

INTRODUCTION

Above the Darkness was written mostly in the comfort of a small back yard, on a small deck belonging to a small house with 5 adults, 3 children and a fat cat occupying it. Oh- and the occasional blue heron who sat on top of the neighbor's roof, so he could scope out fish in their small pond and of course inspire me to keep writing.

I was 22 years old and had just graduated from university the previous year. I was unemployed and desperately looking for a job in my field of study (psychology) so my boyfriend and I could move out of his family's house and start our own wonderful life together. What I didn't know at the time is that our wonderful life had already begun. Being in that living situation not only encouraged me to try harder but it also gave me a great amount of strength as I was challenged in many different ways. I even fell in and out of mild depression on many occasions as guilt, and the feeling of uselessness overwhelmed me.

However, even though there has been a lot of down times in my life, I still was not the type to give up easily. One thing I have learned from my mother is that in order to purge those negative feelings all you have to do is reach for something you love and writing was and has always been something I love. I always wanted to write a novel that inspired others and besides looking for a job, I couldn't think of a better way to spend my time than to follow my dream. I asked myself many times "what can I write about?" and "who can I help?" and "how can I help them?" Being a young adult, I didn't feel confident I possessed the wisdom necessary to help others, so even though I wanted to write a non-fiction novel I steered away from it.

One day, I received inspiration for a story, which was eventually to become, *Above the Darkness*. The inspiration didn't bestow upon me as a fully formed idea, and it wasn't all neatly mapped out but at least I finally had a direction. Then, when I finally started writing, I couldn't stop and committed to it more than anything I ever have in my life. It became a need and a drive deep within me as I knew it would have a special meaning not only for me, but others as well. So even though there wasn't much quiet time available in the small, crowded house I took advantage of what time I did have, when everyone else was away at work or school.

Just like the blue heron, there were many helpers and guides that entered my life and helped me finish this book just as they have helped me in the past through rough times. This cast of guides and helpers included the people that I lived with at the time the novel was written, and I will be forever grateful to them for their support. I wanted to get the message out that if we take the time to listen and observe there are many people, animals, spirits, and so on that are capable of assisting us through the difficult times in our lives and can even bring the light back into it when the darkness seems too overwhelming.

I didn't realize before writing *Above the Darkness* who it was meant for. In the moment, it was just for me, as I was discovering myself again and getting reconnected with my spirit. As time went on I've come to realize my greatest intention in life, which has been subtly manifesting itself from when I was a little girl to the moment I finished writing this novel. At that time, I was still looking for a job in psychology (specifically something that involved helping children) as it has always been a passion of mine. I didn't realize that while I was looking for this "perfect" job I was actually already

completing my life's mission! I wanted to get my own wisdom and the wisdom that has been passed down to me out there to children and anyone who might need it as they pass through, and cope with the tribulations of everyday life.

Taking the basics of what inspires me from day to day - nature, animals, humor, love and peace - I was able to construct a story that encompasses all of these things and create a narrator who wasn't nearly as fortunate as I had been to best illustrate what can be accomplished with these blessings.

Above the Darkness is the story of an unlikely heroine who just tries to survive from day to day in the midst of an abusive home. The main character, Elizabeth, takes advantage of the small opportunities she is provided with and is not afraid of taking risks for the benefit of her growth and health. Although many supernatural elements occur in this novel, Elizabeth still has to deal with reality and somehow make her way through it. Sometimes, her travels seem like an escape from her reality, but at other times they can be perceived as an unjust punishment. Through confusion and heartache she is able to find moments of peace. As the reader you get to experience the whirlwind of mysteries uncovered directly from Elizabeth's eyes by taking every step of her journey with her.

Even in a regular human life, there are different developmental stages that need to be overcome in order for one to successfully move to the next level. In *Above the Darkness* Elizabeth also needs to transcend certain levels in order to learn what she needs to do so she can reach her greatest potential. Her patience is tested, and yours will be too, as you make your way to the next level. Sometimes we want to be 10 steps ahead of where we are in the moment but it is so important to appreciate which step you are at now and take the time to learn everything you can from that place. You will be better prepared for the next steps to come and you will also be able to accomplish everything your heart desires.

My hope and dream is that anyone who reads this novel will get at least one thing out of it - whether that be joy, appreciation, connection, hope or even a life lesson. I am not asking you as the reader to take notes and wrack your brain to find the hidden lesson in every sentence but I do ask one thing and one thing only and that is that you open your heart to what *you* need to hear, learn and take away from this journey.

With much love,
Sarah Morrisette

Chapter 1: The Escape

Every day is like the last, rain pouring down on the rooftop while I listen intently for a message. Some days I hear that message so clearly it rings in my ears, but unfortunately, most days my eyes and ears fog up so uncontrollably I fear I am blind and deaf.

The rain has always been a gift and a curse for me. It's a gift because it brings life into the world, as it feeds all living creatures. These creatures are not only my friends but also my helpers, as they show me a new way of life, different ways of thinking, and, most of all, a very special place to which I can escape. Every morning, I ask the birds outside my window if today I can follow them. When I hear them chirp their consent, I am filled with relief and joy.

Their beautiful melodies captivate me to move towards the lush forest where they dance. The other animals, too, join in with pulses mimicking the heartbeats of the earth. When I am there, my body connects to the beats and after a joyous dance, it is rested into complete tranquility.

The curse is that it is harder to escape to the secret paradise when it is pouring rain. The wet and the cold prevent me from escaping my prison; I am a hostage.

Today, however, I was braver than ever. The message was clear to me; I had to leave the house and follow my friends to the special place. The birds were chirping and singing so loudly, I could not deny them. So there I was, piling on layers of clothes and rain gear and nothing was going to stop me.

I ran downstairs, and there it was; the ugliest, scariest monster I had ever known. His eyes so red, I thought blood was going to run down his face. His hair was black and so greasy it glistened like the shell of a beetle. His hands were dry and chapped with dirt underneath the long and sharp claws. His mouth opened, baring his yellow and black crooked fangs, emitting a fearsome roar, "Where are you going, you little tramp?! You look like you were swallowed by a black hole! Go upstairs and change into something a little lady would wear, not the mess you have on!"

A ball of fire grew in my stomach, but instead of releasing it, I cowered and said, "I'm sorry, Father, you're right; I'll go change."

"Damn right you will!" the monster bellowed.

Although I did fear the great monster, I also knew him well. I figured he would forget five minutes later that he even spoke to me. So instead of changing, I waited for my chance to escape my prison from the back window.

As I waited, I listened to the thunder grow louder, and I watched the lightening flash brighter. Like a great percussion band, the thunder crackled and banged. The lightening shimmered and flashed uncontrollably like lights in a night club. I did not fear these great forces but admired their courage to rage on earth as greatly as they desired. I always dreamed of releasing such power on the demons I encountered every day.

Silence fell upon the house, as the storm outside continued, and the storm inside died. I heard no sign of the demons crawling around downstairs. They must have fallen into a temporary slumber. I quickly lifted the window, stuck a wedge in it so it would not

fall on me, and slipped out on top of the roof. I then slid right to the edge of the roof, looked down and noticed it was a steep drop, but I was not scared: any physical pain endured would be worth it and paled in comparison to the pain I had to deal with inside my prison.

Examining the deck that was about five feet lower than the roof, I finally decided on the perfect spot to reach the banister. Turning on my belly, I shimmied down anticipating the feel of the banister below my feet. When my feet reached it, my forehead was level with the edge of the roof. My hands gripped tightly as I crouched down until they could no longer hold and I was forced to let them fall. I was now grasping onto the banister with both hands. I took a deep breath in and then out. As the air pushed through me, I took a final jump onto the floor of the deck. Now that the hard part was over, I looked up to let the rain wash over my flushed face. Grabbing the floor of the deck, I then dropped into a very old pile of leaves.

The leaves were wet and composting beautifully, which made for a light fall. Winter's snow had recently melted, leaving tons of dead foliage from last autumn. The dull scent from the leaves with the refreshing smell of new buds and spring rain made for an intoxicating aroma. Although I could not bask in the gorgeous scent for long, I took in deep breaths before hopping to my feet and making a run for it. Nature's perfume gave me a much-needed boost of energy, more powerful than any drink...

Chapter 2: Forest Heaven

A two and a half minute sprint laid the thick and abundant forest. When I arrived I took a few more deep breaths of a similar and equally intoxicating scent, which seeped out of the forest. The forest called my name over and over, seducing me to step slowly into its magical darkness.

Little streams of light shot through the forest capturing the raindrops like crystal reflectors. There were tiny plants and enormous trees of any size imaginable. A rainbow of colours flourished in the shadow of the forest's towers. The thick forest acted like millions of umbrellas covering me so adequately that only a few drops of purity fell through the canopy and into my mouth. It tasted divine, better than any water I have ever tasted. It was almost alive, as it trickled down my throat, quenched my thirst and nourished every organ in my body. It was so moist and sweet that I salivated for more. I stood there, 20 feet into the forest, with my tongue out, and savoured the juices of life.

I did not truly understand why the allure of the forest was so powerful that morning until I tasted those drops of ecstasy. It gave me the strength to keep breathing and moving. Every now and then, the Earth gives me this gift. I am thankful every time this gift is offered to me and I hope my appreciation will lead to better and bigger drops of life.

Once I had my big sip of the magical forest, I decided to explore a little further. It was hard to walk since the forest was thick with emerging seedlings, but I managed to make a friendly path with the help of the ground creatures. I followed them, and they taught me where to step so I did the least amount of damage. At the end of the path was what I was waiting for, the special place to call my own. It was a great big tree, with lots

of larger branches that grew close to the ground, unlike the other trees whose branches started up much farther.

I climbed up high enough to see the Earth's most powerful entities. It took my breath away, as it always did. Instead of the raw and rough power the mountains normally exuded, fog wrapped around the nearly invisible snow covered tops. It reminded me that even the most powerful sometimes needs a blanket of comfort around them and that they can become more beautiful with their quiet power and vulnerability. The mountains, like the forest and its creatures, never failed me, unlike my family.

Although I wished to stay there forever, I could not. I had to eat, and my snacks had run out. I also knew that it was close to dinner time and my family would notice I wasn't there. It was a rule in my house to always be there for dinner. I wasn't quite sure why, since we didn't spend that time talking happily about our day or sharing anything more than harsh words and hostility. Regardless, I did not want to pay the consequence for not showing up, so I rushed home.

Chapter 3: The Dinner Table

I came home to the worst part of my day; suppertime always seemed to be filled with constant yelling and bickering. There was never enough food and always too many people. It was as if there had been a drought and the only food left was placed in front of a bunch of fierce predators. I was the little bird waiting patiently on the sidelines to see if I could get some scraps. Most days I would fail at doing so adequately, but today I got lucky. One of my brothers was at a hockey game with his friends. They managed to slip past security and steal some food as well. A part of me admired my brother's risk-taking, and another part of me often wondered if it was just pure stupidity. He did get to eat and see an NHL game for free, while I was sitting at the dinner table with the rest of the predators scraping over the last bits of food.

I have three brothers and three sisters, and I am number seven. My parents don't believe in birth control. According to their religion it is a sin, but to me, having seven children and not being able to feed them or give them appropriate attention and abusing their spirits is a much bigger sin. The two oldest, 20 and 19, are both boys. The next two, 17 and 16, are both girls. Number five is 14 and a girl, and number six is 13 and a boy. If those two were switched, then maybe I would have someone to confide in, but a 13 year old boy in the middle of two pubescent girls a parallel universe is created amongst us. I am the youngest at age 11.

My mother is a stay-at-home mom who never stays at home. Now, don't get me wrong, most of the time she is home, but to me she is somewhere else, somewhere with a drink in one hand and a jay in the other. I sometimes pretend I am watching a movie star who is driven by the inspiration of her dysfunction and addiction. When I look at her this way, she becomes entertaining to me, instead of a slug squirming around at the bottom of a barrel.

She makes me laugh, dancing around the room, swearing and complaining about my father. She tells me he thinks he's God, but he can't even perform in bed. I'm not sure exactly what that means, but I'm sure it's something about sex. In that case, thank God he has problems or I would have even more demons running around me. Secretly,

he probably believes it to be a blessing as well. My mother on the other hand loves to have her audience, creating a different reaction every five minutes. One minute, she is making you laugh, the next she is making you cry, and then she is making you think you are going crazy, as she spins out of control.

At least my mother can be entertaining; Father is just enormously scary. We never know when he is going to crack, never know when he is going to show up in our room, or even know when he is going to come home. So, we have learned to always be prepared, always be on alert and to always be guarded.

Today was no different than any other, perhaps even worse. Just when I was about to reach for the few pieces of chicken left on the table, my father yelled, "What the hell do you think you are doing?!"

"Nothing, I just haven't had any chicken yet."

"Your brother is the one who will need to keep his strength for the big game. He needs to be the best damn hockey player this country has ever seen. The rest of you are useless, never doing what I ask, never contributing to this family; you are a bunch of low lifes like your freeloading mother!"

I watched my oldest brother, Jamie, as he stood up for the rest of us, who sat speechless. His eyes pierced like knives as his face grew redder than blood and he rose from his chair and snapped, "Screw you Dad; I work every day to bring you money! Matt is the only one who you ever give credit to just because he can play hockey. He doesn't even work; he just goes out with his friends all day. Like tonight, you have no idea where your so-called perfect son is now, do you?!"

That was a big mistake. After that, everything was mostly a blur. I heard a lot more yelling, cursing, and punching. By the end of it, the door slammed behind my father and tires squealed as he drove out of the driveway. My brother lay there, covered in blood, and I thought he might die this time. My mother scrambled for the phone to call the family doctor. She would not take any of us to the hospital for fear that the community might find out what our family is really like. That realization seemed to be more frightening than the fact that her son was beaten half to death by her husband.

The family doctor was also a creep. He attended the same church as us and his daughter, Stacy was one of my only friends. We told each other our deepest and most disturbing secrets, mostly regarding our families. I guess our friendship was one good thing about being secretive, although what we truly desired was to live happily, rather than to suffer in secrecy together.

Before the doctor left, he advised my brother to stay inside-not to heal- but to hide what had happened. My brother agreed at that time, and said he would call in sick to work for the next two weeks, but I knew he could not last that long being in this house.

I decided to have a few words with Jamie, as he knows better than anyone to keep silent when dad is in one of his moods. "What were you thinking, you big dumbie?"

"I just can't stand the way he undermines us like that, especially you. You out of all of us don't deserve that. You always do everything that is expected of you. And it is

so frustrating how he always talks about Matt, like he's God, when he's the most useless."

"I know Jamie. I appreciate you sticking up for me, but I don't need you to, I can handle it. Now look what you have gotten yourself into; you're out of work, and- stuck here. You might not get to leave for longer now."

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I know you've been saving up to get out of here, and you deserve to."

"Thanks, sis but, like you, I can handle myself too. I will find a way, don't you worry."

I just frowned, while a tear rolled down my face, and whispered, "I know. I know... Just be careful...I love you."

My mother punished me for starting the whole thing. She figured I was to blame because I was the one who got father mad in the first place, and the one responsible for Jamie's outburst. She said I should always ask before taking food from the table, especially the last of it, which was new to me because no one ever asked. Yet, I agreed because I did feel guilty; I hated to see my brother like that.

Chapter 4: Full of Comfort

I stayed in my room the whole night. I mostly just stared at the wall thinking of ways to conquer the world, well, my parents, who were the force behind the whole world to me.

Suddenly, I heard the rain again. Pit pat. Pit pat. Pitter pat. It made this rhythm over and over for about an hour. Then it got faster and louder until it sounded like golf balls hitting the roof. I never fall asleep unless it rains. Lucky for me that was most nights. Tonight, however, it was even harder to sleep due to my overwhelming guilt. I could not stop thinking of what could've happened to my brother and how it could happen to any of us, at any time. I knew I needed to dream. It was the only way to make me feel better: to find an answer. I thought of earlier that day when I was in the forest and imagined the magical smell, the delightful taste of the rain, and the striking appearance of the lush trees and plants. It captured my heart as I fell into a deep, deep sleep.

I woke up, or I thought I woke up. I was not in my room, and, as a matter of fact, I was not even in the world I knew. I looked at my hand; it had turned purple and was hairy. I was fuzzy and purple! I could not believe it. *I must still be in my dream! But it felt so real- what was going on?* I checked my surroundings and all I could see were these little green plant-like organisms that sprouted up everywhere, but they were nothing like I had ever seen before, and I know my plants.

All of a sudden, they looked up at me and they were alive! I was scared at first but they seemed friendly enough. I think they greeted me, but I couldn't be quite sure, since they spoke in a language I had never heard before. They kept staring at me and each had an individual eye that looked like a nose. Over and over they also said: "Geeshga! Geeshga!" I wasn't sure where the noise was even coming from; they didn't appear to have mouths, but they certainly seemed happy to see me.

I kept walking, making sure not to step on any of them, waving with my new fuzzy purple hand of which I found myself growing quite fond of. The land was covered with these creatures as far as I could see. The flat land went on for miles and miles with no sign of an end or different landscape. I was walking for so long my feet should have hurt, but they didn't. All I felt was a light softness, like I was gliding on a cloud. Just as I came to this realization, I fell through this cloud-like land and surprisingly, I didn't get that 'stomach flying out of the body' feeling as expected.

I was then surrounded by another flat, soft landscape, but this time there were creatures that looked very similar to the brand new appearance I adopted. They had fuzzy soft purple bodies and their faces, like the other creatures, each only had one eye that looked like a nose and no mouths. They also had paws for hands and feet and their ears were rounded like a bear's.

One popped up in front of me excitedly, as if it knew I was a foreigner and started speaking really fast, "Geeshga, wooda wooda, ooki, tee tee, rum rum, hur, lito, bya, oopee, bonjour, aloha, hola, hallo, ciao, hello..."

"Hello!" I said loudly to let the intelligent creature know what language I spoke.

"Aah, yes, an English-speaking human. We have not had one of those in a very, very long time. It is my pleasure to welcome you to Geeshgawoodiooki. It is named after the three ways to say hello on our dimension."

"Dimension? I thought this was just a dream, or at least thought it was just another planet."

"Oh no, young one, you are in another dimension, or as you might say another time in space. We exist at the same time and location as you exist. This is why I know all of your languages, and I also know all of the languages that exist in the universe," the furry purple creature said proudly.

"Wow. That is amazing, but how did you come to learn all of these languages, when I have never heard any of yours?"

"Well, that is a very long story, my friend. Come, let us eat first, and then we will share."

I was not going to argue with that since my stomach was grumbling- which I thought was strange because earlier my feet didn't hurt and I never felt that weird falling feeling. My mind quickly wandered back to my stomach. It was now making louder grumbling noises. The funny little creature assured me that we would be there soon and sure enough, he didn't lie, for in seconds we were there.

It was the biggest gathering I had ever seen. Every creature in this dimension ate together at the exact same time. I was so shocked that I almost couldn't eat, but the smell was too alluring to resist. I came to what was their version of a dinner table, but they did not call it that and it didn't even look remotely close to any dinner table I had ever seen, for it was completely invisible. The only way to know it existed was to run right into it.

"Stop! You will knock over all of the food!" my purple friend warned me as it pulled me back before I ran into the table. "I am sorry, I forgot to mention that every

object we possess is invisible, so you have to be very careful and learn to rely on your sense of touch. “

“Well, I haven’t run into anything yet, so you must not have very many material things.”

“No. We find no need for them. We have created a few practical objects. Like this grand food placer. It holds our food higher than the ground so we do not have to eat right from the ground.”

“Hmm, that makes sense. So this is the food then? The bubble things floating over there?”

“Yes, but they are not floating my friend. And I must warn you, they are quite filling, so as you humans put it, try not to stuff your face.”

I giggled, and then replied, “OK, I will try not to.”

Abruptly, my purple friend’s voice echoed in my ear, “GEESHGAWOODIOOKI! Chi ikki oodiu tu dri! Tiu ir” As he stopped suddenly mid-sentence, he whispered to me, “....sorry I did not catch your name?”

“That’s okay. My name is Elizabeth.”

“ELIZABETH!” Everyone started making all sorts of noise that sounded like cheering. “Hee iktu tom EARTH!” Again, everyone started cheering loudly. I felt like a celebrity. Never in my life had I experienced so much appreciation, especially without doing anything to deserve it. I was so touched, my eye began to water. The energy was so powerful, yet so uplifting I could not help myself.

“Oh don’t cry my friend. We are your friends now and are here for you. Now let us eat!” Immediately, everyone started eating the bubble food. I picked one up ready to put it in my mouth, when I realized I did not have a mouth. “Excuse me, um, purple friend, how do I eat?”

“My name is Oochoo, and here let me show you,” Oochoo said as he popped one of the bubbles on his head. So I did the same and never had so much fun eating in my life! And I never felt so full! I ate three bubbles, and that was one too many, but Oochoo let it go. I think he knew I hadn’t had a good meal in a long time.

After my crazy, yet miraculous experience eating, I followed Oochoo to his house, which of course was also invisible. I knew we were inside when a thin wall rose up in a circle around us and we could no longer see outside except through some oval shaped windows. I thought this was strange since everything was supposed to be invisible, and it was- from the outside. Maybe it was because - like a house on Earth - it was there for security. I could have asked Oochoo about it, but instead I decided to enjoy the unfamiliarity.

I began to feel around for something to sit on. Oochoo guided me to what felt like a bean bag chair floating in the air. “These chairs are very comfortable, thank you.”

“Oh you are quite welcome, Elizabeth. Comfort is very important in our dimension. We strive to always be comfortable and have full bellies. We believe if we can accomplish this, then everything else will fall into place. Our happiness comes from

this place of comfort and satisfied bellies. It makes us feel safe, and when others give us gifts that support these things, then that is when we feel love.”

“On Earth, having full bellies is more of a luxury. For most of our kind this is hard to come by or sometimes never comes at all, while some of us always have our bellies full - too full actually. I guess if we too strived to feed everyone, then there would be more happiness on Earth. Also, comfort is an interesting concept on Earth. Again, it is more of a luxury, only few of us are able to be comfortable all of the time. But I agree, feeling comfortable also denotes a sense of safety as well.”

“You are very insightful my friend. You understand more than creatures on earth realize I bet. This is why they have chosen you.”

“They? What have they chosen me for? I don’t think I’m that smart. I’m only eleven.”

“Age is not important. Some of the most intelligent creatures are very young. Do not put yourself into a certain category before you discover everything.”

“Well, it would take some time to discover everything. I don’t think I will live that long!”

“Again, age doesn’t matter. Do not put limitations on yourself. Your capabilities are endless. As you have discovered today, or tonight in your dimension, anything is possible, right?”

“Yes. You have opened my eyes to some incredible possibilities, but I’m still confused about something. If our dimensions exist exactly at the same time, then why is it day here and night on Earth?”

“That is a very good question. It is kind of like time-zones on Earth. Everyone exists at the same time, but it just happens to be dark in one area, and light in another. Some might say one part of the earth is ahead of another, but really it is not; it all coexists at one time. We happen to have a very short night that lasts 2 hours. We also sleep during this time, but we do not need as much sleep as humans do. Two hours is enough to feel fully energized and leaves us more time for fun activities.”

“Can I participate in one of these activities?”

“Well, yes, you did already. Eating! Which we do for a half an hour 10 times a day, every 2 hours. As you might have calculated, that equals 25 hours plus the 2 hours we sleep, which is 27 hours in a total day. Now, I know what you are going to say, ‘How can that be when our time exists at the same time earth does?’ Well, this is simple: our hours are shorter. What you may call an hour, is not equivalent to our hours. That is putting it simply. It is much more complicated than that. And as you discover in other dimensions, you will see many different ways of looking at time.”

“Wow. Okay. I just wanted to learn one of your games, but all that is good to know. Thank you. And – wait - you said I will discover other dimensions?”

“Yes, Elizabeth, as I said, you were chosen to be a traveller, as was I.”

“But who chose me and why?”

“Well, you were chosen by the wise ones. This is a group of spirits who look over the dimensions. This will become clearer to you as you discover more. But for now you do not need to know why, and I am not even sure if I can explain that to you. I know why I was chosen, but I found this out after years of travelling. The important thing is that you were chosen for a reason, and now we finally have an appropriate traveller from Earth. The spirits have been searching for a long time. Feel honoured Elizabeth, for you have a great job ahead of you.”

I was taken completely by this explanation and suddenly felt a huge sense of responsibility on my heart. Ochoo could see this in my eye, and said sweetly, “Don’t you worry. You will be amazing. Just think of it as something fun you get to do every night. Do not put too much pressure on yourself. Your job is to learn for now.” He gave me a very long and comforting hug. I cried briefly and then spoke with every sincere inch of me, “Thank you.”

Chapter 5: A New Morning

When I woke up nothing appeared the same. The size of the window, the posters on the wall, or even the very existence of my mouth didn’t seem the same. I touched my lips, then my tongue and nibbled on my fingers just to be sure my teeth were there.

I breathed so easily, but more powerfully than ever. I could feel the energy well up inside my stomach and make its journey up through my body and, as the air passed through my lips, it tingled with pleasure.

As a baby grabs its toes examining their every quality, I too was doing the same with myself, inside and out. Except now I had the wisdom of knowing I was a part of something bigger and more beautiful.

The newness overwhelmed me. Not because I didn’t like it but because I knew I had no part in it. It was as if someone had decided it for me. That concept was scarier than my father: a power so great it could control my destiny, my dreams? No - I could not believe that. Somewhere inside of me knew I had chosen what I was about to embark on. I did not know how, where, when or with who, I just knew it was what my heart craved. And I was determined to figure out those mysteries. In the meantime, I had to deal with my reality at home.

Just like my awareness of my body, my situation at home also took on a new reality; as I found it easier to cope. I walked down the stairs slowly, instead of running. I listened and watched around the corner of the kitchen to scope out the present situation. My mother was drinking orange juice, but it was spiked with whisky, of course and she was humming a tune very familiar to me. It was the lullaby she used sing to me when I was an infant “Hush little baby, don’t say a word.”

I felt a sudden shift within my body. I felt I had become a baby again. My mother's humming brought me right back to my first days of life. Her touch was gentle and loving. The rocking motion put my anxiety at ease and the sound of her voice brought life into my heart. It was one of the few times my mother showed pure love for me.

Eventually this song became entrenched with poison. As I grew older, the words grew meanings, and these meanings were very true to how I was treated. I was never

allowed to speak and if I was, I was punished. However, if I did what they wanted I still felt punished, for I never got any of the rewards the song promised.

Although I was not looking to get a shiny ring, I was simply looking for the energy of pure love that my mother once gave to me as she sang this song. But that had not happened since I was a newborn. For this reason, I had a lot of built-up resentment. My expectations for my mother were once high, but now I place no expectations on her at all.

Today, however, was much different; I was reborn and therefore nothing was clearer than her loving energy. Before, I could never look past the negativity that she exuded with her drinking, but today I finally did.

“Elizabeth, come here and stop daydreaming. Why don't you finish up breakfast here? I have to take care of something,” my mother demanded.

“Okay mom.”

She raised her voice as she left the room and said, “Glad to see your attitude has changed!”

She was right. My attitude had changed, but it had nothing to do with me trying to please her or my father. I simply did not want to waste energy resenting everything. Instead, I gave in to the imposed responsibility and made the most of it. I cooked a huge pan of bacon, a mountain of blueberry pancakes, fried potatoes, and eggs Benedict. I also cut up 3 plates full of fruit.

“Well, look at you Miss thang, all grown up, makin' breakfast for everyone. I never thought I'd see the day! You must be feeling guilty for yesterday huh?” I tuned out my 16 year old sister, Christine. She always tried to push my buttons and she did successfully most of the time, but I was not going to give her the satisfaction of pissing me off. “Well come on Lizzy, aren't you going to say anything?”

“No. I am quite fine thanks. There is fruit there on the table and I have your plate of pancakes keeping warm in the oven.”

“Made with blueberries?”

“Yup, it's just how you like them.”

She put her hand gently on my shoulder as I passed her the plate. She breathed in gently, “Mmm, smells good sis.” I was expecting a thank you, but I knew she appreciated it, since no one has made her favourite meal for years. She used to have blueberry pancakes on her birthday every year, but that faded. I knew this because she often brought this up in fights with our mom. She used this as an example of my mother's neglect. This was the least severe of the examples, but it seemed to be the safest one to bring up.

“I think I smell bacon!” Both Jamie and Matt exclaimed at the same time, as they graced the kitchen with their barbaric presence. It was like nothing had ever happened, as usual. Strangely, Jamie didn't show any sign of bitterness. His and Matt's brotherly love, or should I say their camaraderie always seemed to push through. Mostly for survival

reasons, they felt the need to stick together- as did my two oldest sisters, Samantha and Christine. The three youngest, including me had to fight alone.

“Yo Lizzy, izzy, shawizzy, Can you get me one of those fine lookin' eggs benedicters?” Normally my 13-year old brother's attempt to act cool would irritate me as much as a swarm of mosquitoes attacking me, but I decided to laugh and say, “No problemo, Jordon, dog.”

“HAHAHA, oh man Liz, what has gotten into you today?”

“Not sure Jordan, maybe your coolness rubbed off on me.”

“I don't know about that. But you sure are funnier. Thanks for the grub Liz-a.” He was the only one who thanked me, even though I could tell the rest of them did appreciate it, through their enthusiasm.

All except Sam: she was always reacted differently to everything, than the rest of them. “Oh great, more food to get fat from. Are you trying to kill me Elizabeth? You know I am on a diet.”

“Well, there is some fruit there, you can have that, right?”

“No thanks. I can't stand the smell of all this grease. I'll just grab a glass of water and get out of here.” I just sighed in disappointment. I felt sorry for her obsession with weight. I did not understand it much, mostly because she had never been fat. In fact she has always been a toothpick. I figured the need to be skinny was a lot like my mother's need to have alcohol, in that it seemed like a solution to her problems, when, in fact, it was just causing more problems.

The other day, I went to use the washroom and I could hear Sam barfing up dinner. My first reaction was anger because I didn't even get to have dinner that night, but that quickly turned to sadness. I would give anything to see her healthy again and to have her realize how beautiful she is. In my family I could never say that to her though, for I would be ridiculed. Besides, she probably wouldn't believe me, just like my mom doesn't believe me when I tell her she doesn't need alcohol to be a good woman.

“Hey Sam! Wait up,” I cried out, hoping she would hear me.

“What do you want now Elizabeth?” she asked in an irritated voice.

I wrapped my arms around her waist, looked up at her and said, “You are the most beautiful young woman I have ever seen. Please come eat with us, it would mean the world to me.”

Her eyes got watery, but quickly she pushed me away and said, “Maybe, but you can't let me eat any of that bacon.”

“Sure thing- I think Jamie and Matt probably ate the whole plate already anyways.” She laughed for the first time in a long time, and then followed me back into the kitchen.

My 14-year-old sister Ruth was still sleeping, so I sent my brother Jordan up to get her. Lately, that seemed to be all she does. She has not even gone to school in the last 2 weeks. My parents don't know of course, because if they did, the consequences would

be unspeakable. She had kept a note from her doctor and my mom, when she was sick, and copied their exact handwriting and signature as a way of getting out of school. It was pretty impressive how well she could copy it, even though what she was doing was wrong.

I had tried talking to her a couple of times, but like I said before, we don't seem to connect at all, unfortunately. Honestly, if I was her, I would probably not be able to get out of bed either. She had gotten the worst of dad.

About a month ago, just before she stopped going to school, I heard her screaming in the middle of the night for help. My sister Christine and I were the only ones who heard it. We both rushed to her bedroom listening from the outside of the locked door. I couldn't say what exactly I heard for it was too disturbing to remember. I asked my sister Christine what was happening, and all she could say was, "Someday you will understand, but I pray that you don't. Quick, get back to bed, before he hears us." I prayed a lot that night, for it to stop happening to her and wishing that it would never happen to me. All I knew was that it happened to all the girls in my family, but after a certain age they didn't have to put up with the torture anymore. I had wished I could skip the age where my father's demon would take hold of me, but I knew it was inevitable.

"Nope. She won't come down. She says she feels sick, which I think is bull crap. But oh well, more for us, right?" Jordan announced as he waltzed back into the kitchen.

I looked at him with my brows furrowed. I could feel the heat rushing to my face. If he only knew, what she had to endure...

At that moment my father came in the door. We weren't sure where he had been, even though he said he was at the store. It was Sunday morning and barely any stores were open at 8:30 in the morning. We didn't question his story though- we knew better.

"Where's your mother? What the hell is she doing making you cook breakfast, that lazy whore."

I lied, and said, "I am only making sure things don't burn. She made it all." My siblings looked at me shocked that I lied, and shocked that I had tried to protect mom.

My mom walked in at that moment as if she sensed he was home and quickly took over in the kitchen. "Here is your favourite; eggs Benedict, extra bacon and fried potatoes on the side." She said it so convincingly, it seemed like she believed she made it! Which was good for me, only because I wouldn't be caught lying.

He put his plate down on the table then stood there looking down at us with his eyes bulging and hands on his hips, then said, "Now! Does everyone know what day it is?" He asked us this question like we were in kindergarten learning the days of the week. Except he wasn't capable of asking in a friendly way like a school teacher would.

"Yes, father, Sunday of course." We all said almost in unison.

"Good. Now your asses better be in the car by 9:15 sharp." he paused, looked around, and then said, "Where the hell is that Ruthanne? She better not still be asleep." At that moment she rushed down the stairs pulling her shirt over her head. "I was just in the shower; I am here now father, all ready to go." She must have heard dad coming in the door. She always had a knack for being "just in time".

“Well good! Glad to see someone has it together!” He then took his breakfast from the table, walked heavily to the front door and slammed it behind him. He never ate with us in the morning unless there were overnight guests. He ate in his car while he smoked and drank his coffee. We always joked about how he had to have his morning meeting with himself, to plan how he was going to torture us for the day.

After that we all ate quickly, and started to take turns for our three-minute showers. Ruth really had not showered; she just wet her hair and face in the sink before coming down the stairs so that her performance was believable. The rest of us didn't have her kind of talent with acting. Maybe it was because we didn't have as much to lose as she did.

The oldest was always first. It was more important for them to be clean and look good than the younger ones because they interacted with more people. The younger ones could hide in the back, being smelly. Well, that was Jamie's explanation, anyways. He usually had a half-assed explanation for everything.

Chapter 6: The Mask of Faith

I usually dreaded church. I found it boring, non-beneficial, and mostly irritating. It was the people I found irritating, for most of them were pretentious- always coming to church but never really bettering their souls. They usually acted like a bunch of vampires, sucking the life out of each other, but never getting satisfied. This reminded me of my dream, or should I say my “travelling experience” the night before. The creatures on the dimension Geeshgawoodiooki, also wanted to be full at all times, but instead of stealing from each other, they cooperated to make sure everyone was full.

Being at church was like an illusion because there were all these people looking for answers, and wanting to be filled, but they stole the fulfillment of others to get it. Of course this never worked, since most people left feeling even worse than when they walked in. These people claim to be there for God and to get help from him but I didn't believe this. To me it was more of a social game for them. They went to make themselves feel better and get the latest gossip. Don't get me wrong, there were a few that took this time to reflect on themselves, their lives and what they can do better. These people looked to God, or what they say is God anyways.

It was also sad to see that so many of them were using God as a distraction from their problems, and as a way out of taking responsibility for their actions. My mother fell under this category. I could hear bits and pieces of my mother's prayers. They often had to do with her addiction and she asked for guidance to raise her children. But then this was often followed with several excuses as to why she has not made any changes, and blames her misfortunes on God.

My father, on the other hand, only pretended to pray; just like he pretended to be a good father, and pretended to be a stand up citizen. He was a complete fraud. I could say that my mother, my siblings, and I are the only ones that really know who he is but that wouldn't even be accurate. The “bad” man act seemed be just as much as a lie as the “good” man act. I never know what is going on in his mind, and probably never will. A part of me wishes I could know, but mostly I am glad that I do not. I am too scared to

know the truth. It is bad enough knowing what he is capable of doing to his family; I wouldn't want to know what kind of sick things went through his mind.

Church was a whole new experience for me today. Instead of observing everyone and trying to listen to what the priest was saying and trying to make sense of it, I just went inwards, and silenced my mind. I never thought to do this before, but today it was simply my natural reaction. So instead of leaving the church feeling confused, drained, and irritated, I felt relaxed and even happy.

After Church, there was always a huge get together at the local restaurant for lunch. I was tempted to sneak away, as usual, but I figured I shouldn't today, since my father seemed more on edge than usual. So, instead, I waited it out, and tried to block out all the mindless chatter by focusing on the beautiful view out the window. It was the only thing I loved about the restaurant. I could see the peaks of glory and clear blue sky cascaded behind it. The sun shined even more luminously, creating fairy dust that bounced off the snow. I pictured myself at my special tree, feeling glad that I would be there soon.

Chapter 7: The Evidence

Surprisingly, the normally long lunch seemed to go by as fast as the speed of light. And yet, the crammed car ride home was a different story. Everyone was complaining on the way about how cramped it was and how much better this would be if Jamie hadn't gotten in a car accident. This made the ride home seem like at least an hour long, even though we were only a few blocks away.

Finally, we pulled into the driveway and everyone was still yelling at each other, when my father decided to join in, "Shut up! Yes, your brother is stupid but I am tired of all of your whining, you sacks of shit! Now, when you get out of this car, you better shut your traps so the neighbours don't hear!" It seemed the neighbours' opinions were more important than his kids'. We didn't expect much more than that, since his "good" man act benefited him more than his "bad" man act - well, in public anyways.

I managed to sneak in the backyard and find my way to the forest. Usually, I would not do this, because Sunday is the only day that my dad stays with us from the morning to suppertime, so I knew he would notice I was gone. But I was sure after the car incident, that he would be happy to get rid of any of us. I felt a need to go to the forest today, despite the apparent consequences. Something was pushing inside of me to go.

As I stood at the edge of the forest, I could almost hear Oochoo's voice saying something. I closed my eyes and tried to listen intently. Still, I could only hear a faint whisper. I started to walk into the forest, and the voice grew louder. I started to follow the voice, until it led me right to my tree. I could hear the voice clearly now and it was saying, "Come my friend. I need to show you something." Just then, I saw a ghost-like image of Oochoo hovering in the air in front of me. "Can you see me, Elizabeth?"

"Yes! Yes I can! This is incredible, so I am not crazy after all?" I said while jumping up and down and clapping my hands.

His eye lit up, "Hehe. No, no. You are not crazy. If anything, you are enlightened. Here, I left you something that you can bring back to your house. It is for safety, because

I have been watching over you for a while and I can see that you need protection.” His face was now solemn.

I nodded in agreement, “That is for sure. So what is it?”

“It will appear as soon as I go. Right now, I need to tell you something.” Oochoo said while gliding down closer to me.

“Yes?”

“Well, tonight you will again explore another dimension. But I need to warn you that it will not be pretty. It will be very chaotic but you will be safe, as long as you bring what I am about to leave you. This will give you safety in all dimensions.” His big one eye looked down at me like a parent does when warning you to look both ways when crossing the road.

“Well thank you for the protection. But I have to ask, do I have a choice in going?” I felt a big lump in my throat as I asked this. I knew what the answer was going to be, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to ask. I really didn’t want to cross that road.

He paused for a moment, and put his paws together getting ready to hand me the news. “Unfortunately, no. There are lessons that you need to learn before you move on. But, I promise you, this is the only dimension that you will feel scared in, besides the one you are living in now on Earth. Do not try to avoid it by staying awake. Please embrace this experience. You will see the benefits of the lessons right away.” He then gave a nod of certainty.

“Well thank you for the heads up. It is appreciated very much. And, I will do what I must.” I said with a lot less certainty.

He swirled around me with excitement, “I am very glad to hear that, and you are welcome. Now I must be going. It is time to eat! But, remember to look for my present. Bye for now.”

“BYE!” I called up as I saw his soft transparent figure spin upwards into the sky and evaporate.

I looked around and, at first glance, I saw nothing of his gift. I searched high in the tree, on the ground, around the tree, in any holes on the tree – still I found nothing. I sat down on the crevasses that I regularly sit on but something was different. It felt soft, fluffy and warm. It was one of the invisible chairs from Oochoo's dimension! It turned visible as soon as I sat on it. It was round, sponge-like and, of course, bright purple.

I did not know how this could protect me, but I sat in it for awhile while watching the clouds glide over the mountains. I closed my eyes, listening to the sweet melody of the birds, and feeling the wind brush across my face. When I opened my eyes, the chair I had been sitting on became a bubble all around me. I started to breathe faster and my palms became sweaty because of my claustrophobia, but then I realized the powerful light that was radiating from the bubble and me.

I wondered if it could move. “Fly over to the ground,” I whispered. I had my eyes closed at this point, and didn’t feel it move at all, but when I opened them, there I was still in the bubble floating slightly over the ground. I could not believe it! So I decided to

try some other things out to see what it could do. I thought if it could change from a seat to a bubble, then maybe it can make other shapes. I shut my eyes again and said quietly to myself, "Keep me warm". I then felt as if I had a great big squishy teddy bear hugging me. I opened up my eyes and the object had changed into just that! I felt not only warm but very safe.

On my way home I continued asking it to change into various objects. It had changed successfully into an umbrella, sword, coat, shield, and even night vision goggles! It was amazing how it could be turned into anything- well *almost* anything. I did try to change it into a person- my grandmother that had passed away a few years ago, but that didn't turn out so well. It shone brightly, and then burst into sparkling fairy dust.

I was very disappointed by this because my grandmother was really the only one I could talk to seriously about my problems and my crazy ideas about religion and life. She had a great sense of humour, probably the only one in my family besides my brother Matt. He always found a way to make a joke out of everything. My grandmother, Sue-Ellen was known for her dark humour and making a scene at every family gathering.

I remember one time we were all sitting in the living room and out of nowhere she said really loudly, "You know what I like best? I love to heeeear people bicker! Cuz guess what!? *No one* eeeever wins! Hahaha!" She chuckled for a good 5 minutes after that. We all just looked at her curiously. We knew it was true, but we never wanted to admit it. Everyone was only silent for the seconds she was speaking, and then continued on in their ways.

I always knew what she meant, and I admired her for speaking out like that. That is why I miss her terribly. She was on my father's side surprisingly. I could never figure out why he turned out so badly when he had such a cool mom. I never knew my grandfather and maybe that was the reason I never figured out that mystery.

As I approached the backyard I turned the present into a plain, discreet button. I put my hand into my pocket, still holding onto the button so that I would not lose it. I had to sneak into the back window, since it was almost dinnertime and, someone would catch me for sure, if I went through the front door.

I looked around carefully in all directions, placed the button on the ground, and then said quietly, "Be a ladder." The button quickly formed into a ladder. I could climb up it easily. But now there was a problem. How was I going to turn it back into a button without it falling to the ground? So I said, "Be a button with wings." Again, it did exactly as I asked and flew right into my hands. After telling it to get rid of the wings I tucked it safely back into my pocket.

When I got into my room, I kept searching for a safe place to put it. Then I realized it could be invisible. So I turned it into a necklace and placed it into my jewellery box with a lock on it. But, just to be sure, I decided to have it turn invisible as soon as the box was opened. That way none of my sisters could steal it. Often they would break into my stuff and take what they wanted, but now they wouldn't be able to take the most special thing of all!

Having such power over just one object was overwhelming. I was afraid that it might be too much for me, because I do not have control over anything in my life, and

now I had almost complete control over something. It made me realize that if it is this exciting to have control over one tiny thing, then it must feeling amazing to have control over one's own life, although no one really does have full control over their own lives. This is because no one can win against death. Whether you are hit by a bus or die of old age, nobody can say that you made it happen. Except in the case of suicide, but even then, sometimes the methods someone uses don't work, and many people survive through the most extreme measures they took to kill themselves.

Right now, however, I feel a little differently. I feel that anything is possible. Maybe, one day, I will have total control over my life, even over how long I live. Or, perhaps, I already made this decision? Either way, the thought made me feel like I could conquer anything and gave me the courage to do something very serious.

Chapter 8: Courage

I could hear my dad screaming up the stairs to tell us dinner was ready. I was leaving my room, when my sister stopped me in the hall and shoved me back into my room. "What do you want Christine?" I asked insistently.

She looked me straight in the eye, hovered over me and said, "Now, I don't know what is up with you lately, Liz, but quite frankly I don't like it," Christine replied with a bark in her voice that reminded me of a yippy Chihuahua wearing a pink dress. Her attitude often accompanied a waving hand in my face and another hand on her hip. However, this time she just continued to linger and stare, trying to intimidate me.

"What are you talking about Chrissy?" I asked, totally baffled. I knew it was unlike me to make everyone breakfast, but I didn't think that was too big of a deal.

"You know, like this morning, being so nice and everything. Normally, you don't even say anything. And from what I gather, you don't even like any of us." She took a step back and crossed her arms.

I was very surprised that she felt this way. I wasn't aware that I stirred up so many emotions. "Well, that's not true. I love you all. It's just that you guys aren't exactly nice to me, so I thought maybe if I was nice to you, then maybe you would start treating me and each other better."

"HA! You kiddin' me Liz? You know that is not how our family works. Even if we were nice to each other that wouldn't change the fact that we have parents from hell." She said as her hand waved in my face.

"Ya maybe not, but I just thought maybe when our lives are already hell, it's unnecessary for us to make each others' lives even worse. You know what mean?"

