

HOW OFTEN DO you see a girl standing barefoot on a log by the side of the road, playing a flipping flute?

Never, that's how often.

Which is why my focus left the winding gravel for a split second too long, *which* turned out to be way more than enough time to catch the tires of my red Audi convertible on the raised edge of the road, *which* I happened to be driving along much too fast.

I never should have been on that godforsaken stretch of gravel road on that sunny June Friday in the first place. The smart thing would have been to listen to my mom and stay home to finish my novel for the upcoming deadline.

Instead, I had caved in to my pride.

"I'm a real writer, Mom. An *author*, for God's sake. This is what authors do. Authors go to writing retreats." I left out the last part of that sentence, the part that continued on in my head long after my mouth had closed. Authors go to writing retreats . . . *so all the wannabes who pay dearly for the privilege can suck up to us, fantasizing they will be us one day.*

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Several of my weekends that summer had been spent communing with the unpublished—oh my bad, *sorry!*—the *pre*-published, the majority of whom are earnest, eager housewives well over thirty who firmly believe that they are meant to be the next Stephenie Meyer.

I had smiled as I stood in my room packing for the weekend retreat, the weekend retreat that I was getting paid a ridiculous amount of money to attend. Because it was funny, really, that the joke was on all those middle-aged moms who didn't stand a chance. They were deluding themselves, thinking they were ever going to make money off their stupid stories and live the dream. The fame, the book tours, the fans. And I loved, *relished* even, that I was seventeen, less than half the age of most of them, and had already accomplished what none of them probably ever would: written a book, a *trilogy* in fact, for which a major publisher in New York City had paid me a whopping mid-six figures.

Those people were all fooling themselves.

I mean, seriously, what did they expect from me?

That I was going to recommend them to my agent?

Give them a story idea?

Tell them how to write *the* book that would change their lives?

There was no magic formula. And even if there was, I certainly wasn't going to give it up.

I was seventeen years old. At fifteen, I'd gotten a three-book deal, and at sixteen, I'd gone on a twelve-city tour, chaperoned by my mom and my own publisher-appointed handler.

The first two books of my YA series had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for thirty-six straight weeks and counting, and between them and my new movie deal—Steven Spielberg himself wanted to take me to dinner when I went to Hollywood in the fall—I was well on my way to having more than a million dollars in the bank. Well, most of it was in a trust for when I was older, but I did get my hands on enough to write a check for the upcoming fall quarter at the University of Oregon, my dad's alma mater, where I would have a single room in the Global Scholars Hall, the most expensive dorm on campus. Pity the poor freshmen on financial aid who would be stuck in rooms barely larger than closets, eating crusted-over macaroni and cheese in the dining hall or boiling Top Ramen in the basements of their dorms, while I would be eating made-to-order sushi.

My success only confirmed my feeling that if those so-called writers hadn't been able to do by thirty what I'd done by sixteen, then they didn't deserve to be published.

In my humble opinion.

My mom had also let me take out enough money to buy a few things, like my bright red Birkin bag, which happened to perfectly match my convertible with Oregon vanity plates that read WTRGR1: the very same car that lost a bit of stability when I hit the edge of the gravel road while going over sixty when I should have been going closer to thirty.

But it wasn't my fault that I was driving so fast. My unsafe rate of speed was a result of the fact that I was frustrated and very pissed off.

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The writing retreat was remote, back in the woods somewhere on the highway between my home in Bend and the city of Eugene, but near the end of the trip I hit a detour. And my car's state-of-the-art GPS kept telling me, in a lovely British accent that sounded almost like J. K. Rowling, to continue straight while my gut screamed that a quick and tidy U-turn was the better option.

So I'd been on the gravel road for about six miles, sun beaming down on my head, J. K.'s "Continue straight" serenading me every now and then, when I finally shouted into the open air, "This sucks! I am seriously turning around."

But then, rounding the next turn, the log came into view.

The log with the girl standing on it.

The girl's long, dark pigtails contrasted with the white of her Hello Kitty T-shirt. There were holes in the knees of her faded jeans. As she balanced, her bare feet molded around the moss-covered log, her neatly bent arms held the flute at perfect attention for a conductor visible only to her.

What struck me most was her expression: Her eyes were dark and narrowed, as if she was angry.

I don't know if it was the sight of that furious flute-playing girl standing on a green log at the edge of the woods, or the fact that my writer's mind immediately began asking questions.

Why is a girl playing the flute on that log?

And why does she look mad?

Whatever the cause, that moment of lost concentration led to the tires catching the side of the road.

Without warning, the world churned.

I screamed.

The blue of the sky and the green of the treetops were juxtaposed in a rush of crunching metal.

The side air bags punched out and kept me from getting crushed. But even as they cushioned my left side, the front air bag didn't deploy. My head smashed against the steering wheel, and all went dark.

I CAME TO WITH A START AND A GASP. I WASN'T SURE HOW MUCH time had gone by. The sun was still high in the sky. My teeth didn't feel fuzzy, so I hadn't been out that long. A few minutes maybe. But everything was different.

I hung upside down, hugged by the seat belt, my white cami-sole and gray cashmere sweater bunched down around my bust. My position, along with the pervasive smell of gasoline, made the contents of my stomach—a nasty tuna sandwich on sourdough—begin to creep their way up my throat. J. K. Rowling sounded haggard, yet also very determined, as she persistently announced, “Recalculating route. Recalculating route.”

It felt as if someone had taken a hammer to my head.

I started to raise my left hand but cried out at the pain in my shoulder and realized I had better move more slowly. Or maybe not move at all.

I blinked a few times. The light hurt my eyes, so I kept them shut.

“Recalculating route.”

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“Shut up.” I wiggled my toes and kept going, twirling my ankles, bending knees. Everything seemed okay except for my left shoulder and my head. Once I got out of that car, I was going to be fine. A little banged up maybe, but I could probably use the experience as inspiration for another book eventually. Or maybe, if I milked the drama, it could get covered as a news story—KGW in Portland, then maybe even the *Today* show? How many books would sympathy sell?

As soon as I was upright, I would get my publicist on it.

And then I heard something besides J. K. and the ticking of the engine and the beating of my own heart.

The sound was not coming from my car.

The tone was too steady. High-pitched. Fluttering.

A soundtrack to a documentary about fairies and small woodland creatures.

Was that a—

Despite the pain in my head, I opened my eyes, wincing as I blinked.

The girl with the flute stood there in the grass at the side of the road, looking down at me as she played her instrument.

“Please,” I said. “Can you help me get out of here?” I tried to unbuckle my seat belt, but my entire weight pushed down against it. I couldn’t brace myself with my bad shoulder. “I need a hand here.”

The girl kept playing her flute.

Are you kidding me?

