

SLEEPING IN MY JEANS

Connie King Leonard

Sleeping in My Jeans

© 2018 Connie King Leonard

ISBN13: [978-1-932010-??-?]

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Ooligan Press
Portland State University
Post Office Box 751, Portland, Oregon 97207
503.725.9748
ooligan@ooliganpress.pdx.edu
www.ooliganpress.pdx.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
[insert CIP data here]

Cover design by [designer's name]
Interior design by [designer's name]

[list of text and image permissions if needed.]

References to website URLs were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor Ooligan Press is responsible for URLs that have changed or expired since the manuscript was prepared.

Printed in the United States of America

[Ooligan horizontal logo] [PSU horizontal logo]

For resilient kids

Everywhere,

and

For Robby,

Your spirit inspires me.

Chapter One

Air rushes at my face. I stretch my legs out and pump higher. I love swinging. The feeling of freedom it gives me. The way air blows away the pressures of school and life. I love the smile it puts on my face and the peace that floods into my heart.

Meg, my six-year-old sister, swings beside me, squealing with delight. “Mattie! You’re so high!”

~~The day is~~It’s one of those bright, ~~crispy ones days~~ in mid-November. Clouds drift over the pale blue sky. Leaves flutter from the trees, sprinkling soggy green grass with pretty little dabs of red, yellow, and orange. It’s a day to play in the park, act silly, and be a kid again.

I bend my knees and let my body drift back and forth in a giant arc. Fall is my favorite season, with its last-minute splash of color before winter brings on the steady gray of Oregon rain. I breathe in the cool, sweet ~~crispness~~ of the air, pulling it deep into my lungs. My body slows until I drag my feet to a stop. “Time to go, Megsy.”

Some teenagers hate babysitting younger brothers and sisters. Not me. I’ve taken care of Meg since she was born. The two of us are so close it’s like Meg and I are one person, just living life at six and sixteen. ~~If anything happened to her, my body would rip in half and all the love in my heart would bleed out, soak into the soil, and be gone forever.~~

Commented [MF1]: I worry about the effectiveness of this opening paragraph, especially the first line. This manuscript has to grip the reader from the start. I’m not convinced this is the best way to do that.

Commented [MF2]: “Crispy” (edited to “crisp”) was used in the paragraph above. Omit to avoid repetition?

Commented [MF3]: Too much melodrama?

Meg hops off the swing and grabs my hand. “Sundays are the bestest day of the whole week.” She swings my hand extra high. “Mommy’s home.”

I squeeze her hand and swing it back and forth, high and crazy. Meg breaks into a pile of silly giggles. Sundays are my best day too, for that exact same reason. Mom is home.

Me starting high school triggered Mom into finishing her GED. All the high scores she racked up on her tests got her so excited that she signed up for a couple of classes at the community college. Mom still works her regular job at St. Vincent de Paul, but she added Saturdays at 7-Eleven just to pay the tuition.

Meg and I kick our way through crunchy, dry leaves on the trek to our apartment. It’s really Darren’s place, Mom’s boyfriend. We’ve lived with him for almost two years, and that’s a whole year longer than we’ve ever lived anywhere else.

Commented [MF4]: Kind of implies that “Darren’s place” is “Mom’s boyfriend.” Perhaps rewording is necessary?

Meg lets go of my hand and races toward a clump of maple trees sporting crowns of bright colors. These giants spread their arms over our heads like umbrellas. No matter what the season or how crummy the weather, this is always our favorite spot on the trek-way home from school. Meg reaches down, grabs a leaf, and holds it up for me to see. “Look! It’s giant!”

Commented [MF5]: Edited to avoid repetition.

Commented [MF6]: They’re walking home from the park, though.

I dig through a pile of leaves spilling over the plain gray of the sidewalk. “They’re like fire, all crackly and warm and bright.”

Commented [MF7]: Sounds like Meg talking, but I’m not sure.

Meg and I gather up an array of the biggest and most colorful leaves we can find, spreading them out in our hands like a fan. I hold them across my face, cock my head to the side, and peek over the top. “Princess Megan,” I say in a high, squeaky voice, “are you having a very fine day?”

Meg sticks out her hip, rests her hand on it, and fans herself with her leaves. “A very fine day, Queen Mattie. An extra-special fine day.”

We giggle and laugh and pretend while we tromp the rest of the way home. Having a baby sister is the best. I get to color pictures, build sand castles, and go to tea parties. I can play Candy Land and Go Fish all day while Mom works, and not worry about homework or money or a college scholarship. When I'm with Meg, I'm young and I'm happy.

Our neighborhood is in the north part of Eugene and consists of a string of older apartments just off a busy street. It's not a place with a cute little playground for the kids or surrounded by wide green lawns and attractive landscaping for the grown-ups. The apartment building is functional, **no-frills**, with a roof, doors that lock, and living room windows looking out onto the parking lot.

Commented [MF8]: Added to heighten the contrast between the hypothetical apartment complex with a playground and the actual complex.

The inside of Darren's apartment is as plain and simple as the outside. White walls. White blinds on the windows. Faded tan carpet in the mini living room and two small bedrooms. **Mom gave Darren's apartment a bit of style, though, with pictures, plants, and little things to brighten up the place.**

Commented [MF9]: I'd really like to see these items.

Mom is in our mini kitchen cooking spaghetti. "Hey." She gives Meg a hug and grins at me. "Have fun in the park?"

Meg looks like Mom with the same pale skin and dark blue eyes. My dad was part black, so I look like I don't even belong in the same family. Some people are rude and ask Mom if I'm adopted, and when she says no, they want to know what my dad looked like. Those same people never ask about Meg's dad.

Mostly, I envy Mom's and Meg's hair. It's ~~is~~ a soft light brown with these hints of blonde peeking through, plus it's long, straight, and shiny. Hair I would love to have. Mine is a dark mass of curls I can't manage no matter how hard I try.

I grab a spoon and dip it into the tomato sauce. “We always have fun at the park, Mom.”

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

The sauce is so hot I have to blow on it before I can put it into my mouth. Mom is a great cook. She makes meals out of just about anything. When money is short, Mom takes us to the food bank and loads up on whatever they’re giving away. Sometimes it’s foods we’ve never tasted, like turnips or kale. ~~F~~But that doesn’t stop Mom from taking it home, looking up a recipe, and making something out of it. She doesn’t waste anything.

