

Logan

Just like that she was gone.

I remember lights. Screams. Sirens. Then a terrifying silence. Her question still echoes in my mind.

Daddy, are you okay?

No, honey, I'm not. I'm completely battered, head to toe, staring at the ceiling in a trance. But you have it so much worse. I deserve all of this. You deserved better.

It's 4:03am.

My eyes are slow to move, swollen and taut as they are. I can barely look out the window across from me. Wisps of daybreak reach over the horizon. It seems so peaceful out there in the dozing world. Buildings as far as the eye can see, full of dreams. I can't bear to fall asleep. Not anymore. She's the only thing I can see when I close my tired eyes. Her face, looking up at me, afraid.

Fear. I never wanted her to know what that felt like. I was going to be the best father, give her everything she ever wanted, and be at her side always. But being by my side was what cost her. She hadn't seen it coming. Hell, I hadn't either. Her papa would never hurt her.

"Mr. Daniels?"

The sudden voice at my shoulder shakes me out of my reverie. That image is gone.

"Mr. Daniels, I see you aren't sleeping."

I don't respond. Not like I can say much anyway.

The nurse sighs. "Would you like me to give you a sed--"

"No," I gurgle, twisting my head around as best as I can. It hurts so badly. "No, don't."

Her kind face is twisted in pity. “Mr. Daniels, you need some rest. What happened to you was... horrible. An accident. You need to recover. I’m here to help you.” She rests a slim hand on my forearm, as if I can feel it through the bandages.

I just stare at her, defiant. She will not take me to that place again. I can’t handle it. The memories. That beautiful, tortured face.

“Henrietta,” the nurse calls over her shoulder, “Could you get me some morphine for Mr. Daniels, please? He’s in pain.”

“No,” I say again, this time more fervently, “No, p-please. Don’t.” The words come out slow and jumbled, not at all how I had wished. But the nurse pretends she doesn’t hear. After all, what are the demands of a mad, grieved man?

Just put him out of his misery.

Another woman, supposedly Henrietta, comes into my room, vial in hand. I swallow hard, biting back unnatural hysteria, but it gets caught in my throat. The other nurse takes it and goes over to the cupboard to get a syringe. What a vile, evil thing. It fills up to the brim with demons and dread. She goes over to my machine and grasps the tube, giving me one final look.

“This will help you sleep. Relax, and let it take over. You’ll feel better after, I promise.”

I promise.

The fluid injects, trickling into my veins like vicious poison. I try to wrench my arm away, but I am too feeble, and my body rejects itself. The nurses smile ever so softly down at me before they leave, as if they did me a favor. Angels of healing, delivering pain and suffering.

Count down. *10, 9, 8...*

I succumb to darkness.

A smattering of snow brushes against the glass. Wind whistles against brick walls. It all makes my head ache. There's something shaking me, urging me to do something, but I can't seem to surface from oblivion.

"Daddy, daddy, come on. Wake up."

My eyelids slowly peer out into the void and a distorted face comes into view. Her hair is in knots and her mouth still has smears of spit, but her eyes are on fire. Just like her mother's.

"W-what?" I stutter, rubbing my palm across the unshaven skin lining my jaw.

"Daaaad, wake up! You promised!"

More pushing, more shoving. I groan in response, desperately trying to remember this promise. Where am I?

"Honey... Hon, what is it?"

The girl sits on the bed beside me, looking troubled. "You said you'd take me to the park today. Remember? You promised that we'd build a snowman before I had to leave."

"I said that?"

"Yes!" she shouts, directly into my ear, "And we don't have much time left so you'd better *get up!*"

I recoil, trying to get my bearings. It all starts to come back. The drinks. I must have gone over my limit. Was she there for that? Doesn't matter. What matters right now is that we build a snowman, like we do every year. It's what my princess wants.

“Okay, okay.” I sit up, waiting for the room to stop spinning before getting out of bed completely. Outside is gray and feathery, with curls of snowflakes dancing in tempest. My head feels the same.

