

✍️ HAVING TO exert so much effort all week just to give off an appearance that I am a functioning adult makes me feel like a hostage. When I am honest, a hostage is exactly what I am. I am locked in an emotional prison five days a week, and kept from the six other people who are the only people who understand my torment. My siblings and I were only sixteen the night Ardent Graham crept into our lives and murdered all eight of our parents. Becoming a fully functioning adult after that is a fleeting dream. The most you can hope for after that is to be left alone with the only family you have left. I guess even that was too much for us to hope for. The press never left us alone. We thought who we became after what happened to us was our business, but apparently there's little that is just our business. Seven years ago we finally found a solution: a secluded three story beach house in Big Sur. This became our weekend sanctuary where no one could see us, point at us, or hurt us. God help the soul who invades our sanctuary.

I am always the first to arrive on Fridays, and the first to allow the house to shed my layers of façade and emotional torment that plague me throughout the week. Arriving first gives me a chance to suit myself up to be the Selfless Caretaker Breen that became my identity in the wake of our parents' murder and the fight to keep us all together. This wasn't a role I would have thought I was best at, but as oldests, the role of stabilizing rocks seemed to fall on me and Eli like some kind of expected requirement. Eli is more naturally suited for this role than I am, however, since the day we were born, we've always functioned as one unit. Eli is solid and dependable. Those are qualities I love most about him, and I know without him there building me up, I'm not nearly the woman my siblings think I am. In the two roles that make up my life, I will admit I am more suited for taking care of my family than the savvy business owner that I portray five days a week, but neither of these roles are who I would have chosen to be. In the midst of confusing disaster, personal choices seem to float away like balloons with sad faces that look back at you hoping you'll grab the string before they float too far away. When I was sixteen, I jumped after the balloons with all my might, but the strings whipped

lightly through my hand before floating away. This is why I am the first to arrive each Friday so I can give myself one hour a week that truly belongs to me instead of molding to some expectation of who I should be.

As grateful as I am that we found a weekend sanctuary, this isn't where I am while my body is anchored to the chaise lounge on our grand patio with the breathtaking view. My mind floats up the California coastline until I am in Sonoma smelling grapes, until I am home. I feel like I can actually float above our 300 acres of perfect utopia and see everyone I love doing what they love simultaneously. Mazy comes into view first. She looks radiant on her black stallion, and she's jumping hurdles in the arena that Jacob and Jenner built for her. She turns slightly to see Sutton sitting happily on the fence watching her in the arena. Sutton was always happy. She was the one we never worried about because she was always so incredibly happy. Satisfied that those two sisters are happy and in their place, I scan more of the acres in search of my other sister, Riley. I don't have to search long before I see her sitting under a tree reading a book. She's not far from Mazy and Sutton, but she's in her own little world in Narnia. I would give anything to put her back in that place where only imaginary evils could befall us. *I can't go there yet. I haven't found everyone.* I smile at Riley, and take one last look at Mazy on her black stallion then I take my imaginary search for my brothers. I only have to come out of the arena and into the vineyards before I see Chase and Eli happily working alongside Jacob and Jenner learning everything they can from our fathers so they can run this successful vineyard one day. I can't bring myself to find Rhys yet. He was never the type to work with our brothers. I know where he is, but I can't go there yet. I decide to find other parents. I float above happily smelling the grapes then fly into the big, beautiful house at the front of our property where we all lived since the day we were born. The moms are easy to find. They are in the kitchen making a meal, laughing, looking like four beacons of love and laughter. I am so happy to see them. I want to run to them and let them envelope me in their arms and their love, but I can't intrude. One moment where the kids are all out of their hair, and the men are all working and they are four women full of love, leisure, and sisterhood. I cannot

intrude upon that. I just watch. I watch them smile. I watch Bry do most of the actual cooking, while Carrie turns on 80s music and starts to dance. She was so sexy. She makes Arya dance with her, and I watch Arya's hair sway about. Then Bry abandons the cooking and joins them. She's radiant and uncontrolled, and I know what will happen next. Carrie grabs my mother's hands and pulls her into their circle. I lose my breath looking at her, longing to have her hug me. They dance like goddesses, and I not only long to be with them, I long for that happiness and sisterhood for me, Mazy, Riley, and Sutton. Before I get too waylaid knowing our lives are not meant to be like our mothers, I finally go in search of Rhys. He's in the field laying in the wild flowers looking so peaceful. He's holding me in his arms, and letting me sleep peacefully. I see him smell my hair and look at me. These stolen moments will be mine forever. No one can ever take those away from me, even if they could take our parents, our home, our vineyard, our sense of safety, and our place in the world.

