

**Welcome to Fallen Crest:
An Interconnected Collection of Short Stories on
Children of Divorce**

By

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Abstract

Welcome to Fallen Crest is an interconnected collection of short stories that follows three children, siblings Charlotte “Charly” and twins Robert and Louis “Louie” Stephens over the course of eight years as they grow up with divorced parents, Amanda and Edward “Ed.” Each child reacts differently to each situation they come across, whether it be new relationships for their parents (Ed gets back together with his college girlfriend Tasha), or the complications of growing up (Robert and Louie growing apart as they get older despite the fact that they were extremely close as kids). The goal of this collection is to provide more literature for young adults experiencing divorce situations and to let them know that they are not alone in their experiences with divorced parents. There is always comfort in knowing that someone is not alone, even if they feel so, like many children can feel after a divorce. This collection is also for parents to try and understand what their child might be thinking while going through these experiences as they themselves go through their own difficulties of raising children on their own.

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Dedicated to my mother Julie and brother Spencer, who experienced these events first hand and never backed down from a challenge

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Statement of Purpose

In this project, I composed a collection of short stories centered around the conflicts that children of divorce can experience. The main character, Charly, spends eight years growing up as the eldest of three with divorced parents, taking on the roles of both child and parent for her younger twin brothers Robert and Louie. One of these short stories had originally been written for the English Capstone project with the help of Dr. Robisch and Professor McKelvey, but has been heavily edited over the course of this project. The other four stories were written specifically for this project. While this collection means a lot to me, in part for being a larger collection of stories and because I am a child of divorce, it posed the challenge of separating myself and my own experiences from Charly's. I wanted readers experience first hand what children of divorce can experience in reality. Through Charly and her twin brothers, I have been able to create unique characters who portray real children growing up in various divorce situations.

I have read authors who have written series of interconnected short stories to help develop my skills at connecting stories together while also having each story stand on its own instead of being read all at once like a novel. Some examples of authors I read were Sherwood Anderson, Julie Autumn List, Claire Vaye Watkins, and Flannery O'Connor. I also read Janet Burroway to learn and understand more about the craft of creative writing.

Introduction

Writing has always been a part of who I am as a person. I have constantly found myself reading books and writing stories that surprised even me. My writing seemed different from many published authors because it is brutal and honest about divorce situations and how it can be both good and bad for the children and the parents.

Expanded families are almost never written about, and even if they are, they are only mentioned as a problem point for the main character to push on with their own story, whether it be getting the boy of their dreams to take them to prom or falling into another world where the main character has to save the countryside from tyranny, instead of being a fully developed character the protagonist can interact with. I wanted this collection to contribute to the small and almost nonexistent section of literature about divorce families and to have an impact on the people who read the collection to understand more about these situations and what goes on for both parties involved as well as those who are thrown into the mix years later, such as step-family and half-siblings.

Procedure

While writing this collection of short stories, I kept in mind a few topics I wanted to focus on and develop over the course of this project.. One of these topics was the overall creative writing experience of this project. These were fictional stories and I wanted to remove myself as the main character going through these events myself and become the narrator. I also wanted to write in a different genre then I was comfortable in to expand my knowledge of how to write and what differences there were between genres. Another topic I kept in mind was the craft that goes into writing stories to help develop varied sentences and story structures to keep readers engaged from the beginning to the end of each story and the collection as a whole. The final topic was the focus on the children of divorce and having the characters become real and accurate representations of what other children experience. The children had stories to tell and I told them as best I could without my personal bias getting in the way.

The first challenge I faced with this project was whether to write these characters into a novel or a collection of short stories as each posed their own unique difficulties. Professor McKelvey, my advisor, and I decided on a short story collection for various reasons. One aspect of short stories that I have struggled with my whole writing career is creating a definite ending without extra information added or unnecessary details remaining in the stories themselves that could question a potential ending. Each story needs to have a definitive beginning, middle, and end with each word chosen carefully to make the most impact. Janet Burroway states, “[Short stories] can deal with only one or a very few consciousnesses...It can afford no digression that does not directly affect the

action” (52). I needed to learn how to end each story and use words wisely, thus choosing a collection of interconnected short stories instead of writing a novel, which would allow for me to expand beyond the story itself and leave in those unnecessary details that would take away from the story instead of helping it.

Another reason for choosing short stories over an entire novel is because multiple viewpoints and perspectives can be used to show how other characters feel in a particular situation or how the characters look from a removed point of view, instead of an upclose bias the character has about themselves. With a novel, it follows one character over time and can change how characters look or come across from a limited viewpoint that might not give the whole picture like an interconnected collection of short stories with different perspectives can accomplish. This limits the author to a single, consistent perspective while short stories can break up the singularity and allow the author to write the same story from many different angles to provide the readers with a more complete picture of the situation.

Writing is an activity that many people find themselves doing, either on the side as a hobby if it isn't a full time job. However, there are several thoughts and ideas that go into writing beyond putting down words on a page and hoping they make something worth reading. Natalie Goldberg writes in her craft book *Writing Down the Bones*:

This is the practice school of writing. Like running, the more you do it, the better you get at it. Some days you don't want to run and you resist every step of the three miles, but you don't wait around for inspiration and deep desire to run...That's how writing is too. Once you're deep into it, you wonder what took

you so long to finally settle down at the desk. Through practice, you actually do get better. You learn to trust yourself more and not give in to your voice that wants to avoid writing (11).

Though I had trouble being motivated for this project some days, because the subject was a rough one for me to get through, I wrote every day without sudden inspiration for a character or situation. Goldberg's model sets an important structure that helped me considerably in developing my writing as well as sticking to guidelines and getting things done on a regular pace that I have never been able to do at a consistent rate. I wrote and edited the five stories in the collection in three months, and with a short timeframe, using this model kept me on track to meet the deadline with a completed project instead of pieces of a single story had I waited for inspiration to help write these stories.

Connecting stories became increasingly difficult the further I got into the writing process. One thing I kept in mind was that each story had its own story plot along with the whole collection's story arch. Susan Mann stated that the protagonist will start at a child's level of understand of the particular situation before developing into a kind of adult by the end of each story (9). Since I began to write in high school as well as in college at the University of Indianapolis, I have always been taught that the protagonist should go through a change over the course of the story not only to show character development but also to show growth. Characters must be challenged in various ways, not only in a single short story with a distinct beginning, middle, and end, but also over

the course of the whole collection to see how the characters change from the very beginning to the last moment before the collection ends.

Not only is connecting these stories together important, but the characters must be precise. It is said that authors should know their characters better than their best friends by getting into the characters' minds and understanding what their motives, inspirations, and demands are. Stephen King mentioned this in his memoir, *On Writing*:

I never got to like Carrie White and I never trusted Sue Snell's motives for sending her boyfriend to prom with her, but I did have something there...The most important [part of understanding Carrie] is that the writer's original perception of the character...may be as erroneous as the reader's. Running a close second was the realization that stopping a piece of work just because it's hard, either emotionally or imaginatively, is a bad idea. Sometimes you have to go on when you don't feel like it, and sometimes you're doing good work when it feels like all you're managing is to shovel shit from a sitting position (77).

Characterization was difficult for me because each character had a real life counterpart that they were based on. While creating these characters, certain aspects of those real people came out, helping me to understand how the characters worked together and acted when they were alone or had company. I used the idea Stephen King mentioned above and based characters on my family and extended family, to create the best environment for this particular collection of short stories and give them a authenticity to the situation as well as the emotions that the characters display throughout the stories.

Even though basing a character on myself or others can be a great starting point, it can draw on a more memoir-esque style of writing I wanted to stay away from. I already wrote a creative nonfiction essay in this style that inspired this project and I needed something new to write to expand my writing abilities and interests. This became my biggest concern while writing. I returned to Janet Burroway, who commented on this particular dilemma in her book *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*:

If the character is based on you or someone you know, drastically alter the model in some external way: Change blond to dark or thin to thick; imagine the character as the opposite gender or radically alter the setting in which the character must act. Part of the trouble with writing directly from experience is that you know too much about it—what “they” did, how you felt (143).

Though this is a practice I don’t use in my writing, I used my own knowledge about divorce situations with my characters to make it more realistic instead of sounding like a collection of stories that tried to be accurate but lacked a certain understanding of divorce situations and how they can affect people. This seemed to be the biggest problem I found when reading novels with divorce mentioned as a situation for the main characters. There needed to be meaning behind the stories and changing the characters from their real life counterparts to fictional fleshed out characters would create a fictional story over a memoir.

The biggest concept I kept in mind for this collection of stories was the theme. “Theme...is not imposed on the story but evoked from within it—initially from intuitive by finally an intellectual act on the part of the writer” (Burroway 26). This is from an

excerpt from John Gardner in his book *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers* republished in Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*.

This is a key elements that writers keep in mind about writing overall, and particularly in my own collection. Since divorce was a heavy subject that was also the main focus of the stories, actions and reactions from characters needed to make logical sense over a long period of time; eight years. Because of this, the collection is “coming of age” stories, adding depth to the theme and the characteristics of the stories individually as well as a whole. This pulls in the sociology and psychology books I read about children of divorce to see how they react at different ages and have my characters do something similar to add to the credibility of the characters and the situations I created. It was important to see what traits most children of divorce had in common at different ages to make the characters relatable in their actions and emotions.

Analysis and Conclusion

For this project, the main goal was to create a collection of stories that show that children are not alone in their strange and sometimes scary experiences when it comes to divorce. Everyone goes through a different event, but this collection shows how dramatic things can be and any situation that the main character Charly and her brothers go through they can overcome. It may sound optimistic, but it is better to be optimistic than pessimistic. If children focus on the depressing events they experience, a small hope they may have, such as making a new friend or waking up in the morning, will not be acknowledged. It is these little events that help to make a day better and this collection shows that in the best way possible.

Since Young Adult literature is a large section in the publishing industry based on bookstore and library sections, it seems to be a lack of insight from the publishing industry to not include more stories for children about divorce. The absence of a strong body of literature about children of divorce indicates a lack of attention to the needs of such children. Having gone through my own experiences, having to help myself and being alone made life more difficult without literature to help me know that I was not experiencing divorce on my own. Because of this learned skill of needing to be able to do things by myself, it became difficult for me to accept help from others. But young adults do not have to go through these experiences alone anymore. There are others who know what it feels like to be alone and they should not have to feel that way. These stories fill the lack of divorce literature in the young adult genre.

Even though there are five stories in this particular collection, many characters were left out in favor of focusing on the characters established in the collection. For the continuation of the story of Charly and her twin brothers, more stories will be written to fill in the various holes in the timeline that were skipped over in order to focus on the most important stories in the collection.

Reflection

This collection of stories was difficult to write and edit. Since the stories were about children of divorce, I wanted to understand the emotion that the characters would have at each stage of their lives, I needed to remember my own experiences and that brought up some memories and emotions I had not experienced for a while. Because of this, it became harder every day to write these stories, even harder to edit them and add in scenes. Then it posed the question of how I had handled my own parents' divorce. My coping mechanism had been to ignore what the situation had been at the time, throw a fit, and walk away. I could not do that with this project.

I actively sought out help through the Counseling Center and became confident with my past experiences and how they have affected me and still affect me today. Because of this project and my experiences with the Counseling Center, I came to terms with my situation. I became motivated to make this collection. I had to go through my experiences alone, but I did not need to anymore and neither did the children I wrote for. Almost half of all marriages end in divorce in the United States, my therapist told me. So one out of two children have gone through something similar. It may be difficult to understand how someone can feel alone when divorce is a common occurrence in the twenty-first century, but feeling alone is a common way children express themselves after a divorce. With this collection, I hope to show children that they are not by themselves and that there are other children experiencing the same situations and can find comfort in that knowledge.

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Appendix A: Product Produced

Welcome to Fallen Crest

Feet thundered down the hallway and Charly's door slammed open.

"Merry Christmas!" the twins shouted, jumping on her bed and shaking her awake.

"Santa came, Charly!" Robert said as Louie giggled before they both shot out of the room, through the kitchen and to the living room. Charly rubbed her eyes and sat up, looking around her still new room. It was still strange to wake up to purple walls instead of sparkling pink. Charly crawled out from under the covers, made her bed, put on her crooked glasses (which could never stay fixed with two very excited seven-year-old twins) and grabbed a package wrapped in scraps of wrapping paper and newspaper comics before heading out to the living room to join the twins. Mom sat on the couch, Robert and Louie bouncing around like they had to pee.

"Charly," Mom said. "Would you like to do the honors of playing Santa this morning?"

"Well, don't we usually watch a movie and eat breakfast first?" Charly asked.

"Usually, but we don't have a DVD player since we moved."

"Well," Charly held the package in front of her, "Santa presents her first gift."

Charly handed the package to Mom. Mom gave her a quizzical look before gently peeling the wrapping off.

“Rip it!” Louie shouted, laughing when Mom tore at the paper and threw it on him. Once the commotion of the paper fight calmed down, a small DVD player sat in Mom’s lap. She smiled down at the small piece of hardware and held it gently in her hands.

“Charly, you didn’t have to do that, honey.”

“Santa decided that you needed a gift as well. So now we can watch our movies again.” Charly beamed and Mom pulled her close.

“Thank you,” she whispered in Charly’s ear.

“Merry Christmas,” Charly whispered back, before joining the boys on the ground.

“Well, since we’ve got our new DVD player, let’s boot it up and pick out a movie for this morning.” Mom stood and connected the player to the TV while the kids fought over which movie to watch. Charly wanted *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, the live action one because it always made her laugh. Robert had always been a fan of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and Louie was content to continue watching the fire crackle on the TV from the local news station if it meant they got to open presents earlier. Mom said that wouldn’t work because it was Christmas Movie Morning, then she threw out the option of *Little Women* (“What does that have to do with Christmas?” Louie asked, crossing his arms tightly across his chest). The family finally decided on *A Christmas Story*, shouting “You’ll shoot your eye out!” at each other while the movie loaded.

Just before Mom was going to push play, the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Charly said, standing up and heading towards the door, but the twins barreled past their older sister of three years and flung open the door, Louie shouting, “Dad!” before running out the front door, Robert close behind.

Dad stood outside the door with a few packages at his feet as he picked up Louie. “Hey there kiddo,” he said. “Having a good Christmas morning?”

“Oh yeah. We’re about to watch *A Christmas Story*. Come and watch it with us,” Louie said.

“Oh alright. Guess you roped me into it,” Dad said jokingly, setting Louie down and grabbing the packages at his feet. Mom didn’t look too thrilled to have Dad in the house, but she smiled and opened the door wider.

“Merry Christmas,” Mom said, receiving a nod from Dad as he knocked snow off his shoes and walked to the living room.

The twins sat with Dad on the couch and Mom and Charly pulled in chairs from the kitchen, letting the movie start. Charly looked between Mom and Dad. The last time they had been in this house at the same time hadn’t been a good day. The kids had returned from their fall break with Dad’s sister, Aunt Faye, in Kentucky, but they had pulled up to this new house instead of the one that they lived in. The trip seemed to be one of the last happy moments that the three of them had.

Mom stood outside a new house with a big smile on her face, while Dad stood further away, arms crossed, and smiling slightly at the car. Aunt Faye parked the car and helped the boys out of their car seats while Charly pulled the bags from the trunk.

“Hey there, kiddo,” Dad said, giving Louie and Robert hugs and waved at Charly as she struggled with the three bags. Mom came over to help her. “How was break?” Dad asked the twins.

“It was awesome! We got to go on a bunch of roller coasters. Louie got sick!” Robert said.

“Did not! I just didn’t feel good,” Louie said, giving Robert a small shove.

The twins chatted Dad’s ear off about all the different places they had gone while Mom and Charly walked inside the unknown house and placed the bags on the floor.

“Mom?” Charly asked. Mom wouldn’t meet her eyes. “Where are we?”

“We’re home,” Mom mumbled too softly that Charly had to ask her a second time. Mom was trying to keep her tears in, but Charly saw them and knew something was about to happen. Robert and Louie ran around the house to the sounds of laughter, ignorant and blissful. Dad and Aunt Faye stood off to the side in the living room, talking in whispered voices. Charly tried her best to ignore them and focus on the boys, but it was hard when she knew that this was not the family’s house, but Mom’s.

“Kids! Come say goodbye to your aunt. She’s heading back home,” Dad said.

“Bye, Aunt Faye!” the twins said in unison, each giving her a quick hug before running around the house a second time, flying up the stairs this time to explore the upper level.

“Thank you,” Charly said, giving her aunt a hug that seemed to last a little longer than it should have. Aunt Faye bent down and looked Charly in the eyes.

“You’re my favorite niece, and I can’t believe that you put up with your annoying brothers so well.” Aunt Faye got Charly to laugh and stood up. “Just remember, you can always come visit me any time you would like.”

“Thank you,” Charly said again and watched Aunt Faye walk out the front door, Dad closing it behind her. He then guided Charly into the living before going around to various rooms in the house to catch the boys and have them sit on the floor in the living room with Charly.

“Mom?” Robert asked once everyone had sat down. “Where are we?”

“Well, bud, you’re in a new home,” Dad started to explain before folding his hands together and staring at his feet.

“Mom and Dad are going to be living in different houses from now on,” Mom continued when Dad didn’t.

“Why?” Louie asked. “Why can’t we just stay in one house? I like it there.”

“Mom and Dad are getting a divorce,” Dad said, still not looking at anyone, but finally speaking again and breaking the silence that had fallen on them. This made Charly close her eyes and do her best to not cry too much in front of her brothers.

“What does that mean?” Robert asked tentatively, looking over at Charly, his protector, only to see her upset and crying. He crawled over to her and snuggled into her lap, having always been extremely close with her. When Robert would cry as a baby, Charly would pull him into her lap and calm him down. Now Charly was upset and it seemed to her that this was Robert’s attempt to calm her down like she always did for him. When Robert was nestled in her lap, Charly’s tears came more steadily into the back

of Robert's shirt, grateful for some comfort and normalcy, but she still refused to talk, even with Robert silently nagging her to speak anything.

"Mom, why is Charly crying?" Louis asked, confused by his sister's reaction to the news.

"Well, when Mom and Dad get a divorce," Mom explained, "It means that they are no longer going to live together because they no longer love each other. That doesn't mean that we don't love you, but Mom and Dad don't want to live with each other anymore."

"Is it something we did because we can change? Then we can stay together," Louie said as Robert nodded vigorously.

"Louie and I can clean our room willingly and we won't fight as much as we normally do, all three of us."

This made Mom cry through her smile. "Sweetheart, it has nothing to do with you three. This is between Mom and Dad."

"Will we live here?" Louie asked, looking around the small barren house their aunt had dropped them off at only a few minutes earlier.

"Yes," Mom said hesitantly, looking over at Dad, who had stopped talking again. "This is my house now. You'll be living here with me most of the time."

"Will we ever see Dad?" Louie tapped his father's knee as Robert leaned into Charly more as he tears stopped but the shakes of anger began.

“Of course, honey. You will see both of us all the time. We will be moving some of your things into this house and some of your things will stay at Dad’s. The next goal to decide is what goes where and we will leave it up to you three to decide. Sound good?”

Charly shook while she held onto Robert. Why were her parents doing this to her, to the twins? She knew people at school whose parents were divorced, but they were usually kids who were a bit on the weirder side, or those who bullied other kids. Charly was a normal kid, and she liked it that way. Mom and Dad now made things not normal and that wasn’t how things were supposed to be. What was going to happen to her now? What was she supposed to do to be normal? Everyone at school would probably make fun of her and she wouldn’t have anyone to turn to except the teachers, and even then, she didn’t want to be known as the teacher’s pet. That is how kids alienate themselves from their friends. She needed a friend who understood what was going on, but she didn’t know anyone who was going through this, making her the weirdo and no one would understand or would know anything. Her parents were ruining her life and she was only ten years old. How was she supposed to handle the rest of her life?

“Come on, let’s go.” Dad stood up and walked to the front door. Before the rest of them could gather their thoughts or even begin to move towards the front door, Dad sat in his car and drove off to their old house. Mom sighed, helped the kids into their car seats in her car, and drove back to the house that used to belong to the entire family. That night, while everyone else slept, Charly stayed up late writing letters to her teachers, whom she loved at Fall Creek Intermediate, about the situation that was going on with her family and how things were changing for the worse for her. She had actually gotten a

few responses from her teachers, especially Miss Martin, who taught English, and Mrs. Kaiser, who taught math, who wanted to help her out with school as well as being friends with her, since she didn't have any.

