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Reconstructed

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RECONSTRUCTED

by

Ashley Brackett

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(English)

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ABSTRACT

Reconstructed takes the opposite approach to the typical cancer narrative. Instead of witnessing the diagnosis and subsequent decline of a character, the reader is presented with a woman seeking to rebuild herself. She begins her journey fearing that her physical changes have altered her identity. She feels distanced from her everyday life and the things she once enjoyed, as if she's merely playing the part of what she used to be. As she begins to heal from this traumatic period in her life, she must face the reality of the situation and redefine what it means to be herself.

The story is told from the perspective of this woman and is conveyed through fragments of her life. Each chapter features a distinct post-treatment moment where she reflects on what has happened and where she may be headed in the future. These moments are characterized by a slowing of narrative time, allowing these often short fragments to be extended and explored thoroughly.

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INTRODUCTION

This novella was inspired by my mother's recent battle with breast cancer. My family and I watched her struggle through the pain and inconvenience of treatment with her head held high and her attitude, good. That is the story that I didn't want to write, as it's been done so many times that it is no longer interesting. It is the story that people come to expect out of a loved one who is diagnosed with the illness. The truly captivating part of the ordeal was seeing my mother attempt to regain her life. During this time, my mother's calm exterior cracked and I caught a glimpse of the exhaustion and frustration lurking beneath the surface. I became vigilant of the way she styled her wig in the morning, or looked at herself when it was taken off. I noticed her become distanced from the activities she had so readily done prior to, and even during, treatment. Almost a year of her life had been spent defined by her illness and it was as if she didn't know what to do after all risks had been eradicated. What did it mean for her to go back to being herself? Did losing her hair and her breasts somehow change who she was?

I decided these were the sorts of questions that I wanted to pursue throughout this story, using my mother as reference for the way this character may react to coming back into reality. I wanted to expose more of the threads of doubt hiding behind the face of a cancer survivor to try and better understand this odd spike of negativity following recovery. In doing this, I added some dark humor at the character's expense to avoid that stereotypical depressing atmosphere. Though there are still many things that I would change about this story, I am pleased with the overall narrative of an individual trying to

reconnect with their previous identity. Moving forward, I think I'd like to draw more on these philosophical questions of identity, making the story more relatable.

In terms of the story, I've also attempted to make the character seem cut off from the outside world (at least initially.) I wanted it to seem almost as if she's looking into a fishbowl and observing the creatures inside, completely sealed off from that. This imagery starts in chapter one where she is not only emotionally separated from everyone, but opts to keep her car window closed, sealing herself inside of her car. Later, when she interacts with her students and frenemy, Derek, she retreats into her own head in an attempt to put up the same sort of barrier.

I decided to drop some elements of the story as time went on. Initially, I had planned to put a heavier focus on womanhood in terms of identity and explore how the loss of the character's breasts tie into that. I found that this was very difficult to write and would be better suited to a much longer version of the story where I could explore subplots. There are still some scraps relating to womanhood that a reader can draw on, but they're vague and need to be refined. I find that taking a more generalized approach to identity allowed my writing to have a greater scope, so I'm still happy with what I've achieved in the final project.

I reused the car window metaphor, with debatable success, at the end of the story to show a budding symbolical openness. Toward the end chapters, I also try to show her associating with people like her mom and grandmother, even though it's all in her mind. These are the first hints at her coming back to reality before she begins to crack her window. In the future, I'd like to show her more concretely inside the fishbowl by having

her actively interact with her students. Perhaps allowing the story to get completely outside of her head and become purely physical at this point could help.

I feel as though, compared to the storyline, I experimented more in the writing itself. In some ways, it's unfortunate that I tried to do so many new things at once: longer fiction, playing with narrative time, the almost stream of consciousness narration, and avoiding the word 'cancer.' It was frustrating and difficult. I wrote pages and pages for this novella that I later deleted, unsatisfied with the result. However, I'm ultimately glad that I did try something so different from what I'm used to, as I've learned more from writing this story than I have any other. Much of what I've learned is something I would love to try working with again.

The most intriguing technical aspect I played with was narrative time. In the past, I have been known to "rush" a story. They ended up looking more or less like summaries, as I ignored any of the detail that would make them interesting. For *Reconstructed*, I wanted to do the exact opposite of that. So I started off by taking the last leg of a car ride and slowing that down until it became the entirety of my first chapter. This was agonizing. I spent a lot of time staring at words on a screen thinking "what do I do now?" The inclusion of the character's thoughts is what changed this. A person can be lost in their own head for what feels like hours, only to look at the clock and find that a few short minutes have passed. I frequently do this myself, especially in the car. So I decided to slow time by getting into the character's head and mixing their thoughts with the real time fidgeting and action. Adjusting time like this produced a chapter that was so much more compelling than if I had written it at a single, standard pace. I feel that this is one area where my writing was particularly successful.

After this experience, I would also like to try writing long fiction again. Most of my stories fall between ten and twenty pages, so I'm used to a writing formula that favors rapid development where almost every action matters with regard to the plot. I'm very comfortable with writing stories of this length as a result of practice. I decided to read some novellas in order to get a sense of how to go about making the change, and thought that the process would be simple. Like all fiction, there seemed to be a number of ways to go about telling the story and I thought focusing on my character and her development would be almost identical to the way I do it in short fiction. However, switching to longer fiction like *Reconstructed* was much more difficult than I thought.

I had the most difficulty with three aspects of this change: developing my character, deciding what mattered to the story and figuring out where a chapter ends. The first two aspects are, in many ways, related. In order to develop the character, I needed to mention more than what was directly related to her illness. I needed to show that she had an identity to find to begin with. In order to do this, I needed to include sections of text that were seemingly irrelevant like her love of Arbor Day and tacky knickknacks or how she feels about certain craft projects. Some instances of this were more successful than others, but I nonetheless feel that it is important to hint that her life extends beyond the instances witnessed in each chapter.

Aside from this, I had to determine which arbitrary events in her life were worthy of a chapter. Realistically, I could have found a way to make almost any circumstance work, but at the time of writing I was afraid of choosing something and sticking to it. As if there was a "best" option I was somehow missing out on each and every time I settled on a chapter topic. Though these moments also happen in short fiction, I was caught off

guard by just how many choices I had to make in a longer piece. Once I forced myself to let the other options go and continued writing, I began to lose my strange attachment to them and the act of writing flowed more naturally. Though I'll never enjoy this decision-making, I'm glad that I have learned to work through it and believe that I will be able to do so in future works.

The last aspect I had difficulty with was where to end each chapter. Though I knew what I wanted to convey through each, I had a hard time deciding when I was done and what the end should look like. In fact, I found it easier to write the ending for the story as a whole than to write the end for each chapter. It's an area that I still need to work on and that I am the least satisfied by. I feel as though it became a little easier after each chapter, but I still need a lot of practice.

In this piece, I also tried another new thing: avoiding the character's name or the word 'cancer.' I have exactly two brief references to the character's name in the entirety of the story: a student refers to the main character as "Miss Caulfield" in chapter two and Derek refers to her as "Colleen" in chapter three. This stems from a mistake I made in the first chapter. As it is weird for someone to think their own name, and I didn't want to mention it too early and sound like an amateur, I put off naming the character and planned to go back to the first chapter at a later date and add it in. However, I forgot to do so and ended up beginning my second chapter before I realized my mistake. Ultimately, I realized that not knowing the character's name didn't impact the story any and I rather liked avoiding it. The only reason I ended up mentioning it later was to make her seem more connected to the outside world and the people she is used to interacting with. Working on this story further, I might even remove those two instances and work on

developing her personal relations outside of that. I personally like the idea of having a sympathetic character that one can connect to without even knowing their name.

Other than that, I avoided the word ‘cancer’ like the plague. The word in itself has so many negative connotations that I didn’t want to put into the reader’s head. I feel that alluding at her illness rather than directly saying it diminishes some of that depressing atmosphere and helped me keep the tone somewhat light despite the circumstances. Like the character’s name, it also would have been a little odd for the character to use the word in her own head. Also like the character’s name, I find the story more compelling without it. Letting someone read between the lines is always a little risky, as a reader will almost always misinterpret a work, but I feel that it’s obvious enough that I can avoid that issue. Knowing what a story is about despite it never telling you is something interesting that I’ve never actually encountered in a piece of fiction.

The thing I am the least certain about, however, is my narration. It’s difficult to get the character to convey or describe what I want her to and still have it seem natural within her own head. There are quite a few instances in this story where she’s too cognizant of what’s going on and it’s a little jarring to read. On one hand, I really love the way that the reader sees everything through her eyes. In one chapter, I discuss her paranoia with regards to the employees at a grocery store. This is a moment that is much more impactful when put into the character’s shoes rather than objectively stated by a third person, which is the other point of view I’d consider. I also like that this can set me up to show her as an unreliable narrator, and allow the reader to reach some conclusions about the situation that could have otherwise been revealed by a third person narrator.

Ideally, I'd like to keep the first person narration and alter it so that every sentence seems as though it would naturally be in this character's head. I think there's a level of complexity I could reach using this method that I'd be unable to ever achieve using third person. However, third person is also a simpler form and if I wanted to improve the story quickly, then it would do so. I would like to rewrite this story in the third person and compare and contrast the two to determine which does *Reconstructed* the most justice. Considering what point of view is best to convey my story is something that I had never put much thought into before this project and, as frustrating as it is, I'm glad that I've learned to consider it.

Though I'm still not entirely satisfied with this version of the story, the skills I've obtained throughout this process will be able to help me improve this story and develop others in the future. I've been left tired and frustrated by this writing process, and by the time I finished writing, I didn't think I'd ever want to do it again. But now that some time has passed, I feel reenergized toward fiction writing and I'm excited to work on more diverse projects. There's a weird masochism that comes with writing and this thesis has confirmed that I can't get away from that. Even if this story never becomes anything beyond a thesis, it's profoundly affected me and I will carry it with me for as long as I pursue my goal of being a writer.

CHAPTER 1

Disuse has really done a number on this window crank. Keeping the window rolled up and the car airtight seems to help the dust bunnies breed, but it's better this way. Three strips of adhesive and an overtightened elastic don't seem secure enough for the thin lace front to withstand the breeze unleashed by cracking the damn thing open. Though it feels as if the top third of my head will have to pop off for this mop to fly away, I won't take the chance. Even if it was sewn into my scalp, the stitches were superglued down and I had a personal butler to hold my hair into place at all times, I wouldn't reach for that crank. As far as I'm concerned, it is impossible to unroll and I should never try to do it. If I could drive through the Nevada desert in August without airflow all those years ago, I can do it now.

However, the broken air conditioner and black paint don't really help the stuffiness of this death-box. It brings back memories of pimply teenage years spent slaving over pools of darkened peanut oil during those traumatizing July lunch shifts. That familiar moisture surrounds budding follicles, trapping body heat against barren scalp. The fast food wrappers baking in the back seat radiating the scent of miscellaneous fried goods, and the fumes dance around me like the rotten ghost of Colonel Sanders.

It's almost tempting to let just a smidge of fresh air in. To leave just a little hairline crack at the very top of that arching window to escape KFC Hell for just a moment. But my personal FryDaddy is definitely preferable to public embarrassment, and sweating like tied-up rodeo hog is a price I am willing to pay. If hats or bandanas

were allowed at work, I would trade my haystack for a halo in an instant. Being buffed bald by the wind could be a thing of the past.

There are probably worse things to be ashamed of than my head. Like this car. The driver's seat is super kitsch these days. Black leather interior is trapped underneath pastel leopard print padding that was rescued from a Big Lots discount bin and, lost inside a tube of cushion and faux fur, the belt is tackier than ever. I'm still unsure whether or not this compromises my safety any more than the vehicle itself already does. Instead of work, it looks like I'm about to head off to the world's largest rubber band ball with a few Hawaiian T-shirts and a fanny pack full of camera lenses I don't know how to use. I bet my brother never expected me to embrace his gag gifts like this.

Sometimes, I think I should go whole hog and add some fuzzy dice or cheap beads around the rearview mirror. A couple of cat bobble heads and beanie babies would really help camp it up and make it look intentional. It's hard to stop myself, but buying more garbage would just be a waste of my already limited funds. I only need the bare minimum to prevent silicone from being lodged into my ribcage during a tragic "stuck seatbelt" incident. A wobbling velvet kitten, though endearing, isn't capable of that. However, the odd decorations would have helped draw attention away from the wig melting down the side of my face. Maybe I'll head down the Goodwill after work and look for something. I'd much prefer someone judge my knickknacks than myself.

