

## Varying Degrees of Living

The sun is barely coming up as I loop my car around the exit that takes me home. I try to recall the last time I was here. It sort of scares me once I realize I can't remember. Maybe I've blocked out the memory. Which is more or less what I'm hoping to do after all this is over.

After pulling in the driveway, I stand up and stretch, glancing at the rows of quiet, dark houses. I fumble through my purse trying to find the key that will unlock the door, but I'm coming up with nothing. Once I find it, I slide into the kitchen as quietly as I can, trying not to startle anyone. I almost head to tell Mom that I made it all right, but I think better of it. I don't know the last time she slept. The house is a wreck, naturally. Casseroles and assorted foods line the counters, the neighborhood's attempt at sympathy. Someone left the teakettle on all night, and the room has a burnt odor to it, a stiff smell that makes you want to get fresh air.

I dash silently, shutting off the burner, opening the west window that brings the breeze in faster. I start a pot of coffee, hoping to air out the kitchen. As I open the freezer, I shudder as I see a note written in my little sister's haphazard writing. *Mom, Lisa called off and I have to go work her shift. Be home a little after ten. Love, Rach.* Just seeing her handwriting makes my stomach clench, the finality of the situation hitting me.

I try to keep going, measuring out coffee and pulling clean mugs out of the dishwasher, but I can't stop my hands from shaking. In all the commotion, no one bothered to take it down. Maybe they wanted to leave it, maybe it helped them understand. Maybe this was Rachel's suicide note, the explanation we all were searching for.

I was getting ready for work yesterday morning, just like every other day. I promised Alice, my partner in the gallery, that I would get there early to finish the final painting and help set up the new exhibit, and Luke was one step ahead, moving his sculptures out of the loft and down the stairs. As usual, I was already late, brushing my teeth and applying make-up simultaneously. When the phone rang, I was totally content to go on and let the machine pick it up. What good is a machine if you can't screen every now and then? Just as I grabbed my coat, Luke picked up the phone. Two more inches and I would have been safe. He got a playful expression on his face, holding the phone away from his ear. "It's your Aunt Lillian," he said, rolling his eyes. "I think your Mom is having another crisis or something."

"Of course, she times them when she knows I have something to do." I grabbed the phone. Rather than a cheery hello, I greeted my Aunt with the usual, "Good Morning! What's wrong now?" I could hear my mother sobbing in the background. I glanced at Luke, who was smothering laughter with the back of his hand. "*This better be good,*" I mouthed to him.

"Elaine? Oh, Elaine, I'm so glad we've caught you." Lillian sounded anguished, her voice hoarse and emotional.

“What? What’s going on? Tell me what’s wrong.” I was used to being middle ground in family therapy, used to the early morning calls and the never-ending crisis that is my mother’s life.

“Elaine, Rachel—Rose found her early this morning. There isn’t a note. We’re still looking for a note.”

“A note? What do you mean a note? Did Rach run away? What?”

“She took some pills—her epilepsy medicine. She’d stopped taking it. She took the entire bottle.” My Aunt’s voice dissolved into gentle sobs. “But there’s no note. We can’t find a note.”

I felt the room spin around me. I dropped my cup of orange juice. I scared the cat. Luke glanced at me, guided me over to the couch. I found my voice again, probing Lillian for answers. “Listen to me, I’ll be there as soon as I can. Is she in the hospital? Did you call nine-one-one? Where is she?”

“Elaine, no. She’s gone. She’s gone. When Rose found her she had been gone for hours. They haven’t taken her away, yet.”

“Lillian, what can’t you say to me?”

“Elaine, I think you—”

“I need to hear you say it, Lillian. Tell me.”

“Your sister’s dead. She committed suicide.” I didn’t make a sound, more like a silent scream as the entire hand went numb. Luke could have been trying to get my attention for hours, I’m not sure. Finally, I swallowed and spoke to my Aunt.

“I’ll get a few things together, and I’ll be there by morning. Early.”

“Please hurry, honey. Elizabeth’s on her way. David and the kids will be here early on Friday. Your mother needs you, all of you.”