She wrinkled her face, but then said, "You may have a point. But I was told to tell you to quit it because it's not only making us a little freaked out, but dad might start suspecting something and punish us even more."

I could see her point, but I wished that we weren't so trapped in our ways. "Okay, I will cool it for now, but I can't promise to stop being nice forever. After all, I do have a conscience."

She smiled, “Well glad you do sis. But, like I said, if you really want to be nice, you will avoid making dad suspicious at all costs.”

“Okay. Yeah, I know how he can be,” I agreed without hesitation. Although, in my heart, I could not truly and fully agree to stop changing.

Well, it was dinnertime again. Everything was going as expected, but like I said, my heart wanted a change. In the middle of everyone bickering, I stood up and took a piece of roast beef from the plate in the middle of the table. “What the heck are you doing Liz?!” My brother Jamie exclaimed.

“Getting some food, what does it look like,” I snapped back.

“Sit back down and wait your turn!” the monster bellowed.

“NO!” I yelled back.

“What did you say?!” the monster stood up so fast that his chair went flying back.

“I said I am getting some food. I barely ever get any. And today is going to be different. The youngest will go first.” My siblings just gasped and stared at me with their eyelids pulled back so far all I could see were their bulging pupils.

The monster was breathing very heavily at this point, and I swear I thought I saw steam coming out of his nose like a dragon. But I did not budge. Usually, at this point, I would be crawling underneath the table. I put my hand in my pocket and there appeared the invisible necklace. I just held it tight and stared down my father.

The monster's eyes almost appeared human. The steam stopped coming out his nose and his breathing slowed, “Your sister has a point. Today can be different. But ONLY today! If you try to pull another stunt like this, you know what will come to you.” I could not believe it! It was a miracle! I thought for sure I would be beaten until nothing was left of me. My siblings were still staring at me, as I took some food and sat down proudly in my chair, then, they all followed suit. Jordan and Ruth smiled at me with great appreciation.

After the incident, the rest of the evening was surprisingly calm and everyone was just a little bit nicer to each other. It wasn't totally perfect or anything but it was a tiny bit different and anything different, from what it is usually like, is an improvement and a relief. No one was beaten, or abused. Most of my siblings were not happy with me at all, but nothing drastic happened nor did anyone shove me in my room again to tell me to change back to “normal”.

I headed upstairs to go to bed, and I felt more nervous about going to bed tonight than I felt at dinner time. I didn't know what was to come of this dream tonight, and I was scared to know. But like Oochoo said, it must happen. I made sure to put the invisible necklace on before lying down in the bed. I couldn't help but hesitate in shutting my eyes, as my heart pounded fiercely, but I took a deep breath and shut them slowly. I didn't fall asleep right away, so I kept myself calm by dreaming of the magical essence of the forest. Slowly but surely my heart began to calm down, and I fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 9: Birth

I appeared right before the edge of a cliff. I looked down and all I could see was darkness. I felt a push, and I was falling fast, down into the darkness. I could see below to me what looked like burning coals, so I held onto my necklace and said, "Become a trampoline," and it did. I bounced a few times, then sat on the trampoline looking around. I noticed that the coals beneath the trampoline were burning through it, "become a magic flying carpet," and it did. I flew slowly on the carpet along this large canyon where the only available light was coming from the burning coals.

The canyon then opened up to this great plain. It was almost desert-like, with the sky emerging with the ground. The sky was a bright orange that gradually faded into the reddish-grey ground. I found this sight to be very captivating. I did not know why Oochoo was so worried about me. Besides the hot coals and the fall in the beginning, there was nothing scary about this dimension. There was one weird thing about it. It was completely silent- not a sound! I thought maybe I was deaf, at first, but it wasn't that at all. There was just no sound.

I looked down to discover my appearance. I was only a wispy, gas-like figure made up of the same colours as the landscape and so much that if it weren't for the magic carpet I would fade right into the background. Maybe that is what is supposed to be so scary about it - that there was no existence to be found, and, if there was, it must be hidden in the background.

I felt my heart beating fast again with anxiety, as I felt like I was being watched. I thought about changing my present into glasses so that I could see bodies of existence, if there were any, but then I realized I could not touch the ground, so I had to stay in the air. Instead, I commanded it to be a see-through bubble that flies and has the ability to see any life form. I thought this might be too complicated, but it wasn't for something so magical.

I was then sitting comfortably in this bubble and a computer-like screen appeared in front of me. I started to see some figures, and more figures, and even more figures! I was completely surrounded by these gas-like figures. Their faces were long and droopy, with no physical features on them at all. The way the outline of their faces moved, it looked like they were saying something, but, still I couldn't hear any sound. At first I was terrified, because I thought they were going to surround me like a pack of wolves, but they left just enough space to not touch my bubble. All they did was glide slowly past me, but it seemed like it was never going to end, that this dimension was just covered in these figures.

Not only was it covered by these figures, but I noticed the whole place was made up of these creatures. The ground was actually moving and had faces, as did the sky. Everything was moving like rivers flowing in and out of each other. I wasn't sure what to make of this. They did not appear to want to hurt me, but I was scared of becoming one of them. They were just lifeless beings, having nowhere to go and no reason to be living, except to keep their own planet intact. In a way they were working together, because if one stopped then their planet would just stop existing. They had this eternal duty to keep moving and just "be". The boredom would make me crazy by itself, but knowing that is the only reason for my existence was also a terrifying thought.

I decided to keep moving with the flow to see if it would lead me to somewhere different. For what seemed like hours and hours, nothing changed. Right before I thought I was going to go insane from the boredom, I finally saw something different! Although it did not appear friendly, I was still happy to see the larger figure.

The large gas-like figure was not moving! It was bigger than the rest of them and had big yellow eyes! “COME HERE, COME HERE, COME HERE!” I finally could hear something! It kept shouting out to me with a very deep voice. I was frightened to keep moving towards it, but the bubble would not let me stop. “FINALLY YOU ARE HERE. I HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU FOR A LONG TIME!” I did not know why it was still crying out to me since I was right there, but surprisingly it did not hurt my ears.

“WHAT IS IT THAT YOU WANT? AND HOW DO YOU KNOW MY LANGUAGE?” I yelled back to it, just in case it had a hearing problem.

“I WAS TOLD YOU WERE COMING ELIZABETH, AND THAT YOU NEED GUIDANCE FOR YOUR DISCOVERIES.”

“THERE IS NO NEED TO YELL,” I cried out to it, desperate to speak in a regular tone.

“Sorry. That is just how I have to speak when I address the inhabitants, for their hearing is not very good you see, or rather, non-existent. When I shout, the bass of my voice carries out and they understand my commands.”

“Interesting... now what can you tell me?”

“Well, firstly, I want to welcome you to GASSILO. And I am GOASILA, RULER AND SEEER OF GASSILO. I see all that goes on, and correct the many mistakes that present themselves.” The large transparent figure continued to yell the name of the dimension and his name. It seemed that he needed to do so, to be sure everyone was aware of it. In fact, it was quite humorous.

“What kind of mistakes do you correct?” I asked somewhat suspiciously.

“Well, all mistakes, not only on GASSILO but also on other dimensions. I am sort of like... What do you call those electronic things that you use to communicate?”

“Telephones?” I asked, still doubtful of his presence.

“No. Uh. You write out things to communicate, and then send mail.”

“OH. Computers and what you are referring to is e-mail sent through the internet.”

“Yes, yes of course. COMPUTERS!” I rolled my non-existent eyes. “I correct... What do you call it? Uh... viruses in the system, so things run smoothly. Here, if one of my creatures stops or slows down more than the others, I have to correct its speed or GASSILO will collapse on itself.”

I perked up, as I became more interested, “Hmm. I was wondering about that actually. How are they all able to move in exactly the same direction and at the same speed? I found it quite fascinating how it was surviving, but now that makes more sense. But how do you correct these types of mistakes, say in a place like Earth?”

“Well, that is very simple. It has to do with the deaths and births. I try to keep enough balance. If there are too many births, I send over energy; what you might call “population control.” I know it may sound cruel but, if I did not do that, the Earth would also collapse on itself because there would be too many creatures living on it. And the creatures would suffer from longer, more torturous ways of dying, like starving or freezing to death.”

“So do you control Mother Earth then?” I asked again in a suspicious manner.

“Oh no. That is too much responsibility. I might send her a signal saying a hurricane is needed in a specific area but that is up to her as to how big it is or even if she will do it. There are many signals I have put out regardless if she follows through on them or not. You see, your dimension is almost at its breaking point, with the people and nature. Mother Nature is hesitant, because she does not want to sacrifice too much of herself, because many creatures depend on her and it takes some time to rejuvenate herself. But, I still have to send those signals. It is my responsibility to let her know.”

“Wow. That is amazing. I never knew there was actually a somewhat organized system. I thought it was just random,” I replied with great enthusiasm.

“Well the situations that humans create are sometimes related to these “random” acts of Mother Nature. For instance, your pollution has caused her to lose her barrier against the Sun, which has created some necessary natural disasters, and climate change.”

“Hmm. That is interesting, because many humans really don't take responsibility for that. They just assume Mother Nature, or God is the one controlling everything. And others believe they have total control and that they can correct their mistakes, but both are wrong, right?”

“Yes. Exactly, Elizabeth. Humans are not as smart as they think they are. They rely so heavily on beliefs of their own without discovering what is really there. But that is part of your job - to discover the real workings of the dimensions.”

“Am I the only one that has to take on that responsibility? And, have there been others that did what I am doing, on Earth and other dimensions?”

“Yes. As you probably had been told, you are not alone in this. And, I have done what you have done. It started when I kept stopping the system on this dimension by going too slow all the time. So the wise ones wanted to show me what I was doing and the havoc I was creating. After that, I decided to be who I am now, so others like me won't mess up the system, because Elizabeth, the 'SYSTEM' is very important for the dimensions. But, some day, I will have to choose my replacement.”

“Hmm. Does that mean I might be making mistakes? I might be creating some havoc that I need to correct?” I asked concerned.

“No, no. That is not necessarily true. You have to be patient in discovering your purpose. You are doing great. I was impressed with your calm nature in this very scary place.”

“Well I am not going to lie. I was definitely afraid at first, but then I just tried to learn how this dimension worked instead of being scared of it. What helped me was, at first before I discovered the beings, I saw the beautiful colours. And after that, I

appreciated that these beings were making something so beautiful and also cooperating better than I had seen any humans do.”

“Well, I am very glad to hear that, because humans are always afraid of what they call “hell”. And I was afraid that you might see this place as that. Although this is the first dimension, and it does have a chilling atmosphere, there are great lessons to be learned from it. Really this is the most hellish place that exists because of its boring predisposition. It might make a regular human go crazy. But, another way of looking at it, and the way I believe you came to look at it, is that it is very peaceful. I am also glad you didn't refer to the beings as something like “lost souls” because they are not at all. They are actually the births of new souls.”

I couldn't believe my ears! I was getting to see where souls are born! Everything in me pulsed with electricity. “WOW. So I once was one of these beings?” I asked looking around me in awe. My body relaxed as I breathed in the silence before he replied.

“Yes, indeed you were,” Goasila smiled with his now endearing blue eyes. His eyes had changed at least 5 colours since I started talking to him.

“Is there anything else I must do, or find out before I leave?” I asked with anticipation.

“No. That is all for now Elizabeth. Is there anything you would like to ask?”

I pondered for a little bit then said, “Yes actually. You said this was the first dimension and Oochoo said that Earth was only the second dimension. How can that be when Earth seems a lot more complicated?”

“Well, that is a very difficult thing to explain, my little smart one. And you will soon enough get to know the inner workings of Earth in more detail, but I will try to put it simply. Basically, Earth is somewhat the opposite of this dimension, besides Mother Earth trying to make sense of it all, by creating some sort of system. Essentially, it is chaotic. Nothing is or at least appears to be in a certain, organized system. The only things certain are death and birth, which comes from this dimension. Earth is a playground where humans and all living creatures are playing with each other, discovering their strengths, weaknesses, and the purpose of their souls. Many are born again and again, to come back to Earth to discover these things, and often it takes many times to find out what these things are.”

“Well, the creatures on Earth do continue to act like children even as they get older. They always seem to play these games with each other, and are often torturing one another.”

Goasila laughed, and nodded in agreement, “You are quite a treat Elizabeth. Your insight is much higher than a regular human. You truly are on the brink of your ultimate discovery.”

“Ha-ha. Well, that is good to know. I guess I must be getting back to the playground now Goasila. You were a delight as well. Thank you for all of your insight. It was truly an eye-opener.”

“I am so glad you enjoyed your time here. Be good to yourself, and continue to be good to others. You are special, so keep it that way.” Goasila winked and I was sent up to the top of the cliff. This time I didn't fall into Gassilo, I fell right into my bed.

Chapter 10: Time Stood Still

I woke up startled, as I almost fell right off my bed. I have had dreams where I dreamt I fell and then have awakened by nearly falling off my bed, but this time it freaked me out even more, since the fall seemed so real, but then I realized that the feeling was real. I remembered my experience in Gassilo almost instantly. It was so much to take in, that my mind was simply buzzing constantly with thoughts of life, its meaning, and my meaning, but I had no time to think about all that. I had to get ready for school.

Good thing I had taken a shower the night before, or I would be late for sure, and I always hated being late for school. My teacher, Mrs. Gumble, wasn't the meanest person in the world, but her biggest pet peeve was people showing up late to her class. I was late at least once a week, usually because I wasn't able to get ready in time to catch the bus. On these days, I would have to get my brother Jamie to drive me, which he hated to do, because it made him late too. Since Jamie didn't have a car, I made sure I would be ready in time to catch the bus today.

Another reason I was so determined to be on time was if I showed up late enough times, they would send a letter home, and I could not afford to let that happen. My father also hates tardiness. I only got a beating once for being late and, since then, I made sure I wasn't late more than once a week.

Surprisingly, I was at the bus stop early, despite waking up late and being distracted with so many serious questions and thoughts. Good thing, too, because if I had to chase down the bus, I would have no luck. The bus driver was a stickler for that. It seemed every adult in my life was uptight. Except my mom, of course, who was the total opposite, unless my dad was around, and then she would agree to all of his terms.

“Hey Lizzy! Over here, I saved you a spot!” my friend Stacy, the daughter of the doctor, called out to me.

I plopped down in the seat, “Thanks Stacy, appreciate it. This bus is always packed full. Sometimes I have to stand up!”

“Haha. Yeah, tell me about it. I almost had to poke a couple of eyes out to save you the seat, but I figured you would be on the bus, for sure, because of your brother's accident.”

“Yeah, you heard about that?” I asked surprised. Actually, considering all the gossipers in this town, I really shouldn't be.

“Oh yeah, from Mr. Sholtz, the guy who owns the candy store downtown. He saw the whole thing.”

“Wow. I didn't know that. I thought Jamie got into his accident in the country. He told everyone he hit a deer that jumped right in front of the car.”

“Well, your brother probably didn’t want your dad to know the truth, Liz. Mr. Sholtz told me that he ran into the light post right outside of his store. He then saw him call someone on his cell phone and a tow truck showed up right away.”

“Hmm. He told us that his car was fine until he tried to start it the next day. Stacy, I do appreciate you telling me the truth but can you not tell anyone else? My brother has gotten enough punishment to last him a lifetime,” I asked while putting my hand on her leg gently, and looking into her eyes with desperation.

“Sure, no problem, Liz. You know that I am the master of secret-holding,” she smiled softly as she patted my hand.

I smiled back, “Thanks, I appreciate it.” “Now, I have something crazy to tell you,” I said as I jumped into my seat and turned my back to the aisle.

She raised her brow, “Oh really? Do pray tell.”

I wasn’t going to tell her about my dreams or my travel adventures, but I was going to tell her about the breakthrough I made with my family. “You are not going to believe this, but I actually stood up to my father and didn’t get punished!”

“You’re kidding me!?” Stacy exclaimed.

“Nope, I definitely am not,” I responded in the most confidence I had for a long time. I then continued to tell her the details all the way to school. She was so inspired that she told me that if I could do that, then she could finally confess to a boy that she liked him. His name was Damien. This would be extra risky on her part because he is African-American. She and I are not racist but our parents are. They like to deny it, but we can tell by their snide remarks like, “Oh that’s just not right,” after seeing an interracial couple.

“Well, I can just keep it a secret?” She bit her bottom lip, knowing that I didn’t think it was a good idea.

“Stacy...Do you realize how many people in this small town have your father as their doctor?” I gently reminded her.

“I appreciate your concern Liz but nothing can stop me from loving Damien. I’m not going to be scared away just because my parents *might* find out.” We sat in silence the rest of the way to school. I didn’t want to argue with her.

I thought she was crazy for even daring to love anyone and especially someone who wouldn’t be accepted by her family. There was a good chance Stacy’s crush might be a product of rebellion, rather than love. And really, how can an eleven year old be “in love”? The whole idea was just insane to me, but I left it alone because if it is meant to be, it will be. She has her own lessons to learn, as do I. I just hope she doesn’t learn them the hard way.

Speaking of boys, I do like one in my class. His name is Todd and he is simply a massive distraction. He doesn’t help my constant daydreaming, and imaginative tendencies. It was hard enough for me to concentrate without boys, but he just made it impossible. I never told Stacy about him though, because I didn’t want to be like every

other giddy girl our age (even though she was one of those girls). Of course, I didn't love him or anything: it was more of an energy that pulled my eyes in his direction.

He was taller than most of the boys, and he seemed to have matured early. This is what probably what attracted me to him the most, since his actual appearance was nothing special. He had a slightly crooked and large nose and some pimples but other than that, he had an old-fashioned charm. He was also shy, like me, which made him mysterious. I knew there was more to him than met the eyes, but I was always too frightened to talk to him.

As I was daydreaming about what I would say to him, I walked into our class to take my seat, and I noticed the desks were arranged in a different order than usual. Instead of rows, they made a three quarter square. My teacher loved to rearrange the desks just for kicks I think, and it annoyed most of us. But, today, I was so happy I could give her a great big hug. We had our names on the chairs, and I noticed Todd's chair was beside mine! At first I was excited, but the excitement quickly turned into panic. I already had a hard time talking to other people in my class but, with him, it was ten times worse. I was definitely more scared of talking to him than I was of talking to Goasila.

I sat down quickly and opened up a book, pretending to read it, waiting for Todd to get there. As I was doing this, I was thinking about Goasila and his dimension and how creepy it looked at first glance. I thought about how proud I was of myself for going there and overcoming that fear. Also, I was impressed with myself for understanding the purpose and workings of Gassilo. 'If I am so intelligent and brave then why I am so terrified to talk to an eleven year old?' I asked myself. After I had this epiphany, my anxiety symptoms seemed to fade away.

When Todd came into class, I smiled at him, and then I started laughing hysterically! He looked at me strangely, but then he couldn't help himself, and he started laughing too! "What.. are.. we laugh..ing.. about?" he asked almost out of breath from laughing so hard.

"I .. am not s...uurre," I said still laughing. I then took a deep breath in, looked right into his big brown eyes and said, "Hi. My name is Elizabeth, but most of my friends call me Liz or Lizzy. You can call me any of those or none, it's up to you."

"I think I like your whole name best. It suits you better. It is more mature, lady-like." I did not know whether to take this as a compliment or not. I decided to take it as one, since his maturity was what I liked best about him.

I smiled as widely as I could, "Thank you. I will take that as a compliment."

He blushed and said shyly, "Well, it is."

Talking to him after that was incredibly easy. We had more in common than I initially thought. It was nice to talk to someone different for a change. I liked Stacy and I trusted her, but talking to Todd was easier, because I could really be myself. He said things that I never heard before. He told me he went to the library often to research different religions. Most people might find this nerdy, but I found it fascinating. I asked him all sorts of things about different belief systems and he always had an answer. During class, we even passed notes. And, at lunch time, we walked to the park to have

our lunch there together. We got so caught up in talking, we were almost late coming back to class!

I was learning, more and more, that there are few things in life to be frightened of. In the last few days, I gained confidence and made a new friend. I didn't realize that a person could learn so much in such a short time. I was grateful to have that honour. I still could not stop thinking about Gassilo, and the things I learned there. I wondered if Goasila would visit me today, like Oochoo had.

It was my last class of the day, gym class. I wasn't much for sports but it was a good outlet to get out any built up anger I had from home. We were finally moving on to my favourite sport: tackle football. Sometimes I get hurt, but it's always fun to tackle down your enemies. There is something so primal and barbaric about it that makes it attractive to me. For the first time all day, my mind was clear.

I was running about the field when all of a sudden I hit a wall. Not literally a wall, but something so strong it felt like a wall. I looked up, thinking it must be the strongest and most aggressive girl in our class, Roseanne, but there was nothing in front of me at all! Everyone was staring at me wondering why I fell right to the ground for no reason. They kept yelling at me to keep going, since I almost scored a touchdown but, I couldn't move! I decided to pull my present out of my pocket and make it into special goggles to see what was in front of me.

As I put the goggles on, a transparent wall of swirling and colliding sunset colours appeared before me. The wisps of sunrays started to circle and the wall soon became a tornado-like shape, rotating slowly. The tunnel then exploded and flashed into shimmering dust. Finally, I could see two yellow eyes glowing in the dust as a flowing figure formed around them. The familiar face greeted me with a big grin.

"What are you doing here Goasila?! I am trying to play a game here you know."

"Haha. Yes I know, that is what makes it fun." He said as he spun around.

"Yeah, fun for you, Goasila. Now please let me go forward, I am running out of time." I urged, stomping my foot.

"You can never run out of time Elizabeth, there is an endless amount of time in the universe you know."

"Yes yes, I know. But I mean, right now, people are cheering me on to get a touchdown, so we can win the game." I explained as my body danced in place waiting impatiently.

"And what will that accomplish exactly? That you can win at a footcircle game? That doesn't mean you can win at life you know."

"I don't have time to have a serious conversation with you right now. I will explain later, just please let me go through!"

He sighed, "Oh, alright. But you better be available afterwards to have a discussion with me."

"Yes, of course. Thank you!" I jumped up with the football in hand, and raced towards the end. Surprisingly, I made it and we won the game! I don't have any idea how

that happened because Goasila took up so much of my time but I did it regardless. I was sitting on the sidelines afterwards, drinking some water, as everyone else rushed back into the school so that they could change. I, on the other hand, wanted to go straight to the bus, so I took all of my stuff to the field. I was thinking of my bright idea when a random thought came to me, ‘What if Goasila had stopped time while he was talking to me, and I just didn’t take the time to notice?’ Well, that can’t be, can it? I wouldn’t have been able to hear my team cheering if time was stopped. I then faintly remembered that the cheering had stopped when I put my goggles on.

“Yes, my dear that is exactly what happened!” Goasila exclaimed. After gaining my composure I replied, “So, are you trying to tell me something then?”

“Well, at first no. I was just having fun with you. But now that you mention it, yes. You cannot consume yourself with the idea of time. Things that are meant to happen will happen, and at the appropriate time, but you must never force things, or feel rushed. When you slow down, you see and learn more. Yes, someone might be mad if you’re late, or if you didn’t win the footcircle ga-“

“Football,” I corrected him.

“What was that?”

“FOOTBALL. That is what the game is called, not footcircle,” I giggled, “Why did you think it was called footcircle?”

“Oh, because when you hit it with your foot, it spins in circles. I thought it might be ball but a footcir- ball does not look like a ball.”

“Yes, that is true, you do have point. So, what were you saying now about time?” I asked impatiently.

“Well, my point is, Elizabeth, that if you worry so much about time, then it will seem to pass quicker. But if you just do what you have to do, you will see that you actually are on time more often than if you worried about it.”

“Are you saying that it is okay to be late?”

“Well, not exactly. You never want to disappoint people, but sometimes people need to be understanding of your circumstances. There are things you can control and things you can’t. And if you tried to do your best, doing what you need to do, and still are late, then it is best the other person has some compassion.”

“You don’t know the people in my life very well. They are not understanding or compassionate.” I stated firmly.

“That may be true, but that has to do with your perception as well. If you believe they are that way and never change, then that will be the case. But if you convince yourself otherwise, things might change. Just give it a thought Elizabeth, only good can come from it. Now let’s get down to business.”

I looked at him curiously, “What business are you talking about?”

“I am talking about the gift-giving business of course. I have something for you, as you might have already guessed.”

“Yes, I was wondering about that.”

Goasila pulled out what looked like a long handkerchief. It was made up of the same colours as Gassilo. “I hope this isn’t a newborn spirit,” I said a little frightened.

“Haha. Of course not, it is something that will be of use to you. It is a device that can stop time. It will help you through your times here on earth until you can train yourself to stop time on your own.”

“Really?! I will be able to stop time on my own some day? That is why you said not to worry right?”

“Well, no Elizabeth. What I said is you must change your idea of time and that is exactly what you must do in order to stop it. When you learn this, this gift will be taken away. It will also be taken away if you abuse it. You have to only use it when you are desperate.”

“How will I know when I’m desperate enough?”

“Look inside yourself and you will find the answer. You have to ask yourself questions like; is it worth using? Can I endure the consequences? These kinds of questions will help you greatly if you choose to see the true answer. Time may not seem like something that you can learn great things from, but you will I promise.”

“Well, thank you very much for this gift and your advice. Now, how do I use it?” I smirked.

“Haha. Yes, you may need to know that. You simply throw it into the air and it will make a wall around your surroundings so that no one can move, or even speak. It is like the wall I put in front of you but I gave you more freedom, allowing you to move backwards if you wanted and speak. But, the people and things you choose to stop time with will be frozen.”

“Well that is very good to know. Thank you for sharing and giving me this gift.”

“You’re very welcome but remember to use it wisely. It is not for games. Also, Oochoo told me to tell you the same about his gift. It is not to be used as a toy, but for safety purposes only. We do not want you to get caught up in the power of these gifts. We trust that you are wise and honest enough to use them with care and honour.”

“Yes, of course, I definitely will do that. I feel very privileged to get such amazing gifts. And discovering the dimensions has been the greatest gift of all. These past experiences have been overwhelming: I have learned so much in so little time that I am still processing everything.”

Goasila looked at me with loving blue eyes and whispered, “Take your time, take your time.” He then vanished right in front of my eyes. I tied the handkerchief looking object around my neck, and headed for the bus. I thought I might miss it but I did as Goasila told me to do, and took my time. I walked at a reasonable pace, and even stopped to pick some flowers. I thought it might be a nice gesture for my mother.

Chapter 11: Mysterious Relations

When I got to the bus stop, the bus was still waiting there. I was actually surprised because it usually leaves 10 minutes earlier than when I arrived. Just as I stepped onto the bus, the driver followed right behind me, still talking on his cell phone. It sounded like he was talking to his wife. I heard him say, "Well sugar, I got to get going now, running a little bit late. I love you and I can't wait to eat a wonderful late dinner with you." I then heard yelling on the phone and it sounded like she was saying, "Don't you dare hang up! You bastard!" He then quickly hung up the phone and turned it off.

I was not sure what to make of this predicament, as I always thought the bus driver was kind of mean, but according to his wife it sounded like he was the devil. At first I thought he must have been a real jerk for her to yell at him like that but then I turned back around to the front of the bus, and tapped him on the shoulder. He had the saddest looking eyes I had ever seen. I decided to give him the flowers. He either needed it or his wife desperately did. I thought he was going to give me heck for standing up on the bus and bothering him but he grinned from ear to ear, and said very sweetly, "Thank you." I knew then that he needed and perhaps deserved the flowers more than my mother did.

Again, Stacy saved me a seat, even though I was late. "You're late. I almost gave your seat up for a chocolate bar, you're lucky," she said to me with a smirk on her face.

"Thanks. I had some things to do after gym class."

"Oh yeah, what are these things you speak of?" she asked curiously, with one eyebrow raised as usual.

I couldn't think of an answer so I just said, "Well I will tell you tomorrow, I feel pretty tired." And I was actually tired, so I wasn't lying.

"Okay. I will let you get away with it this time, but no more, you hear me?" she said with slight sarcasm. She always liked to pretend to give me heck. Maybe it made her feel powerful because she couldn't get away with it with anyone else. Or maybe she just found it fun, as did I.

I played along, "Okay, I agree. Can I have the window seat, so I can take a bit of a nap?"

As she stood up, she said, "Sure thing Liz, anything for you." She seemed disappointed that she had to move, but agreed probably because she got the window seat in the morning. Not many things in our lives are fair, so we try to keep things between us fair. That way we know there is at least a 50% chance of getting what we want. Well, when it comes to matters between us anyways.

I plopped down beside the window and, as the side of my head rested on the cold glass, I fell asleep. Normally I can't sleep very well on the bus with the hard window against my face and all of the bumps along the way, but my eyes were so heavy that I could not help but fall into a deep sleep.

This time my dream didn't have any "travelling" involved. I dreamt that Todd and I announced to my parents that we were getting married. The dream was incredibly joyous. All of my family was inviting, kind and extremely happy about the announcement. My mom was not drinking and my father did not have a dark cloud over

his head. My brothers and sisters seemed more than content, and my sisters were fighting over who was going to be my maid of honour. I could remember every detail of it.

Todd looked similar except now he had a 5 o'clock shadow and he was even taller than he was now. I also looked the same, except pudgier, and my skin was glowing and my hair looked healthier. Most people always comment on how frail and pale I look. I often get the comment, "Oh, you look sick, are you okay?" And usually I am not sick at all, well not physically anyways. But in my dream I looked healthier, happier and more beautiful than ever. My family also looked healthier and happier. This dream was presenting to me a miracle. I believed in miracles, but not ones that can change people so drastically.

As soon as I made the announcement, my mom came up to me, looked me in the eyes with her eyes watering, and said, "I am very proud of you, and you make me proud to be your mom. I knew you would find someone who would have a heart as big as yours." I started crying, and my sisters came over and created a big group hug around me, while saying things like, "You deserve this", "Your beautiful", "We love you". In my dream, I expected these reactions, as if my relationships with my mother and the rest of my family were healed with unconditional love.

I woke up with tears running down my face and a big smile. "Oh my gosh, Liz. Are you okay?"

"I am amazing. I had such an incredible dream. Everything was perfect Stacey, everything!" I exclaimed to her with warm tears still streaming against my cheeks. A few people around us glanced over, but it did not bother me. Nothing could steal this feeling away from me.

"It was just a dream Liz, you know that right?" Stacey asked with a suspicious look on her face, like she thought I had gone crazy.

"Yes, of course Stac. But I feel like it *could* be real, that it *could* happen. I feel it in my heart."

"Feel what Liz? What did you dream about?" This time she asked in a curious and exited manner.

I looked into her eyes with the utmost compassion and said quietly, "Love, Stacy. Love. Unconditional, pure, happy, overflowing love." I said as I raised my arms up into the air.

Her eyes became teary as she asked, "From who? Your family?"

"Yes. From my family, and what felt like the whole world. It does seem impossible and this is why I had never even tried to imagine it before, but it felt so real. So real, that it has made me believe Stacey." It felt as if my heart was filling up after being dehydrated for hundreds of years. I couldn't believe what I was feeling or saying! A part of me always believed it could happen but maybe just to other people and not me. My dream showed me what it would look like if the people in my life opened up their hearts and changed. I now had a brand new hope- a hope that would encourage my family to come to this place of joy and love.

“Well, I don’t know if I can believe Liz. And even though I desire that too, so badly, it still seems impossible to me. You better wake up Liz, it is your stop next.”

I was saddened by Stacy’s response. I was hoping that I had an impact on her because I felt if I could dream that vividly about it, it must be possible. After discovering what I already had about the other dimensions, this ultimate dream seemed closer to reality than it ever had before. As soon as I got off the bus, I stopped on the side of the road in a field and sat down in the grass to pray. I didn’t know why but I felt I had to, that it was absolutely necessary. I mostly prayed for Stacey. I prayed for her to have that same dream, that she too can be filled with and surrounded by a very incredible love.

I was walking up our laneway when I noticed a tree that was not there before. I thought that maybe it wasn’t our laneway because there was so many in the outskirts of town that looked identical. I looked back at our mailbox to check if it was bright orange and after assuring myself that it was, I concluded that it certainly was our laneway. The tree was not that big but it was not very small either. In fact, it was the perfect sitting tree. I climbed up to test it out and, as I predicted, it was indeed a comfortable tree to sit in. I decided to wait there until my other siblings came home. They always showed up later because the junior high school and high school were located farther away than the elementary school. Sometimes they didn’t even show up until dinner time, because they hung out with friends after school.

The first to show up was my brother Jordan, since he was the only one in junior high. I was going to call out to him and walk home with him but I decided to sit quietly in the tree, instead, to see if he would notice I was there. Of course he didn’t, since he was too busy inventing new dance moves while listening to hip hop music on his iPod. He acted like he was a big city guy, when really he grew up on the outskirts of a very small town. It was very amusing to me, and I started to laugh. On the other hand, I was slightly impressed by some of his dance moves. I thought he definitely had potential.

Maybe listening to music and dancing is how he kept is more happy-go-lucky attitude. I always thought it was just his pure denial of our family life, but maybe he was more aware than I thought and he just chose to not let it bother him as much. In that moment I gained a little more respect for Jordan, and as a result I made a promise to myself that I would dance and listen to music more often. It definitely seemed to make him happy, so I thought I would give it a try.

Next were my two oldest sisters, Samantha and Christine. I couldn’t hear clearly what they were talking about, but I could tell it was something juicy. I could hear a few guys’ names, ones that I have heard before. They kept giggling as well, so it must have been about some guys they liked. I thought that maybe they had spotted me because they continued to talk in very low tones, but they had not even looked up once. I then concluded that it must really be serious gossip if they were taking extra precautions.

A part of me was jealous of their closeness. They trusted each other more than the cycle of the sun rising and setting every day. There was nobody in my life that I could trust that much, not even Stacey. I mostly told her family secrets because she understood and she would most likely find out anyways, but a part of me did not trust her completely, nor did I believe we would be there for each other forever. I knew it was a passing blessing. But my sisters’ trust for each other was undoubtedly an eternal blessing.

I wondered if they would ever let me into their circle of trust or if I would be an outcast forever. I think my other sister, Ruth, felt the same way, which is probably why she kept to herself so much. Her situation is even worse because there is no one that she confides in. I wished that my older sisters would reach out to her even if though they don't reach out to me.

I, on the other hand, had to look in other places for guidance and trust, and that guidance and trust usually came from Mother Earth and all of her creatures. The surreal tree that I am sitting in spoke to me about its own secrets. I knew, no matter what I told that tree, it would not tell the wind passing by, the clouds above, the grass below nor the squirrel resting in it. It would most certainly not tell any humans. Even so, I could not help wondering what it would be like to have that type of connection with another human. I was jealous of my sisters for having the connection I so desperately craved.

Instead of embracing that negative feeling, I thought it best to just let it pass. I found that jealousy does not do any good, and never gets you what you want. For example, I was always jealous of other people's families and the love they seemed to have, but all of these years of jealousy had only made my life miserable. So, instead of continuing to be jealous of my sisters, I decided to admire and love them.

I looked down the lane to see if my other sister, Ruth was coming, but I didn't see her anywhere. I hoped that she was just getting a ride from one of her friends and not up in her room still sleeping, but most likely it was the latter.

While waiting for my brothers to show up, I waited peacefully in the tree. Matt went to the community college that was in the larger city of Vancouver just a half hour to 45 minutes away. Jamie also worked in the city, and was supposed to be staying home, but he preferred to just hang out in the library or with his friends then be at home and I certainly didn't blame him. Matt's day of classes ended earlier than any of the other schools, but since it was farther away, they got home around the same time.

Just as I started to drift off to sleep, I heard a very loud booming noise from a distance. It was so loud that it shook the tree I was in. Just then I spotted a red sports car speeding in my direction. I expected it to fly by, but it halted to a screeching stop at the end of the laneway. My two brothers hopped out the car and started running down the laneway as the car bolted off.

As they passed me, they were laughing hysterically, pushing each other and trying to run but kept stumbling over their own feet. They looked so ridiculous that I started laughing hysterically too. A few moments later my brother Jamie stopped dead in his tracks. He then whispered to Matt. They both turned their heads, looking right in my direction. They started to run towards the tree. Neither of them said my name or anything, so I did not know if they had seen me yet or not, but when they approached the tree my brother Matt called out, "Holy crap! Liz? Is that you? And wow! Did you grow this tree yourself because I do not remember it being here before, do you bro?"

"No way man, this definitely was not here before. And you know what?... Liz *definitely* wasn't living in a tree before!" He smacked Matt's back and we all laughed uncontrollably at Jamie's lame sarcasm. Matt even began to jump up and down with unexpected excitement.

I slowed down to take a breath then said, “Yeah, I thought I was the only one that noticed! And I definitely didn’t think you guys would notice me sitting up here. The others just walked right by!”

“Well, we wouldn’t have either, if it weren’t for Jamie’s freakishly good hearing. Man, were you a dog in your last life? Oh wait. You still are one! Ha!” Matt again began laughing, except this time he was the only one.

Jamie’s eyebrows pushed together as he said, “Yeah, okay Matt. Maybe I was a dog, but at least I wasn’t a pig like you!”

Matt stopped laughing, stood up straight and scratched his head, “I don’t get it.”

“You aren’t supposed to get it dumb ass. I am just saying that you act like a dirty pig, that’s all.” Jamie then looked at me, half smiled and shook his head while pointing his thumb (hitchhiker style) at Matt.

“Oh. Well uh, yeah... there is some truth to that.” Matt said as he nodded in agreement.

“I am sorry to break up this incredibly intelligent conversation but I think we should head home now.” I prompted.

“Good thinking, sis. Hey! Want a piggy back ride, for old time’s sake? Damn, I just called myself a pig! Haha” Again Matt was the only one laughing.

I now thought for sure he had been drinking, but instead of questioning I just smiled and said, “Will you be able to carry me Matt? You looked like you could barely walk just a few moments ago.” I said as I finally hopped down from the tree.

Matt pulled his sleeves up, flexed his biceps and said, “Are you kidding me? Of course, you see these muscles? Come here, I’ll prove it to you!” He then crouched down waiting for me to hop on his back

I rolled my eyes then walked closer to him nervously. I then realized most of my good memories usually involved his silliness. When I was only a toddler he used crawl around the floor and pretend to be my horse. It never failed to make me giggle. Remembering these past memories and smiling, my inhibitions faded and I hopped up on his back. Immediately I slipped and grabbed tightly to his shirt. “Wow! Hold on there Liz. You ready?!” He said with a burst of enthusiasm.

“Ready as I will ever be!” I called out. We dashed off down the lane towards the house. I thought for sure I was going to fall off, but we both held on tight and made it to the house. Matt practically threw me off his back and then collapsed on the ground. “Phew. That was harder than I thought it was going to be, but I made it, didn’t I?”

“Haha. Yeah, you sure did. That was fun, want to do it again?” I asked, just trying to get him going.

Matt’s eyes grew as big as pancakes as he said still trying to catch his breath, “One time was enough for you. You are lucky I did it the first time.”

“I was only kidding Matt, but thanks for the fun while it lasted.”

“No problem!” he said then fell back onto the grass again. As we were talking, my brother Jamie was walking slowly behind us laughing the whole time. “You really out did yourself this time Matt! Haha. That was awesome.” When Matt didn’t answer, Jamie turned to me and whispered, “Is he dead?”

I giggled then replied, “No. I think I just tired him out.”

“Well come on, lazy ass. You too Liz, let’s go inside.”

“Okay. C’mon Matt, before dad gets home.”

It looked as if he rose up from the dead, as he said, “Alright, alright, I’m coming.”

When we got into the house we all went our separate ways as if we were all strangers that had met for the first time. Although our interactions might be childish, I knew if I was going to spend any time with them, I would have to participate in whatever crazy activity they had up their sleeves. Unlike my two oldest sisters, they did not divulge in their personal experiences or secrets, or even other people; they made lots of jokes, and played sports together. It was their way of showing their love to each other, and anyone else for that matter. I think that’s because it was safe. If they tried to express any feelings, my dad would give them heck, call them girls, then give them a good smack.

I usually always felt sorry that they could never express their feelings, but I found out they *were* expressing their feelings, just in very different ways. I actually felt privileged today because they included me, and that meant to me that they didn’t forget about me, and they still loved me.

I was still confused about that tree. I have no idea where it came from, and even my brothers saw it, so I knew it couldn’t be something I just created. I wondered also if Ochoo or Goasila put it there, as if they wanted me to sit there and wait patiently. Whether or not they did, I am glad it was there, and I did sit and wait. I learned some new things about my siblings that I normally would not have taken the time to learn, and for that reason I was very grateful for that mysterious tree.

Chapter 12: Missing

As I walked up to my room I could not help but wonder where my sister Ruth was. I decided to check her room, since I figured she just skipped school again and was probably sleeping.

I knocked first, a couple of times but there was no answer. I decided to knock louder, yet still there was no answer. Normally, at this point, I would just leave it alone, but I couldn’t help it; I just kept knocking and yelling out her name. There was still no answer. I tried the door and it was locked, so I took out one of my bobby pins and picked it until it opened.

She wasn’t there and her window was wide open. Her room was even more of a disaster than it usually is. It looked as though a hurricane had gone through. Even all her draws were open and all kinds of papers and clothes were scattered everywhere.

I ran over to the window as a sudden gust of wind burst through, making it shake vigorously. It started to downpour and the wind picked up even more. The air became very humid and sticky; there was definitely a big storm on the way. I poked my head

outside the window just to be sure she wasn't sitting on the roof. She wasn't, so I slammed the window shut and locked it.

At this point I started to panic. It wasn't as if this hadn't happened before, but I was still scared. Maybe it was the storm, but I knew in my gut it was more than that. Just as I was leaving her room, my sister Christine came up to me and asked what all of the racket was about. "Oh, sorry I was just looking for Ruth."

"Well you know how she is. She is probably just at one of her friend's places."

"Yeah, I know, just there is a really bad storm, and I have an awful feeling." Christine looked at me, as if she had the same feeling but shrugged it off, and said, "I am sure she is fine Liz. Like I said, she does this all the time. And we have had tons of storms like this. It is normal here- nothing bad will happen." She tried her best to reassure me. She even tried to give me a side hug while she was pep talking me but I was not convinced. There was something wrong; I could feel it.

"Well, I am going to go ask mom, maybe she knows since she usually has to tell dad where Ruth is."

"You know she lies 90% of the time right? Actually, she usually doesn't know where Ruth is. Even if she did, you know how mom is; she would forget and have to make up something anyways."

"Hmm. How do you know she lies?"

"I thought everyone knew Liz. Well, I mean I have asked Ruth where she has been, and it usually wouldn't even be at a friend's, or it would be a different friend than mom said."

"Oh. Well, it couldn't hurt to ask." I said shrugging my shoulders then slowly making my way down the hall.

"Well, it might. You don't want mom to be even more paranoid than she already is Liz." She said as she put her hand on my shoulder to stop me from walking away.

"Yeah I know. I won't say why I am asking, I will just ask for curiosity purposes, you know?"

"Okay, but do me a favour. Relax, like I said, I am sure she is fine. She is just going through a rough time right now, and doesn't want to be around dad, even more than us." She now was standing in front of me with both of her hands on my shoulders, and staring intensely into my eyes.

"Okay, yeah, for sure. But I am still going to ask." I pushed her arms away gently, then poked my head in my room to check the time. It was 5:15, 15 minutes until dinner time, and my mom was in the kitchen. I scurried away down the stairs, making sure to catch mom at a good time. Christine gave up trying to talk me out of it and watched me leave.

"Hey mom, can I ask you something?" I asked nervously, not wanting to hear the answer that was coming.

“Uh. Sure Lizzy, but I am kind of busy here,” she took another gulp of her wine and then poured some into the pan.

“Yeah, I can see that, but it’s just a simple question.”

“Okay, what is it? But, be quick - you can’t expect me to solve all your problems. You kids always want me to do everything for you and solve all your god-damn problems. Well, you are all old enough now. You can solve them on your own. I shouldn’t even be making dinner for you.” She said as she chucked some vegetables and spices into the pan haphazardly.

Tired of her rambling and lies, I interrupted her by grabbing one of her shoulders and pushing it back so she would be facing me, “Mom, mom, relax, I was just going to ask you if you knew where Ruth was.”

She shrugged me off, as if I was infected, and walked over to the other counter to start chopping even more vegetables that we didn’t need. “Ruth? This is about Ruth. God girl, don’t you know where that girl is? She is on a different planet, that one. She doesn’t want to be with us, and makes me lie to your dad. I could care less where she is right now.” When she started to wave the very large knife around I started to regret even asking.

“Okay, okay mom. I get it. I was just curious that is all. I will leave you be now.”

She slammed the knife on the cutting board and replied, “Good! Get out my hair. Ruth? Ha! What rotten kids I have...”

I slipped out of the kitchen, as she continued to talk to herself and stir the food in the pan forcefully. I didn’t want to stick around, listening to her complain about her rotten kids when she should be thankful of how we turned out despite our rotten parents. I wasn’t going to let it bother me today, I had a bigger worry on my chest right now, and that was Ruth.

I decided to go up to my room and wait for dinner to be ready. I knew I couldn’t get away with slipping out of the house now, but I would have to go later if I wanted to find Ruth. As I sat on my big comfy chair by the window, I watched the storm. The wind was so strong that branches were flying off the trees and the rain was blinding. I prayed that the storm would calm down so it would make it easier for me to sneak out later.