Mom snatches the spoon out of my hand and waves us out of the kitchen. “Go. Finish your homework. Darren said he’d be home by six.”

Darren’s not my dad and he’s not Meg’s. Mom dated him for six months before she agreed to move into his apartment. Darren’s halfway decent to us when Mom’s around, but when she’s gone, he ignores us like-as if Meg and I are part of the furnishings, like a table or chair. Just obstacles in his way. We don’t complain, though. Living with him would be worse if he hassled us all the time.

Our bedroom is small, with a low bookcase separating twin beds. A dresser sits near the door, and one small closet holds the rest of our clothes, shoes, toys, and any other junk we need to stash. Sharing space with Meg doesn’t bother me. In fact it’s comforting to have her sleeping so close that I can reach out and almost touch her.

Commented [MF10]: Maybe “It’s actually comforting” would sound more teenager-y?

Meg goes directly to her favorite toy, which is the dollhouse she got from Santa. Mom found it at St. Vinnie’s, cleaned it up, and bought her a couple of inexpensive dolls and some little furniture to go with it. Meg loves it and plays with it for hours at a time.

I flop on my bed and sort through my homework. My goal is a college scholarship. So far, perfect grades haven’t been a problem, but high school is way harder than middle school and

the stakes are a whole lot higher. One little B+ and I could end up waiting tables at an all-night truck stop for the rest of my life.

Commented [MF11]: This doesn't seem realistic to me.

At six, Mom calls us back to the kitchen. Darren expects Mom to have dinner ready when he gets home, even on days when she's working a full shift. He never cleans the apartment, shops for groceries, or does the laundry. Sometimes I get disgusted at Mom for letting Darren use us like we're his own personal maid service. Mom says he pays the rent and utilities and that's is huge, plus she says almost men she knows don't cook or clean or help in the house. I say Darren's getting off way too easy.

Commented [MF12]: Kinda victim blamey... It's not Rita's fault that Darren acts this way.

Meg gets the garlic bread and sets it on the table while I grab salad dressings out of the refrigerator. Mom drains the spaghetti and dumps it in a bowl. We putter around, getting dinner ready to eat.

I'm starving, so I plop into my chair and hope Mom lets us start without Darren. Meg does the same. Mom pulls out her phone and fires off a text. We wait.

By now it's almost six-thirty. "Can we eat, Mom?" I say. "The spaghetti's getting cold."

Mom repeats herself. "Darren said he'd be home by six."

Darren makes a lot of promises he doesn't keep. Quitting drinking ~~or~~ and saving his money so he can take classes and to get his contracting license are just the beginning of the list.

"Mommy?" says Meg. "Can we start? Please?"

Mom's parents were druggies and neglected her so badly the state took her away when she was eight. After that, she drifted through foster care until she got pregnant with me. Some of her foster homes were decent and treated her well, but others were not. None of them were stable or permanent. I get why Mom wants the four of us to live like a sweet little family, even if only

for a Sunday night dinner of spaghetti and garlic bread. The disappointment written on her face makes my heart hurt.

Seconds tick off the kitchen clock before Mom finally says, "Okay. Let's eat."

Meg and I ~~dive in, but~~ Mom spends most of the meal twirling spaghetti around on her plate.

Commented [MF13]: This paragraph should be flipped. "The disappointment on Mom's face makes my heart hurt. Her parents were druggies....She wants the four of us to live like a sweet little family, even if only for a Sunday night dinner of spaghetti and garlic bread." This would ease the transition between Meg's dialogue and Mattie's interior monologue. As it stands, the transition is quite jarring.

Commented [MF14]: This edit makes the end of the chapter land better.

Chapter Two

Darren beats on the door and wakes us all up at midnight. “Rita! Open up the damn door.” He pounds and pounds until Mom gets up and lets him in.

The neighbor beside us bangs on the wall next to my bed. Darren’s being way too loud, but it’s not like this is the first time I’ve been woken up in the night. Neighbors come home late or drink too much, and forget some of us have to go to school and work in the morning. Family problems boil to the surface when the rest of us are tired and just want to sleep. Sometimes the red and blue lights of police cars flash through our bedroom window. At least the lights tell me the cops are here so everything will get sorted out and I can go back to sleep.

Meg whispers, “Mattie?” Her voice quivers with a near sob. “Is Darren drunk?”

I crawl out of bed and slide in beside her. “Yeah. Sounds like it.”

Meg and I snuggle together and listen to the fight. Mom tries to keep her voice down, but Darren doesn’t make any attempt to be quiet. This isn’t the first fight we’ve witnessed in person or through our bedroom wall, but that doesn’t make it any easier. Meg puts her hands over her ears. I hug her close and wonder why Mom stays with him.

Angry words pound at the walls of our ~~apartment~~ bedroom. Part of me wants to listen to everything they say and try to make sense out of all the ugly details. The other part of me tries to

Commented [MF15]: I don’t think this is the best introduction for Darren. We’re told that Darren pays the bills, but that’s not enough to get us to like him—and then he comes home drunk and abuses Rita. The reader doesn’t have any reason to believe he’s a good person, so when he eventually gives Mattie and Meg food, the action lacks believability. Darren isn’t supposed to be sympathetic, but he’s completely irredeemable after this scene, and that’s bad for the narrative. And when Mattie wonders why Rita stays with him, below, the reader wonders, too.

shut out their voices or at least pretend it's the wife-beater next door and not my own mother fighting with her boyfriend.

Commented [MF16]: M-W has an entry for wifebeater, the tank top, but I don't know if wife-beater is the correct hyphenation when used to refer to a person.

Their voices stop, but the silence is scarier than their yelling. I hold my breath and listen to the struggle of bodies, the grunts and moans and physical contact. Mom cries out and furniture crashes. Meg and I jerk upright, but Meg doesn't sit in bed like me, staring at the wall. She pushes out of my arms and flies for the door. I throw myself out of bed and take off after her.

Commented [MF17]: Can this be more specific? "Heavy footsteps fall. Mom hisses and Darren grunts. Then, the hollow sound of fist meeting skin..." That's pretty dramatic, but it paints a clearer picture than the highlighted section.