“Laina, what happened?” Luke gave me this concerned look, scared almost; I struggled to find the words to explain what had just happened, but nothing came. Luke, wrapped his arm around my shoulders, squeezed them gently. “It must be bad. Just tell me, please? Let me know.”

“It’s Rachel,” I found myself saying. My voice sounded disconnected, far off as if it were coming from someone else.

“Rachel, is she all right? What?”

“She’s dead,” I said simply. The words finally connected and the bluntness of them hit me in the face. “She took these pills. It’s suicide.”

“Oh, Laina,” he whispered, his face going blank. “God, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, I’m going to grab some things and go in a few hours. Hopefully I can drive all night and make it by morning.”

“I’ll go with you,” he said supportively.

“Stay and help Alice. There’s too much to do. You can catch a flight Friday morning.”

“We’ll drive back together, though,” he said, as he helped me drag empty suitcases into the bedroom. “Ill run this stuff over. You just stay here, all right? Give yourself a little time. I’ll bring back some bagels or something.”

“Don’t, Luke. Let’s just get this done so we can get back. We can push the opening back until after the funeral.”

“I just—” Luke paused, stared at the ground. “Listen, if that’s really what you want—” he said, grabbing my hand.

I sighed, closing my eyes for a second, my head spinning. Finally, I squeezed his hand and stared up at the worry playing on his face. “Let’s go. We’re late.”

The smell of coffee must have been stronger than I thought, because I can hear stirring in the back of the house. “Elaine? Is that you?” I stare into the perfect face of my older sister, Elizabeth.

“Hi, Lizzie,” I say, as she reaches for a hug. “How have you been?”

“Fine, just fine. Up until now, that is. So, how have you been? How’s New York? David and I say we’re going to take the kids on a tour of the city, but we never get around to it. It’s such a pain.” She smiles that too perky smile, the one that makes her a fabulous third grade teacher. My mother told me once that parents request her by name—her classroom is busting at the seams. Funny how she became everything I avoided.

“The city’s great. The gallery is doing good. I’m fine.” Small talk isn’t doing me any good right now. “How’s Mom?”

“Her new psychiatrist has been in a few times. He gave her some medication to help her sleep last night. As far as I know, it worked fine.”

“So it’s pretty much as bad as I figured it would be.” I sigh. Lizzie smiles weakly at me, letting me know without a word that I’m right.

“She can’t figure out why Rach would do something like this.” She explains, in half-hearted defense of our mother. “She kept trying to tell me about when she found her. I didn’t want to know.”

“I don’t blame you. Where’s Lillian?”

“Had enough of Mom. Went to call all of the cousins and let them know about visiting hours, the funeral.”

“Early and late visiting hours tomorrow, funeral Saturday?”

“Right. They wanted all of Rach’s friends to be able to make it.” She reaches for a mug. “I still don’t believe it. I’m in shock. Why would she do something this thoughtless? This dumb?” I swallow at the protests rising in my throat and find my calming voice.

“I don’t know, Lizzie. Have they found anything, a note? A letter?”

“Nothing. We’ve searched all over the place, top and bottom, read her journals, her diary, her homework. I even called the school yesterday, talked to her guidance counselor and a few of her teachers. Not even a trace.” She hasn’t even been dead forty-eight hours and already they’re invading her privacy. I assure myself that I’m not cynical for recognizing the importance of it.

Lizzie’s voice brings me out of my thoughts. “Lillian, called Dad. He’s flying in early tomorrow.” I nod numbly, not sure of what to say. Everything’s been so sudden, I haven’t even stopped to consider my father, or the fact that he’s going to mysteriously reappear in our lives yet again.

My father left my mother when I was fifteen; Rachel would have only been nine. He sat the three of us down, explaining that he needed time, needed to go away for awhile, assuring us that it wasn’t anything we did. Sometimes parents just can’t stay together. They just needed time and space away from each other. And as much as he wanted us to be with him, it would be better for everyone if we just stayed where we were. Lizzie and I were both fully aware that he was leaving because he couldn’t deal with my mother anymore, but Rachel was just a kid, totally unaware of anything that could have been wrong.

My Dad found all the space he needed across the country in San Diego. After that, we saw him maybe once or twice a year, when he’d suddenly resurface, show up on the doorstep. Granted, he did send us letters all the time, lots of phone calls, telling us he loved us and how much he cared. I’ve never been to San Diego.

