to see me." Tears ran down her face as she slowly made her clarification.

She was really upset. I felt completely lost on what to do for Bilson, which was not an experience I ever had before. "Bilson, can you keep your eyes closed for me to kneel down, so we are face to face?" She nodded through her tears. "Okay, Baby. We are face to face. Do you want to look at Mommy's face?"

She opened her eyes as her tears continued to run down. "Do you still love me, Mommy?"

"Oh, Baby, I know things around here have been rough for a few years, but, yes, Bilson, I love you. I love you so much, Baby. Mommy will always love you, Baby."

"No matter what?" Her tears poured down.

She was so upset. "Bilson, there is nothing that would ever make me stop loving you."

"Mommy, will you kiss me, please?"

"What, Baby?" She had asked for hugs a lot in the past years. It always broke my heart that she had to ask. I wasn't sure what to do about a kiss while we were naked.

"I need you to kiss me, Mommy. Please, kiss me. Like you kissed me when I was little. Please, Mommy, please kiss me." Her tears were streaming down her face. I didn't know what to do. I pressed my lips to hers, and

she pressed hers to mine. When I pulled away, her tears turned into uncontrollable wails. I shut off the water, grabbed my robe, wrapped her in a towel, and scooped her into my arms. She wrapped her arms around my neck and wailed the whole way as I carried her to my bed. She wailed in my arms for a long time. Nothing I did calmed her, until finally she completely passed out. Even passed out anytime I tried to get up, she clung to me. Eventually I covered her up and went to sleep with her.

When we woke, Bilson seemed calm. "Good morning, Baby. Are you okay?"

"Yes, Mom. I don't feel well though. Could I stay home and watch movies with you? Please."

I wasn't sure I wanted to establish a precedent that Bilson could stay home from school every time she had PMS, but she had been so upset last night, I may have kept her home even if she hadn't asked. I wasn't sure we were dealing with PMS. "Of course, Baby. Why don't you go in your room and get some pajamas though."

"Would you get those for me, Mommy?" We were back to Mommy. "I want to stay in your bed, please."

"Okay, Baby." I grabbed clothes and changed in Bilson's room then grabbed her favorite pajama bottoms. Before I went back into my room, I slipped into Pauly's room to grab her one of his big, comfy t-shirts (Pauly's t-shirts were comfort t-shirts. I had wrapped myself in his t-shirts many a nights in the past couple of years). When I laid those on the bed for her, I asked, "Bilson, would you mind if I invite Susan over for coffee before she goes to work?"

"Of course not, Mom."

I handed her the remote then kissed her on the lips. "I love you, Baby. I'll be in the kitchen."

I called Susan and started my coffee. We sat at the table as I explained everything to her.

"Haddy, Sarah asked to take a bath with me recently. I think girls go through stages where they need intimacy from their mothers and are very confused about the boundaries, especially since there were no boundaries when they were little."

"I'm sure you're right. I was trying not to overreact, but I hadn't washed off yet and someone left a lipstick trail from my belly button down to a hickey on my inner thigh. Not exactly something I wanted to discuss with my twelve-year-old daughter." Susan covered her face and laughed. When our blissful blushing faded, I embarrassingly admitted, "Susan, I got so paranoid that when she was passed out, I checked her for bruises."

"Haddy, you don't think she and Sullivan ..."

"No, I think I got paranoid. She wasn't even red. I can't believe I did that."

Susan took my hand. "Baby, I may have done the same thing. Bilson isn't the wailing type. I'm going to have a talk with Sullivan and ask Paul to talk to him too."

"Susan, don't let my paranoia get to you. He's so sweet to her."

"Yes, he is sweet to her, but he's still a twelve-year-old boy. He needs to know how to be respectful of Bilson in the next few years."

"I guess that's not a bad idea." I took a deep breath. I needed to discuss something else with Susan that I had been scared to bring up for a couple of years, but Susan was the only one who could help me with this. "Susan, I need to talk to you about something. Bilson has been so upset about Jocelyn. Please don't get upset with me, but a year ago I went to Manhattan to try to talk things out with her. See if she was stable enough to see Bilson because Bilson was asking a lot to see her. Jocelyn opened the door half naked. She looked an absolute mess. There were four naked guys passed out in her living room. I didn't see any other girls, but I did see an abundance of liquor bottles and drug paraphernalia. I just walked away."

Susan could rarely get upset with me. She loved me too much. She immediately launched into comforting me about Jocelyn. "Haddy. God, that must have been devastating to see her like that. I know how much you love her and want her to be stable. I'm sorry you felt you couldn't share that with me."

"If I felt she was stable enough to bring her back into our lives, I promise I would have told you."

Susan put her hand on my face and gave me a loving kiss to remove my guilt and fill me with her love. "She's your daughter. You don't have to explain to me, but you can talk to me about anything, Baby. Anything."

"Thank you, Susan. God, I love you, Baby. What would I do without you?"

"You'll never have to find out, Baby. Never."

Moments passed where only love settled in the look between us. I knew she would have to leave for work soon, and I needed to finish telling her about Jocelyn and Bilson. "A few weeks after that I sent her an email and offered to pay to send her to therapy. She sent back, 'Fuck you'. I think she is keeping it together enough to work, but it destroys me to see Jocelyn like this. I have to accept all of it is her own undoing, and until she is ready to get help, there's nothing I can do. Bilson asked recently if I would take her to Manhattan and the three of us could have lunch. I'm sure to her it seems like a good plan. I guess if I am going to let her see Jocelyn, that would be the best plan, so that I am there. Of course, I don't know that I could look at Jocelyn through an entire meal without strangling her. I told Bilson that I would think about it. I think she is starting to get mad at me that I am keeping her from Jocelyn, but I could never tell her what Jocelyn is like right now. A part of me worries that's what Bilson was screaming about last night, and she doesn't know how to tell me. She asked several times if I still love her like she's scared I've stopped loving Jocelyn and will stop loving her. I don't know what to do, Susan."

"See how today goes, Haddy. Cuddle with her, love on her, and let her feel safe in case there's things she needs to talk to you about. Bilson takes a long time to talk about things, if she talks about them at all."

"Maybe you should stay home with her, and I'll go teach your students."

Susan smiled. We heard Bilson coming down the stairs. "Mom, could I see Susan before she leaves?" was called from the living room.

"Of course, Baby. Come on in."

Susan backed her chair away from the table, and Bilson went to sit in her lap. Susan wrapped her arms around Bilson. "Oh, My Darling Girl. Did you have a bad night?" Bilson didn't answer. She sank into Susan. I was scared she was going to pass out on Susan. Susan cradled her, kissed her forehead until she had no choice but to leave for work. "Baby, I gotta go to work. I'll come over this afternoon when I get home, okay?"

Bilson sat up and looked right at her. She put her hand on Susan's face. "I'm sorry, Susan."

"Sorry for what, Honey?"

Bilson was quiet awhile like she was struggling with something then said, "If I made you late for work. I wanted to see you."

"I'm always happy to see you, Darling Girl. I won't be late. The kids can eat Pop-tarts as we drive to school. They will be fine, but I do need to go, Baby."

Bilson got off her lap. Susan gave her a hug and kiss then squeezed my hand and kissed my cheek as she walked out. As soon as Susan was out of the kitchen, Bilson came to me. She moved my chair back. I thought she was going to sit in my lap like she sat in Susan's, but she straddled me. I tried to remind myself what Susan said about girls needing intimacy with their mothers, and I remembered Bilson had always taken naps on me like this when she was little. She put her hands in my hair and started these gentle strokes. I wondered if she had seen me giving this to Susan then I couldn't wonder about anything. The sensation was so loving and comforting that I laid my head back and closed my eyes. I went somewhere between sleep and awake and saw her doing this when I was depressed in my room for nine months when she was four years old. Bilson would lay on the bed, stroke my

hair, and talk to me. I couldn't believe that came back to me as I felt that entire nine months of my life was a lost gap that I couldn't remember any of it. Then we were on the swings together. We were feeding the ducks. Each gentle stroke she gave me brought me to a beautiful moment with Bilson. I'm not even sure how long she gave that to me. Eventually I felt her arms fall to the side of me and her head fall on my shoulder. Then she said, "You're so beautiful," before she passed out. I rolled my head on hers and passed out too.

Mom seemed torn when she woke me. "I'm sorry to wake you, Baby, but it's time for me to leave."

I laid my head in her lap. "Please don't go this year, Mom."

She started stroking my hair. "I'll skip my Christmas Eve tradition, if you skip yours."

Sometimes Mom didn't play fair. She knew I would never miss my Christmas Eve tradition.

"You win, but could I have one more minute?"

Mom gave me five more minutes of me laying on her and Mom stroking my hair.

Get Well Soon. Mommy loves you.

I stealthily walked around the backyard and climbed up the trellis. Thirty-one years old, and I still snuck into Sullivan's bedroom like I was a teenager. "Bilson, we have a front door, you know," was flung at me sarcastically as soon as I fell onto the floor below the window.

"Hi, Sean," I said with a big smile to the Miller who knew about as many of my secrets as Sullivan knew, just about as many.

The brothers and I were already in uniform for tonight: UCONN Husky shirt and jeans. Sean and Sullivan were on Sullivan's bed playing cards, essentially awaiting my arrival. I went to Sean and gave him a hug then sat in his lap. "Hi, Gorgeous. Escaping the asylum?"

Unfortunately, I knew Sean wasn't referring to Annesleyland. He was referring to the internal asylum that was my home, that he had held me through too many nights to count trying to find release. He never asked for explanation. He weathered my storm. Thank you, Sean. "You know me too well, Sean." I teased back taking in the signs of crow's feet to the side of his eyes which to me were so handsome because those were the sign of someone who smiled a lot.

Sullivan hit Sean on the arm. "Good to see you, Bills. I suddenly think I hear my wife calling me," Sean said as he lifted me off his lap and put me on the bed next to Sullivan. He gave me a wink and quickly retreated from the room. *These are our adult moments.*

Sullivan placed the cards on his nightstand and lay down on the bed. I lay down beside him and removed his shirt. I felt his burn pierce my lips as I kissed his chest. After the night I destroyed him, correction after the last time I destroyed him, Sullivan had no contact with me for nine months. He surprisingly showed up for our yearly end of September weekend in The Poconos. On his muscular chest above his heart was a tattoo written in cursive red letters and read, *Scorched and Broken*. Then there were five drops of blood for every time I wounded him with my dagger. The first time I slashed him diagonally from shoulder to hip. The second time I completed an X on his chest. The third and fourth time, I made an X on his back. The fifth time I bludgeoned him, and he moved to Syracuse to bleed out in private without the needful haunt of my eyes there to make him a liar.

