

*CHEW*: SELECTIONS FROM A NOVEL

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

By

Crystal Squires Ellwood

Director: Pamela Duncan  
Associate Professor of English  
English Department

Committee Members: Dr. Brian Railsback, English  
Jeremy Jones, English

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## ABSTRACT

### *CHEW*: SELECTIONS FROM A NOVEL

Crystal Squires Ellwood, M.A.

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Director: Pamela Duncan

This creative thesis will contain three opening chapters of a novel titled *Chew*. In a world where the government poisons the food supply as a way of controlling the population, two women from opposite ends of the economic spectrum form a rebel alliance. Grocery stores are guarded and monitored. Low income families like Meredith, Austin, and their young daughter Abigail are forced to buy their food from lower-class stores, where the threat of poison is high. Rebecca, a member of the upper class and the mother of an adopted lower-class child, believes her food to be safe. Meredith and Rebecca meet at a makeshift hospital when their children are poisoned. After Abigail dies, Austin, in an attempt to control his own disease after being poisoned by the same food as Abigail, commits suicide. Meredith is left alone and contacts Rebecca. Meredith and Rebecca bond through grief and rage against the government's population extermination of the lower class. They, along with others, devise a plan to create a black-market exchange, the reform plan. Upper class families adopt lower-class children in exchange for food. Growing up in poverty, I have long had interest in representing the lower-class population in my fiction. I draw inspiration from dystopian authors such as Margaret Atwood, Naomi Alderman, Jeff VanderMeer, Nnedi Okorafor, and Lidia Yuknavitch, whose works span race, ethnicity, and gender. Moreover, the dystopias created by these authors span poverty, class distinctions, social rights, and autonomy, all of which will be heavily featured in my novel, *Chew*. The main

characters will live issues of poverty, class, and social expectations in a world where the government controls the population through slow massacre of the lower class. The concept for this novel began with my own lived experience of poverty. It is paramount to my writing philosophy to represent the lesser seen characters of the lower class in my fiction. Having always loved dystopian fiction, it seemed plausible to explore a world in which lower class characters find themselves targeted by the government. This idea resonates with me and enables me to use fiction as a social commentary on the language the government and the media use to describe the poor. They are lazy; they do not work hard enough; they are uneducated; they do not take the steps to lift themselves out of poverty. One goal of my fiction is to address the underrepresentation of the lower classes in the American literary canon. My novel will hopefully not only give representation to the lower class, but also help readers gain a new perspective on lives they have not lived.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Hushed whispers surrounded Abigail as she followed her mother through the grocery store aisles, a cacophony of hurried shuffles and sneakers kissing the linoleum. A man was sobbing in the produce aisle, holding an apple in one hand and an orange in the other. Abigail's mother stopped and turned around.

“Honey, why don't you go grab a loaf of bread?” she said, “you know the drill – smell it first. Always put it back if it smells like a penny. You know Daddy thinks that could be a sign of bad food.”

Abigail nodded and trotted over to the bread aisle, her favorite ragged doll in her grip skimming the floor. The doll's limp arm picked up the grime of the linoleum, slowly staining a gray-brown with the film of uncleanness. There was a young woman standing in the aisle, poking the loaves, sometimes stopping to pick one up and smell it. She glanced over at Abigail and smiled.

“Do you need some help?” she asked, handing Abigail the loaf she had just smelled. Abigail took the loaf, pressed the plastic into her nose, and smelled the bitter ting of copper.

“No thank you,” she said to the woman as she raised the bread in her hands to the woman's eye level, “my mom says that this might kill us.”

The woman's cheeks pinkened and her eyes darted to the floor.

“I can pick it out myself,” Abigail stated. “My mom told me to never take the first loaf on top. Always get it from the back. They put the bad ones in the front, so people will eat them.”

Meredith sat on the front porch, swinging in the dusk. Austin would be home any moment to reinspect the groceries she and Abigail had picked out. Her smoldering cigarette rested on an ashtray next to the swing.

“Those things can kill you,” her mother had scolded over the phone earlier that morning. Maybe they’ll kill me before my own food does, Meredith quipped internally.

Trails of ants lined the porch, leading into small holes along the foundation. A blocky air conditioning unit filled the living room window, whirring away in the summer afternoon heat. Meredith stood up to reenter the house as Austin’s car pulled into the driveway, clanking and popping. As he exited the car, Austin’s greasy work uniform left more black streaks on the previously white vinyl interior, long grayed by repeated use.

Austin approached Meredith on the porch and leaned over the swing to plant a kiss on Meredith’s cheek. Austin wasn’t fond of the ashtray smell, but he understood that the stress of their everyday life made it impossible for Meredith to try to quit the smoking.

“Hey babe, you guys went to the grocery store today, right?”

“Yeah, the one nearer to that gated community just like you said.”

“I know you think it’s silly to go twenty more minutes for groceries, but I really do think that store is less contaminated.”

The two entered the house, where Abigail lay on the stained microfiber sofa watching reruns of Spongebob. Austin went directly to the kitchen where the weekly haul was lain out onto the countertops: apples, bread, peanut butter, canned fruit. Austin grabbed a can of chunked pineapple.

“This was near the back of the shelf, right?”

“Yes honey.”

While Meredith never enjoyed answering Austin's questions with the same answers every week, she knew the probing was only out of concern. Meredith had long ago stopped worrying about the status of the food like Austin did. She knew there was nothing they could do to remove the toxins from the food and that one day they'd get sick just like their neighbors did. Meredith couldn't remember what had happened to them. They were just gone and one of their cousins sold their house. She remembered the empty driveway, sitting barren for two weeks before one day, there was a gleaming red Cadillac in the desolate driveway. Meredith had crossed the drying lawn and knocked on the door. The door flew open and a man, tall and slender with slicked back black hair, answered the door. He wore a blue and black button-up, pinstriped, with crisp black slacks. He rested his hands inside his pockets.

"May I help you?" he asked, eyebrow cocked, assessing Meredith.

"Oh, hi, yes," Meredith said. "I just wanted to ask you if you know what happened to Amy and Joel."

The man stared deeply into Meredith's eyes.

"They're dead. They got sick and died in the hospital. I'm selling their house."

The way the man said this unsettled Meredith. He showed no emotion and seemed unbothered by the death of her neighbors.

"I'm sorry, but who are you? Are you a realtor?" Meredith asked.

The man chuckled.

"No, I'm Amy's cousin. I'm her closest relative so the house was given to me. I don't need a house in this type of neighborhood -"

The man's mouthed tightened and recoiled from his words.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just live in River Meadows and I make too much to live and shop out here. I mean nothing by it, but I’m selling the house.”

Meredith nodded and turned to walk away. The man slowly closed the door behind her.

Austin found a can opener and a colander.

“Austin, we’re hungry. Please make it quick tonight.”

He cut open the can and dumped its contents into the colander in the sink. The juice slurped down the drain, only the yellow pulp left. He turned the water on high, flushing the fruit of its unseen ailments. Thirty seconds of hot water later, Austin delivered the fruit to his ladies cuddled together on the couch. Austin handed Meredith both Tupperware containers, their makeshift bowls, before heading back to the kitchen.

Austin reached for the empty pineapple can, accidentally grabbing the jagged, open lid. Blood beaded upon his index finger. Before Meredith could glance over and see the blossoming prick, Austin had dropped the can into the trash and licked the blood from his fingertip. No need to worry the girls; it would probably be nothing. They had been eating from various low-income grocery stores in their area for years now, but nothing had ever happened to them. Austin was convinced that his food washing and careful food selection in store had saved them any grievance. The can wouldn’t give him any issues.

Austin returned to the couch with a small bag of stale chips. Abigail’s empty Tupperware container was crushed between her leg and the arm rest. Her head, eyes nearly closed, rested on Meredith’s lap. She ate like a ravenous dog, then passed out like she hadn’t slept in years. Meredith placed her hand onto Austin’s just as the news stories on the television changed from upbeat adoption at the nearest animal shelter to a breaking story.

“Just in – homeless man shot for attempting to enter grocery store on Latter Street.  
Condition of the man is unknown.”

Meredith turned to Austin, her eyes getting watery.

“How can they do that? He was just trying to survive. We all are.”

“Well, we don’t try to go to stores we aren’t welcome at. People can learn to clean the food just like we do. They want us to die and if we go trying to break into their stores, of course they’ll shoot us. One less person to poison. If they shoot us, they don’t even have to waste any food on us.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Austin watched Meredith’s tears silently stream down her face.

“How much more do we need to make to qualify us for the safe grocery stores?”

Meredith choked out, her voice cracking and incomplete.

“Sixty thousand,” Austin replied, as he had every night before.

This morning was different. Meredith decided to go to the grocery store alone. Abigail had begged Austin to go to work with him. Austin was on his way out, the three of them standing in the doorway, Austin in his everyday scraps of grimy work clothes: t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, old holey jeans, and cracking Adidas’ they bought at the Goodwill a couple years ago, all with stains aplenty. Meredith and Abigail were in their pajamas.

“Daddy, please! I’m gonna be so bored here all day. It’s Saturday! I wanna go out with you!”

Austin turned to Meredith, with his smirk that said *I can't say no to this girl*. Abigail was a daddy's girl at heart. She would always get excited to see Austin home from work, even giving him a hug before he showered the car grease off of his dry, cracking skin.

"I'm working today, Abby, so you'll have to be a good girl if you come to work with me. You can play games on the computer in the office."

Abigail's face turned upwards with glee.

"Yay! Let's go, let's go!"

"Abby bug, first we've got to get you in some real clothes."

Abigail pouted, but let her father pick her up and carry her to her bedroom. When they emerged again, Abigail wore a blue dress and brown sandals, both hand-me-downs from her cousins that lived a town over.

Abigail ran out the door and down the porch, skipping the broken step, to the car parked in the gravel driveway. She pulled on the door handle of the passenger side, her face grumpy when it wasn't unlocked. She stopped yanking on the handle and wrapped her doll up in her arms, giving it a tight squeeze while she waited.

Austin hugged Meredith in the doorway, leaving a quick kiss on her neck.

"Are you going today?" he asked her.

"Yeah, I'll do everything we talked about. I know, Austin. We've been going through this for years, okay?"

Austin nodded and stepped out the door.

Meredith sat on the couch with a bowl of cereal, mindlessly watching the news. More reports of violence against shoppers sneaking into stores they didn't belong in. Her spoon sat

dormant in the cereal that was becoming mushier every minute. Meredith wasn't sure how she could feel so numb yet so emotional about the increasing news reports at the same time. The world they were living in wasn't new. Three years ago, the government had announced a new initiative: "growth control for populous environments." At the time, it hadn't sounded too crazy. The government had started with allotting mandatory birth control to low income families. Meredith hadn't been upset by this. They had never planned Abigail and certainly couldn't afford another baby. Meredith enjoyed the vigilance of the government. She couldn't afford birth control every month. She had no job other than looking after Abigail and Austin didn't have insurance working at the shop. She was grateful for the government's interference in her life. She received free birth control delivered directly to her mailbox every month. She was grateful.