“I think that was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.” Elizabeth mumbles into her coffee, jolting me out of my thoughts. “Looking Dustin and Rebecca in the face and telling them Aunt Rach died. They wanted to know how, why. And I couldn’t tell them. I couldn’t tell them that she did it.”

“Lizzie, they’re still young.” I mean to be soothing, but I don’t know how to justify anything without sounding cliché, so I let my voice fade out. My sister looks up at me, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“So, she just stopped taking her medication. Didn’t anyone notice? I mean, didn’t she get sick? Someone had to have noticed. Do you think it would have made a difference? I mean, was that how she did it? Is that what happened?” She turns to me, her expression confusion mixed with desperation.

“It might have,” I say quickly. I don’t want to think about it, what may have happened to her. And I know Lizzie wants to find a reason, an explanation. Lizzie looks ready to fire another question at me when I hear the raspy sound of breathing as my mother’s dazed face pops around the corner. Tears well in my eyes as I take her in my arms. “Mom, are you doing okay? Mom?”

“Elaine, Rach is gone. She’s gone.” She whispers, **laying** her head on my shoulder. “Why did she do this?”

"I'm not sure," I say gently, hugging her tightly. Lizzie pours her some coffee.

"It's good that you got some sleep, yeah?" She whispers to Mom, urging her to take a sip. "Feeling better?"

"A little," Mom admits, sitting down at the kitchen table. "There's so much to do."

"Don't worry yourself, Mom. We're going to take care of it, Elaine and Lillian and I. I don't want you pushing yourself," she says sternly. I can only watch, wide eyed. Lizzie leads Mom back to her room, whispering calming things to her. Just *once* I'd like to be the basket case.

A few hours later, the three of us have nearly finished the planning. We decide who's going to speak, what music we should play, and what to serve at the reception. I'm amazed how nothing phases us as we go over the most morbid of details; the color of the coffin, what she should wear. And once it's decided, we dive into the grief buffet and have chocolate cake.

The door to Rachel's room is closed tight. After searching for a letter they nearly sealed it off. Part of me wants to push my way inside, say I'm sorry to whatever pieces of her are left. Oddly enough, my mother's room is almost the same way.

The only person to venture in is Lillian, who brings her tea and pleads with her to eat something. Even Lizzie can't find the courage to mouth soothing words to her now, to tell her it's fine, just to get some rest. And I know I can't. Hell, no one's giving *us* that. Even though we stiffen each time we hear the mournful moaning coming from her room, we don't rush to her side like we did so many times before. We give each other an awkward hug and head for bed as Lillian says her good-byes and heads for the sanctity of her own house.

I toss and turn all night, faded memories of my childhood playing in my head. I never realized my family was any different than any other, but I know Lizzie did. Being three years older, she had already seen other kids' families first hand. When my mother would have an episode, my father would send us down to play in the basement, turning the television volume up, so *The Electric Company* could drown out our mother's ranting.

We played with Barbie dolls until the pizza man came, and Daddy sat down to tell us that Mom would be staying with Aunt Lillian for a little while, to help her out around the house. Even though we knew there was something wrong with that excuse, there was no way to know she was in and out of the psychiatric ward. If we weren't in the basement, it was off to the neighbors when Mommy was sick in bed. Whatever we did, we weren't to disrupt her or her nerves.

It didn't take me long once I started kindergarten to realize my Mom wasn't like most others. She never volunteered to be room mother; she never baked me cookies for snack day. I always came with the distinctive bakery cookies, hoping to somehow impress the other kids with the fancy box. I also noticed that most other mothers didn't stay in bed all day, crying, saying they couldn't deal with life. Most mothers don't have a nervous breakdown every other day. Or maybe they do; they just deal with it and move on.

Maybe, after Dad left especially, we made up for Mom being insane in our own ways. Lizzie was ideal. She defined perfection in everything she did: captain of the cheerleading squad, president of her class, honors student, homecoming queen. I was the outcast, dark and moody, always writing poetry and drawing pictures, counting down until I could get the hell out. Lizzie went off to college, studying to be a teacher. Two years later I did the same thing—went to college and worked too much, waiting for the day I could move out and call myself an artist. I finally did, one day. Packed up and headed off to New York City. It's funny—I call it one of the happiest days of my life, second only to meeting Luke. And when I called home once I was settled in, I found out my mother'd been inconsolable, in bed for a week.