Meg flings open the door to our room and runs down the hall. I grab her before she dives into the middle of Mom and Darren's fight. Meg struggles in my arms, but I pull her close.

The hall light and the small one over the kitchen stove are the only ones on, but they are enough to see the remains of the struggle. One of the kitchen chairs ~~lays~~ lies broken on the floor. The others are shoved to the side. Mom leans against the kitchen table with Darren hovering over her.

Commented [MF18]: "Ones" is missing an antecedent. This is a great opportunity to punch up the description of the apartment. Consider "The apartment is dark save for the hall light and a single lit bulb in the kitchen..."

"Don't you get it, Rita?" -He sneers right in her face. "You just ain't smart enough."

He backs away, giving me a good look at Mom. Her hair is a mass of tangles. Blood trickles from her nose and the corner of her mouth. The side of her face is red and splotchy. My stomach rolls over, sending acid shooting up the back of my throat.

Meg screams, "Mommy!"

Every muscle I own quivers, then tightens until my body turns rigid. My eyes and mouth and face scrunch up so much my teeth hurt from the pressure. I've never seen Mom hurt. Ever. She and Darren have had fights before, but never like this. Never this physical.

Darren raises his hand and tips a can of beer to his lips. That's new, too. He isn't supposed to bring alcohol into the house. He promised he wouldn't drink at all, but that promise didn't last long. He says drinking is the only way he can hang out with his friends. What was the

Commented [MF19]: In the light CE, we should consider a uniform treatment of "too"; comma or no?

big deal? It's just one beer. Now, he doesn't even bother to explain why he's drunk and six hours late.

Commented [MF20]: I struggle to follow this train of thought. Mattie's attention should be on her mom, not on expository details about Darren. Perhaps this info could come earlier in the chapter.

Darren gulps down the rest of the beer, holds the can up, and squeezes until it ~~erushes~~ collapses in his fist. "You got these high-minded plans, Rita, like you're better than the rest of us. But you just don't get it." He holds the crushed can right in front of Mom's face. "College ain't nothin' but a big waste of your money."

Darren throws the empty beer can against the wall. He turns back to Mom and curls his lip. "And you're just too dumb to know it." He thrusts the flat of his hand against Mom's chest and shoves her so hard she stumbles backward. The table she's leaning on slides across the floor, knocking over two kitchen chairs.

Meg cries out, jerking against my arms. Anger sends heat shooting through my nerves, making my muscles go from hard and rigid back to twitching with tension. My fingers itch to rip every limb from his body and scratch his face into bloody gashes. The need to hurt Darren is so strong I can hardly hold myself back, but my job is to protect Meg. I hang on tight and turn all my anger into hating him.

Commented [MF21]: Consider, simply, "Heat shoots through..."

Commented [MF22]: It's you're tense, your muscles are hard and rigid. A different description is necessary.

Commented [MF23]: Isn't that what her anger was doing before?

Darren wheels around. "What are you brats staring at?"

We've shared Mom with Darren for two and a half years and I resent him for that. I look him right in the eye, ~~and say,~~ "You're a worthless piece of trash."

Darren stalks across the room. He leans toward me until I choke at the smell of beer on his breath. I glare right back at him and refuse to show him one tiny bit of fear. Darren doesn't say a thing. He just puts his hands on my shoulders and shoves, sending Meg and me stumbling backwards and landing against the arm of the couch.

Mom leaps at him, screaming, "Don't touch my kids!" Darren ~~curls his lips~~ sneers and flips up his hand. Mom gropes for a lamp on the end table like she's going to throw it, but Darren is already out the door.

Commented [MF24]: Like, giving her the finger?

I let go of Meg. She races across the room and buries her face against Mom's chest. Mom sinks back against the wall and hugs her with one arm, pressing her other hand flat against the side of her face. "Are you hurt, baby?" she whispers. "Are you and Mattie hurt?"

"We're okay, Mom." I step forward afraid to know just how bad Darren beat her. "Are you okay?" She turns away, hiding behind her hair.

"Mom?" I step closer, reach over, and pull her hand away. The pale skin around her eyes is bruised and already turning purple and puffy. I take a deep breath and try to keep my voice from shaking. "You need ice, Mom."

"Get garbage bags, Mattie." Her words come out garbled, slurred together from pain and swelling. "Pack your clothes and Meg's. Only what you need." She takes a deep ragged breath. "All your blankets, baby."

"Mommy," wails Meg. "What's happening, Mommy?"

Mom gently pushes Meg away. "Go with Mattie, sweetie. Help her pack."

I race to the kitchen and jerk a box of garbage bags out from under the sink, peeling off the last of the roll. I grab a sandwich bag out of the drawer, run over to the freezer, and dump in a bunch of ice. Meg clutches at Mom but I pull her away and hand Mom the ice. "Come on, Megs."

I steer my sister into our bedroom and waste valuable seconds standing in the middle of the room, wondering where to start. Clothes. I jerk open a dresser drawer. "Hold the bag, Meg." I sort through Meg's underwear and socks, t-shirts and jeans trying to pick out what we'll need.

When the bag is full, I tie the top shut and grab another one. Sorting takes too long, so I stuff in anything I can grab. When we get to the closet, I don't even sort between Meg and me and cram Meg's dresses into a bag with my jeans and sweaters.

Mom comes in and grabs the first two bags. "Hurry, girls. Grab your blankets."

Meg scoops up her stuffed animals and jams them into a bag with her pajamas. I glance around the room, wondering what I've forgotten. Drawers hang half out of the dresser with

dribbles of clothes draped over their sides. The closet door stands open. Hangers litter the floor, jumbled together with old toys and beat-up tennis shoes. But ~~M~~my books sit in perfect rows on our one little bookshelf. Fantasy. Classics. Trashy romances. All mine. All carefully collected.

The roll of garbage bags is gone.

Mom sticks her head in the door. "Girls!"

Meg and I throw on our backpacks. I hand Meg the pillows, scoop blankets off our beds, and push Meg toward the door. We hurry out of the apartment and there's Darren standing on the sidewalk with a can of beer in one hand and a whole six-pack in the other.