A couple of months after the birth control initiative, it became mandatory to visit a government office in town to report income and receive a colored chip to carry at all times for proof of income status. Austin had gone to the office with his paycheck stubs to receive two green chips, not the lowest income level - that was purple - but close to it. Austin carried his in his wallet. Meredith carried hers in the pocket of her jeans whenever she left the house. During this time, there were a few news stories involving people getting arrested for not having their income identification chips on them. Some of those arrested tried to sue, but the law was the law. The income identification bill had passed and there was nothing illegal about being detained for breaking the law.

Then came the grocery store ordinances. Every house received a pamphlet in the mail explaining the new ordinance – you were to shop at a store that correlated to your income level bracket. The pamphlet was accompanied by a map with a radius of twenty miles, their home at the center underneath a red dot. Meredith and Austin had plenty of choices for places to shop.

They lived in a lower income town, surrounded by other lower income towns. The closest wealthy township was River Meadows, over fifty miles away.

When the ordinance had begun, it hadn't seemed like a big deal. People shopped in certain grocery stores. It's not as if Austin and Meredith had to change their routine. Their favorite store and all the other ones in town were all on their map, matching their income level. They had continued their everyday life, still shopping at the same place. No one was sure why the ordinance had been put into place, but it was now just another rule to follow, so everyone did. After about a month, a rumor began to spread. The Perkins' were sick. They had bronchitis and were in the hospital.

Meredith had always been fond of Linda Perkins. Their children always played in the park together. Linda's daughter Anne came over occasionally when Linda had to run errands. Meredith thought it only polite to run some flowers over to the hospital. After Austin came home from work one night, Meredith had watched Austin and Abigail cuddle on the couch from the kitchen after his nightly shower. It was late afternoon, but the sun hadn't set yet. Meredith poured out two bowls of stale cereal and emptied the last of the milk jug into them. She walked over to the pair on the couch and placed the bowls beside Austin on the end table.

"The Perkins' are in the hospital and I'm going to go take them some flowers."

"Where did you get the flowers?" he nodded in the direction of the kitchen, where a bunch of sunflowers lay on the counter.

"I picked them from the side of the house. I've been babying them for so long to get them to bloom, but I think it's time they give their beauty to more than just the side of the house."

Austin smiled.

“Be safe,” he said, as Meredith grabbed the sunflowers wrapped in tissue paper and walked out the door.

Hospital wasn't really what Meredith would have called it. More like makeshift triage center. Meredith had heard that the Perkins' were staying at the Orange Grove Hospital from neighbors down the street, but she hadn't heard of that particular hospital before. She now knew that was because this hospital didn't exist a few months ago. The hospital was in a strip mall, with a Mexican restaurant on one side and an abandoned parking lot on the other. Grass sprang through the wrinkled concrete and stray cats lay sunbathing in the lot. The hospital itself looked to be an old K-Mart. The outlines of the fluorescent letters remained, the grime stuck to the surface around their previous home. The two sets of automatic doors looked to be broken and were propped open with bricks.

Meredith got out of the car and slammed the door behind her. If she didn't slam it, the window wouldn't fit into place and the battery would die. She had learned that the hard way last week. Austin had warned her, but she didn't realize just how rough she had to get with the old junker for it to cooperate. Meredith approached the open doors and could smell a festering tinge to the air. When she stepped inside, she had an expansive view of the entire store. Beds dotted the empty floor. She could still see where shelves used to be, the same grimy outline standing there, just like the letters on the outside of the building. Patients seemed to be in all sorts of conditions. A patient off to Meredith's left was breathing through a tube, seemingly in a coma. The left side of the patient's face looked melted off.

A perky nurse quickly approached Meredith and the podium standing to her right.

“Hi! I’m so sorry! I’m supposed to be standing here to greet any visitors, but I got a little distracted by a patient. What can I do for you?”

The nurse leaned against the outside of the podium, standing too close to Meredith for her to be comfortable. Meredith stepped back, standing nearly inside the doors.

“I’m here to see the Perkins’. Linda, Barry, and Anne. Perkins.”

The nurse stepped back and rotated behind the podium, leafing through a binder filled with loose leaf paper. The documents were hand written and quickly scribbled. *Why was this place so disorganized?* Meredith wondered. *Since when were medical files handwritten and left out in the open? I could have grabbed that binder when I first walked in.*

After about two minutes, the nurse finally found the file she was looking for.

“Right! They are just right over here. Follow me!”

The nurse promptly turned on her heel and headed to the far-right corner. Patients only comprised a portion of the store’s floor space. There were maybe thirty or forty. The store could have easily held hundreds. With fewer patients than floor space, this meant that patients had more privacy. As much privacy as one can get in a bed in an open old department store. The Perkins’ beds were lined up against the wall, all three facing outwards. The tops of their beds were raised up, so they could clearly see who was walking over. Only Barry was awake, and he attempted a weak smile when he saw Meredith.

As Meredith got closer, she could see the flakiness of Barry’s skin. Patches of skin had peeled away on his arms, leaving raw red patches. Some were oozing pus and other wore crisp, dried blood. Barry’s face was no different. His eyelid had nearly fallen off, leaving a sloughed mess of flaky blood. He could barely open his eye. Meredith attempted to conceal her horror and let out a cough.

“Are there any chairs I could borrow?” she asked the nurse.

Eager to help, the nurse nodded and returned with a cheap, rolling desk chair a minute later. The nurse smiled.

“I’ll be over there if you need me, but visiting hours are nearly over. It’ll be eight o’clock soon.”

“I won’t be long,” Meredith replied. “Thank you.”

The nurse retreated to the podium and Meredith wheeled the chair to Barry’s bedside.

“I brought these from my garden for you guys,” Meredith said, holding out the sunflowers.

Barry smiled, and his eyelid creased. A large flake of blood fell onto his cheek. He was unaware. Barry reached out his arm and Meredith could see the tightness of his skin. It was almost like he was a burn victim. She placed the bouquet in his hands.

“I thought you all had bronchitis. What happened?”

Barry coughed, wrenching on the bed for a couple of seconds.

“Sorry. Yeah, we all have that. That’s what they told us it was when we came in. We tried going to that hospital over in Langley Township, but they wouldn’t even admit us. Told us to come here after seeing our purple chips.”

He shrugged.

“We got here, and some doctor had us put up in these beds and told us we had bronchitis. I don’t really think that’s what it is. I mean, I don’t think your skin flakes off when you have bronchitis.”

Meredith nodded.

“What about the two of them?”

“Oh, now, I don’t know,” Barry said. “They don’t seem to be as sick as I am, but they do have terrible coughs. I could believe they have bronchitis, but not me. Those two don’t need a nurse to come over every few hours and apply ointment all over their bodies, now do they?”

Barry chuckled. Meredith glanced over to Linda and Anne, both asleep in their beds with oxygen masks attached to their faces.

“Tell them I came by, won’t you? I know Abigail is missing her playmate Anne something fierce. If you guys need anything, please don’t hesitate to let me know.”

Barry erupted into a coughing fit, doubling over and crushing the sunflowers that lay in his lap. He grabbed for a tissue that lay crumpled against his leg under the blanket and covered his mouth while gasping for air. The nurse ran over and held Barry’s back straight, patting him until his coughing calmed. Dark red blood embalmed the flimsy tissue. The nurse quickly plucked the soiled Kleenex from his hand and stuffed it into her apron pocket.

“You’re all good now! I do think you need to get some rest.”

The nurse produced a pill bottle from another one of her apron pockets and placed one in Barry’s hand.

“I’ll grab you a cup of water and you’ll be able to get a little rest.”

The nurse smiled at Meredith and sauntered off.

“Barry, get well soon, okay?” Meredith said.

He nodded, still too winded to speak. Meredith silently stood up and walked out of the hospital.

Meredith remembered that Perkins’ had all died in that hospital. She had only begun to understand how they died when the number of infected began to increase. News bulletins ran

every hour. *If you or your loved one is experiencing dizziness, vomiting, unusual boils or bruises, extreme coughing, bloody discharge in your saliva or urine or other bodily fluids, please locate your nearest hospital. Maps of your nearest hospitals can be located at any official government office where grocery shopping maps can be found.* The threat wasn't coming. It was here. The ordinances were impositions, not handouts to be thankful for. Meredith knew they had to be getting poisoned through the food. Guards at grocery stores revealed the horrors housed inside. Food was the easiest way to regulate the poison. Air or water wouldn't be as easily controlled. They had to make sure the right people were poisoned.

Meredith snapped back into the moment, her cereal bowl and now soggy cereal resting on her lap. Her neighbors and friends had been struck by the deadly ordinances and she and Austin had fought every day to live through them. She never wanted what she saw happen to Barry happen to her family. Austin had left just an hour ago, making sure that she was going today and that she'd do everything they'd talked about. She would, but it would be just as emotionally disturbing as every other time she'd gone to the grocery store. It was hardly bearable to see people crying in the grocery store only to know they'd go home and eat poisoned food. The government never told them how many were dead or dying, but Meredith knew the number grew every day. Austin thought he'd developed a system for choosing safe foods. Meredith didn't know if she believed in the concept of safe foods. Those only belonged to the wealthy in their grocery stores.

Meredith ate her soggy cereal and drank the milk left in the bowl. There was no waste in this household. They still had to pay for food, no matter whether it would poison them or not. They still had less money than they would have liked. After placing the bowl in the sink, Meredith got dressed in a tank top and jeans. The weather said the day would be mild. She

wouldn't work up a sweat carrying back a couple of food items, so she wasn't worried about being overdressed in her jeans.

The walk was short. Meredith was skipping the long walk to a grocery store farther away. She walked up to the Speedy Mart and approached the guard stationed at the sliding doors. His uniform was navy, crisply pressed. He looked like he could have been part of the military, but he had no identifying nametag, badges, or symbols on his uniform. The only thing attached to his plain navy outfit was a holster on his hip, containing a gun. Meredith didn't know anything about guns, but she knew she was afraid of them. This man would use it if he needed to. She knew that much from the news.

“Chip please.”

Meredith reached into her pocket and produced her worn green chip and placed it in the outstretched hand of the guard. He turned it over and inspected it and handed it back.

“You're free to go in.”

Meredith thanked him and entered through the automatic doors. She bypassed the cart storage. She only had twenty dollars from the emergency fund jar that Austin deposited his spare change into in the kitchen. When Meredith did the laundry, she always put the crumpled-up dollar bills and loose quarters that had escaped from Austin's work clothes into the jar as well. This had allotted them just enough to get some groceries to make it through the end of the week.