In a way, I think we're taking this so hard because Rachel was almost our daughter. Lizzie and I did everything after Dad left, and we did quite a bit while he was still here. We taught her how to ride a bike; we were the ones who skipped school to take her to doctors appointments, nursed her through seizures, taught her how to deal with her epilepsy. We fixed her toys, we threw her birthday parties, we baked her cookies for snack day.

Lizzie was more like the bad guy to Rachel, always making sure her homework was done and her room was clean, enforcing bedtimes and punishing her for the D's in Math. I was the one she could go to when she and her best friend were fighting, when she had a bad dream or when she was sick. I felt a special bond with her because she reminded me so much of myself. She, too, was the outcast—dark, moody, and artistic.

Once, when I actually came home for Christmas, Rachel shyly showed me her book of poetry, sheepishly asking my opinion. I told her she was incredible, not because I wanted to make her happy, but because it was true. She'd found her way of dealing with everything, and she was amazing at it. I had this feeling Rach would be some great artist, some fantastic writer. She'd move to the city, and we'd split a cappuccino and eat lunch at Serendipity's. I felt, deep down, she was going to overcome our family and be something wonderful. Rachel was going to fly. I don't even flinch when I use the past tense now. The thought makes me shudder as I close my eyes and pull the covers over my head.

I wake up early on Friday morning to the smell of coffee and the sound of voices. David and the kids have arrived. I place my bathrobe over my pajamas and splash water on my face before going out to face everyone. When I get into the kitchen, I find David and Lillian engrossed in some deep conversation, while Lizzie is cooking breakfast and the kids are playing basketball in the driveway. And it's all a little too happy for me.

My brother-in-law is exactly the same as the last time I saw him. Perfect hair, movie-star smile, booming deep voice. It must be terrible to face him in court, the perfect lawyer for any occasion. David smiles and gives me a hug, telling me how good it is to see me, how sad he is we

have to see each other like this. He, too, feeds me the line about wanting to take the kids on a tour of the city. I tell him any time. Instead of pulling up a chair and joining the discussion, whatever boring subject they're going on about, I head outside and hug my niece and nephew.

"Aunt Elaine, is Aunt Rachel really dead?" Rebecca asks me innocently.

Yeah, Becky. Aunt Rach really died," I say softly, brushing at some strands of hair that have worked their way out of her ponytail.

Dustin looks at me thoughtfully. "How did she die?" He throws me his basketball. I try to shoot, but as always, miss the basket by a mile.

"It's kind of hard to explain," I say, tossing it back to him, watching as he effortlessly shoots a basket. "Are you guys hungry?"

I glance in the mirror, adding the finishing touches to my make-up and smoothing my black suit one last time. God, I look tired. I use a half bottle of under eye concealer, but it still doesn't cover up my dark purple rings. On the up side, they do match my outfit rather nicely. Luke called from the airport a few minutes ago, to tell me his plane just landed and he was on his way. I'm glad. The thought of smiling at people, standing in front of my sister's coffin, saying, "Thank you for coming" is too frightening to face alone. I've let myself forget just how much I love him.

I'm reading the last chapter of *Super Fudge* to Becky when a knock on the door cuts me off. Lizzie and David are still primping and Lillian is trying to get Mom ready, so I head to the door. I catch it before the second knock and stare into the face of my father. He looks much older than I remember. Then again, I probably look much older, too. The years gone by and the situation seems to have that effect on us. I step back wordlessly, letting him in the house. He smiles at me, but again, I can only try.

"Elaine," he says simply, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "How are you doing?"

"Fine thanks, Dad," I respond, crossing my arms tightly, unsure of what to do with myself. We head to the living room where the kids cheerfully welcome him. Lizzie and David appear, both black-clad, looking chipper despite the pain I see in their eyes. We all sit around the living room, making awkward small talk, waiting for my mother to come out of her sanctuary. There's another knock at the door, and I jump up to get it. Relief fills me at the very sight of him.