It's been five years, and as I kissed his tattoo, I could still taste blood.

He removed my shirt. He placed his finger on the red letters on my chest above my heart. After our weekend in The Poconos, I had my heart inked for him with, *That you would give everything in you to protect the good in someone else*. I had five hearts wrapped in barbed wire dripping five blood drops gliding off the letters. I upped the ante. On my left side from my hip to armpit, I had tattooed in black: *If you were here beside me, I'd tell you that I loved you since I was a year old. That I know how much my blackness eventually scorched you too, and how broken you feel. We feel. Without each other. But I'd also tell you, the broken had to happen to make us stronger in the mending. There will be an ending we're worthy of one day*. Then in red, I had a love letter (reminder to both of us) branded on me: *I promise one day to extinguish your scorched heart and to reform the broken pieces of our souls into a creatively beautiful work of art we call marriage*.

I went to Syracuse for fall break and gave him my love and promises in our secret language.

He kissed every word now as his hand caressed my breast, and my finger tenderly traced his black Christmas present to me that year in red he had his own promises to me, *I will marry you one day when I know we are both whole, and it's all we remember. Until then I will hold your hand and love you whenever you allow me to bathe in your sweet splendor. I love you, Bilson Annesley*.

He removed my jeans and thong and kissed the red ink above my trim line that read, *I love you, Sullivan Miller*. His kisses trailed to my clit so we could leave behind our broken portions and bathe in our sweet splendor. But all the portions made up who we are now, and the broken portions intensified our love making. After he

licked up my sweet splendor, he entered me and claimed me with an intensity I had never known before. “God, yes, Sullivan,” breathlessly flowed out of me as he tattooed the inside of me so that I would never be satisfied by another again. With every audacious stroke he tattooed, *Property of Sullivan, and you better not fucking forget it, Bilson Annesley*. I won’t, Sullivan, I won’t. I will fucking find a way to claw my way out to be good and whole and YOURS. His claim over me ran out between my legs and reverberated through every cracked crevice within my entire being.

He held me tightly as I released. I released our love, our brokenness, our devotion, our intent to kill, our declarations, our amendments, our resolutions. *Please, God, let the next Our be vows. Vows that can never be tainted or wounded or broken. Please.*

When my quaking rolled into the abyss, “Do you have something inside of you that belongs to me?”

“Everything inside of me belongs to you, Sullivan.”

“I would love to jump on that you said that. It’s not intentional on your part that you lied to me. You desperately want it to be true, but we both know it isn’t true yet, Baby. I prayed for a Christmas miracle, so fasten your seatbelt tomorrow. However, I will ask you again, do you have something inside of you that belongs to me?”

I stared at him. I hated to admit it, but I said, “Sullivan, if you aren’t talking about my everything, I don’t know what you’re referring to.”

He stroked my hair and said, “Okay, My Love.” He stared at me allowing nothing but love to reflect in his eyes. Then he let his fingers explore my body as he called out our history in this room. “Umm. Thirteen when you forced me to go to first base.”

I smiled and teased, “Umm. Thirteen when you so obviously abhorred going to first base because about five seconds later you lifted my shirt and devoured my breasts like those were marshmallow peeps.”

“Damn, I devoured them like they were pillows sent from Heaven, Baby.” Then he sucked on my nipple and released a loud praising exhale. “And, God said let those pillows get bigger for Sullivan’s enjoyment. There are some advantages to growing up.” His witty sexual teasing impressed me and spilled out of me with a loud roaring laugh.

We didn’t venture into the part where he moved his clothed body on top of my clothed body, and I felt him get hard. At first, we enjoyed a slow rhythm of our bodies moving together. Then he started going faster. I busted into frightful tears. Sullivan literally deflated right on top of me. The depths of his need to protect me have never known any boundaries.

“Umm. Fifteen when I was scared Paul was going to find a way to drown me.” A scene took up space in the corner of the room when Sullivan’s dad, Steven, caught us in Sullivan’s bed and this time Sullivan wasn’t rounding bases; he was sliding into Home Plate. Three other parents, who were across the street, were woken. Sullivan and I were summoned across the street. Outside of Millerland before we walked to doom, Sullivan took my face in his hands and said, “It will be okay, Baby. I’ll take all the heat. I love you, Bilson Annesley.” “I love you, Sullivan Miller.” He held my hand as we crossed Penny Lane to endure the wrath of being teenagers in love. Eventually, like after an eternity of the three of them yelling at us eventually, the voice of reason, Susan (I think Mom and Pop could have yelled for a week without a break), surrendered and declared what was done was done, and the only sensible thing to do was to get me on the pill. In a terrified whisper I released the truth that I had been on the pill for months. When they interrogated how that happened, I had no choice but to confess that Jocelyn had taken me. Mom made Jocelyn come home from Manhattan that weekend for round #2 of yelling, but she never suggested, even once, making me go off the pill.

“If Pop were going to kill anyone, drowning would definitely be his method. Surprisingly, I think after the shock, Pop handled it better than Mom and Susan did.” *Bilson and Sullivan, get out of that fucking pool, dry off, and get your asses inside. We all know you’re on the pill, but I don’t need to see that shit. What you do in*

Sullivan's bedroom and when you sneak to the park is your business, but in my pool, there will be hand holding, light kissing, and you may get on his back in the pool, not on his front. You keep your hands off her in my pool. Do you understand? Yes, Sir. So we're clear, keep your hands off her breasts in my pool too. And, Sullivan, every time you make her feel beautiful, cherished, treasured. You always make it about her. That's the secret to being happy. You always make her feel beautiful; she will always build you up like a king. You understand me, Son? Yes, Sir. Bilson, go put on a bikini that doesn't look like Band-Aid manufactured it. Sullivan, you can wait for her by the pool, although if you go out there to endure Susan and Haddy who will not be as nice as I am, you are a brave soldier. Sullivan endured. He was always worthy of me.

There was a knock at the door, and Sullivan covered me quickly in case it was Sadie with no regard for rules of decency. And it was. "We're waiting, Fuckers." Then she came over and tried to pull the sheet off me. "Any new tats, Baby Doll?"

I hit her playfully. "Get out! We will be down in a second." She was being antagonistic. Sadie had held my hand through every torturous stick of the needle for every tattoo I had. I hoped Sean had done the same for Sullivan. Sadie put on her best Marilyn sexy strut as she sauntered out of the room. Sarah walked past as she was leaving, and Sadie said, "They're fucking. Shocking."

I heard Sarah say, "They didn't ask you to join? How rude!" God, I love them.

Sullivan tenderly put his hand to my face and brought my attention to him. "I love you, Bilson Annesley," he said before he brought his lips and tongue to mine to explore the depths of my mouth and my passions for him.

When we released each other out of fear of Sadie coming back in, I assured, "I love you, Sullivan Miller." Sullivan grabbed my clothes and handed those to me.

He was always a gentleman to me.

When we made it downstairs and through the living room and into the kitchen, we found Sean, Sarah, and Sadie pulling out food from the fridge like they hadn't eaten in years. They had glasses filled with wine and 90s music playing at a much lower volume than we would have played when we were teenagers and blared our music like we were trying to wake the dead. Now Susan has six precious grandbabies sleeping in Millerland, so low volume is required, or endure grandma wrath - Christmas Eve Tradition is too sacred for that.

"Wine, Love Fuckers?" Sadie teased with a smile. Despite her harassment of me, I fell into her arms completely. She wrapped me tightly and whispered in my ear, "I missed you, Baby."

I closed my eyes. Felt the security of her love, and the conflict of her love. Anxiety was raging inside of her. She was ready to jump out of her skin. "I missed you too," I whispered then offered all I had to calm her anxiety in that moment, "My window is always open for you."

"I'll be okay, Baby Doll. I know tonight is your night with Jocelyn. I love you."

I barely said it back to her before Sean said, "Who's the lovebirds now? Let's drink some wine."

As Sadie and I pulled out of our embrace, Sullivan declared, "We're having cider." His tone left no room for me to argue. I had never heard that tone before. While I stayed caught in his stare, Sarah made us two glasses of cider. I took my glass from her, and the five of us took our seats around the table.

We all raised our glasses as Sadie said, "'And let the wild rumpus start.'"

Our Christmas Eve tradition began the first Christmas Eve after Sarah and Sadie left for UCONN, and it has been upheld through all the marriages and new additions to our family. No matter how life forced us to grow up, every Christmas Eve (except one) we mocked life by being five teenagers who sit at the table devouring Susan Miller food without bothering with senseless things like plates or silverware and dancing and singing in our seats to the songs that would have defined us on that first year our tradition started. There was something so infinite in feeling that we always come back together on Christmas Eve in our UCONN Husky shirts.

I gave myself over completely to these Christmas Eve nights that were filled with the familiarity of family that contrasted my normal existence the rest of the year. Since Sullivan moved out, I've practically made myself an isolated island. Once a month I go to Manhattan to spend a Saturday night with Jocelyn – a tradition that started when I was fourteen and we have maintained even as I have become an adult. *Always me going to her.* Sorry, I didn't mean to think that, let me shift to happier thoughts. Every few months, a weekend with Sullivan. Every year on the first day of summer, I drive to this neighborhood without going to Millerland or Annesleyland. I drive to the neighborhood pond with a bag of bread. Mom is always sitting on the bench. I sit beside her, and silently we feed the ducks. When I run out of bread, she holds my hand. I lay my head on her shoulder. She lays her head on my head. When I'm ready to leave, I kiss her cheek. She's never missed a summer – neither have I. For survival purposes Sadie comes over on Tuesday nights. All the Miller kids except Sullivan live in Hartford, so occasionally the whole family meets for one of the boys' soccer games; it feels achingly similar to our days of Husky football that Millanneseys felt united and unbreakable. There's one difference now: Sullivan isn't with us which is why I don't join them often. Other than those brief encounters with others and my students twice a week, my life is one of solitude, except for my characters.

I got my fill of homemade goodies and a glimpse of the person I used to be then slipped out the front door and walked across the street to the place of other souls with the Annesley last name. Mom's Mercedes Benz G-Class was gone, and Jocelyn was sitting on the porch smoking a cigarette, a Davidoff Classic – her only brand, like she was waiting for me. Jocelyn always seemed to enjoy sitting in the cold. I sat beside her because I love her, not because I love the cold like she does. She handed me a jacket that she had waiting for me. Like she had thirty-one years of experience in babying me the Jocelyn way. "How's life in Bucolic Millerland?"