Charly smiled, remembering where she had put the letters from her teachers as Ralphie almost shot his eye out with his Red Ryder BB gun on Christmas morning, ruining his glasses. The twins laughed, but no one had really spoken throughout the movie, just mocked the tagline and laugh at everything Ralphie and Randy got themselves into. The movie ended shortly after and Dad bypassed breakfast to hand the twins their gifts and tossing Charly hers, even though Mom was already cooking in the kitchen.

"Santa decided to stop by my house as well, so these are from Santa," he said.

"I thought Charly was playing Santa," Robert said, but no one paid attention to him. Louie tore open his box.

"Thanks Dad!" Louie said, holding a brand new portable CD player in his lap while Charly and Robert ripped theirs open. All three of them got the same thing.

"Thanks Dad," Robert said. Louie gave Dad a hug.

"Don't thank me, Santa knows what you like," Dad said, hugging the twins back.

"Now you can take music anywhere with you."

"Yay!" the twins cried in unison, eying the presents under the Christmas tree.

"But we don't have any CDs," Charly said. Dad didn't seem to hear.

Mom came back into the living room and tossed Charly the Santa hat.

“Charly, would you play Santa this morning?” she asked. Charly beamed, tossed the CD player to the side, and crawled towards the tree, followed closely by the twins. Charly moved slowly, just to make the twins upset.

“Hurry up Charly, or I will steal your hat,” Louie said, making a grab for the hat, but Robert tackled him.

“Don’t take the hat. If you do, she won’t give us anything else from Santa and it will have to be wrapped under the tree until next Christmas. Don’t do it,” Robert said, his brows furrowed in concern.

“I was only joking.” Louie pushed Robert off of him and they both sat against the couch; Mom had turned on the fireplace from the local news station again. Charly handed out a small number of presents to the twins and herself. The sound of ripping paper filled the room.

“Wow! Charly, look” Robert said, bouncing off the couch and sitting next to Charly, who was in the process of opening a large box that sat between her legs. “I got Pokémon Sapphire and Louie got Ruby. We got the newest Pokémon game!”

Charly noticed a used sticker on the back of the cartridge, but smiled at Robert’s excitement. “That’s super cool.”

“Robert!” Louie shouted from the couch. Charly and Robert looked over to see Louie holding up a cord with a huge grin on his face.

“A connector cable!” Robert shouted, running back to Louie and they both held the cord carefully. “We can trade and battle now!”

Both boys stared at each other in shock, mouths gaping open before hugging Mom.

“Thank you,” they chimed in unison.

“Why are you thanking me? They came from Santa,” Mom said as she hugged the twins back.

“You talk to him, so you can tell him thank you for us,” Louie said.

“For both these and the CD players,” Robert added.

“Of course I will. Now let’s see what Charly got from Santa.”

“What did you get Charly?” Louie asked as Robert came and sat next to her.

“I don’t know yet, I haven’t opened it yet,” Charly said.

“Can I help?” Robert asked, reaching out for the red and white wrapped package still between Charly’s legs. Mom cleared her throat and Robert froze, Louie giggling as he returned to the couch to sit with Dad.

“Did Charly say you could help?” Mom asked Robert.

“No,” Robert mumbled and bowed his head.

“Okay. This is Charly’s present from Santa, so she should be allowed to open it.”

“Yes, Mom.” Robert sulked over to corner by the TV where the pile of blankets sat folded where he flopped face first into it, hiding his hiccups of embarrassment. Charly rolled her eyes at her brother’s dramatic overreaction and ripped off the wrapping paper to throw it at him.

“Get up Silly Butt and quit pouting. It’s Christmas,” she said.

Robert smiled and threw the paper back, coming to sit by Charly's side again.

Underneath the wrapping paper was a large shipping box.

"What do you think is inside?" Louie asked from the couch.

"I don't know, but Santa is full of surprises," Mom said with a smile on her face.

Once Charly got through the tape, she found five books inside, grabbing the smallest one to find a boy flying across the cover on a broomstick. Residue of a sale sticker still stuck in the upper right-hand corner.

"It's a really popular series out right now and Santa thought that you would enjoy it to pass the time."

Charly didn't say anything, but got up and hugged Mom.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Your welcome sweetie," Mom said. Charly had given up on Santa a few years ago. Mom and Dad didn't know, but Charly had found her Christmas gift from Santa tucked under the back seat of the truck and knew that this jolly old man was just a fantasy, even though she wanted to believe in him whole-heartedly – minus the whole watching her year round part. That was just plain creepy. She kept up the belief for the twins. She loved seeing the smiles on her brother's faces, especially after the rough year they had all had, when all of them were scared of the world. Besides, Mom was the best when it came to presents and surprises. Even when they had just moved into this house, Mom pulled out all the stops.

“Welcome home!” Mom said, opening the door to their new house. Sure, Charly and the twins had been moving things from Dad’s to here for the past two months, but everything had been painted, unpacked, and put away.

“Wow!” Robert said as Louie’s mouth fell open. The house had a lime green front room that led to a burgundy red dining room, the same as in Dad’s house now, before he decided to paint it white again, wiping away Mom’s design from the house. To Charly, the house felt cozier than it did at the Dad’s house, even when they were all a family in the same house. Just the four of them felt better. She smiled and hugged Mom.

“Charly?” Mom asked, wrapping her arms around her eldest child, who had taken the divorce hard. “Are you okay?”

“I’m happy,” Charly mumbled into her mother’s shoulder, squeezing Mom tighter.

“I’m happy that you’re happy.” Mom let go of Charly and wiped a stray tear away. They both giggled before Mom pulled the boys back over.

“Now, I know that Christmas isn’t until next week, but I’ve been talking with Santa and we both decided that you three have been extra good this year and each of you have a small gift.”

“Really?” Robert asked, his eyes glowing as his voice reached a dolphin level of hearing.

“Really,” Mom said. “But I told him no.”

“No! Mom why?” Louie interrupted and then burst into tears as Robert threw himself as Mom’s feet, repeating what Louie had said. Charly and Mom laughed, trying to calm screaming twin boys.

“You didn’t let me finish,” Mom protested, wiping tears from Louie’s face. Robert had abandoned Mom and now cowered behind Charly, his protector.

“As I was saying, Santa wanted me to just give you gifts because you are so good. But I know all three of you are super smart, so I told Santa, ‘No. I’m going to hide them around the house and have my super-duper smart kids find their gifts around the new house.’ Of course Santa agreed, saying he had never seen smarter kids.”

“So we still get a present early?” Robert asked, peeking out from behind Charly, still clinging to her arm.

“Yes, of course,” Mom laughed. “Santa wouldn’t tell me that and then I wouldn’t let you go find your gifts around the house. Plus, you get to explore the house and find your rooms.”

The twins glanced at each other, then up at Charly, who looked back at them, before the three of them took off running through the house.

“No fighting!” Mom shouted as door slammings shuddered the house.

Robert and Louie shouted at each other as they shut doors in the other’s face. Charly did her best to stay out of the way, but Louie slammed a door in her face, laughing deviously. Three seconds later, the door opened and Louie came barreling out and down the hall.

“Eww, it’s Charly’s room. It’s all purple,” he said before he slammed the bathroom door shut, shouting that he had to pee.

“Louie!” Robert opened the closet door he had been hiding behind, holding his nose. “You don’t have to tell everyone.”

The bathroom door opened and Louie grinned. “All done.”

“Hands, Mister,” Charly said, snapping her fingers at him to get his attention.

“I did,” Louie said.

“Do I need to smell them or should I just tell Mom?” Charly laughed when Louie hid his hands behind his back.

“No.”

“Go wash your hands then.”

Robert laughed as Louie stomped back into the bathroom.

“Get out of the closet, Robert. Your present isn’t in there.” Charly saw a blur dash out of the closet from the corner of her eye as she entered the room Louie had shouted was hers. Lavender walls and a silky purple bedcover greeted her inside the door. Clearly her room. It seemed to be the same size as the one at Dad’s, but this one was on the first floor and had no windows. A mini Christmas tree twinkled on her long dresser that had a plate of homemade oatmeal raisin cookies on it, her favorite cookie that Mom made especially for her. Charly grabbed a cookie before exploring the room further.

Under the bed was a storage bin of her summer clothes next to a small new suitcase, most likely for travelling between the houses, Charly decided – she hadn’t left any clothes at Dad’s because she didn’t have that many to start with. Next to the longest

wall by her bed stood the desk with its own lamp and a five-shelf bookshelf, sparsely filled with books. She hadn't been a big reader, but it did keep her preoccupied for a while. The closet had coats, jackets, and dresses hung inside; other boxes held shoes, toys, and other random things Charly liked to collect. Everything was put away and organized, just the way she liked it.

"Charly?" Mom asked, opening the door slightly to peek her head in. "How do you like your room?"

"I love it. Thank you." Charly said, smiling at Mom.

"Charly!" Robert squeezed past Mom, holding something in his hand, with Louie shortly behind him with a small blue bowl in his hands. "Look, Charly. I got homemade Rice Krispy treats. Louie got Jell-O filled with whipped cream, just like Gramma makes."

Louie shoveled a spoonful of Jell-O into his mouth, smacking his lips loudly as he pulled the spoon out and put it back into the bowl. All four of them laughed as a normal family.

Now here they sat, separated again by the presence of a new person, Dad.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Dad pulled out an envelope from his shirt pocket. "Aunt Faye sent me pictures of your trip down there for fall break." Dad handed the envelope to Charly, opening it to see the front picture of her and the twins standing in front of the newly built white entrance pathway of Churchill Downs. All of them wore jackets because of the intense wind that day.

“Charly, Robert, Louie. Are you guys packed and ready to go? Aunt Faye is here,” Mom called from down stairs. Charly was packing a few more things into her bag that she most likely wouldn’t need but it wasn’t bad to be over prepared when she heard Robert and Louie bound down the stairs, their energy filling the whole house with laughter.

“Charly?”

“Coming, Mom!” Charly shouted, heaving her bag onto her shoulder and shutting the bedroom door behind her. “Look out below!” Charly said as she tossed her bag down the stairs, bowling for twins. Robert jumped out of the way, but Louie got knocked down at Mom’s feet.

“Score!” Charly skipped down the stairs and landed solidly in front of Mom.

“Charlotte,” Mom said, placing her hands on her hips. “What have I told you about bowling for the twins?” She bent down and helped Louie to his feet.

“I know I’m not supposed to, but it’s fun.”

“No it’s not.” Louie threw his bag at Charly, who side stepped and watched it hit Robert in the chest.

“Ow. Come on!” Robert almost launched himself at Louie but Mom stepped in and tossed the bags out onto the front porch.

“That’s enough. Aunt Faye is in her car, ready to go. She is super excited for all of you to come visit her over fall break. I want you to behave though. Don’t come back werewolves or anything.”

“Promise!” Louie and Robert said and headed outside where Dad was transferring car seats into the back of his sister’s car.

“Charly?” Mom asked her when Charly didn’t say anything. “Promise?”

“No guarantees, but I will try my best.”

“That’s my girl.” Mom started outside, but Charly still stood in the doorway, looking at the twins and remembering that her parents’ mail had been coming for them separately instead of together like it usually did.

“Is something going on between you and Dad?” she asked. A pressure was released from her chest because she had wanted to ask Mom that for a while.

“Sweetheart, don’t worry about Dad and me. We are big kids and can handle ourselves, okay?” Mom said.

Charly nodded her head and smiled, heading outside to hop in Aunt Faye’s car. She knew something was wrong, but she didn’t want to upset Mom with all of her questions.

Mom helped Aunt Faye load up the bags in the trunk and made sure the kids had gone to the bathroom and had decent snacks and sufficiently charged Gameboys for the two-hour drive south to Louisville. Then the four of them headed off, waving out the window to their parents as they headed off for this incredible adventure.

Robert and Louie seemed impossible to control that day. It was right in the middle of break and this day’s activity had been picked by Charly; horses. While they thought that it wasn’t that entertaining at first, it soon became a competition between the kids to bet on the horses that would win.

“Now, you can’t place the money yourself, but I will give each of you twenty dollars to bet with on the horses today. Whether you bet it all and win some or don’t win anything, today is supposed to be fun,” Aunt Faye said, holding three twenty dollar bills up and putting them back in her purse. “Now, there’s only one or two races an hour, with a total of ten races today. Each race has about twelve horses racing and we can see them and decide who we think the winner will be. Then I will head to the betting station and put your money on the horse. After that, it’s a return to our seats to watch the race. Let me know if you have to go to the bathroom or if you’re hungry. And please,” she stressed to the twins, “stay close to me and don’t leave your sister’s side. We have gone to the amusement park and the aquarium the past two days, this is what she wanted to do today, so be on you best behavior.”

“Yes, Aunt Faye,” Robert said, taking Charly’s hand.

“I will,” Louie saluted to her.

“Alright, let’s head inside.”

The whole day was spent in two different places: the newly built suites that sat above the race course, and the viewing arena where the horses got ready and everyone could place their bets on which horse would win. The twins bet on which one had the coolest name, Aunt Faye bet on the prettiest horse, but Charly got a tip from one of the employees on how to read the stat guide they were given when they first arrived. Once she learned that, Charly made knowledgeable bets and actually made a few dollars on each bet, but nothing extremely crazy.

“Why does Charly keep winning?” Louie whined after the fourth race, a hot dog covered in nacho cheese halfway to his mouth.

“Because she knows which horse is gonna win. She can speak to them from the balcony we stand on,” Robert said, laughing.

“You never know. Us Stephens girls are really good at reading minds.” Aunt Faye winked at Charly, making Charly smile.

By the end of the night, Charly had made her money back, but the twins and Aunt Faye had lost their twenty dollars. To celebrate the win that Charly made, Aunt Faye took the kids out for some deep dish pizza near the racing track, one of her favorite spots. By the end of dinner, Louie was covered in marinara sauce, Robert was shoving down bread sticks, and Charly laughed at both of the boys.

Too soon it was time for the three of them to head back home and go back to school. Aunt Faye sat weirdly quiet the entire ride and that put Charly on edge. The boys entertained themselves in the back seat and didn’t notice that anything could be wrong with their lives, but Charly knew something was about to happen, and she didn’t like the feeling of it. The feeling was made worse when they drove to a different house instead of the one they had left called home.

Charly quickly shut the envelope, remembering that the trip was fun, but she now knew what happened next and didn’t want to remember the pain she had started to let go of.

“Thanks. I’ll write her a letter to say thanks.”

“There ya go, kiddo.” Dad smiled at her and she sat down next to her box. Robert and Louie ran off to their rooms upstairs, shouting about Pokémon before the door slammed shut.

“I’m gonna head to my room too, okay?” Charly asked. “I want to start reading these.” She motioned to the box in her arms.

“Don’t forget your CD player,” Dad said.

“I’ve got it in here.” The CD player still sat on the floor.

“Okay. Breakfast will be ready in a little while,” Mom said.

“Okay.”

Charly set the box down on the bed and was about to close the door when she heard Mom and Dad talking.

“I’m surprised you didn’t bring her along and just introduce her to the whole family at once. Would have made for a very Merry Christmas,” Mom said.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about,” Dad said.

“Oh horse shit, Ed. Don’t play dumb with me. You know who I’m talking about. She showed up at the goddamn park when we were still married. It’s not like you couldn’t tell you both were more than just friends.”

All of them used to go to the park all the time. Only at the end of summer break did Charly notice anything different.

“Higher Mommy, higher!” Robert shouted on the swings, kicking his legs wildly. Louie decided to climb on the outside of the covered slide when he had been strictly told

not to, and Charly hung from the monkey bars by her legs, hitting her chest like a Gorilla to make the twins laugh.

She turned to find Dad, but he no longer stood under the slide, watching to make sure Louie wasn't going to fall. Charly quickly flipped out of the monkey bars and went to stand under Louie, hoping he wouldn't fall and crush her skinny, boney frame.

Once underneath the slide, Charly heard Dad's voice. On the other side of the bridge connected to the slide Louie was climbing, Dad was on his phone, and the other person was making him turn pink and giggle like Mom used to when Dad would tickle her neck with his stubbly beard before he shaved it off. He didn't do that anymore.

"Yeah, come on over. I'm by the bridge on the playground facing the soccer field. Yeah I'll look for you. See you soon. Love you too. Bye." Dad snapped his cell phone shut and noticed Charly looking at him.

"What's up, kiddo?" he asked.

"Who were you talking to on the phone?" Charly asked.

"An old friend is in town and she wanted to see if she could visit," Dad replied.

"So, she's coming here?"

"Yeah. Actually, I think she is coming this way." Dad pointed to the red mini-van that pulled up in front of the welcome center a little way from them. "Now, she's a little shy, so I'm gonna ask you to stay here with your mom and brothers while she and I catch up, okay?"

"Yes, Dad." Charly looked down at her feet and kicked at a few pieces of mulch as Dad walked over to the woman and gave her a hug and a kiss. Charly stood dumb

founded at the pair of them; Dad didn't kiss anyone besides Mom. The pair sat down near the welcome center and talked. The other woman talked excitedly with her hands while Dad laughed and put his arm around her shoulders, something else he only did with Mom.

Louie's sneakers squeaked on the outside of the slide he was currently climbing. Charly stepped back to see he had lost a shoe.

"Come on Louie, get down," Charly said.

"No!" Louie pouted, pulling himself up a little further. "Mom said I could be up here if Dad watched, right, Dad?"

Charly paused before she spoke. "Dad's not over here. He's talking to some lady by the main building."

"What?" Louie tried to lift himself up to see where Dad went, but he slid down another foot, his butt in Charly's face. She scoffed and pulled him down onto the inside end of the slide while she went to find the missing shoe. Charly came back shortly, picking mulch out of the shoe and handing it to Louie to put on.

"I don't know how to tie my shoes." Louie complained.

"You're almost in second grade. Yes you do. Now put on your shoes."

Louie pouted but listened, slipping on his shoe before standing up and walking over to the swings where Mom swung next to Robert.

"Charly, swing with us!" Robert shouted. Louie ran forward ahead of Charly and snagged the swing next to his twin. Charly shrugged and sat next to Mom, but didn't swing much. Her mind was preoccupied by Dad and the other woman.

“Charly, honey, what’s wrong?” Mom asked, coming to a stop.

“Dad is sitting with another woman by the main building,” Charly said reluctantly.

“Who is she?” Mom asked, standing up to get a view of Dad and the other woman from across the playground.

“He says she’s an old friend from college who happened to be in town. But Mom,” Charly confessed, looking down at her feet. “He said that he loved her.”

Mom froze, staring at the pair of them. Her face dropped and the smile disappeared from her normally cheery face. “Oh,” she said, hanging her head and sitting back down in the swing, staring at her feet. Charly knew then that something was wrong, and she was terrified that she had said the wrong thing, but kept that to herself; she didn’t need to worry her mother anymore than she already had.

“I wasn’t planning on bringing Tasha to your house, Amanda,” Dad said this Christmas morning.

“Wouldn’t put it past you,” Mom mumbled.

“Besides, she’s spending Christmas with her own family.”

“Oh, so you’re ruining two families instead of one. Glad I’m not the only one.”

“Hold on a sec for fuck’s sake,” Dad raised his hand and pointed at Mom, who wielded a wooden spoon sizzling with sausage grease. “You’re the one who wanted the divorce. Don’t make me out to be the bad guy.”

“Oh, so am I the bad guy?” Mom scoffed. “You’re the one who was fucking another younger, skinnier woman behind my back. Marriage is a two-way street, Ed.”

“You can’t blame this all on me!”

“But I am, because I tried my damndest to keep us together, but that doesn’t matter. I’m just not good enough for you and neither are your children.”

“Don’t bring them into this.”

“Well you should have thought about that before agreeing on the divorce, because no matter how you spin it, the kids get the worst of it. They now don’t have a real home.”

The sausage sizzled in the frying pan, filling the house with its irresistible scent. Charly could hear commotion in Louie’s room upstairs where the twins had been for the past ten minutes or so.

“I let you in my house, share my food with you, and I let you be Santa Claus along with me. These things are confusing to the kids and to me. It seems like you care about all of us again, not just the kids,” Mom said. Eggs screamed to life next to the sausage.

“I didn’t know you were gonna be Santa. It’s always been me to dress up and go down stairs dressed up as him and deliver the gifts under the tree. What did you do about that?” Dad argued back. “I know! You didn’t do anything because the suit is in my attic, getting eaten by raccoons.”