Then, still playing, she stepped closer to me. As she trilled,

her lips pursed, fingers flying, she reached out a foot and put it through the open window, poking my bare stomach with her dirty toes. None too gently, I might add.

What the hell? Was she brain damaged?

Even though I was in pain and wanted to bawl, I realized Flute Girl might be the only thing that stood between my staying in that car forever or my getting help and making it home.

So I swallowed the swelling animosity at her utter ignorance or absolute lack of compassion or *whatever* her issue was, forced half a smile onto my face, and injected an entire dose of false cheer into my voice. “Yeah, I’m kind of stuck here. Driving too fast. Stupid, I know. But I’m pretty sure I’m hurt, so if you could . . .”

At last, Flute Girl stopped playing.

“. . . help me get . . .” My inane rambling tapered off.

She slowly lowered her flute and squatted next to the car. We were nearly eye to eye, although I was still upside down and beginning to see spots. She set the flute down on the grass beside her, so gently, laying it there as if it were made of eggshells.

The tenderness of her actions sent a wave of relief through me. I let out a breath.

She’s going to help me.

Flute Girl’s gaze rested on the flute, as if reluctant to leave the precious instrument for even a moment. She sighed before turning her full attention to me.

“That’s it, I think if you help me unhook . . .” I trailed off.

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Because that was when I noticed something, a small detail that, despite my raging headache and the pain in my shoulder and the barely faded terror at *rolling my freaking car*, managed to cause a chill to run up my aching spine.

I'd been wrong about her eyes.

They weren't the eyes of someone who was angry or pissed off or slightly annoyed.

Those eyes were just plain mean.

Then Flute Girl smiled at me, revealing a gap between her two front teeth, a smile that would have been endearing on anyone else in the world. On anyone else, that smile would have been reassuring, telling me, *Everything will be okay. You are safe.*

But on her? That smile was god-awful sinister.

She picked up a stick about as thick as a good-sized snake and wielded it like a baseball bat, her fists tightening around it with none of the care she showered on her flute. And before my vision started swimming and I passed out, the last thing I saw was Flute Girl swinging that club straight at my head.

“OH-LIV-EE-AAAH! OH-LIV-EE-AAAAAAAAAH!”

Mom?

My mother was the only one who called me by my full name anymore. Well, she and our family dentist, who had known me since I was two. My readers—the world—knew me as Livvy Flynn.

And by *world*, I mainly meant the thirty-two countries where the foreign language rights for my series had been licensed. When the first few translations sold, I had posters made of the covers. But as the deals kept rolling in, I gave up. Instead, I had a juniper bookcase made for all the foreign editions.

My talent and fame didn't exactly pour in much-needed money to my family. We were already pretty well off. I mean, my dad was an oral surgeon and my mom used to be a lawyer, so I would've gotten into the best dorm on their dime alone. But they supported me from the start. I started writing pretty seriously when I was twelve, and when it was clear I had a knack for it, my parents encouraged me to keep

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at it. When I turned fourteen, Mom told me about a boot camp for novelists in Los Angeles. Although it sounded pretty cool, I hadn't written anything that long yet and wasn't sure I wanted to go. But Mom insisted. Of course she paid for it, as well as our rooms at the Beverly Hilton, so I didn't even know how expensive it was until I overheard a woman say she took money out of her kid's college fund to attend.

Everyone else there was female and old. In fact, I was practically the only person under thirty. Only a man would have felt more out of place. I wanted to sneak out, go find my mom, and have her take me to Disneyland or the beach or *anywhere else* for the next three days.

But then, as we all broke up into critique groups and got to sharing our story ideas, I looked around at those housewives and waitresses and listened to them as they jabbered about finding each other and sharing the same dream. It took me about half a day to realize I didn't want to be like them: half their lives over, still waiting and hoping for a far-fetched fantasy that was never going to happen.

In that moment, I realized how much I did want to be a writer. But I didn't want it to be simply a fantasy, something I gushed about like all those women. I wanted it to be reality. I would *make* it a reality.

So I decided right then and there not to wait until I was old. I would write a bestseller before I was out of high school.

And I did.

On the flight home from the boot camp, I began *The Caul and the Coven*, the first book in a series about twin teenage

sisters born into an old family in Portland. Their mother died in childbirth, so they live with their grandfather. One day they discover a book in the attic, their mother trapped in the pages. The only way to release her is to find the entire set of books, each guarded by a witch, and bring them together. The series is about their journey to find the books, and of course they find love and encounter danger along the way as they struggle to release their mother.

“Oh-*liv-ee-aaah!*”

That is definitely not my mom.

The voice was high-pitched, the voice of a child. A girl.

A vision of Flute Girl popped into my head, and I forced my eyes open, but everything was fuzzy, revealing only blurry whiteness.

A ceiling?

No longer hanging upside down in the ruins of my Audi, I lay on something soft.

A bed? Had help come? Was I in a hospital?

I shut my eyes.

Thank God.

My head was killing me. *Advil, please.*

The ambulance crew, or whoever rescued me, would have found my purse. My driver's license bore my legal name, Olivia Louise Flynn. Of course the nurses would call me Olivia. My nurse was young, that's all.

I opened my eyes again and tried to focus. On the three sides of the room visible from my vantage point, shelves covered the top half. A desk was pushed against one wall while

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another had two folding chairs beside a table with several blue-topped clear plastic tubs piled on top.

What kind of hospital was this?

The place looked more like somebody's scrapbook room.

"Hello?" Talking made my head hurt. Hopefully I wouldn't have to speak again. I shut my eyes.

"Olivia?" This voice was different from the other, deeper and older. Still feminine, though.

My eyes opened to a woman's face peering down at me. Blond curly hair fell to her shoulders, and she was rather pretty, with a dimple in her chin, but a lot of wrinkles around her eyes. She was probably a cheerleader in high school before she went into nursing. Before she got old. Before she got all those frown lines.

"You're awake." Her voice was flat, emotionless.

Shouldn't a medical professional be somewhat *pleased* that the victim of a rollover was awake and speaking and not *deceased*?

"My head hurts."

She straightened up and put her hands on her hips. "I suppose it does." Her outfit consisted of jeans and a faded aqua T-shirt emblazoned with a crossbow and the words *Mrs. Daryl Dixon*. Her black bra peeked out of a small hole on the right side.

A *Walking Dead* shirt. Odd attire for a nurse.

My heart started to pound.

She's not a nurse.

I am not in a hospital.

“Please, I need to get to a hospital.” *Please.*

Mrs. Daryl Dixon scratched her head. “Oh, I called 911.” She held up the palm of her left hand, a gesture of apology. “Sometimes it takes them a while to get out here.” She set a hand on my left shoulder, my *hurt* shoulder, and pressed.