As I was about to wake in the field and look at Rhys' face instead of only seeing him with my floating self from far above, the alarm sounded waking me and signaling my hour to myself was over. I merely wanted one more minute to look at his face in that field, but I couldn't get back there. I couldn't find him anymore. I sighed and resigned myself to being selfless, caretaker Breen. My siblings would all be here in a matter of hours expecting me to give them a small semblance of our former life. I felt guilty enough that I couldn't give them everything that we had always had, I couldn't take away the one tradition we had been able to uphold.

I stretched, entered the house, and dug into our pot where I scooped out the \$700 we had all ritualistically thrown in there last weekend. Then I readied myself into my Toyota FJ Cruiser and headed to the local Safeway to secure all of the food and alcohol we would need for the weekend. A proper caretaker always knows everyone's favorites even in a family as large as ours. Of course I bought the staples: meat, vegetables, fruit, eggs, milk, juice, but everyone had their weekend guilty pleasure that they only indulged when we were all together on our weekend vacation from attempting all week to be functioning adults. Eli loved summer sausage, jack cheese, and crackers; he must have been born a grown up because even as a

child, he never indulged a sweet tooth. Chase wanted Double Stuf Oreos because regular Oreos weren't manly enough for him. Mazy had to have Cap'n Crunch that she never left even one morsel of for the following weekend. Rhys devoured apple pie and vanilla ice cream even though mine wasn't as good as the apple pie his mother baked for him. Sutton and Riley both forgot their feminine wiles when they inhaled coffee ice cream with Heath Bar crumpled on top; that had been Arya's favorite also and we all loved watching ways Riley and Sutton were complete sides of Arya. That left me. I always forgot to buy myself a guilty pleasure. I usually grazed on all of theirs like I had when we were little, not needing my own identity, as long as I had them.

When I had all of the groceries unloaded, I turned on 80s music and poured some wine that would serve as my companions as I cooked our extravagant Friday night meal until I was joined by my siblings. They all had normal jobs that prevented them from leaving their various pockets of San Francisco until 5:00ish. This had them all arriving at our beach house in Big Sur between 7:00 and 8:00. Eli was usually the first to arrive close to 7:00. I could barely breathe from the moment I heard his Acadia careening down the driveway until he would grab me by my waist and spin me around the kitchen as we both abandoned any sense of reason in those stolen moments. I waited all week to be in his strong arms so I could surrender myself to his passionate kisses. In Eli's kisses was all there was of me: my past, my present, and my future. He held my safe haven as well as my insecurities in a delicate balance that he never let fall. At times I can't remember a time I wasn't kissing Eli, and oddly, I can distinctly remember our first real kiss that seemed etched in time mere months before the night that would change our lives forever.

Eli and I were born only minutes apart to different mothers in the same room. Our mothers, which was not limited to the two who birthed us, always gushed that we had been like magnets. I came first, right on time; Eli wasn't due for another week, but the mothers tell us as soon as Jaea went into labor with me, Eli forced Bry into labor so that he could be with me. From that day forward, they said we couldn't stand to be away from each other, and the mothers started planning our wedding before we were a month old.

For thirty minutes every Friday we delighted in time that was exclusively ours where we could kiss and hold and love without another soul around like the three months we had after we were born before Riley and Sutton entered our lives and our family. As we heard the Escalade carrying our sisters coming down the driveway, we knew our exclusivity was coming to an end. Eli took me for one last stolen kiss that temporarily bandaged my wounded soul before he started busying himself with setting plates for our weekly treasured meal. I love him so much.

Riley and Sutton entered greeting me and Eli like it had been months instead of a week since we had seen each other. During the week while I was away from them, I always felt empty and worried. I often sent Sutton texts making sure she had eaten or seeing if I could bring her something hoping she would need me to come over. I'm sure she found my texts insulting and overprotective, but she simply expressed gratitude for my caring spirit and dismissed my subtle hints to check on her. I text Riley a lot during the week too, but my texts to her were to get her unique perspective on news events or articles I read. Riley wasn't as drawn to drowning in melancholy as Sutton was. Rather Riley pursued melancholy through her obsession with literature; Sutton pursued it through a personal suffering that Sylvia Plath would envy. This made Sutton the one we watched. If anyone was going to quietly join our parents, it would be Sutton.