"Blissful. Still the best food I've ever eaten, and so nice to have time with all of them. The five of us have always been so close." I shared with my sister who probably had more memories of the five of us as little kids than I had. Sadie and Sarah claim they have memories of her spending a lot of time with them. They thought of Jocelyn as a big sister, and thought she was the coolest person they ever met. They even have vivid memories of all of us traveling the entire Northeast to watch Jocelyn swim, and they say watching Jocelyn swim was an unbelievable experience. That I knew as I had my own memories of watching Jocelyn charge through water with all her competitors struggling a lap or two behind her, but in my memories only me and Pop are cheering her on. Her last two months of swimming at Dartmouth – just me cheering.

"I know. I've always been so glad that you had them, Baby Girl. I've always been glad you knew the joy of having a big family even if that was something we couldn't give you." Tears formed in her eyes as she said this, but she wouldn't give herself over to emotion. She wouldn't betray her steel exterior. She changed the subject. "He ask for your hand in marriage again?"

I never shared with Jocelyn like I shared with Sadie. Jocelyn got the evening news highlights. Her fault. She left me to go to Dartmouth while Yale and Pop are less than fifteen minutes away. That I could possibly forgive, but it was the catalyst for the avalanche of pain that Jocelyn has caused me that I can't ever admit. It's fine; merely something else in my life I can't speak into reality for fear of her abandoning me. Permanently.

I didn't want to tell her everything that transpired between me and Sullivan tonight, so I said, "Earlier in the day, not tonight."

"I sure hope one day you say yes. The last thing I want for you, Baby Girl, is to end up like me." With that she flicked her cigarette at Mom's pristine glass Christmas decorations that a professional had arranged about the lawn. She was making a statement.

Stop hurting her, Jocelyn. Please.

Jocelyn stood. "Let's go to bed."

Christmas Day

I awoke to Jocelyn already awake looking at me. “Merry Christmas, Baby Girl,” she said with a kiss on my cheek. We had always slept together on Christmas Eve, well, the ones she was home for.

“Merry Christmas, Josh,” I said like I had when I was little before I could pronounce Jocelyn. She smiled at me calling her Josh. I couldn’t help but reach my hand out and pick up her locket. I was always mesmerized by the intricate details in the design. I was never bold enough to open it for fear of losing a hand. With all the intricate details and the creative design, I was sure Mom made this locket for Jocelyn. Through all the hell they had been through, Jocelyn possessed a fidelity in her love and need for Mom as she had never taken off this locket. I don’t think there is anyone that Jocelyn admires more than Mom. I understand. I have the same affinity, and it broke my heart to know the most amazing woman on earth has her heart broken daily by her daughters.

I hope Sullivan’s Christmas Miracle really does happen.

I released her locket then snuggled into her and was a little surprised she let me. Jocelyn wasn’t the affectionate type like I was, but she did always try where I was concerned. I never felt as complete in Jocelyn’s arms as I did in Mom’s, but I did feel comfortable and more peaceful than battling emotions that stormed and raged when I was in Mom’s arms. All comfort of being in Jocelyn’s arms left me as Jocelyn asked, “What were you dreaming about?”

Shock captured my entire being as I looked at her. “What?”

“You kept saying, ‘Wait. Wait.’ Who were you saying that to?”

They never told me anything. I could be an Annesley too. I rolled over with my back to her, but I took her arm with me. “It doesn’t matter.”

“One day, Baby Girl, you’re going to tell someone all those mysteries you keep locked inside of you. It doesn’t have to be me, but tell someone, please.” I chose a glance around her room to distract me from my dream. Time had stood still in here since Jocelyn left for college. I concentrated on the swim wall with her swim trophies and medals that proudly filled multiple shelves and earned her a full scholarship to Dartmouth. That competitive swimmer wasn’t even the same person who was holding me. I realized how fleeting dreams of all kinds are. “Well, if you’re not going to tell me, I’m going to go open my stocking.” Jocelyn was up and out the door in 2.5 seconds. I stretched and filled in the space with her shadow as we descended the stairs.

When I was really small, the three of them worked hard to make Christmas special for me. Sometimes I didn’t feel it was me they were working so hard for; sometimes I thought they were working hard to feel something from Christmases long past. Eventually, they gave up on trying so hard to make Christmas special for me, or them. *Jocelyn, it looks like that big tree we saw last year. Are all those presents for me? Are those presents supposed to distract me from realizing Mommy won’t get out of the bed? Get Well Soon. Bilson Loves You. Bilson needs you. Susan and I are reading A Wrinkle in Time. It’s my favorite book ever. You should read it with us, Mommy. I don’t understand how you are here but you’re not here, Mommy. I turned five today, Mommy. Susan made me a cake. I know how much you like Susan’s cake. Please come to my party. Please. I started kindergarten today, Mommy. I wanted you to hold my hand. Sullivan held it for you. Get Well Soon. Bilson Loves You. Bilson needs you. Pop and Susan do too.*

“Merry Christmas, My Beautiful Girls!” Pop enthused as we reached the bottom step. He smiled and opened his arms which I ran into immediately excited to see so much life exuding from him. He held me and kissed my head. He smelled like cigars, a smell I had always loved.

I moved aside, and Jocelyn filled the space in his arms. “Merry Christmas, Daddy.” She didn’t call him this often, but it was a kind reminder for him of BB - Before Bilson.

I’m not sure why, but I had always called him Pop.

“Merry Christmas, Little Dolphin,” Pop beamed at Jocelyn, his swimmer.

There was angst between them too, but they weren’t like Mom and Jocelyn. They were carbon copies of each other. With her long, blonde hair most people always said Jocelyn looked like Mom; it always amazed me how much hair was all people saw when they looked at someone. That girl was Paul Annesley made over with Mom’s long golden locks falling all around her. Despite the calm, loving force I’d always known Pop to be, I had no choice but to accept as much like him as Jocelyn is that he must have had some impulsive, hot-headed moments too. I didn’t think Jocelyn was the only Annesley who’d hurt Mom. At times I could see Jocelyn swallow pain he gave her like I swallowed pain Jocelyn gave me. I hated to think who Pop would be without Mom’s loving spirit balancing him out. I had an up-close view with the trainwreck Jocelyn had turned into without a true love. Sometimes Pop couldn’t endure the way Jocelyn treated Mom, and he took control of his household. Jocelyn never yelled at him like she yelled at Mom. Never. They gave each other icy stares that were terrifying. I’d been experiencing those stares since I was five. The first time I tried to save Jocelyn, a courtesy only given once.

Somehow on Christmas those two always found a beautiful reprieve, and I was glad for them to have that. I would love for it to be Christmas every day. Pop gave Jocelyn her stocking first, which she tore through trying not to look so eager to get to the bottom. Jocelyn’s favorite item was always at the bottom: a Montecristo #2 she would smoke with Pop later as they stood on the snowy deck and reminisced about days long gone while I was at the Miller Breakfast and Mom was ... well, I don’t know, but I do know she has a Christmas ritual that we don’t speak of, and she materializes from wherever she has been about 2:00 in the afternoon.

I was quiet as Jocelyn discovered the treats in her stocking then I opened my stocking to find Pop’s constant prank gift of a Yale t-shirt (although a prank, I still had everyone he had ever given me), a journal, purple pens (my favorite to write with), but no cigar. I’m not invited to their yearly club of two – not that I would even know what to do with a cigar; I’m not a true Badass like Jocelyn, I merely try to pretend like one sometimes.

I thanked Pop for my stocking, and knew it was time to excuse myself. I went upstairs to get dressed. The Millers would all still be in pajamas, but I knew when I returned, Mom would be here, and everyone would be nicely dressed for the Annesley Christmas lunch. I selected a purple shirt that was sheer with slits in the arms. I complimented the shirt with a dark pair of jeans, and leather boots that slid right over the jeans to my knees. I would look incredibly out of place at the Millers, but I would make Mom happy.

I liked when there were ways I could make Mom happy.

When I came down, Jocelyn and Pop were already on the deck covered in hooded sweatshirts (green on one head, blue on the other) and puffy coats, and the smoke of cigars was rising above their heads. As much as I could see them on the back deck, I knew they weren’t really there. They were in a pool somewhere detailing stories that one upped each other’s victories. I didn’t interrupt their time with vacant dreams by telling them goodbye. I stopped at my Jeep and reached into the backseat to assemble my gifts marked for Miller Clan.

Suddenly I felt my hips forcefully being pulled backwards, and I was dropping presents. Sullivan threw me against the side of my Jeep pressing himself against me immediately then pressing his lips to mine. He moved his tongue into my mouth and aroused me with his passionate kisses. I was starting to enjoy this new take charge side of Sullivan. Our kisses grew in passion as he started to move against me and put his hand on my breast on top of my clothes. He was hungry for me; I was scared if my backseat hadn’t been full of presents that he would have thrown me on it and made love to me right in my driveway. I almost drowned in his passion for me then reality made me its bitch. We were in my driveway where everyone could see us making out. With it being Christmas that really meant everyone. People we went to school with were home. Moms who had watched us grow up could be looking out their windows. His mom could be looking out her window. That stopped me. “Sullivan, we’re in public,” I breathlessly released instead of releasing him from his pajama bottoms like I wanted to.

Sullivan took his hand from my breast, rested both hands on my hips, and rested his forehead against my forehead. "I'm sorry, Baby. You bending over in those damn tight jeans then me turning you around to see that beautiful face that Aphrodite sculpted herself, I couldn't help myself." He stopped for a minute to sing to me. I loved Sullivan's raspy voice, "Can I have a picture of you tonight? Keep it with me always in my mind." "Fifteen Minutes Old" by Snow Patrol, the song I put on repeat when I needed to feel lost without having to feel guilty about that, when I wanted to dance sensually for myself, when I wanted to access the pieces of me that belonged to me, and only me, when I needed to stand inside myself and see the blackness meet the beauty. He wanted me to feel beautiful. Always. He had always been talented at that. On occasion, I allowed him into my secret garden. We waltzed to this song, the prelude to passion, to love making, to getting lost in a different way. "God, Bilson, I could get lost in you." His lustful eyes burnt a hole in me.

I ran my hands through his wild hair. I knew I was torturing him even more, but *All's fair in love and war*. I was torturing myself as much. I ached for last night again. "I could let you, but I think we are expected at breakfast and neither of us have the strength to endure Susan Miller if we hold up her Christmas Breakfast."

Sullivan released a laugh saying, "You speak the truth, Woman." He grabbed some of my hair and twirled it in his fingers before saying, "I came to help you carry presents, but there's something I need to tell you first." I thought he was going to petition for marriage again, but I knew after last night there wouldn't be another proposal until he thought I was whole. "Whatever hell I have to go through to make you whole, I'll do it, Bilson. I promise. It hasn't all been your fault, Baby. I let Sean do my part sometimes because I couldn't bear to see you cry. I wasn't strong enough for you. I promise to be from now on. Our troubled years hurt me in ways I never could have imagined, but they've strengthened me too. For some reason I know before you know that our lives are about to change. I will step up, Bilson. I will be the man you need in every area. I don't need an answer right now because everything I gave you is only words. I'll patiently wait for my chance to align action with those words. May I walk you across the street, Bilson Annesley?"