I screamed at the instant shot of agony. Unable to help it, I burst into tears.

She let go immediately. “Oh. You *are* hurt. I wondered.” Quite honestly, Mrs. Dixon sounded like she didn’t give a crap whether I was hurt or not.

Where the hell am I? Who is this witch?

“Please,” I said through my tears. “Call my mom. My phone is in my purse. . . .” But she already knew that, didn’t she? If she knew my name, then she had already been in my purse, had already gone through at least my wallet to see my driver’s license. My heart pounded faster.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Like I said, the ambulance should be here before too long.”

My eyes closed, shutting her out—*for God’s sake, shut up!*—but she kept talking.

“I suppose you aren’t used to waiting for anything, are you, Olivia? You probably get whatever you want, exactly when you want it.” She sighed. “You have no idea, do you?”

What did she mean by that? Did she just assume that, due to my expensive car? That I probably had money?

Or did she know who I was?

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Doubtful.

Flute Girl was too young to read my books, probably too stupid as well, and Mrs. Dixon didn't strike me as much of a reader.

Should I tell her who I am?

Would it mean anything if they knew I was a world-famous author?

Somehow, I thought not.

I pretended to be asleep or passed out or whatever kind of unconscious state was plausible for someone who had recently rolled her car and probably had a concussion.

No, actually I *wasn't* used to waiting, and *yes*, I usually did get what I wanted.

And right now, Mrs. Daryl Freaking Dixon, I want you to stop talking, and I want the ambulance to get here, and I want to get some pain medicine, and I want to get my shoulder fixed, and I want my mom, and I WANT TO GO HOME. . . .

The door creaked.

I sucked in a breath and froze. Was she leaving?

"Mama."

The voice. The one I'd first heard say my name.

Flute Girl? Was Mrs. Dixon her mother?

My heart sank as I tried to stay motionless.

"Is she dead?" Flute Girl sounded a little too excited at the prospect of my checking out for good. Maybe that had been her intent when she came at me with that club.

Did this woman—apparently her mother—know?

Something poked me in my cheek.

My eyes fluttered open.

Flute Girl stood next to her mother, both of them looking down at me.

Gathering every ounce of ornery still in my possession, I growled, "I'm not dead."

Flute Girl reached out again to poke me. There was dirt under her fingernails. I reached over with my good hand and slapped hers away. The movement sent a fresh course of pain up my bad shoulder, yet I managed to growl, "Get your filthy hands off me."

Both of them took a step back. Flute Girl crossed her arms as her mother simply frowned at me.

"Well," said Mrs. Dixon. "Maybe you need some time by yourself until you can figure out how to apologize to my daughter."

"Apologize?" I nearly spit out the word. "Are you for real? After what she did? She hit me with a stick!"

Mrs. Dixon looked down at Flute Girl, who shrugged half-heartedly with one shoulder, then turned her gaze to me. Her eyes narrowed. "What my daughter did was come and get me and tell me there was an accident. Then we both got you out of the wreck and brought you here. Do you know how hard that was?"

"You didn't have to do that!" My face burned as I cried and shouted, which sent fissures of pain out from my shoulder, but I couldn't make myself stop. "All you had to do was call

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911!” And it dawned on me that for whatever reason, she hadn’t called them. Not at all. “Just give me my phone! Let me call myself!” The yelling killed my head, and I had to shut my eyes against the tears pouring out. My pounding heart seriously made my brain hurt.

Just breathe.

The woman’s voice droned on, berating me. “Are you this ungrateful to everyone? Or just people who pull you out of cars and bring you into their homes?”

Breathe. I scrunched my eyes shut tighter against the swelling pain and frustration and anger. *Stay rational. This woman is crazy, and you have to stay calm.*

I opened my eyes back up and tried to smile as I sucked up to her. “Thank you so much for that. But I really think I should let you all get back to what you were doing before I came along. You have been . . . so kind.” I almost choked on those words, but I kept going, hoping it would help. “I’m sure you’ll be happy to get me out of here and on my way. So maybe you could try 911 one more time.” And then, the addition of the one thing that most certainly would seal my fate. “I’d be happy to pay you for your trouble.”

Which it did, seal my fate, that is, because Mrs. Dixon’s face clouded over, a sudden thunderstorm on a previously partly sunny day. She grabbed the arm of Flute Girl and whipped around to the door.

Desperation choked me as I cried, “Wait! Where are you going?”

Flute Girl went through the door, and the woman turned

back around to face me, glowering. “You think you can buy anything, don’t you? Well you can’t buy me.” And she left, slamming the door behind her.

“And no one is coming for you!”

There was a very distinctive *Click!*

Did she lock me in? Holy crap, she locked me in.

I yelled, “You can’t do this!” I rolled onto my good side, curled up my legs, and dropped them over the side of the bed. I used my momentum to sit up. “Ah!” The swift stab of pain in my shoulder sent a flurry of white snow across my vision. My balance wavered.

I dropped my head and took a deep breath. As my gaze eventually cleared, I found myself staring down at my feet on the green indoor/outdoor carpeting that covered the floor. My bare feet.

Where were my shoes?

I glanced at my right wrist. My MedicAlert bracelet and gold and silver Rolex were still there. My clothes as well: black leggings, camisole, sweater.

But my shoes, my \$300 black Italian leather flats, were missing.

All the more reason to find out what the hell was going on.

I counted to three and stood up.

The white snow returned, but this time as a blizzard that refused to clear. Before I could sit back down on the bed, I promptly fainted.

MY DREAMS WERE of McGrath's Fish House, a restaurant in Bend where we went nearly every Sunday after church. For an appetizer, my dad always ordered the bruschetta topped with a tapenade and tomatoes and shrimp and a balsamic vinegar reduction glaze. He reeked of garlic for days afterward. The stench seeped out his pores. Once when his breath sang of garlic, my dad had tried to kiss my mom, but she playfully fended him off.

I tried that appetizer one time. But the taste of garlic lingered in my mouth the rest of the day, making me put my hand in front of my mouth in case anyone got near enough to smell my breath. I didn't exactly have to worry about someone trying to kiss me. Well, at the moment anyway. Because I knew exactly who I wanted to kiss.

My boyfriend, Rory, lived in Illinois, half a continent away. We didn't get the chance to see each other much—actually we had never even met in person—but he promised to meet me when my November book tour stopped in Chicago.

Before Rory, I didn't have a lot of friends my age. Actually,

make that no friends. I started writing my series the summer before freshman year of high school. Because I was so immersed in it, we decided as a family that homeschooling would make much more sense than traditional school. So I signed up for an online charter, and Mom resigned from her law firm to stay home with me. I knew how much of a sacrifice that was for her, because she was the sole “minority” partner. The birth mother was an unknown Vietnamese girl; birth father, an unknown GI with some black heritage. Luckily, in the waning days of the Vietnam War, some kindhearted soul had stuck her on a plane evacuating orphans to the US, where she’d been adopted by a wonderful family.