Luke is standing on the doorstep, wearing his suit, slightly wrinkled from the flight over. I stare at him for a few minutes, as if I'm taking him back. His hair is cut, and he even shaved. He self-consciously pushes up his wire-framed glasses, the ones he wears if he's been working or just too tired to put in his contacts. I reflexively grab his hand, and he kisses it softly. "Hey, Laina," he says. "I've been worried about you." I nod, managing a small smile.

"I can't tell you how happy I am to see you right now," I whisper. He smiles slightly, and I know the feeling's mutual. As the two of us walk into the living room, there are a few more hellos and more out of place small talk before we hear the door unlatch. Out comes Lillian, in navy blue

from head to toe, guiding my mother out. Mother looks frail, almost afraid. Her hair is pinned up neatly, and she's wearing a plain black dress and heels. It's easy to tell she's been grieving; she has the same glassy-eyed look that we're all sharing.

My father stands up, tears filling his eyes. My mother nods to him, clutching the edge of her dress. She's not crying; she's not reacting. I'm almost proud of her. At this point, my father's face is wet, and he's trying not to sob. He opens his arms wide for her, and she gives him a polite hug. His voice is shaking as he whispers to her.

"Jesus, Rosie, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry." My mother's eyes glisten with tears, but she refuses to let them fall.

"I'm sorry, too, James. I'm sorry we lost our daughter." With that, she heads out to the cars, and we all follow like lambs, my father the last to leave the house.

Visiting hours were just as strange as I could have imagined them, seeing Rachel's friends and the teachers I used to fear telling me how sorry they truly were. For the first set of them, I couldn't keep my eyes off her. Through all this, this numbness and anger and sense of duty, I'd forgotten it was all about Rachel. And seeing her in the coffin for the very first time scared me, shook me down to the very bottom of myself. She looked so pale and peaceful, in her favorite dress. Lizzie and I agreed if she would have picked something, she would have picked the purple dress.

After I had gotten used to the idea, we had to go out for an uncomfortable lunch and head back to the funeral home for the last set of visiting hours. My father was silent, my mother amazingly collected, Lizzie still too happy, the kids and David surprisingly calm, and Luke and I still holding hands, afraid to let go.

The second set was worse than the first, with more people coming, telling us just how sorry they were and commenting on the flowers. For a moment I felt sorry for what they were going through. What could they say to us? *Why did she do it? Why didn't you stop her?* Instead, they commented on the beautiful floral arrangements and told my mother it was good to see her. I've never been so relieved to get out of one place and into fresh air as I was to leave the funeral home.

I still had trouble sleeping that night, knowing tomorrow was the funeral, then everything would be over. My father would disappear in a haze and be back to his life; Lizzie, David and the kids would go back to theirs, and Luke and I to ours. And God only knows what would happen to my Mom. Now that she would be alone. Now that Rachel was really gone. But I still would have these feelings, be scared, be shaken up. I tossed and turned. Luke wrapped his arm around me, telling me to just relax and get some rest. I wanted to, but I couldn't. His steady breathing finally lulled me off to sleep.



Saturday starts off as a blur, a quick breakfast and lots of strong black coffee. Lillian arrives early, a few of her daughters tagging along. All we need is more small talk. I'm getting nauseous already. Dustin and Rebecca ask Luke about the city. He's telling them all about Central Park and FAO Schwartz, about the Empire State Building and Broadway. It makes me, in the midst of all the madness, smile. Luke notices, as together we promise to take them to see *The Lion King* when they get to the city.

We're all dressed and waiting, almost sharing a family moment as Luke, David, and the kids play basketball while the cousins, Lizzie and I sit on the porch and watch. My father is sitting alone in the living room in silence. Finally, Lillian appears, in black this time, matching all the rest of us, leading my mother. She again looks tired and miserable, but she's not reacting. Dad follows behind, again swallowing the sobs he doesn't want the world to see. This time, we don't wait for anyone's lead in a single file line like before. We all head in different directions, climb into our respective cars and go.