“Laura, have you looked outside lately? It’s a snowstorm.” I point.

She just shrugs her little shoulders. “So? That’s nothing.”

I moan again, but she isn’t having it. The girl props herself against the bed and pushes my back, aiding me to the adjoining bathroom. Her face is set.

“You go get ready. We’ll meet downstairs in ten.” Laura races out of the room and down the hall, her socked feet making hardly a sound. I can only smile at her tenacity. But when I look into the bathroom mirror, all I see is a stranger. His face is slack, his eyes are sunken, and there is no laughter there anymore. Not even when he smiles.

Why does she love this thing, this monster? It doesn’t even resemble her daddy anymore.

I end up taking fifteen minutes due to my... condition. The girl is already dressed in her wintry gear, brunette hair brushed and tucked under a knit hat. In her hands is a long carrot and an old scarf. Apparently, all of this was premeditated. I wonder when we even had this discussion. Or why I said yes. After all, this is a family tradition. Marie isn’t even here to join us.

But then again, perhaps that is for the best.

“Let’s go,” I say very reluctantly, pulling on a thick jacket and crummy work boots. She zooms out the door with a wide grin, hopping into the truck with as much grace as a six-year-old can muster. Her energy is contagious. I find myself smiling, too, as I get into the driver’s seat and rev up the engine. It takes a couple tries before it finally starts. Not a good sign.

I sidle down the main road and turn on some oldies. Normally she has a lot to say about this, but today she is too ecstatic to be critical. Her little frame is practically bouncing up and

down. The roads, I notice, are pretty slick. There's a slight sheen, as if the salt trucks haven't quite made it up this way yet. Being this early on a Saturday, it makes sense. But it still makes me nervous.

The storm seems to increase every minute we're on the road. Ropes of snow lash against the windshield, blocking my view significantly. I flip on the headlights and slow down, wishing we didn't have to be out in this. Wishing I hadn't agreed. Laura looks up at me with a frown.

"Can't we go a little faster?"

I sigh. "The road's pretty bad. Maybe we should do this another time."

"No!" she whines, puckering a lip, "This is the best time! And I don't know when I'll get to see you again..." She trails off, turning her head to look out the window.

"My girl. My sweet girl. You'll see me plenty. I promise." I glance over at her to get an affirmation, but she doesn't say anything. Sighing once again, I concede. What's the harm? It's just a little storm.

No problem.

I continue going toward the park, which is conveniently across town. I'm not sure why it's her favorite, but ever since she was little she's begged to go every weekend, rain or shine. Or in this case, snow. Something about the wide open space, the rolling fields of evergreens. I suppose I can relate. I've never liked living in town. Too cramped, too dirty. Of late, I haven't had much of a choice. There are no apartments out of town, no homes I can afford. Not yet, anyway, but soon. I just have to get this book done.

I get stuck thinking about my predicament, how shitty it seems. Just a year ago it felt like I had everything. A family, a home. And now...

At least I still have Laura. At least I was afforded that much. It's more than I deserve, anyway.

My eyes glaze over. The steady rhythm of wind against the truck pulls me out of focus and I get sleepy. Perhaps it's the hangover. No, it's most likely that. I need to get it together, for her, at the least. I need to be able to see her. If her mother knew what I did when she was with me... If she knew how bad it has gotten...

"Daddy, are you okay?"

I jolt, suddenly unaware of what I am doing. The truck is slowly careening left onto the other side of the road, seemingly without control. Tires squeal against the smooth, unyielding ice. I try to move right again, but it's almost as if my limbs disobey. I see Laura grip her seatbelt very tight, eyes fixed ahead. We take a sharp turn around the bend and I use the momentum to my advantage. That is, until a bright light appears at the other side of the curve.

Lights. I know what is about to happen, but I feel powerless to stop it. Time slows down, and it's just me looking at Laura, and her looking right back. In her eyes is a fear I cannot express. And something else.