So Mom grew up in Portland, went to Lewis & Clark Law School, and worked hard to make partner in a Bend law firm made up of white guys. She assured me nothing would make her more fulfilled than staying home with me.

I felt guilty about it at first, but soon it was clear how much more relaxed she was when she didn’t have to go to work all the time.

And it was all worth it because shortly after that came my book deal, and that was that: school for two hours in the morning, writing the rest of the day.

After my first book tour when I was sixteen, Rory sent a message to my Facebook fan page, introducing himself. He said he’d been at one of my appearances, but was too embarrassed to meet me so he had his mother get his book signed for him. His picture was nice; he had short dark hair and blue eyes and a charming smile with dimples. I wrote back, telling

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him I remembered signing the name Rory. That was a lie; I didn't remember at all, but I didn't want to make him feel bad. Actually, more than that? I wanted to say something that would make him feel good, would maybe make him want to write back. Which he did.

He was the first boy my age I'd ever corresponded with. We discovered we had so many things in common: He loved Edgar Allan Poe as much as I did. I told him about the huge poster I had of Poe up in my room, and he had the same one. And we were both deathly allergic to bee stings. He wore a MedicAlert bracelet, too.

After a month, we started talking on the phone. Secretly, of course, because I didn't think my parents would approve of me spending so much time with a boy they had never met. And only on Sunday nights because he had six AP courses and had to get a 4.0 if he stood any chance of getting a scholarship, so he spent almost every waking moment studying.

I wanted to tell him that I could pay for his college so he wouldn't have to study so hard and could spend more time talking with me. But I wasn't sure how he'd take that. (As if my parents would even have let me.) And then we began to Skype. Well, sort of, because the camera was broken on his laptop and he couldn't afford to get it fixed. So I couldn't see him, but he could see me.

He was the first person who ever told me I was beautiful.

I wasn't *beautiful*, I knew that. But my skin was a nice mix of Mom and pasty-white Dad, and my hair was good, finally. My nose wasn't too big and my eyes were a lovely brown and

my teeth were white and even. I wished I looked more like my mom, but my lips were kind of thin, like my dad's, and I knew that even on a great day, I wouldn't pass much beyond "kinda pretty."

But when Rory told me that I was beautiful? My heart pounded and I blushed. And I would make sure that when we did meet, and we did get a chance to kiss for the first time, I would not eat any garlic beforehand.

Garlic. Why was I dreaming about garlic?

I opened my eyes.

Flute Girl knelt next to me on the floor, orange stains on her chin, breathing garlic breath all over me.

I started to sit up and the pain in my shoulder made me freeze and fall back onto the floor with a groan. I lay there and tried not to focus on the throbbing.

She scooted back, not taking her eyes off me as she called out, "Mama! Oh-liv-ee-ah is awake."

I wanted so badly to reach up and smack my name off her lips, tell her never to say it again. But all I could do was lie there, bracing myself until the wave of agony receded enough that I could start breathing again.

Footsteps neared and Mrs. Daryl Dixon walked into the room, holding a plate of noodles and marinara sauce and a slice of garlic bread. She smiled. "Well, good. Just in time for dinner."

Through gritted teeth, I said, "I need medical attention, not spaghetti."

She tilted her head slightly. "But you must be hungry."

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Let this be a dream. I shut my eyes. *Let it be some stupid dream.*

Then the stench of garlic again, as Flute Girl's breath puffed on my face.

"Get away."

I opened my eyes. Flute Girl sidled away from me, like one of those weird slack-limbed creatures in a horror movie, her pigtails swinging from side to side as her skinny arms and legs drove her backward. Really, it wasn't much of a stretch to envision that pint-sized asshat as a spawn of evil, come to kill us all.

Mrs. Dixon set the plate down and stood above me, looking down. Her hair fell around her face as she shook her head. "You probably shouldn't try to get up on your own." She looked at her daughter. "Help me get her back in bed."

Mrs. Dixon reached for my good arm as Flute Girl headed for my bad one.

"No!" I straightened out my right arm and thrust my palm at her. "Don't! Not the bad side—please!"

Flute Girl didn't listen. Instead, she gripped my bad arm with both her grimy hands and twisted.

The pain was a sharp knife slicing through my shoulder. I screamed and tried to hit Flute Girl with my other arm, but her mother already had a firm hold on it. So I kicked out with my legs, which did nothing but make the pain worse. They dragged me off the floor by my arms as I screamed.

Flute Girl backed up onto the bed, still wrenching my shoulder.

“Stop it! You’re hurting me!” I began to dissolve into ugly crying. “Stop! Oh please, stop!”

Flute Girl finally let go, and Mrs. Dixon shoved me so that I found myself facedown on the bed, my bad shoulder twisted under me. I bawled at the pain, unable to move. Tears mixed with snot smeared onto the bed.

I gathered all the strength I had left and pushed off with my good arm, until I was lying flat on my back. Then I maneuvered until my bad shoulder was in the air, as close to elevating it as I could get.

The sobs took away my breath, and between gasps I said, “You’ve got to get me to a hospital.” At first I wondered if they had even heard me. *Are they gone?*

I rolled my head to the side. Both of them still stood there, watching me.

Flute Girl wrinkled her nose. “Her face is a mess.”

Mrs. Dixon walked over to the desk and brought back a box of tissues. She pushed it at me. “Here. Clean yourself up.” Then she took Flute Girl’s hand and led her to the door. Flute Girl walked through, but her mother turned back to me. “Maybe you’ll be hungry for breakfast.” Then she picked up the plate of spaghetti and shut the door after her.

Click!

I lay there, sobbing, until the only sounds coming out of me were ragged sighs. My God, I was in a freaking Stephen King novel. Only in *Misery*, Annie Wilkes gave the dude painkillers.

I reached for the tissue and blew my nose with one hand as

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best as I could. I didn't plan on hanging around long enough to let Mrs. Dixon start hacking off any of my extremities, that was for sure.

No more crying.

I wiped my face.

Crying isn't going to get you out of here.

I didn't know what Mrs. Dixon and Flute Girl were up to. Were they insane? Or was this some game they were playing so I would *think* they were insane?

Because it was abundantly clear that they had not called anyone: not my parents or the authorities or the first responders. Didn't Oregon have some sort of Good Samaritan law? Whatever it was, they had broken it. No phone call made it clear they meant to do me harm.

Which meant it was me against them.

"So no more crying."

I swallowed, wiped my nose, and sniffled.