Meredith entered the cracker aisle and found the saltines. She was surprised how empty this aisle was. Actually, there weren't many people in the store today at all. She could only hear a few stifled snuffles throughout the store. Meredith rooted around in the back of the shelf and grabbed the box of saltines farthest away from the front. She turned the box on its sides, inspecting the seams. Austin had told her that if the product looked tampered with, don't get it.

She didn't know how the food was poisoned and figured that if it was done in the factory, Austin's technique was blown out the window. But she followed his advice in an effort to take all the precautions she could. She sniffed the box and smelled nothing. She knew she wouldn't be able to smell poison through the plastic casings and the cardboard of the box, but she sniffed it anyway.

Meredith continued her routine through the cracker aisle, the juice aisle, and then to the fresh produce. She was always scared of the fresh water sprayed on the produce, but she wasn't going to let her family eat only processed, boxed foods all the time. If some of the food was poisoned, all of it was. She took risks to survive, and damn it, she wanted some fresh carrots sometimes. There was a man in the produce aisle, his hands rotating heads of lettuce on the shelf. Meredith could see his fingers. Most of his fingernails had fallen off and the bright pink holes that remained shined. He kept reaching up and scratching the back of his neck before prodding another head of lettuce. Meredith wasn't sure how he was scratching any itches he had and felt a cold chill shiver up her spine and down her arm at the thought.

Meredith snatched a cluster of carrots from the shelf and tucked it under her arm. The bundle left a wet print on the inside of Meredith's shirt, but she was more concerned with getting out of the aisle. The man acted like nothing was wrong and that disturbed Meredith more than anything. If her fingernails were falling off, she wouldn't be stroking heads of lettuce in the produce aisle. She wasn't sure if the disease could be caught by interacting with the heads of lettuce after he had, but she didn't want to find out.

Meredith approached the shortest checkout line she could find. She stood behind another woman checking out. Her toilet paper, apples, and canned biscuits lay on the conveyor belt. Once the cashier had rung up the woman's items, she produced the total: \$8.79.

“I have \$7,” said the woman in line.

The cashier shook her head.

“You know that I can’t give you all of this if you can’t pay for it. I’m sorry, but its \$8.79.”

If Meredith had any extra money, she would have spared two dollars. But she didn’t. She looked down at her crumpled bills and coins in her hands. She was sure that she only had just enough for her own groceries.

The woman grabbed a couple apples out of the bagged groceries and handed them to the cashier.

“Alright, take these off then.”

The cashier obliged, and the woman’s total came down to \$6.54.

The woman paid and left the store. Meredith paid for her groceries, the total coming to \$16.06. She could have helped her.

It was Monday again and the cycle of eat, fear, sleep had continued in Meredith and Austin’s household, just as it had for years. Austin had headed out to work early this morning, probably around 6am, since Meredith hadn’t heard him leave. She lay upright in the bed, pillows propped behind her back. It was 9am now and Abigail hadn’t yet stirred, so Meredith was attempting to get some alone time in before she had to tend to her daughter all day. A tattered copy of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* was open on Meredith’s lap. She wasn’t sure why reading about societies not far from hers comforted her. Even though these places were fictional, she felt a little less alone. When you were destined to die, every small comfort was worth the effort and time.

After about thirty minutes, Meredith heard Abigail's door creak open. Meredith's bedroom door was cracked, and Abigail pressed her face to the open space.

"Mommy?"

Meredith slipped her bookmark inside her book and placed it on her side table.

"Come here, baby. What's wrong?"

Abigail slowly pushed the bedroom door open and ran over to Meredith. Meredith took her in her arms and lifted her onto the bed, tucking her in beside her.

"I had a bad dream. Daddy died. I'm scared, Mommy."

"It's okay. It was just a dream. Daddy's okay, I promise."

Abigail started crying. The dream had obviously shaken her.

Meredith got up from the bed and crossed the room, grabbing her cell phone from atop the dresser and getting back in bed next to Abigail.

"We'll call him just to make sure he's okay."

Abigail sniffled and nodded.

Meredith's cell phone was prepaid since they couldn't afford it any other way. They used it mostly for emergencies, but Meredith could see how shaken Abigail was. They'd only use a couple of the minutes on the phone to talk to Austin.

The phone rang four times before one of Austin's coworkers picked it up.

"South Side Automotive. How can I help you?"

"I need to speak with Austin please."

Meredith heard the man yell for Austin.

"Give him just a second. He's under a truck right now," he replied.

Meredith gave a quick thank you and waited on hold.

“Hello?” Austin’s voice came through the line.

“Hey honey, I’ve got someone who had a bad dream and needs to talk to you for a second.”

Meredith handed the phone to Abigail.

“Hi Daddy. I was scared you were hurt, and Mommy let me make sure you weren’t.”

Meredith could hear Austin’s reply.

“I’m okay, Abby. I love you. But I’m at work and I gotta go, okay?”

Abigail nodded with the phone in her hands. Meredith took the phone from her.

“She just nodded. Thanks for talking to her. I’ll see you tonight. I’ll probably take her out to play since she seems so upset.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” Austin said. “I’ll see you tonight. Love you.”

And the call ended.

Meredith sat on the discolored playground bench, chipped from years of parents waiting for their children to tire. Abigail sat on the wood chip pile, next to the green slide, with a slightly chubby boy with a bad haircut, no doubt done at home with scissors and a bowl.

“Mommy, mommy, look!” Abigail cried, climbing to the top of the pile. Meredith smiled, and watched as her daughter ran down the side of the pile, giggling as she went. She was feeling much better from this morning. Meredith hoped she had even forgot about the dream completely. The boy sat at the bottom of the wood chip pile, viewing Abigail from below, letting her be the dangerous friend. She was always the one taking risks.

Just a couple of months ago, Meredith had had to rush Abigail to the emergency room to get five stitches when she jumped off the slide at the park and slammed her face into a wooden

plank upon landing. Abigail was always adventurous and unafraid of anything. Meredith admired her.

Meredith turned to her side, rummaging in her purse filled with graham crackers in ziplock bags and off-brand juice boxes. The last bits of food at home. They'd need to figure out a plan for grocery shopping tomorrow. Meredith felt in her purse's abyss and produced a crumpled tissue. She blew her nose, the discharge a pinkish, thick mucus. Meredith tried not to think about how she had regular nosebleeds. She tried to forget about their unfortunate life and live it happily while she could, as much as she could.

A high-pitched wail pierced the air and Meredith's neck snapped up to a horrendous vision of her daughter. Blood ran down Abigail's eyes; she was bawling red. Meredith's old Nikes tore through the mulch, leaving crescents of concern. Meredith's arms were around her daughter as she screamed, unable to see through the viscous liquid.

“Shhhh, shhhh, baby.”

Abigail's cries lessened, and she began to whimper. Meredith knew what was happening. Playground injuries didn't cause kids to bleed from their eyes. Abigail had been poisoned, and so had they. It pained Meredith to see the poison work quicker in her little body than it was for her or Austin. It was so sudden.

The only other people at the playground were the boy and his mother, who was absorbed in a gossip magazine on a bench across the park.

“Hey! Help us!”

The woman looked up and bolted over. The boy was crying in the mulch about ten feet away from Abigail.

The woman kneeled beside Abigail and reached for her phone to call an ambulance. Meredith looked into the woman's eyes.

"Don't call an ambulance. They won't come for us when we tell them we're green chips."

The woman nodded.

"Do you have any napkins or tissues?" Meredith asked her.

The woman ran back to the bench where her purse lay and returned with a crumpled stack of McDonald's napkins. Grease stains dotted the corners of the stack.

"I'm so sorry," the woman said, her words cracking. She walked over to her son and grabbed his hand and stood at a safe distance.

Meredith wiped at Abigail's cheeks and neck, where the blood from her eyes was pooling.

"I don't have a car. Could you please give us a ride over to Orange Grove?"

The woman nodded and went to get her car. When she parked the car on the pavement near Abigail, Meredith could see that this woman and her family were no better off than her own. The car was multi-colored from the replacement of body parts from other cars. The car was Frankensteined and not very pretty. It sounded like it ran okay even though the idle was skipping. It would get them there.

The woman buckled her son into the front seat and then opened the back door for Meredith. She gently placed Abigail lying down in the backseat before sliding in herself. Abigail's eyes were closed, but she was moaning and whimpering.

The woman got behind the wheel and asked again, "Orange Grove Hospital?"

"Yes," replied Meredith. "It's the only place that will take us."

## CHAPTER TWO

“Please help me! My daughter is in the car on the curb and she’s bleeding. We need help!”

A nurse, not the same one that Meredith remembered, walked outside to Meredith as she sprinted over to the car. Meredith scooped Abigail from the backseat over the shoulder.

“Thank you so much!” she shouted at the woman in the car. The woman’s face exhibited relief that Meredith was dismissing her. She was probably afraid of being asked to help further. She let out a meek “you’re welcome” and sped off.

Meredith turned to the nurse with Abigail nearly limp in her arms.

“Where do I put her?! Help me!”

“Now honey,” the nurse replied. “You need to calm down. You’re not helping her by being irrational and yelling at me.”

Meredith spoke no further.

Meredith hadn’t stepped foot into Orange Grove Hospital since she’d visited Barry. It looked different now. Cheap curtains on rods separated the beds. The room contained nearly one hundred beds, all hand-me-downs from the wealthy hospital. There were so many more beds than when Meredith had last visited. Maybe Meredith had been blind to how many people died every day, but she wouldn’t forget after being faced with the current sight of the inside of the hospital.

Not only had many more beds been added and makeshift privacy curtains gone up, but there was a new front reception area. Instead of a podium, there was an old, block desk. Meredith could see the barcode sticker on the top, indicating that the desk was sold from an overflow

auction from the local university. The surface of the desk wasn't much different from the podium Meredith remembered though. Scattered papers lay everywhere. Cream colored file folders attempted to hold patient information. Meredith could see K, M, and Y bold and in sharpie on three folders underneath all the loose papers. The papers were still handwritten, scribbled where doctors didn't have time to make notes before rushing off to the next patient.

The nurse extended her arms and Meredith let her take Abigail. They entered the hospital and the nurse deposited Abigail on a free bed near the doorway. Abigail moaned softly as her body collapsed on the old bed. The baby blue plastic was cracked open in vines, exposing the yellowed flabby interior of padding.

"I'll get the doctor," the nurse said, as she pulled a privacy curtain around the two. The rest of the patients in the hospital were blocked from Meredith's view as, they too, had makeshift dingy curtains pulled around their makeshift dingy beds. The interior of the old K-Mart looked like an old drapery sales floor, mismatched curtains hanging all over the place from whatever fabric could be harvested to give the poor enough privacy to watch their loved ones die.