Charly heard the stairs creak above her – the twins were planning a sneak attack.

“Well the suit being eaten by raccoons is your own damn fault. All I’m saying is that for next year, I’m gonna be Santa. I don’t want to confuse the kids.”

“You just don’t want me winning because my Santa brings better gifts than your hand-me-down gutter Santa.”

“Fuck off, Ed. Why don’t you go play Santa somewhere else? You aren’t wanted here.”

“But I’m Santa.”

“Santa isn’t real –” Mom stopped short as the stairs creaked more.

“Mom?” Robert asked.

“Is Santa not real?” Louie finished. Mom and Dad looked at each other before Dad smirked.

“Looks like another thing you ruined for the kids,” Dad said.

Mom raised the spatula at him, but quickly put it down before pointing at the door, her glare turning dark.

“Get out of my house,” Mom growled through gritted teeth.

Dad’s face went red and he glared back before he stormed towards the front door, knocking Robert over on his way to his car, Louie running after Dad.

Charly walked down the hallway and helped Robert to his feet as Louie came back inside, tears on his cheeks.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” Mom walked over to Louie, wiping away his tears.

“Dad wore the Santa suit, didn’t he?”

Water Hazard

The doorbell sounded outside my room, startling me back into reality. I peeked out the window. Great, Dad's truck sat in the driveway. I forgot it was Wednesday. I bookmarked my place in the book, refusing to dog-ear anything, and headed to the front room where Dad stood waiting. Louie came running down the stairs and jumped into Dad's arms, Robert standing back and holding my hand. Dad half-smiled at the group before setting Louie down and heading out the door, each of us grabbing our overnight bag and following him.

"Be safe guys, okay?" Mom called after us as we piled into the truck. Louie called shotgun, so Robert and I got the half seats with the bags.

"We're going putt-putting at Ben N' Ari's!" Dad said as he pulled out of the driveway.

The boys cheered. I sat in silence. Putt putting could be fun, as long as the boys didn't lose their putters in the water hazards again and make me go swimming accidentally while trying to fish the poles out with the net. It would be a fun night.

The quick five-minute ride was filled with the boys chattering about how awesome they were at putt-putting and how they were going to cream Dad with their master skills. They also promised me that they wouldn't make me go swimming again. As we pulled into the parking lot, I noticed an extremely tall, beanpole thin woman looking at their car with a high school boy on his phone next to her and a smaller twin version of the beanpole woman running around and collecting rocks that surrounded the putt-putt course. I eyed them suspiciously, I knew that woman from somewhere, but

stopped wondering when Robert couldn't wait for Louie to get out of the car any more, so he climbed into the seat with him and opened the door before the truck had come to a complete stop.

"Robert, calm down there," Dad said, putting the truck in park. Louie and Robert scrambled out of the truck, not remembering that I was still in the back seat. I reached around the side of the passenger seat and pulled the lever to send the chair forward so I didn't have to climb over and around the seat to get out of the door. By the time I shut the door, the woman had come up to Dad and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. I took one look at this new pair and pulled on the truck handle wanting to hide inside even though the truck smelled of farts thanks to the twins, but Dad locked it, so I couldn't escape. Dad pulled me closer by my elbow to introduce me to the others.

"This is my eldest and only daughter, Charly," Dad said. "Charly, this is a good friend of mine, Tasha."

"It's nice to finally meet you, Charly," Tasha said, leaning forward and extending her hand to me. I made no move to return the handshake. Tasha's smile faltered a little bit, but soon looked over at the twins.

"And who are these handsome gentlemen here?" she asked.

"I'm Louie, and this is my twin brother Robert." Louie stuck his hand out to shake Tasha's, Robert a bit more tentative.

"Rob and Louie, fine names indeed."

"It's Robert," Robert said to his feet. Tasha ignored him.

“Well, it’s nice to meet all of you. These are my children. This is Shaunda.”

Tasha pointed to the look alike. Hearing her name, Shaunda dropped the rocks she had been playing with and came to stand next to her mother, a bright smile on her face.

“Hi!” Shaunda practically shouted. Everyone laughed except me. I stared at the girl with a curious look on my face that made Shaunda break eye contact and shuffle her feet.

“And this is my eldest, Ian.” Tasha yanked the teenage boy closer. He didn’t look up from his phone, fingers flying as they sent text messages, grunting his hello. Louie looked at Ian with pure amazement in his eyes. We stood awkwardly in the parking lot, Ian finally noticing that he was being stared down by Louie, who then looked down at his feet before we were pushed toward the entrance.

The arcade itself wasn’t like one of the old arcades that everyone imagines. Those ones have fighting games like *Street Fighter* or *Mortal Kombat*, racing games, lucky chance games (my favorite being *Power Tower*), skee ball, and shooting games. Ben N’ Aries only had old broken lucky chance games. No one knew why this family owned place was still open, but they had a duck pin bowling alley down the middle of the rectangular building, five party rooms lining the wall behind the bowling alley, a ‘concert hall’ for local bands that was a glorified larger party room, and put-put outside with two different courses. We had to go inside to pay for the putt putt, get our putters, golf balls, and score card. Then it was back outside to start the course. It was early enough in the afternoon that it wasn’t crowded, so this hodge-podge of people I was a part of had the

entire course to ourselves, which seemed like a good idea—Shaunda was all over the place and Ian couldn't keep up with the group because he constantly stared at his phone.

“Ian!” Tasha yelled at one point. He had sat down on a bench with his putter between his legs, texting and ignoring the group. “Ian!” Tasha called again, but gave up and let him sit. I thought that might work with Dad, that is, if only I had brought my book.

“Dad, can I sit over by Ian?” I asked.

“Sure. Go make friends.”

I was surprised Dad has said yes that I looked at him dumbfounded before regaining my composure and sitting on the bench near Ian, watching the clouds overhead since Dad said I was too young to have a cell phone. We sat in a comfortable silence, not the awkward silences I sometimes got from Dad when he doesn't know what to say.

“I didn't catch your name earlier,” Ian said, glancing at me.

“Charly,” I said. “Short for Charlotte.”

“I'm Ian.” Ian stuck out his hand and I shook it. He shoved his phone into his pocket and nodded his head towards the rest of the gang. “They seem to be getting along well.”

“Yeah,” I said, looking at Louie and Shaunda laughing at each other. Robert hung back wanting to be part of the fun, but getting pushed aside. “Louie and Shaunda really like each other.”

“Yeah.”

We watched in silence while the kids play putt putt. Robert looked over at us and waved. We both waved back. I turned to look at Ian, but I heard shouting from Louie. I looked back to see Louie shove Robert a bit too hard and Robert fell over the rope barrier of the bridge and into the water hazard. Panic set in and everything slowed down. Robert fell, letting go of his putter before splashing into the water, his putter hitting his stomach before he disappeared under water. I stood but didn't move—he would be fine. 'But he can't swim, idiot!' the voice in my head screamed. At that, I kicked off my flip-flops and bolted for the water; Robert was nowhere near the surface.

"Charly!" someone shouted after me before I jumped in. Robert had always been afraid of water when he discovered he couldn't really float and was a natural sinker.

As I swam further down, the pressure built. I grabbed Robert's arm and pulled him around my neck and also managed to grab the putter, which I used to push off the floor towards the surface.

When Robert was above water, he gasped and coughed up water. I swam us to the edge where Tasha and Dad pulled Robert off my back and doted over him, leaving me in the water. I put the putter on the side and got ready to hop out when a hand appeared in front of me. Ian stood with his hand out for me to take. I took his hand and got out of the water, bending over to catch my breath.

"Thanks," I mumbled, looking over at Robert being swallowed by the other five. Dad looked around frantically until his eyes landed on me.

“Charly, go get management,” he said, turning back to Robert. I sighed and began to walk towards the door; I was the one who could comfort, but Dad always thought he knew best.

I made it halfway to the door when three employees ran past me, towels and arcade shirts in hand. I ran back and found Robert buried in shirts, Louie and Shaunda crowded close while Dad argued with the eldest employee who I recognized as the arcade owner from all the times the twins had a birthday party at the arcade.

“All I’m asking is why the fuck the water hazard is so deep?” Dad asked, his face red and arms crossed tightly over his puffed up chest.

“Sir, it was like that when I purchased the area,” the owner said. “In hindsight I should have filled it. I will take full responsibility for this.”

“You’d better, otherwise you’ll be hearing from my lawyer,” Dad threatened.

“I will make the hazard under four feet deep, make the bridge sturdier, pay for any distress this caused your family, and give you and your family life-time passes for putt putt and bowling,” the owner pleaded with Dad.

“I’ll even throw in free pizza from the arcade and deliver it directly to your house when it finishes cooking so your kids don’t have to sit here in their wet clothes.”

“Alright, thanks, man.” Dad shook hands with the owner, who let out a sigh of relief at Dad’s agreement.

“What kind of pizzas would you like?”

“Two large cheese and one large pepperoni, that should feed us all.”

“Get a small sausage and green pepper for Robert,” I chimed in, wanting to surprise Robert with his favorite pizza. The owner looked at me, but Dad waved me off.

“Go check on Robert,” Dad said before following the owner back inside. I sighed and hung my shoulders; hopefully he would do this for Robert. A shirt draped over my shoulders. Ian had snagged one that the employees had brought out for Robert. I pulled it tighter around me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You okay?” Ian asked. I nodded.

“Charly,” Robert said. He looked at me and held out his hand. I walked over to him and helped him to his feet before he wrapped his arms around me tightly and buried his face in my still wet shirt. We stood like that for a few moments before I started to dry him off with one of the shirts he was buried under.

“I think we should go,” Tasha finally said, walking toward the parking lot with Shaunda in tow after Dad had returned from inside.

“Okay. Follow me back to the house. Pizza will be delivered in twenty minutes or so,” Dad said.

Tasha nodded and motioned for Ian to follow her. Ian gave one last look to me, standing on hot concrete, barefoot, soaking wet, and holding my youngest brother, before following his mother back to the van.

“We have to go, Robert,” I said, drying off his hair

“I want to go home,” he mumbled.

“We’re heading to Dad’s.”

“No, Mom’s.”

I sat in a moment of silence. “I want to go there too, but it’s Dad’s night.”

“But why?”

“Because they said so.” Robert let out a shaky breath and looked at me. “Come on.” I smiled down at him “I told Dad to get sausage and green pepper pizza for you. Okay?”

Robert nodded his head and gratefully took my hand to help stand up, then we trudged off to the truck, both cramming into the back half seats.

The drive wasn’t more than ten minutes, but uncomfortable in wet clothes. The radio chimed ‘80s songs in the background.

Back at the house wasn’t much better. Robert and I changed into pajamas. Ian took most of the long couch, Shaunda had the bean bag chair and Dad and Tasha were sitting in the love seat, with Louie on the floor. Robert and I sat at the table and played war until the pizza came. *The Fellowship of the Ring* played in the background and no one paid attention to it, yet no one talked, opting for the uncomfortable silence that fell between them. The doorbell rang and Shaunda jumped up to answer the door.

“Pizza’s here!” she shouted, throwing open the door. Dad and Tasha followed, coming back with a small stack of pizzas. They placed them in the kitchen, where everyone grabbed a paper plate and pulled pizza in every direction.

“Did you order sausage and green pepper like I told you to?” I asked.

“That’s disgusting,” Shaunda said, piling her plate high with cheese pizza and walking away.

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t know that there were any special requests. I got two cheese and one pepperoni,” Dad said, grabbing a few pepperoni slices and walking back to sit on the couch. Tasha took a single slice of cheese and Ian took a few of both. Louie took the rest of the pepperoni, leaving 4 slices for both Robert and me to share. Robert looked like he could cry. I took his plate and set it on the counter before pulling him into a tight hug.

“You promised,” he mumbled.

“I know, but he didn’t listen,” I whispered into his hair, giving him a big squeeze.

“I don’t want plain cheese and pepperoni makes my stomach hurt.”

“I’ll make you something else then, how ‘bout that?” I let go of my brother and opened the fridge, only finding a couple bottles of Coors Lite, a limp head of lettuce, and a moldy cucumber. I threw the cucumber and lettuce out and opened the freezer. Only empty ice cube trays. I shut both doors and opened the pantry door, scanning the lines of crackers, chips, and microwave mac n cheese. Robert looked inside as well, pulling down a package of strawberry Pop Tarts and a cup of ramen noodles.

“You want this?” I asked, receiving a nod from Robert.

I filled the tea kettle with water and let it heat up while Robert went back to the table and opened his package of Pop Tarts, scattering crumbs everywhere. I put two pieces of pizza on my plate and set it down next to Robert, standing close to the kettle as it warmed up. I opened the cup of noodles as the kettle started to hiss.

“Charly, what are you making?” Dad asked over his shoulder.

“Cup of noodles,” I responded.

“Why aren’t you eating what we got?”

“The noodles are for Robert.”

“Robert, you like pizza. Why are you getting noodles?”

“I don’t like cheese pizza.” Robert spoke with his mouth full to the table

“Grab some pepperoni,” Dad insisted. Robert’s eyes welled with tears. “Robert, what’s the matter?”

“Pepperoni makes his stomach hurt,” I said, bringing over the cup of noodles and a fork to Robert.

“Since when?”

“Since forever. That’s why I asked about the sausage and green pepper. That’s the pizza he likes.”

“I’m sorry, Robert. I didn’t know. I’ll order you your own pizza next time, okay?”

Robert nodded and all eyes returned to the TV, actually watching the movie this time. I patted Robert on the head and sat to eat my two pieces of pizza. I wanted all four, but knew that as soon as I sat down, someone would snag them and they would be upset with me for stealing the last of the pizza. Sure enough, Louie and Shaunda entered the kitchen at the same time, each taking a piece and sitting back on the bean bag chair together. They were becoming good friends. Ian fell asleep on the couch, a slice half out of his mouth.

“Ian!” Tasha shouted, startling him awake. He looked at his mother, wiped his mouth and finished eating his pizza before going back to texting.

The night passed in silence. I cleaned up the kitchen because Dad didn’t really know how - hence the paper plates. I flattened the empty pizza boxes, shoved them in the

trash can, washed Robert's fork and put it away, then went into the living room and took the empty plates and threw them away as well. I wetted a paper towel and wiped up the crumbs from Robert's Pop Tarts and threw that out before returning to my card game with Robert. *The Two Towers* followed *The Fellowship of the Ring* and by the end of that movie, most everyone was asleep on the couch or floor except for me. Robert had moved to the floor once he got bored of playing cards with me. It was time for bed. I helped Robert off of the floor and walked him upstairs, kicking Louie and Dad awake as well. Dad looked at his watch and nudged Tasha awake.

"It's time for bed. Looks like we fell asleep during the last movie," he said.

"That's okay. We can watch the last one tomorrow." Tasha smiled and stretched, nudging Shaunda awake.

"We need to figure out sleeping arrangements. Louie and Robert have a bunk bed and Charly has a day bed with another mattress underneath the one she uses. So Shaunda can sleep in Charly's room. I'm assuming Ian is fine on the couch."

"He just needs a blanket."

At the sound of the sleeping arrangements, Shaunda and Louie looked at each other, then gave puppy dog eyes to their parents.

"I wanna sleep in the bunk bed," Shaunda whined.

"She can take Robert's bed and Robert can have Charly's spare," Louie piped in, not asking his brother if it was okay.

“Well, I don’t think that would be appropriate,” Dad started. He looked at Robert, but saw that he was clinging to my shirt, giving him his own puppy dog eyes. “Boys share a room and girls share a room. That’s the rules here.”

“I’m not climbing the ladder to get in my bunk bed,” Robert said.

“It’s fine, he can stay in my room. I don’t mind,” I said, putting my arms around Robert.

“Please, Dad?” Louie asked.

“Please, Mom?” Shaunda begged on her knees.

Tasha and Dad looked at each other for a quick second before Dad sighed.

“Alright, fine. Shaunda can have the top bunk and Robert can get the spare bed in Charly’s room.”

“Yes!” Shaunda shouted, following Louie down the hall and up the stairs at full speed. Ian looked up once.

“Could I get a blanket?” Ian asked.

“Charly?” Dad asked, looking at me over his shoulder.

“I’ll go get one from upstairs. I’ll be right back.”

“Thank you,” Dad and Ian said at the same time.

Robert and I walked up the stairs and Robert grabbed his bag from his room, walking silently over to my room. I opened the hallway closet and pulled out a couple of Christmas throw blankets and headed back downstairs. When I rounded the corner of the hallway, I stepped back as I saw Dad and Tasha kissing. I looked horrified, watching this intimate moment between the two, remembering that Tasha was the woman from the

park, the one Dad said he loved when he was still married to Mom. My heart broke and I did my best to hold back tears. Somewhere in my mind, I thought maybe Mom and Dad could get back together, but that thought disappeared with this kiss. I backtracked through the family room and the kitchen to the living room to hand Ian his blankets.

“Thank you,” Ian said. I nodded. “Are you alright? You didn’t get hurt at the putt-putt course, did you?”

“I’m fine, thanks for asking.” I cleared my throat. “If you need anything else, everyone is sleeping upstairs. If you feel uncomfortable down here, there’s a futon on the loft you can sleep on.”

“I’ll be fine down here,” Ian said.

“Okay,” I said and turned around and trying to keep my calm checking the hallway again to see if Tasha and Dad were still there, but they had disappeared upstairs. I walked up, hearing giggles come from the twins’ room. I opened the door and saw Shaunda on the top bunk leaning her head over and making faces at Louie, who was giggling uncontrollably.

“Hey, Charly!” he finally laughed out and Shaunda whipped her head around to look at Charly.

“Brush your teeth,” I said.

“I don’t have a toothbrush,” Shaunda said as Louie groaned, getting out of bed.

“Use your finger then.”

“That’s gross,” Shaunda gagged, plugging her nose.

“Whatever.” I walked to my room and told Robert the same thing. All three young kids crammed themselves into the kids’ bathroom, so I knocked on Dad’s door to see if I could use his bathroom, but the door was locked and all I heard was a few grunts before shushed giggling. I knocked again and received stilled silence. Giving up, I waited in the hallway for the kids to be done when I noticed Ian make his way upstairs and lie down on the futon, still in its couch position. I rolled my eyes and nudged Ian, getting him to stand up while I put the bed down. He nodded his head and laid down, watching me as I stood in the hallway. Shaunda ran out of the bathroom with Louie right behind her. I followed them into the room and waited for them to get into bed before I turned the light off and pulling the giant Pikachu pillow stopper in the hallway so the door didn’t shut all the way.

“I don’t need that since Robert isn’t here,” Louie said.

“Yeah, no one in here is a baby and scared of the dark,” Shaunda said and laughed.

“Watch your tone,” I said to Shaunda. She rolled her eyes as I kicked Pikachu into the room and shut the door. Robert finished up in the bathroom shortly afterwards and silently headed to my room, looking sad. I entered the bathroom to brush my teeth, followed in by Ian. When I finished brushing and spit, Ian finally spoke.

“You really take care of your brothers.”

“They’re family,” I said.

“That may be, but I would let have Shaunda drown a little bit. She might grow up a bit. She’s fucking annoying.”

I blushed when Ian cursed; I never thought I could cuss because I was pretty sure I would get my butt whipped for saying them.

“How can you say that about your sister?”

“Half-sister,” he corrected me.

“You have the same Mom?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“No, Dad.”

“So, Tasha isn’t your mom?”

“No, but she raised me. She’s a total drama queen. Forced me to come down here this weekend, even though I permanently live with Dad. But I’m glad I did.” Ian smiled at me. I laughed; I wasn’t the only one who didn’t like Tasha.

“Well it’s a good thing you did, otherwise all hell would have broken loose,” I said. Ian nudged my shoulder and chuckled.

“Look at little sis saying big words now.”

“Ha. Ha,” I said back, walking out of the bathroom with Ian behind me.

“Good night, Charly,” he said.

“Good night, Ian,” I said back before entering my room and shutting the door. I turned on the butterfly night light for Robert and opened a window after I had pulled out the spare bed and set it up, finding an extra pillow for Robert in the closet. I turned the overhead light off and crawled into bed, curling up around my few stuffed animals.

“Charly?” Robert asked after a few minutes.

“Yes?” I rolled over to face him. His cheeks shined in the faint light.

“I saw Dad kiss Tasha earlier.”

“Me too.”

“Do think he’s going to marry her?”

“Dad won’t leave,” I said, doubting my own words.

“Tasha scares me. I don’t want her to take Dad away.” Robert hesitated for a moment. “Why did Louie leave me?”