I kept thinking of places where she might have gone. The only place that I could think of was her best friend Tanya’s house. If she wasn’t there, at least Tanya could help me find her. Tanya lived in town so it would take me at least an hour to walk there. I could wait until after everyone went to bed and maybe then she would come home. If she didn’t, then I would ask Jamie to take dad’s car, and we would go to look for her. Then again, I don’t think he would take that kind of chance. Often, my father would wake up in the middle of the night and check our rooms, and sometimes stay in Ruth’s. I felt terribly sick to my stomach. I didn’t know how I was going to eat dinner.

I remembered the gifts that Oochoo and Goasila gave me, and couldn’t help but be tempted to use them. I could use Goasila’s gift to stop time, which would give me more time to find her. Ruth would be stopped in her actions, so I wouldn’t risk chasing her around. I could also use Oochoo’s gift as a mode of transportation to Tanya’s house

or maybe I could even turn it into a crystal ball to show me where she is. All that would be amazing but I was not sure if Oochoo or Goasila would approve. After all, the lesson I learned today was one of patience, and ironically I had absolutely none at this point. I knew I had to wait until after dinner. She had to return by then and if she didn't, I would call on my friends from the other dimensions to help me find her.

Sam swung open my bedroom door, "Hey Liz! Stop your daydreaming girl! Dad is home and dinner is ready."

"Okay, I'm coming." I first stopped at the bathroom to wash my face. I went past Ruth's bedroom and the door was closed again. I checked the door, it was locked again. 'Is she home?' I thought. I tried to break in again but it had to wait. I ran down the stairs just in time, right before my father sat down.

"Well isn't it nice to see everyone here for dinner?" My father asked us all sarcastically. He noticed Ruth was not there of course. "I can't hear anyone. Is anyone going to answer me? Or maybe tell me where your bratty little sister is?"

"I don't know father." Jamie answered.

"I don't know either father," Matt also answered.

"Girls?" my father asked with a fiery glare. I could see the monster rising.

"We don't know either, father." Sam and Christine answered in unison.

"Now, I know the young ones can't know anything, what about the wife? Oh probably not, she never has a clue, right dear?"

"Well-"

"No. I know what you are going to say. You *do* have a clue, right?"

"Well- " She said with her head down and her hands in her lap.

"Well what? Well, no, you don't know, like usual. How could you know? You are an imbecile. I don't even know why I married you. You kids probably often wonder the same thing. How could a man so great marry a woman so stupid? Right?"

None of us answered, since we thought the exact opposite. How could a kind woman marry such a monster and then turn into one herself. Everyone lowered their heads, except me. I just looked around at everyone else anxiously.

"You agree with me don't you Liz? You seem like one of the smarter ones of the bunch." He leaned over, rested his forearms on the table, and stared into my eyes. If I agreed, I would be on his good side but on my siblings' and mom's bad side. I was stuck. I knew he was trying to intimidate me, but I tried to stay strong, and I looked him straight back into his eyes.

"Depends on how you look at it father." I challenged.

He lowered his chin, straightened in his seat and raised his brow before saying, "How do you mean?"

"Well, how you look at intelligence father. There are all sorts of intelligence. You, of course, are intelligent in every way, and mother is in some ways. So my question

is why a woman would marry a man who is more intelligent than her. So of course, she is stupid in that way. But that doesn't mean she is stupid all the time."

Everyone gave me the same shocked look they did the day before: eyes bulging and jaws dropped. They could not believe what I said, and I think most of them didn't get what I said, especially father.

His face and body squirmed as I spoke, and instead of tensing up, he relaxed when I finished. He nodded his head, took a bite of his food then finally replied, "Uh, yeah. Good point Liz, but she definitely is stupid in this case, all of you can plainly see that. Every mother should know where all of her children are at all times. It is just plain stupid and irresponsible not to." He continued to stuff food into his mouth quickly and messily.

"Yes father, I agree." I said to reassure him of his 'top dog' position. My siblings were totally baffled and slightly impressed, I think. Of course my mother was still lulling over what I said. I think she knew I was saying she never should have married my father, but was probably thinking I was calling her stupid or blaming her for Ruth not being there, but that was not the case. What my father said is true, but he should also know where his children are. So really, they were both stupid and irresponsible, and I think my siblings got that.

After that, everyone was quiet during dinner, which was certainly nice for a change. Instead of listening to bickering I got to listen to the storm that was calming down. As soon as I was done, I rushed upstairs to check Ruth's room. The door was still locked. I broke in again and shut the door behind me so no one would suspect I was in there. I had to look for clues to where she might be.

I came across a particularly disturbing entry in her diary. The page had been ripped out and thrown on the floor. It read,

Sitting here, my stomach aching, tossing and turning, waiting and waiting

Waiting for more pain and more sorrow

Wanting to run, wanting to hide, nowhere to go

I must die

Die? What was she thinking? Is this a suicide note? I prayed that it was not. I have too written some pretty disturbing poetry, but I never would kill myself. She must have just been writing out her feelings. I know for myself that this practice helps a great deal. But she did not have any other poems in her diary entries. This was the only one. All the rest were complaining about our brothers and sisters or people at school. There actually was not one mention of our parents. The printed writing was done with large and immature letters; except for the poem which was eloquently hand-written. I could not be sure of when she had written it or of when the other entries were made since there were no dates on them.

I took the poem, folded it up, and put it in my pocket. I cracked open the door to see if anyone was in the hallway. No one was there so I quickly got out of the room, locked the door, and shut it behind me.

When I went back into my room it looked different. I could not figure out what it was. I looked around, out the window and even my closet, nothing. Just then, I noticed it, on my desk, a note:

Dear Elizabeth,

Your beauty and grace will guide you on this journey. Your love and determination will get you through it. Your patience and optimism will help you along. But most importantly, your understanding and compassion will determine the outcome.

Love, your friends

I knew this letter was from Oochoo and Goasila. I understood that I had to look within for the strength to find my sister, even though it would be difficult. Since it did not say anything about the gifts they gave me, I knew I was not able to use them.

I looked underneath the bed to try and find my umbrella. When I pulled it out it popped open even bigger than I remember. It was not mine and in fact it wasn't even a regular umbrella. I noticed it had a sort of transparency about it with a hint of purplish glow. It was sturdy but light as a feather. I tossed it up in the air and it floated above me. I checked my jewellery box to see if my invisible necklace was still there but it was not. 'Oochoo must have changed it into this wonderful umbrella' I thought. Well, at least I could use one of my gifts.

I changed into my rain gear with my new umbrella following me everywhere above me. I again checked the hallway to see if anyone was there. Both of my brothers were standing there looking as if they were talking to each other, but I could not hear anything coming out of their mouths. I then noticed they weren't even moving! It must be my other gift at work. I looked above into my umbrella and saw both Oochoo and Goasila's face. I whispered, "Thank you," and made my way down the stairs and out the door without a worry.

Chapter 13: The Search Begins

The wind was calming down, the thunder was getting quieter, and the lightning was fading. The rain however was ever so persistent. Good thing I had my magical umbrella because my other one would not hold up to the strength of these heavy droplets.

I came to the part of the lane where the tree I had been sitting on earlier should have been but it had disappeared! I was utterly confused. I am not sure why it appeared earlier and why it just decided to disappear now. The only conclusion I could come up with is that maybe Oochoo had transformed his gift, just as he had transformed it into an umbrella for me to use now. I had hoped that I would be able to change it myself some day, but I didn't complain since it seemed that he knew what was best for me better than I did right now.

I arrived at the end of the lane, but I could not remember what direction Tanya's house was in. I knew it was in town and the town was north of where we lived but for some reason I was drawing a complete blank. I then remembered that the tallest mountain that I often looked upon, when I went to the forest, was in the north. I scanned the land to spot where it was, but I could not see a thing. The rain was shooting down so hard, it was blinding. I then spotted a thick circle of fog that was spinning. I squinted my eyes to see

what was in the middle of this fog, but I still could not see. At this point, I was getting agitated. I looked up into my umbrella and asked, "Please Oochoo or Goasila if you can hear me, can you tell me which direction is north?"

I looked over to the circle of fog and it was spinning faster, and faster. It looked like it was forming a tornado! My heart started to beat faster and harder like the rain. I turned around, about to start running back to the house, but something stopped me. It was my love for Ruth. I knew I had to find her or help her in some way. I could not let my fears stop me. I was often stubborn with many things, which helped me continue doing things I usually didn't like doing. I was determined to say no to myself, to my fears.

I closed my eyes, stepped out from underneath the umbrella, and raised my head, directing it to the sky. A rush of warmth filled my heart. I opened my eyes and the sun was hitting my face, with clouds all around it and rain still pouring around me. I looked towards the circle of fog again. It was getting clear enough that I could see what was behind it, and sure enough it was the magnificent mountain.

I got back underneath the umbrella, turned right and continued to walk on my journey. It felt like days and days had gone by. My stomach was growling and my feet were aching, but again, I thought of Ruth and how much pain she had to endure in her life. I could not stop. Someone had to be there for her. Someone had to care.

I was finally at Tanya's house. There was no car in the driveway and no lights on in the house. I deeply hoped that someone was home. I got closer to the house but still there was no sign of anyone home. I thought maybe they were asleep but they couldn't be, it was only 8 o'clock. I thought that then maybe the power was out. I saw a flickering light in one of the windows, so I walked closer to it. It was a very small window so it was hard to get a good look, but it appeared as if there was a candle lit inside. There was still hope.

I rushed up the steps to their door and gave the doorbell a ring but there was no answer. I tried again, still no answer. I tried one more time and leaned my ear against the door to make sure it was ringing inside. It was not. It may have something to do with the power being out or it was just broken but, either way, I had to knock. I knocked on the door lightly at first, because I was scared of anyone hearing me. The next time I did it louder. I heard footsteps approaching the door. They were heavy footsteps so it could not be Tanya. I started to get scared again. I did not know what I was going to say to this person. I looked like a crazy person, standing out in this storm and they would be sure to realize I walked here since there is no car. I would say that my father drove me and that he is parked farther down the street. Then, I will tell them that we came by to see if Ruth was here. My head started to hurt. My umbrella was still above me as I looked up and I quickly transformed it into a smaller, more normal looking umbrella. It dropped into my hands, and I put it down, along with my thoughts.

The door handle started to jiggle, just a little at first, and then more and more, and louder and louder. The door swung open, the wind helping it along. "That damn door! I need to get the piece of crap fixed!.. Oh, hello, I am sorry dear, just- the door."

"Yes, I can see that. It is okay." I stared into the heavy woman's eyes. It must have been Tanya's mom. She looked just like her. She was round in size, had dark brown

eyes, short blond hair, black eye makeup, bright red lipstick on full tiny lips, and a wide but cute nose. Her choice of clothing today was also not much different from what Tanya would wear. She had a short skirt and a halter top on but, for some reason, she was still sweating. “What is it dear? Don’t just stand there.”

“Oh, sorry. Yes, I am wondering if my sister Ruth is here.” I asked shyly.

“OooH, you’re Ruth’s sister eh? She has been spending a lot of time here you know? From what I gather that father of yours is a nasty one.”

“Yes, he is ma’m.”

“No need to call me ma’m. We are living in the 21st century you know. My name is Helen.” Despite her appearance Helen seemed like a very kind woman.

I smiled, “Yes, that is true. I guess my family is a little bit traditional. So, is Ruth here?” I asked anxiously.

“No, I am sorry. But I believe she is out with Tanya. You can come in and wait for her here. No use waiting in the rain. Did you walk here? Or is someone waiting for you?” I was tempted by her offer, since I was a little soggy and hungry, but I thought I should go look for them myself.

“Yes. I did walk here, but I won’t bother you, I will go and look for her. It’s important.” I said starting to walk away.

“The time you go out and find her they will be home, hun. I always ask that they be here by 9. Besides, you look famished, won’t you come in? I have cookies and homemade lemonade.”

I couldn’t resist, “Well, that does sound pleasant.”

She smiled from ear to ear, “Good then. Come in now, don’t be shy.”

Her house was much like her appearance; loud and tacky, but, in some weird way, it was also comforting. Maybe it was the smell of the cookies, or maybe it was just her kind disposition. Either way, I could see why my sister would rather spend her time here than at home.

Helen asked me all sorts of questions. I felt like I was in an interview. I could understand, though. My sister probably never divulged much, and our family is somewhat infamous. I expected that she would ask lots of questions, because of all the gossip. And, surprisingly, I didn’t mind answering them. It was nice that someone was listening to what I had to say even if what I was saying didn’t have much to do with me. Having someone to talk to also made the time go by faster.

It was already 9 o’clock, but nobody was home yet. “Look at the time. They should be home any minute. Don’t look so worried, they are often a few minutes late.” Just then the door swung open and I sighed heavily with relief.

But it wasn’t Ruth, it was only Tanya. “Where is Ruth honey? Her sister is here for her, she says it is important.”

Tanya scrunched her nose then let out an irritated huff before saying, “What makes you think she was with me?”

“Well, she is usually with you, isn’t she?” Helen asked.

“Not lately mom, you know that.” She said as she threw her purse on the floor, and kicked off her boots.

“No, I don’t know that, what is going on?”

“We got into a fight last week, about this boy. She thinks I stole him from her, but I didn’t- he just asked me out and she liked him apparently. She never even told me she liked him so how was I supposed to know? So I went on a date with him anyways, and she went crazy!”

Both Helen and I looked shocked. I didn’t even know that my sister cared much for boys. But I guess most 14 year old girls do. “What did she do?” I asked nervously.

Her eyes grew larger, she took a deep breath, and started to talk faster than ever as she plopped down on the comfy velvet couch, “She was spying on us while we were having dinner at that restaurant, The Grill. But that is not all: she even came over and interrupted our date! We were just sitting there having a pleasant time, and he put his hand on my hand and out of nowhere we heard this huge bang! She was standing up at her table, (she had been hiding behind a menu) and her chair was on the floor. She was even holding a knife! I was terrified!”

“Oh my God! That can’t be, my sister is not like that. You are lying!” I insisted as I stood up with my arms flailing.

“No, Liz, seriously. I didn’t think she would do a thing like that either, but she just snapped. I don’t know. She has just been extra weird lately. I am sure you have noticed.”

I calmed down and sat back down on the couch, “Well, kind of. She has been sleeping more in her room or hasn’t been home at all, and I did feel like something was wrong. That is why I am here.”

“Well, you have good instincts because there is definitely something wrong. Now, where was I? Oh! Right, so yeah, we just saw her there standing with a knife in her hand, and we thought she was going to come after us but she just came over to us, dug the knife into the table, and said ‘Don’t ever talk to me ever again’. Then she just stormed out of there! I could not believe it.”

“When was this Tanya?” I asked very concerned.

“Just last night. I don’t know how she found out where we were. I hadn’t talked to her since a week before that when we were fighting about the guy. I wish now that we never got into that fight. It was so stupid! I am so mad at myself. But, that is where I was- looking for her.”

“Well, don’t beat yourself up too much. I guess we both had the same idea tonight. I promised I would not give up until I found her. Will you please help me to continue to look for her? I know she is not at home.”

“Yes, of course. I feel so terrible. Mom? Will you drive us around for a bit?”

“Sure honey, I am getting worried myself.”

It was settled then. I now had some people to support me in my search, which made me feel better about the whole thing. However, now I was even more worried because she was already at a fragile point in her life. I felt so bad for her. I prayed that she would receive my love and come home safely. Until then I would not give up looking for her, even if we had to search all night.

Chapter 14: The Darkness

“Where should we look first? I have already looked in all the places she used to hang out. I even dropped by some of her other friend’s houses, but she was not there.” Tanya was terribly puzzled, and I could see the worry on her face. I never thought of her to be that bright. I always thought she was kind of ditzzy but, today, I realized she was just as real as I was.

“I am not sure Tanya. Maybe we should look in places we would think she would never go, places she hates.”

“Yeah! That is a good point. She probably knows that I am looking for her so would probably go to a place I wouldn’t expect, right?”

“Yup. It makes sense to me. Helen?”

“Yeah, whatever you girls want to do is fine with me.” She nodded in agreement.

“Ok.. hmm... Let me think... I know she hates school.” Tanya announced, as if she was the only one who knew that.

“Of course, but isn’t that too obvious?” I asked, doubting that is the place where she would be, especially after school hours.

“True. But where else would she go? The forest maybe? She hates bugs and nature I know that much. One time we tried to bring her camping, and it was like she was in hell. She was definitely born in the wrong place, eh Liz?”

I smiled knowing how much Ruth hated nature, and how ironic it was given where she lives. She might be the only person in our town who doesn’t like nature. I remember her even complaining about the mountains how they were too big and imposing on the sky. She referred to them as ugly guards, keeping her inside a cage. I knew, though, that she was really referring to our parents, not the mountains. They blocked her freedom, just as the mountains made it difficult for anyone to go past them. The mountains probably also reminded her of power- something she thought our parents had too much of.

“That is true. She did hate the woods. But it so big, where would we start?” I asked, resisted to go.

“Well, I think we should start with the main trails. And we should get going because it is getting dark fast.” I could hear the anticipation in Tanya’s voice as well. We both knew this wasn’t going to be easy.

“Yeah, for sure.”

We drove to a major walking trail first. We figured that if she was going to the woods, she wouldn’t want to go on an extensive hike, which most of the trails around

here were. We made sure to bring flashlights. At this point, the sky was still cloudy, but there wasn't any rain or thundering anymore. The cloudiness made it very dark in the woods. We were five minutes into the trail when we had to start using our flashlights.

Even though this trail was well worn, the forest was still packed full of wildlife, and if we made the whole loop, we were sure to run into an animal. I love animals but, when it is this dark, even the slightest sound in the bush makes me jump. The animals were particularly active this evening and, sure enough, every couple of seconds both Tanya and I would flinch. Helen, of course, laughed at us, since she was very much an outdoorsy person, even though her appearance fooled me.

"How far should we go Liz? Mom?" Tanya asked now anxious to get out of the forest.

"I think we should make the whole loop. Otherwise, we are just wasting our time." Helen suggested. She seemed too pleased, walking in the dark forest. I think she enjoyed us being scared, despite her good intentions.

"I think your mom is right Tanya. I don't like being in these woods right now either, but it is worth it if we find Ruth."

"Okay, fine. But if I hear something big out here, I am turning back." I didn't like that Tanya was putting her own needs before my sister's. Maybe she didn't want to find her as badly as I did. Or maybe her fear is just getting the better of her.

I laughed it off then gave her a pat on the back, "Haha. Don't be so worried, Tanya. I spend a lot of time in these woods, and nothing bad has ever happened. The darkness is a little unsettling, but I am sure we will be safe. Besides, there is so much traffic on this trail, we may even run into some other people who can help us, and the animals won't come too close."

"Yeah. I guess you're right." I could tell the fear alleviated from her by the way her shoulders relaxed, well, enough that she kept walking with us.

"I hope so, and I am not just saying that to make myself feel better!" We both laughed a little. Then, sure enough we noticed some people walking in the opposite direction of us. Helen told them of our situation, and they told us that they had not come across anyone in the other direction.

"Well girls what do you want to do? I think if she were here, she would have been here a long time ago, and somebody would have seen her." Helen concluded. I could tell she was ready to leave. I was too, but not because of the darkness. My gut was telling me she wasn't here.

"Well, I vote we should check out the school." Tanya again suggested. I assumed she had a strong feeling that my sister would be there. Or, maybe she knew more than what she was telling us.

"I am starting to think that too, Tanya." I agreed.

"Okay then. Let's turn back. We have been walking for 20 minutes, and we would have to walk another 40 to finish. It is also getting pretty chilly out here." Helen then

guided us back, walking with her head held high. I could tell she felt proud to be helping us out.

As we walked back, I was no longer scared of all the sounds. I was actually very comforted by them. All the anxieties I had about Ruth and the forest seemed to dissipate, but I knew it was not over yet. I took the time in the woods to clear my head, and follow my instincts. I was scared to go to the school for some reason. That is why I avoided it before, but I knew now that was where we had to go.

Tanya and her mother talked the whole way back, but I didn't even hear a word they said. I only heard the crickets chirping, the birds singing, the trickling of the nearby creek, and the soft rustle through the bush. When I could not bask in the beauty of the forest, the sweet sounds of the forest became more predominant. It made me so calm that I felt like I was sleep walking. At one point I almost ran into a tree, because I was not paying attention. Helen and Tanya got a good kick out of it.

When we got out of the forest, all of sudden my anxieties arose stronger than ever. It was as if I fell into a pit full of snakes and there was no way out. "Let's hurry!" I exclaimed to Helen and Tanya since they were still talking away about pointless things, while my sister could be in danger.

"Yes of course Lizzy, right away. C'mon Tanya, it's time to be serious now." Tanya frowned, knowing her mother was right.

We were just outside the city, so it took us about 20 minutes to get to the school. And those 20 minutes seemed like the longest minutes of my life. I was so restless that I kept moving in my seat. "Are you okay?" Tanya asked.

"No I am not. I can't keep still."

"Well, we will be there soon. So relax. Mom why don't you put on the radio so we can think about something else." It was a thoughtful idea but it did not help me. The songs that kept playing were sappy love songs, which just made me sad, and they also made me think about that boy and Ruth.

"We are here!" Helen announced. Finally I could breathe again. I got out of the car and stared at the school, for what seemed like a long time. At night, it looked like a jail. Fog was hovering over it, and the moonlight was shining through just enough so you could see its outlines, and the glare from some of the windows. I felt like we were about to enter a haunted house.

I wondered how things on Earth can appear so frightening when the supposed scariest dimension is not scary at all. There is a lot to be afraid of here, and I could not help but wonder if my dreams were not real, and that maybe I was delusional. No- that could not be. The tree in the lane, for example; my brothers had seen it too, and it had disappeared the next day. How could that be if Oochoo, Goasila or another being didn't put it there? So, instead of continuing to think of the most frightening thought of all (me being crazy), I decided to put my fears aside, and label them an illusion, because that is really all they were. My mind was constructing so many bad things, when they did not even exist. I had to be strong, if not for me, then for Ruth.

The doors were locked, so Helen had to call the principal to get the janitor to let us in. He said that the janitor was off duty so he had to come down himself. Usually, a principal would not make this kind of exception, but he and Helen seemed to have a thing for each other. She was quite flirty with him on the phone, anyway.

The principal got out of his BMW, waltzed over confidently, smiled at Helen, looked at us and then quickly put his smile away. "So you gals want to have some fun in the school at night eh?"

"No Mr. Walich. We are here looking for my sister. It seems she has gone missing."

"Oh. You must be Elizabeth, another one of the Murphies. You look a lot like your sisters. I know your sister Ruth; she has been missing for a long time, well from this school anyway. She claims to be ill, but I have a feeling her notes are false, am I right?"

"Yes, sir you are right. And now I think she needs all the support she can get. She may not be physically ill, but emotionally and, perhaps, mentally she is very sick."

He stepped back and said, "I do not understand this Elizabeth. Your family is known for their place in this community. All the charity events your father has done and the sweet disposition of your mother. I do not know how Ruth could be in any agony." He then put his right hand on his hip, and scratched his head with his left.

"Things aren't always what they appear to be sir."

As if he didn't hear what I said, he changed the subject, "Well, I look forward to having you in our school. You seem like a very intelligent girl, and very articulate, I must say. And as for your siblings, they seem a bit spoiled. Well, that is what I always thought was the reason for their behaviour."

"No, Mr. Walich. None of us are spoiled, I assure you. It goes much deeper than that."

Mr. Walich seemed very puzzled as he scratched his head again. I could tell by his distorted face that he could not believe what he was hearing. "So you are telling me that your home situation is not good, right?"

"Correct. In fact, it is the complete opposite of good, especially for Ruth."

"How so?" he asked with his arms crossed, and a hint of disbelief in the tone of his voice.

"Well, it is hard to explain, and I'd rather not discuss it right now. I'd much rather be looking for my sister. I feel she is in danger."

His confusion and disbelief quickly turned to concern as his eyes grew soft and asked, "What makes you say that Elizabeth?"

"It is just a hunch I have. Also, she got into a big fight with her best friend here, Tanya, and she was acting really weird last night. So much that it made Tanya frightened as well, right Tanya?"

"Yes. I did something I thought was harmless, but I guess I really hurt her feelings." Tanya went on to tell her story to Mr. Walich. My stomach was churning the

whole time. I was even beginning to sweat. I tried to hide it, but I think Tanya noticed because she cut her story short. Thank goodness too, because otherwise, I would have had to find a way into the school myself.

After Tanya was finished, Mr. Walich also was in shock, and offered to help us. I think he realized how she has suffered since she has also been skipping school, even more often than she had before.

We entered the school and it was very sinister. Mr. Walich figured the storm earlier must have put the lights out, so we used our flashlights, and made our way to the basement. After Mr. Walich figured out how to switch on the lights, we could finally search for Ruth without stumbling in the dark. I was relieved with this accomplishment. I took a deep breathe, and smiled to show my appreciation. Mr. Walich smiled back then said, "Good to go!" It was hard not knowing how Ruth was, but trying to find her in a gloomy, empty school was even more frightening. It gave me the chills to even think about it. I was now comforted by Mr. Walich's confidence, and the lights being turned on gave me a little bit of hope.

As we made our way upstairs, I noticed the lighting did not have the effect I had hoped for. The hallways were still seeping with uncertainty. Every time we were about to turn a corner, my stomach dropped. Mr. Walich decided to lead the way in case there were any unexpected visitors. I could tell he felt like he was doing something important and his ego was being served. When he heard a weird noise or thought he saw something, he would always say, "Stay back. I don't want you ladies getting hurt. I can take care of it." He was our protector and he knew it. I always thought it was funny how men never failed to take on this role. Normally, I would be laughing about it, but this time I was utterly grateful.

We were on the third floor now, the highest one. Half of the lights were off, so Mr. Walich made sure to be extra careful and extra protective of us. He walked slower, used his flashlight to check corners, and even banged on the lockers. I'm not sure why he did the latter, maybe because he thought he was scaring "the bad man" away, but there was nothing he could do that would protect us from what was about to happen.

Just before turning the corner into one of the main, pitch-black hallways, he said to us again, "Stay back. I don't want you ladies to get hurt. I can take care of it." As soon as he turned the corner he gasped, stared straight ahead, then quickly turned to us and told us to go back to the car and stay there and wait for him. I resisted, "Please Mr. Walich! What is it? Please!"

"Elizabeth, no. Go back to the car, now! I don't want you to see this, you hear me. I don't want any of you to see this. Go back to the car. I said, NOW!"

"But Mr. Walich! Please! Is it my sister? Please just tell me that, please!" I begged. I needed to see, I needed to see what happened. The others started to walk back, and pulled my arms urging me to come with them. I didn't want to. I had to see for myself no matter how bad it was.

"Elizabeth, control yourself!" Mr. Walich demanded.

"C'mon Liz, it isn't good for you. You have to come with us. Believe Mr. Walich, he knows what is best." Helen also persisted.

“NO!” I pulled away with all my strength, and ran past them into the other hallway. They tried to run after me, but it was too late. I stopped dead in my tracks and fell to my knees. I did not have a flashlight so I could barely see, but I knew what it was. It was my sister. I burst out in tears, and Mr. Walich and Helen put their arms around me. When Tanya came around the corner she started screaming, and kept screaming until her shrieks transformed into tears. She ran up to my sister, and grabbed on to her legs.

“Tanya, no! There is evidence, don’t touch!” Mr. Walich yelled out. Tanya kept holding on. It was a painful sight. “Tanya come here, Tanya please come here.” Mr. Walich urged. She would not budge. She started to yell out, “This is my fault. This is all my fault.” Mr. Walich came over to her and pulled her away. He hugged her tightly, and told her it was not her fault, that it was nobody’s fault.

I stopped crying once I saw Mr. Walich, holding Tanya and consoling her. I felt numb, as if my whole body completely froze, and immediately stopped working. My sister, my dear sister, was hanging there so motionless. With no light left in her eyes, no breath in her lungs, no strength in her heart. My instincts were right. I deeply wished I had found her sooner. I wished she knew how much I cared, how much I loved and still love her, but now she will never know. She died thinking that no one wanted to save her, that no one wanted to care or love her. So many of us ignored the multiple signs. So many of us thought these problems would just go away. So many of us felt powerless. It was somebody’s fault. It was all of our fault. Although, maybe Mr. Walich was right, maybe it wasn’t anyone’s fault, but how could that be? I felt like I had failed her, that we all failed her.

“I see something. Mr. Walich, do you still have a flashlight?” Helen asked. By this time everyone was calmer. Mr. Walich was still holding on to Tanya but she was now crying softly. Helen was the strongest of us all; she had not shed one tear. Maybe she was in shock, or maybe she was trying to be strong for the rest of us.

“The flashlight is right here by our feet. What is it that you see?” Mr. Walich asked, somewhat annoyed. I assume he must have been thinking what could be more important right now, and he was still consoling Helen’s daughter.

She took the flashlight and aimed it towards the wall beside Ruth. It was a message written in blood that said, *I finally came to class*. “What does this mean? This doesn’t make sense. Why would she kill herself because she didn’t go to class, she felt guilty?” Helen asked shaking her head in despair.

“No, Helen that is not it but I agree, it doesn’t make sense as to why she would write this. I think it would be best to call the police now.” I insisted while still wiping the remaining droplets of the sea that had come down on me tonight.

“Good idea Liz, I am on it right now,” Mr. Walich assured me. “In the meantime you girls better get home.”

“I can’t go home. I just can’t.” I protested.

“Well, come home with us sweetie. There is nothing you can do. We will take care of you, until you can go home. But you do need to contact your family immediately.” Helen suggested while taking my one hand and holding it softly.

“I..I. can’t talk to them. I just can’t.” I tried saying while another wave crashed against my face.

Mr. Walich came over to me, put his hand on my shoulder, and said softly, “Don’t worry. I will call them. I will let them know you are staying with Helen and Tanya as well, of course that is if you want me to?”

It was a tempting offer but I thought it might be best if I was with my family. I wanted to avoid them, especially my parents, but I figured they would suspect something if I wasn’t with them or that I would be in trouble for not staying with the family. This was mainly because they didn’t want other people to wonder and ask questions. “No. Thank you for the offer, but I should spend this time with my family.” I also figured, at least at home, I could get some solitude in my bedroom tonight before bed, and maybe talk to Oochoo or Goasila.

“Okay sweetie. But if you need anything, you just call me.” Helen assured me, her eyes now glazed with moisture. I could tell she was trying to hold back the tears.

“I will, thank you Helen. And Tanya?”

Her eyes were red and puffy from crying and tears still melted down her face, she said in a very innocent tone, “Yes Liz?”

“Mr. Walich is right. It was not your fault. Ruth was very damaged, and there was nothing you could do to fix that.”

“Thank you Liz, but it still feels like it.”

“Yeah, I know it does as it does for me too. But you can call me too, if you want anything. I am determined to get to the bottom of this. I just know there is more to it.” Right as I was saying this, the police came in to assess the situation.

A tall and burly man, who looked like the leader, called out, “Okay everyone, time to go home! We have work to do here!” Although he was completely insensitive, I knew he was just trying to do his job.

I took one more look at my sister, and I started to tear up again. I just could not believe it. Logically, it makes sense why she would, do such a thing. I just never thought anybody in my family or life would do this. I felt horrible pain for her that she lost her life, or she felt so badly about it she took it away from herself. I knew, in the future, I would be able to deal with it better but right now, I just couldn’t. The confusion, agony, and emptiness I felt was just too great.

We finally got to the parking lot, after what seemed like a very long, dreadful walk through the school. My whole family was standing there in a line, just gazing at the school. I walked over and joined the line. Christine put her arm around me and didn’t say a word. I thought for sure everyone would have come running up to me asking me all sorts of questions, but I think they knew that would be incredibly insensitive. Not that they understand what usually is or isn’t, but I thanked God that they didn’t badger me. Having to talk about it would be the last thing I needed.

Hours later the forensics were done, and they finally took Ruth out, and put her in an ambulance. My mom and sisters began crying as soon as they saw her, but my

brothers and father just stood there in shock, barely blinking not making a sound or movement.

When the ambulance drove away, it was final. The next time I would see her face, would be in a coffin, in a church. This saddened me the most. I could not hold back, I again began to cry and hugged my sister Christine tightly. She too was crying. We all stood there for a while, until the most unpleasant noise interrupted, "Let's go kids. Crying won't bring her back girls. We have a lot of arranging to do in the morning, so let's go home." My father did not shed a tear all night. My brothers shed a few at least, but not my father. I wondered if he was even sad about what happened, or if he was just annoyed. It was hard to say. I thought at least he would put on an act out in public, but he didn't.

Maybe he was trying to stay tough, like Mr. Walich was, but I knew that was not true. Mr. Walich actually had a heart. He even consoled Tanya, as tears ran down his face. On the way home, to keep my mind off of Ruth, I thought about how the two men were so different from each other. It did not seem to help though, because my mind kept reverting to the realization that my father was probably the main reason for my sister's untimely death.

Chapter 15: Breathing, and Breathing Some More

I was finally alone. I closed the door and sighed in relief. I locked it, then headed over to the window. I opened it to get some fresh air, stuck my head out the window and breathed in deeply. The fresh scent from the passing storm was the only thing that lifted my spirits tonight, so far. I stepped out on to the roof to get the full experience. It was still wet but I didn't mind, the smell was so incredible that I barely noticed. I sat there, just taking in the sweet, crisp breeze, breathing it all in, and then letting everything out. Every time I breathed out, I cried, mourning. Every time I breathed in, I felt love flying into my heart from the forest, and all its miraculous pleasures. I did this for almost an hour until I finally was not crying when I breathed out.

I opened my eyes and there was a small bird, the length of my index finger that hopped on to my lap. It was the most beautiful bird I had ever seen. The light from my bedroom shone like the sun onto the bird's bright yellow and orange blend in the middle of its body, making a picture of a sunset. The colours faded into all the colours of the rainbow onto its tail, head and even legs. It began to sing a sweet melody, so clear and fluid, it sounded just like a flute.

To encounter such magnificence, after such destruction and in the darkness of the night, made my heart grow larger than ever. I was so grateful for this bird, to the forest, the intoxicating smells, and the fresh wind that blew through my hair and against my face. It was so relaxing that I nearly fell asleep. I knew it was time to dream. I held out my finger so the bird would hop onto it, and it did. It sang a short song, I said thank you and then it danced away in the air. I watched it glide, soar, and flutter into the blackness.

I walked over to the bed and fell back, closed my eyes, and imagined the bird flying and singing me into a deep, meditative sleep.

Chapter 16: The Resting Place

When I opened my eyes, only a blanket of soft, calming blue surrounded me. I looked above and below me... nothing. I floated slowly and peacefully in this sky-like

atmosphere. I felt like my mind and body were still in a sleeping state. Only feelings of tranquillity entered my body and mind. Not even thoughts of Ruth entered my psyche; I felt protected.

My body and mind were waking up slowly now, becoming more aware of my surroundings. I started to move my arms and legs in a graceful manner like a ballerina. I then started to swim across the open blue space to see if I could find any other life forms. I felt like I was flying for days: the best days of my life.

All sorts of creatures were now starting to come about, one by one. In an instant they would appear right before me. All the creatures had one thing in common, and that was wings. I too now had wings and began gliding through the sea of blue. The creatures sometimes appeared to be birds, but not all of them looked like birds. Some even had two heads, or no head, or even other animal heads such as a bear, or a dolphin. It was as if all the creatures of Earth had been given wings and put here in this soothing atmosphere.

I came upon a large, shiny white gate that rested in cloud-like figures. This picture looked much like the ones you see on television that represent the fabled “golden gates” to heaven, except they were not golden. I became frightened now because I thought maybe I had died, and had been sent to heaven. *This cannot be true. I still have too much to live for, to learn.*

“You are right, my sweet child,” a stunning large bird appeared at the gates. It was also blue like the sky but glistened like silver. The bird’s face transformed from a long beak to a perfectly proportioned woman’s face. It was soft and nurturing like a mother’s. Her eyes too emanated a graceful, compassionate aura. Her body transformed into a glowing, curvy figure with a sparkling blue dress that draped over it. It flowed so elegantly and danced around her body. Her hair was a soft orange, the colour that her beak once appeared to be. It was long, wavy and flowed beautifully in the wind. Her wings were still there, large and spread out so that I could see each velvety feather. The wings exuded power, yet grace. It was the most striking sight I have ever seen, ‘She must be a goddess’ I thought.

“Thank you but I am not a goddess. Well, not a goddess that people on Earth would think of anyways. My name is Harmony. I am also known as Mother Earth.” She spoke gentle and kindly.

“You are Mother Earth? The one who looks after all the creatures and plants and water and soil and-“

“Yes, my child, I am what humans *call* Mother Earth. Although my role on Earth is not what you would think.”

“I must say I am extremely excited to meet you. I love all Earth’s creatures, and I spend many of my days in nature. I am so grateful for what you have given me.”

“Slow down, Elizabeth, you speak too swiftly. Here you must speak as a turtle walks; slow with ease and grace. I have a lot of explaining to do. First, let us discuss why you are here. I have talked to Oochoo and Goasila. Both have had great pleasure interacting with you, and I hope to as well.”

I suffered some momentary confusion because my memory was not intact. I remembered who she was talking about but memories of Earth and the people there were beginning to fade. "I apologize, once foreign life forms enter here, their memory is slowly taken from them. I will explain later but for now, let's get your memory back." The Earth Mother then touched my forehead with her wing, and images and voices flew into my mind.

"I can remember now, thank you. However, I am still confused as to why I am here. If you are going to ask me, I do not know."

Harmony looked at me with love in her eyes and offered me a friendly smirk, "I do not expect you to know why you are here, sweetie. That is my job, to tell you and teach you. First, I want to discuss what happened last night, with your sister. I know it will be a difficult subject for you, but I believe I can give you some comfort."

Now that I remembered the terrible tragedy, a great sadness rested in my heart. I could not think of anything that Harmony could do to make me feel better. Being in this wonderful place, did give me joy, but I was beginning to think that was because I did not remember things from before. Harmony embraced me with her soft, large wings. A bright white light shone all around me. It felt as though water was pouring over me, washing all the filth that covered the inside and outside of my body. When she let go, I felt refreshed and uplifted. "Thank you. I needed that."

"You're welcome. I thought I had better give you a cleansing before we started our heavy conversation. I hope what you are feeling will stay with you. And if it starts to fade, let me know, and we will do it again."

"Okay. Thank you. I have many questions about my sister. I knew she was not feeling well, but I did not know it was that bad. I wish I had--"

"You are getting ahead of yourself again Elizabeth. Please rest on this." Harmony pulled out what looked like a great big fluffy cloud. I lay upon it easily, even with my new bird-like stature. "Better?" She asked.

"Yes, much. I am listening now."

"Good. First, it is very important for you to understand there was nothing that anyone could do stop what happened. It was Ruth's destiny, her journey. She lived on Earth for her time being to learn what she had to learn. Normally, when people commit suicide, either they become ghosts or they return to Earth in exactly the same situation. This is because they have to carry through to the end of their destined life in order to learn what they are meant to learn... Elizabeth, this is very important. I am not usually allowed to disperse this kind of information; however, it is vital for your purpose, and for what you will accomplish. Your sister did not kill herself, nor was it an accident. That is why the notes that were left behind were so vague, and without true emotion. Those poems did not come from her broken heart. I am not going to tell you what brought her to her death. You will have to figure that out on your own. However, I hope this will give you some comfort, and I hope you will not blame yourself or anyone else who does not deserve the blame. Even if she did kill herself, she would be the only one to blame. She would have been the one to make this final decision, no one else. Do you understand Elizabeth?"

I was tremendously confused by this information. I knew she had reasons to kill herself but I did not know anyone else had any reasons to kill her. I could not imagine anyone wanting to do such a thing. What could she have done to make someone angry enough to kill her? “Elizabeth? Do you understand? You look confused sweetie. I know it is hard to understand why anyone would do such a thing but it happens often with people living on Earth, too often.”

“But why my sister? She was such a nice person and never wanted to hurt anyone else. She kept to herself and didn’t even interact with very many people. Yeah, sometimes she skipped school, but what kind of reason would that be to kill her?! I am so, so... I don’t know.”

“You have a right to be angry Elizabeth. And you should be. Nobody deserves that kind of treatment, especially your sister. But you must understand Elizabeth that your emotions cannot take over you right now. You need to be strong for Ruth. She needs you more than ever right now.”

“Why? Why me? Right now? If she was murdered that is up to the police to find out right? How can I possibly help with that?” I asked still fuming and flapping my wings in distress.

“You will find a way. I know you will. The police will call it an open and shut case. Everyone knows she was showing symptoms of depression, and they will just assume she killed herself. And because it appears that no one had any reason to kill her, they won’t even try to find a murderer. Not to mention, if anyone starts to ask questions, your father will not allow it.”

“Yes, all that is true but why would my father care? Wouldn’t it look better for him if she didn’t kill herself because many people blame the family or friends for not recognizing signs or getting their loved-one help?”

“You make a good point but your father is more concerned with police snooping about and asking questions. Remember, it is vital for him to keep his secrets and, if the police are around and wanting to pry into the family’s business, keeping secrets will be hard to do.”

“True. Okay, so I still have to ask, what am I supposed to do?”

“I want you to pry into other people’s business, like a detective. But be subtle about it, if people get suspicious you know what they will do.”

“Is that right though? I feel uncomfortable doing that.”

“It is right, for your sister and for you. Even if the person who does it never gets caught, you will know for yourself, and have peace in knowing. Also, like I said, this is important for your development as well,” she said with the outmost certainty.

“I know that I will find out why it is important for me later but what about Ruth? Is this what she wants?”

“Yes it is. She cannot come back to Earth for a new life until this one is resolved. The truth has to come out one way or another. It is her “unfinished business”. She must

be comforted that at least one person that loves her knows the truth, or she feels her life has been one big lie.”

I didn't know what to make of all of this. I felt honoured that she would want me to be the one who found out the truth, but I was also scared. I didn't want to put my life in danger, but I knew it was for the best. I did not want to go through my life never knowing and like Harmony said, Ruth needed this, which brought me to another question, “Mother Earth?”

“Yes, Elizabeth?”

“Is this where she will be at peace?”

“No. This is where she waits. All of the creatures you see here are waiting for their old life to be done and their new life to begin.” She said with enthusiasm as her wings fluttered.

“So all of these spirits will come back to Earth?”

“Yes. But not every creature that dies comes here. Some get to move on to other dimensions because their life on Earth has taught them all the valuable lessons they can learn from there. Some creatures are only here for what seems like a few seconds. The spirit is able to be at peace and decide its new life. The ones you see that are here for longer, like Ruth are waiting for something to be done on Earth first, before they can move on.”

“You had said that people who commit suicide become ghosts or go back to Earth and experience the same life right?” I asked, a little suspicious of how everything works.

“That is correct.”

“So are ghosts only made up of spirits that have committed suicide?”

“No. I am sorry. I know it is confusing. Ghosts can be people who have committed suicide. They think they are still living on Earth, playing out what may have been their future, to try to learn what they are supposed to learn so they can move on, but that never works of course. They have to come back as real people to really experience what they should. Other ghosts are sometimes people like Ruth who are just checking in to see if their problem has been resolved yet. Ghosts also can be spirits that are there to guide people, to teach them something. They are from the highest dimension and are trying to help people get to the next level so they don't have to come back to Earth. Some of these highest dimensional spirits also sometimes come back to Earth as a real creature. They are there to remind all living things why they are on Earth to begin with. The ghosts that are high dimensional spirits are usually there to impact only one or two individuals. These same kinds of entities that come back as *real* creatures are there to make a large impact on society, the culture or even the world because it seems to be stuck.”

“Are these people like prophets, like Jesus?”

“They can be but not always. Sometimes these people are under the radar, and do not stand out, and perhaps are not even remembered. Other times, they are people who are always in the public eye like celebrities. Sadly, most of these people who are in the public eye end up destroying lives or doing more bad than good. They do not realize the

power they have over the many people watching them. They could influence others in the most positive way, but unfortunately, most of the time this burden is too great, so they fall by the wayside.”

“I have always felt that too. Often I ask myself why so many celebrities choose to be bad role models, or better yet, *not* be good role models. It’s so sad to see so many of the girls my age, and including my sister Sam become so influenced by these celebrities that they destroy their own health just to look like them.”

Harmony looked at me with her loving eyes and spoke softly as she always seemed to do, “I am very happy you are not one of those girls, Liz. As for your sister, I truly wish her the best. Even though you are younger you can have a positive impact. You are very bright Elizabeth, as many of your teachers have told you, although you don’t always get the credit you deserve, especially from your family. Your strong-willed, yet compassionate nature will serve you well. Just ignore the negativity from your family. You are strong enough to get past it, I promise... For now, one of them needs you and that is Ruth. She wants to talk to you now. Would you like to?”

My eyebrows jumped with excitement and I flew up into the air with joy, “Yes, please, that would be incredible!”

She appeared slowly into the air, her eyes first, then the rest of her new-found body. It was one similar to a cardinal. She looked more beautiful than I had ever seen her. She radiated incredible softness like rose petals. Her colour too, like a rose, was red, powerful, passionate and loving. She was in her true light. Her bird self then transformed into the same physical appearance that she had on earth, only this time she exuded the same beauty that her bird-self did. I was so happy to see her in this light. On Earth, her appearance was always dark, tired, and gloomy. She finally was transformed, yet, I was sad that I could not see her this way while she was still alive.