For tonight, I was glad to see Sutton looked healthy and stable, and Riley looked like she was positively glowing. She had looked this way for the past few months, and I had spilled over with joy when Eli told me that one night when he met Riley to watch a hockey game he had met her girlfriend, Samantha. He said Samantha was absolutely perfect for our Riley. As happy as I had been for Riley, I never let her know that I knew about her secret life during the week. I would never want her to think Eli wasn't loyal to their unique friendship that they had shared since we were babies. I may have been destined to be his best girl, but Riley was definitely destined to be his best friend.

When we were babies, Riley and Sutton enjoyed three quiet months to settle into our family before Chase and Mazy made their rambunctious entrance. Tonight Riley and Sutton had three minutes to settle in before we heard Chase's monster truck blazing down the long driveway. We all shot anxiously like one blob to the window waiting for our very own version of dinner theatre. By the time Chase could put the truck in park, we had a front row view of Mazy yelling and waving her arms tantrum style. Soon came our favorite scene: Mazy terminated her yelling by throwing her big designer purse at him. Then she dramatically opened her door and plummeted out of Chase's truck leaving the passenger door open for Chase to have to close. Two hundred and eighty pounds of solid muscle came apart at the seams as Chase banged his fist repeatedly on his steering wheel before he got out and closed the passenger door. Then Chase headed toward us. This made us scatter like cockroaches hit by light. The entertainment they provided was priceless, but none of us had the guts to endure their tempers if they caught us laughing at them. There was no mistaking they were born to Carrie, but with their uncontrollable tempers, we also suspected them to be Jenner spawn. Individually, Carrie and Jenner were the most combustible of our eight parents. If they had produced offspring together, a respectful fear was just good sense. We never spoke these suspicions aloud terrified it might awaken the dragon that had to be living inside Chase and Mazy.

Before he could enter the house, Sutton went to the porch to greet Chase and his faithful sidekick, Anger. Anger had been his best buddy even when we were babies which kept us all from sleeping as he violently shook the bars of his crib. He flipped his crib over several times terrifying six babies and ensuring a loud round of cries that would wake all eight parents. The only cure that our parents could find for his violent attacks on the crib was to put him in the crib with Sutton. Around Sutton his violence shifted into fierce protection. She may be the one we watched, but she was our hero as she stepped onto that porch to use her power to protect us all from his wrath. Despite our fear of Chase, it was beautiful to watch his anger turn

to mush as she drew him into a loving kiss. On her own, Sutton was already the most stunning beauty among us, but in Chase's embrace, her beauty amplified. The way they completed each other was inspiring.

We weren't quite as fortunate as Riley tried to calm Mazy. Mazy paused her swirl of angst for a total of two seconds to gift Riley with a kiss, but she couldn't be expected to bother with silly things like passion or noticing Riley's new hairstyle. Mazy's style of kiss was more like a drive by if Riley's lips happened to intersect her clanky hike up the stairs as she loudly vented about the torture of spending two hours trapped in a vehicle with Chase. We were all bewildered they made it through nine months trapped together in Carrie's womb without killing each other, but they had. Our lives were certainly more colorful for it.

By 7:45 six out of seven of us were accounted for and starving. Every Friday of our lives we had eaten promptly at 8:00. We all moved around each other expertly to pour wine, put the meal into serving dishes, and distribute necessary condiments about the table without one need to ask another to move out of the way. Our mothers and fathers had prepared for big Friday night dinners effortlessly as well, and even in their absence, our Friday night traditions were upheld. At 8 o'clock on the dot Rhys arrived making his only job to occupy his seat to enjoy the food already assembled on his plate. He pulled this same trick when we were all babies. He arrived a day before me and Eli turned one ensuring there was not a full year between any of us. Despite being born to Bry, meaning he was only Eli's biological brother, he became the little brother that belonged to all of us on that day.

With the arrival of Rhys, The Graham Family was complete. After our parents' highly publicized murder, reporters quickly became frustrated constantly referring to us by the four different last names that belonged to us. That problem was solved by one reporter cleverly calling us The Graham Family. This tactic proved to give Ardent Graham wide spread notoriety and further gave our parents' killer more possession of us. There wasn't really any other name to explain our unique situation, so Graham stuck, and, in a way,

unified and strengthened us more. We needed something to strengthen us after our parents were embarrassingly, not surprisingly, discovered naked. Their vulnerability of being naked and clustered made it easy for Ardent Graham to slip in and shoot all of them in a matter of seconds then cut off their heads.