He laughs when he sees us. "Where *you* going?"

Darren's right. Where are we going? It's the middle of the night. The sky is black, and the air misty and cold. The rest of the apartments are dark and so quiet they could be empty. Despair hangs over the whole building like a dark shroud.

Mom turns away from the man she's shared her life and family with and herds us toward Ruby, our beat up old station wagon.

Darren reaches out and grabs Mom by the arm, spinning her around. "I *said* where you think you're going?"

Commented [MF25]: I want to see more confusion in this scene, some hesitation, maybe some interior monologue. "When we get to the closet, I pause, glancing between Meg's dresses and my jeans and sweaters. We don't have time for this. Without thinking, I cram dresses and jeans together into the bag, not bothering to sort between them."

Commented [MF26]: Consider "spilling out."

Mom jerks her arm away. “You **shoved** my kids.” She leans in and glares at him. “You knew when I moved in that I don’t live with druggies or drunks or abusers.” She pulls back. “And I sure don’t live with guys who knock my kids around.”

Commented [MF27]: Replace with “hurt” to accentuate the point & Rita’s emotions?

Darren swings around and throws his can of beer against the wall of the apartment building. It hits with a **splat**, sending a spray of beer streaming down the siding. Mom uses the garbage bags in her hands to push Meg and me toward Ruby. I stuff our blankets and bags in the back and wonder where we’re going. It’s the middle of the night. Can we find a motel? A room? Are places even open this late?

Commented [MF28]: “Splat” isn’t the right word. “Smash”? “Crash”? Mind the repeated “s” noises in this sentence.

Mom slides in behind the wheel. I shove plastic garbage bags out of the way, settle Meg into the back seat, and jump into the front. Mom starts the car and backs out of her parking spot. We drive away from Darren’s apartment, away from our life of nearly two years. Where do we go from here?

Mom leans forward, clutches the wheel with both hands, and drives **extra slow**. The streets in our neighborhood are dark and lonely. No one is out walking the dog in the middle of the night. No one is driving to the store for milk. The whole world feels like it is lost or destroyed with Mom, Meg, and me the only survivors, cocooned in rusty old Suby Ruby.

Commented [MF29]: Wouldn’t she be racing to leave Darren behind?

The windshield wipers flick back and forth, clearing away the mist. Mom drives to Beltline and takes the eastbound on-ramp. A few cars cruise by, their headlights brightening our way. She drives us a couple of miles before turning south into a quiet neighborhood with tall trees and wide front lawns. I wonder what she’s doing. We don’t know anyone who lives here and there aren’t motels where we could get a room for the night. When Mom **parks** Ruby beside a clump of trees near a small park, I get it. We’re sleeping in the car. No bed. No bathroom. Just the three of us camping out on the street, hoping to survive the night.

Commented [MF30]: Maybe “stops,” to avoid repetition?

I lean toward Mom and whisper. "Can't we get a motel?"

Mom shakes her head. "They're too expensive, ~~plus-and~~ we'll only be out here a few hours."

Meg is so tired she doesn't question why we shove garbage bags around and fold the back seat flat to make a bed. Mom and I spread out the blankets without saying a word. Mom takes Meg over to the bushes to go to the bathroom. I should go too, but I'm not about to bare my butt this close to civilization.

Meg and I crawl into our makeshift bed. Mom covers us with quilts before she slides into the driver's seat and pulls a blanket around her shoulders. I wrap my arms around my baby sister and hold her until her breath settles into a slow, steady rhythm. It's only then that I hear Mom crying into her pillow.

I should comfort her, ~~Pat~~ pat her shoulder and tell her we'll be all right, but all I can do is stare into the dark. How safe is it for girls to sleep in a car, anyway? Mom locked the doors, but women joggers get nabbed even in daylight. We're out here in the middle of the night where creeps could be lurking behind the bushes or around a corner, ready to pounce on us, **their next victims.**

Commented [MF31]: Unclear antecedent. Maybe "pounce on us, make us their next victims."

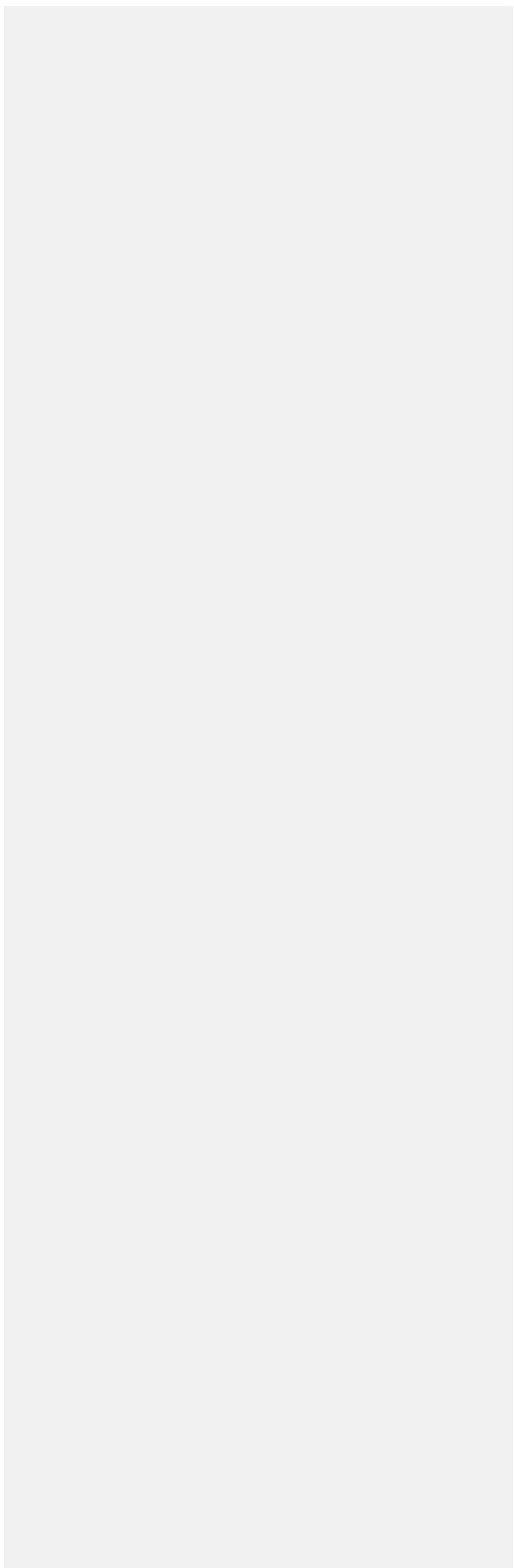
Fear gnaws at me, eating up my self-control. Do predators sniff out their victims, like lions stalking the weakest in the herd? Do they know where to look and when their prey is most vulnerable? Even protected by Ruby's sturdy body, sleeping in the car makes us easy pickings for any scumbag that happens along.