Even on the backroads, I am always surrounded by other drivers. There are a lot of people in Massachusetts. They extend their necks at four way intersections, their prying eyes assessing everyone. Gazes turn toward my uninspected, unregistered Taurus, slip up the rusted hood and pollen-blanketed windshield and rest on me. Maybe they're

busy looking at my obnoxious interior or they may just be zoning out, but they look in my direction every time. I pull down my visor and look in the mirror. In response to their gaze, I fiddle with the wig. I'm careful not to let the entire piece shift at once to reveal a sharp line of slightly stubbly skin. The last intersection in my journey pops up, and I'm relieved to see no one is there. Today, I don't have to dance around with my road-mates.

Not that it's the worst thing in the world. Usually, they look past me and continue their journey to wherever it is they're headed. Probably off to the closest Star Market or Wegmans on a weekly grocery run. Once they've cleared the stop sign, I push the visor back into place and take my turn. If there's more than one other car, I can hear them rev their engine as I drive through, nearly hitting me as they speed by. Almost everyone here is too impatient to wait for more than one car.

After we part ways, they will forget having ever seen the woman and her illegal transportation but I will remember having shared the intersection with them. Most days, I go home and think about every moment that could have revealed what I've become. That's when I analyze these intersection encounters. Was my wonky implant obvious? Did my wig shift? Analyzing every second of the day, thinking about any moment I could have looked *wrong*. I need to make sure that mistakes aren't repeated. I pat my three strips of adhesive and double check that the elastic so tight there are imprints underneath. Every day I get closer to perfecting my disguise.

Everyone who knows says this wig looks very natural. Since it came off of someone else's head and costs an arm and a leg, I would hope so. Insurance paid for almost all of this pricy human hair despite refusing to cover almost everything else I've ever needed. I didn't even know you could get a "cranial/hair prosthesis" prescription

and, up until the Great Fallout, there wasn't a need for it. Good job holding onto that prescription, me! Never again will a non-issue turn to a nuclear meltdown over a trash bin full of tissues and tresses. Having at least one of my expenses covered was one of the few pleasant experiences of the summer.

The young woman running the hair replacement clinic was spirited and helpful and so nice. There can't be anyone in the world who loves their job as much as she does. Even I hit a breaking point from time to time. Telling her what I wanted was the easiest part of that whole shebang. She made sure to get the color and length I had requested, even though she had to special order it. And the stylist really helped turn it into something characteristically me. After cutting, bleaching, toning, thinning, examining, blow drying and back seat styling from a nosy coworker, it was identical to how I kept my hair before. She replicated the way bleached sections had been growing out and the exact cut of my bangs. On the mannequin, it looked perfect. I thought I could easily pass as the old me with this Holy Grail.

In the Proton Center, other patients would gush over how lucky I was to keep my hair. Fooled by the intricate illusion, they oohed and ahed every morning even if they had seen it before. But the hair isn't really mine, and the praise is undeserved. The wig feels wrong. Maybe it's a little too full or, perhaps, a little too textured. Maybe my body is instinctively unsettled by the foreign DNA parading around my skull like it belongs there. Or, most likely, it could be the way I feel like an old man. Particularly, one relying on a combination of Toppik, extra hold hair spray and comb overs to conceal what time and testosterone have taken from him. Regardless, there's something not right about it and the folks at the hospital were definitely full of-- well-intentioned-- bologna.

I take another turn and find myself back on the main road, with the regular load of traffic. I hope that my eighth graders don't notice any of the changes. They're more perceptive than you'd think. With the smallest amount of luck, they'll see my pink alligator shoulder and write it off as a lingering sunburn from the months I should have spent outside. I missed all three of the estate sales I planned on attending, but they have no way of knowing that. They can assume that I went out and spent all of my money on neat little trinkets to add to my collection and clutter up my apartment. If the redness doesn't fade fast enough, I can switch to long-sleeved shirts for a while and go back to my usual wardrobe when it returns to a healthier shade. If it ever returns to a healthier shade, that is.

I've already thought of a number of other ways to distract them from looking too closely. Weekly pop quizzes and bright holographic stickers from the Dollar Tree are my first line of defense. There's something about a flimsy decal that makes children, and adults, willing to do all of the tedious work they've been shirking. When they have cheesy inspirational phrases and smiley faced on them it's even better.

In case of emergency, I spent the last week putting together a Jeopardy clone containing only questions about Sherman's March to the Sea. In the entire time I have taught the Civil War, no class has actually paid attention to that unit, so it should take quite a while to get through. Blinded by a whirlwind of work, they'll believe that I am the same so-lame-they're-hip teacher that made this year's lesson plans and the same so-lame-they're-hip teacher that sent them away last June.

My pulse quickens as I see the building begin to peek through gaps in the traffic. It's a large, flat, generic-looking box with the occasional tiny window dotting along the

side. At first glance, and maybe second or third, you'd probably mistake it for an abandoned Wal-Mart Supercenter. There's something unnerving and distinctly corporate about impeccably square grey-brick buildings. Unkempt English ivy stretches along chipped walls, swallowing up some of the rare windows as it extends itself. In another year or so, it'll probably claim my window, too. The lawn tries to mimic it, but grounds keeping's half-hearted biannual mowing prevents the property from looking too shabby.

The welcome sign isn't terribly noticeable as, at some point in time, a bush decided to overtake it. Conspicuous yellow school buses are the only obvious indicators that this is a school. It's so unassuming that, unless you know what you're looking for, you could easily walk past the school without having ever realized it was there. I wish I could harness that magic: the art of hiding in plain sight. Inside, it feels as though you've disappeared, too. The staff and students exist in our own world with each other. Despite the depressing appearance and terrible gardening, this is one of my favorite places.

I take one last turn into the staff parking lot, making sure to head towards the back of the lot. There's an overgrown shrub in the right corner, which can help block the front of my car from being seen. And to think that I complained about it last year! I still have to get my car inspected and registered and, until then, I really don't need a fine. I have a feeling I will have to park here and lie low for quite a while. Never again will I take nature's gifts for granted and petition for their removal.

The box of paper and office supplies in the passenger seat is begging to be unbuckled and carried inside. There's a place for everything and everything needs to be in its place. As I reach for the seatbelt, I can see single file strings of neon clad tweens bobbing around through the still-sealed window. An unending stream of students is

hopping out of their parents' minivans and running off as fast as they can to join their friends. At the front door, the single file strings merge temporarily before being bottlenecked back into order as the crowd trickles into the hallways. Students arrive later and later as the year goes on and some just stop coming altogether. This sort of congestion will only return in three hundred and sixty five days when the whole circus starts anew.

I already know that most of my homeroom is inside. Unlike most of the kids their age, they value attendance and punctuality. I rarely need a substitute, but when I do these students are the ones I enlist to make sure everything goes smoothly. Each day they do something more impressive than the last. I look forward to what they have in store for the upcoming months. Most of the other teachers are lying when they say they don't have a favorite student, but my class is too good for me to pick just one. Even as an adult, I'm not as responsible as some of these kiddos.

The less punctual, though certainly not less bright, children are still making their way through. They're easy to spot by the puffy fabric paint on their blindingly green T-shirts. We spent the last day decorating them so that they'd stand out among their peers and I can see a few jealous eyes looking at their improvements. My office supply box has more pink paint stowed inside just in case they need to touch up any flaws. I should have them add more decorations, and maybe collect signatures, just before their graduation. Of the doddling students, two stick out more than the rest. Jayden and Kayla, unsurprisingly, don't even look like they're trying to get in. They've distracted themselves with friends they haven't seen for months, gabbing away like they do in class. Having been locked away for the summer, my ears missed the sound of their ceaseless chatting and strain

themselves just to catch a smidge of their conversation. Of course, I also miss the silly faces they throw at each other when they think I'm not paying attention. Thankfully, none of the kids have changed since I last saw them.

This is my second year with the same batch of students. Soon they will move on to one of the nearby high schools and I'll only see them from time to time in the Wegmans Pop Tart aisle. Next year, there will be no familiar faces and my new students will be recognizable by the color of their undecorated shirts and nothing else. Every time my students move on, I feel as though the next group will never be able to live up to the first. But the old group is gone and I have to continue pushing forward. As time goes on, I become adjusted to the new guys and dote on them just as I did the first. My heart still breaks when they leave, though. Like a parent whose kid has marched off to college and left them in the dust. And half of the teachers dragging themselves to work today are dealing with that grief and starting the healing process. I certainly don't envy them.

The air conditioner, if it can even be called that, cuts out as I jerk the key from the ignition. One of these days, I hope that it will kick back in and regulate temperature instead of just pushing around stale air. I don't have much hope, but it's a nice daydream. The humid weather has caused these threads of some stranger's hair to cement themselves to my clammy five-head. Looking down, I can see that that new clinical strength antiperspirant has already failed me. I guess sweat-free underarms was just another pleasant daydream doomed to crash and burn.

I scratch blindly at the visor until the mirror comes tumbling down and smacks me in the nose. The head situation doesn't seem to be doing too well. Unplastered sections of hair have frizzed up and gravitated toward the sky. Overall, the wig looks like

the bastard child of a storm cloud and the Bride of Frankenstein. Not my greatest look but, to be honest, I'm pleasantly surprised by my appearance. It's strikingly similar to the first day of school last year, sweaty arms and all. That has to be a good sign. Perhaps the changes aren't as noticeable as I think they are. I suppose that, no matter what I do, I'm eternally destined to look like hot garbage instead of an updated Ms. Frizzle. As long as that is how I normally look, I think I'm okay with it. It's better than looking like a completely different person.

As the last of the stragglers make their way inside, I turn back to collect my unbuckled office supplies from their throne. There are only a few minutes left until classes officially start and, if being tardy on the first day reflects poorly on students, it's even worse for the teachers. Principal Eastridge is the biggest sourpuss the district has ever seen. If anyone is late, student, teacher or custodian, he will find out and he will give you a stern talking-to. After the infamous Field Day incident, everyone knows the man is off his rocker. We take more care to avoid him nowadays and hope that the students never have to see the vein-throbbing, steaming, yet somehow perfectly calm, rants.

I wish I could drive home, pack up all my belongings, cross the Canadian border and make a new life for myself. I could wear flannel and buy a maple farm. It can't be that hard to shill maple candies, syrup and kettle-cooked popcorn. I've always been great at haggling, too. But I know that I can't do that. Not because it's nearly impossible to run a successful business with no prior experience, but because I need to keep moving forward and, after today, it can only get easier. If all else fails, I can always go back to my nightly analyses and correct myself.

The car door pops open with a few robust kicks. It's more than obvious why this flying metal deathtrap has such a hard time passing inspections, but I just can't bring myself to lay it to rest. For extra expired-inspection-sticker-covering security, I grab an old sun shield from the trunk and lay it over the windshield. Once upon a time, I took painstaking care of my personal transport, and now I only take care of it when it'll prevent me from getting a fine. An officer is probably not going to want to tango with the hulking bush, but every extra effort is worth it. I'd be reasonably upset if the car disappeared altogether, but neither my wallet nor my heart can handle a one hundred and fifty dollar ticket. I have enough medical bills as it is, going into cardiac arrest won't help.

The first step toward the building is excruciating, partly because I'm afraid of what my kids will notice, but mostly due to the pain radiating from fingertips to elbow. It's as if my nerves have decided to throw a rave without permission. Lifting heavy objects has never been particularly enjoyable, but it is even less so after that surgeon scooped out my flesh and left me empty. My hollowed arms feel like they're going to give out, drop the box and break my toes. The broken toes are, in all honesty, preferable, but I need to get to work and make money so dropping the box is not an option.

Spaghetti arms and macaroni elbows lug the box onto a shoulder for easier transport. The pain becomes bearable, but doesn't go away entirely. Thankfully, my classroom is on the first floor of the generic building. Judging by the squatting crab walk technique I've been forced to employ, I don't think I could manage to haul this up the stairs by myself. Asking for help is out of the question. I pass by the front office as quickly as possible, ignoring the sour-faced secretaries and Principal Eastridge. Once

they're out of sight, my steps become lighter. There's a growing bounce to my walk and I can feel my feet glide past each other faster and faster. I'm unsure whether I am nervous or excited, but I think I am ready to get back to work. I think I'm ready to see my kids.