"No more." I shuddered. "You have to be strong if you're going to fight." I kicked myself for not taking the food, because I was hungry. And thirsty.

"You're smart. Do what you do best."

I'd written my first novel fairly quickly, going where the story led me. But since then, I researched each new book. And then I outlined, meticulously. Sometimes I spent months on the outline and then whipped out the novel itself in a few weeks. I didn't mind spending time and effort on the preparation, and maybe that fortitude would be my salvation.

I needed to plot. To plan. Sure, at the moment they had the

upper hand physically, but there was no doubt in my mind that I was smarter. I had to think my way out of this.

Mrs. Dixon had mentioned dinner. I had no idea what time it was, although it was dark outside. In the summer, that meant it had to be at least eight, possibly nine, maybe even later.

The windows were small and high up on the wall.

Could I escape?

Sucking in my breath at the pain, I slowly sat up and slid over to the side of the bed. Then, forcing myself to take it inch by inch, I grabbed the headboard for support and stood up. I felt wobbly, so I sat back down until my head felt clear enough to try again.

I stood up, took a few deep breaths. Woozy, for sure, but better than earlier. I shuffled to the closest window. It was about a foot over my head, but I could see outside. The glow from a big yard light illuminated part of a white-flowered bush and the side of a red wooden building of some kind.

Given the height and size of the window, I had to be in a basement. Getting through the window, if I could figure out how to do it, would be a tight squeeze.

Oh, and one more thing:

Getting out that window is gonna hurt.

And so would what came after: trying to find my way to the road and then walking, for who knew how far, barefoot. And they might come after me, try to drag me back.

I would have to be prepared to fight.

Climbing through the window, escaping, maybe having to

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fight my way out of there . . . all of that would take strength, strength I did not have yet.

Plus, I wasn't stupid. I'd seen it time and time again in movies: The captive tries to escape right away, before she thinks things through. She discovers her captor has left her an out, an opening, and she takes it. But she *always* takes it too soon, and she *always* gets caught. I supposed she has to—otherwise the movie would be over in the first half hour.

But that was a mistake I was not going to make. I knew I might only get one shot, so I was going to make sure my escape was foolproof.

I was going to take my time.

Since I was finally standing, I had a better view of the room. There was another door. At a glacial pace, holding my bad arm motionless with my good, I limped over and pulled it open.

A small bathroom.

Which I hadn't realized I seriously needed until I noticed the toilet. It took me a while, given that I was minus one arm. I sat there, looking at everything. Save for a plastic pump bottle of Bath & Body Works coconut lime hand soap, there wasn't much. When I finished, I slurped water from the faucet for a long time.

Then I looked at myself in the cheap metal mirror. My dark hair had drifted out of the pretty French braids my mom had done around my head. My face seemed puffy, and there were bruises, probably from where I hit the steering wheel when I

crashed. Which reminded me that when all this was over, I would have to write a strongly worded letter to the CEO of Audi about their crap air bags.

Or maybe the bruise was from when Flute Girl hit me.

Rory wouldn't think I was beautiful, not if he could see me now.

I blew out a breath and shut my eyes. I needed to rest. I needed to eat. I needed to get strong before I could try to escape.

I opened my eyes and told my reflection, "I will. I will."

Standing there, leaning on the sink with one good hand, I continued, "You need a plan. A good one. You need . . . let's see. A list. You need a list."

My stomach growled.

Passing up the spaghetti had been seriously stupid on my part. I added it to my growing list of regrets, the first of which was, obviously, ever leaving home in the first place.

I started to feel light-headed, so I made my way back to the bed and gingerly lay back down. I breathed out and took comfort in the softness of the bedspread and the mattress, willing my heartbeat to slow and my mind to relax.

"You always dwell on the bad. Find something good."

I turned my head so my cheek was on the pillow. I sniffed.

That was one thing to be grateful for. My captors could have been less hygienic, and left me lying on a dirt floor somewhere, with a bucket for a toilet and vermin crawling all over me as I slept. Instead, I was lying on a nice bed with

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covers and a decent pillow that smelled like a sunny day in a meadow.

Lucky me.

“Tomorrow. Tomorrow I make a list and plan my escape.”

I shut my eyes.

For now, rest . . .

THE SUN STREAMING in the windows woke me up. My first movements made me gasp; in addition to the jab of pain in my shoulder, the rest of my body was so stiff and sore that even blinking hurt.

My exhaustion should have been sufficient to knock me out for the night, but sleep had been fitful. The pain in my shoulder was smothering, and I had to lie absolutely still, taking long, slow breaths, to keep it from consuming me.

I refused to cry out to Flute Girl and her witch of a mother. They knew that one simple squeeze of my shoulder would bring me to my knees. Which, apparently, was exactly where they wanted me.

Really?

But why?

I had tried not to go there, to breach the constant barrage of *whys*: *Why didn't they call 911? Why did Flute Girl hit me with a branch? Why did they bring me into their house? And why the hell are they keeping me locked in the basement?*

I sighed, deep enough that I had to grit my teeth and hold

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my breath until the pain passed. I reached up with my right arm and ran my fingers lightly over my bad shoulder until I felt what I was looking for. A lump.

My shoulder was dislocated. I would have bet money on it. I'd researched the injury for a book once, and it mentioned pain with movement and also a bump or lump. Problem was, there was no way for me to put it back in myself, and I knew they weren't about to help me. The best thing would be to stabilize it somehow. I should have been icing it and taking Tylenol or Advil or *freaking Vicodin*. But those options weren't exactly available to me at the moment.

As long as I lay on my good side, at least the shoulder was elevated a bit.

My lips were dry, and my throat was parched, but I needed to psych myself up to make the trek to the bathroom.

Until then, I would work on my list.

First things first: escape route. That had to be first, right?

No, maybe not. Because something might prevent me from getting to the escape route. Or be in my way while I was taking the escape route. I would have to drag something over to the window to stand on, and I might get interrupted while doing that.

So . . . I needed a weapon.

My eyes wandered around the room. There were shelves . . . books . . . papers on the desk. . . .

Crafty crap. Scrapbooking supplies.

Ten to one they had already removed any sharp objects.

So a rainbow glitter gel pen maybe? Jabbed in an eye?
But that brought up a new question.

What was the purpose of my weapon? The end goal? Exactly how far was I willing to go?

Was I aiming to simply stun?

Temporarily disable?

Permanently maim?

Would I kill if I had to?

When it came down to that moment, that moment when I needed to escape and Flute Girl and her mother were standing in my way, could I use my weapon against them?

I didn't know what I was capable of. At that moment, I wasn't strong enough to kill a bug if I wanted to.

I sighed.

Wait on the weapon.