Somehow I fall asleep, only ~~knowing-realizing~~ it when a garbage truck rumbles by and wakes me to the early gray of morning. I close my eyes, take in a long, deep breath, and blow it out, slow and steady. We survived.

Commented [MF32]: This chapter ending would be better as "Somehow, I fall asleep." Then, chapter three opens with "A garbage truck rumbles by, waking me to the early gray of morning...."

Leonard

Sleeping - 17



Chapter Three

Mom drives us to one of those all-night gas stations near the freeway. The three of us race to the bathroom past truckers paying for fill-ups and fists full of Twinkies. Mom takes Meg in one stall and I almost jerk the door off another in my hurry to get my jeans down and go.

We clean up in the grime of the gas station. Yellow lights over the dirty mirror turn my skin a dull, sickish shade of brown. I dab at my face with a wet paper towel. Mom says my skin is my best feature, next to my brown eyes. I try to believe her, but I've spent my life as one of the only black kids in an entire school so I can't help feeling different.

My hair sticks out in a halo of dark frizz, but my hairbrush is back at Darren's apartment. Mom has a comb in her backpack but combs are for soft, straight hair like Meg and Mom's. Not ~~masses of~~ curls like mine. I hunt through the junk in the bottom of my backpack until I find a rubber band and gather my hair into a clump in the back of my head. While Mom goes out to the car to get us clean underwear, I pull the comb gently through Meg's hair and wish mine were half as shiny and smooth as hers.

Meg studies me in the mirror over the sink. "I hope Mommy gets us a real house." A smile tilts up the corners of her mouth. "One that has a yard so I can play right outside our door

and we can have a dog and cat and gerbil maybe even a bunny. I really, really, really want a pet bunny. I really, really do.”

The hope in Meg’s eyes hits me so hard I have to turn away to keep from bursting into tears. I know that dream of the three of us in our own house, the white picket fence and the dog and cat and gerbil. It ~~was’s~~ my dream too, once, but somewhere along the way I traded in fairy tale castles for goals big enough to get me someplace. Otherwise, I’ll end up like Mom, digging milk money out of the cushions of a dumpsy old sofa.

Commented [MF33]: This adjective doesn’t contrast the two ideas well; try “realistic” or “reasonable.”

While Mom drives us across town, Meg and I munch on an apple and eat crackers we dip into a jar of peanut butter. Meg’s school starts before mine, so we go there first.

Commented [MF34]: Weird image here... Maybe “Meg and I munch on an apple, trading it between us,...”

Mom parks next to the curb in her usual drop-off spot. Meg leans across the back of the seat to give us good-bye kisses before she hops out and yells, “Bye, Mommy. Bye, Mattie.”

Mom and I sit in Ruby and watch Meg walk toward the front door, ~~with~~ her pink polka-dot pack bumping against her back. She spent half the night sleeping in a car, and yet she marches off to school like any ordinary day.

Columbia High School is not far from Meg’s school and sits on a side street in north Eugene. It’s a one-story brick building and sprawls back from the road with the gym and auditorium poking their heads up on one side. I hop out of Ruby, grab my pack, and walk to the door past huge evergreens standing tall and straight like living sentinels.

Commented [MF35]: Need some interaction with Rita (Mattie wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye).

It’s my second high school. The first was across town, ~~and y~~ You wouldn’t think moving to a different school in the same town would be such a huge trauma, but it was. By the time I walked into Columbia High, halfway through freshman year, the cliques were well established. Any friends I made were new kids like me. I walk through the door and tighten my grip on the strap of my pack

Sleeping in my jeans brings a whole new paranoia to showing up at school. In middle school and high school, clothes become this super big deal, especially for girls. Like if you show up in baggy jeans when the style is ultra-tight, you'll be labeled a freak and sharks will attack, ripping you to shreds before you can even scream for help.

I guess it works the same way for guys too. If a boy wore khaki pants pulled past his belly button, a dress shirt all tucked in neat and tidy, and anything but flip flops or tennis shoes, he'd probably get beaten up in the boy's locker room.

I weave my way through the halls and do nothing but worry. Do I stink? I hate that. Some kids smell and no matter how nice they are, you just don't want to be around them. It's Monday, so at least nobody knows that my jeans and t-shirt are the same ones I wore yesterday.

A tall, gangly guy lounges against my locker playing games on his cell phone. I can't squeeze behind him, because the girl in the locker next to me has her boyfriend crawling all over her. I didn't get my morning shower, I'm grumpy from lack of sleep, and I've got a Spanish test hanging over my head like a hammer. I'm in no mood to mess around.

I glare at the guy filling up my space. "That's my locker."

Avoiding boys is the first rung on my climb to the top. Maybe at twenty-five I'll start looking around, but the guy has to have prospects. Education. Money. Plus, he's got to be calm and loving and stable. All the qualities Mom searches for in a man, but never seems to find.

Clear blue eyes flick at me for one nanosecond before going right back to the game he's playing on his phone. I scowl. "I *said* that's my locker. What I *meant* was get out of the way. Please."

A grin tips up the corners of his mouth. When he lifts his head, he looks full at me while his thumb makes a dramatic tap on the screen. Sandy blonde hair spills over his forehead with a

casual messiness that frames his face. He's handsome. Crazy handsome. But there are **bucket loads** of boys with such perfect looks your body melts and your breath hangs up in your throat so you can barely talk. It's how they act that counts.

Commented [MF36]: Bucketloads is a word, I swear! (M-W)

He shoves his phone into the pocket of his jeans, but he doesn't get out of the way. Instead, he folds his long arms across his chest and keeps right on looking at me. I tilt my head to the side and raise my eyebrows.

