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My arm is ice. I can't lift it. It feels like it's buried under an avalanche of heavy white snow. I could be buried alive.

Maybe this is one of those dreams—those trapped dreams—where you have to get away, but you can't move no matter how hard you try. And you can't scream.

Clank!

I'm awake again, I think. Something woke me, I think. *I think. Therefore I am.* Right? But *where* am I?

The *clank* happens again. Metal on metal? Voices too. But they're on the ceiling, bouncing around, refusing to be trapped into separate sounds. Tangled and interwoven words.

And the smell. Like a too-clean bathroom.

I would be scared, terrified, if I could line up my thoughts in a straight row. But I can't.

I can't open my eyes. Or maybe they *are* open, and I still can't see. Is this what it's like to be blind? Am I blind?

"There's a disturbance on 8th and Maple. Suspected 10-15. Vehicles respond. We have a 10-23 at Highview Heights. Copy."

The words are words now. But together they don't make sense. And the voice is scratchy and filled with smoky air. A police scanner? Somehow I know this. Am I in a police car? But nothing is moving. No high-speed chase. No turns or speed bumps.

"You turn that thing off. You hear me? Don't make me tell you again. I don't care if you're the Highview police captain. You turn that thing off in this room. My girl here doesn't need to be hearing that scratchy thing."

This voice is familiar, but I don't have a face to go with it. Just the soothing sound of the words rolling. Female. African-American. Middle-aged. Is it racist to think this? Is it age prejudice? Gender prejudice?

"It's regulation. I have to keep it on." The voice is young, male. I picture a rock singer, tall, clean-cut, out of place in his own band. Laughed at behind his back. "She can't hear it anyway."

She can't hear it. Does he mean *me*? Am I the *she* who can't hear?

I want to scream at him. *I can too hear it, you pitiful excuse for a rock star!* But nothing comes out.

"She can hear us." The soothing lady's voice

again. In my mind she becomes Lady Smooth, a woman as at home in mules as she is in Skechers.

"That's not what the doc said," mutters Officer Geek.

Lady Smooth whispers in my ear, "I know you hear me, sugar. You'll come back when you're ready."

I feel something at my shoulders. A blanket being pulled up? I *felt* that. I *feel!*

I can't tell if seconds have passed. Or hours. Or days. Or eternity.

Maybe I'm dead.

I've always believed in heaven and kind of in hell. But this isn't like either one of them.

I remember a sleepover. Sixth grade? My friends piled onto my bed. Our fingernails wet with pink pearl polish. Cotton between our toes. And somebody started talking about what it would be like to be dead. Before I could get them to talk about something else, like Jason Weaver or the new boy who just moved from Texas and had the cutest accent, they took turns imagining what it was like to be dead. Most of them believed in heaven, like me. But Molly Jacobs, who moved away the next summer, insisted death was darkness and being cut off from life. A degree of life.

I can't move. It's total darkness wherever I am now. Grave dark. I'm cut off from life. Is that *dead*?

But I smell scrambled eggs. I can't be dead.

"There you go, sweetie. That better?"

That voice again. Lady Smooth. I fight to stay

above the darkness so I can hear her voice. It's the only thing in my world that doesn't hurt. She's doing something around my head. A pillow? I'm in a bed. With a pillow and a blanket.

"Honey, I'm sorry these officers keep disturbing you. I can't keep them out. Believe me, I tried."

Officers? Is this the army? Am I in a war?

But I remember the police scanner. They're police officers, not soldiers.

And I should know where I am. Pillows. Blankets. I do know, but the answer keeps melting out of my head.

"This is Sergeant McCarthy," says Lady Smooth. "And this youngster is Officer Williams. They keep coming back, so I thought it was about time you got introduced proper."

"Are you sure she can hear us?" One of them—I'm thinking the geek rock star Williams—whispers this. Why is he whispering? Is it a test?

A deeper male voice says, "Uh, ma'am . . ." Then he clears his throat and tries again. "I'm McCarthy. I'm . . . we're sorry. . . ."

He's sorry? Sorry about what? I try to pull in my thoughts, but it's like trying to get pieces of bread back together after I've tossed them into Eden's Pond for the ducks.

Eden's Pond. I remember ducks.

"We just need to ask you some questions," says deep-voiced McCarthy.

"Like she's going to answer? This is crazy, Mac." It's the rock geek. Williams.

A sigh comes from my friend Lady Smooth. She doesn't like Williams any more than I do. "Sierra . . ."

Sierra. I'm Sierra. I remember that. Sierra Reynolds. Sierra Emily Reynolds. A senior at Highview High.

". . . they're wanting to know about the accident."

Accident. There's been an accident. A 911 accident? An airplane crash?

I can't remember. I can't remember an accident.

But inside my cold dark skeleton, there's no doubt. There *has* been an accident. A terrible, terrible accident. I was in it.

Maybe I still am.



It's quiet again. The only sound is friendly laughter far, far away.

I am in a hospital. A hospital bed. I'm not sure how I know this. Everything is still black. I still can't move. But the knowledge is here, inside my black cave.

The cold dripping into my arm isn't snow. It's an IV. I've seen them on *ER* reruns. I've seen them when we visited Grandpa Reynolds in the hospital. He had tubes everywhere they could think of.

Do I? Do I have tubes like Grandpa Reynolds?