“I’m also scared you’ll leave me like Louie did today,” Robert said after a moment.

“Louie didn’t leave you. He just made a friend and you can be friends with Shaunda too.” I tried to stay positive.

“She’s annoying,” Robert said. We both giggled until Robert’s laughs turned into silent sobs, making him shake.

“Come here.” I pulled him toward me and wrapped my arms around him, letting him cry into my shoulder. “Everything is going to be all right, okay? I’ll never leave you, I promise.”

Scars

Charly slams the door shut behind her, locking it before pacing her room, clenching and her fists repeatedly. They couldn't be doing this. They wouldn't be doing this, not to her, not to the twins. They are a family without *her*. But not like that mattered. Her father isn't going to listen to anything she has to say. After all, who would listen to a moody twelve-year-old anyways? No one. She knows that already—far too often people ignore her because of her age. Not anymore. Charly isn't going to take it.

In a fit of anger, Charly takes her wooden desk chair, the one *her* grandfather used to sit in while he drew cartoons for the daily newspaper, and throws it at the wall. The chair leaves a sizable dent. She grabs the chair again and beats it in the same spot until the wall caves in, holding the chair hostage in the drywall. She yanks on it a couple of times before one of the legs comes off and she stumbles backwards, bumping into *her* bedside table that has *her* family lamp. Holding the leg chair like a baseball bat, Charly swings at the porcelain lamp and sends it flying across the room in pieces. A few chunks fall limply on the floor while others rain on the window.

"Take that," Charly says, letting out a breath she doesn't realize she is holding. A knock sounds against the door.

"Charly?" It is *her*. "Are you okay in there?"

Charly doesn't say anything back. She slides her hand up and down the wooden leg until a five-inch splinter catches her at just the right angle. She cries out in pain, dropping the chair leg onto her foot then kicking it at her closet door, watching it bounce off harmlessly.

“Charly?” *she* says with more urgency. “Open the door.” The door handle jiggles. Charly says nothing and focuses her attention on the splinter. She tries to push it out upwards, but the splinter pushes in more and breaks off into a thorn further under the skin than she can reach to get it out. She cries out again and swings her hand around to get rid of the pain.

“Charlotte!” The door bows a little bit as *she* tries to force it open with her small model frame. Charly needs out. She sees the chain-link fire escape ladder lying on the floor next to her windows—her mother had insisted that she have one in case something ever happened, especially with her door constantly locking her in and out of her room. She pulls open one of the windows, pops the screen out and attaches the ladder.

“Rapunzel lets down her golden hair,” Charly says. The chain-linked ladder clatters down the plastic siding of the house. There’s more banging on the bedroom door; her father’s voice adds into the mix. “Because Rapunzel can save herself and choose her own life.”

Charly scampers down the ladder, the thorn sliding further into her hands as a drill squeals and the door handle jiggles. Jumping off the last two rungs onto the frost covered grass, a chill runs up her spine; the drill still sounding in her now abandoned room. She clutches her splintered hand to her chest and bolts towards the road her house sits next to, crossing into the neighbor’s yard. The family of four sits at the dinner table, the mother and father smiling at each other while the children laugh and the dog sits patiently next to the table, waiting for food to drop. Charly looks longingly at the family before turning back to her prison tower, run by the evil queen and the corrupted king. She

has to escape. She wants what she can't have, what is right on the other side of the door to another house. She holds back the tears that form in the corners of her eyes and takes a deep, steady breath. She wanted something she couldn't have.

She begins to walk down the road, away from home. Cars drive past in the dark, their headlights blinding her, but she keeps moving further down the road, ignoring the world around her. Her name is called and she jumps, looking behind her. It is her father, but the house isn't in sight. She pads her way across the cold concrete into the woods as her father's voice echoes in the air again. Charly freezes in the underbrush, barely breathing in case it her foggy breath could give her away. As she looks down the road near her house, she sees the twins running around the yard. Robert seemed frantic to find his sister but Louie stares at the ground in front of him and doesn't move. She abandoned her brother when she always told him and his other half, Louie, she would be there for them. She left, not thinking twice about her actions and letting her emotions get the best of her. Charly almost gives in to the temptation of going back and comforting her brother, taking the consequences of her actions

"Charly!" her dad shouts to her, almost snarling, making Charly shrink back into the underbrush, even though Dad is a hundred feet or so away from her on the other side of the road. "Charly!" he shouts again, running into the road and looking around for her. Charly swears that he sees her as he walks past.

"Ed!" Tasha runs up behind Dad, her small heels clicking venomously on the asphalt.

"Did you find her?" she asks.

“Does it look like I found her?” Dad spits back.

“How the fuck am I supposed to know?” Tasha stands with her hands on her hips.

“I told you to wait until Ian was able to come down and keep her calm.”

“Who knows when that would be with his football schedule and ridiculous practice times. Besides, the realtor puts the sign in tomorrow. Thought it would be better to tell them,” Dad says.

“I knew something like this would happen.”

“Oh, that my daughter would go bat shit crazy and run off into the woods? Cause that one threw me for a loop.”

“She’s always been crazy. Her only comfort is this area and you just broke that. Now she is going to be a shit bag until she stops coming up and I know that will break you.”

“My daughter isn’t allowed to stop visiting until she is an adult,” Dad says, flipping off a car that honked at him for standing in the middle of the road. In the noise, Charly shrinks back so she can’t see her dad arguing with Tasha, but she can hear them. They didn’t notice the extra noise.

“Yeah, tell me how that one goes. She’s fucking crazy, okay? There is something wrong with her in the head. You need to call the police before she does something that could be dangerous to herself or others,” Tasha says, her heels clicking again faintly further away from where Charly sat.

“I can’t file a missing person report for an entire 24 hours. She’s fine. She’ll be home in a few hours. And when that happens, I expect an apology.” Dad’s footsteps faint

away and Charly sits with her knees curled up to her chest and rocking slowly back and forth as the sun begins to set in the sky.

“I refuse to go home. I don’t want to be anywhere where *she* is.” Charly stands before she races further into the forest, heading south before turning north in case anyone was following her. The oak trees scratch her exposed arms and legs while she escapes further into the forest, maples dropping leaves on her this October night, a time when people dream about pumpkins, candy, and monsters. It begins to rain.

A gnarled old tree stands in front of her with low lying branches and dense leaves to hide anyone inside. She tries to climb up using both hands, but the added pressure doesn’t go well with the thorn, so she hauls herself up with one hand and a set of fingers to grip smaller branches. The thick layer of leaves keeps Charly mostly dry, but the wind whips through and makes her skin prickle with goose bumps. Once she is sure no one is behind her, she slowly climbs down the tree. Her soft feet became bloody and raw from her wandering, so she stops, sitting on a fallen tree that connects both sides of a small creek together, her wet hair plastered to her face and thunder clashing over head.

“I just want a happy ending,” Charly says, begging the sky and wishing on the second star on the right.

A few hours go by as she sits there. The storm passes and Charly doesn’t move, her clothes starting to dry off.

“I can’t go back,” she says out loud, picking at the skin around the splinter to try and get the thorn out. “They don’t understand.”

Leaves rustle behind her, followed by a dog bark. Charly turns too fast and falls off of the tree stump into the slightly swollen creek, getting her clothes wet again. A wet nose touches her knee and Charly sees a pit bull staring at her. Her heart begins to beat faster and she starts to back away slowly before the dog cocks its head to the side and let its tongue loll out, drool sliding off the tip onto Charly's foot. It sits down and remains silent, staring curiously at the girl in the creek. She looks at the dog before leaning forward and reaching out a hand to pet it, cooing to it as she did so.

"It's okay, boy. I won't hurt you."

The dog leans forward towards her, making Charly flinch slightly before she feels soft fur in her hand. She looks and sees the dog's head nestled in her hand, its eyes shut and leaning into Charly's hand. She pets the dog more and brings herself closer to him, checking his collar for a name.

"Hey Bubba," she says, smiling as she gets a lick on the cheek in response. She pets him with both hands and then gives him a hug. When she pulls away, he licks her injured hand and stands up, taking a few steps away from Charly and looking back over his shoulder.

"Where are you going?" Charly asks, standing up, watching Bubba take a few more steps away from her and stopping to look at her again. She follows the dog, curious to where she is headed. They head further into the forest, just the two of them walking side by side. Every once in awhile they come to the edge of the woods, peering into the houses and seeing families inside, gathering around the TV, the fireplace, or the kitchen

table carving a pumpkin. Laughter fills the air as windows are open to let in the cool breeze after the storm. After a few houses, Charly stops, Bubba looking at her curiously.

“I can’t keep doing this,” she says. Bubba’s tongue lolls out of his mouth. “I can’t keep saying that things will change and go back to normal. They won’t.” Charly falls to her knees in front of Bubba. He pulls his tongue back into his mouth tilts his head to the left, looking at Charly as she begins to cry. “Dad is leaving and I can’t stop him.” Charly buries her head into Bubba’s neck as Bubba licks her ear to try and calm her down. She continues to cry with Bubba for another minute or so before she straightens up and looks around, finding a small hollow at the base of a willow tree just a few feet from her. She crawls over to the hollow and curls up inside, deciding that she needed sleep, but didn’t want to go back to the house. Bubba curled up next to her and together they fell asleep under the tree, leaves rustling in the gentle breeze and falling to hide Charly in her new home.

Chills run up Charly’s spine that wake her out of her sleep. Her body sits covered in goose bumps, her feet are a deep shade of purple, and her fingers refuse to move. Bubba stirs next to her and uses his body heat to try and warm Charly up, but nothing seems to help. Bubba then nudges Charly out from under the tree and starts guiding her east, stopping occasionally to lick her fingers and toes to warm them up a bit.

Soon, she sees lights to a house and hangs back while Bubba keeps moving forward. He barks at her, but she steps backwards and hides behind a cluster of trees - Bubba’s bark has caused movement on the back porch in the morning fog.

“There you are boy! What did I tell you about running off into the forest? It’s dangerous in there for you.” A boy around Charly’s age comes and attaches a leash to the dog’s collar. Bubba doesn’t move; he sits still and looks over his shoulder. The boy tugs a bit more, but Bubba doesn’t move.

“Bubba, what’s wrong?”

The dog stands up and begins to walk towards Charly, who tries to make herself smaller as the boy looks around the group of trees she is hiding in. Bubba comes and sits next to Charly while the boy stares at her from up above. She reaches out and pets Bubba, who gives her a lick on the cheek in return.

“Hello.”

Charly glances up at the boy and shrugs her shoulders, focusing on the spotted pattern on Bubba’s back.

“I’m Justin.”

“Charly.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Charly. I see you have already met Bubba.” The dog smiles. “What are you doing in the forest? It looks like you’ve been out here for a while.” Justin motions to her. She shrugs her shoulders again. The three of them sit in silence, Bubba panting between Charly and Justin as the wind makes the trees creak.

“Why are you in the forest this early in the morning?” Justin asks.

“I ran away,” Charly says after a few moments.

“Why?”

“My dad is replacing me with someone else.”

Justin gives her a quizzical look, but shrugs his shoulders. “Well, I can take you back to my place. Lots of food and clean clothes. Those sound good?”

Charly nods as her stomach grumbles. Justin stands and sticks out his hand for her to take, but she ignores it, standing up herself and keeping her hand tucked close to her chest, not letting Justin see the thorn or her frozen hands. She is terrified for some reason of what Justin would do if he found out about it. Plus, she doesn’t like people feeling sorry for her; her mother already did enough of that. No one else needs to worry about poor, little Miss Charly who is incredibly capable of taking care of herself, thank you very much.

Justin still pulls Charly to her feet by grabbing her arm, even after she ignores his help. They look at each other for a brief moment before Charly looks down at her feet, pink rising to her cheeks and warmth growing in her stomach. Justin laughs nervously before letting her arm go and walking away, gesturing for her to follow.

They walk in silence until a small house with a wooden deck comes back into view.

“This is home,” Justin says as he walks up the steps of the deck to the back door. Bubba pushes Charly along; her hand still clutched to her chest.

“Mom! Do we still have bacon from dinner last night?” Justin yells as he walks into the kitchen, Charly standing at the back door.

“No, you ate the rest of it this morning for breakfast. You still hungry?” A woman the same age as Charly’s mother emerges from the hallway and stops mid-step to stare at

the dirt covered girl in her house. “Justin!” she calls, not taking her eyes off of Charly.

Justin walks up next to his mother, a banana hanging out of his mouth.

“Oh. Mom,” he says after swallowing. “This is Charly. She was wandering around the woods, saying she was lost and hungry.”

Charly almost protests because she is definitely not lost; her house sits across the street. But Justin winks at her and she smiles a little bit, trusting him almost automatically, even though her instincts are screaming that no one could ever be trusted again. Yet she trusted this newcomer so easily. Why? Her stomach grows warm again and she stares down at her bloody and frozen feet, thinking about Justin.

Justin’s mother is still a bit wary of Charly, but she shakes her head and smiles, stepping forward and crouching in front of Charly.

“Are you lost?” Kara, Justin’s mom, asks.

Charly nods ‘yes.’

“Do you have a family?”

Shoulders shrug in response.

“Are you hungry?”

Charly’s stomach growls before she says anything. Justin and Kara laugh and lead Charly to the kitchen of this new kingdom, exactly like the one she wants.

“Well, Charly,” Justin says. “What do wanna eat?” He throws open the fridge doors dramatically, earning a giggle from Charly, her cheeks becoming a permanent shade of pink around her new friend, an idea that has become foreign to her in recent years.

“Honey, don’t overwhelm her. I’ll just toast some bread and scramble eggs. Does that sound good?” Kara asks Charly. She nods again. “Also,” Kara speaks to Justin, “go get a few blankets and a sweatshirt of yours.”

“Okay.” Justin closes the fridge doors and runs down the hallway, disappearing into another room. Charly stands awkwardly in the kitchen as Kara starts cracking eggs into a bowl.

“Excuse me,” Charly says. Kara turns to look down at her from her intimidating height. “Where’s the bathroom?” Kara smiles and leads Charly down the hall to a small, closet-sized bathroom.

“Here we are. Just holler if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” Charly says as Kara shuts the door to leave the small girl in peace. Charly sighs and looks down at her hand. She struggles to unfold her right hand; her fingers slow to respond to her wants but she is able to get ahold of a larger chunk of skin near the thorn. She tugs slowly on it and pain make her eyes black out for a second. She sways slightly before stumbling to sit on the toilet. Bubba pads to the outside of the door and whines quietly.

Charly gives another tentative pull, receiving the same reaction. She grinds her teeth together, fingering the skin before tugging up on it quickly, pulling live skin away and exposing the thorn, blood oozing from her hand. She gives a small cry, clenching her hand to her chest and biting her lip, almost putting a hole through it. Bubba barks loudly, his voice echoing in the small hallway.

“Bubba, don’t shout,” Justin says before knocking on the door. “Charly? You all right in there?”

Charly can’t form words from the pain, but she tries to shrink away into the side of the toilet next to the wall. The toilet brush and plunger clatter around but she doesn’t care. She only wants to disappear for a while, maybe forever.

“Charly?” Justin asked again, sounding concerned. Charly shifts and accidentally pushes the thorn further into her hand after almost getting it out. She cries out in pain, kicking the toilet paper holder into the wall and slipping so her head hit the toilet.

“Charly!” Justin shouts, opening the door, Bubba barking wildly, pushing past him and over to Charly. Charly and Justin make eye contact before Charly hides her face in shame. It isn’t until Kara comes into the bathroom that Charly starts to cry. Kara pulls Charly out from behind the toilet before she notices the thorn sticking out of her right hand. Kara takes Charly’s hands in hers and sees that they are riddled with cuts and scrapes as well. Kara has pity in her eyes for such a young girl in so much pain. Charly is taken aback by this look and cries harder. Charlie thought the family would be incredibly upset by her injuries that she would rather have gone without the function of her hands than ask for help.

“Justin, get me some old towels.” Kara pulls Charly closer to her, cuddling and petting the girl’s ratty hair, Charly crying into her chest as she let the emotion and the pain out she has kept in for a long time.

Justin returns with towels and Kara wraps Charly’s hands in them before pulling her to her feet and leading Charly out to the car. The ride remains in strained silence

except for Charly's whimpers and sniffing. As they pull into the parking lot, Charly finally speaks.

"Call my mom."

Kara turns around. "What's her phone number?"

"317-555-1274," Charly recites from memory.

"What about your dad? What's his number?"

"I don't have a dad," Charly says after a moment's hesitation. Kara nods and helps Charly into a wheelchair before going to the receptionist to get Charly checked in. Kara explains the situation and Justin sits next to Charly, placing his hand over her towel-wrapped ones.

"It's gonna be all right, I promise," he says. Charly nods.

"What's your mom's name?" Kara asks, typing numbers into her phone.

"Amanda Stephens."

When Kara walks away to call Charly's mom, a nurse comes over to the children.

"My name is Laura. I'm going to ask you a few questions, okay?"

Charly nods again and tells the nurse her full name is Charlotte Ann Stephens and that she had gotten the huge splinter from the end of a broken chair while destroying her room. Charly refuses to look at anyone when the nurse unwraps her hands to see the thorn. They are quickly wrapped backup. "We'll take her in right away. Has family been contacted?"

"Her mother is on the way. I just got off the phone with her," Kara says, rejoining the group.

“Okay, I’ll take her back to get started on removing the splinter. Come this way please,” the nurse says. She changes, has an IV tube connected to her arm, and her hands are swollen from the thorn and the cold when Justin enters the room. The pair look at each other but say nothing. He only sits in a chair pulled up next to her bed and places his hands on her shoulder where she wouldn’t be hurt by his touch.

“I don’t have a dad either,” Justin says as Kara and the nurse talk quietly outside the door of the room. “He left before I started school. It’s just been me and mom. Plus Bubba, of course.”

“Things weren’t crazy?” Charly asks, looking at Justin.

“Well, yeah. It was just Mom and me. It was a lot better. There was less fighting and yelling. I wasn’t scared anymore.”

“I’m scared though,” Charly mumbles.

“It gets better.”

“Thank you, Justin,” Charly says, giving him her first genuine smile.

He returns her smile with a wink and nods his head.

It takes thirty minutes for Charly’s mom to arrive at the hospital. By that point, the thorn is removed and Charly is all patched up. Mom jogs into the room, heels clicking on the linoleum.

“Charly, sweetheart,” she sighs, embracing her daughter as gently as possible.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes.”

Kara pulls Mom aside to explain the situation as the doctors say that Charly is good to go home, but shouldn't do anything crazy for the next three weeks while her hands heal. And with the way her hand is bandaged, she can't write since she's left-handed.

Mom drives Charly home, leaving Justin and Kara waving at the entrance doors, promising to visit.

Once home and in bed, Charly hears the front door open, followed by thundering feet. The door opens quickly to let two nine-year-old boys in the room before shutting again, voices yelling behind it.

"Charly!" Robert says, crawling into bed with her before anyone could stop him.

"Hi," Charly says, moving herself to give Robert a little bit more room in bed with her. Louie sits at the end of the bed, looking at Charly briefly before he pulls out a battered Gameboy Advanced and plays a game silently, ignoring the world.

"Why did you run away?" Robert asks.

Charly remains silent, only shrugging her shoulders and placing her cheek on his head.

After a few minutes the yelling stops. Her dad entered the room, with Mom close behind. Charly holds back a cry as her father sits next to the bed.

"Hey there, kiddo," he says, brushing hair behind her ear. She jerks her head away and stares at the opposite wall.

"Why did you run away?" he asks.

"Go away," she whispers, rolling away from him and facing the wall and Robert.

“Charly, what’s happened to you?”

“You don’t exist anymore. I hate you.”

Dad sighs and gets up, looking down at Charly in bed and leaves, seeing himself out of the house, the walls shuddering as the door slammed closed.

Cash for a Wedding

Bachelors beware. Salisville's sweetheart, Tasha Callow, is now engaged. After a sad break up with her high school sweetheart, Tasha was contacted by an old friend from college, Edward "Ed" Stephens. IT was love at first site. After two years of dating, the couple is happily engaged, and wedding plans are underway for a fall wedding later this year.