The funeral is slow and deliberate, with the preacher droning on before Lizzie and I stand up to say a few words. Lizzie talks in honey-coated tones as she tells the large crowd all her favorite memories, reading a poem by someone I'm sure she considers a genius. I stand up and read something by someone I know was a genius. In a calm, clear voice, I stare out at the sea of faces and read my favorite poem Rachel ever wrote. And just like that it's over.

We shakily stand and head to the cemetery. My parents solemnly climb into the funeral home provided limousine as we go to our cars donned with the magnetic funeral flags. Luke drives as I stare out the window at the scenery. It's a beautiful day. The leaves are green and the sky is clear. We hardly say two words, but what we're not saying is all we need right now.

If there's anything harder than seeing Rachel in her coffin, it's seeing it at the cemetery and knowing this is the end. We gather under the small tent, which seems wrong to me somehow. It's a gorgeous spring day; we should stand in the sun. Yet we sit in the dangerously old folding chairs and listen to the preacher read his "ashes to ashes" line. I become aware of the tears on my cheeks, just as I'm aware of Lizzie, Lillian, and Dad crying softly. Luke glances over at me, his face wet with tears as well. He offers me his handkerchief, and I take it gratefully.

My mother starts reacting now. She tries to get out of her chair, falling to the ground, sobbing. "My Rachel, my Rachel," she manages, hyperventilating, becoming more hysterical by the second. My father and Lillian, both still crying themselves yet looking dignified, stand up and go to her, helping her up, leading her back to the limo. The rest of us don't respond. We don't even cry harder. The preacher, no doubt used to outbursts like this, raises his voice slightly.

At last, all of it is done. I don't know whether to be relived or just to stay where I am, unmoving, not wanting to leave Rachel. Finally, we all sniffle and step out into the sun. The limo is already gone, no doubt off to the hospital. We should have taken bets.

Everyone is waiting by the cars as Lizzie and I walk the edge of the cemetery slowly. “I can’t believe she did that. I thought we were so close. God, I can’t believe anything anymore. How Mom is the way she is, how Rachel could be so stupid.”

I suddenly can’t hold everything in anymore. It hurts too much.

“Rachel wasn’t stupid!” I yell, rubbing at the pain shooting through my temples. “Just because she did this, it doesn’t make her stupid!”

Lizzie looks at me, ready for the fight. “What else would you call giving up? She had so much life ahead of her.”

“Are you telling me, growing up how we did, with our mother the neurotic and our MIA father, you never once thought about it?” I’m angry. We’re practically screaming now. People are looking at us, but no one is moving.

She looks up at me in surprise. “No, no I never did. Why would I end everything? I knew that that was only a part of my life! That there was more to come!”

“I thought about it, Lizzie. I thought about it a lot. And because I thought about it and struggled with it, I know Rachel isn’t stupid. This can’t make her any less of what she was.” I had thought about it. And God forgive me, the first thought that entered my mind after the shock wore off was that Rachel did something I’d never had the courage to do, and I couldn’t even admit it to myself.

I can recall so clearly working the late shift at the department store that got me through college, the security lights glinting off the silver razorblade we used to cut packages open. I remember sitting on the floor, watching the light dance on the sharp edge, and practically feeling the cuts on my wrist almost guiding me to the right place to slice. I wondered what it would feel like; taking that deep breath of air while my hand shook mercilessly.

It was a good ten minutes before I set the blade down and continued cleaning up. After all, Lizzie was at a student government retreat, a free trip to Cincinnati, and Rachel had an early Junior High basketball team meeting. Someone had to get her up, feed her breakfast and get her to school without being too late to my eight o’clock class. But how close I came to this day makes my hands shake. And if I try, I can still feel the guiding lines on my wrists.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” she says, as if she’s come to a realization. “You’re so sympathetic with Rachel’s situation because you’ve thought about doing it yourself. That makes everything all right for you, I guess? That you think you know what she was thinking? Well, why didn’t you? Why didn’t you go through with it?” she screams, her face violet.

There is no worse feeling in the world than feeling without a doubt that you’re right, and having someone make a valid point in the opposite direction that you can’t argue. I don’t know how to react, can’t think of anything to say. *Because I had too much to do, because I was scared, because.* Tears stream down my face but the words won’t come out.