When the nurse returned, she placed a small plastic chair next to Meredith and instructed her to sit. The chair looked like it had come from an elementary school lunchroom. It was small and maroon and had those awful metal facets known for grabbing long hair and not letting go without a painful rip. Meredith sat anyway. She immediately felt her hair slide under the metal buttons, getting caught in place. She wouldn't be able to move without ripping a chunk of her hair off.

The doctor entered the curtained room, dismissed the nurse, and turned to Meredith. He was tall and lanky with a head of curly brown hair. He pushed his glasses farther up onto the bridge of his nose with bony fingers.

“Tell me about her symptoms. And you’re her mother, I presume?”

“Yes,” Meredith said, “and she’s bleeding from her eyes, obviously. I don’t think she’s passed out because she’s made some noises on the way here, but I think she’s in a lot of pain and isn’t able to talk to me.”

The doctor grunted affirmation and turned to examine Abigail. Her small frame lay crumpled on the bed, her knees curled into her stomach, arms wrapped tightly around her knees. Her eyes were shut, though not aggressively. She nearly looked asleep. The only indication that something was off was the dried blood along her cheeks and down her neck. She had been crying blood. Fresh blood dotted Abigail’s undereyes, but it had seemed to slow down from the intense pouring Meredith had seen at the playground. The doctor produced a pen light from his pocket and pried open one of Abigail’s eyes, shining the light back and forth over the exposed red opening. Blood oozed out of the cavity, falling atop the dried blood crisps on her cheeks. The doctor dropped her eyelid and spoke quickly to Meredith.

“It looks like the flu to me. We’re just going to admit her and keep an eye on it. The flu can be deadly for children though, so you may want to call any of the rest of your family to come see her. We’ll try our best to improve her condition, but it looks unyielding. The nurse will be back over in a minute to take down your information for our files.”

The doctor exited around the curtain before Meredith could even open her mouth. When the nurse returned, she held a clipboard in her arms. Loose leaf notebook paper was clipped to the teeth at the top.

“Okay, so. First, what is your daughter’s name?”

“Can I ask you a question?” Meredith prompted.

“I’d really you rather not. I’m not qualified to answer any questions you have about the diagnosis. The doctor gave you his consultation. I’m just here for paperwork and making her comfortable.”

The nurse gestured towards Abigail, still lying in the fetal position on the bed. She seemed to be asleep now and her grip on her own legs had loosened.

“Okay, well uh, I’m just confused,” Meredith said. “He said she has the flu, but no one bleeds from their eyes with the flu.”

“I don’t know, okay,” the nurse said. “I’m not qualified to diagnose her and I’m just here to take care of her in the meantime. Maybe it’s some new strain.”

Meredith grunted. The doctor and nurse were the most patronizing people she’d ever met. She was sure they knew what was going on and just couldn’t or wouldn’t tell her.

“Her name is Abigail. She’s five years old and she draws the best birds you’ll ever see. She’s kind and adventurous and she’s the love of my life.”

“I don’t really think that is pertinent information. Could you tell me your income status, chip color, and home address, please?”

After the nurse had taken down the bare minimum of information about Abigail and their family’s income level, she returned with a stack of blankets and a cup of water. She draped the blankets over Abigail, making her a small lump on the bed, only her blond hair visible. She handed the cup of water to Meredith.

“If you need anything else, I should be around. Just peek your head out and flag me down. I’m usually at the desk.”

Meredith nodded.

“Would you happen to have a phone I can use?”

The nurse guided Meredith back to the front desk and lifted piles of file folders from atop a corded phone.

“Here. Just dial 1 before punching in the number.”

Meredith thanked the nurse and dialed the number to the shop.

The phone rang twice before the familiar “Hello?” reached Meredith’s ear on the other side.

“Austin, it’s me. Abigail is in the hospital. I need you to come here now.”

“Wait, Meredith. What happened?”

Meredith’s voice began to crack. Her throat felt constricted with barbed wire.

“I think she’s poisoned. The doctor said it was the flu. She was bleeding from her eyes at the playground. I thought she could have fallen off of something and gotten hurt, but this was crazy. She was just crying blood. The doctor just dismissed it and gave me some bullshit diagnosis. They just want to monitor her as she dies, I just know it.”

Austin’s breathing in the phone had sped up. It was audible on Meredith’s end of the receiver.

“Austin?”

“I’m on my way. You’re at Orange Grove, aren’t you?”

Austin arrived at the hospital in a fury. His voice was raised loud enough at the nurse’s desk that curtains could be heard sliding open to get a glimpse at the anger.

“Where is my daughter? My wife brought her in. Abigail.”

The nurse pointed to the corner that Abigail and Meredith occupied. Austin walked over and threw open a curtain. The woman behind the curtain startled awake. Austin’s face grew pink

when he saw the child lying in the bed beside the woman. The little girl was rail-thin and had large purple bruises all over her skin. Her skin was nearly translucent in places, plastered to her bones. The girl's thin strawberry blonde hair was falling out, chunks littered her stained pillow. The woman sitting next to the child's bed contrasted her starkly. She was robust and wore a green dress. Expensive jewelry was draped around her neck and wrists. She was the opposite of the small, dying girl. She looked lavish and flourishing. Her eyes were red from where she had been awakened from a nap. The girl remained asleep.

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” Austin barked out, sliding the curtain back into place.

“Austin?”

Meredith's voice emanated from the next bed over. She pushed open the curtain and Austin looked upon his daughter. She was awake and sitting up in bed, holding a paper cup of water unsteadily. Meredith had cleaned as much of the dried blood from Abigail's face as she could, but bits remained. The whites of Abigail's eyes were red, and her pupils were barely visible. She raised the cup of water to her mouth, shaking as it reached its destination.

“Hey baby. How are you feeling?”

Austin slowly sat on the end of the bed in the space Abigail left unoccupied.

“I don't feel so good, but the nice nurse lady brings me whatever I ask for. She said she'd bring me gummy bears when I felt like eating.”

“Oh how cool!” Austin replied.

“And Mommy's taking care of me too so I'm okay.”

Austin smiled at her. Abigail returned to navigating the cup to her mouth and gulping down the contents.

“Me and Mommy are gonna step outside for just a minute, okay? You can be a big girl and handle yourself for a bit, can’t you?”

Abigail nodded yes vigorously. Austin slipped his hand inside Meredith’s and they closed the curtain behind them, walking out to the concrete patio area outside the broken sliding doors. A few tears fell down Meredith’s face before she spoke.

“What do we do, Austin?”

He hadn’t exactly thought through that yet. Their daughter was suddenly ill, and he knew there was no way she could get better. He knew Meredith didn’t want to hear it, but he didn’t want Abigail to suffer. The image of the thin girl covered in bruises returned to his mind. He knew Meredith would never go for his idea, but he had to plant the seed.

“I don’t want her to be in pain,” Austin said. Meredith would feel the same way, but she would never go along with his suggestion until Abigail’s disease had progressed into an unbearably painful realm. He just knew it. He would try anyway.

“I don’t either,” Meredith replied, “but what are we supposed to do about it? She’s sick and we can’t make it go away.”

“I’ve heard of a drug they can give her, Mer.”

“What kind of drug? This place wouldn’t give us painkillers if we begged. They don’t care about what she’s being put through in there.”

Austin shook his head sideways. Meredith would be upset with the next words to leave his mouth, but he had to let her know they had an option.

“No. I mean a drug that can make it go away. John at the shop told me about his. His son got sick. He was vomiting and couldn’t eat and then his teeth started falling out. The nurse offered them a way out. An injection.”

Meredith ripped her hand from Austin's.

"How could you suggest something like that?"

Her voice was hushed and aggressive.

"Meredith, we've heard about what this does to people. We've witnessed it. Don't you remember visiting Barry? You told me his skin was peeling off for god's sake!"

Meredith said nothing.

"And there was a little girl in the bed beside us. Her skin was stretched so tight over her bones and her body was covered in bruises. I don't want Abigail to go through any of that! We don't even know how it'll progress for her! Everyone has different symptoms!"

Meredith mouth was scrunched tightly, and her arms were locked across her chest.

"I just want some kind of control, Meredith. If we can't control that we'll all get poisoned, can't we at least control what we do about it? Can't we at least decide when death comes?"

Meredith pulled a pack of cigarettes from her pocket and grabbed one from the bundle. She searched in her pocket for her lighter, her hand jittering in the denim. The click and swoosh of the lighter burned the end of the cigarette and the tang of smoke filled the air.

"No," said Meredith. "We can't do that. I can't give up this time with my daughter."

Austin nodded. He knew this was how she'd respond. But Meredith refusing to stop their daughter's suffering was selfish.

"I understand that, but think about the pain she's in. I can't let her suffer forever. You know this will happen slowly. I won't let you get in the way if she's too far gone."

Austin's eyes steeled. Meredith knew Austin wasn't bluffing. He always needed control. This wasn't just about Abigail and the pain she'd be enduring. This was about Austin's need to

know what was coming. Meredith was sure that Austin's motivation was his own needs, his own selfishness.

"I won't let you murder her," Meredith said. "Only when the time is right will we even consider it."

Austin turned around and walked back into the hospital.

"End of conversation!" Meredith yelled at Austin's back that had disappeared behind the doors. Meredith stayed outside longer than necessary, pulling long draws from the nicotine stick. She knew that Abigail would die. There was no question of this. She knew she and Austin would die eventually. They had eaten everything Abigail had. Meredith's nose bled uncontrollably and with ferocity at random intervals. She had noticed that it had been happening more and more. The nose bleeds, the pink mucus discharge from her nostrils. She wasn't stupid. She knew what was coming. She just couldn't bear to let go of her girl.

That night they had been forced from the hospital. Visitors were not allowed to stay overnight. Meredith lay in their full-sized bed listening to the shower run in the bathroom. Austin wasn't playing music from his phone on the back of the toilet like he normally did. Tonight was different in many ways. There was no room for any sort of happiness or hope. Meredith's thick brunette hair was tied up in a sloppy bun with one of her forever expanding hair ties. She refused to throw them out until they snapped. She wore one of her tee shirts and running shorts. Normally she'd be wearing just one of Austin's shirts, but she didn't want to feel near him tonight. She didn't want to smell the deodorant that lingered on his clothing, the smell never disappearing no matter how many times she washed the garment. She still couldn't forgive his first reaction to Abigail's sickness. The gray loose sheet on the bed was draped over her lower

body. She had opened the window to her right for the fresh air. It was the first night in a while that wasn't hot and muggy. The cool breeze was exactly what she needed to even attempt some rest tonight.

The shower stopped running and Meredith heard Austin pull back the shower curtain. He still made no noise. No humming. Only the sound of the running sink and the brushing of teeth. When Austin emerged from the bathroom, he was wearing his normal sleepwear – just boxers. He crawled under the sheet next to Meredith and turned off the lamp on the bedside table. Meredith felt his warm body press up against her back.

“No,” she said. “I don't want you touching me.”