I had needed to hear those promises since I was twelve and Sean started taking up the responsibility of quiet fortitude while I cried. Maybe it doesn't have to be that I'm getting to the surface. Maybe I can let Sullivan help to pull me out. "I would be most honored, Sullivan Miller." Sullivan helped me get presents out of my Jeep then we started out of my driveway. When we got to the sidewalk, Sullivan shifted presents, so he could hold my hand as we crossed the street. He had been doing this since we were four years old when there was a fracture in the street and between the Millanneseys that could still be felt by all of us.

We walked into Millerland and were greeted by hugs and "Merry Christmas"es from everyone then the four oldest grandsons, Sarah and Sadie's sons who ranged from four to seven years old, showed me what Santa brought them. Sean came down the stairs with a baby boy in each arm saying, "Hey, Bils, you finally say yes to the poor guy?" His blonde wife, Sonya, was walking behind him. I was happy when Sean married Sonya that there was another blonde in the Miller family, but mostly I was happy to see someone make Sean abundantly happy - the end of my guilt that I couldn't wholly belong to both Miller boys.

"I think I'm wearing her down," Sullivan said with a wink to his big brother as he relieved him of one of the babies. Since Sadie's first son was born, I had loved seeing Sullivan with a baby in his arms. He was natural with kids, like his mother.

"Bilson, please make an honest man out of my boy," Steven teased, I assume trying to give me his blessing. He was Sullivan's father. I would be polite. "I'm getting too old to fix that damn trellis every year. Maybe if you two are married, you will use our very functional front door."

"A wise man would take down the trellis, Dad," Sadie joined in on the teasing never missing a moment to give me a hard time. Then she gave me a wink. Sadie teased me mercilessly in front of everyone else, but she always found a way to show me love. Her wink showed how much she knew I loved climbing in Sullivan's window. She knew more than anyone how much I loved Sullivan. How much I needed him. How inevitable it was

that I hurt him. Sadie held me through all of it. She never silently bestowed me with condemning looks like everyone else did when Sullivan left us. Sullivan didn't leave me; he left all of us. There was a fracture in the original five – twenty-five years of completely seamless love and inseparability between the five of us, and I singlehandedly brought us down. I feared I would be the second person Sweet Sarah “accidentally” hit with her softball bat then said, “Oops,” with a devilish grin on her face. For nine months three others would barely speak to me (one wouldn't speak to me at all), but Sadie constantly assured me despite all evidence to the contrary at the time that Sullivan would be back. He'd be a little darker, but he would be back and under all the darkness still be My Sullivan. Sadie even helped me write my latest book. At first, she was against it, unequivocally against it. However, when I told her it had to be done because I had to start healing or I was going to lose Sullivan forever, Sadie left all protest behind and shadowed me through every phrase. Together we took on every cursed blow life had delivered to us, and we painted over the scars with restorative inscription.

We know that we have about three days until the Millanneseys fracture again.

God, please let Sullivan's Christmas Miracle arrive.

“Hey, don't give him any ideas,” Sullivan demanded to his big sister when she teased about taking down the trellis. “Bilson sneaking into my window is my favorite part of Christmas.”

“And I thought it was my cooking,” Susan said with a smile as she came in from the kitchen.

I beamed immediately at seeing my soulmate. Susan was so beautiful, and I swear she was one of those women who got more beautiful with age. Her pretty blue eyes were glowing like they had since she'd been cemented in love. Beautiful wasn't the word for Susan like it was for Mom. Susan was wildly gorgeous. She was Heathcliff, but instead of a destructive Kathryn, Susan met Haddy and Paul who were captivated by her wildness and ran with her in the Moors. Susan recently, like five days ago recently, turned 63 (Mom got three months a year she could say Susan was nine years younger than her instead of ten) and didn't look a day over 40. Like time froze her in a mythical capsule when she and Mom finally got together. When, in Susan's words, she finally felt complete.

I looked over at Steven, only a year older than Susan, but he looked older than Mom and Pop's age. Old wasn't exactly the right word. Derelict. *Sorry you couldn't hold on to her. Maybe you shouldn't have held on so tightly. Vice grips have a way of rusting and weakening.*

Sullivan kissed his mother on the cheek and said, “Of course, Ma,” in response to her cooking being his favorite part of Christmas. Then he sent me a wink like Sadie had.

Susan smiled saying, “Breakfast is ready. Get in line. Don't be greedy. Make sure everyone gets some.”

“Ma, you probably made enough to feed the whole neighborhood,” Sean shouted as he and Sullivan fought for the first in line position like they had since we were kids. This year they were making their plates with a baby boy in their arms which didn't seem to slow down either of them at all from their competition of who could get the most on his plate.

Everyone else jumped in line too, but as much as I was starved for food, I was more starved for time alone with Susan. Susan and I locked eyes. She smiled at me and said, “Get over here, My Darling Girl.” I flung myself into her arms. Immediately I was enveloped in a feeling of knowing my place in the world for a moment. We clung to each other longer than we should have, but there was peace and solace we could offer to each other, even through silence. We had always understood each other completely, often without the burden of dialogue. All her kids were loud, and I was her quiet, literary one, who communicated in ways far surpassing speech, and, yes, I was one of her kids. Through the years, we had endured several jokes from the other four that I was her favorite. Susan would tease back that she loved all five of her kids equally. She did love us all equally, but love isn't the way you feel about a soulmate. At your best, and if you can't get there, I will get you there, is how Susan and I always felt together.

Susan pulled away but held my arms in her hands as I left my arms on her waist. She smiled. "Someone put a big dent in my wedding cake cookies last night."

"You should do something about that rat problem you have," I teased with a smile.

"Those blonde-haired blue-eyed rats are hard to get rid of," Susan said with a big smile.

"I heard a rumor that the rat enjoyed the cookies immensely if that's any consolation." I gave her a Haddy Annesley smile.

"That's all the consolation I need, Baby." She said with a smile then led me to the couch for us to talk while we waited for the line to decrease. I cradled into her. Waited. I knew she was about to read me the riot act. I felt it coming. I lifted so she could look at me while she yelled at me, "If I pick up the phone to hear Haddy crying like last night again, I'm coming after you. You know that right?"

"I wrote her a note. I took it to her this time. I slept on her shoulder. I'm trying, Susan. I promise."

"You think she didn't tell me about your construction paper note? We talked her entire drive she was so upset. I'm tired as hell from staying up with her while she drove. You think the grandbabies are going to let me sleep in on Christmas? There's not enough coffee in the world today. I'm done with your notes, Bilson. You're going to start giving her words."

"Notes are words," I dared then wished to bring that back to my mouth.

"I will knock you into the new year if you sass me again." I had no doubt she would find a way to do it. Susan never handled me with care. She loved me too much for that. She knew I had learned how to turn on my blonde and blue to make people think I was extremely sensitive, so they left me alone. I wasn't sensitive. You can't be Sadie's other half and be sensitive, but I was reserved. I locked a lot of me inside. I'd vanish inside myself if others left me alone like I plotted.

This is why soulmates don't handle with care.

"I'm so sorry, Susan. I'm so sorry." Harshness retreated from her, and compassion filled her completely. This is how Susan always was with me. I treasured her to the depths of me for it. "I promise to try when I go home." Then I tried a Haddy strategy. "I think a lot of my pain would be eased by enjoying a Susan Miller breakfast," I said with a mischievous smile.

"Haddy Freakin' Jr.," Susan said like she was annoyed with me. She couldn't endure long, but way longer than she endured with Her Haddy. "Let's go, Darling Girl." I got up quickly and filled a plate with food that was only had at Millerland.

I sat beside Sadie hoping for one of our books and movies conversations. Our books and movies conversation had been seamless throughout our lives, mere pauses when we were apart that picked up at the same place when we intersected again. I think the conversation started when I was five. Susan took her four kids plus me (the way she seemed to go everywhere then) to see *Big*, and Sadie and I hashed out everything we would do if we woke up as adults. I remember the start of our endless conversation distinctly because I think it was the first time Sadie saw me as a real person instead of her personal baby doll. This was a crowning moment in my life.

Although I chose Sadie at the table while I ate, I chose Sullivan's lap in the living room while we opened presents. I told myself with this many people, there wasn't room for me to have my own seat. The true part of myself knew I savored the moments I shed the blackened parts of me and felt loved and safe with Sullivan's arms wrapped around me. I relaxed and sank deeper into him. He closed his arms tighter around me. I felt the weight of every time I hurt him try to steal this moment from me. He's the person I loved most in the world, and the one I had hurt the most too. How was it possible for those two realities to coexist? Yet, they did, and their coexistence filled me with shame and constant retreating to ensure I never hurt him again. *That you would give everything in you to protect the good in someone else.* I didn't want to retreat anymore. I wanted to stay in his arms forever.

I'm sure this sounds like an odd gift, but Susan gave me a can opener and a bag of wedding cake cookies. It was the most meaningful gift I received. Susan is the coolest.

When I returned to Annesleyland, Mom had returned. She and Jocelyn were in the kitchen pretending to assemble our very late lunch (good thing I ate until my heart's content then went back for seconds at Millerland) as Pop sat in the recliner watching *A Christmas Story*. For once, I opted for the kitchen instead of the recliner. I promised Susan that I would try.

"Lilies. Those were always her favorite," Jocelyn said as I entered the kitchen before all sound and life disappeared.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt," I said trying to disappear myself after the distraught look on both of their faces that I dared to enter the kitchen.

"It's okay, Baby," Mom said so sweetly trying to dispel the awkwardness.

I promised Susan I would try. "Who loves lilies?"

Mom and Jocelyn shared a look of understanding then another look. Then Jocelyn said, "Diane Sawyer. We watched her in an interview where she said that Mike Nichols filled their house with lilies every year on Christmas Day before he died." Jocelyn is a terrible liar, but I wasn't about to call attention to that. *See, Susan, the barriers between us aren't all my doing.*

"Can I help with lunch?" I normally would not have asked such a thing since I can't cook at all, like mother like daughter, but they were being pleasant instead of seeming like they were about to throw knives at each other. I wanted the three of us to have a relationship so badly.