“I’ll tell you why!” Lizzie goes on. “Because you knew that you’d move on and find something that made you happy! You were thinking about what it would do to our crazy mom and our absentee father, what it would do to me and Rachel. And you didn’t want us to hurt like that! You *knew* it would kill all of us. You *knew*.” I can’t hold back anymore; I’m sobbing so hard I’m sucking in air as Lizzie rages on. “But you think because you read Rachel’s poetry and you told her she was good, it makes everything all right. That you called her once a week and sent her letters it makes it good. I did the same thing, Elaine. I did *just* as much for her as you did and you know it. We may not have always been close, but we both loved Rachel—we raised her.”

I’m starting to understand now that maybe what I saw as a fabulous relationship with my little sister—where Rachel knew I loved her, where I called her and sent her letters and told her what a great writer she was—just wasn’t enough.

As I was off living my wonderful dream life, as Lizzie was off living hers, we’d essentially done the same thing our parents did to us: abandon the one we’d brought up. The two sisters who’d raised her went off to live their perfect lives and leave her alone with a crazy mother. Lizzie and I always at least had each other, and if we didn’t have each other we had Rach. We were never fully alone with her. There were only two people that ever accomplished that, Dad and Rachel. One left, the other committed suicide.

The same thing I hated my father for, couldn’t look him in the eye because of, was the exact same thing I myself did to Rachel, and I expected her to be all right with it, to keep loving me back. Rachel had never been to New York City *or* San Diego, and I wasn’t any better than he was. I’m sick with grief, can’t see the sun through the tears in my eyes. I swallow, trying to find my voice again.

“That may be true—in fact, all right, it’s true.” I fire back at my older sister. “We left Rachel alone with our mother. We didn’t even do that. And pulled a Dad on her, expected her to keep loving us and being close when really we left her alone and shut her out of our worlds. But it wasn’t because we didn’t want her there; we did. We were just too happy to think about it. And I’m not going to stand here and let you call her thoughtless and stupid, because she wasn’t. She was *alone*. And we didn’t help her, Dad didn’t, and she couldn’t do it herself. Rachel was talented, loving, and wonderful. And somehow she didn’t think it mattered to any of us because we didn’t show her that it did. You’re right, Lizzie, but at the same time there’s so much that you can’t see.”

Tears run down Lizzie’s face as we both stand in the cemetery, still facing one another, staring each other down. There’s so much left to say, but we’re completely drained. We don’t have enough strength to keep this up.

Luke and David make their way over and break up the war. Luke brushes my hair out of my eyes, wipes away my tears. “Shhhh, it’s all right, Laina,” he whispers. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not all right, Luke,” I sob into his shoulder, finding all the tears and the weakness I know are there and finally let them out. “I thought Rachel knew I loved her, but I’m just like my father.” I lean against him, crying harder and louder than I ever knew I could. His voice brings me back down to earth.

“No, Elaine. You’re not.” He lifts my chin gently, and our eyes lock. “Your father was trying to balance his career and support your family, and take care of your mother, which is a full time job. Being a dad was the easiest thing he could let slide. And because of that you and Elizabeth, you took care of each other and you protected Rachel. Your Dad decided it was too much, and he just gave up and left. You were put in this weird situation where you and Lizzie were the parents to your Mom and Rachel. But you know that it isn’t the same thing. No one ever expected you to stay home forever to be a Mom. You were the kid, okay? Kids grow up, and they leave home. That’s what’s supposed to happen. Rachel knew you were both going to leave; she just held on to this hope that maybe you wouldn’t. And it’s not your fault. You left the nest, Elaine. That’s normal. Your father left his family, all right? He left his wife who was sick and his three kids to deal with her, and you picked up the pieces. I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through, Laina, but you can’t compare yourself to him like that. It’s not the same thing. Listen to me. You loved Rachel. And she loved you.”

My defenses are down. I can’t hide anything, anymore. Luke holds me tight, as I have a long-awaited nervous breakdown of sorts.

The reception is short. People fix plates and we muddle through the last bout of small talk. People ask Lizzie about the kids and her class, and they ask me about the city and what exactly it is that I do. No one asks about Mom or Dad. Lillian arrives at the house looking pale and worn down, helps herself to a Long Island Iced Tea as she tells us they’ve already committed Mom. She also says Dad has no intention of leaving her side. I don’t know what to say.