“You must help her move on, or she will not keep this beauty you see alive. She may even fade or become a pesky ghost.” Harmony whispered, knowing my thoughts. Her ability to do this would normally be creepy, but it seemed so natural in the heaven-like surroundings.

“Please Elizabeth, my dear sister. I wish that I reached out to you sooner, but now is not the time for regrets. We both must move on, in a more positive light, and to do this, the truth must be shown.” My sister’s eyes were concerned. She was showing so much maturity, it was as if she aged 100 years.

“I will Ruth. And I agree, the truth must be shown. I will do anything you ask. I love you.”

“I love you too. I do not want you to do anything you feel uncomfortable doing, like Harmony said. Be subtle. I know you are able to be discreet. You always seemed to sneak past dad and get out of the house. I even learned some techniques from you.” We both grinned.

“Well, I will agree with you there. I have a knack for going invisible. I never knew you learned some of my techniques though. No wonder, for awhile there, you were always the one going missing.” An uncomfortable pause passed quickly, “Can I ask you a question?”

“You want to know why was I sneaking out all the time?”

“No. Well, kind of. Why did you *begin* to sneak out all the time?”

She took a heavy sigh, then said, “Well, for the same reasons you did: To get away, to be free, to collect my thoughts.”

“How come you didn't ask me to go with you?” I was now yearning for the closeness we were achieving at the moment, but never got to experience when she was alive.

“I didn't think you wanted me to. I thought you always hated me. Actually I thought everyone did. Also, I figured you wanted to be alone, like I did.” Her face reverted from maturity to a frightened little girl, as I always saw within her on Earth.

“I do like to be alone, but also I wished we could have been closer. And of course I didn't hate you! Nobody hated you.” I was deeply hurt by this, because it seemed impossible that there was even a chance I would hate her, or anyone else.

“I know that now. But, at the time, I felt like that. Maybe because I felt dad hated me so much.” The little girl was still present.

“I wouldn't take that personally, though. He seems to hate everyone. I am sorry for what he did to you.”

“Thank you. But you are not the one to be sorry. Also, you will soon know the hell he put me through. And the torment I am still living. That is why I need you to do this for me, or I just won't feel right.”

“I understand. So what is it exactly you need me to do? Investigate how you died?”

She came into her new found essence again, as she radiated a soft ocean blue haze. “Well, yes and no. I do want you to search for clues, not just in the school, but everywhere. In our house, even in my friend's houses, in the forest- wherever you feel will get you closer to finding out the truth. Follow your gut and your heart. I trust you.”

“Okay. I will search as long as it takes. `` I said determined to make her proud.

``Good. I just hope it won't be too long. I need you to make this one of your priorities. I know school is ending in a couple of months, but I am sure your teachers will understand if you're not there, and besides you should be in at least 2 grades higher. I rather you spend your time finding out the truth than grieving my death. I am here for you, always, and we will meet on Earth again soon, once the truth comes out.``

Tears kept coming down my face like streams down a steep hill. ``Please don't cry Liz.``

``I can't help it... I am going to miss you! ``

``I will miss you too, but remember you will see me a lot in the next while. I want us to be able to communicate during this process, and Harmony will help us. Keep yourself busy, and you won't miss me so much. I know you - you know how to do that. You can't stay in your room for more than a half hour. ``

I brushed my tears away gently, and smiled. ``I guess you are right. Now that I have something to investigate, I definitely won't be able to stay in my room. ``

``Good. Well, little sis, I have to go now, but remember I am always here watching over you, with all my love. ``

``I know. And I will be keeping busy, so you can be at peace. ``

Her ambiance faded slowly, with a serene elegance. My heart was moved, beyond explanation. All I could do was cry. Harmony embraced me with her silky soft feathers. I felt as if I was in the womb again: warm, safe, and nurtured. Time was passing so passively, so naturally. There were no distractions, physical or mental. The emotions also started to fade like a river seeping into a still, glass pond.

Chapter 17: The Mission

When I felt ready, I opened my eyes and found myself back in my bed, but with the same peace I had with Harmony. Reality was not yet present. My mind and body were only filled with contentment. Nothing more, nothing less.

I lay there for a little while longer, staring at the endless abyss of white, undefined light. The light changed from an almost blinding white to a soft yellow, then to a creamy orange, and finally to an earthy, yet sharp red. The red pulled my body upward, until I was sitting up straight. At this point, what was once blurred became a perfectly clean window.

I did not know what to make of all that had happened that night. It was so much to absorb in such a short amount of time. Yet, I felt like I had been gone for a whole century. I even expected to look down at my hands and find them wrinkled. Luckily, they weren't. I had way too much to do in this lifetime.

And with that thought, I remembered why I was back here on Earth. I had a mission. A mission that may take me a week or maybe years, but it was a mission of purpose, of value. I knew there was no reason to grieve, and no reason to be sitting in my bed!

It was early yet. The sun has just risen and everyone was still asleep. I jumped into the shower and got cleaned up fast, before anyone else awoke. I tried to be as quiet as I could so I wouldn't wake anyone. I was just about to put my hand on the handle of my door when I heard a whisper. "Liz? What are you doing up so early? You are never awake at this hour." It was my oldest brother, Jamie.

"Well, I got up to go to the washroom, and couldn't get back to sleep, so decided to take a shower. Why are you up so early?"

"Uh. Well, actually, to tell you the truth I am always up this early. It is usually the time when dad wakes up and sneaks out. I spy on him to see where he might be going." He told me as he followed me into my room.

"How long have you been doing this for?" I was shocked and scared for him that he did this, but he didn't seem too concerned about it. I assumed he had gotten really good at sneaking around.

“For a while now actually, but I haven't found anything out. All I know is that he goes to the garage to have a smoke and make a phone call right when he gets up. I don't know who he calls, because all I can hear is mumbling. I tried to get closer, but I don't want him to catch me.” His voice broke a little at the end. He was scared.

“Hmm. Then what does he do?” I asked, anxious to know more.

“Well, he comes back in. Then sometimes he takes a shower, makes a coffee and leaves in his car. I know, at the end of the driveway, he *always* turns left, so he must be going to somewhere specific and it isn't into town.” This time his voice raised a little, as if he was angry about his findings.

“That is bizarre. So, did he already leave, or is he still sleeping?”

“Well, that is the weird thing. I think he hasn't been home all night. I was hoping maybe that you caught him leaving earlier.” He bit his lip, hoping not to hear the truth.

“Nope, I haven't seen him, and I'm glad I didn't. Maybe he was just stressed out about last night, and so he couldn't be home?” I asked, hoping to be right, but knowing I was wrong.

“Doubtful. Did you see his expression last night? He didn't even tear up.” He said, with his face scrunched up and his voice hostile again.

“I don't remember you crying either.” As soon as I said it, I wish I could have taken it back. There was a raging red all around him.

“Of course I cried Liz! Why would you say that? I balled my eyes out all night. I loved Ruth. I *still* love Ruth. How dare you?!”

“I'm sorry, Jamie, I didn't mean it like that. I just thought maybe because he is a man, like you, he would do his crying in private.”

He walked over to my desk chair, and plopped his bulky body on top of it, shifting it slightly across the hardwood. He then lowered his head, and brushed the edge of his brow bone. He then finally said something, “Well, maybe that is why he left the house last night. I hope so anyways. I wish that bastard would at least show us a little emotion. Sometimes I wonder if he even has a heart.”

I frowned, “Yeah, sometimes I wonder the same thing. Anyways, I got stuff to do today. Can you do me a favour, and keep spying on dad? I feel like he is keeping something from us.”

He ignored my last comment, stood up with his chest out and said, “Stuff? What stuff? Your sister killed herself last night and you got stuff to do?!”

I walked over to him, pushed his shoulders downwards and said, “Jamie, calm down. I will explain later. But I promise this “stuff” is for Ruth.”

Jamie raised his brows with suspicion then said, sitting down again, pointing his finger at me, “Okay, I'm trusting you Liz. And by the way, don't worry about dad. I will get to the bottom of it. Maybe I will find a good enough reason for mom to leave him.” The last was hopeful but sarcastic. I knew he wished that to be true, but knew it wasn't, so tried to make a joke out of it.

“As if she doesn't have enough good reasons already.” I said trying to remind him of the absurdity of his remark.

He waltzed over to the doorway while saying, “True. But you know what I mean.”

“Yeah. Well, I will catch up with you later. If anyone asks I am still sleeping okay? I will be back before all the drama happens, I am sure.” I said as I tried to encourage him out of the door with large arm gestures.

“Okay, good luck sis.” Jamie patted me on the shoulder then returned to his room. As he left, I realized that I should also start spying on our father. I had a feeling he's much more complicated than we think.

I then started to gather my things, including my gifts. I searched my drawers for money I had stored in there a long time ago. I knew I would need it some day. I then went downstairs to throw some snacks into my backpack. I checked the phone to make sure no one was on it, then called a cab to arrive at the end of our neighbour's lane.

I made a sprint down the lane to be sure my father didn't catch me on his way back home. I thought I made it, but then I saw his car coming down the road. I quickly looked around for somewhere to hide. Just then the mysterious tree appeared before me! I swiftly climbed up it. I watched closely as the car came closer. There was something different about the car. It almost looked newer. Did he get it cleaned? Did he get new parts for it? I could not be sure. I would take a closer look when I got home. Right now, I had to get to the school to inspect the surrounding area. I saw my cab approaching. I jumped down from the tree, said thank you, and ran as fast as I could to the other lane. I made it just as the cab approached.

Chapter 18: The Bumpy Road

I looked at the driver, and he didn't look friendly. As I hopped into the back seat, the scruffy, dirty cab driver asked me, “What is a young girl like you doing up so early?”

I tried to keep my answers short. “I have swimming lessons. My parents gave me money to take a cab, so they didn't have to wake up.”

“Smart folk. So where are we off to Miss? The Y?”

“Uh. No actually, I am taking the lessons at the school.”

“I didn't realize they had a swimming pool,” he asked suspiciously.

“Well, there isn't. Not at my school anyways, but there is one at the high school and that is where I am heading to.” I said with assurance, so he wouldn't question me.

“Oh I see. I was going to say you look a bit young to be attending high school.” He grinned slightly. It gave me the shivers. I was starting to think maybe I should be investigating him. I tried to ignore it, and did not reply. We were heading into town now and it would only be a few minutes until we were there. “So you're a Jamison kid are you?”

“Excuse me?” I asked confused.

“The Jamisons. I didn't know they had any children.”

“Oh, yes. I am the only child. They don't talk about me much. As you know, they are often away on business trips.”

“So, they leave you all alone?” His voice was soft and eerie. I began to sweat as my face heated up.

“No. Of course not, I am still too young. I have a babysitter.” I answered quickly, trying not to sound nervous.

“I bet it's one of the Murphys' kids. They got so many, I wouldn't be surprised if they started shelling them out for money.” He then let out a screechy wicked old witch laugh.

I was utterly disgusted by this comment. Sometimes I think adults just think of kids as some parasite that they must control. Even though I wouldn't put it past my parents to do something like that, it was still rude to assume they were like that. Maybe they chose to have so many children because they love kids! I don't know why what he said angered me so much. I started to breath deeply to calm myself down. I was almost there.

“No. It is not one of the Murphys, my aunt comes out to babysit me.”

“Oh really, who is your aunt?”

What was with all of the questions?! Okay, I have got to calm down.

“You wouldn't know her. She lives on the other side of town, and never uses cabs. She thinks she is too good for that. She will even call a friend or family to drive her somewhere, if she is desperate for a ride.” I couldn't believe how fast I came up with these convincing stories, and without even thinking about it. I normally hated lying, and was very bad at it, but something inside of me pushed the lies through me. It was for my own good.

“Oh really? Seems like a bit of a snob. Just my type. Haha.”

It wasn't funny to me. “Yeah...” Finally we arrived!

“Okay, here is your stop little lady. That will be \$25.32” I only had 30 dollars. I wasn't sure yet how I was going to get home. I thought it would be cheaper than that. I think he may have gone a longer way. No wonder I was getting irritated.

“Here you go.” I didn't want to question him; I didn't know what he was capable of.

“Thank you my dear. Have a good swimming lesson.” He winked at me, as he gave me my change. My stomach rolled over, ready to explode. I got out of the car as fast as I could.

I don't know why but I started to run, and fast. I also wasn't sure where I was running to until I was there, in the middle of the football field. I looked around to discover that there was nobody in sight. Sitting down, I felt the grass that was still damp from the morning dew underneath me. As I sat there for a bit looking up to the sky, I pondered where I should look first. I then noticed a forest in the distance. It looked like it was about a 10-15 minute walk. I didn't think I could find anything there, but I

remembered Ruth and Harmony telling me to follow my gut. A sense of urgency grew within me as I shot up and ran towards the forest.

When I got to the edge of the forest, I noticed that it was not very thick. This was surprising, since most of the forests around here are dense. I could see the sun's rays piercing between the trees, onto the brown mossy blanket that covered the floor. It was a heavenly sight as the rays picked up every outline of a tree, every leaf, and every tiny stone. The sandy brown soil shimmered with delight.

I was disturbed by a crunching noise in the distance. I looked harder through the trees and then all around me but saw nothing. I started to sweat again- something I was experiencing a lot lately. I thought, it couldn't be a person. Why would someone be out here so early in the morning? *I guess I could ask myself the same question.*

I still heard the noise and it was approaching quicker. I looked and looked but nothing. Nothing at all! Were my ears playing tricks on me? It sounded very close now, and still, nothing in sight.

Just then something grabbed onto my leg. It wasn't teeth, or sharp claws. It was small and tingled up my leg. How could something so small, make so much noise? It ran up my stomach, then onto my shoulder and stood there for a moment looking into the woods, as I did. Then it scampered down my arm into my hand and gave me a curious look. Its large brown eyes batted as if it was trying to charm me. Its hair was fluffy and was made up of black, white and rusty colours. I burst out laughing as it twitched his tiny ears and batted its eyes again. I could not help myself. I was so terrified, and it was only a cute little chipmunk. It chattered as it looked up at me. It seemed as if it was trying to tell me something.

Then it seemed frustrated that I could not understand it. I looked up into the blaring sun and asked if one of my helpers would help me listen. No one came, but a whisper entered my ear.

Be silent. In your heart, in your mind. And you will hear. The truth.

I thought I was being silent.

In your heart, in your mind. Close your eyes.

I closed my eyes and tried not to think but the more I tried, the more annoying thoughts came barging in. I stopped trying. I still felt the critter on my hand. I listened to it. Slowly the chatter became familiar sounds that eventually formed words, and now... sentences! I could understand it! I opened my eyes.

“You are going the right way. Please follow me.”

“Where will you take me?” I anticipated.

“I will show you. Follow me.”

It was impossible not to trust such an innocent creature. Its face was so warm and friendly and its eyes glistened ever-so slightly. It ran up my arm, down my stomach and my leg onto the unmaintained brush. The chipmunk camouflaged into it, like a missing piece of the puzzle. I could barely see it now, but that wasn't a problem since it was a heavy scamper.

The woods were getting thicker and I had never been so far away from home, except the time we took a train into the mountains to a ski resort about 2 years ago. It was something my brothers had wanted to do for years, and my dad finally gave in, but there was only one condition: the girls were not allowed to ski. You might think he would leave us at home, but he made such a big deal about it to his church and work buddies, that it had to be a family vacation. It was one of my worst nightmares. It took about 5 hours to get there. The sightseeing was beautiful but it got a little boring after an hour.

My older brothers and sisters had their own agendas, as usual. My brother Jordan listened to his iPod and played computer games on his laptop the whole way. Ruth seemed a little bit happier that day, but not enough that she would talk to me. Maybe it was because we were finally getting out of the house, and when we got there she was actually allowed to go her own way for once without the restrictions.

My parents weren't very strict about keeping tabs on those of us over the age 12. It seemed they thought that was the age when you became an adult. Maybe that was true a long time ago, but it is far from the truth now. Ironically, my mother was overly paranoid, about me and Jordan, so when we got there we had to keep close. That was a total disaster because my brother, like always would tune everything out around him, and just completely ignored our mother. So, I was her only outlet.

I can't remember everything that she told me, as I tried to block most of it out. She told me things about her past and about her and dad. All of that was way too much information and definitely not rated G! Again, the utter contradiction. That's what my mother was and is: a hypocrite. She treated us like we were 5 years old one second, then the next, she would be telling us things that only adults should hear.

The whole experience, was a therapy session, with me as the therapist and her as the client. I thought I would have to take on that role until I was at least 12, but the drink became more of her permanent therapist.

About an hour had passed. The chipmunk was still in front of me, I stopped. "How much further?" I closed my eyes.

"It won't be long now, I promise." It did not lie. About 5 minutes later there was a clearing. I still could not make out the other side, but I started to get butterflies in my stomach, only they were good ones this time.

I picked up speed, and I was running now. It didn't seem to get closer. I ran faster. I lost track of the chipmunk. "STOP", it squealed. "You must pace yourself. There might be others there. We don't want to draw attention."

She made a good point. Now, I was getting the nervous butterflies. When we got there, my heart dropped like an avalanche, faster and faster, heavier, and heavier until it sunk into my stomach, like butter into warm bread.

It was a beach. I have waited so long for this moment! In all my years, living so close to the ocean, I have never had the opportunity to see it or swim in it. My parents had hidden this jewel from me for so long...or did they? Maybe they did not know about it. They always said it was too far, but I knew from maps that that was a lie. Maybe it was just an excuse not to haul all of us over here? Either way, it was an incredible surprise to learn it was so close.

The beach was secluded, not large at all, but definitely good enough to swim in. Luckily there was no one there. I thought maybe the only people that would really know about this place were the teenagers from the high school that would wander off. Although, Tanya didn't mention anything about it. Maybe Ruth went by herself, or with someone else?

I looked down to see if the chipmunk was still there but it wasn't. I was hoping to say thank you. I closed my eyes and did anyways. I always thought it was necessary to show my appreciation. Maybe because any little good thing that happened was a blessing to me, since the things that should be good- weren't.

You're welcome. You listened well. But more is to come. Be safe, be confident.

Be safe? Be confident? What did the chipmunk mean by safe? Was I in danger? And I thought I had already been confident. I couldn't ponder much longer. I would just have to wait and see. I didn't have much time, since I had to get back before all the family stuff happened. I am sure my father would have called the whole family: aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins and others. I wasn't looking forward to the family reunion. I hoped the funeral wouldn't be for a few days. I wondered if there was anyway I could see the body. Not that I would like to or anything, but that maybe there was some kind of clue.

"Hey! You! Over there! What are you doing here? This is a secluded beach, how many times do I have to tell you kids!" The burly man stumbled toward me. 'Time to be safe', I thought. He came closer, moving faster now, but still inelegantly.

"Uh. I am sorry sir. I mean no harm."

He was in my face now. "NO harm! HA! That is all you hooligans mean is harm! Leaving your cigarette butts and beer bottles smashed all over the place. I have even found used condoms- disgusting! I paid good money for my cottage, and you kids come in and pollute it. No respect, no respect." He shook his head vigorously.

"You are absolutely right sir." I said stepping back slowly.

"What did you say to me?" he said, still in my face. I could smell the reek of his fishy breath pouring down on me. I tried to hide my disgust, and resisted pushing him away. I didn't want him to take offense and get more upset.

"You are right, about those kids. They are very disrespectful. I, on the other hand, do not intend to do any of those things on this beautiful beach, sir." He just stared at me still hovering.

Be confident. "If you don't mind, I would like to ask you a few questions though. Last night were there any of those 'hooligans' on the beach?"

He slowly stepped back, scratched his head, furrowed his brow and replied, "Well, uh, let's see, uh. Yes. There were some kids around last night. That's why I was so upset. I thought you were one of them coming back to collect your evidence, although that wouldn't make sense, would it? As I just said they leave everything here..." He grinned a bit, and so did I.

“Well, like I said sir, I am not here to mess up your beach or disrespect it or you in any way. Something terrible happened last night, and I have a hunch it might have occurred on this beach. Do you remember any of their faces?” I asked, hopeful.

“Please, call me Sal. And I am sorry but there are so many of them, and it is usually dark out, so it is hard to say. Although, there are some regulars, two males and two females.”

“Okay, Sal. These regulars, were they here last night?”

“Yes, I believe so. I can usually tell because they are always with a larger, older looking guy. He might be in his early 20s, maybe older. I always wondered what these 15-year-olds were doing hanging out with someone so much older, but I figured they just used him for beer or somethin’.”

“Hmm. Was there anything out of the ordinary?”

“Uh, not really. Just the regular loud talking, laughing, and carrying on. Sometimes, they even bring instruments. Not last night though. And actually when I think about it, they were a lot quieter last night than usual.” *Ruth plays the guitar.*

“Hmm. What kind of instruments do they usually bring?” I asked while pulling out my notebook.

“You’re not going to record that I said any of this are you?”

“Well, I was hoping to, yes.”

“Well, I don’t want any police coming along. Not that I have anything to hide. Just those pigs really irritate me. They try to blame me for all the racket and garbage. But I say what is it to them? Me and other people that live on this beach are the ones that have to clean it up! I bet it’s that Joe guy down a few houses. He is always trying to blame me or the others for anything that goes wrong.”

“Well, you don’t have to worry about the police. Even if I do talk to them, I will make sure I just heard about this whole beach thing from kids at school, okay?”

“Okay, thanks. You sure are precious one. Not like those other girls, nasty things.”

I ignored his comment and continued my investigation, “By the way were you ever able to get a good look at any of the girls? Did one of them play a guitar? And it would be helpful if you could tell me the other instruments.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry about that. Yes, there was a girl with a guitar. She was actually pretty good. Dull and dark lookin’ though. All of them were actually. The older guy always played a drum of some sort. Doing calls and makin’ the most racket. I don’t believe the others had instruments. Maybe another drum? And uh, one of those shaky things?” He said as he fluttered his hand side to side in the air.

“A tambourine?”

“Yes! One of those. I am sorry, but I don’t think I have much else to tell you. I know the guitar girl had long dark hair. The older guy as well, had uh, about shoulder length hair, dark too. Or maybe it just looked dark? Maybe a little lighter than her hair?”

The other two, well one always wears a sweater, with his hood up. And the girl, I can't remember a thing about her for some reason, I am sorry.”

“That is okay. You have been very helpful, thank you. Would it be okay if I took a look around? Maybe they left something important.”

“Sure thing. And if you get hungry, or think of some other questions, I am just the second house up the left side of the beach here.” He pointed towards his cottage.

“Okay, and thanks again.”

“No problem. You take care.” He started to waddle back towards his cottage, when he stopped dead, and turned around. “Wait! I forgot to ask, what was this terrible thing that happened?” I really wished he had forgotten completely. I didn't know whether I should tell the truth or not. I decided not to.

“Well, someone was hurt at the high school just through the forest, and there had been rumours it was one of the kids that come to this beach.”

His face changed suddenly, worrisome. “Well, I hope that kid is okay. And I wouldn't doubt it if one of those hooligans hurt an innocent kid, like you or younger.”

I didn't want to give away too much, but I figured the whole town would hear about it eventually. “Unfortunately she is not okay. She passed on, actually. People say she killed herself. She was my friend. That is why I am so determined to find out what really happened.”

His face grew sadder. “Wow. I did not know it was that bad. I am so very sorry. Why do you think something else happened to her?”

“Well, she was my best friend. She told me everything. And besides a few minor things at home, she was pretty happy.” I didn't want to tell him she was my sister, because he might ask more questions, and I didn't want anyone to know I was investigating. Also, I couldn't very well tell him about what happened to her at home. He would think she killed herself for sure then.

His eyebrows danced, up and down. He probably doubted my story, but didn't ask any more questions. “Well, again, I am sorry. And I wish you the best in your findings. But, I must say, it might be best if you leave the dirty work up to the police. I am sure if there is any sign she didn't kill herself, they will look into it.”

“Perhaps, but that could take months. Thank you for your concern, and answering my questions.”

“No problem. Bye for now.” He waved then walked away again, slower now.

“Bye!” I called out.

I wanted to stay longer and search the whole area, but I knew now that Sal and his nosy neighbours would be watching, so I decided to just look around the fire pit they created then get home. My family would probably notice I was gone by now and I couldn't expect Jamie to cover for me all day.

I took a long stick to scrape through the ashes. I didn't find anything except a couple of burnt plastic bottles. I wondered what they would be doing drinking water,

when they were drinking alcohol. I heard alcohol dehydrates you, but they didn't seem like the conscientious type.

I searched around the fire pit and only found a couple of beer bottles. I decided to take one, just in case I could somehow get DNA from it. I know that would be nearly impossible, but it wouldn't hurt to try.

I looked for a few more minutes. I was going to have to give up for today, and come back another time. I was leaving the beach when I had a craving to test out the water. I knew it would be far too cold still to swim in, since it was only mid-spring, but it was too inviting to resist.

I took off my shoes and socks, lifted up my pant legs, and began to walk towards the water. The warm sand seeped over my feet. I stood there, enjoying it for a moment before going to the water. Just as my feet touched the muddy substance, a wave crashed up and over them reaching almost my knee caps. The foam quickly dissipated back into the unreal mass of water, like a turtle's head shrinking back into its oversized shell. The water was surprisingly warm, but the waves were intimidating so I stayed where I was, enjoying the steady flow.

In and out. In and out. It was never too quick and never too slow. It reminded me of the waltz. Simple, 1, 2, 3. 'I must get home', I thought suddenly, but I did not move. I knew I should have left right away but, instead, I kept standing there, and staring into the ocean as if it had hypnotized me. I wanted to soak in every moment so that I could daydream later about what dance the ocean would bring me tomorrow.

As I forced myself to walk out of the water I spotted something shiny and gold in colour. I rushed over before the wave took it away again. I washed it off, and held it. It was heavy and chunky. A necklace- of real gold? It couldn't be. I didn't know of anyone who had such expensive jewellery. It couldn't be Ruth's. She would never wear something that would bring so much attention. Plus, it seemed far too masculine to be a woman's jewellery. Maybe it was a man's then? Could it belong to one of the owners of the cottages? Not Sal. He looked like he could barely afford his cottage, although, people always say looks are deceiving. Maybe he had money but was cheap. That was it. He complained about paying so much for his cottage. It must be the only thing he has ever paid good money for. Maybe I should visit the other residences? I would not show them the necklace though. I would just ask if they might be missing a piece of jewellery. Maybe the necklace belonged to one of Ruth's hooligan friends? Maybe they were stealing? I couldn't imagine Ruth stealing, or drinking, or smoking! But there is a lot I didn't know. I couldn't believe how naive I had been. It must come with the age.

I knew one thing for sure, and that was that she had been here. Why else would the chipmunk lead me here? And the girl Sal described sounded exactly like her. I would have to ask her if she went to the beach. I knew I couldn't ask anything more than that, but I didn't want to waste anytime in a place that might not be valuable to my investigation and to Ruth.

I walked through the woods towards the school without even realizing it. I had too much on my mind. It didn't seem as long on the way back, but that seems to be the case with any trip. I quickly made it to the front of the school, trying to ignore all the teenagers

hanging around. I thought they may have cancelled school. I guess that means they removed everything from the scene? I wondered if any of them knew what happened. I figured they did. There was an extra-dark cloud lulling over the school.

I still did not know how I was going to get back home. I decided to use a pay phone to call home. Hopefully Jamie had his car back and could pick me up. It rang and rang, but there was no answer. I hung up before it used my quarters. I tried Jordan's cell. "Yo man, what's up?"

"Excuse me, but I am not a man. I am your sister, Liz"

"Oh hey Liz. How's it hangin'?"

"Not too good Jordan. I am stranded here at the high school."

"Why are you there? You don't go there, and besides none of us are going to school today."

"I know Jordan. Now, is Jamie around?"

"Jamie? Uh. Yeah. Why? What's going on?"

"Please, can I just talk to him? No one answered the home phone."

"I guess. But first tell me why."

"Well obviously I got to get back home, and he is the only one with a car."

"Okay, chill. Not sure if he has the car back. Oh yeah, he does. He drove me to the store last night. Before everything happened, that is. How you holding up anyways? And, what are you doing at the school?"

"Please Jordan. We will discuss it at home. Can you ask Jamie to pick me up?"

"Yeah, yeah we'll be there in a flash. No worries."

"Okay thanks. See you soon."

"Yup, see ya." Click.

I was anxious to get home. I didn't exactly know what I was going to tell Jordan, but I had to come up with something. I was trying to be low-key, but now that Jordan knows I was out, it might turn into a big drama-fest. I wanted to get back home as fast as possible, but I was also worried about what I was going to say to Jordan and Jamie.

I sat on the step, just in front of the school. Some kids almost stepped on me a couple of times, but I barely noticed, being so stressed. I could just tell him that I forgot a sweater or something here last night, but I doubt he would buy that. He would wonder why I would pay money to come here just to get a sweater.

I thought about Ruth and what she would think I should do. Would she want me to tell them the truth? Or keep it secret? I knew no one was supposed to know what I was doing, but I could probably trust them, although telling Jordan would be pretty risky. I don't think he keeps secrets very well and he has the best relationship with our father, and might tell him what I am up to. It was too risky; I had to tell him something else, but I had already told Jamie I was doing stuff for Ruth. Now the question is: what stuff? Crap. Right at that moment they drove up.

Beep beep. “Hey!” Jordan waved excitedly out the window. I waved back not so enthusiastically, moving slowly towards the car. “Hey! Come on! We don't have all day!”

“I'm coming!” I yelled back, walking a little faster.

“Come on, come on, get in.” Jordan edged on.

“I'm in, I'm in, relax.” I said frustrated with their impatience.

“No time to relax. We got to get back as fast as possible. Dad caught us leaving, and started asking questions. I told him you were at Ruth's friend's house to collect some of her stuff.” ‘Good story,’ I thought.

“Well, that's funny because that's what I was doing.”

“Really? Why couldn't you just tell me that this morning?” Jamie asked suspiciously.

“Well, I didn't know if you would understand, and I wanted to leave before dad came back. I became sort of close with Tanya and her mom. And her mom told me, last night, that I could come in the morning to get some of Ruth's things. She thought we should have them.”

“Yeah. I guess that's understandable.” He paused for a moment. “So what was so important that she thought we must have? Oh, and what were you doing at the school? And why didn't they drive you home?” All valid questions.

“Well, they drove me to the school because what they wanted to give to me was in her locker, and Tanya has her code.” *Good idea. I should check it tomorrow.* “And they couldn't drive me because her mom had to go to work.” I waited to see if they bought it.

“Oh. So where was Tanya, then? She went to school? Isn't she upset?” *What is he a detective now?*

“No. She wanted to break the news to some of Ruth's other friends. I guess she feels better around people, as opposed to being alone at home.”

“Yeah. That makes sense.” *Phew.*

“Yeah, that makes sense alright, but what was so damn important Liz?” Jordan asked now taking his turn to drill me.

“Here. I will show you.” I pulled out the necklace. I had no idea if it was hers or not. And if it was, she could have stolen it, but it was the only thing valuable that I had on me at the moment.

“Woah! I never seen that before. She had bling like that, and we never knew it?” Jordan reached out to grab it, hypnotized by the golden sheen.

“Yeah. It was a surprise to me too. But it might not be real you know.”

“It looks pretty real to me. And kind of man-ish eh? I know a guy that has a similar necklace and it is real.” He said as he played with it in his hands, running it between his fingers and then holding up in front of him, as if he was trying to get a better look.

“It could be a girl's too Jordan. And I was hoping to find out if it's real, maybe by a jeweller.”

“But Liz, she couldn't afford anything like that. Even if it isn't real, it must have cost quite a bit to look that real.” He said, as he passed it back finally.

“Well, maybe someone gave it to her. And that is why she never wore it around us.”

“Like a guy? Cuz that would make sense. Dad would kill her.”

“Yeah for sure.” I didn't think of that, but he had a good point. Our father never wanted any of us girls to date. He said as long as we lived under his roof we couldn't date. And it wasn't just that he was overprotective- it was a creepy obsession. My stomach boiled.

“Hmm. I would like to know where this rich boy is. He needs a talk and maybe we should give the necklace back to him.” Jamie said in a deep rustic ‘big brother’ voice. Only his intentions were out of love, unlike our father.

Although I appreciated his concern, I felt it was best to keep the necklace until I found out more. I also didn't want to have a ‘talk’ with someone who would not welcome us. “No! I mean, he won't want it back. There would just be too many memories attached to it. And maybe they weren't even on good terms. Actually, I know they weren't.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Jamie got concerning again.

“It's a long story. Tanya told me it last night, before we went to the school.” *Uh oh. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything.*

“Oh I see. Well, I would like to hear about it later.” Jamie said as he squinted his eyes at me in the rear-view mirror.

“Yeah me too!” Jordan eagerly agreed.

We drove up the lane, the tree was no longer there but there were some new cars.

“Looks like some of the family is here, and Liz, you're explaining everything to dad and whoever else asks.” Jamie demanded.

“Yeah, sure, it would be my pleasure.” I replied sarcastically trying to make a joke out of it, even though my fears were real.

We walked into the house, and the rest was a blur. Everyone was far too busy with their own concerns to even care where we were. I could faintly hear my grandparents sobbing in the kitchen as my mother told them everything as she prepared more food. As I walked past the living room I could hear the T.V. blaring and my father and uncles screaming back at it while smacking each other's backs and clanging their beer bottles together. I then almost managed to slip past my older cousins who were fighting with my sisters about celebrity gossip, when Christine pulled me in. I just stood there nodding, waiting for my chance to escape.

After the chaotic social experiment died down, enough for me to slip away, I ran up to my room. I was just about to open my door, and walk in when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

“Where do you think you are going now?” I turned around. It was Jamie. “I would really like to hear that story.” I had no choice; I had to tell him. Even if I didn’t, I figured he would start his own investigation.

“Okay fine. Come in here though.”

“Alright.”

I sat on my bed, and he sat on my desk chair. We then stared at each other for a few moments. “So?” he said while his arms moved in a forward circular motion, as if he was saying ‘get on with it.’

“So... Okay, here it goes.”

I told him everything that Tanya told me, including everything about their love triangle and Ruth's outburst at the restaurant.

“Wow. So she really was involved with some guy? And I can't believe that she would be so crazy like that. It must have really hurt her, eh? Oh man... Tanya must feel guilty.” He rambled, talking more to himself than to me.

“Yeah she does, but she has no reason to. It is not her fault. That is not the reason why what happened, happened.”

“Well, it might be. Ruth wasn't exactly stable.”

“Yeah, that is my point. Even if that ‘pushed her off the edge’, it wasn't the cause for her instability. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah, that is true. So what do you think that necklace means? Are you going to talk to this guy? ‘Cause if you’re not, I will.” He sat up straight.

“Yes. I was going to go back to the school tomorrow, and try to find him.”

“Good. For all we know, he might have done something worse to her. Something that may have *really* pushed her off the edge.”

“Yeah, that is a possibility, but you should know, she had good enough reasons besides that.”

“What do you mean? There is never a good enough reason,” his voice deepened.

“I know that. I just mean - you know, her home life wasn't exactly the greatest.”

“Well neither is ours. And you don't see us doing something like that.” His face was now distorted, and his voice rougher.

I was getting angry with him now. If only he knew what I knew. I tried to pace myself, taking deep breaths before I spoke. “I am just saying she had it pretty bad, and some people’s strength is greater than others.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn't be saying something like that. It's just - I don't know - I’m having a hard time digesting all of this.”

“Yeah me too.”

After a few moments of silence he announced, ``I am going to go downstairs now, to see if mom needs any help with dishes or something.`` I didn't say anything as he walked out and closed the door behind him.

I knew it was getting really uncomfortable for him, and I didn't blame him, but I wish he could be a little more open. I wish all of them could be more open. I tried not to worry about it.

The necklace was calling my name. I had to hold it. There was something enduring about it, almost possessive. I couldn't make out the energy it was giving off. I wanted it to be a positive force, but something was telling me it wasn't. I lay there, holding it for awhile, with my eyes closed. It wasn't until then that I realized how tired I was. I sat up again, so I wouldn't fall asleep. I put the necklace in my jewellery box. I knew I had to stop holding it. I realized then that the present that Oochoo gave me was glowing. I put it around my neck, and held the end of it where a heart-shaped trinket hung. I then heard Oochoo's voice.

*Hold on to this as you sleep. And put the other gift in your pocket. You will need both. Say these words as you fall asleep **light all around me, guide me, protect me and love me.** And rest well.*

I thought his request was sort of strange, but I did not want to question it. I think he knew where I was going tonight. Before going to sleep, I read all of my notes for the day and even made some new ones. I tried to piece things together, but I knew I needed a lot more information. My head hurt - I needed sleep. I did what Oochoo asked, and fell asleep after only 2 times of chanting, "*Light all around me, guide me, protect me and love me.*"

Chapter 19: Bliss

A glaring light pierced my eyes as I tried to open them. I could not - it hurt too much. I left them closed for a little while. The light grew dimmer, slowly, like the sun as it fades behind the landscape, disappearing into space, with no sign left of it but a subtle shine.

I slowly opened my eyes, just in case the light was too harsh. It was the opposite of that. Warm and inviting, it felt as though a large amount of happiness was put into a small box, and I was there wrapped within it. All around me was a cozy, sunset glow. I could not see very far ahead, and I had a feeling there wasn't much else out there but the wonderful light.

I tried to look for myself: my legs, my arms, or perhaps a reflection. But there was nothing. I could not see or feel my body. All I felt was the light. I then realized maybe I am the light, or a part of it. I knew this feeling could not last very long, so I decided not to think too much, and, instead, tried to enjoy it, as if I was lying on a beach, trying to soak in the last rays of sunlight, before the sun left the Earth.

Although I was enjoying myself, I could not help but wonder if this was the next dimension after Geeshgawoodiooki? Did this dimension only contain the affectionate bliss I found myself in? What could I possibly learn from something so simple? Shouldn't there be another guide? Another lesson? Maybe this was the lesson: that I had to learn to

be calm and enjoy the rays. I must have harder lessons to learn than that. I was getting frustrated now.

The light disappeared, and I was left in darkness. Scared now, my heart started pumping faster. My arms appeared, then my legs. I touched my face. Darkness still surrounded me, as I began to fly in the black space. I knew it would not last, and I would fall. My fear was overpowering me. I didn't know what to do. I was dropping slowly into the darkness. My body was appearing darker and darker. Out of instinct, I said quietly to myself, *light all around me, guide me, protect me and love me*. Nothing happened. I kept saying it. It wasn't until the tenth time, that I appeared back in the comfortable blanket of light.

Oochoo, Goasila and Harmony appeared in front of me. "Did you learn something now dear child?" Harmony asked me with a smirk.

"Um. Don't expect too much?"

"THINK HARDER."

"There is no need to yell Goasila. Give the kid a chance." Oochoo told him calmly.

"I think, uh... I think maybe appreciate the light?"

"Yes, but more." Harmony spoke sweetly.

"Appreciate the light, and slow down."

"Yes, you need to appreciate and love the light, and how you do that is by slowing down. Remember that gift we gave you, to stop time?"

"Yes."

"Well, we hoped you would use it to slow yourself down., to take everything in and appreciate it. As you know, life is short. You can't waste your time with all of these useless thoughts."

"You can hear my thoughts while I am on Earth?"

"Yes. And we gave you this experience to reinforce this lesson. It is a crucial lesson to learn if you want to pick up the little details in your investigation. Also, it will prepare you for your job later on, and your experiences in other dimensions. The others are much slower than Earth, especially now. Earth is very fast paced. As you saw, in Geeshgawoodioki, people took their time. And even in the resting place, people have to be patient before they can go to the next stage. I know it is hard for you to understand, especially being so young."

"I understand. But it is easier to understand than to do. My mind spins so fast sometimes."

"I have seen you rest your mind though. You have a great gift, but you must learn to look for it when your mind starts to spin, alright?"

"Yes."

"And, Elizabeth, you can use that gift to help you do it." Oochoo suggested.

“But I thought you said those were only for emergencies.”

“When your mind starts to spin and you worry, and you think negatively, that is an emergency.” We all laughed a little. I think they were like me once.

“We are now going to leave you in this wonderful light. Practice centering yourself, while appreciating and loving what is all around you.” They all disappeared. I said once more, “*Light all around me, guide me, protect me and love me.*” I was, again, one with the light. I could not tell for how long, and I tried not to guess. I did what they asked, and let myself be. Time passed and passed, but the light never went away. If a thought passed my mind, it was positive and full of love, for Ruth, my family, friends, strangers, and the world. If something negative started brewing, I remembered what was all around me.

When I felt no separation, between myself and the light, something changed. I felt as though chains had been lifted off my limbs, and that I was now soaring in a clear sky. I felt much different than I did on Earth, where it seemed other people had the power to put limitations on you. I felt no physical or mental barriers holding me back. When I looked around, all I saw were smiling faces. Not one person or creature had a sad, angry, frustrated, or negative facial expression.

“Hello there. Miss Elizabeth, is it? You are not here to stay, am I right?” A plump, very friendly woman, with a very large smile on her face, approached me. I looked at her for a few moments before answering to see if that smile would dissipate but it did not.

“Correct, Ms...?”

“My name is Amazinglyfantastical, but you can call me Mazfanny.”

“It is pleasure to meet you, Mazfanny. May I ask, where am I?”

“Of course you can ask, and you just did!” She belted out a jolly laugh. I couldn't help but smile. “You are in Awesome world! Where everything is awesome and amazing!”

I wondered if this was a joke. Was I in some comedy show? “You are definitely not in some comedy show, Miss Lizzy. But if you wish to see one, I can show you one.”

“No, that is okay, Mazfanny. What else is it that you do here?”

She continued to smile excitedly. “Well! I will show you.” She bounced around in circles three times, and we appeared right outside of what looked like an amusement park. “Here is where people who love things like roller-coasters and spinning rides go.” She bounced around again three times. We appeared to be in an ice cream parlour. “Here is where people who love ice cream and other sweets go. I spend most of my time here.” She laughed her jolly laugh again, with extra bounciness.

This place was great! It was all about fun, and having a good time. I couldn't believe something like this existed. I thought about how some people think that heaven is a place where you get unlimited things that you desired while you were alive, and I found out there is some truth to that. If people really knew that, they probably wouldn't be so afraid of death.

“You’re right, they wouldn’t. But remember Elizabeth, you don’t just get a free pass. You have to earn it. And you will not spend eternity here, more like a month’s time, half a year at most. Of course it isn’t that amount of time, but it *feels* like it. There is only so much fun stuff you can take.”

“I don’t know about that. I would love to stay here forever.” I said, doubting her claim.

“That is what most people think. But after you have ridden every ride and eaten every flavour of ice cream, what would you do then?” She still had a great big grin, but her eyes were now more inquisitive. I had to think for a bit on that one. I could say that I can always find something new to enjoy, but that may not be true.

“Well, Mazfanny. I thought about it and you bring up a good point. I guess there is only so much greatness out there and, after experiencing it all, over and over again, it could get boring. And, maybe finding it boring makes you think that there is more to life than just fun and games?”

Her smile grew even larger now, along with her eyes. “You are correct. And discovering what that is, is part of your goal now, Elizabeth. Games, theatres, candy, rides are all great, but it can only bring temporary joy. Here the souls already know that and that is why they have come here. It is their reward for knowing, recognizing and appreciating something greater. That is why many don’t stay very long. They have their last hoop-la, and move on. It is the place where they can experience good and positive “Earth-like” activities.”

“But if they already know there is something greater why do they need to come here at all?”

She laughed. I wasn’t sure why at that moment, but it became clearer as she spoke, “Elizabeth, you ask a very good question, but it might disappoint you that it has a very simple answer. Everyone likes to have fun right?”

“Right.”

“Well, that is your answer.”

“So, like Geeshgawoodioki, Awesome World has taken things from Earth that are good and exaggerated them.”

“How do you mean Miss Lizzy?”

“Well, like on Geeshgawoodioki, things like food and soft furniture were used to make everyone feel comfortable and safe. And here, things like amusement rides, and shows are used to make everyone feel joy and excitement, right?”

“Yes. That is true, you are on the right track.”

“So, are the other dimensions just other places that make you feel good?”

“Hmm. I don’t know if I should tell you. I know you will discover that on your own, but I will say they aren’t necessarily. You see here, and in Geeshgawoodioki, you are taught to appreciate those good things, that you once experienced on Earth, but like I

said, this is the last place where you will be presented with anything Earth-like in terms of physical things anyways.”

“But why did they separate them? Couldn't you just go to a world that has *all* the wonderful things Earth has and none of the bad things?”

“Well, I'm guessing that would be awfully overwhelming. Also, each place has it's own set of things that you are to learn before moving on. And, not all good things have the same lesson, right?” She raised her brow, still smiling.

“Yes. I guess that is true. Maybe I am missing something. Maybe the something Awesome World is missing?”

“Haha. Yes, Miss Lizzy, I think you- how do you say... hit the nail on the head? Haha.”

My belly also bounced up and down, as I let out an equally jolly giggle. An important question came to me, as I observed my new-found belly. “Mazfanny?”

“Yes, my dear.”

“How come - and I don't mean to be rude - you have a large belly? Is it because of all of the ice cream you eat?”

Her laugh was so loud that it echoed across the land. “Oh my, .. woo.. let me catch my breath.. That.. is the FUNNIEST thing I have heard this century! Your honesty is definitely refreshing! HAHA!”