Austin turned over and Meredith could feel their backs nearly touching. After a few minutes, Austin began to lightly snore. Meredith couldn't believe he could sleep so easily after the day they'd had. Their daughter was in a K-Mart hospital dying without them there. Was she even being taken care of at night? Why couldn't Meredith sleep in the chair next to Abigail? What would that even be hurting? Meredith knew sleep was far from her mind. She would get an hour if she was lucky.

The day they'd gotten married had been so joyful. Even though they hadn't been able to afford a real wedding, they had made the best of it. The house they rented had a backyard and Meredith could be crafty when she wanted to be. She'd gone to Lowes and spent ten dollars on some discount tile and set up a makeshift aisle over the grass. The grass had been wet; it was spring, and the rain had been pouring every day for a week. Their families travelled from a couple of hours away just to stand in the backyard on a misting day for a ten-minute ceremony.

Meredith's wedding dress had come from the clearance rack at David's Bridal. It was the cheapest dress they had. A dress that was seasons out of style and had been altered for someone who never picked it up. The dress fit well enough but dragged the ground. The woman the dress had been made for was much taller than Meredith. The dress was pretty though, and not bad for a little over a hundred dollars. The ceremony was short and full of jokes. Meredith and Austin had written their own vows, playing up their goofy side. Meredith made jokes about Austin's obsessive need to take out the garbage. Austin made jokes about how he was the nagger instead of his wife. She remembered the day so fondly. As Meredith exited the small ceremony, her mother stood to her left. A tissue was crumpled in her fist.

Meredith followed the tile path back into the house to change for the reception. Their reception was a dinner out at one of their favorite restaurants. They had saved for this dinner for months, squirreling away pennies to be able to celebrate with their families after the vows. Meredith slipped out of the dress in her bedroom and hung it back in its garment bag. The dress was nearly unscathed except for a ring of green grass residue on the hem. The dress hung in the closet until the day she donated it seven years later.

The night of the wedding, Austin lay next to Meredith in their bed. He was reading a book. Something by Hemingway. Meredith had always thought Austin's enjoyment of Hemingway came from his own desire to be a writer. Austin had always told Meredith that if he had all the money in the world, he would be a writer. But as they lived now, they couldn't afford anything like that. Meredith worked as a secretary for a life insurance agency. Her title was secretary, but the agents seemed to think the only thing she could do was retrieve coffee. She sat at a desk all day and filled coffee orders. The agents would file their own paperwork and print their own documents. Meredith wasn't sure what they had against her, but she wished she didn't

feel useless. Austin worked at a friend's mechanic's shop in the next town over. Austin had always been a gifted mechanic, able to keep their junkers running for longer than Meredith ever thought possible. They had once had a twenty-year-old Impala that constantly broke. One day it was the starter, the next it was a busted hose. Somehow, Austin made sure that they drove that car for at least two years past its prime. He was a miracle worker with cars, but she knew he loved to read and write. Meredith wished that in another life she could have had a job where she made enough money to let Austin stay at home and be a writer. She knew that would never happen now. Meredith thought about this often. She felt guilty that they lived minimally and did not have the means to let Austin follow his dreams.

A week before the wedding, Meredith had peed on a stick and found out that they were expecting. She hadn't wanted to tell Austin until after the wedding. They had been looking forward to this day for so long. She didn't want her news to overshadow it. Now, lying in bed next to her husband, Meredith broke the news.

"Hey hon?"

"Just a second."

Austin finished the sentence he was reading and dogeared the page in his paperback. He placed it on the nightstand. It was *A Farewell to Arms*. Meredith vaguely remembered reading that one in high school but couldn't even think of any of the plot.

"I really need to talk to you. I haven't decided what I'm doing yet, but I can't keep it a secret anymore."

Austin began to look alarmed.

"What's going on, babe?"

Meredith began to cry. Her face contorted and her lips squished together.

“I’m pregnant and I don’t know what we’re going to do. We were so safe. We used a condom every time.”

Austin’s mouth was open in a ring of confusion. After a few seconds, the corners of his mouth began to lift.

“Honey, why are you sad? I’m gonna be a dad!”

Meredith’s tears stopped.

“We can’t afford a baby. I was going to go to Planned Parenthood and make an appointment for next week. I’m not that far along. Eight weeks or so.”

Austin hesitated.

“I would never want you to do that. We can make this work. You’ll quit your job and stay at home with the little rascal. I’ll just pick up extra hours when I can at the shop. We can make this work.”

Meredith’s flood gate burst, and tears rained down her pink cheeks. Austin pulled Meredith into his arms and wrapped the comforter tightly around the two of them.

“We’re going to do this and I’m going to be a dad.”

Austin placed his palm on Meredith’s stomach.

“That’s our baby in there.”

Austin had shaken Meredith awake.

“I have to get to work. Do you want me to drop you off at the hospital?”

Meredith nodded and retied her loosen hair up in a bun. She slipped on some sweatpants and a clean tee shirt. She had gotten more sleep than she thought she would and felt guilty about

it. She wasn't sure why. She should have been worrying about her daughter rather than getting a good night's rest.

Austin took his work uniform in the bathroom and locked the door behind him. She could hear the buttoning and zipping of his changing ritual. The changing of clothes, the water in the sink, the scrubbing of teeth, and the flushing of the toilet. Always in the same order. She understood that they couldn't afford for Austin to stop going to work just because Abigail was sick, but that didn't mean she enjoyed the notion. He didn't seem bothered by the fact that their daughter was dying. He was just going through his everyday routine like she wasn't in some makeshift hospital right now.

Violent coughing erupted from behind the bathroom door and Meredith could hear Austin stifling it with toilet paper. A wet splashing followed. Meredith knocked on the bathroom door and jiggled the handle. It was still locked.

"Austin?"

The door opened. Austin's face had smears of red along his lips and chin. Meredith peered around him. The toilet was filled with a viscous dark red liquid, bobbing with chunks.

"You're sick too," Meredith said.

"We're all sick," Austin replied. "We're all going to die. You think your nosebleeds are nothing? You're just taking it a little better than the rest of us."

Meredith instinctively wiped at her nose. It had been runny for the last couple of days and the nosebleeds had happened more often. Anytime she blew her nose, the mucus was always pink.

Meredith turned her back on Austin.

"I'll be waiting in the car."

Austin had dropped Meredith at the hospital after a car ride of silence. He hadn't turned on the radio to fill the air. Meredith was glad he hadn't tried to talk to her. She wasn't in the mood. She just wanted to focus on her little girl. She needed to get to her, be with her.

Meredith was sitting in the little maroon chair again and Abigail was asleep. Meredith didn't want to wake her. She looked skinnier than yesterday - if that was even possible. The sight of her daughter on the bed suddenly brought tears to the rims of Meredith's eyes and an unseen lump lodged in her throat. She had to be strong for Abigail. She couldn't let her see her own mother break down. It would only scare her more. Meredith focused on her breathing. In, out. In, out. The tears cleared and the lump in her throat began dissolving.

Meredith scooted her chair back towards the curtain and accidentally bumped into something on the other side. Meredith pulled the curtain back a bit and saw that she'd collided with a woman's chair on the other side. The woman turned around to look at her. There were dark rings under her eyes. Meredith could only imagine that her child had been sick for some time and the woman was at the hospital every moment she could be. She was plump, a trait that was nearly impossible to come by in predominantly purple and green chip areas.

"I'm so sorry," Meredith said. "I didn't mean to bump into you. I was just trying to readjust in this tiny space they gave us."

The woman gave her a small smile.

"Don't worry about it. It's nice to just talk to another person in here. I feel like I'm going crazy. I just sit here and watch my daughter waste away in silence. The only thing I ever hear in here is the nurse shuffling around."

Meredith looked over to the form on the bed – the woman's daughter. She was emaciated. Bruises covered her body. Her lips were peeling, so dry from her sickness. There was

a crust around her mouth. Meredith believed it to be dried vomit. Meredith tried not to stare for too long. She wasn't trying to make the woman feel uncomfortable. There was something about her that made Meredith want to talk with her. She seemed approachable, but melancholy. She seemed to be the kind of woman that was probably friendly and perky before her daughter landed here.

"I've only been here for two days now but it is uncomfortable in here," Meredith replied. "It's sort of creepy. No one really talks except for the nurse and we've got all these makeshift medical rooms set up. I don't really enjoy any of this. Well of course I don't. Sorry, stating the obvious."

The woman agreed.

"I'm Rebecca. This is my daughter Melody."

"It's nice to meet you Rebecca. I'm Meredith. My daughter is Abigail."

Abigail still remained asleep. Meredith knew that Abigail was typically a very light sleeper. This conversation near her bed would have normally awoken her. Meredith knew this meant the nurse had given her some sort of sleep aid to keep her sedated. She resented this place.

"What did the doctor tell you that Melody has?"

Rebecca grunted. She replied in a low-pitched mocking voice.

"She looks to have meningitis. We'll make her comfortable and bring her medicines daily."

Meredith scoffed.

"My daughter was bleeding from her eyes when I brought her in, and the doctor looked me dead in the eyes and told me she had the flu."

Rebecca let out what Meredith could only call a screech of pained laughter. Rebecca lowered her voice.

“They know what’s going on.”

Rebecca looked at Meredith.

“Yeah, they probably do,” Meredith conceded.

Melody groaned on the bed beside Rebecca and began coughing violently. A nurse rushed over and drew the curtain back between the women.

For the next few days, Rebecca barely left her daughter’s side. Meredith knew this because she barely left Abigail’s. The pair had chatted on and off most days, discussing menial things. The weather, the condition of their daughters, their desire for them to heal. Meredith could see Melody growing more ill. Her condition had amplified, and her body was just skin and bones. Boils had appeared on top of her bruises. Meredith had watched Rebecca grow more upset every day that Melody’s sickness prevailed. She was a combination of upset and angry. Meredith was sure this had led to the conversation they had one day.

Rebecca heard Meredith enter the hospital and take her seat next to Abigail’s bedside. Rebecca slid the curtain apart. Meredith could see streaked mascara underneath Rebecca’s lashes. Bags drooped under her eyes and the clothes were wrinkled. Rebecca was usually quite polished, no matter her distress. She typically kept her emotions bottled inside. Meredith could recognize this in someone else, because she knew she did it too.

Rebecca leaned in to Meredith and whispered under the background noise of groans and the low hum of speech.

“These bastards just want to take out the poor and I won’t stand by and let them do it. They may have gotten my daughter, but I’ll fight for the rest of my life to make sure I save as many people as possible from here on out. My daughter was poisoned and telling me that she has meningitis is something I won’t stand for,” Rebecca stated.