"No, Darling. We have it under control. I'm sure Pop would love some time with you," Mom placated as she walked over, gave me one of her awesome Christmas vodka and cranberry martinis (Mom is an excellent bartender) then sent me out the door to watch *A Christmas Story* for the twenty-seventh time. *I guess right now is time for Mom and Jocelyn to have a relationship, and hopefully, they will include me eventually. God, you didn't have to fill me with this much patience. Give me a little more time, Bilson. I'm working behind the scenes this very minute, and your Pop would love for you to come see him.*

I laid a plastic bag full of rocky road cookies on the counter as I walked out saying, "Jocelyn, Susan sent those for you." The first ones Susan had made for Jocelyn in decades.

I didn't want to accept how my life was about to change, but after Sullivan's reaction to wine last night, I reluctantly snuck into the bathroom and poured the delicious heaven down the drain. Mom's drinks were so delicious, it was hard to do, but I made a promise in my chair a few months ago. I did allow myself to indulge in one sip and the floating cranberries though.

I sat my martini glass on the table beside Pop's recliner as I briefly curled up with him. He was sleeping. I doubted he would know I was there, but he put his hand on my back like he had when I was small and climbed in the recliner with him. I laid on him for a while and soaked in his adoration for me that always made me feel so lovely, so beautiful, so safe, so his.

I needed to let my thoughts run about all Sullivan said when we were standing beside my Jeep. About marriage and changes. I was scared Pop could read my mind even though he was asleep. I whispered, "Don't go yet, Pop. Your girls still need you." Like Mom, sometimes I didn't play fair.

Pop stirred smiling at me, "I can't ever sleep in this recliner without a little girl getting in here with me."

I smiled and said, "Your fault for being so charming."

"My pleasure to enjoy such lovely beauty beside me. You're looking more like your mother every day." Pure love was written all over that man's face as he said it.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.”

“I’m going to have some time alone for a minute, Pop.”

“Sure, Bilson.” Before I could get up, he put his hand (the hand with his wedding band still attached to him. Mom wore a band too with a two-karat square Alexandrite gem that was raised in the center and three, one karat enchanting Alexandrite gems on each side. I doubted it was her wedding band because Susan wore an identical ring) on my face and said, “I love you, Bilson. You know that, don’t you?”

I stared at him thinking, *Please don’t be telling me goodbye. Please*, but assured, “I know it to the core of me. I love you, Pop.” I kissed his cheek then retreated to my room.

I lay on my bed covered with a *Ross and Rachel Forever* comforter and pillowcases that read, *He’s Her Lobster*. I only got to run through my thoughts for a few minutes before Jocelyn busted into my room without knocking and flung herself on my bed. She looked down then said, “*Ross and Rachel Forever*. I remember when we bought this comforter. After Mom let you stay with me on Saturdays, I took you shopping. You had to have a *Friends* bedspread and poster. I thought you were going to get one with all of them drinking milkshakes, but you saw this one and that was all she wrote. You said the lobster episode was your favorite then you quickly changed your mind and said how much you loved the episode where Ross and Rachel finally kissed in Central Perk. You said that was the most romantic kiss you’d ever seen. You were so fascinated with this show that I started watching it every Thursday night so we could discuss it on the weekends you visited. I didn’t really care for the show, but I liked doing something you liked.”

You did something for me? You did something I was interested in? “You never told me you didn’t like the show,” I said remembering the weekend she took me shopping for the bedspread. I glanced up and on the ceiling above my bed was a poster of the six of them drinking milkshakes, but for my bed, I chose *Ross and Rachel Forever*. Thank you, Josh.

“I would never have told you that at the time. You talked about Ross, Rachel, Monica, Chandler, Phoebe, and Joey like they were your best friends,” Jocelyn said rolling her eyes. In a rare affectionate Jocelyn moment, she put her hand on my face. “I know you, Baby Girl. He’s the one thing you’ve always loved. Stop torturing yourself.” Jocelyn was the only one who wasn’t telling me to stop torturing Sullivan. “He’s your lobster. Do you need to hear me say it?”

Could we stay here forever like this, Josh? You looking at me. You really seeing me. Stay here with me. “Maybe I did,” I finally said like my reservations with marriage were resolved because Jocelyn said Sullivan is my lobster. Since we were talking intimately, I decided to attempt the impossible. “What was going on with you and Mom in the kitchen?”

Jocelyn’s control of being able to tell me how to run my love life faded as I brought up something uncomfortable for her. She yanked her hand from my face, rolled back slightly, and stared at the ceiling. “It was nothing. Don’t worry about it.” *I knew you wouldn’t stay.*

“Jocelyn, I’m not a little kid anymore. You can stop protecting me.”

“Maybe it’s not you I’ve been protecting,” Jocelyn said getting off the bed and heading toward my door. “Lunch is ready,” I heard with her back turned toward me and saw blonde hair bouncing around as her pace quickened to get away from me. *And there I was, three years old. She took me over to Susan’s house. I’ll call you every night, Baby Girl. Kiss. I watched out the window as her hair bounced as she walked across the street to her Jeep to drive to Dartmouth. To leave me. She’s not really going to go. The Jeep pulled away. I couldn’t see it anymore. Bye, Josh.*

I got off the bed myself and stood in front of my dresser looking at pictures of me and Sullivan from high school. We looked like the Ken and Barbie of Lyman Hall High School with him looking incredibly handsome with dirt on his face and his dark hair sweaty after a football game and lifting me in his arms with my long, blonde hair falling all around us. He looked so happy. But those were the simple days when no one questioned that we were meant for each other. We had practically been a couple since we were a year old. Of course, he looked happy; everything was always black and white for Sullivan. He liked math. He liked football. He liked music. He loved me.

I was more inclined to the literature side of academics which was about deciphering the gray.

The simple days changed without warning when we went to college, and I started questioning everything. My first semester at UCONN was the first time I was away from the life the Millanneseys carved out on Penny Lane, and I didn't have Mom and Susan posted on each side of me to keep me from coming apart at the seams. I was exposed to in-depth literature that demanded personal resonance, making the pain surrounding me impossible to keep at bay any longer. For over seven years I fought against that pain swallowing me whole and tried not to let it steal the essence of me as Susan demanded. In-depth literature also taught me that all resilient heroes met the day they succumb to the darkness surging through them, and I met that day in my sophomore year. That day, the first day, compromised who I was and who I wanted to be, but I almost felt powerless against the Rough Darkness like I was finally juxtaposing with a part of me that had been fated for me since I was twelve years old.

Although during our college years I felt that I was changing drastically, and not for the better, Sullivan stayed the same sweet, loving gentleman I had always known. The only change for Sullivan was the scorched heart I gave him because when you are part of a couple, there's no way to take on darkness without burning the innocent lovingly holding your hand.

I nostalgically touched the picture of us from high school before I started down the stairs feeling like I was met by the sorrowful air left by Jocelyn when she descended the stairs moments before.

The kitchen and living room were the hub of activity for our house, but Mom enjoyed times when the four of us shared a meal in her formal dining room. Every year Mom put all of herself into designing an elegant Christmas ambiance for her dining room. The dining room table got the most of her. There was a red and gold tablecloth and a beautiful centerpiece with holly, pinecones, and a large red candle in the center. The plates and serving dishes were Charter Club of the Holly Berry line, and a beautiful turkey from some restaurant in Hartford, I was certain, displayed proudly among them. Mom was good at summoning the appearance that this turkey was her own creation. You gotta love her.

Mom smiled as Pop gave her a hug and said, "Lunch looks great, Haddy." Then, like a true gentleman, he pulled her chair out for her. They had separate bedrooms for as long as I could remember. The details of their marriage were an enigma to me, but they were always respectful to one another. Always. (Well, there may have been one gap in their respect when I was six and a half until I was seven. I know what you're thinking. That was right after Jocelyn and Mom threw dishes at each other - the first time. I'm sure that timing isn't a coincidence. However, I was too young to understand much of it. I only understood that Pop was in charge of being the real parent for those six months, and I could sneak over to Millerland if I needed some motherly love) Mom and Pop loved to tease each other. Mom could call him a "Fucking Asshole" in one breath, and "You're such a good man, Pauly" in the next while she made him a margarita. Pop could call her a "Hard Core Bitch" then buy her a pumpkin pie that he delivered with a smile and a wink. Mom wrote, "MMM" with a knife in the center before they ate the whole pie together then shot pool in our basement. Mom always kicked his ass. *Shhh, Bilson. It's not polite to reveal someone's secrets.* Pop was never insecure when she kicked his ass. He knew how astonishing Mom was, and he loved to let Haddy run and play. Whenever Mom said, "I fucking hate you," Pop smiled so big then wrapped his arms around her. Tightly. Transported himself somewhere. Mom let him. Probably went there

with him. The peak of their marriage – I think I’ve heard Mom tease him about that a few times. They were such passionate people, this was how they said, *I love you*. They were fascinating to grow up with. They were best friends. They knew each other. Completely. And accepted each other. Flaws and all. They were my pillars, plus Susan, of course. I always knew they deeply cared for each other. Sometimes they smiled at each other in a way that revealed they had once been madly in love. Complete together. Those moments were beautiful to witness.

We took possession of our seats. Pop carved the turkey, and I was glad to see juice seep out which meant that this year Mom hadn’t reheated the turkey to the point of too dry. Drying out a beautiful turkey was Mom’s specialty. She always tried for us on Christmas though. Mom would do anything for the people she loved. No matter how dried out the turkey was, we ate her loving attempt. Once our plates were made with a slice of turkey, a scoop of mashed potatoes, and a helping of green beans that still allowed plenty of room to see the design underneath, Pop said grace, “Lord, thank you for these and all other blessings.”

The sounds of forks touching the plates as we ate could be heard, because unlike Millerland, no one here uttered a word. With how pleasant Mom and Jocelyn seemed yesterday and today, I hoped this meal would have more life than our other Christmas lunches in the past years. Despite their pleasantness, after Pop said grace, Sorrow that had swallowed them whole a long time ago seemed to enter, and it almost seemed impolite that we didn’t make him a plate. After his appearance, there were a few glances at each other, an occasional compliment about the food, but mostly silence and disappointment. *I’m sorry you were hurt*.