CHAPTER 2

All schools smell the same. It's a slightly musty aroma, like something you'd find pressed into the pages of a paperback science fiction novel that's been sitting in the back of a secondhand bookstore since the 1950's. That scent hasn't always been so precious to me. In fact, my childhood-self despised it. Since my first days in elementary school, I associated it with that horrifying introduction to kindergarten and learning that Mother wouldn't always be within arm's reach. It was a scent that meant my security blanket was gone and I was on my own in a crowd of children screaming their throats raw. Their hollering made me feel as though I needed to be just as scared as they were. I needed to react in the way I was expected to.

I don't know when this scent became so comforting. In elementary school, it used to make my heart race and my body sweat, but now I take secret pleasure in cracking open my desk drawer and getting blasted with a concentrated dose. Instead of uvulas rocketing violently around unhappy throats, crying because the beehive-haired principal scared the daylights out of them, it brings to mind peaceful planning periods spent placing little green army men on a 2D Gettysburg.

I take one whiff of my drawer and I'm brought back to a different planning period, during my earliest years as a teacher. I've got a fresh mug of coffee and a stack of handmade "get well" cards from the week I took off for strep throat. One of the kids has stuffed a packet of McDonald's apple slices inside his card, and the lump has dented the cover art. I sit down at my desk, the old one on the dark side of the building, and flip

through the hefty pile. I'm pretty sure I gave those kids extra credit, though that might have been another bunch.

One more whiff, and I'm out on the playground, leading the seventh graders in a game of Simon Says. Trisha's clunky plastic bangles have given her movement away. She slowly raises her gaze to mine, fully aware that I know. I don't even have to tell her she's out before she plods off to sit with the others. There are two people left now, neither from my class, each struggling to hear commands over the roar of their friends. I trick them both up with a bunny hop, leaving no one to claim victory. I was one hell of a Simon that day.

I decide to stop huffing my drawer like a weirdo and continue to put away my belongings. As I arrange the sheets of paper and stickers inside, I spot my students huddling by the tiny windowsill. It's a popular location for shooting the breeze or, in this case, comparing answers on the summer assignment like last year. I gave them an easy one this time, too.

"Guys! That totally didn't happen until later," Ivy whines. Most of the class manages to contain their dismay, but Jayden openly groans at her antics. The first day of school and the girl is already getting a bit loud. Though I don't think that's really their issue right now.

When I was young, I was a lot like Ivy. She is confident that her answers are always right and tries to help everyone out by imparting her wisdom unto them. In other words, a know-it-all. Unfortunately, she's also almost always wrong and will never own up to any errors. Even when she knows she's made a mistake, she'd rather go down with

her ship than change her mind. It doesn't matter how many people disagree or what they think of her for it. She's unshakeable.

It can be annoying at times, but it's hard to hate someone when you were once just like them. Actually, I was probably even worse. At least once, my math teacher made me stay after school because I wouldn't stop trying to "correct" her on the slope-intercept form. Ivy hasn't brought me to that point just yet. Even though the drawbacks of that undying confidence are pretty obvious, I wish I could be as sure of myself as I was at thirteen.

By the grace of God, no one appears to be swapping events on their cardstock timelines at her insistence. Last year, her convincing certainty had lead everyone astray on their final project and, after having to make them redo it to avoid failing an entire class, I'm glad they're not falling for the same trick again. Not that I blame them for being wishy-washy the first time around. It's not difficult to doubt your own choices when someone else is so content with theirs, and young minds aren't assertive enough to resist the pull. They're just beginning to forge their identities and it's hard to be like Ivy when you barely know yourself. Someday, when they know themselves better, they'll be almost as unshakeable as Ivy. If they're lucky, they'll be able to have that security forever.

I close my drawer and open the next. It doesn't take much to send you back those times of uncertainty. Your television drama transitions into an Arby's commercial, you get a call, and before that commercial ends you have all of these new doubts and your favorite show has been tainted. You try to keep hold of your body as you fall down the rabbit hole, but piece by piece you fall apart until you hit the bottom and there's nothing

left. A surgery, two wonky bags of silicone, some chemo and proton radiation later and your Arby's commercial becomes the highlight of the entire experience. Doctors try to piece you back together with foreign substances and nice words, but you can't leave as you came. You're only half of a woman now. The rest of your parts have been stripped away and tossed into the garbage. How can you know what you are when all that you were has been taken from you? I try to remember how I came to know myself in the first place, as if replicating the process will fix everything.

When I was a preschooler, I knew a little bit about myself. I was a girl just like all the other girls. I had long hair and I wore pastel pink jumpers with flower patterned tights which were always kept clean. At recess, I'd go join the clique of girls playing with Barbie dolls on the pavement.

The bossiest member of the group assigns everyone a character based off of their appearance or how popular they were. On a good day, I would get to be Teresa, but today she declares, "Here. You can be Skipper," and releases the doll from her chubby baby hand. I pretend to be happy and Barbie's boring sister in front of my face, chirping my best impression of the character at the other girls. At the end of the day, I put the doll back in the classroom bin and promise myself I'll get there first next recess. I never got there first.

Every girl wanted to grow up and be a woman like Barbie or Teresa or Midge or Christie, and we tried to emulate their plastic, smiling faces and impossibly small waists. We would all dress the same, act the same, play the same and talk the same to fit the mold of what each of us supposed we ought to be. I had a shallow understanding of myself, but it was something. As long as I followed all the other little girls, I thought that

I was doing exactly what I needed to. I tried to meet the minimum criteria so that I could grow up to be that plastic figure that everyone liked. I wasn't anything beyond being a girl at that point.

As a gradeschooler, I knew a bit more. I liked arts and crafts and I didn't mind covering my jumper in stiff spots of glue. Dolls were traded for construction paper and scissors, which I used to make up to five hand turkeys a day. Hand-turkey-maker was one of a few hats I wore, and kids would come up asking for them in exchange for a quarter. At some point I had tweaked my design and created hand-peacocks in a bid to get more customers.

With the new customers came new friends, and my friends had become more diverse than they had ever been. There were boys who sat by the art corner and shared their glitter with me and girls that had bobbed hair and chased after the Barbie clique with fistfuls of worms. I didn't feel as though I had to blend in with any of them in particular. There wasn't a "female" schedule to follow, and boys were no longer the epitome of everything I stood against. I was free to leave Skipper behind and finger paint the classroom red without trying to emulate every other little girl. Minimum criteria still had to be met, set forth by the girls who had maintained their ways, but it wasn't important enough to strive for. So I chose to keep making my turkeys and peacocks. I was only vaguely aware of it, but I had an identity beyond the frills and bows. Over the next decade or so, this novel idea was improved.

I didn't fully understand who I was until I was completely done with school and out on my own. Without parents or teachers giving me some idea of what to do, I had to figure out what I really wanted out of life and what I liked to do. And I started going to

estate sales and Goodwills and collecting odds and ends to put together and sell for way too much money on eBay. Pristine jumpers and tights had worn away to hand-me-down t-shirts and blue jeans with holes in the back pockets. I was a weird, slightly frumpy lady who liked old shit, cats and learning and it worked out so well for me. I had completely forgotten the rules to being a woman because I didn't care about being the most feminine dame on the block.

And then all the things I hadn't cared about started to matter again.

The first thing I was given after surgery was a pink tote bag care package. At the time, it was great. I was hungry and there were granola bars inside with little chunks of chocolate and it was everything my drug-addled brain could have wanted. Even though pink isn't my favorite color, the bag was a nice gesture. But it was only the beginning of the brigade of cutesy things that didn't actually help the situation.

Free shirts used to be my jam, but after the fourth or fifth eye-gougingly pink "you go, girl" tee, it starts getting old. I must have stocked two Goodwills with nothing but those ugly shirts in the last few months. I can't imagine anyone actually liking these things. It sets you all the way back to the preschool stage of defining yourself through your gender and favorite color. I didn't spend two weeks leaking duck-sauce-looking fat juices through tubes strung through open wounds to be treated like a child.

That constant barrage of pink and concerns over how I felt about my hair and chest forced me into the mold again. When the nurses lean down into your face and condescendingly ask how you're holding up without your tits, it reinforces the idea that that's what's important. When your mother calls you and asks if you want some strange

folk treatment for hair growth, and you know it's garbage, you shouldn't be tempted to try it "just in case."

I need to figure myself out again but it's frustrating to have to start back at the beginning. Everywhere I turn, people show me their "I Heart Boobies" bracelets and try to reassure me that everything looks "natural." But I don't have long hair. I don't even have the bob that was so popular in elementary school. Fatless, non-functioning impostor breasts lurk beneath my skin to helping me lie to others about what happened.

And, to prevent any future estrogen-related issues, I have been left barren. I don't even want my own children and I am made to feel bad about it. I remember my doctor coming to see me on my last day of inpatient care, sitting at his little computer stool and recommending I see a therapist over it. As if I'm unhappy that a huge risk has been removed from my life forever.

The last drawer slams shut, a victim of my soured thoughts. Here I am, a grumpy, frumpy something-or-other taking in the glow of naïve children and spoiling it with the gusto of an old jaded witch. If there is any doubt that I have changed, this negativity erases it.

Having finished swapping answers, the kids settle into their individual desks. The students always arrange themselves differently in their second year. Several groups of friends will dive for the back corners where they think I can't see them passing notes or hear them crunching on their lunches well before noon. Every now and again there are kids that no one would ever expect to get as close as they do. Their interests or attitudes just seem too different for them to get along. I always think it is a little weird when it

happens but then I remember that, at this age, they don't need friends that are carbon copies of themselves.

“Good morning, Miss Caulfield! Did you have a good summer?” Kayla peeps from the middle of her cluster. She always waits until the bell is about to ring to spark up a conversation, as if staving off class for even a minute is the most valuable thing she could do with her life. I barely manage to suppress my smile. I'll pretend I don't know about her hidden agenda.

“It was great,” I reply, “I spent every day brainstorming quiz questions. You guys are in for a treat this year.” Young faces freeze with eyes so open I can see hamsters turning wheels through their pupils. The urge to smile grows stronger, and the moment my face starts to crack the children have spotted my weakness. They erupt into a chorus of good-humored booing and I respond with an exaggerated curtsy.

Kayla wrinkles her nose at the display, having accepted the response as my final answer. She doesn't like receiving incomplete information. As a talkative person, she's developed into a bit of a gossip. I'm afraid to give her even a hint of the truth, as she might challenge herself to follow my clues. I already picture the hellion digging through my desk when I step out to use the bathroom or badgering me until I accidentally let something slide.

She doesn't pry any further for my summer itinerary, but something is wrong with her gaze. Like all the others, she is facing forward and her eyes are resting on me, but she's focused on something other than my face. My flaky, irradiated shoulder.

“Holy crap. Did you vacation on the surface of the sun?” she spouts without warning. “Your arm looks like Jayden's phone!” Kayla snatches the device from his desk

and runs toward me to compare the two. Sure enough, the cracked screen perfectly mimics my scales. I need time I don't have to weigh my options for a response. I could deflect the question entirely and chide Jayden for the horrific state of his phone or ignore it entirely and tell everyone to sit down and take out their pencils for class, but either of those options will activate Kayla's "sleuth mode." There's no way to get out of answering the question. My mind runs through a thousand excuses, trying to find the most convincing response.

"I forgot to rub in my sunblock and fell asleep on the beach." To make up for the bad excuse, I try my hardest to sound sincere. This is something I'll go home and beat myself up over tonight. I just know this is going to go bad. I shouldn't have worn a tank top today but it was so hot when I woke up and I knew the car ride was going to be hell with this wig and I thought I could get away with it and I can't believe I was so stu-

"My mom buys me the purple kind so I can always see if I put it on right!" Ivy chimes from the front row. Oh, thank goodness. Someone believes me. Now I'll be able to sleep after I'm done raking myself over the coals. If everyone else has bought the terrible excuse, then my evening will go over even better. I lift my head to see how well the excuse went over with everyone else.