Meredith was taken aback. She had never heard someone so openly protest the government’s actions in such a public space, even in whispers. Sure, she and Austin had discussed similar thoughts, but that was at home in privacy. Meredith wasn’t sure if she could be prosecuted for saying these things aloud, but she didn’t want to chance it. The government would do what they wanted no matter the legality. However, she wanted to hear Rebecca continue.

“How would you do that?” Meredith whispered. “I mean, how would you save people?”

“I would save poor children. I know there’s some way to do it en masse. Melody came from a poor family. I think they were purple chip. I adopted her about six months ago. I’ve always wanted children, but I don’t think I can. I tried for a while with my ex-husband, but we never got pregnant. Anyway, I had no idea that Melody had eaten poisoned food before I adopted her. She began showing symptoms about a month ago.”

Meredith nodded, urging Rebecca to continue.

“I actually live in River Meadow a couple of towns over, you probably know it, but the hospital over there wouldn’t admit Melody once they saw her medical file. Apparently, even when she is my daughter, she remains in a purple chip status for a year before she can officially transition to my chip color - orange. It’s ridiculous.”

Rebecca paused and cleared her throat. She leaned in farther to Meredith.

“I know this is because they could possibly become sick for a year after eating poisoned food. They won’t tell you that, but I think the viruses can be dormant for a while before they get

you. A year passing without symptoms means the kid is finally safe and can then become a member of the higher class.”

Meredith couldn't believe what this woman was telling her. She seemed to know so much about how all this worked. All Meredith thought about was surviving until the next day, not changing the world or figuring it out.

“I want to save children and get safe food to the poor,” Rebecca said. “I know I could do it. I have other friends who I know would help. We may be wealthier, but we sympathize with you, darling. We don't want people to be dying. We need to do something. Even if we can give people a safe meal a week and adopt lower-class children, it's something.”

“Yes,” Meredith replied meekly.

“What's wrong?” Rebecca said.

“I just... I never thought that there were people out there who wanted to see us live. My husband and I live day to day just struggling to not die. Hearing you say you want to help people like us is new to me.”

Rebecca laid her hand on top of Meredith's.

“Once I leave this hospital for good, I have already promised myself that it's my mission.”

Meredith wasn't sure why she trusted this woman. She had only met her a few days ago, but she believed every word she'd said. Knowing that there were people out there who wanted to help the poor was new to her. She had thought that everyone who wasn't being poisoned were happy to see them go. If the population had to be controlled, let it be the poor. They didn't contribute to society anyway. But Rebecca was different. She had even said she had wealthy friends who felt the same way she did.

“I want to help,” Meredith whispered. “I mean, of course I have my daughter to think about, but I need to help.”

Rebecca rubbed her thumb across the top of Meredith’s hand.

“I think we can manage that,” she said. “And we can surely get you some safe food to eat at least once in a while. You said you had a husband?”

“Well yes, I do have a husband,” Meredith replied. “But the safe food won’t be a problem. We’re both already sick.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Meredith said. “We all ate the same food that landed Abigail here. It was only a matter of time. Right now, I only have nosebleeds, but they get worse every day. My husband is vomiting blood already. Abigail here was suddenly bleeding from her eyes one day. We never know what’s coming next.”

Rebecca stood up and pushed her chair back. She leaned over Meredith’s chair and embraced her.

“We will do what we can with the time you have left. We may not be able to change the world, but we can change a couple people’s lives at least.”

Footsteps crossed the tile floor and Meredith could see white sneakered feet approaching them. The curtain on the other side of Melody’s bed ripped open. The nurse’s smile was stretched past its capacity.

“Hi, now, is this curtain broken? I can fix it for you.”

Rebecca stood up and returned to her chair next to Melody’s bed. The nurse jerked the curtain between Rebecca and Meredith closed.

“Please don’t open this again. You might cross-contaminate the patients and we wouldn’t want that, now would we?”

Meredith heard Rebecca reply, “no ma’am” and the nurse’s footsteps receded back to the front desk.

Meredith’s following evening and morning played out precisely how her last day had. Austin picked her up from the hospital, they had dinner and went to bed, and the next morning, Austin dropped her off at the hospital before work. All of this was done in complete silence. Meredith had nothing to say to him and he knew he could say nothing to convince her of the need for lethal injection. Meredith could feel the tension between them whenever they shared a space.

Meredith had arrived at the hospital a little later than usual this morning. They’d gotten a flat tire on the way and Meredith had sat in the grass on the side of the highway while Austin changed it.

“At least it was an easy fix this time,” Austin had said once they were back in the car. Meredith had only nodded.

Once they’d arrived at the hospital, Austin pulled to the curb and put the car in park.

“What are you doing? You need to go.”

“I’m already late,” Austin said. “Please just talk to me. I agreed to not push the subject until it was time. You won’t even talk to me.”

“I’m not ready to forgive you for wanting to kill our daughter the second she showed symptoms,” Meredith said, exiting the car and slamming the door.

Austin pulled away from the curb and Meredith entered the hospital, on her way to returning to her little maroon lunchroom chair she occupied every day from nine to five.

Abigail was awake when Meredith opened the curtain.

“Hi mommy,” she giggled. Her doll was cuddled in her arms.

Meredith smiled. Abigail didn’t look as much in pain today as she had yesterday. She seemed to just be sleeping through any pain she had. It was a good sign that she was awake this morning. She seemed almost normal. Meredith leaned over Abigail and gave her a loose hug. Abigail squirmed free and produced a folded piece of scrap paper.

“Mommy, this is for you.”

Meredith took the note and opened it.

*Call me at this number. We need to talk.*

A number was listed below the words. Meredith knew Rebecca had left it for her. Meredith pulled back the curtain that separated their two rooms. The bed that Melody had laid upon was stripped clean. There was no chair next to the bed. It had been prepared for the next patient and Melody and Rebecca were gone.

## CHAPTER THREE

Meredith kept the folded piece of paper with the phone number on it inside the drawer of her nightstand. She wasn't sure why she hadn't called. It had been three weeks since Rebecca had disappeared from the hospital. Meredith knew that Melody had died, but she preferred to not think about that part. She wanted to call Rebecca, but she still needed to put her own daughter first.

In these three weeks, Abigail had gotten better and seemed herself before a disheartening turn of health. She had seemed well for about a week. The two weeks that followed brought sickness like Meredith had never seen it before. Abigail was vomiting nearly every thirty minutes and she was unable to drink water and keep it down. Everything she drank came right back up. She hadn't eaten solid food in two weeks. Her body was shriveling without sustenance. Her eyes, never having reversed to normal, still were nearly all black. The areas that had been white before the illness were still red with burst blood vessels. Her pupils could barely be seen. Abigail had fits where her eyes would begin bleeding again. This was the hardest for Meredith to watch. Seeing your child vomit was a lot more normal than watching her panic over blood pouring from her eyes. It got harder and harder for Meredith to watch. Every day Abigail grew worse and Meredith silently cried herself to sleep in the chair next to Abigail's bed for those two weeks.

The pale, shrunken body lay crumpled beneath the stark white sheet. Meredith and Austin sat in chairs pulled up to the edge of Abigail's bed. Austin had stopped going to work this week. He knew that he needed to be there for Abigail, no matter the cost. They would make something

work. Meredith and Austin still hadn't discussed the rift growing between them. They lived a silent existence when Abigail wasn't around.

Abigail's breathing was labored, and her blanket was pulled up to her nose. Her bulging eyes peeked out from underneath the sheet. Abigail began to cough, blood spattering the white sheet. A nurse entered the large room and approached the three. Without a word, she stripped away the soiled sheet and replaced it with an identical, clean sheet.

"Thank you," Meredith said. The nurse promptly exited without turning to Meredith's voice, drawing the curtain behind her.

"Let's go outside for a minute," Austin said. He leaned over to Abigail and kissed her on the forehead.

"We will be right back, baby."

She nodded, weakly.

Meredith and Austin exited the hospital into the chilly September wind. They leaned against the building. Meredith's face contorted. Austin knew this was the face she made right before sobbing. Austin made no move to hold her as he might have done a month ago. He didn't want to upset her further.

"Shhhh, it'll be over soon. You know it's time." he said.

"I don't want it to be over soon. I want her to get better."

Meredith breathed deeply. She didn't want to cry and seem weak. Austin wasn't crying. He didn't even seem bothered, the bastard.

"You know it can't happen. I know you love her. I love her too. But she isn't going to get better, Mer. We should really think about what the nurse was telling us about. It's the same

injection I told you about before. It would make her suffering go away. I don't want her to hurt anymore."

"How can we do that to her? What if she starts to get better?"

Meredith's face twisted with grief and the knowledge that her pleading had no basis in reality.

"You know that she won't get better. Look at this place. It used to be some old Walmart or something. This isn't a real hospital. They don't care about us. They just let us come here and think that they're taking care of Abigail so that they can add her to the official death count when she's gone. They just want to know how many of us they've killed. They don't care about her. They make that poison to kill us! She's not going to get better! She's just going to cry and cough up blood until she's in so much pain that she can't talk to us or look at us anymore! She's already a skeleton, Meredith."

Meredith jerked her head up, eye level with Austin. She squinted and clenched her teeth.

"I'll do it. But not for you. For her."

Meredith ripped the hospital door open, storming back into the room lined with bodies, separated with flimsy curtains and family members crying over shriveled and dysmorphic bodies. Austin grabbed the door just before it closed, jogging to catch up to Meredith. He reached her just as she came face to face with the nurse.

"We want it. I'm not doing this because you want her dead. I'm doing it because I love her."

"Yes, ma'am," the nurse answered, grabbing a syringe filled with blue liquid from the cart next to her littered with loose paper, gauze, and bandages. There were no sanitation items. The nurse had no gloves and the syringe had been sitting out next to three other identical ones.

Meredith resented that the moment they'd walked through the hospital doors, they had been doomed to die. Even in death, true and clean medical care couldn't even be given to them.

The pair walked behind the nurse in an ominous procession, on view, in the aisle, for all the damaged families to behold. The ones who had decided their daughter should die. The three reached Abigail's bed where she clutched her doll. Abigail's fingers were twirling the black strands of yarn on the doll's head.

"Mommy, can I have some juice?"

"Maybe later, baby. This nurse is going to give you some medicine first."

Abigail's eyes slowly closed as the nurse injected the cobalt liquid into the clear IV bag. Meredith leaned over, squeezing her daughter's hand.

There was no paperwork to fill out. They were not given any options. They were told that Abigail's body would be transported to the disposal center across town and they could discuss and arrange what they'd do with her body in the meantime. The nurse had been so unemotional as she explained the next steps as their daughter lay on the hospital bed. She just looked asleep, the rag doll clutched in the crook of her arm.