When we were finishing our lunch, we heard the roar of a motorcycle in the driveway. Jocelyn was on her feet in an instant with a wistful look I had never seen before. She hurried to the front door, and I was right behind her to see what all the rush was about. She stood on the porch for only a moment before she was walking fast to the man in the driveway getting off his Harley and taking off his helmet. He was about Jocelyn’s age, but it was clear that he was as handsome and rugged of a man that existed. He was tall and muscular with black/gray hair and an unshaven face, but not a beard. He had piercing blue eyes that reminded me of mine, and I was dying to know who this man was especially seeing the reaction that he brought out in my sister. Throughout the years I had known that Jocelyn had taken several lovers, but that’s all they were: lovers. She had never shown an interest in any of them except for sexual pleasure. The look on her face now was one of pure love like this man could unlock all the secrets bound inside of her. There were no words; he grabbed her forcefully and brought her into a passionate kiss that even I couldn’t write for my characters. Jocelyn abandoned all of herself as she let herself get swept up by this man’s fervent kisses. I stood watching this kiss that went on for minutes. It was so beautiful and passionate I couldn’t look away if I had tried, but I didn’t even try. I was thrilled to see Jocelyn so swept up in passion and overcome with curiosity to know who this man was who brought it out of her (A part of me knew what I was witnessing, why I couldn’t look away. A part of me knew this would be the only time I got to see this, be a part of the love that created me, and I was glad to see it was love. His eyes are exactly like mine. They won’t tell me about anything before I was born. It was all about to collide. As beautiful as this moment was, the majority of me wasn’t ready for acceptance. For a fracture that would solely belong to Annesleys).

Without notice, hurt seemed to take over Jocelyn’s face. The pain on her face was so clear that my heart broke looking at her. This man had hurt her before. He had broken her in a million tiny pieces, and that pain was coming back to her now. She reached out and grabbed abandonment and brought it back to her as she pushed this man away and wiped tears from her eyes.

He looked as hurt as she did. He placed his hands on her arms like he was trying not to detonate a bomb. Now I wanted him to leave. I didn’t want to see Jocelyn crumble in front of him and let him know how deeply he must have hurt her. I didn’t want him to see that he had so much power over her, but I couldn’t be the one to tell him to leave. That was Jocelyn’s job.

“Josie,” he started. Josie? I had never heard anyone call her that before. “I knew the moment I first laid eyes on you that you were all I needed to be complete. All these years without you, I have existed as a shell of a

man.” He was good. I will give him that. “I wish I could take it all back. I can’t, but if there is anything in my life that I regret, it is leaving you and the baby. I will spend the rest of ...”

“You had a baby?” I cut him off as surprise shot out of my mouth.

Jocelyn turned to me genuinely shocked to see me standing there. She had been so engrossed in this man she hadn’t noticed me out there, but now she turned all her attention to me. She looked deep into my eyes like she was trying to implore something of me. She took my hands in her own then said, “Yes, she was born on my fifteenth birthday.”

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t breathe. I wanted to scream for her to let go of me, but I couldn’t breathe, so I couldn’t scream. I tried to back away. I tried to take possession of my own hands, but she wouldn’t let go. The pressure building inside of me had to release so tears were the first course of action, vomiting was the second. She released me then. I threw up on the snow covering Mom’s perfect lawn then I ran as fast as I could.

I ran for miles with tears falling from my face. My stylish boots were not made for running, but I couldn’t stop running for fear the spinning of the Earth would catch up to me and fling me from the planet. I fought the boots for miles until my hurting feet couldn’t be ignored any longer. I couldn’t breathe. I was getting a cramp in my side. Tears were falling so fast I couldn’t see where I was going. I stopped. I just stopped. I looked around to discover that I was in the park, a place I had come to often as a child and a place where Sullivan and I snuck out to many nights as teenagers (and adults). I was amazed that my crazy, random running had subconsciously brought me here. I threw up again then went to the swings. I could feel how cold the seat was even through my jeans. While I had been running, the cold had been welcomed, but now I was starting to feel numb. I could see my breath, and my hands were turning purple to match my sheer shirt. Even turning purple, I sat motionless on the swing and admitted that feeling numb was preferable to the explosion of my entire existence that was going on.

November 17, 1995

I climbed out of my window at 2AM. I had been lying in bed for a long time not able to sleep, not able to endure being awake anymore either. I was going to jump out of my skin. It was the first time I considered hurting myself. I knew I had to do something. Anything. I climbed out my window, but I didn’t cross Penny Lane. I wasn’t even sure where I was going. I needed my mom. Swings. My ample led me to the park so I could have her again. This beautiful moment before she left me for a while. She was in her room, but she left me. I got to the swings. I propelled as fast and as high as I could then I screamed my lungs out. Then I let the swing slow. I wrapped my elbows around the chains, so I didn’t fall off as I let myself go limp and wail. I didn’t make one attempt to stop myself from wailing uncontrollably. I had to have release.

I wasn’t wailing long before Sean was in the swing beside me quietly waiting. I sank out of the swing to the ground. He sank with me and held my hand supplying me with his fortitude. I think we were there for an hour with him holding my hand. When I calmed, I cradled into him. “Sean, how did you know I was here?”

“I’ve felt something was wrong with you for a long time since you missed school that day. I’ve been trying to keep a close eye on you. I saw you climb out, and I followed you to make sure you were safe. Please don’t come here by yourself anymore, Bilson. I won’t stop you from screaming and crying. I won’t even ask for explanation if you don’t want me to, but if you won’t let Sullivan protect you right now, let me. I’ll hold you. I’ll let you cry. I’ll be a good man in the storm.”

“Thank you, Sean. You and Sullivan are such good guys. I’m sorry I can’t have you both.”

“You can, Bilson, in our way. I told Sullivan about the kiss.”

A few months before Sean, Sullivan, and I were watching a movie. Sarah and Sadie were fifteen now. At a party, leaving the three of us alone. Sullivan fell asleep. There was a moment in the movie that was so funny I laughed out loud which was rare for me. Sean looked at me and the glow on my face, and I think he couldn't help himself. He kissed me. He gave me a beautiful kiss and became the third Miller who kissed me. Then he pulled away and said, "I know you're Sullivan's girl, but you belong to me a little too, don't you?" I belonged to all four of them a little. I laid my head on his chest, and he cradled me while we finished watching the movie.

"Sullivan was understanding when I told him, and I promised him it wouldn't happen again. Our kiss didn't cause you to be this upset, did it?"

I rose and smiled at him. "No, Sean. I liked our kiss. Don't ever doubt that. Sullivan and I talked about it too. Everything is fine with the three of us. I can't tell you why I'm upset, but I will accept your friendship and your protection if you're still willing to come out here to hold me when I cry."

"Anytime, Bilson. I'll get us some walkie talkies, and we can come up with code names."

"You're such a good guy, Sean." I knew being good like his mother was very important to him. He smiled that I said that.

"May I hold your hand and walk you back to Penny Lane?"

"I would be most honored, Sean."

We walked in silence for a while then Sean said, "I'm so sorry about everything going on with Haddy and Jocelyn."

"I miss her so much, Sean."

"We all miss her, Bilson, but I know not as much as you do. I'm so sorry, Bilson. I've tried to ask Mom about it, but she won't say anything."

"Yeah, my mom won't either. Whatever happened must be really bad, but I just want to see my sister."

"I'll start praying for a thirteenth birthday miracle for you."

"That's a long way away."

"That might be as good as you're going to get."

"Thank you for your prayers." I hugged him in front of our houses then said, "Goodnight, Sean."

"Goodnight, Bilson."

*This time I didn't propel on the swings or scream or cry. I permitted numbness to take me over until the cold was ruthless in cutting into me. Was this really how I wanted to go? I thought I might need to start running again - where I didn't know. Sullivan's truck pulled into a parking spot and his headlights shined on me sitting on the swing. He looked like the best Christmas present ever, and I left the swing to get into his warm vehicle. As soon as I got in, he handed me a puffy coat and gloves, then moved so he could hold me while I cried. *He really is going to step up and be my good man in the storm.* When I could speak, I said, "How did you know I needed you? How did you know where I was?"*

"Jocelyn came over to the house and asked me to find you. She didn't tell me what happened, but she said you were really upset. I knew where to come."

"I didn't have a plan when I took off running. I somehow ended up here."

"We always end up here, Baby. It's our place. This is the first place we made love, and the place I always come to find you. Now tell me what happened?"

I took a deep breath. I wasn't sure I was ready to say it out loud. That would make it true, and I still couldn't believe it. Like the time I had sex with someone besides him our sophomore year. I didn't want to tell him. I didn't want to make it part of his truth, the blackness and ugliness I really was. Still, it was the truth, and I had to tell him. After the first time, I hurt him four more times. Blackness. Ugliness. Roughness. Then, I slithered back into his bed and his heart because I was selfish and in love with him and needed him, but needed others too.

There was no ambiguity in the guys I chose. They all had the same M.O.: Bad Boys - so bad you could look at them and know you should run like hell from them. I didn't run from them. I let them use my body as the vessel to host the badness coursing all the way through them. Despite the crazy ways I gave my body to these men, I never kissed a one of them. They didn't care. They weren't the kissing kind. They were the kind who didn't care about your name or your pleasure, only cared to use your body for rough sex, so rough I had to mentally escape at times. Then I would go in search immediately of my gentle, loving, protective Sullivan because the thought of my life without Sullivan would destroy me completely.

(After the fourth bad boy, Susan showed up at my dorm unannounced and alone. Sullivan never told anyone, even Sean, about my cheating, but eventually he broke down and went to Susan for guidance about these bad boys. He had shown no concern for himself at all. He was only concerned about me, that I would allow them to use my body like that. He was concerned about what it was doing to me, and he couldn't comprehend that anyone would use another person the way they were using me. *Please tell me what happened to you*, Susan tearfully pleaded. I had a feeling she knew but wasn't quite capable of the forceful confrontation it would require to force me to talk. I had a feeling she wasn't ready to accept it herself. Eventually she accepted both of our agonizing internal abodes for the time being and did the only thing she could do: embrace me and fill me with her love before she went back to Penny Lane)

These conflicting necessities haunted us both and caused a turbulent relationship until we were twenty-six, and I finally hurt him so badly he left me. Sullivan left me. I had taken a few summers I didn't come home in order to fast track my PhD, so I was in my second year of teaching at UCONN, and Sullivan was in his first year of teaching. We were renting a small house together that we had been renting for a couple of years, and we thought we were through all the hard parts. He cancelled one of his classes to surprise me, but I'm the one who surprised him by being in his bed with another bad boy. Hearing about these bad boys had been torment enough, but having to see me in his own bed with one, I'm not sure there are words for that type of torment. I had not done this since our senior year (since my talk with Susan), and Sullivan had started to trust me again. I started to trust me again too, then the rabbit hole sucked me in deeper. Was I desperately begging Sullivan to save me from myself? It felt like the moment I made the choice to go down this path again, Sullivan cancelled his class to come protect the good in me. Everything ached in me as he looked at me like he finally accepted there wasn't any good left. He grabbed a few of his things and walked out. He called later that night to tell me he would be by the next day to get the rest of his stuff and that I better not fucking be there.