I backed away a little, intimidated by her exuberance. “Okay, so I haven't offended you?”

“Oh gosh, no! You ask a very interesting question, actually. My physical body here is not my actual body. You see?”

I looked at her belly, and all around, confused by her contradiction. “No.”

“Well, I represent overindulgence, and joy. And like “Santa Claus”, that image seems to be more recognizable with those things. *But*, let me remind you, as you probably already know, there are no consequences for having fun here. Whether that is eating junk food, and not getting diseases that may come with obesity, or going on a thrilling ride without the risk of falling off or dying.”

I was not quite surprised by this information, but was still very intrigued. “But, why is that?”

“Because all of the souls here are passed that point. They don't need to know there are consequences for their actions, like on Earth. Instead, they get to enjoy things here, without paying those physical consequences. However, there are other things they have to learn. It is not easy to see, Miss Lizzy, and you may not know it until you are here. And, those who figure these things out don't need to come here. Although, like I said, everyone likes to have fun, so most of them at least stop by for a short while.”

I was still very curious. What was this thing that was missing in this great place? And what profound lessons could anyone learn in a place like this, except to have fun?

“I think you are right Mazfanny. I still have a lot of learning to do. And, even if I do figure it out, I will definitely stop by, and not just for the fun but to see you. You are a great pleasure to be around.” Her beautiful, glowing smile was so endearing that it felt like a protective, warm blanket all around me.

“You are too, a great pleasure Miss Lizzy, and I wish you the best on your adventures. I do still have something to give you. Actually, two things - two very important things. I hate to get serious, but now is the time.”

“What is it, Mazfanny?” My senses perked up, waiting to hear what was next.

“Here.” She handed me a large package that was elegantly wrapped, with a big red bow and glossy pink wrapping paper.

“Wow. Thank you. What is it?” I have never seen such a nicely-wrapped gift. Normally, when I got presents, they were thrown in a cheap bag, or even sometimes wrapped in newspaper. And that was *if* I even got a present. It was nice for a change to have something so wonderful. No matter what the gift was, the wrapping made me feel special, and made the gift inside of it special, no matter what it was.

“You will have to open it when you are back at home. It must be at the exact right moment. And, don't worry, you will know when that moment is, I promise.”

“Well, it is so pretty, I don't think I want to open it.”

“Haha. You are in luck, my dear. After you open it, and want to put it back, it automatically wraps itself up the same way!” She seemed very proud, and excited about this factor.

“That is very wonderful, Mazfanny. I will definitely enjoy that.”

She gave a satisfied smile. “Good. Now here is the next thing.” It was a small piece of paper folded what looked like a hundred times. “It is a message, from Ruth.” Her eyes grew serious now. “A clue, Elizabeth, for your investigation. After you read it, you will know when to open the present I gave you.”

I grew anxious, as I studied the piece of paper, but then I looked up and saw Mazfanny's eyes, and I couldn't help but smile and feel warmth in my belly. “Thank you for everything Mazfanny. It truly has been a delight. I will remember you and this place forever.” I grew teary, not in sadness, but in great appreciation and love.

“I should hope so, my sweet child!” She gave one last bouncy laugh as she grew thin and faded into the sunny air.

Soon after, the rainbow-coloured sky swirled around and around like a spin top, getting smaller and smaller, until only a small black hole was visible. It then vanished instantly making a clucking noise. The whole time, my eyes were fixed on the unusual sight but, when the hole vanished, my eyes closed suddenly, and I was again one with the soft light. I stayed for just a little while, soaking, as though I were in a hot bubble bath. I did not want to leave. I could truly stay there forever. It brought me even more joy than any of those things that Awesome World could bring me. That was it! The missing thing! Light? No. It could not be *just* the light. Something more, something it represented? I was thinking too much again. *Enjoy*, I told myself, *just enjoy*.

Chapter 20: Fun

Before I knew it I was waking up in my bed, feeling more refreshed than ever. I had a strong inclination to do something exciting. I must have gotten that from Mazfanny. I really did love that woman. Some might find her liveliness overwhelming, irritating even, but once I had come to enjoy her presence and that great big smile, there was nothing irritating about her. I wish more people existed like that on Earth. Why couldn't we all just be overly joyful like that? What was stopping us? Then I thought: *pain*. And, in Awesome World there was no pain. None at all, not even the pain of being overweight, or the guilt of enjoying too much. I knew *pain*, and the feeling I got from the light, was part of the missing puzzle piece. I just did not know how all of the pieces fit together.

I could not sit there all day and ponder, I had to get out, and maybe have some fun! I got ready quickly, ran downstairs eager to eat a hearty breakfast and start my day.

“Well, don't you look chipper,” Sam commented ever so bitterly.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I am chipper.”

“Why? Aren't you sad at all? What is wrong with this family? None of you have a heart. It disgusts me.” She began to tear up.

“Oh no, no, no. Sam, please.” I took her hand, gently. She pulled away a little. “I do have a heart. You must know that. I miss Ruth terribly, and I wish what happened never did, but I can't live forever crying about it, and I am sure she wouldn't want me too. I bet she is looking down on us right now, and wishing all the best for us. For us to be happy, Sam.” She just looked down at the floor, and awkwardness settled in between us. I decided to try to change the subject to make the situation better.

“So, I got an idea this morning. I want to do something fun, with you and anyone else who wants to join. I think it would be good for us. And, I know Ruth would be happy to see us happy and laugh, don't you?”

Her tears let up slightly, but she still could not look at me directly. “I don't know Liz. I mean, that makes sense. And, if I was her, I would want everyone to be happy too...but it is just too soon. How can I put all these sad feelings away and have fun? How do you do that? You must not care as much?” Her eyes pierced through me like swords.

“Trust me, I care *a lot*. I want Ruth to be in peace, to be happy, and not worry about us. It still hurts. Really hurts. But, that doesn't mean we can't try, right?”

She sniffled and wiped the moisture from her cheek then finally met her eyes with mine. “Yeah...I guess so. For Ruth, right?”

“Yeah, for Ruth, of course. And, for ourselves. We have had enough pain. I think it is time we experience some happiness.”

She looked at me, almost shocked at my honesty, and deep words. “What did you have in mind?”

“I am not sure. What do you like to do, for fun?”

“Well, me and Christine usually go out with friends, and... sometimes do, well... what you and Jordan definitely wouldn't be allowed to do.” Her head lowered again, but not in sadness, in shame.

I knew exactly what she meant, and I wasn't impressed and she knew it. “I don't mean superficial fun, I mean *real* fun. Like the type of fun kids have on a perfectly warm, sunny day.”

“Most of us aren't kids now, you know?” Her tone was sour, as she looked down on me.

I put my hands on my hips, raised my brows and stared into her eyes doubtfully. “Actually, Sam you guys are. Even our older brothers, who claim they are “men” now. Please, both you and I know better, right?”

She paused for a moment, and then said, “I guess.”

“And even if we were adults, who says we can't have fun?” I said, trying still to convince her. I felt like I was chopping at a concrete wall.

“Do you ever see any adults having fun?” She asked, continuing to distrust what I was saying. I now thought she was just trying to get to me.

“Not that I often. But... I know there must be some that do, right?” Another chip fell away from the wall, cracking it.

“Yeah, you would think so. But I can't really think of anything we can do.” I could tell I was getting to her, I just needed some incentive.

“What are you guys talking about?” Matt asked.

“Liz had this great idea that we should do something fun today. You know, try to get our minds off things, and try to be happy, you know, for Ruth.” I was surprised that she said ‘great’. I thought maybe she was just mocking me, and so did Matt.

“Huh? Are you being sarcastic again Sam?”

“No. I'm serious, and so is Liz. You don't have to participate, but do you have any ideas on what we can do?” Maybe I got to her more than I thought? Either way I was happy the wall was gone.

“I do, but you girls wouldn't enjoy it. You might break a nail.” He said in his regular, pompous attitude, trying to get a rise out of us. I didn't play the game.

“No. Please, tell us.” I encouraged.

“Okay, Jamie and I were thinking about going to play some touch football, and were going to call up some buddies, but... if you think you girls can handle it...”

Sam and I looked at each other unsure. “See, I told you. You girls would never go for it.”

“No! Wait. We're in. Right Sam?”

“I guess...”

“In? In for what?” Christine asked, as she walked into the kitchen, with everything from her hair to her jeans perfectly in place.

“Touch football!” I exclaimed.

“Hahahahaha. You? Football? This is a joke right?”

“I thought so too Christine, but they say they want to play. So how about you?” Matt asked.

“Oh yeah, I’m totally in!” Christine said, excitedly, while she gave Matt a high-five. I was surprised, because she did not seem like the type of girl who would be willing to ‘ruin her hair’, but I was glad my judgement was wrong.

Jamie and Jordan dragged themselves into the kitchen, looking very hungry, and tired. “What is all the noise about?” Jordan asked, irritated.

“Yeah, we have enough trouble sleeping as it is. We don't need to be awakened so early.” Jamie agreed.

“Early? Which planet are you living on man?” Matt asked.

“Why? What time is it?”

“It is 9 o'clock.” I said.

“Yeah! See? That is early!” Jordan exclaimed. Both of them pretty much always sleep until 11 or 12, if they don't have to get up. Dad gives them heck every time they sleep late, even on Saturdays, when they are allowed a little extra time in bed. I know Jamie has his reasons. He really hasn't been happy even before what happened to Ruth, and seeing as he does get up early to check up on dad, I don't blame him for sleeping in. As for Jordan...I blame it on early teenage hormones.

“Well, just so you know, you better get your butts in gear because we are going out to play some touch football.” Christine urged.

“Football? Don't we have a funeral tomorrow guys? Come on now, whose idea was this?” Jamie said in a scolding voice with his hands on his hips.

“It was mine. And the funeral isn't until tomorrow. I figured it would be good for us to have fun, for once, together. Maybe we could try and appreciate each other a little more? I feel it would be good for Ruth's spirit too. She doesn't want to see us depressed. She wants us to be happy.” They looked at each other first for approval, then for assurance.

“You can't tell me that there isn't some truth to that, right?” They looked at each other again, in the same unsure manner. I let them get their thoughts together.

“Yeah. You're right, sis. It wouldn't kill us to spend some time together, and have some fun. For Ruth, right? Since we should have tried to be closer with her and, maybe, even tried to have fun with her? Right, Liz?” After he let go of his need to be responsible and keep us in line, Jamie always seemed to be on the same level that I was, maybe because he was the most mature.

“Yeah, exactly.”

“Okay guys. Get ready. I will get the football and the car started. You better be out there in 10 minutes!” Matt demanded.

“Hey, you’re not driving man.”

“Why not? You always get to drive. Please Jamie.”

“Okay, but you better be safe.” There was the paternal instinct kicking in.

“Yeah, yeah.” Matt said as he waved his arm back, leaving the room. He used to get really irritated with Jamie’s disciplinary nature but, now, I think he knows Jamie is trying to be a good brother, so he ignores it.

The experience was better than I imagined. On the way there, Matt cranked up the music, and we sang and danced in our seats the whole way to the school. We decided to go to my school, since the high school would bring up too many bad memories.

None of us fought, and Sam and Christine actually included me in their “older girl” conversations. I learned some new things about boys, and yes... s-e-x. Not sure if all they told me was true, but it was interesting, nonetheless.

When we got there, the sun was shining brighter than ever, and you could feel summer in the air. It was coming early. We were lucky there wasn’t any rain, which normally would have shown up on a beautiful day like today. The grass was still wet from the rainfall the night before. The ground was also very soft, and muddy. I didn’t mind, though, as it made it even more fun.

I had played football at school, and it was always okay, but this time there were no rules. I must say I released some of my pent up energy and anger, as did the others. Luckily, none of us got hurt. I thought, surely that one of us was going to get a broken wrist or something, but the older ones gave us some slack.

I had never needed a shower so badly before in my life, and it felt great! If I were to go to Awesome World, I think I would choose to do this. Well, at least once in awhile. I’m not sure how my body would take it 24/7, but - oh yeah! - there are no *physical* consequences in Awesome World, which makes it even more fantastic!

I thought of my dream helpers, and wondered if they would approve of what I did today. I also wondered if it was what Ruth would really want. I know I was supposed to do more investigating, and her funeral was tomorrow. I felt guilty now. Maybe I should have done something more productive for Ruth?

“Matt! Pull over here! At the high school! Please! I need to get something.” I blurted out without even me realizing it.

“Okay, okay. What could you possibly need to get?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you get enough yesterday?” Jordan asked doubtfully.

“What is he talking about Liz?” Sam asked concerned.

“Should I tell the rest of them? Jamie? Jordan?” I asked, looking for guidance in how to deal with the situation.

“It’s up to you.” Jamie replied.

“Okay. Well...you know Ruth's best friend, Tanya, right?” They all nodded. “Well, she told me about something of value Ruth had in her locker that she thought her family should have.”

Their eyes narrowed in on me, and their tense bodies turned to fully face my direction. “Well?” Christine pushed.

“It is a necklace. From her ex boyfriend. Jamie, you tell the rest. I can't talk about it.” I suggested, hoping he would comply.

“Sure Liz.” He went on to tell the whole story about who I thought Ruth's boyfriend was, her friend, and the restaurant incident. The feeling in the car grew slowly more depressing. Everyone was angry at “this guy”.

“So are we here to kick this guy's ass, Liz?” Matt asked with his face flush and ready to jump out of the car.

“No. That won't make us feel any better, right? I want to double check her locker, to see if I missed anything important. I mean, we should probably clean it out for her anyway. Someone else will have to use it again, someday.” They looked at me with assurance.

“Okay, I'll be back in a few minutes.” I said, while trying to get out of the car as fast as possible.

“We should come with you, or at least one of us should.” Sam suggested.

“No. It might be too risky. You know, you might see friends or something, and they might ask questions. I suggest we stay under the radar. I don't think our sister should be the latest gossip.”

“I agree, but I don't think that can be avoided.” Christine made a good point, but I still wanted to check Ruth's locker by myself. “I still think it is best if I go in, on my own, since no one knows me.”

“Okay, see ya in a few then, Liz.” Jamie insisted.

Chapter 21: The Locker

As I was walking into the school, I realized I actually *didn't* get the combination from Tanya. In fact, I didn't even know where Ruth's locker was! I wanted to ask Mr. Walich for permission, but that might be too risky. I considered my options, and there was no other way. I was going to have to ask him.

I cleared my throat, and took a big gulp, feeling a ball roll down my throat right into my stomach, where it rotated. The secretary was talking in a friendly high-pitched voice, which complemented her small frame. Her back was to me, as she continued her conversation with another bulkier, stunted woman. The ball was still rolling.

Maybe she didn't notice me? The counter was quite tall, and I was very short. I almost turned to leave the office, but I couldn't. I had to get into that locker. My siblings were waiting and I had to be quick. Finally, the ball shrunk enough to make room for words to come out, “Excuse me.”

“Yes? You look a little too young to be in high school, dear. Are you wanting to register?” Even though her voice was still perky, her face grew sour.

“No, actually. Would I be able to see Mr. Walich? I have something important to talk to him about.”

“Oh, I am sorry dear. He is in a meeting.” She lifted herself off her seat, and tilted so that she was a little closer to me, and started to whisper, “He is with the police - an urgent matter.”

“I see. Does it have to do with Ruth Murphy?” Her eyes widened, and she plopped back into her chair. We stood there staring at each other for a moment. She was growing suspicious. “Who are you, exactly?” Her voice now serious and hostile.

“I am sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Elizabeth Murphy. I am Ruth's sister. I was there... there when... Well, I was there when it happened. I was with Mr. Walich. Please. I need to speak to him. I am in a rush.”

Her eyes grew sympathetic. She got up from her chair again, and placed her hand on mine, “Of course dear, I will try my best. If I can't get him, is there anything I can do to help?” Of course, she wanted to be the first to know if anything else happened. I realized the hand gesture was not out of empathy, but false sympathy and eagerness to get at the gossip. “No. Please, I just want to talk to Mr. Walich.”

She looked disappointed, but rushed over to Mr. Walich's office, and knocked on his door. “Who is it? I am busy. I asked to not be disturbed!” He was not in a good mood. “It is *very* important sir.” Her voice then lowered almost into a whisper, “Ruth's sister is here.”

“What?!” Mr. Walich asked, irritated, as he swung open his door. It looked as if he was about to give the secretary heck when he looked up and our eyes met. “Elizabeth! Oh please, come here. Actually, the police may want to ask you a few questions. Eleanor, why didn't you tell me it was one of Ruth's relatives?”

“Sir, I tri-”

He quickly turned his back to her, and walked closer to me. “Yes, yes. Come here, Liz.” I followed him into his office. There were two policemen there. One was very young, and handsome. He had deep blue eyes, light brown hair, and a lean, muscular build. The other was very tall, with grey hair, a giant nose and kind eyes. “Who is this young lady?” The older one asked.

“Oh this is Elizabeth, Ruth's younger sister. She is only in grade six, but she is smart enough to attend school here, right Liz?”

“Well, I am not sure about tha-”

“Don't be humble, Liz. I was actually talking with your teacher, and the principal at your school, and they were thinking of skipping you a couple of grades.”

“Really? I will get behind be-”

“Oh that isn't true. You will be fine. Besides, by the fall, you will be right up to speed, right?” He patted me on the back. I could tell he believed in me more than I believed in myself.

I was getting frustrated now. I didn't want to talk about school. I needed to get into Ruth's locker. I raised my voice slightly, “Mr. Walich, I did actually come here for a *specific* reason.” They all waited with anticipation. “I need to get the number of Ruth's locker and the code, or some way of opening it. I would like to open it in private as well.”

“You have something to hide?” The older policeman asked in a deep, raspy voice.

“No, of course not. I would rather be alone in case... well... in case I get emotional. You know what I mean?”

They all looked at me with that “feel sorry for you” look on their face. “I understand Liz. I will get the secretary to look that up for you. While I am doing that, I do believe these nice policemen want to speak with you, if that is alright?”

“Actually Mr. Walich, I don't mean to be rude but my brother is waiting for me, in the car, and we have to get back to the house for family stuff.”

“Oh, I see. Okay, well men, if you want to set up another time with her, and find out when other family members are free, go ahead. I will get that information for you Elizabeth.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it, Mr. Walich.”

“Yes, of course.” He said in an annoyed tone, as he walked out of his office.

“So, Ms. Murphy, is there a more appropriate time when we can have a chat?” the older officer asked softly as he walked over to sit in the principal's chair.

“Yes. Here I will give you my phone number, and that way you can call me or the rest of my family at any time.” I assured him while grabbing a pen from Mr. Walich's desk.

“That sounds like a great idea, eh Jimmy?” The young one said, trying to smooth out the tension. I jotted it down quickly on a post-it. “Here you go. And, I hope to be in touch soon. I should see if Mr. Walich found that information. Take care guys.” I said quickly, and left the office, before they could respond. *Guys? What was I thinking? These were police officers. Crap! I hope they aren't suspicious of me.*

I looked around to see if Mr. Walich was there, but he wasn't. The secretary stood up from her seat and handed me a small piece of paper, “Here. Mr. Walich asked me to give this to you.”

“Thanks.” I said as I scurried out of there.

I opened the piece of paper. The numbers 346, 12, 45, and 3 were written on it. I figured the first had to be her locker number. I went around to the first floor first, but I could not find it. I noticed when I got to the second floor that all the locker numbers started with 2. I then thought her locker must be on the third floor. I dashed up the stairs, as quickly as I could, as I knew my siblings must be getting restless by now. I hoped they wouldn't come in here looking for me.

324, 325, 326-335, 336-344, 345, Ha! 346! Okay... Now how do you open these stupid things again? Even though we had lockers at my school, I rarely used mine. I tried the numbers, 12, 45, and 3. It didn't work. "Hmm." I remembered that I had to spin it around past zero to the right a couple of times, then stop on zero, then go to the first number, but I couldn't remember if it was to the right or to the left? "Argh!"

"Excuse me? That is not your locker." A tall, skinny, blond girl said as she approached me with her hands on her hips.

"I know. It was my sister's."

"Oh! I am so sorry. I heard what happened, I can't believe it. That is such a tragedy!"

I interrupted her. I didn't have to time for this. "Yes it is. Now can you tell me how to do this? I need to get her stuff out of here."

"Oh sure." She took the piece of paper from me, and opened it like a skilled professional. She then handed the piece of paper back to me, and stood there staring. "I'm sorry, but I would really like to be alone." I insisted.

"Yeah, right. Sorry. And, sorry for your loss again." She slowly backed up, then left the hallway.

Finally she was gone. I stood there, leaving it open only a crack, peaking in. For some reason, I was scared. *Scared of what though? Finding out the truth? There was no time to be scared.* "Liz! What the heck are you doing? C'mon! I have been looking all over for you!" Matt called out at the other end of the hallway.

"I'm coming! I'll be there in just one second. I got to get this stuff in my bag."

"Hurry it up!" He left and good thing, as I didn't want him to get a look at this. Her locker was covered in pictures. There wasn't even one tiny area where you could see the locker. It wasn't the presence of the pictures that shocked me but what the pictures were of. Each one was a different person. "These can't be all of her friends," I thought aloud. She didn't even have any pictures of Tanya. I took a closer look, and most of them were males, but they weren't celebrities, and they all looked around her age or older. Actually, some were a lot older. I started to tear them down, and shove them in my backpack. I could get a closer look later. The rest of her stuff was papers scrunched up with what looked like poems scribbled on them. I took those too. I reached to the far back and searched the floor to make sure I didn't miss anything.

The only thing left was another necklace! It was like the one I found before, except it was lighter, less chunky, and, well, more feminine. *Did I find her boyfriend's necklace on the beach and this was hers?* I threw it in my bag, and made sure it was zipped up tightly. I hurried out of there.

As I approached the door, my siblings called out to me asking me why I took so long, and asked me what I found. "I am really sorry guys. Mr. Walich saw me and started talking to me about school and what not. I couldn't get him to leave me alone. Does he talk that much with all of his students?"

They laughed, then Christine said, “No, not usually, but when we have assemblies they last a looong time, right guys?” They all nodded in agreement.

“Yeah, I should have warned you about that. Sorry sis.” Matt said as he sped off.

“Let me see what you found.” Jordan pressed.

“Yeah, let us see too!” My sisters demanded loudly.

“Sorry to tell you guys, but I didn't find anything worth mentioning. I found some papers, school work, and that's about it.”

“Why is your backpack full then?” Sam asked warily.

“She had a lot of papers, and I didn't want to waste time going through all of them, so I am just going to go through them when we get home. I thought I saw some poetry in there. I didn't really want to throw that stuff out, or anything else she might have wanted to keep.”

“Yeah. That is true. Well, let us know if you find anything good, like love notes or something.” Christine suggested.

“Sure, of course.” I didn't want to tell them about the pictures. I knew my older brothers would assume too many things about these “guys”. They might want to find these “guys” too, but I knew I had to do that on my own. I needed to find out who they were, and what their connections were to Ruth.

When we got home, I went straight to my room, to look through the material I had collected from Ruth's locker. I looked through the papers first, assuming I would have to throw out most of it. It didn't take me a long time to go through everything, since a bunch of them were only scribbles of math work. I was beginning to think I should throw the rest out, but then I found a large neatly folded pink piece of paper. It was a long letter to someone named Daniel.

It read:

Dear Daniel,

Last night was wonderful, but I am beginning to think it was a mistake. I am not sure if you feel the way about me that you said you did. I saw you in the hall talking to Nadene and it looked like you guys were flirting. I don't want to be suspicious, but it is hard not to be jealous when she is so tall, blonde and beautiful. Also, she is your age, and I am much younger. You have even said that I can be immature sometimes, and maybe I am being that now, but you make it difficult not to be suspicious.

I also wonder if this is going to work out when you can't even talk to me at school. I know you don't want to ruin your reputation, but I really love you, and want to be able to spend time with you even at school. I just want to announce to everyone that we are together. I don't understand. If you love me, then don't you want to do the same?

I'm really confused Daniel. I don't want to be a pain again, I know how you hate that, but I have to talk to you. Maybe we can go to our special place? And without the

others. They will just ruin it. I heard Melanie already told someone about it. I don't want everyone to start going there you know? It's OURS.

Also, we still have to make time to take more pictures. I know you like the ones I already took, but we need more. We have to finish what we started. Those people may not stay here in town. We have to search for them, and get what we deserve. So we can run away and live happily like you promised.

Again, I am sorry if I am inconveniencing you, but if you don't come out with the truth about us, I may have to back out on our deal and move on. I can't wait around for you forever. Or, I might just tell everyone. It has to be done, before someone catches us.

I love you with all my heart, but I can't keep going like this. I want to run away and be free with you! Please, I will do anything.

Your lover and friend always,

Ruthanne

I sat there, staring at the words-last night-flirting-suspicious-immature-love-school-pain-special place-OURS-pictures-those people-search-run-truth-move-tell-love-run-lover-friend???. Who was this guy? And, why was he so important to her? What were they planning? Did they...make love? This guy sounded like a real douche-bag. It was obvious that he was using her. She couldn't have been that blind, or could she? I had to get to the bottom of this.

I started examining the pictures. On the back of each one there was some sort of code. It almost looked like an address.

11 Tunskin- 44W

67 Marigold- 44W

82 Grilson- 101E

113 Shephard- 12S

The codes continued. They have got to be addresses. It was the only thing that made sense, but what were the last numbers and letters? Then I noticed all the letters were either W, E, N, or S- West, East, North and South! They must be highways, coming from those directions. Maybe that was how you get to these addresses?

I wondered if I should check out some of these addresses first, or get hold of Daniel. No. Tanya. I needed to talk to her first. She might know this Daniel guy, and it might be who she was at dinner with. And, maybe Ruth told her something about this plan that she and Daniel had.

“Elizabeth Roseanna Murphy! Get your butt down here!” Uh, oh! It was the beast again. I then thought I should get down there and make some kind of an appearance. I opened the door to find Sam and Christine standing there. “Yes?”

“Well? Did you find anything?” I couldn't decide whether to tell them about the letter at first, but I decided that I would, but not yet. “Not yet. I will let you know.”

“Not yet? You have been in there awhile. Are you hiding something? Is there anything we should know?” asked Sam, while trying to poke her head around me, into my room.

“Of course not. I just started- I was cleaning up my room first.”

They looked at each other, then their eyes met mine. “It doesn't look very clean.” Christine insisted.

“GIRLS!!!”

“Uh, oh. C'mon, we will talk about this later.” Sam said tugging at my arm.

Chapter 22: Act of Kindness

The night ended up being a long one. On the positive side I didn't have to discuss my findings with anyone. And, by then, I was too tired to do so. I crawled under my sheets, plopped down into my pillow and fell right to sleep.

The blinding light was back. My eyes were less sensitive. I opened them. My helpers were standing before me.

“Why are all of you here?”

“We wanted to tell you how proud we are. You not only learned something last time, but you put it to work in your life, and even brightened the lives of others. Now you are so much closer to the truth!” Oochoo clapped after his excited speech.

“I am? I feel like I could have done more today.”

“Remember. Take your time. Enjoy every moment, but never give up. Each step is worth congratulating, and it may not seem like it now but it was a big step. You haven't even used the gifts we gave you!” Harmony reminded me.

“Oh my gosh. I guess I just got so caught up in the excitement I totally forgot! I haven't even opened the gift from Mazfanny or Ruth!” I couldn't believe it. I thought it would torment me for days. I thought I would have opened them in the morning.

“That is okay. It wasn't the right time. But you must open the piece of paper from Ruth. The other can wait.” Harmony insisted.

“But I don't have it with me.”

“Open your hand deary!” Mazfanny said in her overly excitable manner. So, I did. I opened the piece of paper. It was numbers and letters like the ones on the backs of the photos. Except they were numbered. 1. 113 Shephard- 12S

“So is this the order that I should look at them?” I asked as I raised my head. No one was there. I fell back to sleep.

When I woke up, I was completely speechless. I found myself in a place I never expected. Something bad. Something awful. Was I in hell? I thought I was supposed to be moving upwards, towards the light.

It was darker than Gassilo, much darker. I closed my eyes. I could not look. It was too scary, too much, but I could still hear everything. There were high-pitched screams for help, and cries of pain all around me. I tried to plug my ears. “What is this!?”

Goasila! Oochoo! Mazfanny! Harmony! Help! Get me out of here!” No one came. I didn't know what to do. *Who was in charge? Who could I speak with? Was this it? Am I going to die?*

The sound stopped, but I still could see.... the horror... I cried and cried. I wanted to save these people. I saw a naked little girl being beaten. I ran to try and save her. I picked up a bat that was lying there, and swung at the man. It went straight through him! He kept going. “STOP! STOP!” I screamed. “Can't you see what you are doing!?! Can't you see her pain!?! What kind of person are you!?” He continued. I stood in front her to take a blow. I sheltered her with my arms and closed my eyes tightly. I didn't feel anything. Did he stop? No. He swung at me again, but this time he turned to dust, and the air carried him away gracefully.

I turned around to see if the girl was there-she was not. She was gone too. I prayed that she wasn't being hurt by someone else. Everyone stopped, frozen in their disgusting acts. A tall, sophisticated male walked towards me. He was dressed in a light grey cape that enveloped him. It looked as if he was floating. He had long, brown hair that flapped in the wind and his eyes were a bright, but soft green. I didn't know whether to be scared of him or not. My gut said to stay. My gut said it was safe.

He spoke with poise and elegance. “Hello Ms. Elizabeth. You are finally here. Here in Herosavieltun. You are probably wondering where you are, and if you stepped into the wrong place, am I right?”

“Yes. Mr.-”

“You can call me Vincent. I am the guard of this dimension. I see everything that goes on, and I create it.”

“Why would you create something so awful?” I was disgusted by his pride for orchestrating such a place.

“Oh, it is not. If you take a closer look, nothing is as awful as it seems. Are you familiar with that saying?” He still stood tall with his hands comfortably placed in front of him, meshed together.

“Yes, I am. But I always thought that wasn't true and, really, things are usually worse than they seem.” I, too, stood with assurance, as if I knew better than him. He could tell I liked to challenge people.

He smiled gently, “Yes. On Earth, that may be sometimes the case, but that is because nobody knows any better. Worse and worse things are handed to you, if you don't learn from your mistakes. You see, you are the product of your actions, thoughts and emotions. People expect to be handed good things, but don't take the time to hand out the good things themselves.”

“They are selfish.” I agreed.

“Selfish, is one way of describing it, but ignorant is another.”

“How do you mean?” I asked not really knowing the difference.

“Well, not many people get the opportunity you are getting, Elizabeth, to see the universe's mysteries. How can they possibly know that things can't just be given? Really,

that is all they know, through their parents or other caregivers. They, at least, get food, water, and shelter, right? Not all, but most. They grow up, expecting this and more, especially if they are spoiled.” I was somehow failing to see his point. I felt a sense of hostility coming out of him towards Earth’s creatures.

“That does make sense, but why do we have to suffer? Why is this place created? Why do we need to see and experience such horrible things?”

“You missed something, Elizabeth. *You* have created your suffering. Everyone has. By not helping one another, one can't fully appreciate someone else's help. Therefore, it is not given to you, until you have proven you can appreciate it.”

“It is something you earn.” I concluded.

“Correct.”

“But, I still don't understand the purpose of this place. Why is it so horrible and scary? I know you said things aren't as they seem, but I am having a hard time believing it.”

“You just helped that little girl, didn't you? You stopped her suffering?”

“I think so. I can't be sure.” I said, thinking back to the event.

“But, that was your intention? You felt compassionate towards her?”

“Yes.” I agreed.

“Now, someone might do the same for you. Your heart is already in the right place. That is why I am helping you. That is why we all are helping you. Your heart has always wanted to help others. And, you are doing the biggest helping right now, helping Ruth. That is admirable.”

“But, wouldn't anyone do that? Don't we all feel compassion towards each other?”

“No. That takes time and requires many lessons from many lives. Spirits are put on Earth purposefully to be selfish. It is something that is in their innate nature; it makes it hard to be compassionate when one is wired to be selfish. But, that is the battle that we all have to take, and have taken to become better spirits, souls, and lights.”

“I can't imagine someone coming here, and not helping one of these people. Wouldn't they feel immense guilt? Or maybe they are the type to inflict the pain?” I was confused as to who these people were, and where they came from, and if they existed at all.

“You are right. No one comes here, not without the desire of helping another.”

“Aren't those real souls; hurting others?” I asked, still trying to get to the bottom of the murky matter.

“No. I have created the illusion, Elizabeth. This is another stage. No soul will come here who has not passed the other stages: so, they will - like you - instinctively put themselves in a position to help another.”

“But if they are already compassionate, why do they have to come here?”

“That is difficult to explain. It is more of a reminder. After coming from Awesome World, they are in a high state of pleasure and delight. This shocks them back into reality of where they came from and of who they are. Because, as you know, existing isn't just about fun and games - it is much easier to appreciate fun, than it is to appreciate pain. This is a harder lesson.”

“Yes, I agree, much harder. But, don't some people already learn that on Earth? Why do they have to experience it again?”

“Some have directly stopped a person from hurting someone. This is more present, more real. You can indirectly help someone and not have to sacrifice anything, but jumping in front of a bus for them is on a different level.”

“What about those who have?”

“Again, this is a reminder. Remember how you said you were caught up in the excitement and how you forgot things - things that may be more important than those exciting things?” I understood now.

“I guess even higher level spirits need a reminder.”

He smiled with satisfaction. “That is true.”

I sighed. “What's the matter?” he asked.

“I wish I knew why I was picked...to do this. To discover all of these things even before my spirit is supposed to come here.”

“Don't feel like you don't deserve it. You are doing us a favour. We know you may not have reached your full potential, but you will, soon enough. And, then, there is a job waiting for you, as this job waited for me.”

“But who was here before you?”

“No one, it did not exist. The universe and its higher powers continue to learn as well. As schools, governments, and other organizations always find something to improve, so do they. Some people when getting to their highest point, forget. Forget about the pain. Forget about helping others with their pain. And, forget about *the purpose*. That is why this dimension was created, and why I was sent here. But, I too, had to go through stages, as you are.”

I could not imagine staying in one place for so long. “You are happy?” I asked him.

“Of course. I help thousands of souls every day. Nothing could make me happier.” His seriousness left for a moment, as his smile increased. It then disappeared, as he looked into my eyes. “You are sad? Why?”

“I guess... I don't want to complain Vincent, but I am having doubts.”

“About?”

“My importance, or ‘job’. I feel like I am running in the dark.”

“Don't worry. You are strong. Once this is all over, you will be able to embrace your beauty, *your purpose*. Remember things could always be worse, and things are

never as bad as they seem.” His green eyes soothed me like the forest, with their soft radiance.

“Here is another gift. I know you have not yet opened your last one but there will be a time for that.” He handed me a necklace with a stone the same colour of his eyes. “Hold this when you are feeling overwhelmed. It will calm your nerves and those racing thoughts of yours. You will feel refreshed but, you will also be reminded of your pain, of that girl's pain, and *your purpose*.” I liked the sound of the first part of that, but not the last, even though I knew it was necessary. It would give me strength, and help motivate me to move forward. I thought of Ruth, then of our siblings.

“Vincent?”

“Yes, sweetie?” He became warmer now, as he placed his hand on my head, and ran it down my hair.

“I know I was not to speak of what I am doing for Ruth with anyone, but I have found myself telling some things to my siblings, and then lying about other things to cover up. I don't know if I should include them, or keep them in the dark?”

“You should never keep anyone in the dark. You must know that. Do what feels best. If you can trust them, tell them. If you can't, don't.”

“What if I don't know if I can trust them?”

“Believe me, you will know, when you take your time to look closely inside them, at their souls. Is it ready? Hold on to your necklace for clarity if you need to, when you do this.”

“Okay. Thank you. I will try doing that.” I said, as I held tightly onto the necklace.

“I think it is time for you to go, Ms. Elizabeth. Tomorrow is an important day, but you will have all of the tools you need. Don't doubt yourself. Your instincts are correct.”

“Okay. Again, thank you for your help and guidance. This has been an interesting trip. I will remember, Vincent. I will remember.”

“I know.” He said as he, again, laid his hand on top of my head with his lanky, but graceful arms.

Chapter 23: Connections

I sprung up from my sleep suddenly. I had beads of sweat rolling down my forehead, and my whole body felt flushed. I felt as if I just had a really bad dream. I had. Well, at first, I had but why would I still feel like this, and why did I wake up so frightened? Maybe, it was an actual dream?

I laid back down, trying to remember, but all I could remember was Herosavieltun. All those horrible images came racing through. I held on to the stone tightly. I felt it warm up quickly in my palm. The images faded into positive embraces. If someone was being beaten, the individual would become the recipient of a warm, loving hug. Then I remembered. I remembered saving that little girl.

The dream! It was about her. The little girl! The dream was about what I saw in Herosavieltun. Except, when I tried to stop it, I was beaten badly. Remembering this dream made my stomach turn. It made me worry that maybe I wouldn't be able to save Ruth. Maybe the person who hurt her, will hurt me. I was scared for my life. I knew the more information I got, the bigger trouble I would be in. That is when I realized I must tell someone else, to protect me and to find out what really happened to Ruth.

I didn't know how I could explain that I knew she didn't kill herself. I couldn't talk about my dreams. Maybe I could say that I did have a dream? I had a dream that Ruth was murdered, and the crime scene looked suspicious. Yes. That was what I would tell them. Now, who was "them"? I knew the person I could trust the most was Jamie and, of course, my two sisters. Since Jamie has a car, he could drive me where I needed to be, and the girls go to the same high school where Ruth was found in, so they could spy on people that I think will reveal information.

But, what about Matt? Could he be trusted? Sometimes I think he is too close with dad. I will have to ask Jamie about him. Jordan, I think is too young. I know I am even younger, but this job had been given to me, and he was not very mature. He might not understand, or would he? None of us are really that close with him, and he seems a bit delusional about our family. Maybe that was how he dealt with it? For now, I would only tell Jamie.

A loud knock came at my door. I jumped right out of my bed. "Who is it?"

"It's your brother, Jamie. Open up!" I wondered what was so important that he would be banging on my door so early in the morning. "Okay, okay, just a minute." I put my robe on then went to open the door.

His eyes were watering and his face was red and tense. "What is the matter Jamie?" I asked softly.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure."

"Quick. Close the door." So I did.

"Dad went out again this morning. And this time I followed him." He announced as he paced across the carpet, and tried to stop his hands from shaking.

"Did he see you?"

"No. I don't think so. Well... I hope not. I made sure he was well down the road before I left."

"So, what did you find?"

"Another.. well.. it was another.. " His eyes watered more now, almost overflowing.

"Another what? What could it possibly be?"

"Another woman!" He shouted. "Another woman" He whispered. I was not surprised, and I couldn't understand why he was.

“Jamie. I am sorry but that doesn't really surprise me. Our father is a lying jerk. You know that.”

He shook his head, “Y-yes, I know he is but this woman, Liz. This woman is not what you would expect...And, on top of that he went to see her on the day of Ruth's funeral!”

“What do you mean, she is not what I would expect? And yeah, that is pretty insensitive, for him to even go over there on a day like today, but I am still not shocked Jamie.”

He grabbed my arm, and sat me down on the bed. “It's not a woman. I mean it is, but it isn't.”

“Huh?”

“It's a girl. A teenaged girl, Liz!” Wow. He was preying on other girls as well? Now that Ruth is gone, it made sense. Maybe he was doing this the entire time?

“Was it at her house? Hotel?” I pried.

“A hotel. A dingy hotel. Just off of highway 12, south.”

My heart dropped. Was he connected? Could the addresses on the picture be linked to hotels my father was going to? “What street?” I asked, but a part of me didn't want to know.

“Uh, I think it was Shephard.” He was connected...but how? Did he kill her? No. He is evil but not *that* evil. He couldn't hurt his daughter like that. Wait, no one is evil. That is too hard to believe, especially at a time like this. Where were my helpers? I didn't know what to do. I held the stone. My heart slowed.

“Liz? Are you okay?” He was now sitting beside me on my bed, and put his arm around me firmly.

“There is something I found in Liz's locker. You *have* to see it. I am not sure, right now, if we should tell anyone else, but I just know I need your help, and you already know so much, so there is no sense in trying to hide anything from you.”

“What is it Liz? Please. You can trust me.” I got out the letter and all of the pictures I had found in Ruth's locker. “Here. Look at these.”

“Who are these people?”

“I don't know. Look on the back. And- here - maybe read this first.” I watched my brother read the shocking letter. His eyes darted fast, back and forth, like a ping pong ball. His eyebrows sank then lifted, and so on. When he finished, he scanned the letter, again and again.

“I just don't know what to say. Why was she involved with such an idiot? She should have come to me. I could protect her.” He continued to scan the letter.

“I think she felt alone, very alone.” I tried to explain.

“But she had all of us.”

“Did she really? And - even if she did - how could she trust her brothers and sisters, if her own father treated her like dirt?” I couldn’t help but respond in that way. My anger took over as I thought of our father, and what he did to her.

“How do you mean?” I raised my eyebrows, and stared at him for moment, in disbelief. He didn't know what I was talking about? I wasn't sure how that could be.

“Oh.” His eyes fell to the ground and his body drooped, in disappointment, of himself. “I wish I could have done something. I mean not that I could've, but how? How Liz? I didn't-” Tears sank down his face.

“I know Jamie. We all feel guilty. But, now, I think this should make us all realize how much we need each other, and that we can't be scared. Just because we were raised by the same parents doesn't make us *them*. We are good people, right? And I think we should start acting like it, before something this bad happens again.”

He wiped the tears quickly off his face, shook his head, and said, “You’re right. Now, what else did you want to show me?”

“The pictures. Look at the back of them.”

“What are these? Addresses? Oh my god! One of them is where dad went to.”

“Exactly. And, I think, first thing tomorrow we should go there. Actually, tonight might be better, just in case he decides to go there tomorrow morning too.”

“Good point. But what does this all mean, Liz? And, why do we have to go there? Couldn't it be a coincidence? Do you really think dad is connected somehow to Ruth's...Wait, they confirmed it was a suicide, didn't they?”

“That's what the police say. But-”

“But what?” I began to tell him almost everything, but, if I had to refer to my dreams, I simple referred to them as that - *dreams*.

“So these dreams gave you so much suspicion, about Ruth's death, that you decided to start investigating it? And, you think Ruth is supporting you in this?”

“I know it sounds a little crazy, but I really do think Ruth came to me in a dream. I know you always hear about it on TV and movies and stuff, but I really do believe it could happen. And, I had a very strong instinct, right from the moment I thought she had gone missing.”

“Okay, Liz. I am going trust you, but I have a feeling it wasn't a suicide either. I think we really have to be careful. And, I don't think we should tell the others yet, not until after we check out these addresses.”

“Deal.” I nodded.

“And, we have to be really careful if we aren't going to tell the police. You really believe that they won't investigate further?” His eyes squinted with doubt.

“Maybe, and we might be in trouble if they do. I have the stuff from her locker, and the necklace from the beach. They might think I had something do with it or, if dad *is* involved, they might even cover it up, or never believe us. I just want to be sure, before

we bring all of the evidence to them. For now, let's pretend we don't know anything. And, really, at this point, we don't know any details.”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same things, and just making sure we are in the same boat, so we can come to a clear understanding on what we are going to do about this. And, no more hiding stuff. You tell me everything you are doing, and everywhere you are going, and I will do the same. Better yet, we will do whatever needs to be done together. The others might wonder, but oh well. They will find out soon enough. There is no point in creating drama, if there isn't a good enough reason to yet.”

“Yeah, for sure.” I nodded again in agreement. I liked that we both had similar feelings about the whole situation.

“Okay, so where can we hide this stuff for now?” Jamie asked, scanning the room.

“Well, I can put it in my jewellery case. It is pretty big, and it has a lock on it.”

“Okay, but don't leave it out in the open, just in case Christine or Sam want to search in here. If it's locked, it might bring more attention, especially since they already know about the necklace.” Jamie reminded me. I ignored his ‘know it all’ attitude, since I already thought about those things, and was onto something more important.

“I was thinking, before we check that address, we should stop by Tanya's. Maybe she knows more about this guy that Ruth was seeing. Maybe he is the same one she went out to dinner with. We can get his info, so we can ask him questions. They obviously had something planned together.”

“Yeah, sounds like a plan, Liz. I guess we should get ready for the funeral now. They are probably wondering where we are.”

The funeral took place at the church, of course. Many people showed up: lots of people I knew, and lots of ones I didn't know. I was surprised to see quite a few teenagers from Ruth's school. I didn't realize she had so many friends. Of course, most of them weren't her friends, just people attracted to drama.

Mr. Walich and most of Ruth's teachers were there as well. They sat in the bench behind us. I heard sniffles amongst the crowd, and I observed all of them in order to determine whether or not they were sincere. I wondered if her killer would show up. I thought it would be highly unlikely, as I am sure the killer would avoid going at all costs for fear of getting caught. Although, the smart thing to do would be to show up to avoid suspicion.

Amongst the teenagers, there was a particularly interesting group. They all sat on the bench behind Tanya and her mom. Tanya and Helen gave a polite wave over as they sat down. The group of juveniles looked neither sad, nor angry, nor or even pleased. They simply looked dead. There was no emotion, not even fake emotion. They reminded me of steel, nice looking but cold. Were these her beach friends? There was no older male as Sal described, but the others fit his description. The younger male could be the one she was involved with. He didn't look much like a Daniel though.