In the movies, the captive always makes the mistake of leaving before she has enough intel. I needed to know more. I needed to know their routines, what time they got up, what time they went to bed. What they did during the day.

Did they have activities that made a lot of noise? Vacuuming? Running the dishwasher while they watched a movie so they had to turn up the television really loud?

Too bad Flute Girl wasn't Tuba Girl. *That* would've covered up any sound I had to make.

Diversion.

If I picked a time when they were in the middle of whatever it was they did—bath? shower? trip to the grocery store?

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church? (yeah, that one was doubtful)—then I would have a better chance of buying myself some time. Of course, I had the disadvantage of being locked in this stupid room.

One thing for sure: They needed to think I was in as bad a shape as possible. I mean, I *was* in terrible shape, so I didn't have to fake that. But if they thought that I was truly incapacitated, not capable of even moving myself about, they might relax their guard.

So as bad off as I was, they needed to think I was worse. No, they needed to *believe* I was worse.

And then, when they left the room, I could sneak over to the door and listen for something that would help me escape. But I needed to eliminate—or at the very least, curb—my weaknesses. I glanced at my shoulder, obviously low on the asset list.

I sat up and slowly maneuvered out of my sweater. Then I flopped one sleeve over my left shoulder and pulled it under. I tucked my left arm in close and across my stomach. I tied the sleeves with my good hand, sticking a sleeve in my mouth to help me pull the sweater tight, immobilizing my arm and my shoulder.

Click!

I quickly shut my eyes and slid back down, letting my jaw fall open as I took deep, even breaths.

The door opened, and someone took a few cautious steps into the room. There was a slight jingle. A dog collar?

No.

Bracelets?

I hadn't noticed any jewelry on either of them. But then I had been out of it the day before. That couldn't happen again.

Vigilant. I would have to be aware of *everything*, hear *everything*. Absorb and remember *everything*.

I took a deep, loud breath and moved a bit. Then I opened my eyes.

Mrs. Dixon stood about five feet away, staring down at me. She wore a smock with red-and-black flowers on it, black scrub pants, and shiny red patent leather clogs. In her left hand was an orange-and-black Oregon State University lanyard with a key on it. *Oh, it figures that she's a Beaver fan.*

A small key. Like to a padlock? Was that what she locked me in with? Somehow, that made me feel worse. I hadn't thought about it before, but why *did* someone put a lock on the outside of a door? To keep someone from getting in? Or to keep someone from getting out?

I shivered, and she noticed I was awake.

Her head tilted a little, as if she was considering something. "You're up."

"Yeah." Hopefully that one word had sounded laborious, my voice feeble, like the act of getting it out was a strain for my shattered self.

Mrs. Dixon said, "I see you felt perky enough to make yourself a sling." She glanced at the open bathroom door. "And get yourself out of bed."

Crap. Livvy! Why didn't you shut the door?

I nodded slightly. "Last night." I swallowed, making a big show of the effort. "I'm not sure I could do it now. I feel so . . .

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weak.” I hoped I wasn’t laying it on too thick. But then again, I would bet that my intelligence outranked hers.

She said, “You need to eat. Keep up your strength.”

The words didn’t sound like she was musing aloud. She sounded confident, like it was an order. Did she work in health care? From the looks of her outfit, I thought maybe she did.

She smiled a bit. “I’ll be right back.”

Mrs. Dixon shut the door behind her.

Click!

Definitely a padlock.

I blew out the breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. What did she think I needed to keep my strength up for? Did she need me strong? Did she—

You are so stupid.

Ransom. Despite her previous freak-out at my mention of money, there could be no other reason. Plain and simple: They knew who I was, and they had kidnapped me.

With the lock on the outside of the door, maybe this was premeditated. They had seen the car, my shoes—the \$300 shoes that were no longer either on my feet or anywhere in sight—and then they had probably dug in my purse. They’d found my ID, either recognized the name or looked me up, and then they’d decided to get some money out of it.

I racked my brain to remember anything about kidnapping, fact *or* fiction. Kidnappers usually took pretty good care of the victims, didn’t they? They needed them to stay in good shape for the exchange, right?

The exchange. Had she already called my parents and set a ransom amount? Was she simply waiting for them to pay?

Maybe I should go ahead and tell her that they would pay whatever it took. Hell, I had money; *I* could cut her a check, then and there.

She came back in holding a plate, and I decided not to say anything. Instead, I would lie back, wait, and let *her* provide some information for once.

My hunger had put my senses on overload, and I smelled . . . *garlic?*

Mrs. Dixon set the plate of spaghetti and garlic bread from last night on the dresser next to the bed. She nodded her head at the bathroom. "I guess you can get yourself in there if you want a drink of water."

Before I had a chance to say anything, she was out the door, locking the padlock behind her.

I frowned at the plate of spaghetti. "What the hell?" I painfully inched my way to a sitting position so I could see the plate. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it wasn't the same plate.

I slowly reached out, my hand hovering above the food. Ice cold. "Are you *serious?*"

Apparently she had absolutely no idea how a kidnap victim was supposed to be treated.

I maneuvered my way to the edge of the bed so my right hand could reach the plate. Balancing it on my lap, I took a moment to appraise the meal.

The butter on the garlic bread had congealed. With one

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finger, I poked at the slice. Rock hard around the edges, still semi-soft in the middle, saturated by pooled garlic and butter. I dug some out with my finger and stuck the frigid lump in my mouth.

I started to gag, but slapped my hand over my mouth.

You need to eat.

I forced myself to chew and swallow. “Gah.” I shook my head. But then I pried out some more bread, continuing until all that was left was the stony shell of crust. The noodles and marinara sauce looked unappetizing as hell. I wasn’t a big fan of meat, especially hamburger that had sat out all night, but the chill of the plate reassured me. At least it had been in the fridge and not growing bacteria that would consume my organs while I slept.

Any of the noodles not covered by sauce were shriveled and brittle. I twisted the fork in the middle of the pile until it was laden with soft noodles and sauce. I stuck the food in my mouth and chewed. Not as bad as the bread, for some reason. I swallowed, and then got another bite.

I ate cold pizza, right? What was the difference?

I took another bite. While I was chewing, I attempted to move the dried noodles out of the way. The fork slipped out of my hand. I grabbed for it, but my right knee shifted. The plate slid right off my lap and landed with a crash on the green indoor/outdoor carpet, which apparently wasn’t enough of a cushion because the plate burst into pieces. Spaghetti flew all over the floor.

Click!

I stiffened.

Had she been standing out there the whole time, listening?

The door slammed open, black-and-orange lanyard with the key clutched in Mrs. Dixon's hand. Her glare soaked in the mess at my feet. Her face reddened as her eyes narrowed at me. "Ungrateful. Little. Bitch."

I blurted out, "It was an accident!"