His smile spreads. "You're kinda cute."

I sigh and roll my eyes. "And you're kinda in the way."

He still doesn't move. Just grins.

I narrow my eyes and my voice takes on this razor-sharp edge that's guaranteed to squelch any male ego between the ages of two and two hundred. "I've got class. Now move."

He peels his body off the front of my locker and steps to the side just far enough for me to squeeze in. His body moves in long, fluid motions, easy and loose. He's tall, like **basketball scholarship** kind of tall. "Where's your class?" he asks.

Commented [MF37]: Closed compound, I think?

The guy obviously didn't pick up on my **get-lost** message, so I ignore how close he stands and step up next to him. "Nowhere you need to be."

Commented [MF38]: "get lost" message, perhaps?

I open my locker, stuff in my algebra book, and pull out my English. The guy shifts his body so he can rest his shoulder against the locker next to mine and studies me.

Most girl's eyes would sparkle with excitement and anticipation. They would smile and flirt, hoping to impress him enough to snag a date to the next dance or even walk to class with him. ~~Maybe-It might look like~~ I'm in such a foul mood because I spent half the night sleeping in a car, terrified out of my mind. Or ~~maybe it's just~~ that I don't like being the focus of anybody's

attention. The real reason, though, is that I won't let myself waste ~~energy and time~~ time and energy on boys. Not now, and maybe not ever.

Commented [MF39]: "Time and energy" flows better.

I slam my locker door and take off for class. ~~Leaving confuses him, because his~~ The boy's whole body jerks back, like he didn't expect me to walk away.

I keep moving. He slaps the guy making out with his girlfriend and says, "Later," and with three quick strides falls in step beside me. "I creeped you out, didn't I?" I don't look at him. "That was supposed to be me flirting."

He leans down and peers right into my face. "Instead I was cocky. Arrogant. Bigheaded."

"Conceited," I add without giving him a glance.

"Brash. Smug."

"Revolting," I throw at him.

"Revolting? Oh, man. Was I that bad?"

He wants me to smile. To say some cute little nonsense thing that lets him off the hook. Girls do it all the time. Smart girls. Going ~~to~~ places girls. Girls of every shape and size. ~~But~~ Not me. I extend my stride and keep right on walking, but his legs are plenty long to keep up.

"I'm sorry. I really am." He pauses waiting for me to respond. "It was stupid of me to come on like that."

I don't say a word but he keeps right on pushing. "I'm Jack."

Now I'm supposed to giggle and smile and tell him my name. That's how the whole boy ~~meets~~ girl game works, but I don't give out my name to just anybody. My name means too much to have people tossing it around without thinking how I feel or who I am. I turn into my classroom without giving him a glance.

I'm halfway across the room when he yells, "And you're not just kinda cute. You're really cute."

I spin around, rooted to the floor with my eyes wide and my mouth hanging open. Jack rests both hands high on the doorframe and leans into the room. His blue eyes twinkle and the grin on his face spreads to his ears. Twitters of laughter erupt from the class. I turn away, stomp down the aisle, and throw myself into my desk so mad I could rip off his head.

Class starts and I don't give the locker guy one second of my time. At noon, I stand in line at the cafeteria to get my free and reduced lunch. That's another part of high school that's hard. All the kids with a shred of extra cash eat off campus. That leaves ~~we-us~~ poor unfortunates who can't afford McDonald's every day of our ~~life-lives~~ waiting in line for rubbery hamburgers and slimy hot dogs.

My friend, Lilly sits at a table with her boyfriend, Tanner. She waves, and I wave back. Lilly and I came to Columbia High at the same time so we ~~got-came~~ to be friends. We used to eat lunch together and hang out once in a while after school. We even went to a couple of movies and school plays together, but then Tanner asked her out and that was the end of Lilly and me. We're still friends, but we don't do anything social~~ly~~ anymore, just talk when we've got a class together or text each other once in a while.

I take my tray to a table, plop down, and prop open my algebra book. High school would be a lot more fun if I had more friends. It's not that I don't like people or can't make friends. It's just that every time I make a connection, something happens, like Lilly falls in love with Tanner. Or my friend, Finn, starts smoking weed and hanging out with a bunch of druggies until his mom packs him off to live with his dad. Life just seems to get in the way.

Commented [MF40]: Conveys more surprise than annoyance, and doesn't seem to fit with Mattie's emotions on the page before.

I've only gotten one problem done when Jack slides in across from me. He's got a Burger King bag in his hand and a grin on his face that just won't quit. I ignore him and go back to my homework. He reaches over and flips up the cover of my notebook so he can read my name.

"Mattie Rollins." He says it soft and slow. Like he's digesting it. Memorizing it. He extends his hand across the table. It's so big he could pick up a basketball without even straining. "Hi, Mattie Rollins."

The guy's got this calm, easy grace about him like he's totally comfortable in his skin. I jerk my eyes back to my math book. Jack leaves his hand hanging between us for way too long, as if he expects me to change my mind, give in, and shake it. When he finally pulls it away, I can't keep my eyes from glancing up. Jack's face is so open and vulnerable that my heart kind of cramps up and bangs around in my chest before it gets back to a steady thump, thump, thumping.

"Look," I say, "I'll be polite and nice and lay it out straight." I zero right in on him so he knows I'm not some wishy-washy sweet-chick who says one thing but means something totally different. "You're wasting your time."

His eyebrows squeeze together so much they wrinkle up his whole forehead. "You've got a boyfriend?"

I shake my head. "No. It's not that." I try to think of the right words, but my brain is too jumbled. I blurt out the truth. "I've got goals, see? So I'm not getting sidetracked by some super cute guy with shiny white teeth."

Jack bursts out laughing. He just lets the sound flow up through his body and out into the universe like he doesn't care if the whole wide world knows he's happy. I glance around, aware that the entire school cafeteria is now taking a sudden interest in my life.

Jack keeps grinning while he unpacks his lunch. Two double Whoppers. A huge order of fries. A cup of soda so giant I'd need two hands to lift it. I nibble on my free M~~u~~mac and C~~h~~ese while he mows through his first Whopper.