"My parents said the purple one isn't that good," Jayden sneers. "You should ask for a stronger sunblock." Ivy's forehead shrinks and her brows move together. Kayla's ears perk up at the sweet beginnings of an argument. Along with the rest of the class, she shifts her focus away from me and toward the unfolding drama. I'm not supposed to relish in my students bickering, but it's better than being grilled by a thirteen year old. Within seconds, battle lines are drawn and the entire class is fighting like cats and dogs

over something no human being should ever be this invested in. Slinking back into my seat, I decide to wait to end the war and take the spare time to calm the fitful beating in my chest.

I wonder what they would really say if I told them what had happened. Would I get pitied? Would the entire atmosphere of this room change into something grim and quiet? I'm afraid that there would never be another booing fit or sunblock fight again if they knew. That they would see me as something broken and fragile that can't handle what I used to. If I told them I was no longer the me that they laughed with and learned from it could ruin the bond we've spent so much time developing. With the laughter gone, nothing would be left but serious lessons and clock-watching. I'd have to put away the stickers and the Jeopardy games and settle into the attitude of an old crotchety Catholic school nun who hates fun and puts a long essay question on every exam. What a dreadful thought.

Ivy's kitten heels rattle against freshly waxed tile as she stomps her feet. This is not the first time she's thrown a tantrum in my class. Tiny dents litter the ground by the chalkboard from all of her previous marching. The sound dulls into something like a slow metronome, suspenseful and slightly menacing. The tapping calls me back to this Battle of the Munchkins and reminds me what I am here to do.

"If you'd like to continue this argument," I announce, "you'll have to do it at the end of the period. If I hear anything about sunblock in the next hour then we're all going on a field trip to Principal Eastridge's office." Though my tone would indicate that I'm joking, we all know that the threat is real. Since they're always complaining about his

nasally voice and spiteful intercom announcements, I figure this would be a great punishment.

Each student shoots me a betrayed look as they shamle back to their seats. They know better than to argue with my decisions. This type of morning is uncommon for my kids. As responsible as they are, they're not used to being yelled at. The dead silence tells me that they're ashamed of themselves. It's a good think I'm not a *complete* pushover. Those puppy eyes almost make you apologize for daring to point out their misbehavior. The last student, a young man who really needs to learn to hustle, rolls into his seat just in time for the bell to unleash its freaky robotic alert. This will be the easiest part of the entire day.

I square away the last item in my supply box and toss the empty crate beneath my desk. It's time to put on my teaching hat. Ear and eyes focus on me and, for once, I'm not worried. It's strange to go from a feeling of foreignness to absolute comfort. But, I suppose, maybe I shouldn't have been so afraid to begin with. No one asked if I had a new haircut or stared at the lopsided disaster like I thought they would. They focused only on the thing that mattered the least about my appearance. Perhaps it's been too long for them to remember exactly how I looked. Red skin is obvious on anybody, but everything else is a lot more subtle. Maybe they think I've always been this way because they've never looked close enough before. I want to believe this, but God knows what else they would have questioned if they had had more time.

The actions are locked into muscle memory after years of standing at this desk and calling the shots. It's nice to know that, despite everything, the school will always be the same. I hand out the standard multicolor health forms for parents, this year's

textbooks and bright yellow folders and begin the lesson that my former self planned out months in advance. This year starts with learning about all of the presidents and elections. When I teach, we have no time to think about anything other than good ol' American history. Though I'll never have that Ms. Frizzle look, my teaching will always have her magic.

A textbook opens and our grey brick school disappears behind the bushes and shrinks away from the crowded city. The room disappears entirely, and we find ourselves wandering through the pages. I am the guide on this unique duck tour, pointing out the landmarks as we pass by. For each, I make a corny joke and launch into the spiel of why it is so significant. We'll talk to George Washington and fight alongside Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson later on in the unit. This way of teaching makes it feel as though we're traveling back and viewing our history firsthand. In reality, we are interpreting lines of ink out of a book whose spine has been taped back together and has been outdated for fifty years or more. I have the power to change the lives of these children and make sure that their education isn't stunted by their underfunded school district. They will move on to high school and then college and then life without ever knowing how disadvantaged they were. I've done so much for them and I can do even more if I can get my act together.

And this classroom can help me just as much as I help it. I'm the center of attention in this room, but these kids are looking beyond me, focusing instead on the magic I add to the lesson. Hair length and body parts don't matter to these children. I am not perceived by my appearance but rather my dedication to their learning and passion towards my job. I wonder if I have always been this way. Maybe my worth can be found

hidden amongst or sprinkled within the same things I had before the diagnosis and before surgery.

A small amount of weight is lifted from my shoulders by twenty tiny hands.

CHAPTER 3

Vases are a rookie mistake. I've three knock off Louis Vuitton handbags tucked beneath one arm, an antique cookie jar in the other hand, and I've just spotted a tattered "Sexy Presidents of the United States" calendar stashed inside the cracked vessel. It's more than a little out of date and water damage has released some of the glue from the binding, but the pictures are too precious to relinquish. The person who squirreled this delight away is going to be mighty disappointed when they return to their obvious hiding spot.

I flip through the loose pages, admiring the cartoon recreations. October's Baberaham Lincoln smiles back at me as I consider how he'd look pinned to the wall of my home office. Without a second thought, I unscrew the cat-shaped lid from the cookie jar and jam the calendar inside for safe keeping and bustle toward the front door. Vases may be a rookie mistake, but cookie jars are a completely different story. I vaguely recall having seen a deserted tent at the entrance of the property, loaded to the sky with frames of every size and material. Baberaham and his friends will need a new home once I tear them free of their ineffective glue prison. As I round the corner of the aisle, I turn my head to see three older ladies being knocked to the side.

"Excuse me. Pardon me. Coming through. *Move it or lose it, lady!*"

His shrill voice punctures my eardrums before he even comes into view. The man barrels through the displays, rail-thin arms laden with tiny tin horses. His sallow face is warped into its usual expression of satisfaction, the type that's typically seen on a mustache-twirling cartoon villain. It's rare to find career pickers in this neck of the

woods, so, fortunately, Derek is the only one I have to deal with. Every auction and sale in the state is ruined by His Smarminess. He mostly purchases antique toys, each time swearing that he'll be a billionaire once he sells them. Despite his insistence on being a great appraiser, he never actually makes any money. Even newcomers know better than to trust his opinion by this point.

I don't want to deal with him today. This is the first day in four months that I haven't felt as though my skin is on fire while standing in the sunlight. I haven't been able to enjoy a good sale in quite some time as a result. It would be great to have a nice, peaceful, thrifty day of shopping without Derek huffing hot air out of his raptor nostrils at me and trying to take my stuff.

In fact, I don't want to deal with him *any* day. Ever. Not once from here on out. It's been so long since I've gone out that I forgot this man even existed. I don't want to go out if I know he'll just be polluting the air at all of my favorite places. Especially since I'm his primary target. Though that's mostly my own fault.

It used to be somewhat fun to mess with him. After years of that weasel bidding me up, taking things solely because I wanted them and acting as though he's smarter than everyone else, giving him a taste of his own medicine felt great. The others in attendance seemed to have appreciated it as well.

The first time it was a spur of the moment decision. I'd stopped by a Star Market on my way to a garage sale for a Dr. Pepper. The woman in front of me had four carts full of frozen meals and a million coupons. She's the kind of militantly frugal that I never want to be. I'd had so much time waiting for her to finish that I found myself staring blankly at those reusable grocery bags that are always pushed on customers but never

actually used. Except for that day. I tossed four of them on the belt, having finally found a use for them. That use wasn't groceries.

Diva Derek used to be fashionably late to every event, which gave me plenty of time to take all of the crappy metal figurines he goes after. I looked at every table, storage bin and checked every conceivable hiding place. After decking myself out like a pack mule, I booked it to the seller to pay for my ill-gotten goods, Derek's signature smirk stretching itself across my wide cheeks.

"Are you really buying all of that?" the vendor asked, shocked. His face was caught somewhere between confusion and absolute delight. His garage sales weren't usually so lucrative, though they did see a lot of traffic.

Though my heart seized at the mere thought of spending so much money at once, the devil on my shoulder was too convincing for me to resist. I told the man that I did, indeed, plan to buy all of the useless old toys he had lying around in his garage and whipped out my wallet. Since my purchase was, admittedly, based entirely on petty revenge, I didn't bother trying to haggle with the man and paid the full amount upfront.

Just as I placed the cash in his hand, I spotted Derek's car lazily pulling up beside the sidewalk. It was during a time when he was still figuring out how to give off an "assertive" vibe, and so he walked with an awkward amount of force. It caused his greasy bowl-cut mop to bounce to the rhythm of each step. That walk deflated the moment he saw me with my bags of robots, horses and policemen. It was like watching a doll slowly come to a halt as its batteries died. He hadn't said a word then, but the atmosphere shifted so sharply that everyone turned away from their browsing to stare at him.

The second time I gave it back to him was at a storage unit auction. He thought that he could get turn the tables by bidding me up even higher than usual on any unit I wanted. Of course, the man is so hot headed that it's very easy to trick him into spending a lot of money on something completely worthless. I managed to get him to spend all of his money on the second unit then.

I had actually showed up late and the second unit was the first one I saw. The auctioneer had the lock cut and the door lifted and the only visible item was a molded rug that reeked of cat urine. The scent was so pungent that I didn't think Derek would be stupid enough to take the bait.

But he did. I put up a ten dollar bid and he doubled it. I put up a fifty dollar bid and he doubled *that*. He kept his eyes trained on me, and that was his mistake. He was so wrapped up in warring against me that he forget we were bidding over a piss coated rug. The faster I spit out offers, the more generous he was with his funds. I doubt that he even knew what numbers were flying out of his mouth. I coaxed him into a four thousand dollar bid before dropping it. I should have never bid that high to begin with as, in the off chance he decided to grow a brain, I would have been living off of ramen packets and Kraft cheese slices for a month. Judging by the look on his face after he started digging through his locker, I'd wager that he didn't even have ramen money after that.

He's been trying even harder to catch me off guard since. He shows up to every event and arrives early by an hour or more. He always asks about the layout of a sale so he knows where he wants to go once it opens. He waits for any opportunity he can get to try to get me kicked out of events. He's even tried to bribe auctioneers into denying me entry. None of these tactics have helped him.

If the last few months weren't spent waking up every six hours to pop pills and trying to get my arm to function correctly, I might enjoy battling with my old friend again. But I'd really rather grab my sexy presidents and get going before he tries anything. I don't have the energy to do it anymore. I'm not the same as I used to be and I don't want to risk losing a battle of wits against a bag of rocks. That would only make me feel worse about myself.

I take a step back to let Derek through the door. He seems more concerned with his horses than the people around him, thankfully. I might be able to stop by that picture frame tent after all. A nice black or white set could be painted with bright reds, whites and blues to yield a patriotic background for these fine, upstanding gentlemen. Although, yellow might match the Mount Rushmore photograph hanging on the—

“Colleen, what a surprise! I thought I chased you out town.” Derek swivels on his heel at the last moment, blocking the doorway and preventing my exit. I can barely see him over the tower of horses in front of him, yet I know he's giving that stupid smirk. The faux delighted tone reminds me of those cliques of TV housewives that only speak in backhanded compliments and sarcastic well wishes.

I guess the picture frames are out of the question again.

Sorry, Baberham.

“Not quite, Derek,” I respond, faking a smile. He shuffles his armful of horses to reign them back in, his eyes peaking over the top of the mound. They dart around my figure, sizing me up like a chintzy piece of furniture left by the side of the road. If I cared the slightest bit about what he thinks, I might feel self-conscious about my frizzed out

wig and altered body. But I don't, so I'm not. He doesn't know anything, the irritating need to stare everyone down just comes naturally to him.

"You look different from the last time I saw you," he remarks. My body freezes involuntarily. It's unlikely that Derek, of all people, is the one person to notice, but my heart and brain are walking opposite paths. If he ever did find out, he'd probably play mind games with me at future events. He'd become more unbearable and condescending, if that's even possible. I take a deep breath in through my mouth and out my nose. This is even less pleasant than I remember, as he is even more annoying than he used to be and I have my own private concerns now. If only I had my face reconstructed with my boobs. I could slip by undetected like all of the passing women who have, fortunately, not received his attention.

"Really? How so?" It's a struggle to keep my voice level. I just want to take my calendar, as nothing could make me leave this gem behind, and go before this turns into something I've been avoiding. He readjusts his horses up again and walks over to me with that awkward walk of his. He paces around me, assessing me from all angles.