She strode toward me, eyes narrow slits. "Disrespectful—"

I held out my right arm. "I was eating, I swear!"

Her hand swung at me, and I ducked, trying to avoid the blow. It landed on my good shoulder, not that hard, but I shrieked anyway.

"Clean it up!" Mrs. Dixon screamed. "You won't get anything more until you clean it up!"

My heart pounded, and my face got hot. My eyes filled with tears as I glared back at her. "What do you want from me?" I swallowed, trying to gather my voice, which seemed to abandon me. "Just tell me what you want. Money? I'll give you money. My parents will give you money!"

Suddenly petulant, she took a step back, her mouth forming a small O. Her forehead wrinkled. "Is that what you think? That I am doing this for money?"

I nodded. "Why else would you keep me locked up, not call 911? I was in an accident, for God's sake. I'm hurt." And then I realized I wasn't so much afraid of her, although I should have been. Instead, I was pissed as hell. "Are you even aware of Good Samaritan laws? I'm pretty sure you're breaking every freaking one."

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A smile played at her lips. Then she laughed, so hard her eyes filled with tears and she leaned over, setting her hand on her knees.

What the hell did she find so funny? I sniffled and wiped my nose.

Still half laughing, Mrs. Dixon finally stood back up. “Oh my God. I told you last night, I don’t want your money.”

“Then what?” I shook my head. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

She crossed her arms, eyes once again serious. “I want you to admit what you did. I want you to admit that you”—suddenly she gulped in a breath—“No. No *you* have to figure it out. *You* have to remember. Or it doesn’t mean anything.”

What was she talking about? Something I did after my accident? Before it? Had she seen me driving too fast? Was she worried I might have slammed into Flute Girl?

Maybe she should tell her little freak-show offspring not to play in the road.

“Remember what?” My voice was calmer, only because I was doing everything in my power to sound rational. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She turned and walked toward the door.

“Wait!” I didn’t want her to leave. I didn’t want to be locked in again. I did want to do what she needed me to do. Because I did want to go home. “Please. I will totally do whatever you want. *Say* whatever you want me to say.”

Mrs. Dixon whirled around to face me. “I told you that wouldn’t mean anything! Don’t you get it?”

“Then tell me.” I was on the verge of tears yet again. “Tell me what to do so I can go home.”

She rested her hand on the doorknob and smiled at me. Then she pointed at the broken plate of spaghetti. “You can start by cleaning that up.” Then she left, the click of the padlock sealing me in.

THE EXCHANGE WITH Mrs. Dixon left me breathless, my heart pounding, sobs catching in my throat. I wiped my face with the back of my hand. I needed to calm down. Even though it would hurt to get back up, I lay down on the bed and got as comfortable as possible.

My eyes closed.

I *would* clean up the mess. Later. After I rested and got some strength back. And I suspected they would leave me alone for a while, so there should be plenty of time.

A few deep, cleansing breaths made me feel a little better, although my head was killing me nearly as much as my shoulder.

What had she meant? What did I have to apologize for?

The weird thing was, although she didn't come out and say so, Mrs. Dixon acted like she knew me. Knew who I was.

She could have, definitely. Maybe she had read my books. My photograph wasn't on the covers, but there were shots of me online from signings. If she did know about me, she would

have recognized my name if she had looked at my driver's license.

Maybe I was totally wrong about her, and perhaps she had attended one of the conferences where I gave the keynote. Or maybe one of my bookstore appearances in Portland or Bend or Salem.

But if that was the case, what could I have possibly done to make her mad enough to kidnap me?

Because seriously, once she got caught, she would be in deep trouble. Deep. She would get thrown in jail, and her kid would be taken away from her.

I could think of nothing to warrant that kind of a risk.

The events I attended gave me no opportunity to screw up that bad. At conferences, I typically did a panel with other authors or maybe a First Pages event with my editor, where participants read us the first pages of their novels and then we gave our first impressions. If I liked what they read, I was honest. And if I didn't like it, I was diplomatic, always careful to find something nice to say. I lied if I had to. So the chance of pissing anyone off at one of those events, in my opinion, was infinitesimal.

Book signings consisted of reading a chapter before signing books. Worst-case scenario was that I could have been crabby or rude or dismissive. But any worse sins were impossible. I was never even alone with anyone; my mom sat on one side and a media escort or an employee of the bookstore sat on the other.

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And the conferences? Either my editor was with me or Billy, my agent.

My eyes snapped open.

Billy! Why hadn't I thought of him before?

He had called me on the drive because a German publisher wanted to put my books into paperback. Billy advised holding out for more money but wanted to run the specifics by me first. My cell kept fading in and out on the Santiam Pass, so I said I would call as soon as I arrived at the retreat. Billy told me to make sure that I did because he needed to get back to them on Monday.

So that was Friday. He would have expected me to call him that day, and he knew that I would. Billy was amazing, and I owed him my career. My mom hadn't wanted me to get an agent; she thought that 15 percent of my earnings was too much of a cut. But I would rather have 85 percent of something than 100 percent of nothing. And I'd made the right call. Billy championed my words from the get-go, and we both made a bunch of money because of it.

He would not have let the sun set on Friday without talking to me.

So was it Saturday? Had to be.

When Billy couldn't reach my cell, he would have called my house and talked to my mother. And Mom would have tried to call me, and then she would have gotten worried. She had all the contact information for the retreat.

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They had already sent me part of my fee and would have

absolutely flipped when I didn't show up. Among the conference organizers, my mom, and Billy, someone had to realize something was wrong.

They would be searching for me. For my car. And they would find it.

Right?

But how far was my car from where I was now?

Maybe miles.

But Flute Girl had been barefoot. Even with soles of leather—or cloven hooves—she couldn't have been all that far from home. Plus, if they had both dragged me to their house . . .

My car had to be nearby.

And as soon as anyone saw it, they'd call the police. And they would come looking for me.

"They'll find my car." I breathed out, trying to relax. "And then they'll find me. They will."

Outside a motor started up. Gravel crunched, and a vehicle drove by the window. The sound disappeared. I rolled to my right, sat up, and slid off the bed onto my feet, careful to avoid the broken plate. I gimped over to the door and pressed my ear against it. Music and canned laughter drifted down from above, one of those dumb kid shows on television. A chair scraped.

I stood up straight. Mrs. Dixon left Flute Girl home alone? A door slammed. Then nothing.

I went back to the bed and sat down, perusing the mess of spaghetti and broken china that lay scattered on the green

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floor. I sighed. I still didn't feel like cleaning up. I leaned over. Maybe some of those noodles were still edible. . . .

A door slammed overhead.

I sat back up.

Quick footsteps covered the floor above and came down the creaky stairs.