Screams. Her mouth opens wide and her eyes snap shut, awaiting collision. I think I'm screaming, too, but nothing coherent. Shock wracks my body and I am utterly paralyzed. There is a loud, deafening crunch of metal-on-metal. Blunt force whips us forward, and then back. My torso, my face, everything slams against the wheel. A wave of air meets me thereafter, causing even more pain. Blackness engulfs my vision.

Sirens. It seems like forever until I hear them. Voices are calling out and there is a frantic movement of feet. Hands are grabbing, reaching for me. I can feel them trying to get me out. But I want to stay. I use the last ounce of energy I can muster to open my eyelids, which are swelling

up fast. I look down at my girl, my whole world, but she is gone. In her place is an old scarf, a broken carrot, and a pool of blood.

Then a terrifying silence. My brain shuts down and I let go of everything. I give in to nothingness, wanting to run away from the reality. The men, they finally get me out, but it's not what I want. I want to die.

You promised.

Yes, yes I did. I promised I would always be there. But where you are now, I cannot go. And for that I am sorry.

I tried, honey. I wanted to follow you there. But maybe this is my punishment for failing. A life without you. I can't imagine anything worse.

Logan

Wake up.

Her voice, muffled by lead ears. It's the voice of an angel. I want the Reaper.

Please...

Listen to me: I don't want to live. Do you understand? Deliver me from this righteous atonement. Take me before I can hurt someone else. Take me before I do it myself. Have mercy.

“Dad.”

No. I can't believe it. Shouldn't believe it. She's gone, remember? Remember her screams, that revolting thud, the awful silence? Most of all, the blood...

“Dad, wake up.”

My eyes break open, but I blink because of the blinding fluorescent lights overhead. I was too far under to notice that my room was lit. My breaths come out shallow and quick, like I had woken from a nightmare, but I can't quite remember it. I groan with unease, feeling every single sore muscle in my body being filled with life once again. A haunting echo reverberates in my mind, sounding eerily like...

“Are you okay?”

There. The close, familiar voice makes my head snap in its direction, not ever expecting that it could be anything more than a figment of my deranged imagination. But there she is, wrapped in subtle white, as beautiful and young as the day she left. Her dark hair falls down her chest in ringlets, her cheeks a healthy shade of pink. She appears to be breathing, and altogether unscathed.

My eyes water from looking too long so I close them up tight. The realization hurts.

“I'm hallucinating,” I whisper to no one, setting my head back down in grief.

“What do you mean?” the curious vision asks.

I don't want to look at her again, but I can't help myself. Slowly this time, I glance over at the apparition, careful not to mess up the brace around my swollen neck. “You're not real,” I say with a gruff finality. The words are far more honest than I feel. Hope is a virus.

The girl smiles and gives a careless shrug. “That doesn't matter.”

Something about her nonchalance strikes a nerve. I glare at her, heaving my body up on one bony elbow as best as I can. The painful strain on my muscles only helps to fuel my sudden rage. “Of course it matters,” I grumble, “I killed you, five days ago. You're *dead*. And now my own subconscious is tormenting me with your memory.” My arms suddenly give out and I fall on the bed. Frustrated at my weakness, tears start to trickle down my grizzled cheeks unbidden, and I just let them.

“My baby girl is gone.”

Laura gazes at me with sad eyes, her mouth now a tight frown. I can't tell you how many times I have seen that look. It makes me ache, knowing that my daughter pities her father yet loves him all the same. It's the kind of unconditional love only children can possess. I feel that have abused it.

She sits down at the chair next to my bed noiselessly, never taking her eyes off my ugly, bruised face. “What matters,” she says, “is that *you* are still here. And that I will always be with you.”

The tone of her voice makes me tremble. Something about her is different. No more bubbling excitement, no squeals of laughter, no bouncing in her seat. Just the soft, serene glow of wisdom and maturity beyond her few years. I can't accept that this girl is mine.

“No,” I respond, shaking my head, “No, Laura. I can’t do this. I can’t deal with the weight of you, with the pain. Just leave me, please.” My voice drops to a whimper. The memories, they’re choking me, smothering me from the inside. Making me crazy. How does one save themselves from thought?