Is there something off? I know my wig is on straight, that my overalls cover all of my scars and skin damage, and I've done a fairly good job dressing myself today so I shouldn't look like a ragamuffin. Other than my blotchy face, and sweaty everything else, I don't think anything that out about me today. And a large woman overheating on a hot day isn't anything unusual.

Derek completes two more turns before returning to the door frame. It really would be nice if he could shut up and let me through. This isn't an auction and he cannot take the items I've already decided on purchasing. I simply don't see what he plans to do

considering his sabotage methods will not work here. It's as if he's antagonizing me simply because it makes him happy to do so.

“Did you do something with your hair?” No. It's the same style and color it's always been. Unless he can physically see that it's not my DNA, he has no reason to suspect it's anything but the usual. I roll my eyes and snort, but it's not worth my time to respond. And if I did, it might just encourage him to keep going. I regret having acknowledged his existence to begin with.

“Change shades? Maybe it got a little thicker?” he prods. My heart beat begins to slow, and I no longer feel it pulsing in the tips of my fingers. He really is treating me like an antique on display. Like the clay vase he nitpicked last year to get a better deal. He'll say anything and everything until he finds a complaint that sticks. Even if he has to manufacture his own problems.

“No, nothing's different. If you think I've changed colors, then you might want to get your eyes checked, kiddo. They're important in your business, you know.” I've turned the tables on him again. In an entirely different way than I usually do. This time, I am holding him under the magnifying glass and pecking around until I've found a worm. And I've struck gold on my first attempt.

With neither of his hands free, Derek wrinkles his nose to set his spectacles higher on his face. He shifts his eyes away from me, bristling as I take digs at how poorly he does his job. I'm clearly not the only one who remembers all of the money he's lost in the past five years due to bad investments.

“It might be why you picked up that reproduction. Surely you would have seen it from a mile away if your prescription was correct,” I point at one of the horses spilling

out of his hands at random. I don't know if it's actually a reproduction or not. I don't even know if there is anyone who reproduces them to begin with. But for some reason, he trusts my inferior, non-expert assessment over his own, supposedly flawless, appraisal. His brow crinkles together as he returns his gaze back to my face.

“Oh...,” he pauses, obviously trying to find an excuse, “I'm glad you reminded me. I took one for my private collection and I want to make sure I get a good discount on it.” He gives an insincere chuckle to try and appear careless, struggling to regain his air of authority. The last time I heard an excuse that poor was in preschool. And even my preschool self would be able to see that this man is lying.

Derek tries to grasp its pale blue tail through his fingers, but he can't maneuver past all of the other figurines. One by one, they tumble out of his hands and he struggles to reach the “fake.” His smile gets bigger with each failed attempt, his already thin lips disappearing into his cheeks.

“Jesus H.” he whines under his breath. It's odd to hear the nasally, high-pitch voice flow out of his mouth in a gruff whisper. I can practically see his blood pressure increase through translucent skin. No matter how many times I witness one of these tantrums, I'll never get used to it. It's more than apparent that he's trying to remain calm but there's just no way to hide the crazy lurking underneath the surface. Anything could set him off at any time and he would always look and sound like this.

The exit is finally cleared as he relocates to relinquish the tin stallions on a drawer-less desk. Its wobbly leg causes the entire surface to rock with the force of each horse landing against it. With his hands free, the merchandise haphazardly slides through his searching fingers, clanking against each other as each item is moved. One foot at a

time, I creep toward the exit while he paws through his pile, making sure I have my own fake merchandise and my cookie jar. He may have a problem with knock offs, but I will always enjoy getting something practical and fun at a bargain. And I'm going to purchase them and take them home, even if it's the last thing I do.

It looks like I'll always be able to win a battle of wits against Derek. Even if I'm not the same as I used to be, he will, until the end of time, be an easily defeated idiot. Maybe it's not that hard to deal with him when I want to go out. Can't let a grease ball with a superiority complex get in the way of my fun, after all. Perhaps now my evenings will be filled with something other than sitting in my home after work, playing with Liz or grading assignments. My regular hobbies are all still in reach and I cannot let them slip by just because someone is a massive inconvenience for me.

With the sun casting a dry heat across my back, I walk across the vast front yard toward a spot of blue in the distance. As it gets closer, a striped tent comes into sight. Baberham helps me pick out twelve skinny black frames from a small stack in the back of the cluttered tent. Though it takes a few hours, I've finally collected everything I want. As I leave to pay for my small collection of treasures, the corners of my lips perk up into an unmistakable smile. Should anything crop up or anyone come to bother me, I will be able to handle it. I'm back in the groove.

And my home is going to be full of sexy cartoon presidents.

CHAPTER 4

My mother always warned me about those oddballs that go around spreading poop on produce at the grocery store. As far as I remember, she never went into any detail as to how they get away with it. I could only picture mustachioed men in striped burglar costumes conspicuously creeping around the aisles with a box grater in one hand and their weaponized excrement in the other. The image was at least partly inspired by those waiters at Italian restaurants that blanket anything and everything your order in a thick layer of Parmesan snow.

"Filthy. Inside and out," she'd complain as I kicked my tiny baby legs out from the cart. I got to tag along on each of her shopping trips and quickly learned her patterns. She'd grab five or so bottles of that rip off store brand cleaning fluid every month and hose down every carrot or mushroom to cross through our front door. At the time, she had my brother and me convinced that the fluid was magic. Somehow, souped up tap water washed away all of the invisible evils tucked behind skins and rinds.

Ma was a kitchen priest, exorcising demons with a combination of Whole Foods holy water and the Good (Cook) Book. My brother and I were her pupils, collecting pearl onions of wisdom as they rolled under counters. Someday, I aspired to be that busybody, organized, cleaning machine of a domestic goddess that was my mother.

I must have defected somewhere. At five bucks a bottle, that once magical elixir has become little more than a memory stacked between the Galas and Paula Reds. And the broccoli and cauliflower. And the carrots and radishes. And underneath that strange

little peanut cart no one walks by. These places put a lot of effort into badgering you with something until you buy it.

But they won't get me. I'll go home tonight and my food safety ritual will consist of loading unwashed groceries into my fridge and rubbing them on my shirt as I need them. The romaine is still dewy from its midday misting and that's clean enough for me. If rubbing a plant with extremely diluted bits of other plants is enough to defecalize it, then by God this moldy smelling mist can do the same thing.

Almost nothing is good this time of year anyway. All of my favorite foods have disappeared with the warm weather and now bland imported garbage is all that's left. If I get sick from grimy cherry tomatoes, it can't make them much worse in my eyes. I'd much rather hop on down to the frozen foods and pick up a couple of large meat lover's pizzas. If only Dr. Flynnt hadn't put me on this diet.

A diet I wouldn't even need had they not forcibly funneled ice cream down my throat when I was stuck in their care. I'm lucky that I didn't get also get diabetes from that.

If I had stayed with the Church of the Holy Veggie Wash maybe I'd know how to make this crap taste better. I'd literally-but-not-really murder someone for a big old Pyrex dish of my mom's zucchini and summer squash lasagna right about now and I'd probably maim someone for the long lost recipe. If she were still around, I wouldn't even need to think about my nutrition. She'd have packed three years' worth of meals in my freezer before I had ever been admitted to the hospital to begin with. *And* she would still have let me eat the ice cream on top of it.

If she were here, I'd could still be lounging around at home instead of running errands on the coldest day of the year. With a quilt tucked around me, I'd lie on the couch and watch *Full House* reruns all day. Kayla says it's a key part of staying home when you're feeling under the weather. Liz could settle down atop the back of the sofa and groom herself between commercial breaks. I'd drift in and out of consciousness to the wet clicking of tongue against fur and the cracks of bitten toes.

Ma would toddle in between the kitchen and living room several times an hour with trays of snacks and soups or burning hot mugs of cream-less chai tea. I've heard that dairy makes colds worse, but Ma would apply that logic to any illness. If you broke your arm, no dairy. If you had a stomach bug, no dairy. If you had a head cold, *no dairy*. She had specific dietary plans for any occasion and we were expected to follow them. Especially priest/Doctor Mom's "home sick" diets.

If nothing at home suited her standards, she would head out and find something else's. Even as an adult woman, I'm certain she would ask a neighbor to look after me while I was gone. Growing up, there was a nice elderly couple across the road, and she'd always ask them to watch my brother and me when we were sick. She could be taking a five minute walk down the street, but she always needed someone to watch us. And then she'd come home with four or five full meals and hope we'd be tempted by at least one of her offerings. She didn't mind wasting the rest as long as we were willing to eat one.

From my spot on the couch I'd try to convince her to stop shoving food down my throat. It would take an episode or two, but eventually she'd abandon the kitchen altogether and commiserate with me on the couch. She'd let me have my blue day and

give me one of those corny inspirational speeches. Every now and again she'd pepper in a few of her favorite phrases and clichés:

"Tomorrow will be better, sweetheart."

"You have the power to make your day great. You just have to make the choice to focus on the positives."

"Even Einstein had his off days."

"You're so good and you don't even know it yet."

There's maybe a two percent chance that she'd keep it at that, but, since this is my daydream, I'd like to keep the embarrassing mom conversation as short as possible.

If I still had hair, she'd stroke it while she rambled. When I got sick as a kid, and she had to stay home with me, she'd complain about her boss while she did this. He doesn't know the difference between an Angora and a Lionhead or he gave a blacklisted customer or sometimes she'd just complain that the breakroom smelled after he microwaved his lunch. I can practically feel the warmth of her hand gliding off my scalp just thinking about her rants. The sensation of having each and every strand haunts me like a phantom limb. It would be awfully weird if she tried to rub my bald head like that. She'd probably end up scalping me with the friction.

The couch and my mother and my cat and the spicy smell of that chai tea slip away until I'm back to the present. My companions have turned to Brussels sprouts before my eyes and the scent of cinnamon and pepper becomes that nasty mildew-y mist. I am alone. Ma is not here to wash my veggies, rub my head and take care of me. It is up to me to make sure that I buy enough food to keep Liz and me from starving for the next week.

I move my cart down the length of the store to observe the slabs of plastic wrapped meats that will undoubtedly leak all over my fridge tonight. Though I'll never be as great of a mother as Ma was, I do take pride in caring for my own little one. Liz deserves far better than hard nuggets of corn product or strange, goopy seafood in a can. She's a growing girl and she needs only the purest of proteins ground up and blended together with freshly ground bone and vitamins. That pink slime is the key to maintaining a long companionship with my feline friend, and I don't know what I would do if I couldn't hear her precious motorboat purr at the end of each and every day. She eats far better than I do these days.

I put three packages of bone-in chicken thighs next to the sweet potatoes and one pack of cubed stew beef by the milk. After years of accidentally using one of her ingredients and feeling bad about it, I thought it would be reasonable to start separating my food from Liz's. All of my stuff gets stowed in the baby seat and Liz's wide variety of nutrients, alongside any new toys and litter, take up the rest.

I can't wait to have the opportunity to stand in a mile long line for five hours with all of the people who decided to blow off Christmas dinner shopping until the last minute. Not that I'd fare much better at the front of one of these lines. The poor employees are probably already flustered enough with this crowd, and I don't want to have to explain to them why these sweet potatoes should be put in a different bag than that one. Being such a dedicated cat mom is hard, socially awkward work sometimes.

I know it'll pay off when I get home, though. Liz will hear the car door slam and rustling plastic, non-environmentally-friendly bags as I struggle to find my key and sashay her way over in that lazy walk. She'll stand by the entrance and stretch while I

work hard to get the groceries in as fast as possible to keep my heat from escaping. And then, as I'm loading my filthy, unwashed, heathen veggies into the fridge, she'll flop down next to me and watch me put everything away. If she's feeling particularly helpful, she'll paw at bags I might have accidentally left something in, but, normally, she just likes to watch.

Once I've put away all of the foods that need to be refrigerated, a blur of grey will wind around my feet, the motorboat purr echoes across the barren kitchen as my little boat navigates the great blue sea of tiles. She'll stick by my heels and follow me into my room and we'll both settle down for a nap beneath my quilts. I'll turn on the living room television and raise the volume until I can hear the reruns from my bed. Best of all, I'll wake up several times throughout the night to the little idiot kneading my scalp like some sort of tiny masseuse. If masseuses had sharp, painful claws.