It was early December, but right then he accepted a position at Syracuse University and as soon as exams were over, he got as far away from me as he could. He didn't even come home for Christmas - the original five were fractured. Sarah literally almost killed me that I took her little brother away from her, and that her mother had to endure a Christmas without all her babies home. Sean didn't threaten murder, but he barely spoke to me or looked at me. I got Sullivan's new number from Sadie, but he ignored my calls. He returned my letters. He didn't speak to me at all even the following summer when my first book was published. I went on book tour, but I made my publicist keep the last weekend in September free. I went to The Lodge at Woodloch in the Poconos prepared to be disappointed. I opened the door to room 319, and there he was sitting on the bed with a dozen stargazer lilies, my favorite. Tears formed in my eyes immediately but tore down my face uncontrollably when he said, "I guess I would rather protect you a little than not at all."

Since then, I certainly haven't cheated on him, and I have tried to put myself into overdrive to restore myself, and us, so eventually we could be married. But I desired our marriage to be true and so defined that it could never be broken or even dented again. After all we've been through, we deserved that, even if Sullivan was desperately trying to speed up the process to make it happen before we were ready. I knew I would have to be the one who brought strength and patience and set limitations. We've had a long-distance relationship since then which is hard because we've been together every day since we were a year old, but the distance helps now. We share weekends every few months and our breaks from teaching. We love while we are together and heal in our times apart. He's too much of a gentleman to force me to see the damage I've done to him. I really believe he thought if I would marry him, all our pain would disappear; marriage would magically fix us. I've been closely examining two marriages on Penny Lane and one female relationship for most of my life. I knew marriage wasn't the magic prescription that fairy tales tried to trap us into believing that it was. I felt fraught every time I refused him, but I had to hold steady to what I knew to be true.

He didn't ask me to marry him last night, and he showed up to weather the storm, he didn't send Sean. *He is strong now too.*

Understanding love and marriage isn't the only thing I've chased most of my life. I was always in search of something trying to make pieces of things I knew and things I'd been told fit together. This big something I have chased my whole life that I didn't even know what it was, and maybe all along it was the truth that I am Jocelyn's daughter. That her getting pregnant with me at fourteen was the big disappointment that sucked the life out of our family, yet still lived large within us and every breath we took and word we spoke. There it was. It was real now.

"A man showed up. Jocelyn was clearly in love with this man, but also clearly hurt by him. He made future promises to her then apologized for past regrets. One of those regrets was leaving her and the baby."

"Jocelyn had a baby?" He asked. I was trying not to go too fast for him. I couldn't catch up myself, and I had witnessed her telling me firsthand.

"I was surprised too, but more surprised to find out that baby was me."

"What?!" Sullivan screamed, not able to hold in his shock. "I'm sorry ..."

"It's okay. I was shocked too. I still am."

"I can't imagine what you must be feeling," Sullivan said taking my gloved hand in his.

"I don't know what I am feeling. Everything feels so confusing. It makes sense with the big age difference between us, but it also turns my whole world upside down."

"I understand that. Did Jocelyn tell you anything about it?"

"I didn't give her a chance. I ran away as fast as I could."

"Are you ready to listen to her yet?" Sullivan asked sweetly, always wanting to make sure I was ready for anything life was throwing my way.

"No, I'm not, but could we go to your house?"

"Of course." He put the truck in reverse and didn't question that Millerland was the place I needed to be when my whole world was exploding around me.

"I was finally having hope there would be some restoration in our family. Mom and Jocelyn were getting along this Christmas. Now this. We may never recover from him showing up. And Pop is sick, Sullivan. I know he is. Now he is forced to relive Jocelyn getting pregnant with me, and that man leaving her during her hardest time. Do you know how much Pop loves me and Jocelyn? His little girl at fourteen was pregnant and abandoned. That must have killed Pop. Pop treats Mom like a queen. He treats us like queens. He took time with you and

Sean to teach you to be good men.” I spewed feeling the weight of the world falling onto me. Then I screamed. A loud scream releasing the confusion and angst stirring inside of me.

Sean was used to these screams. Sullivan was not. Still, he offered me fortitude as he spoke in our language, “And in one little moment it all implodes.” He was quoting “This Isn’t Everything You Are” by Snow Patrol. It was exactly what I needed.

I came back with, “Breathe deeply in the silence. No sudden moves.”

He put his hand out to me and said, “Just take the hand that’s offered and hold on tight. This isn’t everything you are.” I took his hand although I was struggling to believe him in the moment. I almost became angry with Sullivan lovingly holding my hand thinking, *this is some fucking Christmas miracle to pray for*. Maybe it is though. I’ve been hanging at the surface of the rabbit hole for a while unable to break through. I begrudgingly told myself that complete breakthroughs only happened after complete truth.

Fasten your seatbelt. It’s going to be a bumpy night.

We rode in silence the rest of the few minutes it took to drive back to Penny Lane that had taken at least a half an hour for me to run from. As soon as we pulled in, Jocelyn ran across the street. “Are you okay?” She entreated as I got out of Sullivan’s truck. She had been crying, and she looked a mess which conflicted with how together and beautiful she normally looked.

I guessed that an hour had passed since I had seen her, but it felt like thirty-one years had passed. *Mama*. “I’m okay, but I’m not ready to come over there yet,” I said clearly.

“Bilson, please, come hear me out. Please.” Jocelyn pleaded very unaccustomed to me not doing exactly as she instructed. Jocelyn never afforded me space when I requested it. I had learned to accept how impulsive she was, and I stopped requesting space at all.

“Jocelyn, Bilson will be over when she is ready,” we heard bellowed from behind us. We turned to see Steven Miller standing on the porch. He usually gave the appearance of a playful man, but when he was serious, everyone fell under his command. His words may seem nice, but those had nothing to do with me. He had a score to settle with Jocelyn. *Did you finally dump his destructive ass, Jocelyn? Like for good this time? Is that why you looked so at peace yesterday?*

Jocelyn gained some composure about herself in Steven’s presence. Then the two of them stared at each other for several moments. During those moments years of secrecy and every array of emotions from intimate lust to complete hatred seemed to resonate between them. Now he had watched her kiss my father in a way I knew she had never kissed him. For some reason, this was one battle even The Unstoppable Jocelyn wasn’t equipped for. Jocelyn placed her hand to her cheek giving it a subtle wipe then consented, “Of course.” Then she turned her attention and mascara-streaked black stained eyes to me. “Bilson, I’m glad you’re okay. We will be waiting whenever you are ready.” Then Jocelyn walked across the street. She seemed so distraught that I almost followed her, but I took Sullivan’s hand for us to walk into Millerland.

Sadie came down the stairs saying, “I put the kids in our room to watch *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and Sean, Sonya said that she would stay upstairs with the babies.” She came to me and pulled me into a loving embrace that I welcomed because the hug gave me time to catch up to my world spinning around me. Sadie never missed an opportunity to give me a hard time, but she was always the first one on the battlefield if I was hurting. This was a side of her that she only gave to me in private when we could be vulnerable with each other. When we could allow someone who understood to see and love our blackness. Sadie released me and teased, “So who’s the hottie on the bike?” She smiled a smile I couldn’t help but return. She had always had a thing for guys on motorcycles. That worked well in Mark’s favor when she met him in college. Sadie went to sit by Mark on the couch, and I took a seat in the chair they left open for me.

Sullivan sat on the arm of the chair and took my hand. He was giving me the love and strength to say it. I took a deep breath accepting another layer of truth then said, "My father, I guess. Apparently, Jocelyn is my biological mother."

Silence took over a living room that was rarely inhabited by such a thing. Then Sean said, "But she would have been like ..."

"Fifteen when she had me," I finished for him as everyone stared wild eyed at me.

As shocked as everyone looked, Susan didn't look surprised at all. She looked like Susan, constantly concerned about me. Loving me as much as she could across from me.

"God, Bills, you must be dying," Sarah offered. She was sitting with her wife, Carla, in the chair beside mine. Sarah reached over and took my free hand. Goodness poured into me. Whenever I needed to be reminded of the good in humanity, I always sat by Sarah.

"I don't know what to think. My whole life she's been my big sister, but really, she was my mother who let my grandparents raise me as their daughter. This has to be why we moved here where they could say I was their daughter, and no one would know the truth."

"Bilson, I think they did the best with the situation that they could," Susan said in her compassionate tone. "This way Jocelyn still got to go to college and have a life as well as watch you grow up."

"How nice for Jocelyn," I spat full of anger that Susan didn't deserve. That no one in this room deserved (Well, maybe one person in this room, but definitely not Susan, my soulmate, my second mother). Yet I couldn't stop. It was safe with her. She would never abandon me like Jocelyn had. "She didn't fucking watch me grow up. She took off when I was three. She did something so awful when I was ten that she didn't see me for three years. After that I saw her once a month. Every time I thought I could trust her again, she found a way to let me down. To be a colossal fuckup." Sarah squeezed my hand tighter. This was not sweetness that coursed through every pore of Sarah. This was a warning if I dared to spew one more thing at her mother. The only thing that made Sarah stray from her sweetness was a mistreatment of her mother. There are not words for how those two loved each other. I stopped before Sarah went for the softball bat. I looked back at my soulmate. "I'm so sorry, Susan."

"There's no judgment here, Bilson," Steven said as he stood behind his wife and put his hands on her shoulders. Susan pushed his hands away. Quickly. If her children weren't sitting there, I'm sure she would have turned around and punched him in the balls for touching her. She hated him. Faithfully. There had been such little faithfulness in their marriage, but their hatred for each other was as faithful as if that had been one of their vows on their wedding day. My poor soulmate. "We know how hard this must be for you to know and to understand." I looked right at him and thought, *Yeah, there are a lot of things that are hard to understand.*

I looked away from Steven, from pure evil. I looked at Susan, pure goodness, who I could always trust even when I couldn't trust myself. "I feel like I have so many questions, but those seem out of my reach. How much do you know?"

Susan looked sad and conflicted, not about how I yelled at her, she didn't care, she only cared that I was hurting, that I was confused, that she wasn't the one who broke me, so she couldn't be the one who fixed me. "I know a lot, Darling Girl, but it wouldn't be right for me to be the one giving you answers. I understand you need answers, but those will have to come from Jocelyn, Haddy, and Paul. Haddy had planned to tell you everything while you were home for Christmas. I know this would have been a lot easier on you to have come from Haddy instead of another one of Jocelyn's impulsive acts. I'm sorry, Baby. I'm sorry Jocelyn told you like that without me or Haddy or Paul there. Haddy will have my head if I tell you though. You know that."

I did know that. I had known when I asked, she wouldn't tell me. That she wouldn't betray my mother. The faithfulness between them was purely beautiful. I had been fortunate to witness their love growing up. I looked into her loving eyes. I wanted my mom right now, but I was confused about who my mom was in this

moment. Susan was always my close second when I needed comfort that I wouldn't allow Mom to give me. "Could I come over there?"