"Could she be anymore full of herself?" Charly asked, throwing down the newspaper that showed a picture of her father and his fiancé. Ian stomped into the kitchen, ignoring Charly's outburst against his step-mother, like he normally did when Charly was around. She could get away with saying things around him and not get in trouble for it; he didn't like Tasha anymore than Charly did. Shaunda followed closely behind Ian and that was Charly's clue to shut up. If Charly sneezed funny, Shaunda would say something and Charly would be sent to her room as punishment, which is where she wanted to be in the first place. Tasha usually made Charly help her make breakfast on the weekends all the kids were in the cramped house, which meant that Charly made breakfast while Tasha sat on the couch and watched the morning news or reruns of *America's Next Top Model*. This Friday morning, Tasha had gone out to Wal-Mart since they were out of eggs and Dad went to work. Charly had still been woken up and asked to make toast for the family, which she did, all buttered up with a shaker of cinnamon sugar on the side of the plate in case anyone cared for it. Ian stood by the fridge, looking at Shaunda like she was some strange being looking up at him with crossed eyes, until he pulled down a package of Pop Tarts for her from the top cabinet,

where she couldn't reach and eat them all at once. Charly rolled her eyes, so much for making breakfast.

Eight o'clock rolled around and Shaunda sat in front of the TV watching cartoons while Charly cooked eggs; Tasha had disappeared to her room in the back of the house and Ian had left for a run, conditioning himself for the upcoming fall sports season. The eggs finished scrambling and Charly put them on five different plates, one for each of the kids including herself and one for Tasha even though she didn't eat much, if any. Charly knocked on her brothers' door and opened it, flicking on the light and seeing soda cans everywhere with the TV still on. She crossed the room and turned off the TV, pulling blankets off of beds and receiving whines.

"Breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast is ready. And I want you to throw the cans out before Tasha comes in and yells at you for the mess."

Robert mumbled incoherently, rolling a bit too far and falling out of bed onto his back, one leg still in bed. He groaned and picked himself up as Louie covered his head with a pillow. Robert stole the pillow, noticing a large drool stain on it.

"Dude, you drool in your sleep!" Robert shouted, throwing the pillow back and running out the door to the kitchen, Louie stumbling after him.

"Do not!" Louie shouted back.

"Yeah, Louie doesn't drool!" Shaunda shouted from the living room, not taking her eyes off the TV.

"Enough. You are all ten years old, does it matter who drools and who doesn't?" Charly asked, all three of them staring at her.

Shaunda shrugged her shoulders and changed the channel, finding *Mythbusters* far more entertaining than *Scooby-Doo*.

“Anyways, breakfast,” Charly says, pulling the twins’ attention back to her. “Pick a plate. Don’t argue cause it’s the same amount. I have to go get Tasha because she wanted help with this garage sale thing.”

Charly left the kitchen and knocked on Tasha’s bedroom door. There was mumbling and Tasha answered the door with a cami, sweatpants falling off her hips, and still half asleep. Seeing Charly, she pulled up her pants and grabbed a robe off the back of the door.

“What is it Charly?”

“It’s eight. You wanted to open the garage sale at that time.”

“Well, I have a headache, so why don’t you do it yourself? Money is in the freezer. Get some cold hard cash.” Tasha laughed at her own joke and closed the door. Charly sighed and pulled the money apron out of the freezer before heading to the garage. She opened the door and began displaying the pieces of furniture that her father no longer wanted, even though he brought up from the move. The kids’ clothes were all hung on racks around the garage and Charly turned on the local radio station, sitting back and beginning to read the last Harry Potter book that had come out six days prior. She sold some of the boys’ old toys and a couple of outdoor chairs by the time Tasha showed up. She carried a few boxes with her, Ian in tow—must have gotten back from his morning run already. They placed the boxes on the table and Tasha opened the lids. Curious, Charly bookmarked her spot and walked over to Tasha, who had stickers labeled \$3 in her hand.

Inside the three large boxes was Charly's lost VHS collection. She hadn't seen them since the move up north.

"Where have these been?" she asked.

"In the house," Tasha said.

"Why didn't you say anything. I've been looking for these for years." Charly grabbed a box, put the lid on, and tried to take it back into the house. Ian entered the garage again with three more boxes.

"That's the last of them," he said before disappearing back inside, refusing to make eye contact with Charly, who pleaded silently with him to back her up on this.

"Thanks, honey. What did you say Charly?" Tasha asked.

"I've been looking for my movies for years. I want to take them home."

Tasha took the box of movies from Charly and placed them back onto the table.

"No. They belong to the family, and we no longer need these." She put stickers on them, one by one. "Besides, you haven't wanted them since your dad moved up here," Tasha argued back.

"I didn't know they were here. I want to take them back."

"Charly, please don't argue." Tasha pushed Charly away from the table back towards the chair she had been sitting in. She stared in disbelief before running inside, dialing Dad's cellphone number.

"Hey there," Dad said

"Dad!" she shouted. "I found my VHS collection and Tasha wants to sell them."

"Sorry I can't reach the phone right now," his voice continued.

“Dad?” Charly asked.

“Leave me a message and I’ll get back with ya soon. See ya.”

Charly hung up the phone and stared at it as it hung on the wall, hoping Dad would call back. The phone remained silent. After a moment, she decided to head back outside. Charly grabbed a few movies and tried to make it back inside, but Tasha grabbed Charly’s arm as she was helping the grandma who lived across the street pick out movies.

“Charly, let go of the movies. We have no way to play them now. Besides, Ed told me to sell them, so let them go. They aren’t yours, anymore.”

Charly stopped and let go of the movies, staring at the white garage door for a few seconds, not believing her ears. Dad didn’t care about her attachment to those movies. He didn’t understand how they seemed to be the last part of her childhood that she remembers being happy. Charly clenched her fists and turned back around, determined to not let her memories disappear. But as she stood next to the freezer filled with deer meat, Tasha sold a giant stack of all of the Disney princess movies, including the straight to VHS releases of *Aladdin* and *Beauty and the Beast* to the grandma.

“My granddaughter is going to love these,” she said, and smiled at Tasha.

“I hope they are loved as much as they used to be here.” Tasha said and smiled back.

The woman grabbed her paper sack of movies and saw Charly staring dumbstruck at her. “Oh, this must be Ed’s daughter I have heard so much about.”

“Yes,” Tasha said, turning around and pulling Charly closer, putting an arm around her shoulders and giving her a side hug. “This is Charlotte. She used to watch

these movies all the time but outgrew them in favor of Harry Potter, so I want the movies to continue to experience love like they should.”

“Oh my, Harry Potter?” The woman gasped, noticing the book in the chair and shaking her head. “Do you know that Harry Potter promotes Satanism?”

“I heard,” Tasha said back, letting go of Charly and shoving Charly behind her. “But if you will excuse me, Mrs. Wilson, I need to go check on my children and make sure that they are up and moving so they don’t waste daylight.”

“Well, it was nice catching up with you, Tasha, and congratulations on the engagement. I read about it in the newspaper this morning.”

“Thank you,” Tasha said as she disappeared back inside and Mrs. Wilson looked down at Charly.

“You should be ashamed of yourself for reading such filth. I should take that book and burn it.”

“The Nazis burned books and look where that got them,” Charly said before she could stop herself. Mrs. Wilson flushed red.

“Watch your tongue. Didn’t your mother ever teach you manners?”

“Yes, but only to nice people. Not people who buy stolen VHS tapes from children who didn’t know their dad and his girlfriend hid them in their room for a year to hope the kids forgot about them.”

Mrs. Wilson turned pale. She eyed her bag of movies and back at Charly, before turning to walk away.

“Just be careful, Mrs. Wilson,” Charly said, getting a glance from the woman over her shoulder. “*Mulan* doesn’t work the best. She’s rather worn when she looks at her reflection.” Mrs. Wilson flushed red and she dug in her bag before putting *Mulan* in her hands and walking away. That was one movie safely in Charly’s hands, one she loved as a kid and was the twins’ first movie they saw in theaters. But Tasha came back out and saw *Mulan* in Charly’s hands and nearly screamed.

“Did you steal from Mrs. Wilson?”

“No, she gave it back. Said she didn’t want it,” Charly said.

“Oh, right, because that totally wasn’t the first movie she picked up and was super excited to take home for her granddaughter.”

“No, seriously, she gave it back.”

“What did you say to her?”

“Nothing,” Charly lied, staring Tasha down. Tasha looked like she was going to explode, but she calmed herself down as other people came to the garage, looking at the collection of VHS.

“Fine. You can keep that one and whichever ones don’t sell. But, I’m sending you to your room.” Charly made a grab for Harry Potter, but Tasha snatched it up first.

“Without Harry Potter,” Tasha said, smiling at the shock and terror that crossed Charly’s face as her mouth dropped open.

“You’re gonna catch flies like that.” Tasha shut Charly’s mouth and leaned back when Charly made a jump for her book.

“Give it back! It’s brand new and I saved up money for two months to buy that myself at the midnight release I dragged my mom to.” Charly made another jump at it and Tasha laughed, setting it on top of the cabinet she stood next to.

“I will if you behave. Inside, now.” Tasha snapped her fingers toward the door.

Charly looked up at her book on the top of the cabinet and then over at Tasha before taking off the apron and heading inside to her room. She heard Tasha shout for Shaunda, no doubt telling her to watch Charly and make sure she stayed in her room. From the window in Charly’s room, she watched as more of her movies left in the hands of others. She had already read every single book in her room and the book she wanted to continue to read was currently stuck in the garage. She paced back and forth, wanting to take things and destroy them, but her right hand would tingle at the memory of last year’s escape and how she got a thorn in her hand.

Hours ticked by and at one point Ian brought her a sandwich and had managed to snag her book back from Tasha. Charly smiled in thanks and Ian left. She ate and continued to read, occasionally looking out the window and seeing more movies leave. At noon, Tasha told Charly she could come out of her room, weird since the garage sales usually went until three.

“Come on, you need to take a shower,” Tasha said.

“Why?”

“We’re going out to a nice place tonight and you need to look your best. You can even borrow one of my old dresses. It might fit you.” Tasha left and Charly grabbed what she needed to take a shower. Once out, she ventured into Tasha’s closet and looked

around at the super skinny clothing. None of this was going to fit her, not with her larger chest and wide hips.

“Charly, these ones on the bed,” Tasha said from behind the bathroom door.

Looking at the bed were some larger dresses, tags labeled ‘maternity.’ Charly rolled her eyes and grabbed a dress with blue and green flowers before heading back to her room to put it on and mess with her hair. She left her room and felt naked in the dress. It was tight across her chest, but overly loose around her waist and it came down to her calves, making it look like an old granny dress to her. Shaunda ran around the house in a red dress with her ruby red slippers, Ian wore a button down shirt and a tie.

“Nice dress,” Ian snickered. Charly rolled her eyes and walked to her brothers’ room, knocking before entering. Louie was taller than Robert at this point, so one of Ian’s old shirts fit him well enough, and he wore dark jeans since Ian’s pants were nowhere near the right size. Robert didn’t have a shirt to wear, however, and Charly didn’t want him to get in trouble for not looking his best. She went back to her room and pulled out one of her button up shirts she wore when she needed to look ‘fancier’ than necessary. It was still a bit large for Robert and had a feminine shape to it, but when it was tucked into his pants, it wasn’t so bad. Robert smiled and hugged Charly, following Louie out into the living room to sit on the couch and wait for everyone else to be ready. Ian stood nervously by the door and Charly sat in the kitchen, waiting to be told what to do next. Tasha’s voice came from her bedroom.

“Charly!” she shouted. Charly walked over to the door. “Would you be a dear and go cut everyone a flower from the backyard? The boys need them pinned to their shirts and you and Shaunda can carry two or three.”

“Sure.” Charly went back to the kitchen, grabbed a pair of scissors, and left through the patio out into the backyard to cut flowers. Each of the boys got a purple petunia and she and Shaunda got white lilies. Charly cut a few more for Tasha - tiger lilies, and an orange petunia for Dad, because if the kids needed flowers, so did the adults. She headed back inside and had the boys tuck the flower into their shirt pockets. By this point, Dad had returned home early from work and wore a suit and tie, Charly putting the flower through the lapel hole.

“What’s up?” Charly asked.

“Just getting ready for the wedding, that’s all.” Dad adjusted his tie

“I thought the wedding was in September.”

“Didn’t Tasha tell you? We closed the garage sale early to go to the courthouse to get married. Spur of the moment thing, since the sale went well.”

Charly stood still, her hands falling to her side. She should have guessed. Why else would she have to wear a stupid maternity dress and cut flowers from the backyard that shredded all over the place, making it look like she got sneezed on by a bumblebee. Tasha came out in a slinky black dress that hung to her every curve, making a big scene of kissing Dad in the kitchen before heading outside and piling the kids in the car.

“I called your parents. They’re on the way. My mom decided to stay home and cook a big meal for us. After the ceremony, because we are cutting it a bit short,” Tasha

tapped the clock that read 3:49. The courthouse closed at 4 and took three minutes to get there. “Mom says she doesn’t have any chips, so I told her we would stop by Wal-Mart and pick up a few bags.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ed said, bouncing his thumbs on the steering wheel as he sat at a red light, time ticking away.

3:53, they park the car and head inside.

3:55, paid \$20 cash for the marriage license.

3:58, wedding performed.

3:59, Ed and Tasha pronounced married.

“You may kiss the bride.”

Text Messages

April 2, 4:30p.m.

Dad: How did your school week finish
up Charly?

Charly: Fine.

Dad: you ready to come up for spring break?

Charly: No.

Dad: Why not?

Charly: I told you. Shelby and I already have plans
this weekend to go prom dress shopping and hang out
before she visits family in Oklahoma.

Dad: And I told you no because
we have to prepare for your
grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary.
You're on decorations.

Charly: It's a gym. Wtf am I supposed to do
in a gym, throw glitter around and call it a day?

Dad: I told you to come up with something.
You're the artsy one.

Charly: Why does everyone say that?
I'm interested in astronomy, not fucking
balloons and streamers. If anything, Robert is more

artsy than me!

Dad: Charly, watch your language.

Charly: w/e

Dad: Charly, you will be here tonight.

Dad: Charly?

Dad: Charlotte Ann, answer me God damn it!

Charly: Watch your language.

Dad: This isn't funny Charly.

April 2, 4:45p.m.

Mom: Ready to go Charly?

Charly: Mom, I told you, I'm staying
with Shelby this weekend.

Mom: What did your father say?

Charly: No, but I'm already over here.

Mom: Please don't make things difficult.

Charly: I'm not going.

Mom: Suit yourself. You deal with your
own consequences.

April 2, 5:30p.m.

Dad: Charly, where are you?

Charly: In a black hole.

Dad: Charly, why aren't you with
your brothers?

Charly: I told you, I'm in a black hole.

Dad: Charlotte, this isn't funny. Tell me where
you are, I'm coming to get you.

April 2, 5:35p.m.

Charly: Mom, please tell me Dad isn't
coming to pick me up.

Mom: Yup.

Charly: Don't tell him where I am, please.

Mom: Even if I did tell him he wouldn't
have listened to me. You know he has been
diagnosed with selective hearing disorder.

Charly: Mom, did you tell him where Shelby lives?

Mom: No, of course not.

Charly: Thank you. I love you.

Mom: Love you 2 babe. Be safe.

Charly: I'm invisible. I'm safe.

April 2, 5:45p.m.

Ed: Where are you?

Ed: Charly?

Ed: Answer damn it!

x2 missed calls

Ed: Damn it Charlotte, we are all heading up

north, now.

Ed: Stop ignoring me Charlotte.

Ed: Fine, you come up Sunday.

That's an order. You do NOT want to

disobey me again, you hear?!

April 2, 8:03p.m.

Evil Queen: Hey Charly, where are you?

Evil Queen: I thought you were coming up

with your brothers.

Evil Queen: Shaunda was excited to see you.

Evil Queen: We can't decorate without your

artistic eye.

Evil Queen: It's lonely without you.

Evil Queen: Please stop ignoring me.

It's rude.

Evil Queen: Charly?

Evil Queen: Chaaaaarrlyyyyyyy!

Evil Queen: Charlotte this isn't funny
anymore. Answer your phone.

x1 missed call

Evil Queen: Charlotte, answer your phone.

x2 missed calls

April 2, 8:23p.m.

Ed: Stop ignoring you mother.

Charly: She's my step-mom. Not my mother.

Ed: Don't use that tone of voice with me kid.

She is your mother.

Charly: No.

Ed: We will have a discussion about this
later, but your attitude has gotten you
into a lot of trouble missy.

Charly: Ooo, I'm soooo scared.

April 3, 12:56p.m.

Charly: Hey Mom, I locked my keys in the car.

Can you bring the spare set?

Verizon Support: We're sorry, this #
has been disconnected.

Charly: Mom, this isn't funny.

Verizon Support: We're sorry, this #
has been disconnected.

April 3, 1:04p.m.

Charly: Dad, did you disconnect my phone?

I can't get ahold of Mom.

Verizon Support: We're sorry, this #
has been disconnected.

Charly: You fucking serious right now?

You are a mother fucking asshole,
you know that right?

Verizon Support: We're sorry, this #
has been disconnected.

April 3, 1:11p.m.

Charly: Hey bitch! You fucking Evil Queen.

I hate everything about you. Go jump off
a fucking cliff you motherfucking piece
of shit. And shove a stick up your

ass while you're at it.

Verizon Support: We're sorry, this #
has been disconnected.

Charly: Suck it.

Verizon Support: We're sorry, this #
has been disconnected.

April 3, 1:15p.m.

Shelby: Hey Miss Stephens, Charly accidentally locked her
keys in the car when we went to Qdoba.

Could you bring the spare set?

Miss Stephens: Did she lock her phone in the car too?

Shelby: No, just the keys.

Amanda: Why didn't she call me then.

Shelby: Hey Mom, it's Charly. Dad disconnected
my phone because he called her my mother
and I said no and we argued. Now we're stranded at Qdoba,
not too bad but I don't have a working phone.

Amanda: That fucking asshole.

Shelby: Tell me about it.

Amanda: I'll bring the spare keys and we'll get you
on my plan. He can't do that. What if it had

been a real emergency and you couldn't even contact
the authorities and you were by yourself?

I don't want to think about it right now.

I've had enough of his crap.

Shelby: Thank you. I'll buy you a burrito

Amanda: Steak queso burrito

with sour cream and guacamole please.

Thank you.

April 3, 1:24p.m.

Amanda: Why did you shut off Charly's phone?

Ed: She has no right to speak to me or my
wife the way she did.

Amanda: Fine, but you can't shut off her
phone. That is the only way she could
get a hold of anyone.

Ed: She can go a few days without a cellphone.
She did for almost 16 years.

Amanda: No. What if there was an emergency?

Ed: Nothing bad is gonna happen. Nothing ever
happens in your quiet suburban neighborhood.

Amanda: No, Ed. Stuff happens. Charly locked her

keys in the car. She couldn't get a hold of me
and had to use Shelby's phone to text me.

Ed: Well, if she had come up here with me and
the boys on Friday, this wouldn't have happened.

Amanda: That is beside the point. Sure, it was
just a pair of locked keys. But what if it had
been something worse? You can't disconnect her phone.

Ed: She'll get it back after we talk about
her attitude tomorrow after the anniversary party.

Amanda: No, not with her driving herself 2
hours north alone.

Amanda: You know what, just get rid of her number.
I'm putting her on my phone plan with the boys,
even though you agreed to keep her on your plan
so it wasn't so much of a burden for me. Not like
you really care about me or the kids.

Ed: That doesn't teach her her lesson.

Amanda: Well, it's good to know you're more
interested in punishing our children
rather than making sure they're safe.

Ed: You were always the pushover.
No wonder the children are unruly.

They don't have any discipline.

Amanda: Edward, they're just children.

Ed: They're teenagers, almost young adults.

They need to behave. It's a good thing I got
out when I did. I wouldn't let the children be unruly
with a bad mother such as yourself and all.

April 3, 3:43p.m.

Charly: Hey Robert, it's Charly. Had to get a new
phone number because Dad cancelled mine.

But don't tell him please.

Robert: Okay. He's super pissed.

Charly: I know and I don't care.

Robert: He's scaring me.

Charly: If anything happens to you or
Louie, call the cops okay?

Robert: Now you're scaring me.

Charly: I'm sorry bud. I just don't want
anything bad to happen to you guys.
I would never forgive myself.

Robert: I know, but don't worry. We're fine.
I'm currently throwing glitter all over the

gym cause Dad told me to. Said it was your idea.

Charly: I was being fucking sarcastic. Geez.

Robert: Lol

Robert: Hey, Aunt Faye is here and wants
your new number.