The vision stays silent for a moment, pondering my expressions of anguish helplessly. I squint at her, wanting to scream at her for staying and tormenting me, for doing nothing to ease my soul. But before I can make up my mind, she stands and wordlessly makes her way toward the door.

Like the flip of a switch, I am unexpectedly dreadful. “Wait,” I cry, attempting to sit up again. “Wait, don’t go. I didn’t mean it.” Fresh tears start to fall as I reach out for her over the railing of the hospital bed, grasping with weak hands. I can’t lose her again. Better to be delusional than alone.

“You’re not alone,” Laura says, turning around to face me. The fire that I had missed, the spark that I had lost, found its way to her eyes once again. She gives me a sad yet determined smile and motions toward the open window, which is lit with the burgeoning grace of sunrise. “Go to her, Dad. She may not have needed you then, but she needs you now. And I think you need her, too.”

With that, my daughter leaves me for the second time.

Marie

I was at the hospital when it happened. I was there in the aftermath. And now, even after five months, I find it hard to go back.

She was everything, the last shred of family I had left. And he took her from me. I can't forgive, and I can't forget. I can only wallow here, alone in an empty apartment full of memories. Everything she touched I had to lock away in her room, and I haven't been in there since. It is a vacuum. It is a tomb.

The day it happened I was on duty. There were plenty of broken bones in the ER, some hypothermia cases, a woman with too much mucus in her lungs. It was typical; a Saturday morning in the middle of winter. I was just about to get off my ten-to-ten shift when an ambulance unloaded and bustled in a very broken man. His blonde hair was matted atop his head with blood, his features almost indistinguishable from swelling. He was raced into trauma without hesitation. I didn't think anything of it.

I was at the nurse's station, tying up loose ends, eager to go home to bed. My eyes ached from staring at computer screens, and my bones creaked from endless movement. Laura and I were supposed to build a snowman later that day, the first of the season. A tradition since she was too young to remember. The thought of seeing her again after the long weekend was the only thing keeping me from collapsing. I hated leaving her with her father, that drunken son-of-a-bitch, but it was what she had wanted. And Laura always got what she wanted.

Martha, my colleague, must have been doing the paperwork with the police. I wasn't paying any attention until I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. I turned to face a very teary-eyed Martha, who didn't normally show such emotion, as solid as she is. Alarmed, I stood, only to

notice the two officers near the counter. Their faces were grave. Stone. And they were looking right at me.

“Ma’am, there’s been an accident.”

I shook my head and almost laughed if it hadn’t been for their expressions. Of course there had been an accident. Accidents happened all the time around here.

The younger of the two came forward, hat in hand. He beckoned me closer to them, away from Martha, who kept looking at me like I was about to break apart. The man looked eerily like my husband, with his sad green eyes and pursed lips. I don’t know why that image popped up in my mind, but it made me remember the man who had been brought in only moments before. A blonde head. Blood everywhere.

Something clicked, and I knew.

“No,” I said, desperation now creeping to the edges of my voice, “No, you must be mistaken.”

The tired officer gazed at me with melancholy. “Your daughter... I’m sorry, ma’am, but she’s gone. There was nothing we could do. She and your husband were in a fatal car accident. Must’ve slid on the ice.” He swallowed hard, probably wondering how much he should say. “They hit a semi head-on.”

I don’t remember breathing. I don’t remember crying, or falling to the floor. But I do remember what he said next. Vividly.

“Your husband, he’s okay, though. He’s here, being treated. I think he’ll be alright,” the younger man had reassured me, grasping the edge of the counter like it would somehow comfort me to be closer, to be doing something with his hands. He thought he was giving me a gift. But

the pain truly grasped me in that moment, when I realized what he was saying. My daughter was dead. But my husband lived in her place.

He got to live.