"Guys," was all Susan had to say, and everyone went into the kitchen.

I sank into her lap. She cradled me in her arms as she kissed my forehead. I cried. I cried out almost an entire ocean. A deep-sea ache of all the ways Jocelyn had hurt me. Of all the ways someone else had hurt me – I couldn't even get to the surface of that ache, distortion, while I was dealing with everything from love to loathing toward my sister/mother. Of the man in my driveway who ran off before I was even born. I come from good stock, don't I? Susan didn't try to stop the tears. She held. She loved. She bore my pain with me. Jocelyn would have never done that for me, but Haddy, Susan, and Pauly, well, fortunately I was blessed with three parents who loved me unconditionally and gave me all of them, all the time. Yet sometimes even all three of them couldn't fill the void left by the one who abandoned me.

When I finally got to the end of my pain, I thought about someone else's pain. Someone who already had enough pain and insecurity about losing me. "Did you go over there? Is Mom okay?"

"Of course, I went over there. As soon as I saw you run away. Her impulsive daughter hurt her most beloved daughter. Again. She's in true Haddy form." Yelling at Jocelyn.

"And Pop?"

Susan put her hand on my face. "It's best you stay here for a while, Baby. He'd never want you to see him like he is right now."

I resumed the crying. "Why now, Susan? They were starting to get along."

"Darling Girl, this is how Time plays us sometimes. When you're healing and there's still some truth left to reveal, it will force out, so there's complete healing. It feels harsh, but ultimately it is loving so we truly heal instead of partially." I knew Susan had healed partially several times. Then had to start the process all over again. I'm sure she didn't want that for her love or her soulmate. I know she was trying to be comforting, but every Almost I'd ever seen with Mom and Jocelyn crashed in on me. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't breathe. She started kissing. Intimacy. She raised her shirt. My hand roamed her stomach. My safe spot with Susan. Kisses. Kisses. If it wasn't freezing, I'd make her take me to the pool and spin me. We couldn't. It would have to be here that she calmed me. She couldn't. "Sadie!"

Sadie came running in. Wrapped her arms around me. Kissing my cheek. The wailing persisted. The wailing through inability to breathe. Lean into my ear so Susan couldn't hear, "My niece will not have her first view of humanity be like this, so you better shut the fuck up with that crying." Laughing. Choking through tears and laughing, but this was Sadie's superpower – making me laugh no matter what I was going through, essentially diminishing the power of the moment, pulling away the magnifying glass, and seeing there's something else. There's laughter. There are people who love me. There's My Sadie. I leaned my head into her. "That's my girl."

"She's my girl," Susan corrected.

"You already own the original Bilson; you need to own the mini-replica too? Hell fucking no. Property of Sadie. I stamped it all over her, remember?"

"She was my girl before she was your girl," Susan teasingly protested.

"We probably took possession of her on the same day, and you were blinded by Haddy, so Bilson became mine. So back the fuck off, Bitch." Susan smiled at her. She loved Sadie's wildness. "Look, Baby Doll, two awesome women like us fighting over ownership of you, and let Haddy walk across Penny Lane, and we both come in 2nd and 3rd. I'd say you're one loved girl. ITE, remember that, Baby Doll." I smiled, wiped at my face that I couldn't help if I had wiped fifty times, but it was a show that I was trying in this moment, and nodded at Sadie.

"What's ITE?" Susan asked.

“None of your fucking business. That’s between me and Bilson. Quit crouching on my territory.” Sadie grabbed my hand that was roaming Susan’s toned abs out of Susan’s shirt and smiled at me, “Don’t make me feel like I have to compete with those abs to have you. I’m 34 and never had the washboard abs my mother has at 63.”

“She’s a scientific marvel,” I chimed in. “Like my mother. Who looks like that at 72?”

“You think they’re keeping each other young?”

“Took ‘em long enough to find each other. Now they want to drink each other’s sweet elixir until the end of time.”

“Bilson!” Susan screamed at me while she was smiling the whole time.

“That’s what we need, Bilson, to become beautiful dikes drinking the elixir so we live forever.”

“Dumb us, Sadie, we had to go fall in love with some stupid boys,” I jumped in before Susan could.

“Boys,” Sadie said smiling and shaking her head, “Can’t live with them. Can’t live without them. That’s why Mom and Haddy learned to keep one around.”

“They hit the jackpot too with a man who’d put up with both of them.”

Sadie smiled at me, “You know what, Bilson? I think we did too with Mark and Sullivan.”

“For stupid boys, it doesn’t get better than them.”

We all smiled at each other for several moments. This is my home. This is my family. I kissed them both on the lips then said, “Thanks, My Wild Things. I feel better, but I think I need a little time alone. I’m going up to Sullivan’s room to find myself.”

“You need to go out the front door and climb in his window?” Sadie teased. Then the Sadie wink. “I love you, Baby Doll.”

“I love you, Sadie. I love you, Susan.”

“I love you, Darling Girl. I love you. You belong to me no matter which Annesley woman birthed you. You got that?” I smiled. I kissed her. I got off her lap. I didn’t answer. Susan is smart enough to realize that, but she let me go.

I heard Jim Carrey talking to Cindy Lou Who as I passed a bedroom full of children who didn’t notice that I walked by. I opened Sullivan’s door and closed it behind me. I felt so uncomfortable in my own skin, so I removed my clothes and put on Sullivan’s big, comfortable Husky t-shirt and pajama bottoms. They didn’t change my skin or the truth I was struggling with, but they wrapped me in Sullivan’s goodness. I looked at his dresser that was as much of a homage to our time in high school as mine was. In the corner of the mirror was a strand of photo booth pictures of us making silly faces or kissing. I smiled at those then looked down at the football from the State Champion win our senior year. I touched it, trying to bring back some of the excitement and feeling of being invincible that we shared that night, that the whole town seemed to share. There was a moment I could see the excitement of that night, but I couldn’t feel it. I moved my hand from the football to his framed letter for a full scholarship to UCONN to play football. I could feel some of his excitement from that day. He was the happiest man alive knowing we were going to UCONN together and would be able to follow in the footsteps of the athletic Millers. For one year the five of us would be together again, all at the same college, all officially adults, all officially discovering ourselves. Together.

There had only been one college besides UCONN that I had ever considered. Columbia University. Mom’s alma mater. A special night of Haddy finding and falling in love with Mom and Columbia. Susan had taken me to Wellesley once where she had been a superstar softball goddess. Where time stood still for four years in celebration of Susan. I loved seeing Susan there. I loved that she would share that with me, but I didn’t love Wellesley like I loved Columbia. I absolutely loved Columbia. But Columbia was in Jocelyn’s backyard. I would

have been forced to endure her impulsiveness more than once a month. If Mom came to visit me, she would have felt obligated to endure Jocelyn. On a regular basis endure the ten minutes of pleasantries before Jocelyn tried to lacerate the soul out of her. I couldn't put Mom, or me, in that position. Almost as quickly as the thought to go to Columbia entered my mind, it hurried right back out (At home, by myself, I often wear Columbia t-shirts and look in the mirror smiling seeing Mom staring back at me. I almost capture her completely in those Columbia t-shirts). During the summer before my senior year of high school I had one day a week Pop declared I belonged to him. The great summer of Bilson and Pop touring college campuses. His time to be the man in my life before I left his home, and his safety. My poor Pop. I liked Brown. I liked Sarah Lawrence. I liked RISD. But I loved Sullivan Miller. UCONN was the only college I applied to.

Despite having my sights set on UCONN so I could be with my "siblings" and not be too far away from Mom, Pop, and Susan, Jocelyn constantly harassed me to go to Dartmouth. In her mind, there wasn't another college worth considering, because what her harassment was really saying was, *I've found it nearly impossible to hold onto a part of myself since I left there*, and she wanted desperately for us to have a connection besides sharing a birthday. However, the moment Sullivan got his football scholarship to UCONN, she gave up the fight for Dartmouth and immediately wrote out the check for my first year of tuition at UCONN where I had already been granted early admission. At the time she said that paying for my tuition was something she wanted to do for me, but I realized now it was something she had to do. I could feel a questioning of the motives of every act by Jocelyn where I was concerned taking me over.

I didn't know what happened between her and the guy on the Harley, but she had been deeply hurt by the man she obviously still loved. He was her lobster, and I had come between them. When Sullivan was going to UCONN, she didn't want me to lose my lobster; that was one motive I wasn't questioning. She had no idea that I would be the one to do the hurting in our relationship. "Nature versus nurture" that Jocelyn said last night rang in my mind. I didn't even know the man on the bike, but I knew enough to know I was like him. The hurt look I saw on Jocelyn's face today was the same look I saw on Sullivan's face five years ago.

With that thought, everything about me collided. I couldn't take it. I crashed onto Sullivan's bed and shut out the exhausting thoughts going through my head.

We stood at the window of our dining room. Pauly stood behind me, holding me, providing me the strength of a boulder and love that even I could barely believe after all we had been through. We watched him reappear, and Our Little Josie get completely swept up by him again. She was 46 years old, but I knew both of us were seeing her at 14. Both of us wanted to go out there and yank her from that boy and knock some sense into our little baby. But she wasn't our little baby anymore. She only got to be our baby for fourteen years, and there's some things in life that you don't get any do-overs for. We were as helpless now as we had been when she was fourteen.

Pauly released a loud exhale. "I guess Sorrow has come calling for us again, Haddy."

"I swear sometimes I feel like we have spent the past thirty-two years being punished for being so blissfully happy for twenty years of our lives," I yelled.

Pauly wouldn't have it. "No, Baby. We've had a good life. Don't ever forget that."

"I'm sorry that I said that, Pauly."

"We'll get through this one, Baby. Like we've gotten through everything."

"I was just getting her back, Pauly."

Suddenly he grabbed tighter. Like he was holding onto a bobcat as I tried to tear away from him.

"No, Haddy. No!"

"That fucking bitch!" He forced me to the ground and held me down. She had turned to My Bilson and told her without me! He wasn't trying to keep me from Bilson when she needed me. He was keeping me from killing our other daughter.

April 25, 1968 – They all finally fell asleep. The four of us surrendered on our couch exhausted, blissfully happy, but exhausted. Maddie was straddled on me. Max on Pauly. Katie on Roger. Kendal on Celeste. Like a proverbial symbolism of which parent our daughters would always belong to. Roger looked over at me. "Haddy, you can't deliver that baby. We're about to be outnumbered." I laughed at my brother. Laid my head on his shoulder. "I guess we'll have to start playing zone instead of man to man, Roger." He kissed my forehead. I fell asleep on him. And for one blessed minute Josie settled down inside of me, and the nine of us reveled in peace and love together.