I prayed to my helpers, to give me a sign, if the killer was in here, and who he or even she was. I then had a striking thought. I realized it would be practically impossible for just one person to hang Ruth from the high school ceiling. Okay, maybe not impossible, but it would take a very strong person- the older male- or perhaps the whole group to tie a body to the ceiling. A mistake or premeditated? I think I needed to find out what she was up to with this Daniel guy before I answer the other questions.

Don't rush. Be safe. Trust your instincts. The answers will soon follow. I heard Harmony's sweet whisper, and I felt her warm aura around me. It was completely silent. It felt like I was alone in the church. I opened my eyes and realized I was. It was over? I was praying for that long? Where did everyone go? Or, where did I go? And, why didn't anyone tap me or something?

Maybe I fell asleep, and this was a dream? *Enjoy. Enjoy. The quiet. The still. The beauty. Feel her. Remember and love.* A sweet melody glossed over me.

I opened my eyes again, and this time everyone appeared back into existence. My sister, Sam, was walking up to the podium. My father elected her, last night, to give a speech. I felt sorry for her, especially since she is more introverted than the rest of us. I listened intently, praying she would be okay.

She brushed her hair from her face then put it behind her right ear. She then cleared her throat. I heard her breathing deeply, and saw her face turn red. I was beginning to think she was about to freeze. Just then, she started. Her voice was slow and quiet at first, but it grew firm and self-assured.

“There is so much I could say about Ruthanne, but there is only one thing that needs to be said, and that is that she was loved, and will continue to be loved. I remember when she was born; my other sister, Christine, and I were so excited to get another sister. We thought we would be able to teach her everything, and show her all the girly things we loved. But, sadly, as we grew older, we forgot those promises. And, at the most unfortunate time, we finally remember. We all wish we could have done something more, something to stop her from making such a sad decision, but we can't change the past. What we *can* change is how we love, and show that love in the future. My other sister, Elizabeth, made me realize this yesterday, when she suggested that we - all of the Murphy kids- do something fun together. It reminded me of how lucky I am to have my brothers and sisters in my life, although it is sad to realize these things after Ruth is gone, I want to thank her for making us realize just that: how lucky and how loved we *all* are. So, thank you Ruth! We will always remember you, and keep you in our hearts, as we remember to be thankful for the love we receive and for the love we can give, as she always gave her love so freely.”

Everyone in the room was crying, even the steel rods. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought the helpers were speaking through Sam. Not only were the words moving, but Sam had said them with such poise and confidence. I was proud of her, and proud of Ruth, for bringing love to us.

Chapter 24: Loose Ends

After the funeral, the people that were close to Ruth came back to the house to eat and socialize. The immediate family was there and some extended family members as

well. Not surprisingly, Tanya and Helen were the only people - outside of the family - who came back to the house.

I spotted Jamie, in the corner of the living room, slouching in the big chair, flipping channels. I got his attention quietly. "Jamie?"

"Yeah, Liz."

"Since Tanya and Helen are already here, maybe we can talk to them now, instead of going over there later."

He sat upright, "Yeah, sure. You want me to be there, or would that be weird?" He sunk back into the chair.

"Not really, but, I guess, Tanya might be more comfortable talking just to me. And, actually, I probably should talk to her without Helen, since there may be information she doesn't want to talk about in front of her mother."

"Yeah, good point. Okay, you get Tanya out of here, maybe up to your room, or outside, and I'll talk to Helen." This time he finally got up out of the chair. His enthusiasm fluctuated. This was normal for him, but it was especially evident today. I figured he was going back and forth from being sad about Ruth to being intrigued by getting her justice and feeling useful.

Jamie walked over to them first. I saw some nodding and grinning. He then took Helen by the arm, and led her into the kitchen. He knew how to charm the older ladies. They always took to him for some reason.

"Hey Tanya, how are you holding up?"

"I should be asking you that. But I am okay, and you?"

"I'm okay too. I was wondering if you would come up to my room with me. I need to speak with you, and alone would be better." I announced uneasily.

"Yeah, sure. I should let my mom know."

She was about to leave, when I grabbed her arm then said, "Oh, she is fine. She is with my brother Jamie."

She giggled a little and said, "Yeah, he's quite the charmer, eh?"

"Maybe with the older ones, but he's a total klutz around women his own age."

"Really? That surprises me."

"It surprises most people. Well, so we are good?" I said, while I led her up the stairs.

"Yup, but will it take long?" She asked, looking back in the direction we came from.

"No, it shouldn't."

"Okay."

As I opened the door, I realized my room was a total mess. "Sorry about the tornado that went through here."

“Haha. That is okay; it’s not as bad as my room. So, what did you want to talk to me about?” She asked, as she made herself comfortable in my bean bag chair.

“Well, hmm, where should I start? Do you know the guy’s name – the one you went out for dinner with that night? Because I think he and my sister were more involved than you knew.”

“Why do you say that?” she asked. I hesitated, wondering if I should tell her about the letter and necklaces. I could hear the nervousness in her voice. I thought she had the right to know.

“I found a letter in Ruth's locker, she’d written to this guy Daniel, and it sounded like they were really *involved*, if you get my drift.”

She looked horrified. “Oh. Well, that can't be. They barely ever spoke. I swear she had the whole thing made up in her head. This letter wasn't given to him right?”

“Wait. So it is the same guy? Daniel?”

“Yeah, but-”

“No, I understand what you are thinking, but I think she was hiding more from you, Tanya, and this guy sounds like he was playing you both, along with a bunch of other girls.”

Her eyes welled up with tears. “Listen Tanya. I hate to bring this up, especially today, but I want you to know the truth. I think Ruth was hiding *a lot*, from, not just you, but everyone. I intend to speak with Daniel to get the whole story but I need his information from you. And, if you know anything - anything at all - please let me know.”

She was pacing now, back and forth, in my room, kicking some papers and clothes along with her. “I just can't believe what a lying scumbag he is. No wonder she freaked out. I would too!”

“Tanya, I know you’re upset, but please, do you have anything?” I tried to stay calm.

“Well, don't worry. I will talk to that jerk and get the whole story. He must be why she killed herself! Eeerrrr!”

“I know you want to kick his ass, and we all do - trust me -but the important thing is to find out the truth. Maybe he didn’t have anything to do with Ruth's death.”

“Well, why else would she kill herself? She must have been in love with him, and he broke her heart. Ugh! And, I feel so stupid! It's my fault too!” This time the tears came flooding over like a dam just broke. I came closer, to give her a hug.

“Really, it's not your fault, and maybe not his either. But, I need to know. Now, is there anything else she might have been keeping from you; like any weird behaviour?”

She sniffled for a minute, wiped her tears, and then said, “Why are you asking? You should ask Daniel. And, why does it matter now? She is gone.”

I debated, again, whether or not I should tell her that I don't think it’s a suicide but I decided not to. “I think it’s because I feel partly responsible, and there were other people in her life I didn't know about that could have driven her to such a tragedy. I need

to know, for peace of mind. I guess maybe to feel better about myself. And, I think Ruth would want us to know the truth now.”

“Yeah. I guess it is better to know why. I think knowing the truth would put me at ease too. And, I know Ruth was probably hiding stuff to protect us all. I am not sure what, but I guess that is why we need to find out, right?”

“Yeah, exactly. I’m glad you understand.” She looked down at the floor, as she had been doing for most of the conversation, and then nodded gently.

“I don't think I know anything else, but I can tell you something about Daniel. I don't trust him, and I know I shouldn't come with you, but someone should.”

“Don't worry, I will bring someone: probably Jamie.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Hopefully, he isn't as hot-headed as your dad, or he could be the one in trouble.” She said, concerned.

“Well, I’m not worried about that. I already told him about the letter and other things, and he is angrier at himself, than this guy. And, I know he won't do anything stupid, no matter how mad he gets.”

She walked closer to the door. “That's good to know. Well, I should find my mom now. She is probably wondering where I am. These days, she has been *extra* over-bearing.”

“At least you know she cares.” I assured her.

“That's true. Thank-you for letting me know about the letter. I appreciate it. I probably would have gotten sucked in by his lies. I needed a bit of a wake-up call.” She admitted uneasily.

“I am glad to help. And, remember, he isn't the only jerk out there.”

“True.” She leaned over to give me a hug. She held on longer than I expected. I didn't mind though. I think we both needed the support.

“Bye Liz. Take care of yourself.”

“You too.” I closed the door and quickly went over to take out my jewellery box out from the top of my closet. I pulled out the picture with the address 113 Shephard-12S. I looked on the front of it, and it was a picture of a teenaged girl, around 14. It was very odd as it didn't fit with all the other pictures, which were of men. Was this the same girl that Jamie saw our dad with? I had to show him.

And, what about this Daniel guy? How does he fit in? It didn't make sense. I guess I would know soon enough. I had to take the helpers’ advice, and let it unravel in good time, and I had to *be safe*. That was the second time they told me that. I then assumed I would be dealing with some dangerous people. I felt an overwhelming sense of relief when I remembered Jamie was now there, by my side.

I decided not to go back downstairs until everyone was cleared out, and Jamie and I could slip out unseen. I was coming down the stairs when I got a glimpse of a familiar face; a face I never expected to see.

“Liz! Hey!” The sweet face greeted me. Warmth fluttered in my stomach and in my heart.

Jamie approached him, “Who are you? What are you doing here, and how do you know my sister?”

I ran down the rest of the stairs quickly, “It’s okay Jamie. He is a friend.”

“Are you sure?” He asked with his chest out and hands on his hips.

“Of course I am sure.”

“I meant to go to the funeral, but I did not hear about it until a half hour ago, and I heard people were coming here afterwards. I thought you might need a friend.” The gentle voice explained.

“Thank you Todd. That is very nice of you, right Jamie?”

“Yeah. Liz, if you need me, I’ll, uh, be around.” He agreed with uncertainty, then slowly backed away.

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” My eyes met Todd’s, as we both shared a shy smirk.

“So, uh, how are you?”

“I’m okay. Do you want to get out of here? Maybe talk outside?” I suggested feeling restless.

“Sure.” We headed outside to the backyard. We walked slowly, as we took turns exchanging glances. We then sat on a bench in our well-kept garden. Neither of us said a word for what seemed like forever. I didn’t know what to say. I had so much going through my mind about Ruth’s death that I couldn’t think about how this would be a great opportunity to get closer to Todd. I knew I couldn’t tell him anything about what I knew. He might tell someone else or, worse, he might not understand.

Look into the garden, I heard as a warm breeze encompassed the air around us. Spring was here. I looked down at the garden. It was beautiful. The flowers were not yet in bloom, but the beads of life were evident. Everything was beginning to come back to life.

“What are you staring at?”

“Oh. The plants. See how they are just starting to bead? Isn’t it amazing?”

“What is?”

“Its essence. Its life, growing before our eyes, starting out as a tiny seed, and growing into something so exquisite. Then, it is picked, and given away, to spread love and happiness but it always dies. After that, another starts its life. That’s what’s amazing, don’t you think?” I looked at him, hoping he wouldn’t think I was crazy.

“Well when you put it that way, yeah. Definitely. So, you like flowers I take it?” He nudged me, as he shot me a goofy smile.

“Not given to me to die, no.”

“Oh.” He was disappointed.

“Well, unless I can plant them of course, so they can flourish.”

“Yeah, good point.” Silence again. “I have to be honest, Liz. I am not sure what to say. This must be such a hard time for you. I just wish I could make you happy in some way.”

“Thank you Todd. That is sweet. But, believe it or not, you have already made me feel better, just sitting here with me, away from all of the noise and drama. Maybe sometime soon, we can do something fun. That will definitely make me happy.”

He gave me a big smile that brightened everything around me. “I think that’s a great idea. So, what do you like? Movies? Bowling?”

“Hmm. I like hikes. Of course, not on a rainy day, but a sunny one like today, and when the air is warm.”

“Well, how about the next day that’s like today? We could do just that. And, maybe, we could bring a picnic. Any requests?”

“Haha. You are going to make it?”

“Yeah, of course.” He said proudly.

“Okay, hmm.. Steak? Haha...just kidding..umm..Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches will do just fine. Oh and maybe some chips, and apples or any other kind of fruit. What do you like?”

“That sounds great to me. But I think I will make a fruit salad. And maybe even a regular salad too.”

“Oh, now we are getting complicated, haha. Anything you want. I’m not picky. As long as PB and J sandwiches are in that picnic basket, I am good.”

He chuckled a little, and then said, “Will do.”

“Well, I should be getting back in the house. We will be having dinner soon. And, I think most of the people are leaving, so I should say my good-byes.”

“Oh right, of course. I should be getting home too. Well, here is a card. I know it doesn’t mean much, but, uh, I hope it helps.”

“I’m sure it will, thanks.” I went to take the card from his hand, but I found myself holding on to the card and on to his gaze. “Sorry” I looked down shyly, and retracted my hand slowly. I felt a stern but gentle touch. His hand had touched mine. He held it for a few moments, as he said, “If you ever need me, you know you can call, right?... Right?” He grasped a little harder.

“Yes, thank you again... I will call you soon.”

“I look forward to it.” He turned to walk away, when I realized I didn’t have his phone number. “Wait!” He turned around quickly. “I don’t have your phone number.”

“Haha. Oh yeah, sorry. Do you have something to write it down?”

“Oh. No, haha. Let’s go inside.” Good thing we always keep a dozen pens on a small table by the door along with the key hanger and a pile of mail. I grabbed a pen and one of the many flyers we never looked at to write down his number. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“It’s 765-9988.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll, um, call you soon, eh?”

“Sure thing. Bye Liz. Take care.”

“You too.”

As he shut the door I folded the flyer and put it in my pocket. As I went to put the pen back, I decided to look at the mail. I noticed something that was addressed to me. I hadn’t gotten mail since my grandma was alive. Even stranger, there was no return address on it. I decided to take it up to my room, along with the card from Todd, so I could read both of them in private.

I opened the card from Todd first. I was more excited about that than anything else. I was hoping there would be a long letter or poem, but, more realistically, it was a short and sweet note. On the front there was a large picture of a rose, with water droplets crystallized on the petals. It was quite beautiful. Inside I expected a hallmark saying something like, “Feel better soon”, but it was more than that; he had hand-written a poem himself.

*The days may be long and difficult,
But I know you’ll make it through,
Your strength and beauty, like a rose
Never stop growing,
Never stop believing,
And keep loving, in that special way you do
The clouds will clear, and the sun will shine,
With all the hope and happiness you’ll need
From your friend,
Todd*

At first I had doubts about whether or not he wrote the poem himself, but I knew he must have. He didn’t seem like the type to copy someone else’s work. Even though it wasn’t spectacular, it was still very sweet and thoughtful, and that’s what counted. It was pretty impressive for an eleven year old boy. But, then again, Todd was more mature than most 11- year-old boys, so it didn’t surprise me too much.

I felt a surge of nervousness. Did he really care about me that much? We had barely spoken - before that day at school. I couldn’t figure out why he would. He barely knows me. Maybe he doesn’t like me, and he has some other ultimatum, like that guy Daniel. I had a difficult time trusting the opposite sex, and for good reason. Maybe I shouldn’t even be his friend. It would just complicate things. I decided to open the letter.

Be yourself, be open

Don't look ahead, the time is now

Keep friends close, keep family closer

This must be a letter from my helpers. I think I knew what they were saying. I had to be open and myself with Todd, and just enjoy the moment. Also, I knew this time was critical and I had an important job to do. I couldn't get too distracted with friends, but that didn't mean I should cut them out completely. I did have to concentrate on what I had to do for Ruth though.

There was a knock at my door. "Yeah?! Who is it?"

"Jamie!" I put the letters in my jewellery box and put it back in my hiding place. "C'mon Liz, dinner time."

I came to unlock the door. "Sorry. I'll be right there."

"We are waiting for you."

"Who's still here?" I asked, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"Just our grandparents and Uncle George."

"Our other uncles and aunts left too?"

"Yeah, I guess they knew mom and dad had enough kids to feed, and you know how our cousins eat."

"Yeah, true. Okay, I'm coming down."

Dinner was more tolerable than usual. My Uncle George did most of the talking. He told us about his crazy fishing stories again. My brother Matt asked if he could go on a deep sea fishing trip with him someday, but my dad wouldn't let him, "You don't need to waste time on fishing son, you got hockey to concentrate on."

"But dad, it would only be one weekend, right Uncle George?"

"Still. I don't want you to like it, and become a bum like your Uncle."

"Excuse me Bill, but what makes you think I am a bum. I make pretty good money you know."

"Well, I don't want him to have your life. He has talent, and there is no sense in wasting it. I am the father here, and if you have a problem with that, get out!" He stood from his seat, and pointed in the direction of the door.

Uncle George quieted right away. He knew just as well as the rest of us, what our father's temper was like. I looked over at my grandparents, on my mother's side. My father's parents passed away long ago. They looked a little shocked. My dad never raised his voice near them. He usually keeps it real cool around his in-laws. That way, if my mom says anything about him, they would never believe her. Maybe, that is partly the reason why she never left my dad. She wouldn't have the support she needed. Her family doesn't have very much money, and wouldn't be able to afford to take us in. They were very simple, but very sweet people. They always thought the best of others. It wouldn't surprise me if my mother tried to tell them the truth and they denied it.

Usually they don't get invited to our family gatherings. I actually hadn't seen them for about 4 years. My father tries to keep them distant. He felt they aren't as important as his family, even though he hates his family too. It would be a little suspicious to the rest of the community, if he didn't invite all sides of the family to Ruth's funeral.

It was a little awkward not having my grandmother from my dad's side there. She usually took control of everything, and made things run a lot more smoothly, in a dysfunctional sort of way.

Luckily, dinner didn't last long, and, before I knew it, the adults were in the living room with the television blasting and drinks flowing. I went to my room to gather up what I needed for mine and Jamie's hunt. I took the jewellery box from underneath bed, and then discovered something; the present! I still hadn't opened it. I felt this was the perfect time to open it. I had a feeling it would help me in my search.

I examined the present - it was so pretty; a part of me wanted to leave it intact. I felt Mazfanny's presence with me. My heart was filled with joy and excitement. It was beating rapidly. I took the end of the ribbon and pulled it carefully but quickly. I then tore each folded corner. It was a wooden box. I was surprised because it felt so light. There was a lock on the box. But where was the key? I thought of the other gift that Oochoo had given me. I thought this would be an appropriate time to use it. I held it, then said, 'key to open the box'. And it changed. I thought it might not work, but sure enough it did. Before I lifted the lid I heard something move. Was it something alive? Was the poor thing trapped in this box the whole time? No, they wouldn't do that. I opened the lid slowly.

There was a loud pop noise, then "Hello!" said a fury brown ball with big blue eyes that bounced out of the box.

"Shh," I said to the funny creature after I jumped right off the floor.

"Sorry, I am just sooooo excited!"

"Who, or what are you?" I asked the small and energetic creature. It just kept hopping around my room. Every time it would land, it changed into something different. Sometimes it looked like a rabbit and other times it looked like a creature from the land of Geeshgawoodioki. It took on all sorts of shapes.

"Can you show me your true shape?"

"I don't have one. My true shape lives here." The cute, now squirrel-looking creature calmed down for a second, and touched the area where his heart is.

"Oh. Well, is there a shape you like the best?"

"No. I like them all!" It bounced, then landed and became just a round orange fuzz ball. It then started rolling around the room. What was Mazfanny thinking? Yes, this creature is definitely fun but, right now, shouldn't I be serious? Hopefully, I will get some guidance on what I am supposed to do with this creature.

"Excuse me? Do you have a name?"

"Yes, my name is.....WHOOPIDOOOOO!"

“Whoopido?”

“Yes! That’s what I said, WHOOPIDOOO! You say it like that!”

“No, I can’t.” I shook my head, refusing to participate.

“Sure you can. C’mon WHOOPIDOOO!”

I started to blush, in embarrassment for him, and, because a part of me really did want to say it like that. “C’mon Lizzy! Say it, plllleeeassee.” It changed into a little kitten with big round green eyes. It was too cute to resist.

“Okay. Here it goes, WHOOOPIDOOO! Wow, that felt good!”

“Of course it did!” He said, as he hopped all around again.

I took a look in the box, to make sure there wasn’t something that I may have missed. There was another letter, and all of my gifts from my helpers, and all of the information, and the necklaces that I collected for Ruth’s investigation was inside of this box. I picked up the stone, that Vincent gave me, and held the keys from Oochoo in the same hand. I then picked up the handkerchief that Goasila gave me. As I held these very powerful but comfortable objects, I looked at the creature who was now sleeping at the end of my bed, in the shape of a kitten. It was even making purring noises. I still couldn’t figure out his purpose. Wouldn’t it distract me from what I am supposed to be doing, like Todd would? They were both cute, nice and fun, but what was I supposed to do with *that*? And if I bring him with me, how is he going help? What would I tell Jamie? *Open the letter.*

It was from Ruth. Maybe she knows.

Dear Elizabeth,

I know right now you are confused and feel lost, but I promise things will come together very soon. Tonight, you will need the gifts that the helpers gave you. I know Whoopido might seem like a handful right now, but he will be the most helpful. He is Mazfanny’s pet. She wanted you to have him for a while. He will keep your spirit light, and remind you, even when you are in the darkest place, that there is always something positive. I promise, he will never fail to make you smile. And, just let him know that he should stay in one shape, like a dog, and not to talk when Jamie is around. That will help you greatly. That way, you don’t have to explain anything to him.

As for the other gifts, there are specific instructions that the helpers wanted me to give you.

From Oochoo: Be unseen. Move only when safe.

From Goasila: When time is limited, slow down to take a closer look.

From Mazfanny: Laugh quietly. Step lightly.

From Vincent: Remember – Purpose.

From Harmony: I believe in you, now believe in yourself.

I hope this will help you. We will all be watching and will be there for you. We love you,

Ruth

At first, this letter only made me anxious. Were they preparing me for something... horrible? Was tonight going to be frightening? I felt very uneasy about the whole situation. I didn't want to go. It would be too much. I was too young for this. I knew they said to believe in myself, and I knew they would be there to help, and I have their gifts, but was that going to be enough? Was that going to protect me? Will Jamie be brave enough? Or, maybe, he will be too brave? Will Whoopido give everything away? Will he ruin everything?

"I am here to help you Lizzy. I am your friend. Behind you all the way." Whoopido took the shape of me! Only miniature. I couldn't help but giggle. "What are you doing Whoopido? Why do you look like me?"

"I am part of you and you are a part of me. I am showing you that I have the same intentions as you, because look - I am you!"

"But, you aren't me. You don't know how important this is." I was no longer laughing. I was scared to risk.

"Now, I may not seem like the most serious type, but that doesn't matter. My heart is in the same place as yours. I want very much to help you, Ruth, the rest of your family, and anyone else who will benefit. I am here to tell you, you don't have to be *serious* to care. And look - when I have to be serious, I am, right? I am your shadow tonight. I will follow right behind you all the way. That's what friends are for, right?"

"Yeah, that is true. Okay. I'm sorry I have a hard time trusting anything I don't know, although I never knew Mazfanny, or Harmony or anyone else before, and they have been nothing but wonderful, so I trust you will be the same, right?"

"Of course!"

"Okay, but we have to go through a couple of rules." I said, as I got out my scolding finger.

"Okay, I think I can handle that. Mazfanny always gives me a few rules. Awesome World isn't really the place that looks like it has rules, but there always has to be some, or things will get chaotic, right?"

"Yup. So here are the rules. No talking unless we are alone together. Also, I need you to pick a shape now, so you can stay in that shape, and not run the risk of changing in front of someone. Or else, they may be scared of you, okay? So what would you like to be?"

"Hmm, well I guess I should look like your pet. And, I want to be something to protect you, so a dog?"

"Yeah, that works but you should probably be a regular size dog, not just a little one. If I tell Jamie I am bringing you for protection, he won't buy it if you're too small."

"Yeah, that is fine. I just like being small things usually, because they are cuter. Hehe."

"Haha. Yeah, you definitely are cute. So what kind of dog?"

“Hmm, well I always wanted to be a German Shepherd. They are fierce, but still cute!”

“Haha. Okay, German Shepherd it is. And, quite appropriate, since we are going to Shephard street first.”

There was a light tap at the door. I put everything in the box again, and slid it under the bed. I came to the door, not sure of who it was. Jamie usually knocks loudly.

“Hey Liz, have you seen Jamie?” Jordan asked quietly.

“Well, no, but he is supposed to take me to the store soon. And, why are you being so quiet?”

“Well, I just don’t want to draw any attention up here. You know, so the adults don’t come up here.”

“Right.” I remembered how loud Whoopido and I were being. “Jordan? Did you hear any weird noises earlier? Coming from up here?”

“No, why?”

“Oh just because I was going through some of my stuff, and I think I was being loud.”

“Oh no. So, are you sure you don’t know where Jamie went?”

“Nope but when you find him-actually, I will come with you. I really need to get to the store before it closes. By the way, why are you looking for him?”

“Well, I wanted him to take me to my friend’s place. I don’t really feel like being here.”

“I know what you mean. Okay let’s go and find him. On second thought, I am going to change.” I said, turning quickly back to my room.

“Okay, I’ll be in my room.”

“Sure.”

“Okay, Whoopi. I think you need to stay here for now. Hmm. Maybe you can go outside and when you see me out there just come up to me, and pretend you are a stray dog.”

“Whoopi? I am no Whoopi Goldberg.”

I laughed out loud. “I know that, silly. I just thought it would be a short version of your name.”

“No short versions please. If anything it has to be the long version, WHOOPIDOOO!”

“Okay, Whoopido. No short versions. But, how about my plan? Sounds good?”

“Yup, yup.”

“Okay, I have to get ready now, so I will see you outside.”

“Sure thing, Lizzy.” He disappeared instantly. My insides were still laughing, even after he left. Mazfanny and Ruth were right; he will make this process a lot more enjoyable.

Chapter 25: The Stormy Hotel

“Jordan? You ready?” I asked as I knocked gently while opening his door.

“Yup. I thought maybe we should check outside. He might have already left with the car somewhere. I haven’t seen him since dinner time, and I know he would have to ask dad. I already checked his room too.”

“Okay, yeah. Maybe he is just on the porch outside.”

We left through the front door, managing not to bring any attention to us. “No, not there.”

“Well, the car is in the driveway. Where else could he be?” We went into the back yard, and he was sitting in the garden petting Whoopido!

“Why are you sitting out here man? And who is this dog?”

“I just needed some air to think, that’s all. And I am not sure who this dog is, but he sure seems to like me.”

“Yeah, he is very friendly.” I said as I walked over to pet him. “C’mon Jordan, he won’t bite.”

“I don’t know. I have had bad experiences. Dogs don’t like me.”

“I am sure this one will. He is precious. Look at those eyes.”

“Oh, okay.” He walked over timidly. As he put out his hand, Whoopido came over to him and licked his hand. Jordan flinched. “See Jordan? He likes you!” I said as Whoopido rubbed his side against Jordan’s leg. I looked at Jordan’s goofy grin, and couldn’t help feeling my insides laughing again.

“So, I know why Liz is here, but how about you Jordan? What did you want?”

“I just wanted you to take me to my friend’s place.”

“Yeah, sure. I just got to check with dad. You guys stay out here, just in case he isn’t feeling too generous.” We both nodded in agreement.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t long before Jamie came back. He had a strange look on his face, an almost confused look. “What’s up Jamie? Is everything okay?” Jordan asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Things are great, let’s get going. Liz, is there anything you need to get? Like your purse?” I knew he wasn’t actually thinking of my purse, but the addresses.

“Are you sure Dad was okay with it?” Jordan asked suspiciously.

“It’s fine. It’s just he seemed too okay with it. I think he didn’t even hear what I said. But, I guess that doesn’t really matter. If we come back, and he asks why we took the car, I will tell him I did ask beforehand. I guess I’m worried that he won’t believe me or something.” He said, while fidgeting and looking downwards, talking to the ground.

“Well, if he doesn’t, I will back you up,” I said, trying to make him feel better.

“Yeah, but I don’t want you to get in trouble.”

“I won’t. Let’s not worry about that right now, though. I’ll get my purse.” I rushed upstairs, to make sure I had everything. I thought about Whoopido, and what we were going to do with him. I know Jamie would think it’s a bad idea to let him stay with us, but I have to convince him somehow.

When I went outside, the car was already running, and they were waiting in the car. Oh no, what about Whoopido? I took a closer look, and he was already inside the car! I supposed Jamie and Jordan liked him just as much as I did, or, maybe, Jamie thought the dog would protect us if we got into trouble. Either way, I was relieved.

“You got everything?” Jamie asked with seriousness in his eyes.

“Yup.” I assured him. We drove to Jordan’s friend’s place first. It wasn’t too far into town, but it was out of the way. I didn’t know where the address was exactly, but I knew we would have to backtrack, past our house, to go where Jamie and I needed to go.

Before I knew it, we were heading back in the right direction. “So now that Jordan is gone, what is the plan?”

“I’m not sure Liz. But I have kind of a bad feeling about this. Do you really think it is necessary? What if dad shows up at this hotel? And what are we supposed to do when we get there?”

“I don’t know, but I am sure we will figure it out. We could probably ask at the desk what room they were staying in, or if they were staying there at all. I think I have the picture of that girl. The same address, that you saw them at, is written on the back of this picture of her. I’ll show you when we are parked.”

“Really? So maybe Ruth knew about what was going on? But, I still don’t know why she would have a picture of this girl, or all of those other pictures. I wonder how they are all tied together.”

“Me too. She and this Daniel guy must have had something planned. I got his phone number from Tanya. Did you want to call him now? Or, should we go to his house after the hotel?”

“We will call him after. Maybe even while we are there, we will call him. And then, we can possibly get him to meet us there. We will know if he has something to do with all of this by his reaction.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Hmm... Do you think that the people at the hotel will be willing to give us any information?”

“Not sure. I just hope that they don’t contact the police, and tell them that we have been snooping around.”

“Yeah, I hope not either.”

“Well, here we are. Can I see that picture now?”

“Yup. Here.... Does it look familiar?” His eyebrows furrowed, and he frowned.

“Well? Is something the matter? It’s not her?”

“No. I am pretty sure it is. The face looks really familiar, and the body shape is the same, but-“

“But?”

“The hair colour. It’s brown in this picture. But, when I saw her, I could have sworn it was blonde.”

“Weird. Maybe she wears a blonde wig. We’ll ask the receptionist, or whoever else we show the picture to, if the face looks recognizable. Also, tell them she might have been wearing a blonde wig.”

“Yeah, true. So you ready?” I almost blurted out no, until I looked over at Whoopido. He was happily panting in the back seat, with his drooling tongue hanging out. His eyes brightened. “I’m ready if he is.”

“You want to take the dog in?” Jamie asked unsure.

“Yeah, of course. We’ll say we are training him to be a seeing-eye dog or something.” It looked like he was ready to say no, when he also looked back at Whoopido. Whoopido then whimpered a little. “Oh alright. We’ll take him in.” Jamie complied.

Whoopido then bounced in the back seat, making funny little bark noises. “Looks like he is happy about that.” Jamie recognized. “What should we call him? I mean we should have a name to call him don’t you think?”

I hesitated, thinking about whether I should suggest his real name. I decided not to. I doubted my 20-year-old brother would really go for that. “Okay, well you pick the name Jamie.”

“Hmm. He looks like a silly character. Maybe he should have a silly name.”

“I agree.”

“Okay. Hmm. What about pookie?” He suggested, almost sarcastically.

“You are kidding right?” I laughed.

“Yeah, but what do you think?”

“Whoopido?”

“HAHA. Can we call him Whoopi for short?”

“Haha. No, I don’t think he would like that.”

“Okay, well it will do for now. Whoopido it is.” I couldn’t believe that he agreed to the name, although, it did suit the creature’s sweet and silly predisposition. He must have more influence than I thought.

It was raining heavily now, and it was dark. I could barely see the outline of the building but, from what I could see, it didn’t look like it was in very good condition. It almost looked more like a trucker’s motel than a tourist’s hotel. If anyone had anything immoral going on, it would be better to do it at a place like this.

When we walked in, there was a small lobby and reception desk. The woman sitting there had long, bleached blonde hair, a fake tan, and long red nails. She was filing them, while talking on her cell phone as we came in. She took a quick glance up, but ignored us. I had a feeling she wouldn't be the best eye-witness. At least, we could probably count on her not to go to the police.

"Excuse me, Miss?" Jamie said fairly loudly. She still didn't look up. He said it again while knocking on the counter. She held up her index finger, indicating for us to wait a minute. So, we did, but, when two minutes went by, Jamie said, "We are just going to take a look around and we'll be back." She waved her hand at us. We glanced at each other, to make sure her gesture meant we could go ahead. Even if it didn't, we went anyways.

The hallways were narrow and long. There were only two levels: the main one, and the lower one. We went downstairs first. We had no idea where to start. We couldn't knock each door to see who was in there. We really needed the data from the computer, to see if they had any record of who'd checked in.

An older woman was walking towards us, with a cart full of cleaning supplies. She was short, a little plump, and was sporting a frizzy, red fro. "Why don't we ask her? She must see a lot of people coming in and out. Also, we could ask if she has seen anything suspicious when cleaning." I suggested to Jamie.

"Good idea. Maybe you should approach her Liz. She might take to you better. I will stay here with Whoopi-wo?" I didn't blame him for not wanting to approach her. She did seem a little scary.

We both giggled. "Whoopido."

"Right."

"K. I'll be right back. Wish me luck."

"Good luck. We'll have your back, don't worry."

She was opening one of the rooms as I approached. I didn't want to lose my chance to talk to her, so I said loudly, "Excuse me!"

She stopped suddenly, and gave me an annoyed look. "Yes? I am busy here little girl." She was bitter, and seemed to be the type that was constantly irritated. I didn't take it personally.

"Sorry, I can see that. But I have some things to ask you, if that would be okay?"

"Why would you want to ask me anything? I don't know anything. I am just the cleaning lady." She said, while giving me exaggerated hand gestures to imply her sarcasm.

"Well, I am sure you are more than that ma'am. And I assure you, you must know more than the woman at the desk."

She gave a shy smirk, "Well, yes, that is probably right. Okay, what is it you want to ask me?" I could tell flattery worked well on her. She looked like she hadn't gotten a compliment in years.

I pulled out the picture, and held it up so she could see it. "Have you seen this girl before? When she was here, she might have had blonde hair. And, she might have been here last night."

"Why? You friends with her? I sure hope not. That girl is trouble." She said firmly, with one hand on her hip and the other resting on her cart.

"So, she was here then?"

"Yes, many times. I am not sure what that girl's problem is but she lets men take advantage of her, and it's not right."

"She has been here with different men?"

"Yes. And she does wear wigs. She has a deal with the manager of this place. They know who she is, but noone else does. I believe she usually goes by the name Natasha." I wrote that down in my notepad that I brought along. I looked back to see Jamie and Whoopido standing there. Jamie's eyebrows raised, and his head nodded slightly. I nodded back.

"Who is that?" The woman asked irritated again.

"Oh. That is my older brother and our dog. We are training him right now. Can they come over here?"

"If they must." She said sternly.

I waved them over. I gave him the update on the girl. "Is she a prostitute?" He asked bluntly.

"Oh my. I am not sure, but I wouldn't doubt it. She dresses pretty risqué, if you know what I mean." We nodded knowingly.

"Of course. Would you be able to describe some of these men? Like the one you saw last night with her?"

"Oh it wasn't last night. Well, it was very early this morning. Most of the time they don't stay the night, or they come in the middle of the night. And, before I tell you any more, I would like to know why you want to know all of this information. I don't care much if she or these men get in trouble, but none of this is my business. Are you a cop, son?"

"No. We're worried our sister was involved with these kind of people and she has passed away recently."

Her posture softened. "Oh, I see. So, she had some secrets?"

"Yes, it appears that way," I said.

"Do you really want to know what kind of person she was, if she was involved with these kinds of people?" Her attitude came back full force. I could tell this woman had trouble letting her guard down.

"Well, we don't believe she was *like* these people, just manipulated, and maybe hurt by them."

“Oh, I see. Well, I would like to help, but I should get back to work.” She turned her back towards us.

“Please Miss-“

“Call me Mary.”

“Mary. Can we just ask a few more questions? Then, we will be out of your hair.”

“Oh, alright but, if my manager comes by, you better run out of here. He is a mean old goat.”

“Yes ma’am, of course. So the man this morning - what did he look like?” She began describing exactly what our father looked like. Hearing it from someone other than Jamie made it more real, and harder to digest. My stomach irked and rumbled. I could tell Jamie was also having a hard time taking in the *truth*. I tried to ignore the feeling, and I kept asking questions. I wanted to know whether or not Daniel had been there.

“Was there ever a younger man here with her? One that looked younger than my brother here? He is 20.”

“Hmm. I think so, yes. He was probably the youngest man that ever came here with her. I wondered if it was her boyfriend or not, but that wouldn’t make much sense because who would date someone like her?” It made me uneasy, every time she bashed this girl. I know she probably wasn’t the most morally sound person, but she was young. Young enough to be manipulated, abused and trapped. Even if she had something to do with Ruth’s murder, I couldn’t help but feel compassionate towards her.

This was a stepping stone for me. I didn’t believe I was the most judgemental person but, when it came to matters like these and girls like that, I probably would react the same as Mary. Today was different. I looked at the dark cherry wood eyes of Whoopido’s dog shape. They exuded sweetness, innocence and loyalty. I couldn’t help but wonder if this girl once had these same qualities.

On the other hand, I did agree with Mary. Why would someone date someone who did this for a living, unless they had some other reason? Maybe he was taking her money? Maybe he is one of the son’s of the men she had been with? I couldn’t be sure. I knew we definitely had to talk to Daniel tonight, or I would not be able to rest.

Jamie and Mary continued the conversation. He asked her about the other men and what the younger man looked like. He wrote down all of the descriptions in my notepad. He was also a very good artist so he sketched most of the descriptions - the ones where she remembered a lot about the person’s appearance anyway. I would have to compare these with the pictures I found in Ruth’s locker.

As they talked, I thought about my helpers’ advice. They made this such a big deal, but it didn’t seem very dangerous. I hadn’t used any of the gifts either, except Whoopido. I got out the letter from my pocket and read it over:

From Oochoo: Be unseen. Move only when safe.

From Goasila: When time is limited, slow down to take a closer look.

From Mazfanny: Laugh quietly. Step lightly.

From Vincent: Remember – Purpose.

From Harmony: I believe in you, now believe in yourself.

Maybe these messages weren't literal. Maybe they were only metaphorical. Maybe I have to do all those things from the inside but, if that were true, then why would I need the gifts? There had to be something more coming, I could feel it.

Just then a tall, balding, grey haired man came around the corner. He was moving fast and stepping heavily. His face was rough and wrinkled. He moved much younger than he looked. "Is that your manager?" I asked panicked.

"Oh no, yes. Sorry kids, I got to go." She was about to close the door when I got out the handkerchief, from my bag, and threw it in the air as fast as I could.

Everything stopped immediately, only I was able to move and talk. I knew I still had to get the records from the computer. We needed to know what room they were in, to see if they left any evidence behind. I ran to the front desk. I didn't know how long the time would stay stopped. Goasila never gave a limit, so I assumed there wasn't one. He always said to slow down, so I did just that. I had to make sure I got the right information. I checked the records, but my father's name wasn't anywhere, and neither was Natasha's or Daniel's. I assumed my father wouldn't use his real name, but there wasn't even a single man checked in at any time last night, or this morning.

The only strange thing I found was a peculiar pattern for room 301. That room was always booked under the name Mr.Riotta. I wondered if he was the manager. I tried to check the records of employees and information about the hotel. It took sometime but I finally found it. Sure enough, Mr.Riotta was the manager and owner. Why would he have to book this room every night? Was he behind all of this? Did he use this room for illegal activities? I had to get into this room. Now...Where would it be? The rooms on Floor 1, always start with 1 and on the main floor everything started with 2. Yet, there was no third floor, so where was this room located? And, how could I tell Jamie without him wondering how I attained this information?

Whoopido! He could pretend to sniff it out. I could say the handkerchief was dad's, and the dog could smell that, then lead us to the room. I had to talk to Whoopido privately. *Whoopido, if you can hear me, follow my voice. I need to speak to you.* He then showed up on the desk as a frog. He jumped up and down on the bell, ringing it.

"Whoopido? What are you doing? I need to speak to you."

"I like the bell, it's fun! And, being a frog, gives me extra jumping power. And, listen. Riiiiipit." He continued to make singing frog noises. I was amused, yet intrigued by the enchanting frog sounds.

"Okay, Whoopido? I know you want to have fun, and so do I, but I need you to listen to me."

"Remember Liz, I am here to help you have some fun. Speaking of which, how about that Mary? A character, eh?"

"Yes, she is. And, I know you are trying to make things more light-hearted, but I do need you to do something for me. I enjoyed your froggy noises and acrobatics, thank you, but can you listen now?"

“Sure. Okay, what is it?” He said as he drooped down in disappointment.

“Well, I need to get to this room. The number is 301. I think something fishy is going on in there.”

“Fishy? Like this?” He then transformed to a fish, and was flopping back and forth on the desk. I was a little annoyed. He was still trying to get me to lighten up.

“Whoopido, please. I can’t have you playing games. I don’t have much time.”

“Sure you do. You have all the time in the world. Just look around you. Everything is perfectly still.”

He made a good point, but I still felt rushed to get the information. “Okay, you’re right. I shouldn’t be so worried. Is there something you would like me to do before you help me?”

“That is quite a silly question, child. I do not need you to do anything. I am not your boss. And, I cannot force you to do anything. But, if I had a choice, I would like you not to resist lightening up.”

“Yeah, I can try that. But, I am going to tell you the plan now okay?”

“Sure thing, boss.” We both giggled.

“Like I said, I need to get to the room, 301.”

“But, it doesn’t exist.”

“It does. It’s on the computer. We just have to find where it is hidden. Can you use your instincts to help me find it?”

“Sure, I can try.”

“I am going to use this handkerchief. I will tell Jamie it is our father’s and, because you will be a dog, you will be able to sniff out his scent. I have a feeling he was in this room.”

“That sounds like a great idea, but I am not sure if I will have the sniffing powers.”

“Sure you will and, even if you don’t, we just got to keep looking until we find it, okay?”

“Okay, but what do we do about the scary man walking towards us?”

“Uh? Who?” I looked around, panicked.

“You know, the one frozen in the hallway, coming towards Jamie there.” He said with a half grin.

“Oh right. Um, I am not sure. We have to get him to leave us alone somehow. Maybe we can tell him we have a room here that we are staying in, or that we need a room, and the woman at the front desk wasn’t very helpful.”

“Not sure if that will work, but yeah, we can try.”

We walked over to our position before I stopped time. *Start again.* Everyone continued in the same manner. The door shut, and the man kept walking faster. He walked right up to us, and then spoke in a surprisingly soft voice, “What is a dog doing in here?” He must have assumed we were staying in the hotel.

“We are sorry sir. We meant to ask the manager, but the woman at the front just ignored us. We needed a room, and we need to have our dog with us. My sister-” Jamie approached the man’s ear, then spoke in a lower tone, “My sister sir - she is blind. The dog helps her.”

“Oh, sorry. Carry on then. But wait, you said you need a room?”

“Yes, that would be great, thank you. Are you able to do that?”

“Of course, I am the manager here. Riotta, Keith, Riotta.” He held out his hand. Jamie shook it firmly.

We all followed him to the front desk. I took on my role, as the blind sister. It was funny how my brother already knew what to say. I then remembered our discussion in the car about what we were going to do if someone asked us about the dog. I am glad Jamie remembered this, because I might have blown our cover. I must have been too preoccupied with that room.

“I have been wanting to fire her.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Her.” He pointed to the rude receptionist. *Of course.*

I stood back a bit to give them some space. He took her phone, hung it up, and then began speaking to her firmly. I couldn’t hear what they were saying, but their body language told a lot. They didn’t just have an employee, employer relationship. They knew each other more than that. Relatives maybe? Lovers? I couldn’t quite figure it out. I then realized I shouldn’t be staring over there, since I am supposed to be blind.

“Okay, let’s go.” The man said, and then progressed in front of us, still stepping forcefully.

“Don’t we have to pay?” Jamie asked.

“In the morning, son.”

“Aren’t you afraid we will just walk out?”

“I am never afraid of anything. And, if you did that, there would be hell to pay. Now do you want a room or not?” He became hostile.

“Yes, yes. Of course.” No one said a word after that. He gave us the key to our room, when we got there, then turned away, and stomped off without a word.

“Well, this turned out better than I thought,” Jamie said.

“Yeah it did. Good idea about the dog.”

“Thanks, I thought so.”

We stepped into the room. It was dark, musty and puny. I could hardly breathe. It felt like no one had been in there for years. I opened up the window to get some air.

“Don’t do that.” Jamie scolded.

“Why?”

“What if someone walks by and can hear what we are talking about.”

“But I can’t breathe in here Jamie. I can barely think.”

“Okay. Well, let’s just keep it down then.”

“Sure. Actually, there is an idea I had.”

“What is that?”

“Well, I think it would be a crucial to find out what room dad stayed in. And, that Natasha girl, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, but how would we ever do that?”

“With this.” I held up the handkerchief, being sure not to throw it in the air. “It is dad’s. It has his scent on it. And, I think, Whoopido can track his smell down.”