Charly: Awesome, give it to her!

April 3, 3:54p.m.

(502)555-2712: How's my favorite niece.
I noticed you weren't here.

Charly: I'm blowing off your brother.

<<saved>>Aunt Faye: Uh oh, what now?

Charly: He won't let me be a normal teenager on
spring break where I hang out with my
only friend, my boyfriend, go to movies,
and prom dress shopping.

Aunt Faye: Idk what to say then. You've
been complaining about him to me since you
got an email address five years ago or so.

He doesn't change. But are you
still coming up? I really want to see you and
so do your grandparents. They've been harassing me

about you since I arrived here from Louisville.

Charly:

Aunt Faye: ???

Charly: I'll come up Sunday for the party

Aunt Faye: That's the spirit.

Charly: But I'm sticking to you the whole
time like glue. I don't want to mess
with Dad. Too much.

Aunt Faye: Don't worry, I won't let go
of you. I would love it if the bf
came along as well ;)

Charly: We shall see

Aunt Faye: XD

April 3, 4:14p.m.

Charly: Hey Justin. It's Charly.

Got a new number. Asshole shut off the
other one.

Prince Charming: Why hello there my
princess.

Charly: I have a question.

Prince Charming: What's up?

Charly: I promised my aunt I would go to
the party for my grandparents' anniversary,
so do you wanna come with me?

Prince Charming: I thought you were
avoiding the party like the black plague?

Charly: I was, but I haven't seen my aunt since
my parents' divorce seven years ago and the
party is about my grandparents, not my dad.
He can shove a stick up his ass for all I care.

Prince Charming: You sure this is the right
thing to do, not for your family but for you?

Prince Charming:

Charly:

Charly: Yes

Prince Charming: Alright, I'll drive.

Charly: Thank you. I love you.

Prince Charming: I love you too, always.

Charly: :D

April 3, 7:28p.m.

Dad: Is your sister finally coming up? I know
you've been texting her.

Robert: Yes, she and Justin are on
their way up.

Dad: Who's Justin?

Robert: Charly's boyfriend.

Dad: Oh, that guy.

Give me Charly's phone number,
I need to get a hold of her.

Robert: I'm not allowed to do that.

Dad: Why?

Robert: Sister's orders.

Dad: I'm your father.

Robert: And she's my sister.

April 3, 7:32p.m.

Ed: Have you heard from Charly? You two
text all the fucking time.

Faye: Yeah. She and her bf are coming up tomorrow.

Ed: The boyfriend wasn't invited.

Faye: I went ahead and invited him.

Ed: Why? We only planned on a hundred
people or so

Faye: So what's one more person?

Ed: A big deal.

Faye: He's not gonna eat everything.

Ed: and what if he does?

Faye: Then you don't have to worry about the left overs.

What, no retort from that, baby brother?

Ed: You always do things behind my back.

Faye: Because I know you won't do things

that need to be done.

Ed: This is about Mom and Dad, not you.

Faye: I know. I invited Justin because Mom won't

get off my back about him and when she

is finally going to meet him.

Ed: I hate you.

Faye: The hate is mutual baby brother.

April 3, 10:08p.m.

Aunt Faye: Your dad's an asshole.

Charly: Tell me something I don't know.

April 4, 12:11p.m.

Prince Charming: What was the whole point
of this event again?

Charly: My grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary

Prince Charming: So why has it become the

Tasha and Ed show?

Charly: Cause everything is about them

Prince Charming: Have I ever told you I

hate your step-sister?

Charly: Join the club.

April 4, 4:47p.m.

Dad: Guys, get off your phones. It's picture time

Louie: Coming

Robert: I'm in the bathroom

Charly: I'm standing next to you, Dad.

April 4, 5:03p.m.

Dad: I do not appreciate the behavior you have

displayed here today. Today was about your

grandparents and you did nothing but hang out on your

phones and ignore the rest of the family and

friends here to support them.

Louie: I talked with grandma for most

of the day!

Robert: Aunt Faye is pretty cool.

Dad: Still, unappreciated behavior.

Charly: whatever. It's better than the Tasha show.

Dad: CHARLY!

Charly: Come at me. I'm 18, I technically don't
have to be here. But I came for my grandparents
and for Aunt Faye. I came because I love them.
I didn't come for you or your model wife. You
guys mean nothing to me. I hope you understand
this is the last time I'll be seeing you.

Dad: I don't appreciate your tone.

Charly: I don't care.

April 4, 5:37p.m.

Charly: It was great to see you again Aunt Faye

Aunt Faye: You too Charly.

Charly: Justin and I are heading home.

Aunt Faye: Leaving me to calm down
your father.

Charly: If you want.

Aunt Faye: what did you say to him.

Charly: FWD: Come at me. I'm 18, I technically

don't have to be here. But I came for my
grandparents and for Aunt Faye. I came because
I love them. I didn't come for you or your model wife.
You guys mean nothing to me. I hope you understand
this is the last time I'll be seeing you.

Aunt Faye: Fair enough.

April 4, 5:33p.m.

Faye: You're an asshole.

Ed: What did I do this time?

Faye: You drove away your daughter.

Ed: She's just having a bad day, that's all.

Faye: No. She has felt this way for years.

Ed: And how would you know?

Faye: there's this little thing called an email that
you refuse to answer that I use to talk with
Charly over these past few years you've
been running around with she-bitch.

Ed: That is no way to talk about Tasha!

Faye: Face it Ed. I don't like her, Charly doesn't
like her, the twins don't like her, our parents don't
like her. Hell, Charly told me that her son doesn't

even like her. You have effectively ruined your
relationship with the rest of the family, and I hope
you like the bed you made cause you gotta sleep in
it now.

April 4, 7:23p.m.

Charly: Thank you for coming up with me today.

Prince Charming: Any time princess

Charly: It was rough, but I hope you had fun.

Prince Charming: Just think. You and I leave for IU

in 5 months where we get to start over new.

No more Ed, no more crazy step-mother and

step-sister, just you and me taking

on the world. How does that sound.

Charly: Sounds like the happy ending I've been dreaming of

Prince Charming: <3

Charly: <3 <3 <3

Appendix B: Welcome to Fallen Crest Outline

Part 1 - Initial Shock

Age 10

- Lives in Sunrise neighborhood with her father Edward “Ed” and mother Amanda, as well as her two twin brothers eight-year-old Robert and Louis “Louie”
 - Normal after school day where Charly gets her homework done early, Robert is sitting in front of the TV watching cartoons, and Louie is complaining about the food.
 - Ed and Amanda enter the room and sit the kids down at the table
 - Describe that for fall break, they will be going down to Louisville to be with their Aunt Faye, Ed’s only sibling
 - Aunt Faye takes them to Six Flags, Newport Aquarium, and Churchill Downs over their five-day break
 - Kids return to Sunrise and Amanda has moved to Fallen Crest, but Ed is still at Sunrise.
 - Amanda and Ed explain how they won’t be living in the same house anymore, but this has nothing to do with the kids. They will see each parent equally, but they just live in two different houses

- Louie is confused, as well as Robert, but Charly is visibly upset with tears, but doesn't say anything because she knows what is happening - divorce.

- She thought that this might happen when she had picked up important looking mail but both of their names weren't on the envelopes.

- In December, Amanda has completed the move with the kids to Fallen Crest, right before Christmas - everything is now unpacked. (Fallen Crest is lower-middle class area (older area in Fishers, but not cheapest/shittiest area in the Indianapolis area))

- Amanda tries her best to hide her depression in the holiday season, but the children do notice, especially Charly, who doesn't ask for an allowance and tries to help her mother out as best as she can

- Charly even offers to pitch in what little money she does have to buy a few presents for family.

- Amanda appreciates the move, but refuses, saying the money is for Charly to use.

- Charly buys her mother DVD player from Goodwill so they can watch movies again, like old times.

- On Christmas morning, the children have fun just hanging out with their mother, around the tree, and watching a fire crackle on the TV.

- Door bell rings and Ed shows up.

- Charly answers the door with Amanda and the twins right behind her
- Ed invites himself into the house on Christmas morning, ignoring Amanda's open glares about intruding uninvited.
- Gift exchange is made and Ed gets the kids new CD players with no CDs
- Amanda gets the kids used books and video games that they will actually play and read.
- After kids run off, Amanda and Ed get into an argument over the holiday season and who gets to be Santa
- During the argument, the twins find out that Santa isn't real
- Amanda kicks Ed out of the house. Ed doesn't even say goodbye

Age 11

- Summer
 - Ed arrives to pick the kids up for their weekly Wednesday night custody session
 - Tells the kids that they have a special event planned for the night -- something that never happens
 - Arrive at Ben N' Aries Golfing and Arcade on the north side of Indianapolis - Fishers
 - Ed introduces a woman and her two children to Charly and the Twins

- Tasha is the woman, who is just a “friend,”
- Ian is the older of the two children (16) and completely uninterested in the whole event
- Shaunda is an annoying 9-year-old mini-Tasha who is way too interested in the wins for Charly’s comfort.
- They start off the night putt-putting
 - Charly hasn’t said one word, just waved her hand in hello, but decides to play a round anyways, in silence
 - Twins and Shaunda laugh and giggle while taking crap shots to shoot the golf balls into the various ponds so they can use the net to fish them out
 - Ian is “too cool” to put-put and continuously texts his football friends and girlfriend while sitting on a bench near the arcade entrance.
- Charly ends up joining him to get away from Ed and Tasha
 - Tasha weakly hits the balls, so Ed will wrap around her and guide her on how to putt
 - Ed won’t leave Tasha’s side
 - Each attached at the hip and make goo-goo eyes at each other
- Robert and Louie get into a small argument and Robert falls into the water hazard below – he can’t swim.

- . Charly runs in and saves her brother from drowning while Ed and Tasha argue with the owner of the arcade about the safety of the place.
 - . Owner throws in free pizza to calm everyone down.
- . Once the kids are calmed down and mostly dried off, they return home and ignore the arcade and duckpin bowling alley.
- . Pizza arrives and there isn't enough pizza for everyone to eat
- . Charly ends up making more food so that Robert doesn't go hungry with the lack of pizza.
- . When bedtime comes, the kids split up weirdly for sleeping arrangements and Charly sees Ed kissing Tasha, freaking out because there is no way that her parents could possibly get back together if she played her cards right.
- . Ian and Charly become acquainted better
 - . But Robert fears that he will lose his sister to Ian like he lost his brother to Shaunda
 - . Charly promises to never leave her baby brother.

Age 12

- . Summer
 - . Ed places the house in Sunrise for sale just under a year after introducing the kids to Tasha and her kids

- Once Ed decides he is going to move in with Tasha, Charly runs to her room and throws things around.
- . Upset about the situation but doesn't really know how to handle her anger.
 - Puts holes in the wall (imagining smashing Shaunda's pig face in), destroys a desk, and breaks a lamp with a leg from the chair (getting a giant splinter in the palm of her hand).
- . Once her initial shock subsides and she notices someone trying to open her bedroom door, she escapes down the fire ladder (that Amanda was so insistent Charly had in her second story room) and runs across the street into the small wooded section to try and hide herself, escape from her life and pretend nothing ever happened.
 - . Tries to wake up from a bad dream but can't - not dreaming but in reality – just wants a happy ending.
 - Charly ends up finding a pit bull named Bubba, who leads her around the woods and protects her from the elements as she stays the night under a hollowed out tree.
 - Bubba leads her to a house where a boy is sitting on the back porch, freaking out about his lost dog.
- . The boy, Justin, is overjoyed to see his dog, but is also taken aback by Charly, covered in mud and shivering in the morning cold.

- Justin takes her into the house, where he lives with his mother, and takes care of the girl he found at the edge of the woods
- Justin runs to get his mom when he sees Charly's splintered hand. They wrap her in a blanket, clean her hands, call Amanda, and take Charly to the hospital to get her hands stitched up
- Charly didn't feel any of it since her adrenaline was running, but also wanted to be brave in front of her friend.
 - Amanda arrives at the hospital with the Twins and takes all three of the children home, thanking Justin and his parents for helping their family out.
- Winter
 - Ed sells the house and moves, but not before fixing it up (finishes basement, paints house, puts up a fence)
 - Never got around to fixing Charly's room
 - Forces her to sleep on guest bed on the loft because of the glass still in her carpet
 - Also easy to monitor her so she doesn't try to escape again like the night she cut her hands and fled to Justin's house
 - Wants to keep Charly safe

- Ed moves in with Tasha in Columbus Trails neighborhood in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

- Charly gets a room barely bigger than a small walk-in closet.
- Twins share a room with Ian
- Shaunda gets her own room
- Ed and Tasha get the master bedroom with attached bathroom
 - The other 5 have to share the other half bath.

- Christmas

- Ed and Tasha buy several expensive items because the house was sold
 - They tell kids to not get used to it.
- Charly gets shitty clothes that are too big and a used GameBoy Color
 - Says “Ian” on the battery pack on the back
 - Only received Barbie and puzzle games (hates Barbie and the puzzles are too simple)
 - Wanted Zelda, Mario, and Pokémon games
 - She doesn’t complain (like she resolves to) because it is the holidays
 - Yeah, she got shit, but the Twins got the goods and they are having a good time
 - Doesn’t want to ruin that for them

Age 14

- Summer

- Charly has gotten used to living out of a suitcase and having no privacy
 - When the Twins ignore Shaunda, she comes to mess with Charly
 - Knows that she will get a reaction out of Charly
 - Cries and gets Charly in trouble every weekend for not cooperating with Shaunda
- Most of the time, no one sees Charly
 - She is usually studying and doing homework or reading to stay away from family
- Discovers old movie collection had been in the attic when Ian brings out boxes to the garage sale Tasha is putting on.
 - Tries to steal them back, but Tasha stops her.
- She forces Charly to sell her old movie collection at the next garage sale for three dollars per VHS
- Charly is visibly upset and does her best not to cuss out customers
 - But lets Tasha know her feelings
 - Also won't let Charly read the newest and final Harry Potter book she had bought herself while selling her childhood away
 - All about pushing the sale on people, as if it was a retail store rather than a shitty garage sale
- Day three of the garage sale closes early so Tasha and Ed can go to the court house right before it closed to get married
 - Charly is a bridesmaid

- Shaunda is the maid of honor
- Robert is the best man
- Louie is a groomsman
- Ian is a spectator with his girlfriend
- Tasha and Ed now become Mr. And Mrs. Stevens
- After marriage, they have to go to Walmart before the dinner at Tasha mother's house to grab some last minute ingredients
 - "Could it get any more Redneck than this? We close the garage sale early to make it to the courthouse in time so they can get married, and now we have our reception at Walmart because we forgot something or other. Duh-huh." (Banjo-Kazooi Laugh)
- Fall
 - Ed and Tasha move the kids to a new house in the richer area of town to Valley Forge neighborhood
 - Each kid can have their own room, but the Twins decide to share a room, so they get the biggest room besides the Master Bedroom on the main floor of the house
 - Have their own TV and bathroom
 - Ian moved off to college back in August, shortly after Tasha and Ed got married
 - He gets the spare bedroom/storage place in the basement when he comes home on breaks

- Shaunda and Charly have rooms across from one another, also in the basement as well

- Shaunda has a TV and a new desktop computer

- Charly has a faulty TV and a semi-working old desktop computer with no desk to put it on or internet to connect it to so she could do her homework.

- Ed and Tasha say that it was too expensive to route one more cable into Charly's room

- Just want Charly to spend time with the family as a whole

- Not always secluded away in her room

- Winter

- Ed and Tasha want to talk to Charly since she is the oldest in the house now about responsibilities to the house and to the family

- Charly isn't having it - just fed up about being treated like a child

- Ed and Charly go at it in a yelling match

- Ed says he didn't have to move - "You could have said something! I could have stayed at the Sunrise house!"

- Charly: "Oh, like you would have listened to a twelve-year-old and a pair of nine-year-olds about

where you should live. You want me to have responsibilities but you can't even take any blame yourself."

- The argument ends with Charly being sent to her room
 - Her room is in the basement for a reason - to escape, she had to go up the noisy stairs and get past her annoying step-sister
 - Charly discovers she could fit through the half window in the basement and escapes that way
 - Would walk around the neighborhood aimlessly, since she was out of the house.
 - Only got away with it a few times before the police were called to escort her home - neighbors worried that she was a stalker or potential predator
 - The window became locked from the inside and outside
 - No more escapes

Part 2 - the quiet years

Age 15

- Fall

- This is the first time Charly requests to stay home for a weekend from Ed's
 - High school homecoming - freshman year
 - Justin, good friend who found her in the woods, asked her to go with him
 - Ed refuses to let Charly go to some silly event such as Homecoming.
 - Lawrence North High School is on Amanda's weekend, so Charly asks Justin if he would like to come to that one instead
 - Ed finds out and strongly encourages Amanda to refuse to let Charly go
 - She would be irresponsibly since she was just like her mother and grandmother
 - Amanda is incredibly offended and openly yelled at Ed on the phone in front of her children because she was so upset
 - To keep the peace in the family, Charly asks Justin to only go out to a small dinner and then to the movies
 - A first date

Age 16

- Late winter/early spring
 - Ed pays for Charly to take driver's ed so she will be able to drive up to his house so he won't have to drive to pick them up

- Won't get her a car though or phone - that's Amanda's job, since she is the custodial parent
- Charly ace's the class and driving - obviously with her excessive study habits and unnecessary nerves
- She ends up getting stranded at school when there is a miscommunication about pick-up time after school
- She gets stuck at school from 4:30 - 7 after driver's class one day with no way of getting ahold of anyone
- Most students had gone home for the day
- Has to wait for swim practice parents to show up so she can borrow a phone to call Amanda to pick her up and let her know that she is okay
 - Amanda forces Ed to get her a phone so something like this won't happen again
 - Finally gets a phone
 - Without a car, Charly can't go anywhere
 - Ed gets a phone, but Amanda should get a car
 - Amanda can't afford a car and Ed gets upset he still has to drive to pick up the kids.

Part 3 - The final blow

Age 17

- Spring

- Getting ready for prom season, Charly blows off her dad's request to spend her whole spring break with him and Tasha
 - Chooses to stay at friend Shelby's house
 - Ed calls several times along with Tasha, but Charly ignores them, choosing instead to watch stupid movies with Shelby until 3am instead of preparing for her grandparent's wedding anniversary party
 - Charly and Shelby spend the next day shopping
 - Both find prom dresses at a resale boutique in Fishers (Havilah's)
 - Lunch at Qdoba, Charly accidentally locks her keys in the car
 - Charly calls Amanda on her phone to get the AAA info to unlock the car.
 - Phone number has been turned-off
 - Ed's way of getting back at Charly for not following instructions
 - He didn't tell anyone, so this took everyone by surprise
- Shelby calls Amanda about car and Amanda is furious that Charly can't call anyone
 - Tells them the number and the policy ID

- Amanda calls Ed in a fit of rage but he won't change it until Charly has learned respect for her entire family.
- Amanda takes an extended lunch break, with her boss and boyfriend Atkins to keep the girls company until AAA can arrive two hours later.
- After AAA comes, Charly drops off her dress at home and after getting ahold of Aunt Faye, Ed's only sister, Charly and Justin travel up to the party.
- Amanda is barely able to afford the switch, but wants Charly to be able to contact anyone she needs to whenever
 - Atkins pays for the charge fees and Amanda is embarrassed and thankful
 - Charly likes the two of them together and supports her mother's choices
- Ed and Charly don't speak until after the party the next day, after Justin has returned home because he had to work the next day after the party.
 - Heavy tension between the two
 - Twins know that Charly is going to be in serious trouble and want to protect her since she always protects them and they try to stay by her side, but they are sent to their room and told to not come out no matter what they hear.
 - Charly smiles and says she is going to be fine

- “Your Mother is Poisoning YOU!” argument with Tasha - no respect for anyone, when they are trying their best to create a loving family
 - Tasha is lying out her ass and Charly knows it, and refuses to take any of this harassment tonight.
 - Charly tries to run out the back door but Ed catches her, drags her, and locks in her room with no phone for the rest of the week, six days
- After two days, the Twins are able to steal her phone back for her and present her with a new book to keep her entertained before having to go upstairs so they won’t raise suspicion
 - Charly contacts Amanda and Justin when she knows that Shaunda isn’t in her room and tells them what has happened.
 - Amanda and Atkins are at work, so they can’t come get the kids until after Atkins gets out of his legal meeting with a high profile case member.
 - Justin tries to borrow his mom’s car to come and get her and the twins out of that situation after but can’t.
 - Amanda, Atkins, and Justin ride up that afternoon to pick Charly and the Twins up
- Ed refuses to acknowledge Justin, threatens to punish the Twins for breaking the rules, but gets super enraged that Atkins showed up with Amanda.