Memories are rolling through my mind so fast they're bumping into each other. Grandpa Reynolds. He moved east because he had only one son, my dad. Grandpa hated chewing gum and loud music, and I don't think I ever knew what he liked. He spent the

last three weeks of his life on a life-support machine in Highview County General. I remember the “quality of life” arguments my parents had when Grandpa was on oxygen, the clear bag expanding and collapsing according to the commands of metal dials on metal machines.

“We should tell them to turn off the machines,” Dad insisted. “What kind of quality of life is this?”

“You can’t do that,” Mom whispered. “You can’t betray your own father like that!”

Gotta wonder if Mom and Dad have had that particular discussion about me. I haven’t moved since I’ve been here, however long that is. I can’t even open my eyes because they’re heavier than lead. Eye leads. A joke—*leads*. How can I have a sense of humor here?

The blanket lifts, and I feel a rush of cold air.

“Vitals still stable, Nurse?” It’s a doctor. I’ve heard his voice before. I’ve heard lots of doctors, male and female, come and go, this one more than the others.

“Ninety over 70. Pulse rate, 65.”

The cold stethoscope shocks my chest. Inside, my skeleton jumps so high, it smashes on the ceiling. But I don’t move.

He squeezes just below my knee, then moves my leg. It hurts. “That hip will take some time. But the leg looks good.”

Should I be flattered? My mother has great legs. Mine are okay. They’re not my best feature. But thank heavens I got Mom’s feet. Size 5 1/2. Nothing

weird about the toes. A foot made for sandals, Steve Maddens.

I concentrate, trying to call up an image of myself. I see my feet first. Toenails painted, a tiny flower on each big toenail. Perfect with cork-heeled Bebes.

What else? Average height. Five-five. I'm *cute*. I guess that's what everybody says: *Sierra, you are so cute*. I don't get over 122 pounds, or Mom starts leaving dieting pamphlets in my bedroom.

Cute. I'd rather be gorgeous. Or beautiful. Or striking. Like McKenzie Parker, my best friend. She's tall and tan, with streaky blonde hair that turns heads in the mall.

When I think of Kenzie, something inside twinges, like a physical pain. That's odd. She's been my best friend since summer. I got to know her on yearbook staff our junior year, when she was still pretty mousy. But over the summer, she changed her hair, her style, everything. We went shoe shopping a couple of times and hit it off. We've been best friends our senior year.

So why don't I want to think about her anymore? Did something happen to her? Did she get hurt too?

In the blackness behind my eyes, my own image finally comes into focus. I have shiny auburn hair, deep red really, with natural blonde highlights. I can't remember when it hasn't come at least to my shoulders. My hair is my best feature, and I know it.

And my eyes. Green and deep set. People say they're Irish eyes. Ryun, my boyfriend, says they're the biggest eyes he's ever seen.

Ryun. When I think about Ryun, I can hardly breathe. Longing? Fear? Where *is* Ryun? Why isn't he here?

Above me, Doctor and Lady Smooth are talking about cutting back drips, consulting specialists. They argue about something, but I can't keep the thoughts together, so I let myself sink into the mattress and fall all the way through.

I smell Old Spice. Someone's leaning on my bed. The Old Spice has to be my sister's. Jacqueline's in eighth grade, and Mom won't let her wear perfume to school. So she wears men's cologne. That's Jacqueline. I picture her in flip-flops—never mind it's no longer the season for them. Not the cool flip-flops with designs on the inside of the sole. Not like my turquoise pair with bright edges and straps and the palm tree design. Just plain yellow thongs. And overalls with a T-shirt—the slogan, thankfully, illegible because of the overall buckles. Her friends all wear skater clothes.

Jacqueline would have her wild red hair stuffed under a hat. Maybe the broad-brimmed Panama or the one that looks like she's going fishing and it should have hooks and worms on it. My sister loves hats.

"Hey, Sis!" she shouts. "Can you hear me? Wake up! I miss you, Sierra. I'm not kidding. You need to meet your roommate. You have the coolest roommate. Her name's Missouri. Isn't that amazing?" She pronounces it *Missou-ruh*, not *Missour-ree*.

I think I'm not hearing her right. I have a roommate? A roommate who is a state?

"You should have seen Dad when he walked in," Jacqueline continues. "After you got out of intensive care and into this rehab unit, Dad demanded a private room, which they didn't have. And anyway, he's the one who wrote this discovery grant. Remember? For University Hospital and rehabilitation? Putting old people with young people—*The Nurturing Program*. So Dad couldn't just say, 'This is ridiculous,' which you could tell he wanted to say. It was great though. You should have been there. Oh. Okay. You *were* there. Anyway . . ."

Jacqueline takes her weight off the bed. Her weight isn't much. She's skinny as a Granny boot. "I don't know what to do for her. Except talk. Do you think she can hear me?" she asks.

"I think she can. Sometimes," Lady Smooth answers.

"I hope so." My sister lowers her voice. "Why is her face like that?"

My face? Like what? Why is my face like what?

"It hardly looks like Sierra," Jacqueline says.

Why doesn't it look like me? What happened to my face?

"Your sister's face is just swollen, honey. She'll be all right. That scar on her forehead will fade too. You'll see."

Jacqueline asks more questions, but I can't hear them. All I hear is *scar. Scar on her forehead*. Blood is pounding in my head. If I'm disfigured, I don't want to live.

*How could this happen to me? God, if you're
out there, why did you let this happen to me?
What did I do to deserve it?*

I don't want to wake up, not ever.

degrees of betrayal