He unwraps the second sandwich, takes a bite, and looks at me across the table. "Fair enough, Mattie Rollins."

He doesn't say another word all the way through the Whopper, so I figure he got the hint and I'm done with him.

"But it's my time." He takes a long slurp on his soda and pops a couple of fries in his mouth. "And I don't think I'm wasting it."

What do I say? Get lost? I already said that and he didn't seem to get the hint. I don't get another word out of my mouth before Jack points at my lunch tray. "Are you going to eat that?"

I glance down at the brown glob of chocolate pudding piled in the corner of my tray and wrinkle my nose. "Seriously?"

He gives me that Oscar-winning smile. "Seriously. I love that stuff."

Commented [MF41]: Burger?

Commented [MF42]: Not a great last line.

Chapter Four

“Mattie Rollins,” crackles the intercom over Mr. Zaponski’s desk. “Report to the office to be checked out.”

Tension drops out of my shoulders, the muscles in my face relax, and relief fills my chest to overflowing. Thank God, Allah, and Buddha too, because Mom must have found us an apartment. She’s calling me out of sixth period so Meg and I can get settled before she heads off to work. I slide between the girls in the alto section of the choir, step off the riser, and gather up my backpack. Mr. Z hands me a pass. I’m so happy I practically skip to the office.

Mom is waiting near the door. She’s standing in the shadow of a trophy case ~~which that~~ doesn’t do anything to disguise the blue and purple bruises on her face. I scribble my name on the sign-out sheet and follow her out of the building.

“Is the apartment close? Can Meg and I walk to school or do we have to take the bus?”

Mom takes off for the door without answering me. That’s how I know we’re still homeless and sleeping in a car. I don’t catch up with her until we’re outside tromping through the rain.

“You tried, didn’t you?” My words come out loud and harsh but I’m too cranked up to care. “You didn’t just go off to class and forget about us?”

Mom should slap me. She doesn’t deserve purple bruises, split lips, or Darren’s bullying

her about being dumb. But Mom never hits. No matter how sassy and snotty I get or how tired and cranky she is, she never turns mean and abusive.

Commented [MF43]: "Mom should slap me" doesn't relate to the rest of the highlighted section.

Mom stops right in the middle of the sidewalk. "I skipped classes, pounded on doors, and begged apartment managers to take us." Mom holds her arms stiff by her sides, clenching her hands into fists.

"Can't we get a motel?" I say. "Just for the night?" I know I'm acting like a whiny little brat, but once I get sassy it's hard to rein myself in.

Commented [MF44]: "Annoying" is a far more accurate term for how she's acting than "sassy."

"No." Mom takes off across the parking lot. "We need first and last month's rent, plus a cleaning deposit. A motel is too expensive."

I'm so focused on Mom finding us a room with a door and bathroom that I walk right through a rain puddle and don't even feel my tennis shoes turning wet until I squish out the other side. "What about your friends, Carly or Jen? Did you ask them? One of them would let us crash on their couch for a couple of days, just 'til we found something."

Mom shakes her head. "Carly's brother and two kids just moved in. That's seven in a tiny two-bedroom."

She stops next to Ruby and opens the driver's side door. "And Jen's husband beats her up all the time. She's finally taking the kids and moving to Portland to live with her mother."

We stare at each other across Ruby's roof. "I'll make more calls, but I can't promise anything. Not for tonight, anyway."

Meg hops up and down on the back seat. "We're going to the library, Mattie, and we can read books and do our homework and it will be really, really fun!"

I paste a smile across my face and bat away the worry ripping holes in my gut. We made it through one night on the street, but can we be safe for two? Is that tempting fate? Dropping our

odds of survival?

Mom slides into the driver's seat and clutches the steering wheel so hard her hands look like claws. "The library was the only place I could think of where you would be safe." She tilts her head toward a plastic bag on the console between us. "I made sandwiches."

I pick up the plastic bag. Two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches along with a baggie of those cute little carrots. I hand a sandwich back to Meg, pull out one for myself, and take a bite.

Ruby splashes through puddles, her windshield wipers whipping back and forth to clear away the drizzle. Rain is just part of living in Oregon. At least in the winter. Some people hate the damp and cold, but I love hearing that soft patter of raindrops on the roof or feeling them plop on my head when I walk outside.

It was easy to love rain when I lived in a place where I could make a cup of hot chocolate, curl up with a good book, and spend a lazy evening all warm and dry. Rain takes on a whole new dimension when my home is a car and my tennis shoes are so wet my feet and toes feel like ice cubes.

I force myself to chew the glob of peanut butter and jelly in my mouth. We need an apartment. Now. Even a room works as long as we can get to a bathroom. **Scrubbing my armpits with a soggy paper towel worked for one day, but we can't keep it up.** I choke down another bite of sandwich.

Commented [MF45]: I wonder why can't she use the gym shower at school?

Mom stops in front of the library. I slide out with my backpack clutched in one hand, and the **peanut butter sandwich Mom made for me** in the other. Meg crawls out of her booster seat and stands beside me on the sidewalk.

Commented [MF46]: Maybe "sandwich" or "PB&J"

"I'll meet you in the children's section as soon as I get off work." Mom leans toward us. "And don't let anyone know you're here alone."

Mom searches my face for a sliver of forgiveness. I should give it to her, but I don't. Instead, I turn away and guide Meg to the door of the city library and hours and hours of time to kill. Just like all the other homeless people.

The downtown library is the nicest place we ever go. It's three stories high and beautiful with lots of tall windows and bright open spaces. A glassed-in coffee bar with tables and chairs forms an entryway. The checkout desk is inside by the front door, and across the entry is a beautiful curved staircase that winds up to the two upper floors. All the wood is a natural light color that makes the place warm and friendly and inviting.

The children's section is off to the right, and Meg and I treat it like a second home. When Darren and his buddies were watching football on his big-screen TV, Mom drove us here. We came at other times, too, because it's just such a great place to read and hang out. Once in a while, if Mom has enough money to splurge, she'd buy us a cup of hot chocolate or a cold drink at the coffee bar.

Today, I don't scan the low stacks of books, hunting for one that Meg will like. Instead, I glance around the room, searching for a place where we can spend hours of time and not be noticed. I hold Meg's hand and guide her past small tables scattered near the librarian's desk. In the back corner, I find a couch, a couple of chairs, and a little round table. If we stay quiet and mind our own business, no one will notice we're here without Mom.