- Thought he had left him in the courtroom
- Charly pushes Ed to distract him from Atkins, whom she respects immensely
 - Ed tries to push Charly back, but he pushes Justin instead as Justin is trying to get Charly out the door
 - Justin is pushed into the railing and doubles over from stomach pains
- Charly helps Justin up and out the door
 - Ed is angry drunk, which he has never been before to Charly's knowledge
 - Atkins pulled his lawyer skills to get the kids out of the house temporarily until Ed cleans up for his next weekend with the kids in two weeks
 - The drive home has Charly cuddled in Justin's arms, making sure he is alright from being shoved into the banister
- Summer
 - Charly spends her time bouncing between Amanda's, Justin's, and Ed's
 - Charly is harassed harshly at Ed's but she ignores it for the most part
 - Any back talking results in getting sent to her room with no computer and no ability to look at colleges or do homework, which she doesn't want to happen, so she continues to ignore the family to the best of her abilities

- Charly is also prevented from getting a summer job because of Ed's strict schedule that doesn't allow her to work weekends
- Summer remains calm and hot
 - You could hear a pin drop in a usually noisy house that is Ed and Tasha's
- School Begins/Fall
 - Charly commits herself to her schoolwork and clubs and applying to colleges
 - Wants to look good for college applications
 - Justin joins her for almost all of the clubs when not working out for baseball, varsity team captain off-season workouts (plays shortstop)
 - Amanda and Justin encourage her to go to college
 - Ed doesn't want to pay for it
 - Tasha and Ian don't think she is smart enough for it.
 - Charly is forced to get pre-approval from Ed and Tasha about weekends home
 - Approve of academic weekend events, but not games or homecoming

- On a weekend Charly is home at Amanda's, she and Justin are able to attend homecoming and genuinely have a great time
 - He gets her a promise ring and she freaks out and after her small panic attack, they get intimate for the first time
- Ed disapproves of the ring, but says Charly can just deal with the inevitable teenage pregnancy, just like family history
 - She ignores this statement, but she knows Ed doesn't trust her
 - Sad, thought that there could have been a little glimmer of hope, but she doesn't see any anymore
 - Doesn't care about Ed or his family anymore, they don't care or trust her, she doesn't care or trust them back.
- Winter
 - Same as in years past:
 - Charly secludes herself in her room to try and create the least amount of conflict
 - Ian and Shaunda praised most with Christmas gifts
 - Twins happy and content with their gifts
 - Charly gets leftovers
 - Charly can only call Justin when either Tasha and Ed are in the room

- Hides texting
- Concentrates mostly on homework and the beginning stages of AP studying
- Finishes applying for colleges
 - A few scattering of wait listing and rejections lower Charly's confidence about being able to go to college
 - Doesn't help with Ian and Tasha say, "Told ya so."
 -

Age 18

- Birthday/Late Winter
 - Ed insists on taking Charly out to lunch on her birthday
 - She is at an academic conference all day
 - Ed is upset but settles on taking Charly out for dinner
 - Ed, Tasha, Shaunda, the Twins, and Charly go to El Rodeo
 - Justin not allowed to come
 - Dinner is alright
 - Charly gets \$18 even for her birthday and a pin that says, "I'm 18, an adult. Respect!"
 - Has to put the button on even though she doesn't want to

- Wears the giant sombrero and is super embarrassed about the whole birthday celebration in general
- Shaunda has a meltdown about not being the center of attention and makes herself known front and center
 - Still acts like a baby, even though she is a high school freshman
- Becomes the Shaunda show
 - Charly takes a back seat
 - No energy after the conference and doesn't really care anymore.
- Charly thanks Ed and Tasha for dinner before she drives the Twins home in Amanda's car that she borrowed for dinner
- Once home, there is Gramma, Shelby, Atkins, and Justin to celebrate and eat cake
- A few weeks later Ed, Amanda, and Charly all sit down in a neutral area out in the open - neighborhood park (with Atkins and the twins still at the house) - to discuss college options
 - Ed and Amanda have opposite views and Charly agrees with Amanda - setting Ed off
 - Ed is still upset about being abandoned and replaced by Amanda and thinks Amanda has corrupted Charly against him

- Tasha was right in saying that Amanda was poisoning Charly
- Charly confronts Ed to say that these decisions are her own and to quit beating up on Amanda and living in the past
- Ed storms off and says they can bury themselves in debt, it's not his problem
- Spring
 - Charly cracks down on studying for AP tests
 - Early May: Ian graduates from Ohio State
 - Charly is in the middle of studying for tests that start next week
 - She pays attention to Ian graduate with the School of Business, but studies while other students graduate that she doesn't care about
 - Ed thinks Charly isn't paying attention at all
 - Ed emotionally harasses Charly and takes her study books, saying she shouldn't study because it is a waste of time and money
 - Robert, Louie, and Shaunda follow Charly out into the hallway of the auditorium
 - Louie tells Shaunda off and sends her back inside, crying to her mother.

- Tasha returns to hallway with an evil determined look in her eyes and is going to tell Charly off once and for all, but Charly and the twins have left.
- Amanda let Charly borrow her car since she didn't have to work on the weekends
 - Plus, Atkins can drive her
- Tasha runs outside to bring the children inside, but they are already on their way home
- Charly is ready for the AP tests, and takes them with relative ease
 - From all the studying, Charly remains calm the whole test
 - A month later, she finishes school with all A's
- Receives a larger scholarship from Indiana University, to study pre-law
- Thanks to Atkins
 - Receives 4 and 5's on her AP exams in mid July, receiving enough credits to be a college sophomore
- End of the Summer
 - Move-in Day
 - Charly and Justin are in the same dorm building
 - Justin is a computer science major
 - Ed shows up at Amanda house with some items for Charly's dorm room and asks if she needs help moving in
 - He is denied

- As Charly, the Twins, Amanda, Justin, and his parents get ready to head out, Ed looks rejected
 - This shocks Charly and as much as she has grown to hate this man, she goes and talks to him.
 - There is awkward silence between the two as they don't know what to say to each other
 - Charly extends her hand and gives Ed a genuine smile
 - Ed shakes her hand and gives her a smile back
 - No words are said. Ed gives a content sigh, and Charly nods her head and gets in the car with Justin to head down to Bloomington to begin college, and her new life.

Character Age Chart

This is a concise table with all of the character's ages displayed in an easy to read format

	Welcome to Fallen Crest	Water Hazard	Scars	Cash for a Wedding	Text Messaging
Charly	10	11	12	14	18
Robert	7	8	9	11	15
Louie	7	8	9	11	15
Ian	14	15	16	18	22
Shaunda	7	8	9	11	15
Ed	35	36	37	39	43
Amanda	39	40	41	43	47
Tasha	30	31	32	34	38
Faye	41	42	43	45	49
Year	2003	2004	2005	2007	2011

Character Descriptions

Character Sheet adapted from *Characters, Emotions, and Viewpoints* by Nancy Kress.

Each of the following character sheets were created for characters important to the outline but may or may not have been mentioned or developed in the stories themselves.

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Charlotte “Charly” Ann Stephens

Age: 10-18

Birthplace: Indianapolis, Indiana

Marital Status: single

Children and their ages: none

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Blonde, brown eyes, shorter torso/long legs, large chest and wide hips

Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three concubines):

Primarily with mother, visit dad and step-mom on weekends

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Student in the Hamilton Southeastern School District

Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a bumbler, etc.):

Competent

Character's feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as "just a job," has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):

Pushes for best grades possible – it allows for an escape from her family in hard times.

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Mother, Father, Twins Robert and Louie, Step-brother Ian, step-sister Shaunda, step-mother Tasha

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Charly

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

School, friendship, family (specifically mom and twins)

What three things do they fear most?

Divorce, rejection, being alone/lost/abandoned

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.)

If you want something done you gotta do it yourself

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as "all right" and trustworthy?

Doing what they say, being a genuine person

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Mistrust/back-stabbing, lost loyalty

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

Close family and friend motivation and empowerment

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Studious, angry, shy

How accurate is their self-description?

Very accurate (but not always as shy as she thinks she is)

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Robert Stephens

Age: 7-15

Birthplace: Indianapolis, Indiana

Marital Status: single

Children and their ages: none

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Shaggy brown hair, smirky grin, playful brown eyes

Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three concubines):

Stays with Mom during the week, enjoys spending time at Dad's almost every weekend, even when it isn't his weekend.

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Student, Hamilton Southeastern School District

Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a bumbler, etc.):

More competent than brother Louie

Character's feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as "just a job," has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):

It's neither here nor there, just something he has to do.

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Super attached to Charly and twin Louie, will stick to Charly over anyone.

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Robert

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet):

Family, music, happiness, life

What three things do they fear most?

Lose, drowning, darkness

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.):

The glass is half full, cause I drank the other half

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as "all right" and trustworthy?

If Charly and/or Louie (mostly Charly) trust them, then he will too

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Seeing Charly get beaten up for protecting him and Louie

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

The close family he is in

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Mischievous, happy-go-lucky, protector

How accurate is their self-description?

Pretty good

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Louie “Louie” Stephens

Age: 7-15

Birthplace: Indianapolis, IN

Marital Status: single

Children and their ages: none

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Blonde hair (Charly), blue eyes (Amanda), rounded ears (Robert), thin lips (Ed)

Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three concubines):

Mom primarily (with Charly and Robert), Dad and step-mom on weekends

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Student, Hamilton Southeastern School District

Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a bumbler, etc.):

Moderate learner

Character’s feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as “just a job,” has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):

Not interested, just wants to leave as soon as possible

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Attached to Ed over Amanda (Dad over Mom), Robert's best friend but finds his younger twin to be a bit of a nuisance.

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Louie

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

Peace and quiet, intelligence, family

What three things do they fear most?

Loneliness, lost, death

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.)

The glass has water in it

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as "all right" and trustworthy?

Spends time analyzing behavior and asks several questions for similar answers to his

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Losing his twin Robert

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

Hasn't happened yet

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Smart, aloof, protective

How accurate is their self-description?

Pretty good

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Amanda Stephens

Age: 39-47

Birthplace: Indianapolis, Indiana

Marital Status: divorced

Children and their ages: Charly 10-18, Robert and Louie 7-15

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Same as daughter Charly, slightly taller and more aged/wrinkled face from stress
(makes her look older than she actually is)

Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three concubines):

Small three-bedroom house with children in a bit of the rundown part of Fishers
to keep the kids in the same school district and not disturb their lives more
than she and her ex-husband already had

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Receptionist at Atkins and Brown paralegal office

Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a bumbler, etc.):

Extremely competent – want to become a paralegal but has no money (all of it goes to keeping her kids happy, healthy, and safe)

Character's feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as "just a job," has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):

Loves it – paralegal Atkins helped with divorce and gave her a job (eventually becoming her boyfriend/lover)

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Father died young (of a heart attack), mother even younger – raised by grandparents when mother was working to put food on the table

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Amanda

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

Family, trust, love, honor

What three things do they fear most?

Loss/rejection, harm to loved ones, letting kids go to their father's and having something happen (paranoia)

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.)

Family is the most important

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as “all right” and trustworthy?

Honesty, willingness to help in the face of need

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Dishonesty and loss of honor

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

Having happy, healthy kids who experience no pain from her ex

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Determined, strong, protective (like a mama bear)

How accurate is their self-description?

Incredibly accurate

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Edward “Ed” Stephens

Age: 35-43

Birthplace: Fort Wayne, Indiana

Marital Status: divorced, remarried

Children and their ages: Charly 10-18, Robert and Louie 7-15

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Short brown hair, scruffy mustache/beard, beer belly, shifty/squinted eyes,
wrinkled forehead, thin lips

**Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a
ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three
concubines):**

Lives with second wife Tasha and step-daughter Shaunda with visits from
step-son and own children

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Computer programmer at Ace Fixers

**Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a
bumbler, etc.):**

Experienced, has learned from past work in the city when he lived with Amanda

**Character’s feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as “just a
job,” has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):**

Mixed – loves computers, “just a job” but wants to stay because he is committed to making more than enough money for his family

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings’ names, parents’ names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Small family. Stay at home Mom, community active dad with Associate’s Degree from small Christian college. Sister Faye left for out of state college and never came back. Now has a sort of distrust for his sister for leaving the family.

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Ed

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

Money, forgiveness, consistency

What three things do they fear most?

Parental death (wouldn’t have anyone to truly trust anymore), bankruptcy, unforgiveness

What is this person’s basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. “Things will usually turn out all right,” or “They’re all out for themselves,” or “It’s best to expect nothing because then you won’t be disappointed,” etc.)

Get get what’s coming to you

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as “all right” and trustworthy?

Same ideas, allowing forgiveness

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Not receiving forgiveness for what he claims isn't a big deal

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

Marrying Tasha and having the seemingly perfect American life

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Efficient, understanding, money conscious

How accurate is their self-description?

Not good. He doesn't understand when people's perspectives are different than his own and want to argue against him

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Tasha Callow-Stephens

Age: 30-38

Birthplace: Fort Wayne, Indiana

Marital Status: divorced, remarried

Children and their ages: adopted son Ian 14-22, biological daughter Shaunda 7-15

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Short jet-black hair that she will dye random colors that don't always match her
skin tone, super curvy, skinny, sharp nose

**Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a
ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three
concubines):**

With Ed and Shaunda, occasionally with Ian, Charly, and the twins

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Local model, Pristine Image (how Ed reconnected with her

**Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a
bumbler, etc.):**

Decent (not appealing model face but great body)

**Character's feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as "just a
job," has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):**

Just a job, but not educated to do anything else besides watch TV and exercise
excessively

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Rich area, spoiled youngest child of five, the perfect image of the American
Family

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Tasha

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

Beauty, freedom, cooperation with her ideas

What three things do they fear most?

Ugliness, rejection, bankruptcy

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.)

Beauty is all a woman needs

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as "all right" and trustworthy?

If they praise her beauty

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Not being an acceptable model

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

Getting back together with her college sweetheart Ed

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Beautiful, perfect, cunning/smart

How accurate is their self-description?

Eh, accurate but not for the right reasons.

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Shaunda Callow

Age: 7-15

Birthplace: Auburn, Indiana

Marital Status: single

Children and their ages: none

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Curly brownish-black hair, mother's brown eyes, short, small waist (almost an exact replica of her mother Tasha)

Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three concubines):

Lives with Ed, Tasha, Ian and sometimes her step-siblings (but not with her father. She rarely visits him)

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Student, Dekalb County School District

Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a bumbler, etc.):

Not really good, more interested in a potential modelling career like her mother

Character's feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as "just a job," has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):

Just school. Would like to follow in her mom's footsteps

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Super close to Tasha, hardly sees her father, thinks of Ed as a father, completely ignores Ian, super interested in the twins (especially Louie). Jealous of Charly—gets her into trouble all the time so she can be the center of attention for the family

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Shaunda

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

Tasha, success, health, beauty

What three things do they fear most?

Unsuccessful, being fat/ugly, losing Tasha

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.)

Beauty is the way to a successful life

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as "all right" and trustworthy?

If Tasha trusts them, she does too

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Losing/being rejected by Tasha

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

When she decided to follow in Tasha's footsteps

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Beautiful, kind, smart

How accurate is their self-description?

Not very accurate. Can be bitchy and dumb and definitely not kind.

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Ian Callow

Age: 14-22

Birthplace: Auburn, Indiana

Marital Status: single

Children and their ages: none

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Short brown hair, broad chest, muscular – football, a bit on the short side

Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three concubines):

Stays with his father most of the time, but visits step-mother Tasha and her husband Ed from time to time, mostly to check up on Charly and make sure she is handling the craziness well.

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Student, Dekalb County School District; Ohio State University

Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a bumbler, etc.):

Somewhat competent, but lazy and unmotivated to care more and get above the bare minimum for football requirements

Character's feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as “just a job,” has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):

Doing it to be first college graduate on the Callow side of the family

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Lives with Dad, sees Mom weekly, regular sport practices, in his own bubble of friends and acquaintances.

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Ian

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

Strength, freedom, friendship

What three things do they fear most?

Weakness, being alone, inability to play sports

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.)

Sports are life

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as "all right" and trustworthy?

Nothing, he trusts anyone cause he really doesn't care. If they mess up, they mess up and he moves on with his life

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Death

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

Going to college for football

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Strong, handsome, intelligent

How accurate is their self-description?

Decent – definitely not as smart as he thinks he is

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Justin Fincher

Age: 11-19

Birthplace: Kokomo, Indiana

Marital Status: single

Children and their ages: none

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Small frame, lean and muscular, blue eyes, gentle smile, constantly winking,
shaggy brown hair

**Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a
ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three
concubines):**

Lives with single mother and pit bull named Bubba in a quaint ranch house across
the road from Ed's house (Charly's dad)

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Student, Hamilton Southeastern School district

**Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a
bumbler, etc.):**

Moderate learner (knows facts, is just a lazy procrastinator)

**Character's feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as "just a
job," has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):**

Enjoyable

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Good family, no problems (other than Dad when he was little, but nothing recently)

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Justin

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

Friends, family, sports, life

What three things do they fear most?

Loneliness, spiders, not being able to help others

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.)

I got this, maybe?

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as "all right" and trustworthy?

Being honest and truthful

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Losing anyone while away/being unable to help them

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

Charly

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Friendly, sporty, huggable

How accurate is their self-description?

Very accurate

Mini-Bio for Key Characters

Name: Daniel Atkins

Age: 38-45

Birthplace: St. Louis, Missouri

Marital Status: single

Children and their ages: none

General appearance (whatever seems useful):

Very well put together, slicked back brown hair, clean shaven, tall, small shoulders and large feet

Living arrangements (i.e., lives with wife and three young children; rents a ramshackle apartment alone; has tent in nomadic tribe with three concubines):

Lives in a 2-bedroom apartment by himself, until Amanda (Charly and the twins' mother) asks him to move in with the family.

Occupation, including name of employer (if applicable):

Paralegal – Atkins and Brown law firm (he's a co-owner/partner)

Degree of skill at occupation (beginner, really competent, experienced but a bumbler, etc.):

Extremely competent

Character's feelings about their occupation (love it, hate it, regards it as "just a job," has mixed feelings, is actively searching for other employment):

Absolutely loves it

Family background (whatever you think is important: ethnicity, siblings' names, parents' names, social status, clan affiliation, total repugnance toward everybody they knew before the age of 12):

Family moved a lot, now all in different states. Pushed to be a lawyer by his own father (who dropped out of law school), but never found anyone he wanted to settle down with until Amanda and her family, after he defended her in court when she was getting a divorce from her ex-husband Ed and offered her a job as a receptionist at his law firm.

Emotional Mini-Bio

Name: Atkins

What three or four things does this person value most in life? (i.e., success, money, family, God, love, integrity, power, peace and quiet)

Smarts, loyalty, consistency, courage

What three things do they fear most?

Death, never finding a companion, water

What is this person's basic underlying attitude about life? (i.e. "Things will usually turn out all right," or "They're all out for themselves," or "It's best to expect nothing because then you won't be disappointed," etc.)

You can win at almost anything with wit, determination, and skill

What does this person need to know about someone else in order to accept that others as "all right" and trustworthy?

Telling the truth

What would cause this person more pain than anything else possible?

Losing practice/law firm and/or Amanda and her kids

What would this person consider the most wonderful thing that could ever happen to them?

Amanda and her kids plus his partner Connor Brown

What three words would they use to describe themselves, accurate or not?

Witty, honest, friendly

How accurate is their self-description?

Alright. He's more shy than witty

Annotated Bibliography

Alexie, Sherman. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*. 20th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperPerennial, 1994. Print.

For this collection of short stories, the author has connected the stories together with the same collection of characters at different ages, levels of maturity, and perspectives. Since Sherman Alexie is a Native American who grew up on the Spokane Reservation in Washington state, his characters are based on people he either knew or situations he witnessed or was a part of. This brings an interesting connection to all of the stories while also having each story stand alone each with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. This has been the best collection of stories I have read for my senior English Capstone project and for my honors collection of short stories because of the interconnected stories and how the characters change over time. One part that really stood out to me was the timeline.