Lillian fills us in on the details as she packs some of Mom’s clothes to take back. She tells us the new psychiatrist won’t be releasing Mom for at least two weeks, until he’s sure she won’t do harm to herself. She also mentions that it’s impossible for our mother to live on her own. She’d been dreading bringing up the subject until now. Lillian, with her blessed sense of timing, offers to take care of her for the summer. This way, we can look at all the options, take our time. After thanking her quietly, no one says a word.

Lizzie and I are perpetually nice to the people sitting in the house, pretending this is all normal. We’re professionals at it. Once the reception comes to a close and it’s just us, we clean up the house and throw away the paper plates and cups and split the leftovers between us for our drives homes. Lizzie doesn’t speak to me, and I don’t speak to her. The kids are watching television, David is sleeping and Luke is reading a novel Rachel left lying around. Once every-

thing is done, we don't even acknowledge each other, just peel off our mourning clothes and head off to bed. I stare out the window and at the ceiling, realizing I may never sleep again.

Luke and I pack up everything and are ready to hit the road by nine. We all feel like we should stay a bit longer, at least until Mom can come home, but we have to get back, we've all got lives waiting. I notice that when we appear from the bedroom, Lizzie and David are already packed and ready to leave.

Dad comes to say his good byes. He tells us that he's staying a tad longer than he'd expected, to be with Mom. When he's not at the hospital, he'll just go ahead and stay at the house. He mentions looking into getting a job with his old office, but I'm not holding my breath. When the guilt wears off, he'll change his mind and be gone. He mentions getting together in a month and going through Rachel's room. Even though the thought makes my head spin, and I'm sure Lizzie feels the same, we agree. I'm surprised at the tears in my eyes when I hug him good bye. I'm even more surprised that before I can let him go I whisper, "I'm sorry."

Elizabeth walks up to me and hesitates slightly before giving me a hug. I hold her tightly, and both of us are crying again. "I love you, Elaine," she says firmly.

"And I love you, Lizzie," I respond, almost scared to let go of her. We stand for a few minutes, just hanging on to each other. Once we finally let go, she heads to her car and I go back to mine, and with a few final farewell waves, David eases the car out of the driveway. It's just Luke and me, and I'm not sure what to say. "You think she knew how much I loved her?" I ask softly. Luke walks up behind me, wrapping his arms around me. I sigh, leaning my head on his shoulder.

"She knew, Laina."

"But Lizzie was still right—"

"She didn't tell you anything you didn't already know," Luke points out. "Elaine, I'm so sorry about all this, about Rachel, your Mom, your Dad. I don't know what to say to make things better."

I kiss him lightly. "The fact that you *want* to is enough for me," I say quietly. We reluctantly let go of each other and climb in the car. "I have to stop by the hospital before we leave, to see Mom."

"We should," Luke says, starting the car and opening my sunroof. "How's she doing?"

"The same. I guess they've got her pretty medicated. Some things never change," I joke, leaning back against the seat. "Thanks for driving."

"No problem," Luke says, turning up his CD. "You get some sleep, all right? I think you've gotten three hours since everything started."

"Thanks," I say softly, leaning back, sighing. "So what happens now?"

"We go home, I guess," Luke says, pushing up his sunglasses. "We do have that exhibit to open."

"God, that's right," I moan. "I've got so much to do." And no strength or desire to get it done. "I should take a vacation."

"I think it might be a good idea," Luke says, grinning. "As long as I've known you, you've never taken a day off. Ever."

"I may just have to surprise you then," I say, trying to be lighthearted. It's not working. "It's going to take time," I say softly, wiping at the annoying tears. I've gone from hardly ever crying to becoming a pro in a matter of days.

"That's right," Luke assures me. "Everything is going to get better. I promise. Just give it a little time." I succumb to the drowsiness, closing my eyes and picking up his hand. I smile sleepily.

"Thanks," I whisper. Now the faded memories of my sisters playing in my mind, memories of Rachel seem less painful; now they're slightly comforting. And I'm holding onto them as I answer Luke, "I needed that."