I slid off the bed and went over to the door. I pressed my ear to it. "Hello?"

Someone was definitely there. Probably that little freak Flute Girl, messing with me.

Click!

I stepped back, waiting.

The door opened. A small brown cardboard box slid to a stop in front of me as the door slammed.

Click!

I carefully knelt by the box. With the makeshift sling holding my shoulder immobile, my movements didn't hurt as much as they had at first. Or maybe I was adjusting to the constant pain.

Without touching the box, I did a close examination. The edges of the top were tucked snugly together, but there wasn't any tape. With a few fingers of my right hand, I nudged the box.

What was that sound? I bent over the box.

A buzz. Definitely a buzz.

"Oh my God." Flute Girl had brought me my phone! I smiled and murmured, "I take back everything I said about that little jack wagon." I sat down and pushed the box

between my two legs, anchoring it. “Don’t hang up, don’t hang up!” I slipped the fingers of my right hand under the edges in the middle and pulled. The top of the box flopped open all at once, freeing the four angry bees that had been trapped inside.

Two flew straight for my face. I screamed and waved my hand at them. I kept screaming, first because of what my hysterical flailing was doing to my shoulder, but then because of the sting in my right hand as one nailed me.

I kicked the box away and fell back on the floor, then rolled over and painfully crawled to the wall. I got myself upright and leaned against it, legs out straight.

I’d been stung. And I was allergic.

I didn’t know exactly what was going to happen. The first and only time I’d been stung was when I was far too little to remember. But when I was ten and put up a fuss about wearing my MedicAlert bracelet, my mother told me, “You nearly died. It was the only time I have ever seen your father cry.”

As I leaned there against the wall, a wave of heat coursed over my entire body, like I’d stepped into a furnace. The sting on my hand was already a blister about the size of a quarter. My heart began to race—was it because of my freak-out? Or was an elevated heart rate part of the allergic reaction?

A second later, my breathing grew rapid and shallow.

I screamed, “Help! Please!”

My vision swirled a bit, and my heartbeat sped up even more. I shut my eyes for a moment. “Calm down, calm down.” When I opened them, my hand was red and swollen, already

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a third larger than my other hand. I tried yelling again. "Somebody! Please!"

My throat felt funny. Ticky. I swallowed once, and then tried again, but a knot thickened there, partially blocking my swallows. And it began to hamper my breathing.

Click!

The door opened. Flute Girl stood there, wearing a dirty gray Mickey Mouse shirt and a nasty grin on her face.

I managed to spit out a whisper. "You little bitch."

She shrugged and backed out, shutting the door.

Click!

I tried to get my feet under me, possibly stand up. But my legs trembled and wobbled, then gave out. I collapsed onto my right side. The four bees lazily circled overhead as I lay there.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Nasty suckers probably wondered how long it would take for me to die.

My breaths turned to wheezes, high pitched. My lips and nose tingled.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Vaguely, I caught the crunch of tires on gravel.

I squeezed in a breath, which only half entered my oxygen-starved body.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

A door slammed.

I squeezed in another breath. It felt like a fourth of the air I needed.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Faint voices murmured overhead.

I breathed again. Tried anyway. Barely any air that time.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Footsteps on the stairs.

Click!

The door swung open.

“Oh, balls.” Mrs. Daryl Dixon stood there, staring at me.

I reached up a hand to her, with only enough breath for one word:

“Epi.”

She whirled around and disappeared, leaving the door open.

Oh, would that I had enough energy to do something about that . . .

I closed my eyes and rolled flat on my back.

Calm down, calm down.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Breathe.

Innnnnnnnnn.

Ouuuuut.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Innnnnn.

Ouut.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

In—

In—

In—

That one caught.

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No more breaths.

And no more air.

My eyes snapped open, my mouth shutting and closing like a pathetic guppy. I was a fish, stranded on the beach, aching for water.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

How apropos, that the bees' mindless droning was about to sing me out of existence. I had breathed my last and was going to die sprawled on the floor of a strange basement. My gaze darkened around the edges as my eyes brimmed with tears. As much as I wished for air, my lungs remained empty.

No one would ever know what happened to me.

Bzzz.

A blurry face, leaning over me. Mrs. Dixon was back, brandishing the EpiPen I kept in my purse.

In case she had no clue where to administer the shot, I clumsily reached out the fingers of my left hand, bending my wrist that way as much as the sling would allow, trying to motion to my thigh.

My eyes closed, tears squeezing out.

Bzz.

I tried, once more, a last-ditch effort for air.

But my paralyzed diaphragm refused, my locked-up throat denied me. I was done. My parents would never know what happened to me. Rory would go on and kiss some other girl before me. All of my dreams were done.

Bzz—

A second later, there was a violent punch to my thigh where

Mrs. Dixon jabbed the needle in. My body jerked, automatically reacting to the blow.

But there was no air to cry out with the pain.

Seconds passed. Seconds I didn't have.

The pain from the shot gradually receded as the fist clenching my chest began to loosen.

I gasped my first ragged breath.

Bzzzz.

Another breath came, then another, each marginally less raspy and laborious and painful than the first. I began to hope, to *believe* in the possibility that—for the time being—I would not be dying after all.

My eyes opened.

Mrs. Dixon squatted a few feet away from me, her forehead scrunched up. Was she actually worried about me? She noticed my open eyes and blew out a breath. Relief?

Bzzzzzz.

As I lay there, slowly coming back from my near-death experience, she rolled up a magazine.

I dropped my head to the side. She stalked the bees, slamming the magazine down. I imagined their bodies crushed, innards oozing out. They'd get no sympathy from me.

I set my swollen right hand on my chest, relaxing as it rose up and down, calming more as my breaths grew deeper and stronger.

Mrs. Dixon *should* have been worried. Kidnapping was one thing. But having your kid murder someone? That was something else entirely.

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The buzzing finally stopped. She tossed the magazine on the table and walked back over to me.

I wasn't sure if I had the power of speech yet, but I had to try. My voice was soft and shaky, but still audible. "She tried to kill me."

Mrs. Dixon shrugged. The casual gesture implied she couldn't give a crap. But the tightness of her arms to her sides betrayed her. She had been scared, perhaps still was. Yet she tried her best to seem uncaring as she held her chin high. "Well, now I saved you. So that makes us even."

Even? What was she thinking? Even if I had wanted to speak, there were no words.

She pointed. I couldn't see exactly where, but knew exactly what she meant when she said, "And you'd better clean that up or you won't be getting any more food."

Then she walked out and slammed the door.

Click!

That was it? I could have died on her watch, and that was it?

Lacking the power to yell anything after her, I simply raised my red, swollen right hand. As viciously as my zapped, anaphylactically shocked body would allow, I snapped up my middle finger.