Not all of the stories were written in chronological order. There is Vincent, the main character through all of the stories, describing a story of his parents and how they had drunk parties to entertain the neighborhood while Vincent was downstairs, followed by another story that describes Vincent going down to Arizona to pick up the ashes of his father that were found in his trailer years after he left his mother, then followed by a third story about a different character hanging out with Vincent back on the reservation to keep him preoccupied while his parents fought and threatened divorce. With the jumbled timeline, it gives the feel that all of the stories are just that, stories. They don't have to be in any order, and I had never thought about that before.

Since my project is both for my English Capstone and my honors project, this book has been the best for describing how things can connect together, while not necessarily being in order. This can be a great advantage I can use when drafting the stories as well as deciding their order for the final project. With an interconnected collection of short stories, I had always figured that the stories had to be plotted out in chronological order, since I mainly read novels, and they are plotted out in chronological order. But since these are stand alone stories, I can do whatever I want with each story, from any age, time, and perspective, and create a unique and compelling series of short stories that would not have come about in a novel or linear collection of short stories. This will definitely be an aspect that I bring to my own writing and I will continue to work with in the future.

Anderson, Sherwood, with an introduction by Ted Olson. *Winesburg, Ohio*. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2010. Print.

This book seems to be one of the best collections of interconnected short stories on the market today. Since reading it, it has helped with my writing tremendously. Not just in the way that shows writers how to write a good short story, but how to connect everything together. Sometimes, while writing my own collection, it was hard to make the stories stand by themselves but also be connected to one another, one of the goals of this project. Sherwood Anderson wrote this collection almost one hundred years ago and it still holds up as a formidable collection of stories. Not only is the connection there, but the language and the emotion is present as well. One of my favorite lines is “she was like one who has discovered the sweetness of the twisted apples, she could not get her mind fixed again upon the round perfect fruit that is eaten in the city apartments” (12). This line, from the story called “Paper Pills” describes a character who moved to this rural town after having lived in a major city for a while, but returned to her family. Once back, she decided to stay because there are things in small towns that you cannot get anywhere else, and those little things make the best gifts to each person who comes to a small town.

It is these intricacies of the stories, and also the central location that make this collection seem incredibly modern and relevant today. The characters are distinguished and express themselves on the page in their own way, which is something I have been trying to do, but do not always seem to make it all the way, or have the characters as unique as they need to be. Anderson has created some great characters and I am going to

emulate that in my own writing so my stories are firmly based in reality and can last for long periods of time.

Bernheimer, Kate. *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: Women Writers Explore Their Favorite Fairy Tales*. New York: Anchor Books, 1998. Print.

This book came to me later in this project than previous books that were predetermined before I started writing. For one of my stories I wanted to use a fairy tale motif because the main character wanted to escape what she called “her Evil Queen,” her father’s girlfriend, soon to be wife. Because I wanted this motif, I needed to do more research on how people write about fairy tales as well as how fairy tales have effected writers from childhood to adulthood. I, myself, have taken a liking to fairy tales since I can remember my mother reading me some watered down versions of Grimm Fairy Tales before going to bed as a little girl. Because of this, I thought that it would be best to add in fairy tales to my own writings.

Of all of the women writers in this book, each had a different take on what fairy tales meant to them, whether it be from reading them as a child to being a big influence on their own writings today. Getting several different perspectives on how fairy tales influenced writers that I look up to is fascinating. And it wasn’t just fairy tales in general, some writers were influenced by specific fairy tales from *Snow White* and *Rapunzel* to *1001 Arabian Nights*. One writer, Vivian Gornick, wrote an analysis essay over *The Princess and the Pea* and how our society nowadays is obsessed with finding the right man, but putting almost no effort into the act of looking and wanting to be swept off of our feet by a knight in shining armor or Prince Charming. Another writer, Linda Gray Sexton, daughter of the late poet Anne Sexton, who wrote an entire poetry collection on fairy tales, remembers what it was like to grow up with her mother, who was always

reciting fairy tales as well as what it means for her as a writer trying to define herself as a different person from her mother even though they write about similar topics.

With these different interpretations of fairy tales, writing my own story with fairy tale motifs is going to be a unique experience as well as one that isn't so uncommon, but each retelling of each fairy tale is individual. While the story *Scars* ended up not using the fairy tale motifs I had done the research for, it still helped while writing and editing and going through different phases of editing and versions of the story.

Burroway, Janet, Elizabeth Stuckey-French, and Ned Stuckey-French. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. Boston: Longman, 2011. Print.

Within this most recent edition of Janet Burroway's craft book, the author lays out many different ideas about how to write narratively, but also how to think about how things work within the English language and its craft. English can be difficult to be in control of when it comes to writing, especially for beginners or nonnative speakers, but it can also be a wonderful skill to have when writing becomes a more natural thing for people to use and understand. Characters can be developed in the English language to become unique and compelling figures who can change over the course of the story or novel, whichever is being written at the time. For short stories, Burroway says it's a bit more difficult to express lots of change in a short amount of time, but it is not impossible. That is the best advice the author can give me at this point in time, since my writing style is more typical of that from a novel, which I describe details that may seem unnecessary in a short story, but are almost always essential to a novel, from the daily lives of a character before a change, as well as the usual banter of conversations that happen over the course of any day, no matter the situation. Novels seem to be pushed forward by dialogue, which is not necessarily a bad thing, as it allows the readers to further understand the characters and connect with them on a more personal level and create a bond between reality and fiction.

The author has laid down several tips for slimming down the text and word count for short stories as well as how to flesh short stories out to make them into longer stories

or even a novel, which will definitely come in handy as I continue to work on these stories for my honors project as well as any future writings I do after graduation.

Campbell, Bonnie Jo. *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters*. Brooklyn, NY: Maribeth Batcha, 2015, Print.

Besides from loving this collection of short stories for their narrative voice and characters, the relationships is that I seemed to pick up on most from this collection. As the newest collection of published short stories by Bonnie Jo Campbell, many of the stories relate around a main female character interacting with others around her. Sometimes the character of the story is interacting with a boyfriend, who is not the greatest, a brother or other sibling, or a mother. In the title story, the main character is an elderly mother, who has lost the ability to speak to her daughter, and telling her all the stories she wants to tell her but cannot because she is slowly losing her mind. This mother explains that her husband, her daughter's father, was not always the best, but they did with what they had and how they continued to survive long after he had left the family picture. This story alone is incredible for understanding how mothers interact with their daughters, and sheds light on how my own mother and I interact and how the mother in my short story collection should interact with her children, and how each of them will have a different relationship with each other, like people do in real life.

There is also the interaction that the characters have in this collection of short stories I read. The relationships seemed genuine, not something contrived inside someone else's head. This type of relationship I have struggled to create in my own writing, but by seeing how someone else has created these relationships, I am able to take my own twist on the relationships and make them my own and interesting characters with real centers

of conflict and internal struggle that make characters whole instead of just words on a page. That is what I strive for in my own writing.

Díaz, Junot. *This is How You Lose Her*. New York: Riverhead, 2012. Print

This book has quickly become one of my favorites that I have read for this project. I had read one story out of another book before hand for my Fiction Workshop class, but to read Mr. Díaz's newest collection of stories was a great privilege and I was excited that it could be worked into this project.

In this collection, most of the stories might come across as similar or the same with different character names. And for some of the stories, like "Nilda" and "The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars," I can see why critics have said that about this collection. In "Nilda," for example, the story is about a boy who says he is in love with this girl, Nilda. He wants his whole life to revolve around this girl, who is the high school slut, and how he would treat her right and not act like all of the other guys who just want to sleep with her and brag that they did so. But, the narrator ends up sleeping with her and finds nothing appealing about her, and then turns around and brags that he slept with her and that she wasn't anything special, a waste of his time. That is cruel, but that is the life of a high schooler. There were students in my own high school who had the same nicknames and people said the same things about them. Looking back, it is horrible, but I laughed at them because I was better than the girls who only slept around to gain a name for themselves, such as Nilda in the story.

The story did not seem to stick out, at first, to me. It was just another story that I read for this project and I almost skimmed over it because I had so many more books to read and there were other, better, stories in this collection I wanted to read and was excited to read ("The Cheater's Guide to Love" for example). But the end of "Nilda"

stabbed me in the stomach. It is years in the future and the narrator sees Nilda at the laundromat, children hanging off of her. The narrator comes to an epiphany, one that I was not expecting from the character. The narrator wonders what would have happened if he had not said those things about Nilda to his classmates and if they could have had a better life than the ones they were currently living. On the flip side, he wonders if he had stayed with Nilda, would they still have ended up like this, in a laundromat, children running everywhere, and no money because they chose to raise a family instead of getting out of their rundown town and making a new life for themselves.

This sort of conflict is one that is incredible for me and why I will continue to read Junot Díaz long after this project is over. That punch in the stomach at the end is a feeling that I love to feel when I am reading a story and one that I want to be able to write and make my own readers feel. I know how it was done in this story and I will try my hardest to add it into my writing, because that is an important feeling to writing that makes stories stand out in readers' minds.

Francke, Linda Bird. *Growing Up Divorced*. New York: Linden/Simon & Schuster, 1983.
Print.

This novel seemed to be more of a psychology book meant to be read by parents than a story to be told. That does not make it a bad thing, it actually helped immensely with the stories I wrote. Since it did have the psychological background for understand divorce and how children in the late 1970s to the early 1980s grew up interpreting their parents' divorce and how that can change with age as either the child grows older as the divorce evolves, or the child is older when the divorce takes place. Because of these different reactions, I understood how my own characters would evolve as well as understanding what I myself went through almost 12 years ago with my own parents' divorce that inspired this collection. With this book, it was easy to see how things transcribed from one year to the next as well as where things can go differently from me and my characters. These stories are not supposed to be memoirs for myself, but stories about characters who have gone through an experience I have myself, and how things can go differently based on each individual in the story or household.

Seeing these changes that people can go through in shared experience is helpful for how to structure my characters away from myself and my family members who some of the characters are based on so that I had an idea of where I wanted them to go in the story itself. With the help of this book, I can now see where my characters are going in their future developments of the stories and how to make the changes seem real and understandable for the character progression as well as for the readers and myself when I am writing the story.

List, Julie Autumn. *The Day the Loving Stopped: A Daughter's View of Her Parents' Divorce*. New York: Seaview, 1980. Print.

Within this nonfiction story, a lot of details are described so readers can fully understand what is going on in the situation. Since this is a first hand account of what the author remembers happening to her and her family after her parents' divorce, it was eye opening to read what others have gone through that was either similar or different from me based on who we are as people as well as the time difference. The author's parents got divorced in the 1970s, when no-excuse divorce became legal across the United States – meaning that there didn't need to be proof of a bad relationship or cheating to get a divorce, you could get one because you and your partner wanted one. For me, my parents divorced after the turn of the twenty-first century, so there were changes in society as well as how situations such as divorce were handled in the household and in court.

Even though this book was incredibly helpful as a basis for what I want to do for the future of this project, there was a sort of disconnect to the story. Yes, it is about children and their view on their parents' divorce, but that time difference of almost fifty years is a big challenge to overcome. With that time difference, readers cannot quite connect with the narrator. The book starts off with a college prom where families are invited to celebrate with their student before they graduate the next day. For me, the only proms I ever went to were in high school, and I definitely did not want my mother to attend that. Because of this disconnect and lack of literature, I am more motivated to publish these stories and make them as best they can be so that young people can read something modern that makes sense to them without the strange social constructs that

might be found in older literature that came out around the time of this book when the no-excuse divorce was becoming popular and divorce was more common.

Martone, Michael. *Not Normal, Illinois: Peculiar Fictions from the Flyover*.

Bloomington: Quarry /Indiana UP, 2009. Print.

While this book came with high praise and expectations, it was a bit of a let down in the sense of storytelling. The premise of the book is a collection of weird and "out there" stories written by people who grew up or are currently living in the Midwest, such as myself here at the University of Indianapolis. The stories were weird, and weird is never bad. I like weird. But the wrong kind of weirdness, for me, came from either the subject or the craft of the writing. The Midwest is not particularly interesting in my opinion, after living here for the past 22 years, but the authors tried to make it so, which is something I appreciate.

Not everything in life can be extraordinary when you live in such a place as the corn fields of Indiana. Some of the situations written came across as normal, like the Boy Scouts in their secret hideout after school, but what the whole story was interested in was pretty strange. The Boy Scouts in this particular story, wanted to be on the lookout for communist missiles that could potentially hit their area of southern Illinois during the early era of the Cold War. That is almost impossible; it is not going to happen, but these characters want to be on the lookout, "just in case." While stories like this can be appreciated, it is not really something I can use for my own personal work since my project is based in modern times and deals with current situations that affect half of the American population under the age of 18. This is not to say that this collection of stories was a waste of time. It showed me an extreme other end of how stories can be set in

reality, but all of this crazy stuff can occur; or that they can be totally out there in the sense of story, but still work wonderfully for craft.

Munro, Alice. *Dear Life*. New York: Vintage International, 2012. Print.

Many say that Alice Munro is one of the best short story writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. And to be honest, I have to agree with them. Munro takes very small aspects of life and makes them into intricate stories that either come full circle by the conclusion, or they are a series of unorganized flashbacks that make sense by the end of the story that you would have never understood if you tried to make the story linear. This technique is what I pulled on heavily for my opening story, titled “Welcome to Fallen Crest.” With the series of flashbacks, it would be hard to tell the story in linear order because each of the scenes is triggered by something in the present, and the way the human brain recalls memories is not linear. Munro captures this thought process in her stories and makes things absolutely beautiful when she tells them.

One story in particular stuck out to me, because it was told from the perspective of a young daughter traveling across the country by train, while her mother is off with someone else and trying to get over her own problems. The perspective jumps between the two narrators seamlessly and tell the story from both sides while also bringing an outside perspective on the characters and their actions with one another as well as those with them on the train. The story does not seem that interesting on the outside, but with the thoughts of the characters being the main drive of the story, readers learn about the characters that no one else would know, not even the other characters in the story, all while they are on a train to get somewhere else.

Since I have finished this collection, it has opened my eyes to a whole style of writing that I would not have known about and could use for my writing. Because of this,

my writing has improved and my knowledge of writing has expanded along with the different ways of telling a story.

O'Connor, Flannery, and Frederick Asals. *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1993. Print.

Flannery O'Connor has always been one of my favorite short story authors for her quirkiness and spontaneity with how the story unfolds. Most situations start off as normal, like a family going on vacation in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" or a mother and daughter starting their day on the farm in "Good Country People." All is well, the descriptions are funny and entertaining, making a normal day seem a little bit more interesting than the last. Then, something strange happens. A serial killer kills the family going on vacation and a supposed bible seller steals the daughter's fake leg because he thought it would be interesting to add to his collection. The events are incredibly random and almost seem out of place, but they work in the context of the story. The twist comes at the right point where the reader might think that nothing out of the ordinary is going to happen, but then the sudden change has readers' attention and continued interest in the story.

For my project, this seems like an interesting approach, but might not work as well in my own stories for this collection as some other stories that might develop in the future. There are not serial killers or creepy bible sellers who come to disturb the family I am writing about. But the event or twist does not have to be that. Since the serial killers and the bible seller are hilarious, they leave the reader laughing at the end, even though a family is killed and a girl loses her wooden leg. For my own benefit, it would not be something as hilarious or absurd, but something just as drastic to hook the readers into the story again and have them hold their breath to see how everything turns out. That

kind of writing is one that I want to use in my own stories and hope to execute well for all of my readers as well as myself as an author.

Russell, Karen. *Vampires in the Lemon Grove: Stories*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013. Print.

In this collection of stories, craft is everything. The author uses craft to her advantage and creates compelling stories based on craft of the English language rather than the characters or the plot. In the title story "Vampires in the Lemon Grove," the characters are not incredibly interesting, but with the author's use of words and craft, the story reaches a new level of characterization that allows the reader to understand who each character is and the world that they live in without the words on the page directly telling the readers the motives and ideas each character has. The main characters are vampires, but readers understand that they are vampires before they are physically described as one. That level of description and understanding is one that can be achieved through reading several stories like "Vampires in the Lemon Grove" and other stories in general, while writing and rewriting your own words on the page. It takes practice, and through this practice, the words and stories are beautifully done and keep the reader hooked and continuing to read.

There is an underlying layer of depth to each story in this collection; it is never explicitly said but understood. This is what I want my writing to be like. Words are precious things that need to be thought about carefully and this collection of stories shows this perfectly. Not only does the collection tell wonderful stories that are created in the reader's mind, but it also shows me, as a writer, exactly how words have an impact on readers in profound and wonderful ways.

Saunders, George. *Tenth of December: Stories*. Random House: New York. 2013. Print.

George Saunders is a short story author many writers strive to be one day, myself included. The writing style is unique, compelling, interesting, and easy to become enraptured in. It has been a long while since a short story caught my attention and kept it for a long period of time without interruption. It is a state referred to as the “vivid and continuous dream,” a term coined by James Gardner when he spoke about the narrative, structure, and plot working together as one to engage the reader for, potentially, forever. One such story in this collection was titled “Escape from Spiderhead.” While the story did not make sense at the beginning – it was an experimental facility that tested new serums and medicine on convicts to help benefit society – the character pushed the plot forward. This was his story, after all, and he would tell us what needed to be said. The further into the story I got, the more I wanted it to keep going. I did not want it to end, and when it did, I sat in silence and stared off into space because something inside me was affected by how the story had turned out. It was not something I expected, but when I went back and read it again, it was the only possible ending.

The structure of the story is incredibly well done and I want my own readers to experience a story like this one, but with my own characters and plot line. I want to be able to pull readers into the story, and with the help of George Saunders, I have an example of how that idea could work for me. While I will not be writing about scientists performing questionable tasks on convicts, telling the story of children of divorce from different perspectives can be as engaging with readers of “Escape from Spiderhead.”

Stern, Jerome. *Making Shapely Fiction*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1991.

Print.

One of the things I fall victim to when I write is using the same style of writing and story structure, which does not add variance to the stories and makes them seem similar to one another rather than their own unique stories as they should be in a collection of interconnected short stories like this. Professor McKelvey recommended this book for different structures for my stories to make the stories more interesting and not so similar to each other, and also open me up to different ways of writing that can be used beyond this project, something that is incredibly important for writers to use and express in their writing if they want to be successful.

Of the 16 shapes that can be used for fiction, I looked over ten of them that could possibly be used for the five stories I had written for this honors collection. Several stories had multiple potential shapes and many stories overlapped with one another in potential structure, making the options greater and more interesting when it came to writing the stories themselves. One of my favorite shapes of fiction is called “Bear at the Door,” that starts with writing a story where there is a problem that is significant and pressing, such as a large bear at the door of a house trying to get in. Anything can happen in this structure, but the most important thing is that the character has to act, and they have to act now. They are not being acted upon, such as “Visitation” shape mentioned for another story shape. The characters’ act and their actions are what drives the story forward. “The tension in the story comes from the battle between the challenge and the

character's need to face the problem" because if the character does not react, then the bear is coming into the house and doing whatever it wants to do.

And the characters do not have to act logically. The main character "can't pick up the knife. He puts a Mozart symphony on the stereo. The puzzled bear eats the record. Life is suggestive, not tidy."

Fiction can take any shape it wants and collections of stories are successful as long as each story has a different shape, something this book has shown me and I have used in this project.

Watkins, Claire Vaye. *Battleborn*. New York: Riverhead, 2012. Print.

Unlike previous book I have read for this project, this collection of stories is very character based and character driven – the opposite of the stories in Karen Russell's *Vampires In the Lemon Grove*, which are very craft based and driven. That is not a problem for Claire Vaye Watkins and her collection of stories since the characters are well put together, thought out, thorough, and compelling. This, combined with a simple narrative, makes the stories compelling, touching, and engaging for the readers that seemed to be lacking in other collections that were more craft based. I found myself crying over the story of a prostitute, something I never thought would happen, and not in a derogatory way; the thought had never crossed my mind to either read or write a story on that topic. The story is beautifully done, not because of the "sad life" this prostitute lived, as many people would assume because of her occupation, but that she opened up to another character when she said she would not, and then got stabbed in the back emotionally, that is what made me cry. That is what I need to use in my own writing, the raw emotion that hits hard and can move people into thinking about something they never would have taken a second thought at.

My characters must be fleshed out and compelling enough to make readers feel for these fictional beings, but also show that characters are important, not only because they drive the story forward, but because they have human emotion and can seem like real people who are experiencing real feelings in real situations. That is what I learned from this collection, and what I look forward to using in my own writing the most.