Meredith wasn't sure why she wasn't crying as she looked at her daughter. She had been euthanized. Meredith didn't have to pretend to be unafraid anymore to keep Abigail calm. Yet she couldn't make the tears come. She was numb from holding her daughter's hand while she died of Meredith's own permission. The nurse gave Austin what looked like a business card. They exited the hospital and Meredith stopped outside the doors, looking up at the building. It looked no different from a month ago. The shadows from the old florescent letters, the outline of

“K-Mart” just a blaring reminder that her daughter had died in an old supermarket. A bird perched on the edge of the roof, its black wings outstretched. It was getting ready to depart.

Austin and Meredith pulled into the driveway. The ride had been silent, just like all those before it. But this one had been different. Melancholy permeated the air. The unspoken mourning charged between the couple. They didn't need to speak. The sun had nearly set and the skyline behind their house was pink and purple with the dying of the day. Meredith exited the car, closing the door, careful not to slam it. She didn't need to hear any loud noises. She felt safe in the silence. Austin walked behind her into the house and into the kitchen. He pulled the card out of his pants pocket. Brown dirt stained the crisp white rectangle of paper from where Austin's pants never truly came clean in the wash. Austin placed the card on the kitchen counter and deposited his keys on top of it. Meredith watched him as he grabbed a beer from the fridge.

“I'm going to bed,” Meredith said. Austin raised his beer towards her. She took that as confirmation.

Meredith closed the bedroom door and locked it. They hadn't been sleeping in the bedroom together since Austin suggested the injection nearly a month ago. Austin's bed had been the ratty couch. He left the television on all night, every night even though Meredith had yelled at him about the cost of the television running all the night on the electric bill. Austin had replied that he paid the bill, so he could have the tv on when he wanted. Meredith had stormed out of the room.

Meredith could hear Austin in the kitchen, the sound of metal clanking onto the stovetop. Meredith couldn't even begin to think about eating right now. She stripped off her jeans, leaving her tee shirt on, and crawled into the bed. It was only evening, but she couldn't stay awake in a world that didn't have her daughter in it.

Meredith didn't even remember falling asleep, but she had slept through the night. The thin curtains over the window in the bedroom were lighting up. Morning had come. Meredith looked at her watch. 9am. A growl erupted from her stomach and a grinding sensation in her abdomen startled her. Meredith realized she hadn't eaten in 24 hours. She had eaten a frozen waffle yesterday morning before heading to the hospital yesterday. The day her daughter left her. Meredith emerged from the bedroom and headed to the kitchen. Austin was asleep on the couch, his arm dangling over the edge. The tv was off. Meredith scrambled herself some eggs and plopped them onto a paper plate. She stood at the counter, her lower back pressing against the countertop. The pinch of pain she felt from the hard edge pressing into her soft skin was refreshing. She was alive.

Meredith glanced back into the living room where Austin slept. An empty bowl with a dried yellow crust inside was on the wobbly, old coffee table in front of the couch. She figured Austin had eaten the last box of mac and cheese. A half empty glass of tap water sat next to it. Three empty pill bottles sat next to the bowl and glass. Meredith swallowed the bite of eggs she was chewing and put her plate down on the counter. Deep inside, she already knew what had happened. When she reached Austin, she saw a ripped piece of notebook paper in his hand. His knuckles were still clenched around it. Meredith picked up one of the pill bottles. They were over the counter sleeping pills. He'd swallowed all three bottles.

Meredith leaned over and pressed her fingers to Austin's wrist. He had no pulse. His hand wasn't even warm anymore. She checked his neck just to be safe. No pulse there either.

Meredith pulled her arm back and before she knew it, her hand had slapped Austin's cheek. A red handprint blossomed on his face. Meredith was angry with him, but she was also surprisingly disappointed. She was upset that Austin had left her in the same day her daughter

did. He hadn't considered what this would be like for her at all. Somewhere though, she was happy for him that he finally got that control he was looking for.

Meredith returned to the kitchen and grabbed her paper plate of eggs to throw out. She wasn't hungry anymore and the thought that she was wasting food was far from her mind. Before she dropped the plate into the garbage, she noticed that Austin had thrown away six empty beer bottles. The water on the table had only been a chaser. He had definitely known how to seal the deal. Three bottles of pills and six beers seemed excessive, but Meredith figured he had just wanted to be sure it worked.

Meredith walked back to the bedroom and got her flip phone from the nightstand where it was charging. She dialed 911 and waited for the operator.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"My husband committed suicide last night."

"Have you checked his vital signs? Is he still breathing?"

"No, he's dead."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"What's your address?"

"145 North Elm Avenue."

"I'll send a unit out as quickly as possible."

"Thank you," Meredith replied as she ended the call.

She wasn't sure why she felt nothing. Maybe she'd known Austin would kill himself. It only made sense that now that Abigail was gone, he felt free enough to do it.

Meredith returned to the living room and sat in the space on the couch that Austin's body didn't take up. His bare feet nearly touched her thigh. She reached over and grabbed the note from his hand. His fingers gave it up easily and splayed out flat, hanging over the couch's edge, nearly touching the floor.

*Meredith,*

*I know I'm a coward, but I'm in pain. I'm sorry I can't stay with you. Now that Abigail is gone, it is easier to make this choice. I hope one day you'll forgive me for everything.*

*I love you.*

Meredith's hands were shaking. All the pain she had been holding back was brimming on her eyelids. She suddenly couldn't take being in the room with Austin and dashed into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. She closed the toilet seat and sat down. She tilted her head and looked at the doorknob. Why had she locked it? Who did she think would come after her to console her? Meredith began to sob, letting all of her despair over her daughter and husband fall onto her lap as she leaned over and propped her head up with her hands.

The tears were falling, and Meredith could barely breathe. She tried to draw in a breath and found herself hyperventilating. All she wanted in that moment was to hold Austin's hand. She took a deep breath and shuddered it back out. Nausea rose in her throat and she stood quickly, throwing open the toilet lid. She vomited into the toilet, pink mucus in her bile. She wasn't sure if she had thrown up because of the crying, or if her sickness was just getting worse. Meredith picked up the bath mat and put it in the shower. She laid down on the tile of the

bathroom floor, its frigidity permeating her cheek. She laid there for quite a while it seemed, but maybe her grief made the time feel longer.

A loud *rap-rap-rap* snapped Meredith to attention. She stood up and unlocked the bathroom door and headed to the entryway, where the noise was coming from.

“Ma’am, it’s the police. Please open up.”

Meredith pulled open the front door. The man in front of her was short and round. His thin hair was masked with a cap. His facial hair was just a mustache, Meredith’s least favorite look.

“Were you the one who called in the suicide?”

“Yes. It’s my husband.”

“Where is he?”

“The living room,” Meredith said, gesturing inside.

The police officer stepped past Meredith and approached Austin’s body. He bent down, checked for a pulse, and then stood back up.

“I’ll have the unit outside take him away,” the police officer told Meredith.

He reached into his uniform’s chest pocket and produced a white card. Meredith took it from his extended hand. It was the same card the nurse had given Austin yesterday. She would be making decisions for two bodies now, not just one. The police officer turned from her and walked outside to a black van. The driver’s window rolled down and the officer said a few short words Meredith couldn’t hear. The driver nodded and turned off the engine. Two men got out of the van, both wearing plainclothes. The driver opened the rear doors of the van and then approached Meredith, the passenger following him closely.

“Where’s the body and what’s the deceased’s name?”

Meredith pointed into the living room and squeaked out Austin's name as a reply to the man's question. The men lifted Austin's body easily, as if they did this every day. At this point, Meredith realized, they probably did this many times a day. They carried Austin into the back of the van. The police officer had already departed. The men said nothing. They got back into the van and drove away.

Meredith went back into the house and paused at the couch. She picked up the empty, crusty bowl, the glass of water, and the pill bottles. She dropped the pill bottles in the trash can and started washing the dirty dishes in the sink. What did it matter if she cleaned up her husband's suicide crime scene? It mattered not at all since it was not a crime scene. It was just a time and place where one of the poor people had hastened their sickness.

When she had draped the dishes in the drying rack, Meredith gravitated towards the white card lying under Austin's keys on the kitchen counter. She picked it up and flipped it over. Nothing was on the card save a phone number. No company name, no business description. It was the same number as the other card she had been given. Meredith retrieved her phone from her bedroom and leaned back against the kitchen counter, pressing each number into the keypad. The ringing emanating from the phone seemed to last forever, and then a woman's voice answered on the other end.

"Disposal services, how may I help you?"

"I'm not sure how to do this or what my options are, but my daughter died yesterday and my husband died this morning and this is the number I was told to call."

"No problem, just give me the names of the deceased and each family members' chip color."

She gave the woman her family's names and stated the chip color that applied to all three of them, her included.

"You have two options," the woman replied. "We can do a no-cost-to-you disposal and nothing is required on your part. We take care of everything. Or, for \$1,000 each we can cremate them and have their ashes ready for pickup at the center."

There was silence on the other end of the line, where the woman was waiting for her answer.

"Where do they go if I choose the free burial?" Meredith asked.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, but we also prefer the word *disposal*. Not burial."

Meredith was not reassured.

"Can I make a decision later today and call back?"

The woman said "mhm" and asked if there was anything else Meredith needed. When she replied no, the woman hung up.

\$2,000? Where could Meredith get that kind of money? She wasn't even sure how long she'd be able to stay in their rented home before she would be kicked out. She had no income and the end of the month was nearing. She couldn't pay rent, let alone pay \$2,000 to have her family's ashes given to her. She knew Austin's bank account contained nearly nothing. Not only did they live paycheck to paycheck on a normal basis, but he hadn't gone to work in a week. She wouldn't have been surprised to find out that his checking account was overdrawn.

Meredith remembered Rebecca's note in her nightstand drawer. She knew it was terrible of her to call Rebecca looking for money, but what else could she do? She couldn't bear to be homeless and let her daughter and husband be *disposed of*. Meredith dialed Rebecca's number and a voice greeted her after three rings.

“Hello?”

“Rebecca? It’s Meredith. From the hospital?”

“Oh, Meredith! I’m so glad you finally called me. I’ve been waiting around to hear from you and I just started to give up hope. It’s been over a month.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just... I had to focus on Abigail.”

“I understand that completely. How is she?”

“Well, actually, I called to ask you for a favor. Abigail and Austin are both gone. I need to borrow \$2,000 to pick up their cremated remains. I know it’s terrible of me to not call you until I need money and a favor. I’m sorry. But please Rebecca, I need your help right now. I don’t know what I’ll do if I have to live with the fact that my family was just dumped somewhere. I don’t even know what they do with the bodies, but they’ll only call it disposal. What does that even –”

“Meredith, Meredith, hey,” Rebecca’s voice called from the other end. “Calm down. I get it. They explained the same thing to me with Melody. Even though I have the means, I still only got to choose from those two diabolical options.”

Meredith released a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Rebecca’s voice continued on the other line.

“What’s your address? Let me come over and talk with you.”