“I am not sure about that but it’s worth a try. I think we should wait a little bit. And maybe turn on the T.V, and then leave it on, when we leave too. I don’t want to bump into Mr. Riotta again.”

“Okay sure.” I could use the break anyways. I felt too pressured and worried. I needed a moment to collect my thoughts. Maybe something would come to me, or maybe not. Either way, I had to relax. This was taking both Oochoo’s and Gaosila’s advice: move when safe and slow down to take a closer look. We were waiting to move, and I am slowed down, but take a closer look? At what? I looked around the room to see if there was something that stuck out... nothing.

“What are you looking for?” Jamie snapped.

“Nothing in particular but, I think, we should look around.”

“This isn’t the room, though.” He said indisputably.

“How do you know?”

“Well, they wouldn’t put us in the same room where illegal activities might have carried on.” I tried not to let his arrogance bother me, and listen to what he was saying. Normally, I would have blocked him out or gotten into an argument with him. I knew, now, it was better to work together, no matter how much we irritated each other.

“I guess that’s true. Still, I am going to look around.” I took the sheets from the bed, looked in the closet, in the bathroom, under the bed, in the T.V stand’s cupboards, still nothing. I was surprised that they had a coffee maker, and even more surprised they had coffee. I checked the expiry date, 04 05 1999. I couldn’t believe it. I figured it would be expired but 10 years? If someone tried to drink this, they would be poisoned, for sure.

“Look at this Jamie.” I handed over the coffee.

“What?”

“Look at the expiry date.”

“Oh my god, that is ridiculous. We could probably sue them for this.”

“Well, only if we drank it and one of us ended up dead.”

“True.” Then I had a crazy thought. Maybe they *do* poison people with this? Could it actually kill someone, though? Was this the murder weapon? I decided to check the sheets again.

“What are you doing now Liz? Would you just sit and relax? Here watch this show. It’s old but good.”

It was the old hit show 90210. I couldn’t believe fake, superficial people like that actually existed. I couldn’t believe Jamie liked this show, but I didn’t say anything. Instead, I stared blankly at the luminescent screen. It was hypnotizing, with all of the colours swirling around on the screen, with a pervading shimmer that covered the people on the screen, like an expensive sheer blanket.

Whoopido lay at my feet, at the end of the bed. He was calm and peaceful; breathing gently from his cute dog nose. I was happy he was with us. I felt safer and gentler.

My brother had fallen asleep. I didn’t want to wake him, but I did want to get started on our search. Maybe I could go by myself? It might look better if Whoopido and I run into Mr. Riotta. He won’t get as angry at a blind girl trying to find her room right? But then what if room 301 is his room? I can’t break in there. Or maybe I can? No. I can’t break in. How could I break in anyways? I don’t have a key, and I have no idea how to pick a lock. Wait a minute. Yes! Oochoo’s gift, I can use that!

I jumped out of the bed, and then covered my brother up with a blanket. It was getting chilly. The rain was cold tonight. I should shut the window but it was old and I didn’t want to make a lot of noise.

“Whoopido. Come.” He jumped out of his sleep quickly and came to the door.

“Okay, Whoopido. We are going to look for this room by ourselves. I don’t want to wake him up.”

“Do you think that is a good idea?”

“Well, I figure if I am with you, and we run into the manager, he won’t be as harsh with me.”

“Okay, I guess that makes sense. It is your choice, and I am here, by your side, no matter what. You can count on me!”

“Thank you. If you see Mr. Riotta you have to lead me okay? I can’t be leading my seeing-eye dog. That would be weird.”

“Indeed.” He agreed with a quiet bark.

We came to the end of the first floor. The hallways were dark and dingy, like the rooms. We still could not find room 301. I wasn’t surprised. They probably wanted to hide the room, since people might think a random 300-number room would be strange, and suspicious. Also, the location of the room couldn’t be among the regular rooms. I am

sure the manager wouldn't want guests like us to know where this room was. But then, how would I find it?

I walked back up to the main floor, and walked down every hallway to make sure. Still, nothing. I saw Mary come out of one of the rooms. She was at the other side of the hallway, so I ran quickly to approach her.

"Excuse me! Mary!" She stopped and rolled her eyes. "I am sorry Mary, but I have one last question to ask you and then, for sure, I will leave you alone. I promise."

"Okay girl, but you better make it quick. I am really aching for a smoke, and break time is now."

I nodded my head, "Well, here is the thing. I would like to know what room that Natasha girl usually stays in."

"Oh, now you are asking too much. Mr. Riotta asked me specifically not to even mention that girl to anyone, never mind tell them what room she stays in. Are you out of your mind, missy!"

"I may be. But really, I won't say a word. Besides, if he sees me snooping around, he won't think much of it."

"Why is that?"

"Because he thinks I am blind."

"What? You can't be serious."

"I am. I know it sounds silly but, when he came rushing up to us earlier, my brother must have panicked because he didn't want us to get kicked out, so he made him sympathize with us, by telling him that I am blind."

"Mr. Riotta? Sympathize? Well, that is definitely new."

"It may be, but it did work. So, please Mary. Don't tell him okay?"

"Sure, but I am not telling you what room that Natasha girl stays in. It's too risky. I don't want to lose my job. This is the only thing I got."

"Well, I think I already know what room. I just need your help in finding it."

"What are you talking about now?"

"Room 301. Right? That is the room?"

"That is where Mr. Riotta stays when he is working, and how do you know that?"

"It is hard to explain, but is that where Natasha goes?"

"Yes and no."

"How is that possible? She stays there sometimes?"

"No. Well, I have seen her go in there with those men, but the men don't usually come out of that room. I am pretty sure there is an outside entrance. And another room that is attached to it that isn't labelled."

"Well, you clean it, don't you?"

“No. Never. He doesn’t let me go in there. I don’t even have a key.”

“Can you tell me where the room is though?”

“Little girl, you are getting way too deep into this. I think you should take your information that you have to the police.” She said sternly, as she pointed to the way out.

“I can’t do that. I have to do this! Please try to understand!”

“I have an awful feeling. Even though I don’t like you much I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Well, thanks, I think? But, whether you help me or not, I am doing this. I already searched the hotel, and I will keep searching until I find it.”

“Oh, alright. You sure are stubborn, aren’t you?”

I smiled, “I like to think of it as determined.”

She smiled back. “Okay, I will tell you, but you must *never* tell anyone where you got the information, alright?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Good. Go down to the end of this hall, take a right, and when you’re almost at the end, there is a door that has no label on it. That is 301. You might have missed it because it is a very small door and it is the same colour as the paint on the walls, where the other doors are a different colour.”

“Thank you! Thank you so much. Again, I am sorry for the inconvenience.”

“Just be careful, little girl.”

“I will.” I walked quickly down the hall, with Whoopido close behind. I followed Mary’s directions and, sure enough, I found the door. It seemed to blend right into the walls, like Mary said. I tried opening it but, of course, it was locked. I took out Oochoo’s gift in the shape of a necklace. *Turn into the key that will open this door.* And it did. Before I opened the door completely, I remembered Oochoo’s advice, *move only when safe.* Was it safe? I couldn’t tell. I looked around, and nobody was in sight. I put my ear to the door, and I couldn’t hear a sound. It was safe for now. Whoopido moved closer to me, and looked up at me, saying with his sultry eyes, “Are you sure about this?”

I looked up and closed my eyes, as I felt my helpers all around me and a surge of confidence filled my heart. I looked back at Whoopido, and said, “Yes. I am sure.” I opened the door.

I didn’t find a hotel room, but another hallway, one with a few rooms. This hallway was even darker and dirtier than the other ones. There was only one light on, and even that one was not very bright. I looked on the doors that were in this hallway to see if there were any numbers on them, and sure enough there were: 301, 302, 303 and 304. I didn’t try to open 301, since I figured that one was Mr. Riotta’s, and I did not want to run into him. I hoped he had gone home, and was no longer in the hotel, but that was unlikely.

I tried 302. It was open, but I did not fully open it. Instead, I tried the other ones. Surprisingly, they were all open. All this trouble to have a secret hallway, and the doors were open? I didn't hear any noises from any of the rooms. It must be too early for his customers, so I checked each room one by one.

The first one was like a regular hotel room. It was even fairly clean, which was surprising. There was no sign of anyone ever being in there. No clothes were left behind, no wrappers. Nothing. I checked the coffee machine and coffee. It was fresh coffee! This must be where most of his business comes from, since it seemed he tried harder to make these rooms more welcoming than the others.

The second room was the same as the first, except this one even had a big screen T.V, a DVD player and a game console. I looked in the drawers and found lots and lots of movies that I should never watch. I just saw lots of pictures of naked women and shut the drawer. It seemed like this was an entertainment room, one for men who wanted to get away from their real lives, and indulge in guilty pleasures.

When I walked into the third room, I was met with total darkness. This gave me an uneasy feeling but, when I turned on the light, I knew why I felt uneasy, and it was not because of the darkness.

There were ropes, chains, handcuffs and whips hanging from the walls. There was a leather bed, with strap-like things hanging from the ceiling. I moved closer to the bed.

“Let's get out of here Liz. We shouldn't be here.” Whoopido pressed.

“Wait. There is something here, on this bed.”

“What? Let's just get out of here. My dog ears are picking up something.”

“Are you serious, or are you just trying to make me leave?”

“Seriously Liz. Quickly, c'mon.” I never heard such gravity in his voice. I wanted to listen, but I knew there was something important I had to get.

I walked over to the bed anyways, and saw some kind of liquid on it. It was splattered all over, and some had even gotten on to the floor. “Is there another light over there?” The one that was on, was far too dim.

“No, but I think this is one of those ones you can turn up...I don't want to Liz. Let's go. They are getting closer now.”

“I can't.” I got over to the light quickly, turned it up, and turned back towards the bed, but this time I didn't need to get closer. I knew what it was. Blood. And, it wasn't that old either. I didn't want to do what I was about to do, but I knew I had to. I got out the handkerchief wiped some of the blood onto it. *DNA*.

“Okay, can we go now?”

“Yes, yes. Wait. Listen.” We both heard talking coming from outside the room. Men's voices, one that sounded like Mr. Riotta, one that was younger sounding and another that was a girl's voice - Natasha maybe?

Whoopido nudged me, “Look”. Behind heavy dark drapes, there was a sliding glass door. We took a chance and ran for it. We ended up, somehow, at the back of the building, next to the garbage bin.

“We need to get back to Jamie, tell him what we found, and get out of here.”

“I agree.” Whoopido barked.

When we got to the front of the hotel, I peeked inside to see if the receptionist was still there, but she wasn't. “Okay, let's go in now, before she comes back... if she comes back.”

We made it through the lobby, and down to our room without being detected. When we got back into our room, Jamie was thankfully still there, fast asleep. I wondered if we should stay here the night, and leave really early in the morning. Maybe we could catch the others leaving. Then, I thought of that guy Daniel, and how much information he must have on Ruth. We had to talk to him. And if we stayed, and tried to leave in the morning, we might even run into our father. Besides, he might suspect something if we are gone all night.

I pulled the covers off of Jamie, and shook him until he woke. “What? What? What is it? I'm up.”

“We've got to go. There is nothing more here. We have to call that guy, Daniel.”

“What are you talking about? I thought you wanted to find out what room Dad was in?”

“I already did. I mean, I talked to Mary again while you were asleep.”

His grogginess subsided quickly, “You what? You shouldn't have left this room without me Liz. It could have been dangerous. You brought the dog, I hope.”

“Of course and we were fine. No worries... Anyway, she told me where the room was, and she said I wouldn't want to know what was in there. She said men come here to fulfill their immoral fantasies. Whatever that means, and I didn't want to ask. But, I am sure you know, right?”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense. But, what about evidence? What about finding out if Ruth was here?” I could tell he still wasn't happy about me not including him, but I couldn't risk it or wait.

“I also told Mary what Ruth looked like, and she said she had never seen her here. And, if she was here, Mary said that there is a back way into these rooms, so she barely ever sees anything.” I felt bad not telling Jamie the whole truth, but there would be too many questions about how I got into the room, and he would be angry that I went without him.

I was trying to figure out how Ruth, my father, Mr. Riotta, Daniel and Natasha were connected. I hoped that Ruth was not involved with those kinds of acts. I was especially worried about the third room I went into, # 304. Could that have been her blood? Was it someone else's? Was it a bunch of people's? The thoughts came like a disturbing slide show in my mind.

I then remembered Herosavieltun, and all of the horrible things I saw there. I remembered the purpose: to learn compassion, to help and to sacrifice for the better good. I thought about these people here, in this hotel, doing those disgusting acts. How does that, in any way, serve a purpose? How could people do such things with young girls like Ruth and Natasha? I hoped that Ruth wasn't involved, but my heart and gut knew better. My father must have brought her here. She must have tried to get out of it. Or, she might have found out something valuable, and she was going to spill his secrets. That was the only explanation.

Again, my mind was a flood of distressing thoughts and images. 'Why?' I kept asking myself. Maybe, when I sleep tonight - if I can - I will find out more. Again, I remembered those horrible acts in Herosavieltun. After thinking about it for awhile, I realized it was the witnesses of those acts who had harder lessons to learn. If you experience something first-hand, and then see it happen to another person, it is easier to have compassion for them. However, it is harder to do this, when you have not experienced those things for yourself, and you now have to take action to stop it. It was the same for Jamie and I, and any others seeking the truth. It was our chance to learn those big lessons. I then wondered, are those awful people here as our teachers? Are they just an illusion, like the ones in Herosavieltun?

Jamie stopped making the bed, fixed his daunting eyes on me, and asked, "Liz? What is wrong?"

"Nothing. Just thinking." I said trying to sound convincing, but he didn't buy it.

"I know what Mary said is hard to understand and digest but, hopefully, we can make sense of all of this soon."

"I hope so."

He took a deep sigh, picked up my bag for me, and stood at the door as he said, "Alright. Well, let's get going then. I will call this Daniel kid when we get to the car."

"Should we check out? Or give any money for our time here?"

"I am not sure. We will ask the receptionist. That is if we can get her to speak to us." I nodded in agreement.

Luckily, the receptionist wasn't on her cell phone when we got there, and Jamie was able to talk to her. I figured he would be able to get us out of here and probably without paying. I went to sit on the couch in the lobby with Whoopido by my side. I felt a little better that we were now closer to the truth, but I was still unsure about how everything was going to play out. Whether it would be okay or not; I knew this was my journey, and I was glad for my company.

Jamie waltzed over from the reception desk with a grin on his face. "Alright Liz, let's get out of here." I was relieved.

Chapter 26: A Guy with a Story

It was still raining, but faster and harder than before. When we got to the car, we were soaking wet. "Do you want to go home and change before we meet this guy, Daniel?" Jamie asked, as he looked at my sopping wet clothing.

“No. Maybe just turn up the heat, and, hopefully, we will dry out a bit.” I suggested.

“Okay. Yeah I didn’t really want to go back home either, but I thought I would ask.”

Even though Jamie and I were both uncomfortably wet, we knew it would be best if we didn’t run the risk of going home. Dad might not let us back out.

I stared blankly out the window, as Jamie attempted to call Daniel. I would have normally listened in, but I felt like avoiding the situation for the moment. A part of me really didn’t want to meet this guy. It made me sick, thinking of how he treated my sister and the fact that it could be a lot worse than Jamie and I ever suspected. That thought made me panic. My stomach started doing summersaults, my palms and forehead were sweating, my hands were shaking, and my breathing kept getting heavier. I stuck my hand out in front of me, holding it in the air, and watching it shake. Just then, I felt a damp, hot cloth underneath my hand. It stopped shaking, and I began to pet Whoopido. It eased my fear, and I fell back into the seat with a sigh of relief. The panic was gone, leaving calmness in its wake. With the heat cranked up, and our wet clothes, it began to feel like a soothing sauna in the car.

“You look content.” Jamie said as he glanced over at me.

“I am, finally.”

“Well good, you should be. You get to finally meet this person who seemed to be such a big part of our sister’s life. And, I have a feeling he is going to reveal a lot. Well, I hope so anyway, because I really want to know Ruth’s connection in all of this.”

“Me too.” Jamie didn’t seem nervous to me at all. He even appeared overly confident. I didn’t know if this was a good thing or a bad thing. For all I knew he could be a pot of boiling water, ready to explode. Even though this guy, Daniel, probably deserved whatever Jamie wanted to give him, I didn’t want Jamie to get in trouble.

“Well, here is the place.”

“He lives in an apartment building? Doesn’t he live with his family?”

“Apparently not. And, by the way, he thinks we are here to give him an interview for the paper.”

“Really? You didn’t tell me that.”

“Well, I thought you were listening when I called.”

“No. I guess my mind was somewhere else.”

“Oh, well, here is the deal. I called and asked him if he would be interested in an interview, and that’s all I said. Luckily, he responded by asking if it was for the local newspaper, and if it was about teens who lived on their own.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, crazy eh? It made it so simple. Oh, and I said that you were my little sister who is interested in writing for your school paper, and you wanted to know how interviews are done.”

“That was a good idea.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” he said with his impeccable posture, and reassuring nodding of his head. “You ready to go in?” He then asked me.

I paused and looked out at the pouring rain for a moment, and listened. “Yes. Wait! Should we bring the dog?”

“Sure, if you want to.” He said, as he shrugged his shoulders. I was relieved, since I didn’t think I was going to be able to handle meeting this person without Whoopido.

The apartment building was old and made of brick. There were no balconies, and not even a buzzer to ring. The entrance was small, and when we walked in, there was a small landing with stairs to go up and stairs that went down. “Which floor?”

“Third.” I followed close behind, with Whoopido casting a shadow. As we started to walk up the stairs, I noticed all the mailboxes on the right hand wall. They were made of rusted metal, and a lot of them looked like they weren’t in use because there were no locks on them, and they hung wide open.

The staircase and hallways were old hardwood and full of dirt. They looked like they hadn’t been cleaned in a couple of years. There were wrappers and other garbage on the floor. I figured he didn’t have a lot of money, or he just hid it well, but then, I thought about those necklaces. They looked pretty expensive, but they could be fake. Or, maybe, he hadn’t bought them at all. Ruth wouldn’t have bought them, and I don’t think she would have been able to. Perhaps they were stolen?

Jamie knocked lightly on his door. I could hear his footsteps approaching the door. He opened it. “Hello,” my brother said, with a big smile on his face, as he held out a hand to shake Daniel’s.

“Hi, come in.” He shook Jamie’s hand firmly, then stood back to allow us to walk in the small doorway. His appearance was pretty much what I had suspected. He was pretty tall, well built, with blond hair, and wore pretty stylish clothes. He certainly didn’t match the appearance of the building or his apartment.

There was very little furniture. An old brownish couch sat in the middle of the living room. When we sat down on it, it creaked. There was a small TV and TV stand in front of the couch, and two old wooden chairs. There was no dining room, and a very small kitchen. Beside the kitchen, there was a small rounded patio table that looked as though it had spent a lot of days out in the rain. Next to it, was a matching patio chair.

“Sorry for the mess, I wasn’t expecting company at this hour.”

“I am sorry too. I just had the idea for this story this evening when one of my other ideas fell through. So, I thought, I would try to contact you.”

“Oh, I see. So, I am your second choice?” He asked, as if he were offended.

“Not exactly.”

“Huh.” He raised his brows and looked us right in the eyes. It felt like he was reading us like a good book, trying to put all the pieces together.

“I guess uh- I’ll get started, if you don’t mind?” Jamie said, ignoring Daniel’s attempt to intimidate us. I was proud to see my brother showing no sign of guilt. I, on the other hand, grew warm and sweaty.

“No, not at all. But, let me ask you guys something first.” He then leaned over in his seat, and stared into our eyes again. I thought for sure he suspected us, but it seemed like he played along anyways. “What are your names?” He finally asked.

“Oh, right. I am so sorry. My name is Jeff and this is my sister Barbara.”

“Barbara? That seems a little bit of an old name.”

“Well, yes. It is a family name, passed down for generations.” Jamie replied without hesitation.

“I definitely won’t be passing down *that* tradition.” I laughed uncomfortably.

Daniel smirked at me, “I don’t blame you.”

Jamie was good, real good at playing the reporter. I thought he should do this for a living. Daniel told us all about his story, and how he got to be in the place he is. He said he had been an orphan since his parents died at a very young age. He then had foster parents, but he couldn’t stand them so he left home when he was sixteen. He was now turning eighteen, and graduating high school this year. When he first left home, he spent a lot of his time at the shelter run by the church, and not just any church, but the one our family attends. I remembered my father saying he did volunteer work, helping out homeless teens. I could never understand why, since he barely spent time with his own teenagers.

Jamie then asked him how he made a living. He told us that he got some money from the government but that he also was working a lot for a company called, Technicol. He said normally you need a college education to work there, but a friend of his from church gave him a job. Jamie and I tried to hold in our reactions and stay calm. This was our father’s company. Jamie continued, and asked him what he did there. Daniel didn’t tell us much, but mentioned he did a lot for the manager, like run errands and whatnot. He told us, it was an entry job until he gets his college education, then he would be hired on full time with a more important job. When talking about this, he was very confident and full of pride.

“Wow. You really lucked out, didn’t you?” Jamie said, acting impressed. I wasn’t sure if it was sincere or not.

“Yeah, I guess I did. You are probably wondering why I am not in a better place, but I’m living here to save up money for college. I figured, instead of paying for a nice place, I would settle for this and save money.”

“Smart.”

“Thanks, I thought so.” Not only was this guy handsome, but he was smart too. No wonder there were girls fighting over him. Not to mention, he had his own place, and independence. At first glance I could see nothing wrong with this guy, but I knew there was *a lot* more to the story. He must be very good at hiding and putting up an act - a lot like my father.

I thought Jamie might think it would be too risky to ask any questions about Ruth, since Daniel worked for our father, so we left the conversation at that. When we were leaving, I worried that Daniel might wonder why his story isn't in the paper tomorrow morning. He would definitely suspect us, then, if he didn't already, and, if he had anything to do with Ruth's death, he would be on guard for sure. I couldn't think of any other way that we were going to find out the rest of the story. Maybe my helpers would show me tonight in my dream, or at least give me some more clues.

"That went pretty well. At least we know the guy's history, and how he is connected with our dad." Jamie said.

"Yeah, but do you think maybe dad set him up with Ruth?"

"Why would he do that? He hates it when his daughters are dating. Remember when Sam dated that really nice guy last year and dad freaked out and scared the guy away for good." Jamie always got really worked up on the subject of our father, and the injustice of his actions.

"Yeah, that's true. But it doesn't make sense."

"Wait. What if dad got Daniel to check up on Ruth? That would explain how they met. Or it could just be a coincidence that they met at school and he happened to work for our father." Jamie suggested.

"It could be but I don't think they met at school. Remember in the letter how it mentioned that their relationship was a secret. Well, it must be a secret for a reason. Not just that he was 'cool' and she was not. It must be more than that. They were even investigating something together."

"Yeah, that's true. But what? Maybe this guy isn't so bad after all. Maybe he was trying to help Ruth investigate those hotels and what our father was or is still doing."

"I doubt it. Yeah, he *seems* nice enough, and he's got the whole "bad childhood" story, but I don't know, Jamie. I think he is hiding something, something big. And I think Ruth paid the price." I could tell Jamie didn't want to believe what I said, but I had to say it. We can't assume the best about this guy. I think he truly didn't want to face that Ruth was immersed in *that* kind of life, as Mary so bluntly pointed out. And I certainly don't want to believe it either but this isn't a time for denial, it is a time for truth.

We decided to call it a night. It was getting really late by now, and we couldn't really go to the other hotels without staying at them. I was still worried what Daniel would think when he wasn't in the paper tomorrow. "Jamie? What is going to happen when Daniel finds out you're not a reporter?"

"Not sure yet. I could always write up the story and try to give it to the newspaper. They have lots of boring stories in there, and are always looking for something to fill the pages."

"Yeah, but you don't work for them. Do you think they would?"

"I don't know, but it's worth a shot. I will send it through email tonight. And if they don't publish it, and if Daniel asks I will just tell him they wouldn't take my story or there wasn't enough room for tomorrow but they might publish it on a different day. And

besides Ruth, remember he doesn't know who we really are. He doesn't have our real names."

"Oh right." I replied, relieved.

"See, nothing to worry about." He said as he patted my shoulder.

"Yeah." I agreed with reluctance. I knew there wasn't *nothing* to worry about.

"We should get a good night's sleep. We have to check up on those other hotels tomorrow and maybe somehow get more information about Daniel and Ruth's relationship."

"Okay," I agreed. Falling asleep wasn't going to be easy. There was still too much speculation and not enough proof. I wondered how I was going to get a DNA check for that blood sample I got without telling the police. If it was Ruth's, I knew where she was murdered and even what weapons were used, which would bring us that much closer to her killer.

But wait! How could it be hers? Ruth hadn't been wounded or else the police would have suspected she had been murdered. The only wounds that would be relevant to what they think happened are either cuts on her wrists showing she tried to commit suicide or marks on her neck. The person who killed her must have strangled her, or else they knew exactly where to cut. I must ask the police if they know how she died. I am sure they would understand why I wanted to know, but I fear I might let out too much information. It would be so much easier to just hand this information over to them. Then it would be *their* responsibility. Or isn't it already? It is their job.

Except, Ruth and the helpers asked me to do this. That makes this my job, and perhaps it would help me complete my future job. But what future job? I am just a child; a *human* child. What could I do to possibly make this right? And would it be enough for just me to know the truth or should everybody know? If everybody needs to know then I think I should get the police involved. I was so confused.

I felt guilty for wanting to give this job up but I also felt justified. I would have to meet with Ruth tonight. I must know if it is okay to ask for more help.

I walked into my dark room and didn't bother to turn the light on. I sat by my window and looked out watching the rain. I tried to see through it to look at the forest, my haven. I had not been there for awhile and I missed it. I missed the comfort, peace and simplicity. I missed the days when the only thing I had to worry about was my dysfunctional family. Even then I was able to escape. It didn't bother me. Probably because I couldn't see the pain Ruth was going through and at the same time denying mine and everyone else's pain.

I was happy I got to spend more time with my older brother though. He is more fragile than I thought but, also more confident. I was glad he was by my side. With this thought I looked down at the floor at Whoopido. He was curled up on the area rug, sleeping. His breath was harmonizing and calm, in contrast to the pounding rain outside, it was comforting, and I felt safe.

I laid beside him on the floor, kissed the top of his head, and said, "Thank you for making me smile." I fell asleep shortly after that.

Chapter 27: Reflections

I woke up and all I saw was me. Reflections everywhere I turned. I tried to walk one way but immediately ran into myself. There were high walls of what appeared to be mirrors. It was bright but confusing. I didn't know which way to turn. I thought I was in a maze. What was going on? Is this another dimension or am I having a real dream? Where were my helpers? Where was Ruth?

I sat on the ground then curled up into a ball. I was scared, and this time no one was here for me. I began to cry. I felt like giving up. I didn't want to walk through this dimension and I was more scared now, then I was in any of the other ones. The only thing I had to face here was me.

I heard a whisper in the distance. It was saying my name in a beautiful lullaby way that eased my fear. I sat up, and then eventually stood up. I couldn't believe how I was acting. I am more mature than this. I know I can do this, this was nothing. It was just a bunch of mirrors, showing me, me! I was being ridiculous. I pushed myself to try and walk through the frustrating maze.

As I got further the mirrors not only showed me reflections of me but they also began to play movie-like images of when I was younger, up to as recent as yesterday.

One of the movies was so enchanting I couldn't stop watching. I felt like I stood there for hours. It was me, as a toddler, drawing a picture of a dog, however, it didn't look like one when it was done; it looked like a bunch of scribbles. I was so proud of myself for drawing this awesome picture that I tried showing it to everyone. I waddled over to my mom first. She was on the phone talking obnoxiously to one of her friends while drinking of course. I held up the picture and said, "Doggy! Doggy!" It was one of my first words.

When I showed her the picture she barely glanced down at me, and carried on. I did it again, then once more, with still no response. I then tried to run over to my father who was watching T.V. On the way there I fell, but it didn't bother me at all; I was determined. When I approached him I tried to hold up my picture but, he just shoved me away. I didn't try again with him because I was scared he would hurt me more.

I continued to try and show it to everyone in the house, but no one seemed to care. Some of my siblings looked at it but that was it. Even Jordan said, "That's not a doggy, it's a bunny!" I then watched my toddler-self cry alone by the doorway. I wanted to leave even when I was that young. I knew something wasn't right. Just like I know something isn't right now.

"Do you understand now?" A familiar sweet whisper asked me. I didn't see where the voice was coming from. All I could see was me.

"Understand what? And who is this? Show yourself." I demanded, out of frustration.

"I cannot show myself. I can only show you. I do not exist physically, only spiritually."

"What does that mean?" I asked, becoming more irritated by the second.

“I am the force that helps you find you. I show you your reflection. It would not help if I were to show you myself. All you need to know is that I am no more, or less, than you. By not seeing me, you can’t compare yourself against me, as you do with people in your life.”

“Compare? I don’t compare.” I denied.

“You don’t? What about your thoughts about the police. How it’s *their* job and not yours. You are using them to put yourself down. They are no more or less than you. You are part of the same force, but you do have a different purpose. And I must emphasize, *different*, not better or worse, but *different*.” The sweet but confident voice said.

“But I don’t know my purpose, or what my job really is. Everyone keeps telling me I have one but, I don’t know what it is. I am walking blindly.”

“Look at yourself, and your journey thus far. That will give you all the answers you need. I am leaving now but, take this opportunity to *really* look at you. What does that toddler say about you? What can she do for you now?”

I continued to look at myself as a toddler and think about what the voice said. Maybe she is right, maybe all the answers were here. A feeling in my gut told me I was doing what I was supposed to do but, I was still fearful, and didn’t know why.

I looked at the cute chubby-cheeked toddler dressed in a fuzzy baby pink sleeper crying. That’s why. I didn’t want to put all this work into something and end up crying. I admired how proud that toddler was of her picture and how determined she was to get someone to look at it. I thought of words that would describe her; cute, smart, creative, confident, passionate, determined. However, are these words I would use to describe myself now? Probably not, but maybe I should. Or, maybe I should allow myself to embrace these qualities that I forgot about and left behind.

I knew it wasn’t that little girl’s fault that nobody paid attention to her. She had every right to draw that picture and be proud of it. It was those people’s loss for not taking part in her accomplishment. Maybe just because other people can’t see or, choose not to see the importance in something I was doing, didn’t mean I should stop doing it. And I certainly shouldn’t stop doing something because I am afraid of rejection.

I kept walking in the mirror maze, and saw thousands of images of myself. It became clearer and clearer to me who I was and where I was supposed to be going. I could see that finding the truth for Ruth was not just a favour for her, but also for me. It pushed me forward and forced me to take courageous steps.

I felt like I was getting closer to the end of the maze, yet it seemed to keep going. Was I going in circles? Maybe there was something else I had to figure out before I got out of here.

The experience still didn’t tell me much about my future. I knew I was heading in the right direction but, I was looking for more definite answers. Maybe there are no definite answers? But how could there not be when the helpers told me there was something definite? Or maybe I have to decide that. If I was in one of their positions, what would I be good at?

The mirror before me started to play out like a movie. This time I was five and I was in a classroom during play time. I sat in a chair with a big flowery hat on my head, a red boa around my neck, a simple purple dress and bright fluorescent pink tights. I couldn't help laughing at the sight of myself. Apparently I was a judge. All of my friends lined up before me to be judged. I would send them to heaven, hell or, make them prove to me they deserved to be in heaven. That year, I was more into the Catholic religion and, it was a Catholic school, so all of us kids believed in heaven and hell with no hesitation.

It looked as though, in this scenario, I was playing God. Wouldn't my friends get a boy to do that? Or maybe the *he* part wasn't as important to us as the being judged part. And I judged them so quickly! They barely said a word to me and I would make my decision.

I knew that wasn't going to be my role later in life, the almighty God. That would be crazy. Although, maybe my job was to judge? Judge what though? And if I am no better or less than anyone else, how would I have the right to judge? If I was no longer a human, maybe my wisdom to judge others would be coming from somewhere else? Somewhere beyond what can be seen. I know I have always had a good judge of character. I never made bad friends, and when I didn't have a choice, I simply chose not to have friends.

Maybe it's my ability to tap into the truth in everyone. But why was it so hard for me to see the truth in my father, besides the monster I see him as. How could he only be a monster? Do monsters exist? Are there some people or entities that are just simply that? Simply horrible? But if there is no true evil energy, how could those people exist? I know in Herosavieltun evil did exist, but those incidences didn't really happen; they were just there to teach people something. Could the evil that happens on Earth just be a severe way of teaching, like my lesson on compassion? Why does such horrible things have to happen in order for people to find compassion? Shouldn't we already be that way?

Although, if no bad things ever happened, Earth might be somewhat boring. Not to mention, there would be no need for compassion because there would be no opportunities to reach out to someone. So, why can't it just be that simple? Why can't there be only good and why can't everyone be happy?

If that were the case, most of our human emotions wouldn't exist. But would that be so horrible?

Another image appeared before me. It wasn't my life, or not one I could remember. It was the same instance of when I was a toddler, except, this time everyone came over to see my picture and praised me for it. It showed me what it would look like if my family was perfect. I noticed how different I was. I was arrogant, selfish, mean to people when I didn't get my way. Also, I didn't try as hard in school because I felt like I didn't need to, and therefore, didn't do as well. On top of all of that, I had no real friendships because I wasn't even real. My head was always in a place of feeling superior. But, I noticed, I forgot about other people in my life. I forgot about the animals, trees and the mountains. I appreciated nothing. Nothing could ever fulfill me. I asked for the most expensive toy and I got it. I never said thank you, and I wasn't even satisfied with my toy because it wasn't "good" enough.

After seeing this scenario it became clear to me why we have to go through tough times. We need to develop character, and developing a moral and amazing character is hard work. I would rather be the person I am today, than the person I saw in the alternate option.

As I came to this realization, I finally saw something other than myself standing in front of me; Ruth. “Hello sister,” She greeted me sweetly.

“Hi.”

“I am very proud of you. You did a lot of work on yourself tonight.”

“Thank you.”

“I am here to answer some of your questions. I would have done this from the beginning but, I needed to know that you were willing to put the work in for yourself, and that you would be able to understand. I know now, more than ever, I can trust you.”

I felt as if sweet, warm honey poured into my heart. I was glad to hear her kind words. “What questions are you willing to answer?”

“Well, I still can’t tell you what happened to me but, I think you do have enough evidence to go to the police now. You have taken many risks for me and I appreciate it. But I don’t want you to take any more serious risks without the police backing you up, because you could get seriously hurt.” Her eyes looked at me with a mature concern. She had grown up beyond the human years. I believed every word she said.

“Ok. That is good to know.”

“Also, after you tell the police and the truth comes out, I have to warn you that your life and the rest of our family’s lives will drastically change. And, it may not seem the best at first but, you have to trust me, and your guides that it is for the best. You will then truly be able to move forward with your purpose.”

“Can you give me a clue as to what this purpose is? They showed me an image of me judging my friends, does that have anything to do with it?”

“Not really, because it is all about a reflection of you and what you do, not just to others but to yourself, and I think you did what you were supposed to do after that image; judge what is good and bad, just like you were trying to do as a child.”

“Oh I see. So... are you able to give me a clue?” I pushed, anxious about the future.

“Haha. No. You would know better than I, anyways. Remember all of the answers are right here in front of you.”

“Right. Who was that talking by the way? You? And what is this place called?”

“No, it was not me, but you. And let’s just call this place after its purpose, Reflection.”

“Me?” I asked, unsure of her answer.

“It is difficult to understand but it was you. The you that is already in the place you are to be. You will soon see the truth, all truths. I love you and I must go now. Good Luck.”

“Wait!” I yelled with frustration. I needed more questions answered. But she disappeared immediately. I guess, it was like she said; all of the answers were right here in front of me, but how can that be? And if they are, they must be hidden. Why are they hidden? “Because you must go on the journey to find them.” I heard the voice again. It didn’t sound at all like me, and if it was me, it must be a much older, wiser me. It reminded me of a sweet, yet smart, strong and healthy grandmother. I don’t know how I could tell all of this from just a voice but I could, and it was very apparent.

Although this voice was comforting, and I enjoyed seeing Ruth, I wanted to see my other helpers. A part of me missed them, like they were family. They had not spoken to me since the letter and, I was beginning to wonder if I was ever going to see them again.

I remembered that I still had the letter in my pocket. I pulled it out to read. Even though they were not there with me, just reading their wise words gave me even more strength and reassurance. I felt like a plant, on a sunny day, just after the rain. My thirst was quenched, and now, I was being fed fresh warm bread. I felt myself growing from inside out.

From Oochoo: Be unseen. Move only when safe.

From Goasila: When time is limited, slow down to take a closer look.

From Mazfanny: Laugh quietly. Step lightly.

From Vincent: Remember – Purpose.

From Harmony: I believe in you, now believe in yourself.

The last two entries struck me the most. I knew they were more closely related than I initially thought. In believing in myself, I was more likely to achieve my purpose. I had to trust the guides’ wisdom, and myself. Seeing my reflection gave me insight into who I was, who I am, and who I ought to be. I stood up straighter, with my head held high; I was proud, proud of *Elizabeth*.

Just then, the walls started to shrink smaller, and the mirrors began to fade. It was getting darker and darker. When the walls and mirrors disappeared it was completely black; all but a small pool of water remained shimmering like the Milky Way, I couldn’t help myself but, be drawn to it. I kept getting closer and closer until, I found myself stepping into it. I looked down and saw my reflection in the water, except this time I looked different. I was old, yet vibrant. My light brown eyes and grey hair glistened with spirit. I never noticed how beautiful my smile was until now.

I didn’t look beautiful in the conventional sense, but in a much different way. I considered myself stunning. It was the energy that I felt from myself coming from this reflection. It was almost as if I was looking at Jesus, Mother Theresa, Ghandi or any other spiritual icon. I felt completely in harmony with this spirit that was so clearly mine.

I walked farther into the pool of water until, I was fully immersed. I felt one with the warm, soothing water. The connection was so unbelievable it was as if my body melted into the essence of the pool to hibernate there for a long needed rest.

Chapter 28: Maternal Instincts

I woke up with a sense of resolution. Unlike the past few days, I finally felt rested, and calm. Sureness and confidence grounded me, in a way I had never felt before. I took a long stretch and approached the window, where the sun was glaring in. I felt its warm rays seeping into my skin, giving me life.

I opened the window as far as it could go. A sweeping air wafted into my nostrils, filling them up with a sweet, moist scent. The yellow streams penetrated the roof, soaking up the last of droplets left by the powerful storm.

I touched the surface; it was dry enough. I crawled out of my window and lay down on the warm shingles. The birds were louder and more present than ever. It sounded like an orchestra was playing beside me. Everything came together, like paint strokes in a heavenly portrait.

For once, I took my time and my brain didn't spew off into a million places of worry. The simplicity was captivating and refreshing, however, one thought did come to mind, and that was of last night's dream.

Maybe that is where my sense of deep conviction came from. I finally felt completely comfortable in my own skin. Everything made sense now. Any lingering doubts came with a sense of peace in knowing the answer would come in its own time.

A light tapping noise disturbed my peace. "Was that the door?" I asked myself, as I sat up. I heard it again, only it was louder this time. "I'm coming!" I cried, as I looked into the distance, beyond the forest. I felt drawn to the mountains more than ever today. I must go to them, for something special is hidden there.

Before I got up to answer the door I felt a *thank you* was needed. This exquisite morning couldn't have come on a more appropriate day.

The quiet knock tapped against the door once again. I threw on my robe and went to open the door. I figured it would be Jamie. It wasn't.

"Do you know what time it is?" My mother asked in a sarcastic tone.

"No, actually I don't. Why?"

"Becaaaause..... Elizabeth. It is late." She said irritated.

"Late? How late?"

"11am."

"Okay? So? I don't have to go to school today, do I? I mean, we did just had Ruth's funeral yesterday, and it is Friday."

"No, of course not. But you did miss breakfast and everyone was wondering where you were. We do still have guests in the house Elizabeth, and, I don't appreciate you making a fool out of me."

“If you were that concerned, you could have just woke me up.” I said doubting her intentions. It was odd of her to care so much of looking like a “fool”.

“Don’t you have an alarm clock?” She quickly passed the blame back to me.

“Yeah, but I didn’t set it because I knew I wasn’t going to school today.” I snapped back.

“Well-, well-“ Her eyes darted back and forth, as she placed her hand on her hips, and straightened her posture.

“Well, what, mom? You never come and check on me, even when I am sleeping in. And I am sure Uncle George and Grandma and Grandpa don’t care. We did just experience a family tragedy. I think I have a right to want to sleep in. So... mother. What is the *real* reason you came up here?”

“Forget it. I will leave you alone.” She lowered her head and started to turn around.

“Please, mom. What is it?” Her body turned back towards me, with her head still lowered, and her eyes now watery.

“What is the matter? Did something go wrong?”

“No. But... Nobody else is home.”

“Nobody? Where did they go?”

“I am not sure where Jamie went. He left early this morning. He told me to tell you he would be back around lunch time. The others went with your grandparents for a hike in the mountains. And...” She paused, and the tears dropped faster now.

“Father? Something happened to him?”

“No.” She sniffled. “He went to go drop your uncle off at the airport.”

“Okay mom. You really have me confused now. Please just tell me, what is the matter?”

“Nothing. Nothing. Sorry, I am going.”

I grabbed her arm and pulled her close. “No you’re not. Not until you tell me what is bothering you.” We looked deep into each other’s eyes for the first time, in a long time. I was almost the same height as her due to her short stature.

“You never cared before.” She looked away.

“Well, you wouldn’t come to me, if it wasn’t something serious right?” I pressed.

“Well, it’s not. It’s stupid just like your father said.”

“Dad thinks everything is stupid, especially feelings.” She looked up at me somewhat surprised like she was discovering for the first time I knew how horrible he was.

“It is about Ruth.”

“Ruth?”

“Yes. I did something horrible. I am a horrible mother and I am sorry. I should have spent more time with you-with her. I should have protected her, helped her.” The tears were gushing now and she was shaking.

“It will be okay, just come and sit down.” I held her arm and guided her to my bed.

“I’m going to be honest mom. Yeah, you probably should have done all of those things, but you can’t do anything about it now. Did you at least learn anything from this?”

“Yeah, of course. That is why I came to see you, Liz. I don’t want to lose you. I noticed you have been taking on her habits; disappearing and sleeping in.”

“You won’t lose me, mom. I am just going through a bad time. I need time to think and be alone.”

“What about Jamie? He has been acting the same way and I have seen you two leave together or have private discussions. What is that about? Do you know something I don’t?”

I hesitated to answer. I had no idea she noticed our changes in behaviour. I felt like she wasn’t even a part of our lives any more, that she wasn’t present at all. I had no idea she still cared, and even better, noticed what we were doing.

“I probably know a lot you don’t know. What exactly are you talking about?”

“I am not sure. I just feel like there is something more. I can’t believe Ruth would just do something like that.” She continued to snuffle. “I know it is partly my fault, and I know this house can be crazy sometimes but, I just thought I would never lose any of you.”

“That is probably what all parents believe.” I tried to reassure her but it didn’t work.

“No. You are not understanding. There is something more. There has to be!”

“What are you getting worked up about mom?”

“You know!” She stood up and looked down at me accusingly.

I couldn’t tell her, but how did she know we knew something? Had Jamie told her? “What makes you say that? Did someone tell you about what I have been doing?”

She started pacing, “No. No. No. No.” then stopped dead in front of me. She bent over and gripped my shoulders. “I know this sounds crazy Liz, but Ruth didn’t kill herself. I know it, I feel it. I am her mother.” Her eyes stared into mine with the upmost seriousness I have ever seen in her. She did care. And not only that, she had the same feelings I did before I even found out the truth. She also deserved to know the truth. This motivated me even more to find out. For some reason, I knew our family would be better after all of this.

“Don’t worry mom. I will find out for you. I have that same feeling.”

“You do?” She looked happily surprised. “Is that why you have been sneaking out? Are trying to find out what really happened?”

“Yes, but you can’t tell anyone. Only Jamie and I know. We definitely don’t want dad to find out either. I don’t want to say this but, he might be connected to it or, know someone who is.”

“Right of course, but how do you know that? He couldn’t harm her like *that*.”

“I am not saying he did, but, he might know the person who did- *and* not even know what the person did.” She looked even more confused now.

“Okay. All I’m saying is, he could be connected directly or indirectly. And Jamie and I are finding that out.”

“You can’t.” She was strict now, pointing her finger at me and everything.

“Can’t what?”

“You can’t. No. It is too dangerous. Even if he has no connection to it- if he catches you guys snooping around-” She was pacing nervously now.

“He won’t. We are very careful.”

“No! You don’t understand! You don’t know what he is capable of. You don’t know where he goes in the middle of the night or early in the morning. Your father is sick and I don’t want you following him, you understand!?” I never heard her speak with such importance. She must know what he really does and, who he really is. This might be the perfect time to get some honesty out of her.

“Ok. Fine. But I need to know why you are so scared for us. I know dad can be mean sometimes but, do you think he would hurt us?”

“Maybe not, but he associates with people who would. He doesn’t care for you kids like I do- he can’t.”

“How do you mean? Doesn’t he love us?”