Our tight knit family often played a game called Pin The Tale On The Daddy. Unless we were willing to have tests done that further validated our label of freaks, we would never know for sure which of the four amazing examples of fatherhood completed each of our DNA. None of us really wanted to know anyway. We were a family. Knowing our exact DNA held no value for us. When we all coupled, we made a pack not to bring children into the world not because of the possibility of us being siblings, but because we were survivors of the worst evil humanity had encompassed. We knew how messed up the world was. We also knew our stolen weekends were the only break we ever got from that messed up world.

“Sutton, how’s your project going?” Mazy shocked us all by volleying up this question as we all began to enjoy our meal. A display of interest for the life of another person was uncharacteristic for Mazy. Mazy’s selfish streak was as clearly defined as her voluptuous curves that society tried to convince her was unacceptable. Society had failed miserably in any attempt to shame my sexy sister. She touted her curves as a badge of honor, and secretly my thin sisters and I wanted to be just as sexy and bold as Mazy. We were certain those sexy curves had to be Riley’s governing attraction to Mazy. Growing up Riley had always been attracted to curvy women making it clear from a very young age that she was a lesbian. Mazy wasn’t as conspicuous with her lesbian tendencies at a young age as Riley was, but looking back, those were always there as she spent hours in the mirror turning herself on. When they got together, we were all a little unsettled. We didn’t care that our sisters were lesbians, but we couldn’t imagine what our deep soul intellectual, Riley, had in common with our shallow attention hogging, Mazy. Once they started displaying their affection in front of us, we learned that hot sex was one fierce connector in the lesbian community. We wondered if their affair had been going on much longer than any of us had been privy to knowing.

By the time Riley and Mazy let us in on their kinky secret, mine and Eli's as well as Chase and Sutton's unions had been well solidified. This made Rhys the odd man out, but that's how he had been since the day he was born. On weekend nights after we all went to bed, Rhys went out hooking up with random women. He was respectful enough to never bring any of these women to our house, and respectful enough to always make it home in time for breakfast. He had been alone when he found them in a pool of blood with their heads removed from their bodies; he wasn't going to be away from the family for too long.

"Mazy, it is going great. Thank you for asking. I'm excited about how many people and organizations have gotten involved. Almost all of the Oakland Raiders have agreed, and will be at Sutton's Place next week to have lunch and play outdoor games with the kids," Sutton answered as she seized an opportunity to talk about her foster children which made her eyes come alive with passion. She was the only one of us who wanted children, an unspoken sacrifice she made to keep our family together. She assuaged her desires by opening a state home for twelve teenage foster children and spending her time during the week organizing fun projects for the children no one wanted. Had we not all had each other after Ardent Graham took all of our parents from us, we would have been children no one wanted.

"Sutton, this is a really amazing thing you are doing for those kids. My boss said to tell you that he is looking forward to sponsoring them in the co-ed softball league this summer and several of our guys are lined up to serve as coaches," Rhys informed. He was a lawyer in a firm of nice people who had all sold their souls to the corporate run around and were excited to have a way to make a difference – the reason they had gone to law school in the first place. In the three years that Sutton's Place had been operating, Rhys' firm had contributed a lot of hours to keeping those kids involved and giving them a purpose. This was their penance for the dirty deals they made that tore at their souls. All of us had contributed to Sutton's Place in one way or another, but Rhys was the only one who got involved with the kids and put himself on the front lines fighting for them to be better people and have a real chance at life.

“Well, I couldn’t do it without all of the help that we get. Tell your boss thank you, and the kids are very excited about playing on a softball league. Breen, we also appreciate you providing the food next week,” Sutton said with a sweet smile in my direction. For the past seven years I had been the proprietor of a famous catering company, Comestible Corner, which serviced the entire San Francisco Bay area. I have a team of skilled chefs and waiters who do all the hard work. My job at this point is more about keeping up my image and generating business. Occasionally I still get my hands dirty by actually cooking some of the meals. My embarrassing soft spot for Sutton became apparent when she asked me to supply a meal that would make for an incredible tax write off as well as generate publicity. If she had asked me to provide anything that would mean I would have to look into the eyes filled with pain of those children, that would not have happened. I had six sets of eyes filled with pain looking at me every weekend, and that was all the pain I could HANDLE 🐉