Something about that thought nestled deep within my mind and festered. I grieved for my child for days, for nights. I attended her funeral alone, amidst people who barely knew her, never able to see her whole again. I suffered by myself. But despite all of that, I felt like a fire had been lit. That thought burned me up to ashes. I wanted penance for what I had lost, retribution. I desperately sought a way to make myself feel better, to take back what I had lost.

I considered seeing Logan a week after it happened, when he was to be released from the hospital. I considered doing a lot of things, violent and ruthless things. But imagining myself face-to-face with him only made my stomach roll and my eyes burn. Even his pain did nothing to staunch my own. I wanted him dead, but knew I couldn't ever do the deed myself. So I resorted to silence, and never saw him again.

I know there is no atonement to be had now, nothing to be done. She's gone, and the only grace I will ever have is knowing that he will live the rest of his days in his own personal hell, buried with guilt. I hope it chokes him.

I can't live this way anymore, living in constant anger and sadness. Laura's memory still haunts me in the halls and cries out when I sleep. I wake every day with her visage on my eyelids, punishing me. But why? Why should I have to deal with the pain, too? It's not my fault. It's not.

But she doesn't care. My girl knows how to get in my head and make me hurt. She beckons to me, and urges me.

Come with me, mommy.

Baby, I can't.

But I miss you.

God, I miss you, too. You know I love you, right?

That's why you must leave.

That's why I *should* leave. What does this world have for me anymore? Nothing but pain. A little more pain and I'll be rid of it forever. I can have her back. I can be freed.

I walk into the house distracted, throwing my purse down on the floor and rushing upstairs. Though I am exhausted from work, my mind feels wired and restless. In the bathroom, I draw a bath, careful to get it at just the right temperature. I strip out of my loose scrubs and shiver, taking a final glance at the mirror. The woman staring back appears demented, with bones jutting out of her skin like they are vying to escape. Her eyes are smudged with weariness and defeat. She is ready.

Slowly, I lower my pallid limbs into the tub, a breath leaking from my lips. The lights are off, so I can only see by the dim light of the morning sun reaching across the room from the window. It is so peaceful; more peace than I've felt in a long time. But I know I can't wait much longer, or else I'll lose my nerve. I grasp my manual razor and attempt to break off one of the blades, my fingers getting sliced in the process. Doesn't matter. Once I have it, I rinse it off quickly in the water, out of habit. I laugh a little to myself, mostly out of nervousness. The thin, silver edge is duller than I would have liked, but it'll do.

I knew there would be pain, but not this much. I bring the razor across the pale flesh of my forearm over and over in a crisscrossing fashion, mesmerized by the patterns of blood already appearing. It hurts, it hurts so badly, but I can't stop. I cry out and I whimper, but there's nothing else I can do.

I'm coming sweetheart.

My hands, shaking, drop the razor on the side of the tub where it sits dirty and red. My head is swimming as I gaze into the pool of water, now tinged with blood. It dances and pirouettes as it flows from my veins. So beautiful. I reach up and take the bottle of Vicodin I had swiped from the medicine cabinet months before, shaking out a few pills into my clammy palm. They are so white and clean in contrast to the darkening water. I shove them down my throat and sit back, eyes closed. Pain no more.

Time stands still as I lay there, tranquil and quiet, slowly easing myself into death. I don't really know what to expect. A bright light? A dark tunnel? Where do mothers go when their only sin is wanting to join their children? I'm afraid of the answer. But my doubts suddenly dissipate as I see her standing in front of me, eyes round as marbles, hair dark and sweeping. Her head is surrounded by an unnatural golden light. Laura looks at me and gently smiles, giving me comfort at last. I laugh again, so giddy, and reach out to touch my angel. But before our hands can meet, there is a very loud thump on the door, followed by frantic yelling. It sounds muffled in my ears. Laura turns around in fright, and then vanishes in a puff of air. Tears well in my eyes, but I can't control them. My whole body feels paralyzed.

I look up at the white ceiling in despair, feeling the darkness overtake my muscles, my throat, my ears, and finally, my eyes.

My last memory is of complete stillness, followed by a very loud bang.