Our first two hours whiz by, but as time ticks off the big clock over the librarian's desk, the minutes slow to a crawl. We do our homework and I read Meg stories. We take trips to the bathroom, get drinks at the water fountain, and look for new stories to read. As the evening drags on, we get tired, hungry, and worried.

Meg nestles against me on the couch. "Will Mommy get us a house?"

“I hope so,” I whisper. “I sure hope so.”

“I miss my doll-house, Mattie.” Meg speaks so quiet I can barely hear her. “Darren better not sell it or give it away or smash it before we get a house, or I’ll be really, really mad.”

The muscles in my chest constrict around my heart and lungs, making it hard for me to breathe. Meg’s dollhouse, stuffed animals, and my books and all the other things we owned are probably gone forever. Do I tell her that or let her go on hoping she’ll get her dollhouse back?

Before I can think of what to say, Meg falls asleep with her head on my lap. I gaze down at her and stroke the side of her face. My sister is so sweet, young, and innocent, but she’s strong, too. She got tossed into the street and, lost most of her toys, and she’s still tough enough to fight back.

I ache for Meg, for me, for Mom. Our life wasn’t great with Darren, but at least we had a roof and a bathroom. Now all we’ve got is Ruby. We survived one night on the street, but can we be lucky for two?

Commented [MF47]: Phrasing is similar to previous mention of Ruby, page 27. Consider omitting.

Mom hurries into the library at five minutes to nine. By then, Meg and I have gone back to the bathroom, gotten drinks, and are standing near the door. I don’t need to ask her if we have a warm, safe place to sleep. The worry in her face tells me all I need to know.

Commented [MF48]: Dark circles? Heavy-lidded eyes? Pursed lips? What does this look like?

Mom parks in the same neighborhood where we stayed last night. I snuggle deep into our pile of quilts, curl my body around Meg’s, and hold her tight against my body. Reason tells me we aren’t the only kids who’ve spent a couple of nights in a car. It probably happens a lot more than I think, but knowing other kids survive doesn’t take away the fear of predators prowling dark, lonely streets.

Commented [MF49]: Good place for a section break.

My mind spins through every horrible thing that could happen to us. The more I try not to think, try to get control of myself, the worse the scenes that run through my head.

To stop the fear chewing at whatever pitiful bit of courage I own, I say, “Mom?”

Mom sits in the front seat, reading a textbook by flashlight. “Yeah, honey?”

“Do you wish you were rich?” My question sounds all wrong, like I’m some airhead that just wants the latest new clothes or fanciest phone.

“I mean, what would you do, if you had more money? How would you live? What would you do with it?”

Mom clicks off her flashlight and sits so quiet and still that all I can hear is her breathing. “I’d get us a house, of course. That would be number one. Not big. Not fancy. Just comfortable, with clean, sturdy furniture, and in a nice neighborhood near good schools.”

I’m thinking she’s done, that’s the end of her dreams, when she says, “And then I’d finish college so I could get a good job and take better care of you and Meg.”

Mom hesitates again and then adds, “But that’s not the only reason I want to go to school. I hate being ignorant, Mattie. I’m embarrassed that I don’t understand words or the history of our government. People talk about the news and I don’t recognize the countries or their leaders. I want to know things, Mattie. Be educated.”

Mom startles me with the force she throws into her words. We sit wrapped together in the dark, protected by Ruby’s rusty shell.

“What about you, Mattie?” Mom’s voice settles back to calm and quiet. “What would you do if we had the money?”

I hesitate too, as if this is the most important question I’ll ever answer. “I want the house, the education, the security, but I want to see things, too. Paris. London. New York City.” I breathe in the cool night air. “I want to hike in the mountains. Swim in a warm ocean. See a ballet. Go to an opera. So much, Mom. I want to do so much.”

My mind whirls with possibilities, listing them in no order. Mom and I sit in silence, lost in our own dreams.

“Don’t give up those goals.” Mom’s voice is so soft I can barely hear her. “Hang tight to them.” She leaves the flashlight off, but I don’t hear her put away her textbook or pull the quilts up around her shoulders.

I study the rivers of rain gliding down Ruby’s windows, tighten my arms, and pull Meg even closer. My eyes get heavy and I drift into that in-between space where I’m not asleep, but I’m not awake either. My breathing slows. My body sinks deeper and deeper into sleep.

Crunch. My eyes pop open. I peer into the dark. Crunch. My breath slows to barely a whisper. Crunch. Steps? Someone walking? Rain patters on the roof and muffles sound. I don’t move my head, but push the quilts aside far enough to peer over the edge. All I see are dark streaks of rain sliding down Ruby’s windows.

I breathe out, slow and steady, and tell myself not to be paranoid. Not everyone is a rapist, killer, or sex offender. Maybe somebody is walking their dog or coming home late or taking an evening stroll. The steps come close, so close they are right next to the car. I don’t move, don’t breathe, I don’t even blink.

The steps stop. Is someone bent over Ruby, peering in her windows? Do they see us? I can’t see them, but I don’t move. What if this person is not a dog walker, but a rapist looking for his next victim?

A scream rises in my throat. I press my lips together and lay as still and rigid as stone. Meg sleeps in my arms, but Mom is still awake. I can tell, because she is not making the slightest bit of noise, either. We wait, covered in a blanket of darkness.

The person moves on, the crunch of their steps falling away into the rain. I let out my

breath. “Mom?” I whisper.

A soft hiss of air escapes from Mom’s lips. “Yeah.”

“I’m scared.” The dark hides my fear and lets me speak words I wouldn’t admit in the bright light of day. “I’m so scared.”

“Me, too, honey. Me, too.”

I hear tears in her voice, feel them sinking into her sweatshirt, taste them on my own lips. My dreams are gone, lost in the reality of Ruby, parked alone and vulnerable on a dark and lonely city street.

My mind spins for hours or maybe just minutes, conjuring up more disasters. Somehow in the damp of the night, I sleep.

Commented [MF50]: If the end of chapter 1 is changed, this might need to be changed to avoid too much repetition.