Even though it hurts, I appreciate her love.

I'll scratch her head back and make up some sort of baby talk on the fly. Unlike Ma, I don't have lines of text memorized and prepared for any moment and, though exhausted, my brain isn't capable of the same type of sappy, corny crap. My corny baby talk is on a level far beyond that. But I'll try to talk normally to Liz anyway to pay her back for everything she gives to me. That is, in a way other than taking hours out my day to prepare her special diet or getting up at dawn because she's hungry. Those moments are rightfully hers, the baby talk is the privilege.

She'll push her paw against my shoulder and stare while I whine about all of the things that I didn't like about today. She's not judging when she does it, but she's not

really helping me any, either. There's something wrong about the situation. Something that my mother could help me fix in a heartbeat.

Nothing really gets solved.

I'll get to let off steam for a bit and feel better for the time being, but the bad day is bottled up and put back on the shelf with all of my other bad days in the end. Any day now something could come along and reopen all of the bottles, or the shelf will become so occupied that it tips over. And then I'll have no one to help me clean up the mess it leaves behind. Liz doesn't even have opposable thumbs so that's well beyond her scope of influence.

I'm just not like Ma. I don't immediately know the answers to solving my big girl problems, and I don't know how to make myself feel better. It's one thing to depend on someone else and trust that they'll always be there to handle it when things go wrong. It's another thing entirely to try and trust yourself to make it through. And right now, I don't know if I can keep making it through each and every day when I wake up and go to bed feeling blue. All of the stress is on me now and there's more than one person and a slightly overweight cat can bear. Even with an army of cats to help support my load, it would be too much.

Liz is basically flopped over by my feet while I try to keep the world from falling on us. I appreciate her staying in light of the imminent threat of being crushed.

When I was young, Mom could balance finances and budget time even with a thousand things weighing on her shoulders. Some mornings I could hear her getting ready for work at two in the morning, but I'd always fall back asleep before I could watch her

leave. Two hours before school started, she'd come home in her fast food uniform and stupid visor and get my brother and me ready for school at the speed of light.

"C'mon, guys, it's time to get up," she'd whisper as she pulled us out of bed. Though she looked to be out of breath, her voice was steady and slow. She'd grab a brush and rake the living hell out of my scalp until my bedhead was calmed into something more presentable. If I took too long to brush my teeth, she'd swoop in and "help" by jabbing between my gums. Each time the hard plastic scraped against one side, she'd switch directions until no surface was left unbruised.

"You're going to be late," she'd warn, even though school wasn't even close to starting. She kept herself deliberately calm, as if there was absolutely no rush. But if she thought we were straggling, Ma would dash out the door with a child under each arm like a madwoman. She'd buckle us in and then drop us off early every morning. One kiss each and a shared goodbye later she'd peel out of the drop off zone and disappear down the street. Looking back, I think this was during one of her, very few, breaks.

When school ended, she picked us up in her cleaning company uniform. She wasn't as rushed then, so she'd take us home and make supper. This was the only time she had to hang out with us, so she tried to make cooking serve two purposes: feeding the family and having fun. Those were the times I'd learn about her magical overpriced veggie cleaner and the dangers of strange men who rub their poop on others' food. Some days she could even help us with a few homework questions before she had to change into yet another fast food uniform and head off to that last job.

Despite that heavy work load, she didn't stress out over taking the day off to take care of one or both of us. Even when we weren't sick so much as we were feeling down.

She missed out on hours and hours of work just to give us her cheesy little talks and run around town to find something for us to eat. Somehow she could take on all of this and still know what she was doing and where she was going. I trusted her to bear the weight on her own. I knew that she was capable of doing it so I stopped worrying.

What's the difference between her being here and her not being here? How is it so easy to blindly trust someone else with your life but so hard to take it into your own hands? Is because she was so organized and responsible and talented at everything she did? Or because she took such great care of herself in the limited downtime she had?

I don't know.

I take my cart and drag it back through the aisles, doing one last sweep for anything I might have forgotten.

Milk. Check.

Meat. Check.

Sweet potatoes. Check.

That damned bottle of produce cleaner follows me through every section. I try to ignore the shelves of it stacked beside the most commonly purchased groceries.

Cherry tomatoes. Check.

But the employees place them at eye level, so it's not really something you can avoid.

Celery. Check.

Lettuce. Check

I knock one of the bottles into my cart. The five dollars can't be that bad if Ma bought several of them a month. It must be at least relatively effective, too, or else she

wouldn't have ever bought it. I'll buy it for Ma's sake and use it. That way it'll be like she's still looking out for me. I'd better make sure to clean all of this when I get home. I don't want to buy five dollar bottle of tap water just to use it as a decoration. I have Baberham for that. Maybe I should take two. I don't know how long these sprays last. Who knows if I'll get through all of Liz's stuff before I run out?

And while I'm at it, I'd better go put back this milk.

CHAPTER 5

After four hours with a shovel and a wheelbarrow, my garage is finally clean again. Mostly. There's no point in sweeping up the leftover soil. I'll just track more dirt in tomorrow anyway. I creep outside to grab the freshly emptied garbage bins from the curb. I don't have my wig on, but it doesn't look like any of my neighbors are awake yet. Except for me, everyone on the block sleeps in until noon on the weekends. I have to drag them across the grass to stop the plastic wheels from scraping off the pavement and drawing attention, but I manage to get them inside without being spotted. These can cover the worst of the black spots.

Liz arches her back against the doorway, proud of the inconvenience she has caused me. Her paws knead at the concrete flooring, as if to mimic what she's done to those poor sacks. Her fur is slicked into wet spikes from her recent, very thorough, bath. Hopefully she can't get underneath the tarp and cause any further damage. I don't need paw prints being tracked throughout the house, and I don't need to deal with a crying cat trying to break out of the tub again.

I delicately raise the shovel to rest on my shoulder, pleasantly surprised by how easy it's become. Everything is starting to seem lighter, and raising my arms no longer pulls at the muscle. Perhaps in another month it'll be even easier. The doc will say I'm fully healed, and then I won't have to do so many stupid, bird-like stretches at odd hours of the night just to stop my arm from locking up. I've been waiting a long time for things start going back to normal.

I scratch Liz on the noggin as I pass by. No matter how much trouble she causes, I'll never be able to punish her properly. That one's spoiled to the core the way she ought to be. She's practically my child. Liz bops her head against my hand, basking in the attention. I have to fight to get it back so I can continue preparations. As I leave the garage, she follows close behind.

The saplings, willow, oak, and maple, are lined up against the back wall of my home office. It's not absolutely identical, but the smell they give off reminds me of that glorious, wooden first-day-of-school smell. The translucent green radiating from the branches isn't a bad sight, either. Still, there's something wrong about the sight. The best one of them all is missing.

I still can't believe that none of the nearby home goods stores are selling any elms. Especially considering the time of year. Hopefully, it's only because planting event organizers have already bought them all up, though I was fairly late to the party last year and there were still trees of every variety on sale then. It just wouldn't be right to celebrate without a good variety and elms are crucial to beautifying a town. They're gorgeous when they're fully grown and, after being nearly plagued out of existence, they really need some love. These saplings are still beautiful, but not what I'd hoped for. On the plus side, Liz hasn't taken to the trees like she has the soil. Not a single pulpy, saliva-coated leaf in sight, no unsolicited poos around the base, and no scratch marks up and down the trunk.

"It's an Arbor Day miracle, Charlie Brown." The fur ball weaving between my legs doesn't respond, though that's not unusual. I call her by so many names, I'm not sure if she even knows who she is anymore. Creaking noises erupt from my knees as I bend to

scoop the little devil up. There's a few hours left until the tree planting project begins, so I'd better get some work done in the meantime.

Pushing several branches out of the way, I sit down at my desk, set Liz in my lap, and crack my knuckles. Arbor Day is incredibly underappreciated and I won't stand for it any longer. Starting tomorrow, I'll make sure all of my students leave with an understanding of this very important holiday. This year I've managed to arrange my syllabus to allow for a day to conduct a special "unit" on it. I just wish my mind had been clear enough to also come up with activities when I decided to plan for it.

If it weren't for the Internet, and the stockpile of *Family Circle* magazines that keep getting accidentally delivered to my house, I'd be doomed. I never thought I'd be thankful for "Mr. E. Jenkins" refusing to correct his mailing address.

I grab the thick backlog of magazines and start sorting them by month. Predictably, none are dedicated to this precious holiday. There are, however, a few tree-related projects hidden in the copies released for spring and fall. I'd prefer if I didn't have to resort to one of these Halloween "spooky tree" activities, though. I can bend some of the suggestions to fit my needs, but Halloween is too far out of theme for me to try and pull it back. It'd just end up like that woman who used a penis shaped pan to make a lighthouse cake. Kind of cool, but pretty tacky.

All of the unimportant copies get tossed back into their spot, making sure the corners of the bottom magazine line up with dust outline. I'm not sure why but I can't tip them into the bin and be done with it. Maybe old man Jenkins will be back for them one day. Unless that happens, they'll most likely be there until the day I die. Or the day the pile gets so big I suffocate in it. Which is more or less the same thing. Since I,

unfortunately, haven't seen any odd old men who enjoy tacky crafts, I think it's going to be the death path. Which is a shame because I could teach Jenkins where to find better projects.

These "useful" copies aren't as good as I had hoped. Each page is like an excited soccer mom, the type with a sweater tied around her shoulders, running full blast at you shouting, "Isn't this so cute and original? Suzy made this Indian necklace out of food dye and macaroni!! No one's ever done that before!" Yeah. No one except every single elementary school since the colonization of America.

Several soccer moms later, I find *an* idea. I don't like it too much, though. There's something very "kindergarten" about having students slap together construction paper trees with cotton ball leaves. In a pinch, it'll have to do. There's not enough time to keep searching through this garbage for anything better. If I were one of my kids, I'd just be happy to have the class off. It's too close to the end of the year to pay attention to a real lesson anyway, and giving them something that won't end up on a quiz will help tide them over. I'll sweeten the deal and let them watch *Ferngully* just in case the crafts are a little too simple. I'm pretty sure kids still like *Ferngully*.

The Internet may still be able to save the kids from liquid-glue-wrinkled trees, however. Pinterest, here I come. Images reach out from the screen, luring me in with a range of spring green to emerald. So many projects specifically related to Arbor Day, proving once and for all that I'm not the only one who follows this holiday. I'm certain that this is the only place to look for projects related to these important underappreciated events. Though the final product is always touched up in Photoshop, they're much more

quality than anything you'll find in a magazine. I scroll down the page, eager to find at least one decent project.

Themed cupcakes. Can't exactly bake at school and I'm not about to spend all night mixing batter after spending all day planting trees just so my class can decorate a few baked goods. It'd probably make a big mess, too. I learned three years ago never to trust students with piping bags. The ceiling of my old classroom still has squiggly yellow stains coating the tile and my paycheck is still getting docked for the repairs. One more frosting incident and I'll be living outside Starbucks with that strange banana costumed man.

Homemade leaf jigsaw puzzle. Absolutely not. Even if I got permission to use the wood shop, I don't want to watch little fingers go flying everywhere and have parents file lawsuits. Besides, I'll never be able to convince anybody that it's even tangentially connected to history. I really don't want Eastridge breathing down my neck for not staying in my lane. Again. I could probably assign it for extra credit, though, and then all liabilities would be shifted from my shoulders.

Toilet roll tree. For Christ's sake. That's even uglier than the construction paper tree. The toilet roll doesn't even serve a purpose since it's just covering up a standard paper trunk. And it still uses cotton balls for leaves, so it's just a convoluted version of the other project. Who the hell comes up with these things? If I donated the gauze from my drain care kit, they could probably create a fully functioning city.

Leaf identification worksheet. Finally something I can work with. It's reaching a bit out of my subject area, but it's technically related to Arbor Day and it'll keep the kids busy while they watch their movie. I reach for the tray of printer paper and pluck out a

fresh white sheet. If I keep the leaves as outlines, it'll be easier to make and I can turn this into a coloring exercise!

I briefly consider using my own photocopier to clone my wonky drawings, but, after Principal Eastridge refused to let the class plant trees on school grounds, I'd like to waste the school's money instead. Public schools never seem to care about the things that are actually important. He could have at least authorized a field trip to attend someone else's pre-planned event. Every single time someone tries to convince Eastridge to okay community events, he refuse. It doesn't matter who is asking or what they want, anyone below his pay grade is irrelevant to him.