Meredith recited her address. Rebecca was on her way over immediately, leaving Meredith twenty minutes to sit in the empty house. She sat down on the couch where Austin’s body had lain. Her head in her hands, she breathed deeply. She couldn’t believe she was asking a near stranger to give her money. She was ashamed. Meredith and Austin had lived their life in refusal of charity. Austin had always insisted that they could get by on his income, never

accepting what he called “handouts.” They qualified for food stamps, but Austin had always refused.

“I can support my own family,” he had said.

Meredith had wished he would yield, but she respected his ability to be independent. That was another reason why Meredith had been grateful for the government ordinances when they had begun. They were mandatory. Austin couldn’t tell her to send it back. She would miss his need for order, but his demand for control was just not her style.

Meredith lifted her head and stared at the surface of the coffee table. Raised rings laid on the water pocked particle board from years of condensation on plastic cups. Scratches lined the table, light brown smears on black coating. Abigail had loved to use the table as an obstacle course for her toy cars. She had zoomed them around, creating pretend mayhem and crashes galore. Meredith had stared at the table for a time, and there came a knock on the door.

Meredith opened the door to find Rebecca in pajamas. Her hair looked oily and was plastered to her skull in places. Flecks of mascara dotted the circles under her eyes. Her pajama pants were covered in dancing cats and her top was an oversized Harvard tee. Her purse, an oversized Chanel slouch bag, was draped over her arm. Running shoes with no socks dressed her feet. Rebecca leaned forward, embracing Meredith. Meredith tensed under her embrace, but released her apprehension when she heard Rebecca sniffing.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Meredith prompted.

Rebecca let go of Meredith and stepped inside, slipping her bare feet from her shoes. She collapsed on the couch, where Austin had lain and where Meredith had just waited. The couch had seen an overabundant share of grief today.

“I’m just so sorry you lost them. How long ago did Abigail...?” Rebecca trailed off.

“Yesterday. And Austin this morning.”

Rebecca’s eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Oh, wow. Austin seemed fine last month. I guess it sped up, but I hadn’t expected to hear such bad news from you.”

“Well, he decided he didn’t want to get any sicker. Sleeping pills.”

Rebecca embraced Meredith again, but only briefly.

“I’m so sorry. It’s hard after it happens and it’s so fresh for you.”

Meredith nodded. Rebecca continued on.

“I didn’t sleep a lot after Melody was gone. It’s gotten better, but mostly I just sit around the house looking like this.”

Rebecca gestured down her body.

“I still haven’t been able to go in her room. All the toys in the living room. I just had to box them up and put them in the attic. I couldn’t look at them. I still can’t. I’m not ready.”

“I haven’t even processed my emotions yet, I don’t think,” Meredith replied. “It’s like they’re not really gone. But if I haven’t realized that by the end of the month, I sure will when rent is due and I get evicted,” Meredith said.

“Oh honey,” Rebecca replied. “You don’t have to worry about that. You can stay with me until you find a job and get back up on your feet. There’s no need to grieve your family and deal with all of that. I have a guest room you can stay in. The sheets probably aren’t too fresh but I’ll get the housekeeper to wash them when I get back.”

Meredith was uncomfortable with idea of what Rebecca was offering. It was charity that Austin would have never even thought about accepting. Perhaps that’s why she did. She wanted to be making the choices now and she’d have to since he was gone.

“Okay, thank you,” Meredith said. “I really appreciate it.”

“You can bring your stuff over later today if you’d like,” Rebecca said as she pulled a small grey clicker from her bag. She recited her address. “Here’s the garage door opener. Park your car inside and then shut the door.”

Meredith knew this was because Rebecca didn’t want the dilapidated car to be spotted outside her house, which was sure to be lavish. It would raise awareness from the neighbors.

“Don’t worry about me. I don’t need it for now,” Rebecca said, pointing to the garage door opener. “I can park on the other side of the driveway.”

Rebecca smiled. Meredith thought Rebecca seemed genuinely happy to have Meredith coming to stay with her. She hadn’t known Rebecca for long, but she felt deeply connected to her. She may have been nearly a stranger, but there was something comforting in her generosity and ability to make Meredith feel at ease. It would be nice to be surrounded by that aura all the time.

“I know that losing your family is fresh and I don’t want to push you too much,” Rebecca stated, “but tomorrow we have the first meeting for the reform project at my house, so if you’ll already be there...”

Meredith could see that Rebecca was helping her out in the hopes that Meredith would return the favor. She assumed that the reform project was related to the plans Rebecca had relayed to her, bedside at the hospital.

“Yeah,” Meredith replied. “I’ll be there. I’ll bring my stuff over later. I’ll wait until it’s dark. I know it’s dangerous for you to be seen letting me stay over.”

Rebecca embraced Meredith one last time.

“I’ll get out of your way, but here’s the money you needed.”

Rebecca handed Meredith a check. The penmanship was in perfect cursive. Meredith was sure there wasn't anything imperfect about Rebecca. Meredith thanked Rebecca as she left, pulling out of the driveway in a newer BMW.

Meredith got her phone and redialed the number on the white card.

"Disposal services, how may I help you?"

"Hi, I called earlier about my daughter and husband."

Meredith recited their names and their chip color for the voice on the other end of the line.

"Alright, I see that those bodies have a pending decision. What did you end up going with?"

"Cremation," Meredith replied. She could hear the woman on the other end typing into a computer.

"Great, I've got that scheduled for today. You should be able to pick them up tomorrow morning. And of course, it'll be \$1,000 each. You know where your nearest center is, correct?"

Meredith confirmed this. She knew that the center was about five minutes away in the most populous part of town. She figured this just made it more efficient in transporting the dead. She thanked the woman and ended the call. Just one day until she would hold her family's ashes in her arms. In the before, cremation took days or weeks. Now, the centers were developed for more efficient cremation.

She tried to put this out of her mind and pack for staying at Rebecca's. She knew she couldn't come back to her home. She had nearly no money, and their landlord would not show mercy - he came from the land of yellow chips. She had no use for many of the items in the house anymore: kitchen items, the ratty furniture, or even Austin's clothing. She hated to leave

everything behind, but there was nothing she could do. She retrieved the only travelling bag she owned from the small closet in the bedroom she and Austin used to share. She loaded her favorite outfits into the bag: her comfortable tee shirts, her three pairs of jeans, one sundress, and one special occasion dress. She was a stay-at-home mom. She hadn't realized she wore the same clothes day in and day out until now. Her bag looked sadly empty.

Meredith opened the second dresser drawer on the bureau beside the bed. Austin's shirts lined the drawer, folded into neat squares. She reached her arms into them, feeling the rough, forever stained fabrics brush the soft hair on the tops of her arms. She took a stack in her hands and pushed them into the depths of the bag, underneath her own clothes. She couldn't completely leave Austin behind.

She grabbed a plastic bag from underneath the kitchen sink and went to their small bathroom, swiping her toiletries into the thin white bag. She tied it in a knot, not wanting her shampoo and other liquids to spill onto her clothing. She shoved the plastic bag into the duffel bag. There was only one more thing she wanted to bring with her: Abigail's doll. The doll that had seen her through to the end. Meredith had brought the doll back from the hospital after slipping it from Abigail's arms. It was still in the backseat of the car, limbs flayed over the old pleather. Meredith slipped the doll into her bag before closing it in the trunk.

The sun had begun to set, and the sky was illuminated in orange and purple hues. Meredith walked back to the front door. She had turned all the interior lights off before she had headed to the car. She stood at the closed front door, getting ready to leave the rest of her life behind. She had already lost her family. Now she was walking away from her home. It had never been the fanciest, but it was theirs. Their lives would be forgotten, and their possessions would be thrown out.

Meredith turned her key in lock, hearing the click that indicated safety most nights. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to lock the door before leaving. Perhaps she wanted some sense of normality. Meredith slid behind the wheel of the car and turned the key in the ignition. It took three tries before the engine turned over. Meredith knew that Rebecca's address was at the River Meadows complex. Rebecca had once told her that at the hospital.

Dusk turned to darkness as Meredith rode in the silent air. The night was quiet and there were few cars on the roads. The crisp air snaked into the car through the crack where Meredith had rolled down the window a bit. It didn't take long for Meredith to reach River Meadows. The problem was the security. The community was gated, with a number pad that was her only way in. Why wouldn't Rebecca have remembered to give her the number? Meredith pulled her phone out of her back pocket, the garage door opener falling into the floorboard. Meredith put the car in park at the keypad and fumbled in the dark, trying to feel around for the small grey box on the floor. Her fingers grazed it, and she leaned forward, straining to grasp it. She pulled the garage door opener from the floor and noticed a piece of masking tape on the back. 2485, it read. Rebecca hadn't forgotten to give her the code, she had just forgotten to tell her about it.

Meredith punched in the code and the gate peeled away slowly. She easily found number 245, Rebecca's house number. The bold numbers were outlined on the mailbox next to the driveway. Meredith clicked the garage door opener and light began to flood from the raising sliver of the door. Meredith drove into the garage and pressed the button again. The door came to a halt at the concrete floor, sealing Meredith safely inside. She grabbed her duffel bag from the trunk and then pressed the lock down inside the driver's side door. Meredith knocked on the door in the garage twice to no avail. She figured Rebecca knew she was coming, so she tried the handle. It was unlocked.

A quick push of the door put Meredith in the living room. Rebecca lounged on the couch in her outfit from earlier, watching what looked to be a cooking competition program on the large television mounted above the fireplace. She hopped up.

“Oh hey! I didn’t even hear you come in. Let me show you your room. That bag looks super heavy.”

Meredith followed Rebecca up the plushly carpeted stairs and down a hallway.

“This one right here is my bedroom. I’ve got a bathroom and everything so the one down here is all yours,” Rebecca said as she gestured to a closed door to the left. They walked to the end of the hallway and Rebecca opened a door. She flipped on a light. The bathroom was decorated in blues. The glass shower was extravagant, the dual shower heads excessive. A double vanity lined one wall. There was enough walking space in the bathroom to live in. Meredith blushed. This bathroom was the size of her bedroom at home. At her previous home.

“I can’t imagine what your bathroom looks like if I’m getting pampered like this,” Meredith said.

Rebecca chuckled.

“Don’t worry, I live comfortably,” she replied.

Rebecca flicked off the light and showed Meredith a second room. The guest bedroom was modern and simple. Green walls were accented by a black bedframe, a king bed centered in the middle. A black dresser lay up against one wall while a black leather chair sat in an opposite corner. The carpet was even plusher in this room, a room Rebecca barely used.

“Rebecca,” Meredith said, turning to her. “I can’t thank you enough for doing this. I’ll be out of here as soon as I can. I don’t know why you have such an interest in me and helping others like me, but I’m so grateful.”

Rebecca's eyes steeled and a serious look crossed her face.

“Agricultural Services and Food Administration,” Rebecca said. “I work for the government, Meredith.”