“Of course he does.....I think, or I don’t know, honestly. I know he doesn’t love me, as you might have noticed.”

“But why is he around us, if he doesn’t love us?”

“You know how important his business and the community are to him.”

“Yes, but he can’t possibly go through all of this trouble to have a family, just to look good in front of people.” I said in disbelief.

“No. I don’t think it is just that. I believe it is also a mask. A mask for what he really is.”

“But what is that?”

“I have said too much now. I shouldn’t be talking about your father this way. It is not right of me. And even if someday you do want to know the truth, you are too young right now. You may not understand. I don’t even understand.”

“I could understand, really, mom-please.”

“No. It is unfair for me.”

“No it’s not. You have to tell me. If not for my benefit, then for Ruth’s.”

“Well, I have been wanting to tell someone for a long time. But I just can’t. If this gets out, our family will be destroyed.”

“Our family is already destroyed, can’t you see that?” I could feel the emotions well up inside of me. I was angry that she wouldn’t tell me, and angry at my father for making her keep his secrets for so long, and using us as pawns, and not loving us. I felt my heart breaking, and I saw my mother’s doing the same.

A part of me was happy that she cared and she did love us. Unfortunately, Ruth had to die for her to make some kind of effort, but I appreciated it, regardless.

“I can see it, Elizabeth.” She sat down beside me on the bed now, and put her hand on top of mine. “And I am sorry.”

“I know mom, I know.” I wrapped my arms around her for the first time in years, and felt her hugging me back. We both sat there crying and holding each other for what seemed a long time.

Just then I saw Jamie out of the corner of my eye in the doorway. “What is going on? Everything okay?”

“Yeah, we were just reminiscing- you know- about Ruth.”

“Oh.” His eyes read my thoughts.

My mom wiped her eyes, stood up and brushed off her spring dress. “Well, I will leave you kids alone.” She crouched down and gave me a kiss on the cheek, then walked over to Jamie, put her arms around his neck for a hug and, also gave him a light kiss on the cheek. The side of his mouth raised slightly in an unexpected smirk.

Chapter 29: Revealing Mountains

We were in the car heading out of the gravel driveway as I was comparing Jamie’s notes and sketches with the photographs I had from Ruth’s locker. Most of them didn’t add up, but there were some that could be matches.

One picture was of a man with dark black hair and a thick beard. He had a nose ring and what looked like a tattoo on his chubby arm. He was also wearing a black leather vest, like the one Mary had described.

It made me wonder how these men were so different from each other. Some looked like biker guys and others looked like successful business men. If what I think, and what Mary insinuated is going on in that hotel, then I guess it would make sense that all kinds of men used those services. I guess it doesn’t matter what kind of life you lead, you still could have secrets. I learned this from my father.

This reminded me of the odd conversation I had had with my mom. What could she be hiding? And why was she hiding it for dad, if she knew he was cheating on her? She did seem scared; maybe he would find a way to hurt her if she ever told? That would explain why she stuck around for so many years; she was trapped.

Jamie had barely spoken a word since we left the house. I assumed he was also thinking of our mom and her bizarre behaviour. I wanted to ask him what he thought and

tell him what she told me, but I also wanted to get the whole story from her first. Or, find it out on our own.

“So where are we heading today?” I asked, even though I probably knew the answer.

“Well, I was thinking we would check out the rest of the hotels. That might take all day, but I think it is worth it. And maybe we will see one of those guys from the pictures. Then we could really find out what is going on...But- Liz?”

“Yeah?”

“I think it will be dangerous-real dangerous. A part of me wants to back out and go to the police.”

“Me too. I was thinking maybe we should just wait until we know a little bit more then we will contact the police.”

“Ok.” He said with hesitation. I could tell he was just as frightened as I was.

“Should we try talking to Daniel again?”

“I don’t think so. But I have a friend that works for dad and might know Daniel. Maybe he can tell us something.”

“Okay, yeah, sure.” I didn’t think that would get us anywhere but it was worth a try. We were now on a road I have never been on before and it was climbing out of the valley. “Which direction are we going first?”

“Well, we could have gone straight through and head down the coast, but I thought it would be fun to go the scenic route. As you might have noticed, we already passed the other hotel. The other ones are more south-west. Past these mountains there are a few resorts on the other side with an amazing view of the ocean.”

“So the hotels we are going to probably won’t be run down and dirty like that other one right?” I said hopeful.

“Well, I know one of them, is pretty upscale. A lot of rich people and tourists go there because there is a nice view and, there is a pretty good slope there to ski on.”

“Oh I see. Which one is that called?”

“I believe it’s called Michael Riggs Ocean View Lodge.”

“Who is that? His name sounds familiar.”

“Oh, actually now that I think about it, I think he is one of dad’s friends... Yeah! That’s right, he is. I have heard dad mention that he gets good discounts and often has business meetings there.”

“Really? Well, that is interesting.”

“Yeah, sure is. I can’t believe I forgot that. Liz, I feel like we are getting too close to this. I am beginning to not want to know. About Dad or Ruth.” I could hear the little boy in his voice; he was more vulnerable than I thought.

“I know, me too, but I really feel like it is all going to work out now. Please Jamie, you got to stick with me. I wasn’t going to tell you, but, I think mom knows something. That is why she was in my room crying. She wanted to tell me something about dad but, she couldn’t bring herself to do so. She thought I was too young. Maybe we can both talk to her? We can check out these hotels today, and then if we don’t find anything, we will ask her.”

“What? She knows something? Like what Liz? If she knows what I think she does, why hasn’t she left the bastard?! Why hasn’t she got us out of this hell hole?!” His rough manly exterior was back.

“She is really messed up Jamie. And I think she is really scared. He probably threatened her.”

“So? Why couldn’t she go to the police? Or tell me? I am old enough to know. I can protect this family from that jerk, you know, right?”

“Yeah... But I don’t know. She probably thought nothing would come of it.”

“This really angers me, Liz. Like what the hell? I don’t get her. Maybe that is why she drinks so much, but I don’t know... I just don’t know Liz.”

He was gripping the steering wheel pretty tightly now. I was worried he would start speeding. “Calm down, Jamie. I think she will tell us.”

We were both silent until we got to the resort. We walked around the hotel checking out the lobby, cafeteria, hallways, and anything else but the rooms. I looked closely at the walls to see if there were any hidden doors but, there was nothing. As we were leaving I saw a familiar face; it was one of the guys in the pictures! And with Daniel! I quickly pulled Jamie aside and asked if he had seen what I did.

“Yeah, it was Daniel. Looked like he was doing business.”

“Yeah, running another errand for Dad. That guy with him- he is in one of the pictures. That is it, I am confronting him!” I stomped over in their direction as they were heading into a board room. “Liz! Wait!” Jamie yelled after me. It didn’t stop me. I needed to know.

When I entered the room, I couldn’t see them anywhere. It was just a large empty room with a bunch of tables and chairs. It also had a projector screen at the front of the room.

Jamie flew through the door. “What are you crazy?” He said and pulled me back into the hallway. “These people could be dangerous, don’t you understand that?” He scolded.

“Yes, but I don’t care, I need to find out.”

“Liz! Are you forgetting that our sister got killed-murdered for probably doing what we are doing?” He was whispering now.

“I know, I know. I think it is time to go to the police now. Give them all of the evidence and tell them what we think we know.”

“Maybe you’re right. Ok. Let’s go home. Maybe we can get something out of mom anyways.” Jamie suggested, sounding relieved that we were leaving.

I remembered now what Ruth said; that it was okay to go to the police. Even coming out here was taking a big risk.

We were about to leave when I saw Daniel and the other guy smoking on the balcony. “Wait! We can’t go out that way. We have to find another way.”

As we turned around I could feel a gust of cool air on my back, then heard Daniel’s voice. We walked faster now turning a quick left down a small hallway. I spun my head around to see if he was following us, or even noticed. His eyes looked straight into mine.

This time his eyes were not full of charm and innocence but malice. He knew! He touched the other man’s shoulder and started to walk faster in our direction. “Jeff! Barbara! I thought I saw you guys earlier. What are you doing here?” We couldn’t run now.

“Uh, we were doing some research for our next article- about this hotel actually. I heard a lot of good things about it so I decided to check it out for myself and do a review.”

“Yeah, this hotel is really nice. I do a lot of business here- you know- for Techniko1. That man is one of our biggest clients. He is willing to buy some of our software.” I was beginning to think he didn’t really know who we were, and what we were doing.

“The manager let you meet one of the biggest clients? I thought you just do errands for him.”

His face clenched; I could see I was getting to him. “Well, Barbara- if that is your real name- the manager is in the middle of some family crisis and he asked me to meet with this client for him, since he came up here all the way from California.”

“Well, couldn’t he get someone more qualified to do a job like that?” His face was now turning redder than a stop light.

“Don’t mind her- she likes to make trouble. I apologize.” Jamie said, trying to take the heat off of me.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t be having such an immature girl tag along on your job. And by the way, I checked the paper today and I didn’t see my article.”

“Oh that was becau-“

“Because what? Don’t try to play me. I know what you two are up to. And if you ever come near me again, you will pay- I will be sure of it. If you will excuse me now, I must be getting back to my client.”

“Of course.” Jamie replied acting as if nothing happened. Daniel then walked away quickly and adjusted his suit in a confident manner-*too confident*.

“See! I knew we were in too deep. C’mon let’s get out of here.” Jamie scolded me again as he pulled my arm. We then headed out slowly, making sure Daniel was gone.

As we were leaving, I caught a glimpse of the view; it looked like the resort wasn't lying. The hotel was nestled in between two mountains where the road split them a part. At the back of the hotel there were other little cottages that appeared to be ski rentals, private rooms and things like that. There was only the one hill but, it was long and luxurious. A fresh powdery snow, always ready to be carved by the slick glides of skis, covered the hill. In front of the hotel there was a small dirt road, which lingered slowly down to the ocean front. In the distance, I could see a few large fancy boats, along with a pile of kayaks on a dock.

The sun glimmered on top of the soft waves that rose big enough to see from a distance but, not too big that you couldn't go out on the water with a boat. It seemed the ocean kept going on forever, the water getting darker and darker as my eyes glided farther out.

I could see some dark clouds building up into a fluffy dark blue smoke. Even though it was colder up in the mountains, I could still feel the moist breeze colliding with the sky and water, soaking it up as it prepared to pour down in a torrent of rain - or up here, most likely snow.

I looked over to my left and Jamie was waving to me. I could tell he was in a hurry, and I guess I should have been too, but I just couldn't help being enthralled by nature's power. In every shape and form, it seemed to amaze me. I thought I shouldn't make him wait any longer and, I couldn't risk Daniel coming out and making another threat-or worse.

I should have been worried and scared but I wasn't for some reason. I still had the confidence that I had had in the morning. If anything, I was even more relieved. Instead of panicking more, like I usually would have-about mom, then about the encounter with Daniel- I couldn't help feeling it was all coming together for a reason, a purpose. A purpose that I knew would lead to my ultimate purpose; this realization gave me great comfort.

The drive back reflected how my insides were feeling. The mountains were so large and over protective. They stood with confidence, knowing that no matter what hit them; the winds, rain, snow, and even the constructions of man, its strength and perseverance will always come through. And I know mine will too.

Chapter 30: Necessary Help

I noticed we were coming into town now, and the rain started to fall. The droplets were so small that it created a wet mist on the windshield. It was just enough moisture that Jamie would have to turn on the wipers. "I thought we were going home now?" I asked, noticing we were going in an unfamiliar direction.

"I want to stop at the police station. We have to make this right." He stared out the window with passion in his eyes. He wanted to find out the truth as badly as I did.

We walked in calmly but, our nerves were stirring about. I didn't know who we were supposed to speak to, and, what we were supposed to say, when we did speak to them. I hoped Jamie would be able to explain better than I could.

“Okay, Liz- I want you to speak. You know more than I do, and you got me into this. So? Are you up for it?” He asked with his hand on my shoulder and, his eyes filled with anticipation.

Up for it? I didn’t know if I was up for it. I had assumed he would take care of it. This was not the scenario I had hoped for. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to give me a push in the right direction or if he was just too chicken to do it. Either way, I knew it was my job.

I walked to one of the counters and asked the plump woman with puffy short blondish hair, who was smacking on her gum, if I could see who was in charge.

“In charge? We are all in charge here little girl.”

I huffed in irritation. She thought I was a joke, and, I wasn’t going to put up with it. “Listen, ma’am. We have something very serious to report, and I would like to speak with the- um- the Chief of Police, as people usually call it.”

She rolled her eyes at me but then picked up the phone dialling an extension number. I was hoping that even people in a small town like ours would do their jobs properly. “Please have a seat. He will be out when he gets a chance.”

“Thank you.” I replied as politely as I could.

“So?” Jamie asked.

“He will be out ‘when he gets a chance’.” I quoted.

“Gets a chance? We have a serious issue here.”

“I know. But did you expect them to take an eleven-almost twelve year old seriously?”

“Actually, I thought they might be more sensitive and believe you more.”

“Apparently not.” I said as I slumped down in the seat beside him.

We sat there staring at the clock for what seemed like hours. The reflection off of the clock turned so bright I could not see the numbers any more. The light then swirled in circles and began to change colours. First purple, then blue, and green, then yellow, turning into orange and red like the colours of a sunset. It hypnotized me into a trance. I tried not to show any signs that I was seeing something other than a clock.

The colours kept turning in and out of each other like silky cloths dancing in the wind. The colours then began to fade into a grey, then light blue, and soon a soft white. It looked as if I was looking at a television screen now.

I began to see my helpers, one by one, in the order I met them. They all waved to me or blew me a kiss. A familiar warmth filled my heart, knowing they were still with me. I hadn’t noticed their presence around me as I used to, but, I also felt I didn’t need to as much, anymore.

The screen then turned into the image I saw in my last dream; of an elderly version of myself. The glow around her was now even more present and came from the inside out. She smiled more too, not afraid to be herself. She comforted me greatly, like

sitting on a cozy couch, with a warm fuzzy blanket wrapped around me, and, holding a creamy cup of hot chocolate, beside a blazing orange fire.

“Are you the little girl that wants to speak to me? Haven’t I met you before?” I heard a gruff but gentle voice. I stood up. “Yes, I am, and yes you have met me before. At the highschool. My name is Elizabeth Murphy.”

“Oh yes, that is right. We have actually been trying to get a hold of you or one of your other family members. Remember, we wanted to speak with you that day?”

“Yes, I remember. And now I-we- need to tell you some very important information.”

“What about, dear?”

“About our sister, Ruth.”

“Good. I have some questions for you about her. Let’s head back to my office.” We followed him through a long corridor. His office was the last one on the left. The room was very small and cluttered. There was only one extra chair and a pile of files and papers on it.

“Sorry for the mess. Here let me get that.” He said as he quickly grabbed the files and placed them on the floor. “Oh, you might need chair eh? And sorry I didn’t catch your name?”

“Jamie.” He replied as the police officer held out his hand. “Nice to meet you Jamie. You are one of the oldest, are you?”

“Yes, sir, the oldest actually.” The officer didn’t look surprised. He then left the room for a moment and came back holding an old wooden chair. He wiggled it around the mess on the floor, to make sure it was stable. “May I ask, why is it that the youngest and the oldest are the only ones that have come down here today?”

“Well- it is difficult to explain Mr.-?”

“You can call me Jimmy.”

“Jimmy- The thing is that we know more than the others.” Jamie announced.

“Know more about what?” He asked raising his brow curiously.

“Actually, I think we’d appreciate it if you told us first, what you wanted to talk to us about.” I said firmly.

“Ok- but I am not trying to make trouble here. But I found some things fishy about your sister’s death. She had a number of bruises on her arms and legs and they were injuries I don’t think she would be able to impose on herself.”

“You think someone hurt her?”

“Yes, I do. Now I am not saying someone murdered her but, it could be the reason she killed herself. If she was being beaten and it was happening on a regular basis then I could see why she would have been depressed.”

“I hate to be blunt Jimmy but....”

“Yes?”

“But we know she was murdered.” I said matter-of-factly.

“No, no Elizabeth, that can’t be. I don’t think anyone in this small town would be capable of something so horrendous. I know the people well.” He said as he shook his head, and his voice heightened, trying to deny the truth.

“But, you think someone is capable of physical abuse?” I pointed out. I didn’t mean to be rude, but I wanted him to realize we were telling the truth.

“Well, yes. There are actually a number of cases of domestic violence. I thought she just might have been dating the wrong guy or something. I heard about her outburst at the restaurant.”

“Yes. She was dating the wrong guy but, there is so much more to the story than just that. We can’t exactly prove anything yet but, we do have evidence.”

“Well, I wish you came to me earlier. Your sister is already buried- we can’t do a proper autopsy now, especially with no one knowing.” He replied, irritated. I could see in his eyes he didn’t believe us- or didn’t want to.

“I know this is very inconvenient and may not sound realistic, but please we really need your help. We think we might be in danger, and we can’t do this alone.” I said in desperation.

He stood up, turned around and stared out the window for what seemed like a long time. I could tell he was taking his time to think about it. “Okay. I will help but, only on one condition.”

“Anything, anything you need sir.” Jamie said without hesitation.

“First of all, don’t call me sir, it makes me feel old. Second, you have to tell me *everything* you know. Then I will see if it needs further investigation. Sometimes family members of a person who committed suicide, like to think there is some other explanation. That way, they don’t have to feel guilty for ignoring the signs. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, we do, but that is not the case. After you hear us out you will understand.” He nodded in agreement and sat back in his chair, crossing his arms, ready to listen, “Go on.”

From there, I started explaining how it got started. Of course, I didn’t mention any of my dreams but I did state I had a strong gut feeling that something was wrong. I showed him all of the pictures from the locker, the necklaces, and the letter. Jamie then explained how he had seen our father at the hotel, and how we went back there. He also explained our interview with Daniel, and how he worked for our father. He then gave him all of our notes that we gathered from the hotels and the descriptions from Mary. Finally, I told him about our experience this afternoon at the Michael Riggs hotel.

The whole time, he was in the same position, as he was when I started, nodding his head at appropriate times. His brows were now lowered and his lips pursed. He intimidated me for the first time, since I had met him. My chest pulsed nervously and, I could feel the sweat collecting on my forehead. I was beginning to regret telling him,

when he stood up from his chair, looked out the window again, and then moved some papers off of his desk. He then clunked right on top of his desk. "So what is it that you need me for? It seems like you have everything in order. In fact, we are looking for someone to hire in the investigations department, are you guys interested?" His face was still serious.

"Are you joking?" Jamie asked. Out of nowhere Jimmy started laughing hysterically. I quickly looked at Jamie, who had a stricken look in his eyes. I had no idea what to think. Did he think we were joking? And if not, this was no laughing matter! I could see all over Jamie's face that he wasn't impressed either.

"Well, as a matter of fact I'm not. Elizabeth- Obviously you are too young but I think you-" He turned his attention to Jamie, "Jamie should definitely consider it. Have you been to college yet?"

"No, I am saving up."

"Well, how about I give you kind of- uh- let's say an apprenticeship. And you can work your way up to a scholarship. Although... you will have to quit your present job- where are you working?"

We exchanged stunned glances. Jamie then smiled bigger than I had ever seen him. He ignored the question and asked, "So, you believe us then? We handled this well?"

"To be honest, I would have liked you guys to come forward with this sooner, but, I am glad you finally did at this point. And a cop might not have been able to get this kind of information from the people. I am proud of you kids; that was very brave. And Jamie, really, I am very serious about this. I would like you to help continue this investigation. You will be undercover until it is safe for you not to be, and, it will be hard work. And remember, you might find out even more unsettling things - things that might be a little closer to home base. I just want you to know that."

"But what about Liz?"

"She is far too young to be involved in this but, I do appreciate her ambition and determination thus far. Elizabeth-please forgive me but I can't allow you to be a part of this anymore. Your brother will be close to the investigation, so you will be first to find out anything, and we will have someone keep an eye on you since you have already put yourself in danger. We don't know what this Daniel person, or any of the others, are capable of."

"Okay, I understand." I said in disappointment.

"I just have one question. What about your father? Are you certain he is involved in this?" Jimmy asked apprehensively.

"We probably should tell him everything... I mean everything about our father Jamie."

"What do you mean?" Jimmy asked intrigued.

"I don't think that is a good idea. We can't even go home if he finds out about this then." Jamie insisted.

“I know but we have to tell him or he won’t understand why he is involved.”

“Well, you think he cheated on your mother right?” Jimmy asked.

“Yeah, but there is more.” I replied quietly.

“More? What do you mean? You guys are going to have to come clean now.” Jimmy demanded in a snappy manner.

I stood up; tugged on the bottom my shirt, gave a big sigh, and then began. At first, I was afraid he might not believe us but, then I realized how much he already trusted us. I knew he was a good and honest man. I could feel it my bones when I was around him. An overwhelming safety, the kind of feeling one should get when protected by their father, came over me. He listened intently, and patiently waiting for a pause in my ramblings, to comment. By the end of it, I was in tears. It pained me greatly just how much negativity my father has caused in my life, and in all of my family member’s lives.

Jimmy stood up, and came over to me to give me a hug. He then patted my back, and said, “There, there. Everything will work out now.” He grabbed my shoulders and pulled me back from him, looked me straight in the eye then said, “He will get what is coming to him, I will promise you that.” He then released his hands from my shoulders. I could tell he was angry, mortified and determined to get justice; not just for Ruth but everyone who had been hurt in the storm. I deeply appreciated that.

Conflicts began to build up inside of me. Did I really want my father to be punished? Did I really want him to suffer? Maybe he was suffering already and we just had no idea. I know he does deserve to be punished for his horrific actions, but is that really for us to decide? Now, that I know there really isn’t one true God that will judge us, is it right for us to judge each other?

Do the Guides judge us? I thought of my helpers and what they had shown and taught me. I have to do right by them, and myself, but, is this the right direction? They did say to go to the police. Do they already know what is going to happen? Can my sister rest now, or does she have to see the whole truth revealed and justice being served?

I felt relieved, yet puzzled. Maybe it was over for me now. Maybe I am just a passenger. No. There was more, there was so much more, but not here, somewhere else. I was needed somewhere else. I could feel a pull, stronger than gravity, for me to be elsewhere.

“So what now?” I asked as I placed more physical evidence before him; the beer bottle and handkerchief with blood on it.

Chapter 31: Moving On

The answer to my question was not fulfilling, in the least. I was hoping for some cosmic explanation of the future but all I got was, “We will just have to proceed with the investigation, and take precautions. This will help, thank you.”

I knew they needed more evidence to bring my father in but, that would just be a matter of time. It was difficult to go home now, knowing that sometime soon, it won’t be my home or, at least it won’t be home in the way it has been. I decided to concentrate on making a connection with my mother, and siblings that evening. I never wanted to do that

before but my mother coming to me earlier made me realize how important she really is in my life. Even though, I felt angry about the things she has done, I thought I was ready to forgive her.

My father on the other hand, was a completely different story. I don't think I will ever be able to understand what he has done or be able to forgive him for it. A part of me, wanted badly for there to be a good person inside of him but, I was blinded by my hate, and I couldn't see the possibility of a good person existing within that monster. The only explanation that I could come up with, was that he was here in one of his first lives on Earth and, he had a lot more learning and lives to go through. I also thought, maybe he is a teacher; a teacher of compassion, in the way that Vincent explained Herosavieltun to me? Maybe he didn't exist; spiritually? Maybe he is only a physical illusion for people like me to learn to more, so that they can continue to grow and love? Maybe that is, what bad people are; not good people that make mistakes but truly undeniably bad? And, that is what I thought of my father. I wished it could be something more, but it simply just did not feel that way.

"Dinner is ready!" My mom called out down the hallways and up the stairs of what seemed an empty house. My father had not gotten back from taking my grandparents to the airport. I was thankful for that. I wasn't sure why he just didn't take them, when he took his brother. Perhaps it was because their flight left much later, or perhaps, the real reason was that he was able to escape the house for the whole day.

"So, Liz and Jamie, were you able to accomplish all of what you wanted today?"

"Yes we did." Jamie replied promptly, obviously not wanting to discuss it.

"Where did you guys go anyways?" asked Christine displeased by the short answer.

"Actually, I think everyone would like to know what you guys have been up to lately...Like, what's up with all the secrecy?" Sam interjected.

I know we hadn't been fair with them, since I had shown them the letter, but it was too risky to tell everyone. Did they have a right to know, before everything crumbled down? I looked down and noticed two necklaces I happened to put on this morning, without even thinking-they were glowing. I took this as a sign to press on. I turned my attention for a brief moment to Jamie, "They will find out eventually, but, I think it is best if it comes from us."

"If what, comes from you? What are you talking about Liz?" Jordan asked also frustrated.

"I am sorry I didn't come to guys earlier but it would have been unsafe." I paused with anxiety infecting my core.

"Liz? Everything okay?" Sam now asked concerned.

"No. I hate to say but it isn't. I can assure you though, it will be."

“Maybe I should explain.” Jamie suggested, standing up from his chair. “You shouldn’t have to do this.” He said assertively while looking down at me with a vibrant care in his eyes.

“No. I should. I started this, and I should be the one to tell it.” He sat back down.

“So, what is it dear? Please don’t tell me it was what we were talking about earlier.” My mom asked with her frowning eyes watering.

“Somewhat. But it is much more than that. Maybe even more than you know Mom.” The water began to pour over her cheeks, drop by drop.

“Maybe you should reveal what you know first mom. Not just to me but to everyone.” I insisted. I wanted to know her side of the story because it might make my story make more sense, and it might help the investigation.

“I told you I can’t.” She whimpered with her forehead now resting on the table.

“You can. I promise things will be okay. You don’t have to be scared any more. We will all be in this together, right guys?”

Everyone stared at me with anger, sadness, frustration, and confusion. I knew they wanted answers, and they wanted them now. “Okay. I will explain.” And I did. I told them the truth about searching for Ruth that night, and the next morning at the beach. I explained the locker, the letter and Jamie’s findings about our father. Before I continued on, with mine and Jamie’s combined findings, I paused to take a look around at everyone’s reactions.

Sam was now crying, and holding mom’s hand. Christine stared blankly at the wall, as if she didn’t want to continue listening. Jordan’s eyes lit up on fire. Everything real was coming rushing in, and his emotions were running wild. Matt just kept shaking his head, with his brows furrowed in confusion. He looked at me, then Jamie, then me, then Jamie, waiting for one of us to begin again.

“There is more. And it gets worse, then better.” I warned them. I told them next about the hotel and our findings there. This was just too much. Almost everyone now had tears in their eyes. Finally, I told them we went to the police.

“Why didn’t you go to them earlier? I can understand why you didn’t come to us earlier. You were right about it being dangerous. But why didn’t you just tell the police about your suspicions? Now you guys are in trouble with the police, right? They probably don’t even believe you do they? ... Do they!?” Matt challenged. His anger scared me. It reminded me of our father. His face even made the same shape. It was like he put on a mask of our father. I looked past it, to see Matt’s innocent, hurt interior. I don’t know what allowed me to see it, but I did, and was I thankful for it. I didn’t back down and continued my story.

“They do. They really do. And they are going to help us. They are going to find out the truth. They even said they would have someone look over me for protection. And now that you guys know, they can protect you too. And guess what else? Jamie tell them.” I said, as I nudged his shoulder.

“They are going to hire me! I get to help continue the investigation. Isn’t that great? Of course they said I would be undercover at first but still...”

My mother now looked at me with hope in her eyes. She was relieved the truth had come out, and we had support. She looked at Jamie with pride. I noticed as she stood up she didn’t have a drink with her. She didn’t even have a smoke! That was very rare to see, especially in a stressful situation like this one. She came over to give him a hug, then paused to give me one. She hugged me tightly, grabbed my face and kissed my forehead multiple times. “Thank you, thank you.” She whispered.

The others neither looked angry, nor impressed. “So? What are your guys’ thoughts? What do you think we should do next?”

Before anyone answered, Jamie replied, “Well, I think we should call Jimmy right away and tell him the family knows. Dad might be back at any moment now, and, we need to know how to approach this. They might even tell us to leave the house.”

“Good point.” Matt agreed. “I think we should go about this as cautiously as possible.”

As Jamie went to go call Jimmy, the rest of us sat at the dining table in silence. This was not at all what I expected. I figured they would have been asking me all sorts of questions, or worse; reprimanding me.

As Jamie walked back into the room, we heard the front door slam shut. Then the front table crashed to the floor. I could hear heavy boots clunking and shifting on the hardwood floors. They were getting louder. I quickly held my mom’s hand, frightened of what might happen next. I grabbed Christine’s hand as well and in seconds all of us were standing in a circle around the table holding hands as one. I could feel the energy running through us. Even through the fear, I could sense more love.

“Oh! So you started dinner without me eh?! Typical!” His hair looked like it had been through a wind storm; messy and wet. His eyes were hazy and blood shot and his face streaked with dirt. There was a trail of mud from the doorway, to the dining room. It smelled like he had bathed himself in booze, then rolled in manure. It was unbearable. I could see a dark cloudy substance all around him, with bursts of red shooting out from random directions. We held tighter.

“What the hell are you imbeciles doing? Praying!? That won’t help today, not if I have anything to do with it!” He roared.

We held tighter. “Close your eyes everyone.” They did what I said, without question. I felt a soft, comforting feeling growing in my heart. I opened my eyes, and saw a stream of white crystal running through us...connecting us. I closed my eyes again. I could hear him yelling, but now it was faint, as though it were miles away.

We held tighter. Our hands were now pulsating with divine purpose, as the beating of our hearts gave us life. I heard a loud banging noise again and again, over and over. I still felt their hands; we were still connected. But then.....our hearts were no longer beating, and our hands no longer touching.

Again, a loud bang rang through the room. I felt the earth shake beneath me as a loud thump landed to the ground. The fear was gone.

Chapter 32: Where the Truth Lies.

The silver stream was now a lake. All of us were camouflaged, and completely submerged. I still felt the energy connecting us, as though we were still holding hands. I could no longer see with my eyes but, with something else. It was a vision I have never known. Everything I saw, felt as though I was also touching, tasting and hearing it. Things appeared more alive and everything felt like it was a part of me, or I was a part of it. Everything was separate but nothing was disconnected. Complete unity, complete peace and complete love are all that I felt.

Goasila, Oochoo, Mazfanny, Harmony, Vincent and even Whoopido appeared before my spirit eyes. Even though I still wanted to know more, the urgency, anxiety and fear that came along with it, was no longer present.

“Hello Elizabeth,” they greeted me in a soft joyous manner. “How are you?” Harmony asked with slight concern in her voice.

“I am not sure. Right now, fairly content, I suppose.”

“Do you know what just happened?” Oochoo asked in a comforting tone.

“I think so. Should I?”

“No, of course not. But we would like to know if you are ready to hear it. And, we would like to show you something else.” Vincent explained. I could feel their eagerness.

“Don’t feel pressure, Miss Lizzy. You are able to do whatever you like. I even brought some goodies, if you wish to indulge.” Mazfanny consoled me, in her chipper way.

“I am good, thank you for your concerns. I am ready. I am no longer filled with pressure or anxiety. My heart is at peace, yet my mind is still wondering.”

“Ah, the mind, even when it no longer exists in the physical, it continues to play tricks.” Goasila reassured me.

Two things then came to me. First, I knew without a doubt, I no longer existed on Earth. Second, I still did *exist*.

“What about the others?” I asked calmly.

“The others are continuing their souls’ journeys.” Goasila explained.

“Will I get to see them again?” I asked holding back tears.

“Of course. As you have felt, they are here right now but you will be able to *see* them soon, very soon. All you need to know, is the whole story before your souls can move forward. I hope you are not angry with the way this turned out.” Harmony pressed on, “But it was meant to be... I know that sounds cliché but it was. You all chose this path. And, believe it or not, you are the one that made this outcome possible. If it weren’t for you, all of your deaths would have been a lot more painful and lonely. I am very proud of you Elizabeth. We all are. You now will be able to begin the next stage in your development, as will the others. They have many great adventures ahead of them. And ones with less torment than the last. There will always be torment Elizabeth, because as

you know it teaches us and helps us grow stronger. There is also great joy, for everything must consist of both, to be balanced.”

“I think I understand this more than ever now. I would like to know what will happen to my father and, the others involved in Ruth’s death. I am ready to learn now.”

“I trust deeply that you are indeed, ready.” Harmony immersed her energy in mine. It felt like the greatest hug ever received. Every tiny cell that existed within me became whole.

When I looked up I saw Ruth, then the others started to slowly appear. I felt us connect as we had around the dinner table. “They can’t see us Elizabeth.” Oochoo told me. “But they can see you. And they will be able to see what you are about to do now. Then I am afraid you will have to say good-bye.” It was odd hearing the seriousness in Oochoo’s voice. I appreciated him telling me what was about to happen.

It then came, like a splash of colour on a movie screen. It moved so fast, that I thought it might be hard to process but it wasn’t. I could see everything, everything that happened, and that was going to happen.

I saw my father meeting with Daniel for the first time at the church. That part of Daniel’s story was true. He met with him several times and offered him money. I then could hear a discussion between them about Daniel coming to work for my father, but not for Techniko1, it was for a different business, a much more dangerous one. My father offered him lots of money and power. Daniel didn’t even hesitate to take the offer.

I then saw several transactions between Daniel and many men. All of the men were men Ruth had pictures of. Harmony and the others made sure to leave out the gory parts like what those men were doing. Drugs were definitely a part of it but, it was more sexual transactions than anything. Daniel would set up under-aged girls with these men and then in the hotels these girls would allow the men to play out their fantasies.

I think that was the hardest part to digest, was not just the fact that my father was running and participating in this organization, but that were so many men doing it! I resisted the bubbling lava within my gut.

Ruth, as I expected, was killed because she knew too much about the business. The movie continued, showing us Ruth meeting Daniel at the beach through one of her friend’s. They hit it off, and she quickly became infatuated.

Daniel invited her, not knowing she was Bill’s daughter to his parties that he hosted at the fancier hotels. He told her it was for this great job he had with an outstanding company, but failed to mention it was under Techniko1. She showed up there and, found out for herself. It was indeed, a business party but the people from Techniko1 were totally clueless. Daniel was very good at picking out “clients”. Anyone that was in charge of Techniko1, and worked closely with my father, knew where Techniko1 really got its funding, and none of them seemed to mind one bit.

After she realized it was Techniko1, she wanted to get out of there quickly so our father wouldn’t see her and punish her. She did see him, but luckily, he didn’t see her. She decided to follow him. She overheard him talking to a young girl around her age. He was giving her crap for not following through on their deal, and she owed money for

stealing from the “stash”. Although Ruth knew her father was corrupt, this was far too much to handle, and she was determined to take him down.

That is when she became closer with Daniel, and never told him what she had seen. Daniel was scared, because on some level he didn't want her to get hurt. He told her he had nothing to do with it, and that he would help her but, instead of helping her, every time she got a good piece of evidence he would “lose” it. Ruth became obsessed with Daniel, and the company. He could not handle her anymore and tried to get her off his back.

He told her that she was crazy, and that she was bored. Ruth was getting fed up because he was pushing her away and, refused to tell anyone about their relationship. This is where the letter started to make sense. By this point, she knew she was right and she had to do something.

And she did. She went to one of the hotels. She told Daniel she was doing this. And, even though he cared for her, at one point, he no longer did. He didn't want to lose his job, so he went straight to Bill, and told him everything that this girl was doing. Our father quickly figured out that it was Ruth. This angered our father greatly. He began to throw things across the room in his office and yelled at Daniel. “What the hell were you thinking?!” He kept saying. And Daniel just said over and over “I don't know, I am sorry.” He even began to cry. He was afraid for his life. My father then stormed out. He then made a quick phone call to someone asking them to meet at the hotel that Ruth was going to be at.

At this point my heart sank, knowing what was going to happen next. My father hired two of his people to rape and kill Ruth then stage her suicide. It happened in the room I found myself in that night. It was her blood. My soul ached with sadness, flooding with compassion for Ruth. There were still unanswered questions.

My father- how did he know we knew? Or is that even why he took our lives? And was he even human? Did he even have a soul? How could he do this to his own family? But then I remembered something:

At the Michael Riggs Ocean View Lodge I felt something. Not just the presence of Daniel but, something far bigger and dangerous; my father. He was there. He had seen us there and followed us to the police station. Why he didn't stop us from going, I am not sure but maybe it was because he feared being thrown into jail right then and there. I know one thing for sure and that is he was feeling fear greater than he ever had before. It was his breaking point. A part of him, knew he wasn't going to get away with it anymore, and his whole world was crumbling. His true identity would be recognized, and, he would be a total outcast, living the rest of his days in jail.

Maybe that whole time he had been in denial? Maybe he was just doing this for the money, or for the power? Maybe he was so damaged that he made up an elaborate life to make him feel something inside? Perhaps when reality struck, his mind simply could not handle it. His realizations about how much destruction he had caused upon others, and himself, were too much to bear. It was our fault in his mind, that he could not have his “perfect” life anymore, and we were the reason he no longer wanted to live. So, evidently, we had to go down with him.

But was that the truth? Or was some evil energy at work? Is there evil? After my experience some probably wonder how I could doubt evil but then again, I had the great pleasure of experiencing the other dimensions, the guides and how much love there is in the universe.

My helpers appeared before me at that moment. They stood at a distance. My family, whose loving energy never separated from mine, came closer. Not a word was spoken and there were no words that needed to be spoken. We all knew what had happened and we all knew what will happen on Earth. The police will catch the others and there will be justice for all of our deaths. From our evidence, and the incident this evening, it would be very unlikely for them not to find the people responsible. With the greatest conviction, and love, our spirits hugged in the most gentle and peaceful goodbye.

I knew then, that our spirits would connect again someday, and we would learn and grow with each other. I felt the greatest appreciation that I was able to have them in my life on Earth. I even appreciated my father. If it weren't for him, I would not have been able to get this far in my spiritual journey. I learned so much from him being in my life and for that, I am thankful.

I also wished only love and happiness for him. I wondered where he was now. What was he is thinking? What was he is doing? Most would imagine he is in hell, but I knew there was no hell. The most hellish things I have seen, always occurred on Earth. He was there. I felt it, then saw it. The screen again began to sparkle and flash. He was a baby now; a sweet, innocent baby who was full of love and joy. I could tell by his loving and compassionate essence that he had chosen a better path; one that might endure the same hardships as the last, but at least his heart will remain intact.

For me, Earth was no longer a playground. I had a bigger job with bigger lessons ahead of me. "I am ready to know my destiny." I said aloud.

Chapter 33: Cloud Seven

It was dreamlike. Not fluffy clouds or golden gates. Not endless amounts of sweets or sexual pleasure. Not butterflies and rainbows. Not big comfy beds with luxurious sheets. Not great peaceful mountains and crystal clear lakes. Not children laughing and babies sleeping. No. These were the heavenly things that existed and will continue to exist on Earth. It was only a taste. Only a taste of where I was right now.

I cannot explain my surroundings for they changed every moment, every second. And every second lasted forever. Every moment was overlapping, moving forward, moving backward and everything in between; creating not the most beautiful sights but the most beautiful feelings stirring within me, around me and everywhere else. Every moment of peace, harmony, love, joy, and compassion that I ever felt on Earth in all of my lives, were unwrapping inside of me, spreading and multiplying like millions of flowers, blossoming at once.

I felt like I could never get tired, yet I was in a total state of relaxation. It was peaceful like water, powerful like fire, comfortable like Earth and harmonizing like the wind. I didn't have an urgency to go anywhere, or do anything. I had no feelings of sorrow or anger. I could not even remember what these things felt like. Yet, when I remembered my life on Earth I still felt overwhelming compassion towards Ruth, my

mother, and everyone else including my father. I also felt the same loving energy towards every other living creature that existed in the universe. I never knew I could feel so much, for so many. I felt like a cloud, which had endless amounts of rain to give life to others.

When it came time to leave this place, I was not upset, nor did I resist. I went with grace, and sureness, of the feeling within.

Chapter 34: Table of Purpose

I felt my body float into a new area of the dimension. The wonderful feelings and energies that soaked through me carried on inside of me when I sat at the Great Table that was now before me. I connected with everyone who sat around it. I saw the faces of all of my helpers and some new faces as well.

“Elizabeth. You have a new name now.” A new face that was long and wide eyed told me matter-of-factly. The tall, bald figure stood up as he said: “Your name will be chosen by you. Pick one that resonates with your soul.”

I did not respond. I only searched within myself to find feelings of love. It then rushed through me like a river that was full of life, wonder and mystery. “My name is Venita, and yours?”

“Perfect. Well, that is not my name of course, it is Yamil.” Everyone giggled.

“And I am Sinubrey,” said a feminine creature with chocolate-y wavy hair down to her curvaceous hips. Her eyes glistened a deep liquid gold.

“It is very nice to meet you Venita. My name is Joolem.” A young round face with a genuine smile of joy and excitement greeted me.

“It is very nice to meet all of you.”

The last one was toddler-like. She had long straight blond hair and eyes that had all the colours of the ocean swimming inside of them. She looked at me but she did not speak. But I heard her anyways. Her name was Katamilasoonika, but others call her Kata for short.

I nodded in her direction to let her know I had heard her. Harmony then looked in my direction, and stood up. “This is a very important meeting. We are welcoming someone very special who will serve us, the spirits of this universe and even far beyond that. She has proven herself to be courageous, compassionate and influential. She will help us lead this universe into a new direction; a better and more peaceful direction. We have failed in some areas, and she is here to help us with that failure. And help us with the new changes. I thank you for welcoming her so kindly but, now we must let her know what is in store for her.” Everyone clapped with excitement and happiness.

I too joined in. I no longer felt like Elizabeth, but Venita. I felt secure in my place. I felt no awkwardness, fear, anxiety or impatience. I continued listening intently for I knew something important was about to be said.

“As you might have noticed before you came here, you were in another dimension. Actually, we are still there but in an observatory place. This is where we can watch everything below us. I am not going to tell you the long story of how we got here.

That is not the important thing. You will learn that when you take on your new job. For now, we will just tell you what that is going to be.” Yamil explained.

“You will be centered in between here and Earth.” Sinubrey continued, “What that means is you will be a channel between the 7th dimension and the 2nd. This is very important, because the 2nd is growing more chaotic and more complicated. More negative things will be happening there because of an unbalance. Your life you just lived on Earth represented that unbalance. What your father was involved in and many other people are involved in is evidence of how bad things can get there. We never meant for things like that to occur, so often. There have always been ups and downs in human history on Earth, and some might say it was worse before, but we feel a Universal Storm coming and Earth will not survive it if we do not balance out the negative. You are the key to this Venita, for you will represent the positive and implement more of the positive on Earth.”

“That is amazing. Thank you for this. But how will I be able to do that?” I asked with intense curiosity.

“Well, it is quite simple actually. As you know already spirits go to the resting place before going to their next steps. Well, after that, some of them; people like your father will come to you, for an extra step before moving on. You will give them a taste of the 7th dimension. Of the love, compassion, purity and peace it offers. And through this experience when they go back to Earth they will be able to recognize these feelings on Earth and appreciate them. As a result, hopefully they will help create more of these positive things.”

“Is that really possible?” I didn’t mean to be sceptical but it did seem too easy.

“Don’t be mistaken Venita. Your job will not be easy, for these spirits are very damaged. It will be hard to get them out of their denial and ego and into their heart, but I, and everyone else here believes you will succeed. And, if by chance you don’t, then whatever happens, happens and is meant to be. We will all move on or continue doing our jobs the best we can. We will not be sad, angry or frustrated, nor hold any blame on you, and you will not be alone. We will all be helping you, while you help us. Together, as a unit, we will make a difference. We have in the past and will continue to do so in the future.”

“I also believe, and I will do my absolute best. I cannot ask for a better job than to show people the wonders of the 7th dimension and allow them to see it in their early development...I have one question though.”

“What is that?” Yamil asked.

“Will this change the other dimensions as well?”

“Very good question Venita. Well, yes and no. The changes that we hope to see on Earth will most likely shift the others as well, for everything is connected and anything that happens on one will always affect the other, but this will be for the better. Something so positive will only have good effects on everything around it, unless there is an unbalance. It can go the other way too of course.”

I nodded in agreement and then, sat in silence for a while, observing everyone else. They looked tranquil and rested. Although a great sense of responsibility was now held upon my shoulders, the feelings of love never left me.

The Guides faded from me, moving farther and farther away, but it did not bother me for I was again in my rightful place. I felt secure and confident. I was away from the others but still felt they were present. I was grateful for their support.

The warmth of sensual oils and refreshing sprays of water covered my whole body. I wasn't asleep, nor was I awake. Airiness then lifted my spirits to dance peacefully. The feeling never left me. I did not have to force it to come, nor did I have to struggle to hold onto it. It was just there. It was me. And it was everywhere.

The first time these positive feelings tipped over like a glass of water losing its balance, was when my first visitor came. I knew this visitor, even though I had never been in his presence before. He had affected my Earth life in some way, but how? I then looked deeper into his heart. It was cloudy and dirty. He hurt someone... someone I loved... Ruth.

Sinubrey was right; this was not going to be easy.

Let love, harmony, joy, and compassion rise in you like fire, push through you like water, fill you up like earth and dance in you like wind.

THE END

Notes: Let Elizabeth aka Venita be a reminder to do good even when you fear, to love the unlovable and to be open when all doors are closed. This is dedicated to my mother who has inspired me and allowed greatness to manifest within myself and others.

From Level Seven