Which is why my kids are going to be stuck watching cheesy environmentalist animated films, making cotton-and-paper trees, and naming crappy drawings of leaves. At least I can actually help on my own time. These trees are just waiting to be placed into the ground where they can grow big and filter toxins from this filthy city.

I push aside a bowl of properly washed apricots to look at the clock. There's still quite a bit of time, but I'd rather start packing and get there early. I've already prepared this week's cat food, cleaned the garage, planned activities for my class, and set up dinner in the crock pot. It's not like I have anything else to do at home.

My wig is still a little damp from its last wash, but the tape should still adhere to it. I grab my usual three strips and tighten the living daylights out of it. Maybe by the time my arm is feeling better, my hair will be long enough for one of those short cuts celebrities get just before a public meltdown. I'll be so happy when I finally get out of Sinead O'Connor territory.

The young trunk presses into my palms as I haul it over my shoulder. It's much heavier than the shovel. I place my hands beneath the roots for support and waddle down the hall like the world's least fit caber toss contestant. Branches and leaves bounce against my back with each strained step toward the door.

A few months ago this would have been impossible. If I somehow managed to avoid splitting my stitches, the shooting pain would have made me drop the tree instantly. Its weight would crash down on my foot and leave yet another limb unusable.

Recovery made me feel like a child at first. For the first month after surgery I couldn't hold my own drinking glass. My mother or brother would stop by at random and set something on the coffee table for me. I never told them I couldn't lift it and they eventually went back to their own homes.

One Saturday morning, after stewing in front of the television and binge watching cartoons, I constructed a genius plan. Or what my pain medication addled brain thought was a good plan. I daisy chained straws together to try and sip my tea from the couch. The tube sprung several leaks before even a drop could reach me, and I never bothered to try that again. Scooby-Doo is a liar.

When I could finally get back to drinking like a normal human being, I thought I'd try organizing all of my lesson plans for the school year. I hobbled over toward my desk to collect the stack I had prepared beforehand, turned back toward the living room and immediately dropped them. After that disastrous cleanup, I refused to pick up groups of more than twenty pages. At least I managed to get the organization done eventually, though.

Out of everything, getting groceries was the worst. When I was at the store *and* when I finally got home. Employees stared blankly at me every time I asked for help getting my groceries to the car. It wasn't overtly angry or frustrated or anything. Just empty. Like Star Market had hired a tribe of knuckle-dragging Neanderthals instead of bored high school kids. Dead, half-lidded eyes and a slightly downturned mouth are never signs of great customer service. That expression said everything that I didn't want to hear. I couldn't bear to look back at them knowing that I'd be scrutinized so heavily.

It was a look that made me feel like a granny. Not a cool one, either. The type that somehow always smells like fresh urine and can't stop talking about the time she went to a sock hop. I was someone to be humored and begrudgingly dealt with. They were inconvenienced by my feeble arms and unwilling to help since it would conflict with their busy schedule of sitting around twiddling their thumbs. My request was so beneath them that they couldn't even manage a normal expression or polite small talk. No "how's the weather" or "how 'bout them Sox?" for the weak old lady. They'd mutter something under their breath in response, but it certainly wasn't anything friendly. Then they'd silently follow me out of the store, do what I had asked them to do and then leave just as silently as they came.

But they still helped. Bags after bag of canned soup dumped into the back of my truck. Thirty pound bags of dry cat food, an absolute embarrassment to be seen with, lifted like they were full of packing peanuts. I wouldn't be surprised if they thought I was some sort of bum judging by the types of groceries I used to buy. The employee and I never made eye contact during these transactions, but I'm fairly certain their expression never got any brighter.

I'd get home and have to take the cans out of the bed two or three at a time and put them on top of the counter. Then I'd head out and try to lift Liz's practically-animal-abuse food. Most of the time I couldn't even raise the bag an inch off the ground. When that failed, I'd try to drag it in and then, when *that* failed, I just left it there. Bringing a measuring cup to it twice a day was much easier. And if I didn't feel like going out twice, I'd bring out my mug and she'd get one big meal.

That was the saddest period of my life. We ate like shit, I felt like shit, and the store employees treated me like shit. I'd take a million leaky daisy chained straws over the grocery debacle. At least that didn't strain my arms and nobody could see my embarrassment but Liz, whose cheeky kitty smirk ended with a whole three minute shunning.

Eventually I was able to drag it, though. And then I started lifting the bag higher and higher. And then I finally had the energy to go back to hand-making Liz's food and didn't need to bother. And now I can lift entire baby trees all by myself.

I'm not even sure if I could do that before this whole mess. Maybe things are starting to look up for this old girl.

CHAPTER 6

Greasy like the floor of underneath a burger joint's fry station. There's no other way to put it. A spring of pomade erupts I run my fingers down a few strands. I spent thirteen dollars just to look like Aunt Sheila had a baby with Animal the Muppet. The homeless baby oil addict look is most likely against dress code and, after the Arbor Day debacle, pissing off Eastridge again is the last thing I want to do. Looks like it is back to the drawing board.

With a little effort, I manage to create the perfect balance of hot and cold water. At some point I should replace the faucet handles. The pliers are starting to leak a nasty red sludge onto the faux marble and I feel slightly trashier each day as a result. I dip my head into the stream and slap around the counter, searching for my shampoo bottle. At least this time I didn't bonk my head off of the faucet.

Steam carries a fresh breeze of apples and lemons up to my nostrils. For the most part, the lemon drowns out the apple, leaving behind a dish-soapy aroma. It makes me feel a bit like Gram. Back when she used to use the kitchen sink hose to release excess dye from the depths of her cotton ball head. I used to make fun of her for trying to cover those greys, for pretending that they weren't there to begin with. I guess this disaster is a healthy dose of karma thirty years late. Except instead of plastering yellow foam to my head, I'm trying to make the most of the wisps of candy floss I've got left.

There's not much dry space left on the hand towel, but I try my best to sop up as much water as I can. I don't have the time or patience to let my hair air dry, and I have to limit any heat treatments unless I want to singe it all off. Blow drying the devil out of a

haystack can only lead to a fire, and I'd much rather have dry, thin hay than soot. I can't afford to put it through this torture much longer.

WHIRRRRRRRRR. Oops. I'd better turn that down before it blows my house over. The ancient buttons are crusted with God knows what, but slamming them against the corner of the sink always does the trick.

Whirrrrrrr. Much better. On this setting, I can probably get two more blow dries before going up in flames. I don't know what the snowflake button does, but it seems promising enough, so I might as well press that, too.

Oh. Well. Maybe I should have tried that to begin with. Strands weave around my hand, buffeted backward by the unreasonably strong wind. They still reek of Gram's favorite dish soap. Trapped in the lightly heated vortex, it dances around me like the ghost of a Macy's perfume aisle. I'm not sure whether this is Gram laughing at my misfortune or trying to help me get through baby's first hair styling. The second would be nice. She always had a good grasp on her hair products.

This pomade is the priciest thing I've bought in a while, and I've already used half the container. Not that it's a lot of product to begin with. When I ordered this off of the internet, I expected something a little bigger than a pot of Carmex. There's so little left inside, I won't have enough for the rest of the week regardless of whether or not I figure out how to use it today. What could be going wrong? I might as well just give up now, get one last hour of sleep, and cram that goddamn wig back on my head before work. It's not like it'd be the first time this happened.

I can't help but look at the styling products piled up in the garbage from the past month of misadventures. Extra hold hairspray that made my hair look like plastic draped

in cobwebs, texturizing paste built for hipsters who like the unwashed look, and a trial sized bottle of artificial hair fibers sit on the top of the stack. Somewhere beneath a rat's nest of used tissues there's the mousse. Bought to accentuate those tight curls that I couldn't even achieve. I burnt my scalp here and there trying.

I'm certain that one cost me a few follicles in addition to the price tag.

"You get one more try before getting tossed like all the others," I chide, shaking my finger at the packaging. God I miss my hairdresser. I twist the cover off and lower the tip of my middle finger into the pot.

I just need a little. My hand trembles as I lower it.

A little. So far so good.

A little, I said! Too late. The pad is coated in a dime-sized circle of goo, and a chunk is wedged underneath the corner of my nail. That's twice as much as my hair can hold. It is okay, though, I can still save it. It's not like I've put it in yet. I'll just wipe some of it on the side. *Some of it.*

Phew. I bet Gram never had to put this much effort into her hair dye.

This time. I think I'll work from back to front. That way any extra greasiness is tucked away as much as it can be. The most important thing is making this hairstyle look intentional, even if unfashionable. I'm an old broad, I've earned the right to make dodgy style choices without being questioned.

With my goo-free hand I rip a reference photo off the mirror. Jamie Lee Curtis taunts me with her professionally primed hair as she flutters between the cans of hairspray and mousse. I really wanted that one to work out. Damn celebrities and their stylists and makeup artists and fitness instructors.

I scan the perimeter of the mirror for my next reference, but the only thing I see is my own reflection. Eugh. Maybe I should have worked on my skin while the hair was out of commission. Were those dark circles always there? They sag from my lower lid like two giant blood blisters, threatening to spurt down my cheeks at a moment's notice. I jab at the purple bags, trying to press them back into line with the rest of my skin. No luck.

Was I always this pale? I know the sun and I haven't exactly been friends since radiation, but this is some *Flowers in the Attic* shit. Good lord. The dark circles only make my skin look worse in contrast. Without these precious few inches of hair, I'd probably make a good Uncle Fester impersonator. It's amazing that I've never gotten a nasty comment when I go out every single day looking like this.

Well, it's too late for the skin now. Can't exactly change that at a moment's notice. Hopping down to CVS for makeup I don't even know how to apply at five in the morning is out of the question. I guess I've just got to wing this hairstyle to distract everyone from the face situation.

I can feel my brain struggle to locate hair-related memories. I've got absolutely zip from my adult life, I had long hair in high school, middle school and elementary school. There must be something...

The only thing I can remember are those bobs that were popular when I was young. But that requires hair that reaches at least to the bottom of the ear. Besides, leaving my hair down only makes it look shorter. I'll have to style it upward, but that's much harder than I thought it would be. All updos are waiting to come crashing down, either from gravity or product. After that last round of pomade, I know less is more. These thin, downy tufts turn from fabulous to floppy in an instant.

This half-of-a-dime amount of product might still be too much. Maybe. I'm not the keratin whisperer Gram was. This feeling is terrifying. It's like sitting in front of a blank canvas with a brush and trying to figure out where to make the first stroke. Who knows what the final form will be and whether or not you're taking the right steps to get there?

I run the length of my fingers across each other, stretching the pomade as thin as I can get it. Lemon punches me in the face again and I prepare myself to channel Grandma Hinckley. Better hair or bust. Scalp rubs against my hands as I slide them up from my neck. Goo lightly coats each strand, lending support to the delicate roots.

I wonder what my class will say, assuming I get this right, when I walk into the room like this. Such a drastic change in appearance over one weekend. Could I convince them that this was my own choice? Would they finally put the pieces together and figure out what had happened? Would they think of me as being weak?

On the first day of classes, I managed to dupe them. I acted as if nothing had changed and they believed my ruse. Could I do that again? I'm better than I was then, but this is so much harder.

Trembling hands move to smooth out flyaways on the top of my head. I glance over at the wig stand screwed into the towel shelf. It's a beautiful wig. Itchy, battered and obnoxiously warm, but beautiful. It's got that low maintenance, brushed and lightly hair sprayed look that I used to love. It looks like me. In elementary school, in middle school, in high school. That was what I was.

Mirror me stares at it, too. Her hair coiffed into a boyish shape. It reminds me a bit of a loaf of homemade bread, with a single bump smoothed over the top. It's not the

same as the wig, but it's not terrible. Every time I take my eyes off of her, she turns back to the shelf and stares. I can't see her eyes when she does it, but I know the emotion behind them. She wishes that hair was hers, but it's not. This loaf is.

She could put the wig on and pretend she doesn't know what's underneath, but it won't change anything. The lace front won't melt away and let the hair melt into her follicles. She's delusional. It's the same as Gram concealing her greys with religious weekly treatments by the kitchen sink. She needs to stop pretending. If Grandma Hinckley could learn to embrace her eternal cotton ball head, then this woman should be able to handle her bread head until it finishes growing out.

I remember the day Gram put down the dye. She was a delightful raisin of a woman by that point. With a bottle poised in one hand and a mirror in the other, she looked at herself. The folds of skin, wrinkled eyes and deep smile lines. Liver spots dotted along her cheeks like freckles from so many years basking in the sun. She was every bit as stunning as she had always been, but she had grown old. All those hours she spent dumping bottle after bottle of chemicals on her head were wasted. No matter how young she made her hair look, she couldn't hide the way that time had changed her.

I had been sitting on the floor, elbow-deep into a box of Cheerios when she realized. Her hands shook and her eyes flashed rapidly like a strobe light of emotion. First they were wide and afraid. She'd been doing this for so many years, it was so normal and comfortable to her. Then they watered. Like an owl, she opened her eyes as wide as she could to stop any tears from squeezing out. She didn't like how she looked.

After switching between these two emotions four or five times, she returned to normal. The saran wrap she had intended to cover her head in ended up wrapped around

the unused dye and she chucked it into the trash bin beneath the cupboard. All of a sudden it was as if nothing had happened. She was the same grandma she had always been. She used the extra time to help me make cereal bars.

I could learn to be a bread head, I think. I smooth my hands across the top of my head, relishing in the lack of grease. Plenty of other staff members have been sporting this look anyway. They're all much older than me, but nonetheless they're rocking the look. Maybe that one crotchety secretary will stop giving me the stink eye now that we're twins. We could be part of an exclusive clique with matching knitted sweaters and trade beauty secrets over a game of cribbage on the weekends.

My kids would absolutely love that. Especially if I could convince her to look the other way when they were tardy. It'd be like the time I befriended that lunch lady and they got dibs on the least soggy slices of pizza. Of course, Gertie probably doesn't have a secret bread head society and definitely wouldn't do me, or anyone else, any favors. But it would make a great joke response for any questions.

I look back at the wig one last time. It would be so easy to go back to wearing it. I've never had any real issues with it. The past few months have gone by without a hitch, and that elastic has done so much for me. But I just can't wear it anymore. Wearing it used to make me feel complete. It wasn't exactly what I wanted, but it was a great replacement for a piece I was missing. Life was like playing Monopoly with a penny because you've lost the thimble. But there's nothing special about it anymore. Putting it back on wouldn't make me feel any better, it would just prolong a life I don't want to live anymore.

I reach out toward it and pat down the flyaways poking out from the crown. The corners of my mouth pull downward and out toward my cheeks. This doesn't have any value for me, but it feels as though I'm losing something by leaving it behind. This weight in my chest grows the more that I look at it,

I turn around on my heel and dash out of the bathroom. There's no way I can change my mind now. It's time to take the big leap.

CHAPTER 7

That two-inch gap unleashed the floodgates. My headrest is pelted by strands of hair blown back by the strong breeze whistling through the car. The rhythmic tapping seems to bring life into this old rust bucket. That and the ray of sun shooting through the windshield. Despite the air circulation, my cheeks tingle from the dry heat spanned across them. What a beautiful day for some goodbyes.

The back roads are finally usable again now that the spring mud has dried up and the scent of decayed leaves is buried beneath all of these invasive flowers. The light purples and deep blues are my only companions on this long path for the time being. The longer I drive like this, the more I become paranoid that I'm stuck inside some weird loop in space and time. There are no changes in this road, just the same straight path.

I used to think the year was moving by at a snail's pace, but now it's coming far too soon. My odd stretch of land seems to have transported me back in time, bringing back memories of my first day back. When I came back to my class a different person. Today is the last day I'll get to hang out with these kids. Next year I'll get to start over new, but there's so much that I'm going to miss.

Who's going to alphabetize the composition notebooks for extra credit when Kayla is gone? Who will I rely on to answer questions when the rest of the class doesn't want to participate? Will next year's class be able to beat the cornbread record during the Oregon Trail unit? I can't handle the change.

I swipe some hair away from my eyes and head down toward my four way stop. I have to be at least five or six cars from the stop sign. There must be some sort of traffic

jam on the main roads to cause this much buildup. It's a car crash, knowing this area.

And the traffic intruding on my peaceful drive is bound to cause another on these narrow roads.

My hair flutters back down as the wind slows, tickling the sun-kissed skin of my shoulders. That ugly radiation burn has faded into beige, hidden beneath by my gardener's tan. The sun-like glow of my fluorescent yellow dress bounces off of that skin. It makes me feel as if I've finally grasped onto that classic Ms. Frizzle style. Even the windblown hairdo looks like it belongs for once.

It may have taken me an entire school year to get the look down, but it's better late than never. At least my kids can finally see me before they're gone forever. And if I can keep it up, then I can start next year on the right foot, too. I don't want to be an empty husk of a person for these kids any more. I'm ready to go back to being that lively teacher who engaged with her students and made every lesson an adventure.

Every morning for the past month or two, I've stumbled into the bathroom and taken a good look at myself. For a while, I left the lights off. The end table lamp from the hallway lit up the room just enough for me to see a shadow of myself. I could see changes without having to stare at the worst aspects of myself. When I noticed major improvements, I started turning the bathroom light on. Each and every time I enter that bathroom, I look a little better than the day before.

First, the color started to come back into my skin. That type of blotchy pink you see in a newborn baby after it's cried. Like the first splatters of acrylic on canvas, it didn't quite look right. But over time the color has spread out and became blended with a range of other healthy tones. It might be the nicest I've ever looked.

Once I reached the pink stage, my eye bags started to deflate. That tiny sliver of purple along my cheekbones just vanished this morning, eliminating the last trace of their existence.

Even my hair has filled out in these last few weeks. Shaking my head, I can feel the change in weight. It's unbelievable how quickly all of this turned around. Almost a year of no progress and then suddenly *shabam!*

The woman in the mirror stopped stealing glances at that wig, grimacing at the expensive garbage and pining for cosmetics. She didn't have to redo her hair five hundred times just so that it would become passable. Her morning routine is down to just twenty minutes and I get to see less of her each day. Maybe all that extra sleep is what fixed the eye bags.

The yellow SUV in front of me creeps forward in line, crowding the people in front of us. He can't see me from here, but I can definitely make out two middle fingers waving around in the air. What kind of idiot pulls a double bird on back road traffic? Even in this state it's, at most, a one bird job. Someone really ought to teach these yahoos how to use their rude gestures efficiently.

Inappropriate road rage is probably the one good part about being stuck in the back of traffic. You can see what's going on with everyone else, but nobody can see you laugh at it. Nobody can turn around and laugh at what you're doing, either. This minor scuffle will never be as good as the 1988 Christmas road trip, but it's still pretty funny.

I roll into my place behind the SUV and roll my window halfway down. That hair hat may be gone, but I'll always sweat like a pig under this godforsaken sun. The roots of my natural hair are just as gummed up as the lace front ever was. Once I've paid off all of

those medical bills, that air conditioner is first in line for repairs. Sweat pools connecting your armpits to the floor are even less professional than strolling into class like a week old corpse that just busted out of its casket.

The wind flow carries in the sounds and smells of the city, both good and bad. Off toward the main road I can hear several horns honking and at least one “fahk you.” On the other side, past that field, a group of insects compose the odd music of summer by scraping their legs together.

Once the traffic clears, that window is going straight back up to the two inch gap. Every now and again it's nice to take in the world, but this part of town should be observed only in moderation. I'm fine with watching the city from a distance, for the time being. Besides, inhaling this many gasoline fumes can't be good for my brain cells.

The line in front of me creeps forward again, until I'm at the front of the four way stop. The old woman to my left plows through the intersection at the first opportunity. She takes no time to look at any of the other drivers. Meanwhile the guy across from me looks nervously between us, clearly unsure who's going next. The drivers in this state are all unique but somehow equally bad.

After looking around, he settles his gaze on me. Not on my hair, or on my once-crispy shoulder, or even on my slightly-less-wonky chest, but directly at me. I'm just another driver on the road, like the speed demon old woman or the asshole in the SUV, who I'll forget about by the end of the day.

The moving van on my right honks impatiently, and the man flinches at the noise. The idiot doesn't move, though. The van honks three more times in quick succession to try to catch his attention. I slide my arm out the window and wave the poor kid forward

before I get stuck here all day. After a moment of hesitation, his car lurches forward and barrels through the intersection like the old woman before him.

I finally look to my right to see chunks of that familiar greasy hair flap in the breeze like flat strips of plastic taped onto a box fan. Of course it would be Derek. He's hunched over at the steering wheel like some sort of cartoon villain, waiting to scare the daylights out of some innocent civilian. Technically it's his turn to go, but if everyone else can drive like a moron today then so can I.

I peel out in front of him, arm still hanging out of the window, and flip him off. Just with the one hand. Unlike some people, I know how many fingers is appropriate for a given job. It's childish, but seeing his face in the millisecond before he slapped his hand onto the center of the wheel made it worth it. Maybe he'll try harder to outsmart me at next week's swap meet. He seems like he needs a little motivation lately. Even after getting this far away, I can hear his angry beeping echo off of traffic. It's beginning to feel more like applause than anger at this point.

I can just picture him turning up at the swap meet. He'll probably show up with two of those big moving vans and a thick stack of cash, strolling through rows of vendors with that weird pimp walk of his. Up and down the aisles he'll search for me, trying to show off what he's got. I can picture him turning every corner with money held an arm's length ahead of him, just to make sure that I can see it. By the time he finds me, I'll have already bought everything I wanted. The time he wastes searching for me means someone else might be able to pick out his toys before he even starts looking. At the end of the day, he'll have brought his two big vans and won't have filled either of them. Now that

I'm settling back into my normal life without unwanted distractions, taunting the man has become even more rewarding.

I merge back into the traffic on the main road and my dismal workplace peeks out over the tops of the cars. It's slightly better than last year, though. Going against Eastridge's rules was definitely worth it. The translucent glow of those leaves has been wonderful to see outside my classroom window. It'll be even better once the upturned earth around the roots settles down and grass coats the top. There's a good chance groundskeeping will let them become diseased like all of the others, but if that happens then I'll just have to keep planting more with each class until the day I retire.

Even when my class has gone on to bigger and better schools, I'll be able to look outside my window and remember one of the few good moments we had together at the end of their time here. I can watch the trees grow and think about how my know-it-alls and my chatterers must be growing, too. Those trees will be so much better than any scrapbook or yearbook could ever hope to be.

The school comes closer into sight and I run through all of my plans for our last day together, looking into the rearview mirror to see that I've remembered all of my supplies. This is my final chance to hang out with so many people before I have to spend the entire summer stuck between a very needy cat and an over competitive antique collector. My end of the year party needs to be better than anyone else's. It needs to be so good that kids from other classes borrow bathroom passes just to come and hang out with my kids. As I roll up into the parking lot and pull into my registration-sticker-concealing spot, I'm certain I have everything. My eyes finally stop scrutinizing the back seat of the car and I look at myself in the mirror.

This woman in the car is so much better than the woman in my bathroom. She's a little sweaty, but there's a glow emanating from her. She looks confident and accomplished, and with the sweat, a little like someone who's just finished their first marathon run. She's crossed the finish line as a completely different woman than when she started the race. But she's not broken or tired. She's stronger and happier having overcome the challenge. She taught herself that she's more capable than she thought she was and, after this, there will never be an obstacle too big to overcome.

I will be able to get through this day and these goodbyes. I'll look at each of my kids with the energy that I should have been radiating this entire year. I will show them, in this one day, how much I care about them, how much I'll miss them and how confident I am that each will be able to do more with their lives than they can even imagine at this point in time. And after I hand them over to their parents, and spend some time worrying over what my next group will be like during the summer, I'll be able to take on another group. And that group will only ever get to see this new me. I've taken the scraps of my past self and forged them into a better woman.

AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Ashley Brackett was born in Lewiston, Maine on September 19, 1995. She was raised in Auburn, Maine, and she graduated from Edward Little High School in 2013. During her time at the University of Maine, she majored in English and minored in Philosophy. She also received the Helen C. Hardison Scholarship, the Abby Sargent Neese Kelly Scholarship and the Nellie Ruth Pillsbury King Memorial Scholarship during this time. She is a member of the National Honor Society and Phi Beta Kappa.

After graduation, she plans on relaxing at home with her family before seeking work in her field.